



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

Is this a Roman Road?

by Lis Garnish

A Roman road approaches Wantage from the north, running between Frilford and Hanney, and it is likely that the toll road from Hanney to Grove (now the A338) overlies the continuation of its course. The metalling of the road was detected again in the area of Witan Way, during excavations carried out in 1967 (1), and late Roman graves were discovered aligned on the route. Various finds of coins, pottery, wells and other remains would suggest that a Roman settlement lay north and east of. Camel Cross in Wantage, and was served by the road. However the further course of the road, south of Wantage, is far from clear. In 'Historic Towns in Oxfordshire' (2) Foster, Rodwell, Squires and Turner suggest that it continued along Ham Road, followed the private driveway to The Ham and beyond, and then continued up the parish boundary across Court Hill Road and east of Segsbury Castle. This suggested course is far from satisfactory. The parish boundary is not straight, as is shown on their sketch map, but 'steps' round the furlongs of the strip field system, and takes an even more tortuous and angled course across Court Hill Road and up to the Ridgeway. There is no evidence that a track or footpath ever followed this line, and it would, in fact, have meant ascending one of the steepest parts of the face of the Downs south of Wantage. I would suggest that a better case can be made for a continuation to the south-west of Wantage.

Between Windmill Hill, in Letcombe Regis parish, and Sparsholt Firs, in Childrey parish, a bridle way and road run for nearly three miles to the crest of the Downs, and at one time connected back to the B4507. The first part, above Letcombe Regis, runs on a ledge across a south-facing slope and is a fairly level track with no steep inclines. Near the Childrey parish boundary the track deviates around a 'modern' chalk pit (post-1761) but originally it continued on a straight alignment. Beyond the pit the track climbs slowly up the 'nose' of a north-easterly spur of the Downs, until the B4001 is reached. Here the track becomes a road, which takes a diagonal line across the north face of the Downs. This diagonal course provides a less steep gradient than would a direct assault. At Sparsholt Firs the track and road have climbed something over 350ft, with no severe gradients at any point.

It might be objected that the Wantage end of the track finishes abruptly at Windmill Hill, and would involve two right angle turns and a steep climb for it to join the B4507. However, John Rocque's map of Berkshire of 1761 (3) shows it continuing in a straight course and joining the B4507 approximately where 'Kirklands' stands today. When the crops and lighting conditions were right I have observed the 'ledge' of its further course, continuing through the fields on the Wantage side of Windmill Hill.

Again, it could be argued that this projected south-westerly course would not align with the known course through Frilford and Hanney. However Christopher Taylor states "... straight alignments are not an invariable characteristic and if the local topography demanded it a Roman road took the easiest or most convenient course" (4). The ultimate goal of the Frilford/Hanney/Wantage road is not known, but the suggested course to Sparsholt Firs would allow for a continuation south-west to Cunetio (Mildenhall), south to Lambourn or south-east

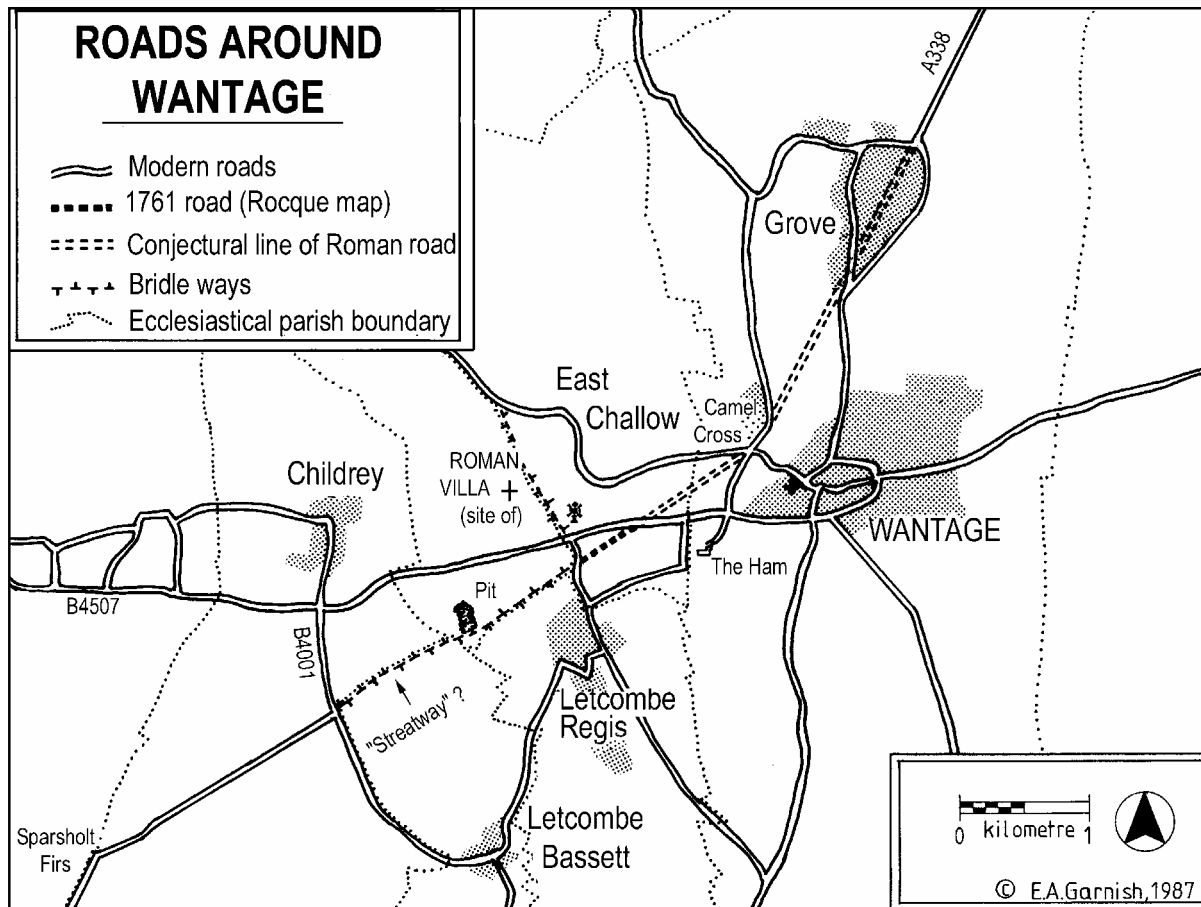
to the Romano-British 'farm' at Bockhampton Down. At the Wantage end, the Windmill Hill/Cornhill Lane track would give access to the Roman villa by Cornhill Farm.

Another point in favour of the antiquity of the Windmill Hill/Sparsholt Firs route is that it serves as the parish boundary between Letcombe Regis and West Challow and between Letcombe Bassett and Childrey. Margaret Gelling observes that in Berkshire it is "...striking...the extremely limited use which the modern parish and pre-Conquest estate boundaries make of the known Roman roads in the County" (5). Where such use occurs, she argues, it "demonstrates that Roman roads were used as boundaries when estates were divided late in the Anglo-Saxon period". Childrey, Challow, Letcombe Regis and Letcombe Bassett were separate manors by 1066, but Letcombe Regis and Challow were still ecclesiastically linked, Letcombe Regis church having superior jurisdiction over East and West Challow which were only chapelries. Also, the shared name of 'Letcombe' would suggest a late separation of the manors which became 'Regis' and 'Bassett'. If the land unit of both the Letcombes and both the Challows began as a single estate and were divided during the Anglo-Saxon period then, at the time of the grant, an existing Roman road would have provided a clear internal boundary, and suggests that the road must pre-date the Anglo-Saxon parish boundaries. Additionally, two separate acres of land, belonging to the parsonage of Childrey and lying in the East White Field, were described in 1634 as "...bounding upon streatway..." and "...shutting upon Streatway...", both of them being some distance to the south of "Ickleton way" (6). Gelling suggests that "streat" would indicate a Roman road (7).

The extended lines of the Frilford/Hanney/Wantage road and the Windmill Hill/Sparsholt Firs road would intersect at Camel Cross in Wantage and would suggest that the last section of Denchworth Road also conforms to the alignment of the northerly section. The first part of the southerly section is more difficult however. If it aligned with the southern part of the route then most of its course is now lost under the Hamfield/Naldertown development, but a section should lie across the playing fields of Segsbury School and might supply a chance for some active 'field-work' by the History department. A trial trench of the 'green road' section of the track above Childrey or Letcombe Regis would also be a possibility, and such archaeology would be the only positive way to prove the line of the 'Roman road'.

REFERENCES

1. Kirsty Rodwell (ed.), 'Historic Towns in Oxfordshire', Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit, (1975), p 163.
2. Ibid, p 167.
3. John Rocque, 'A Topographical Map of the County of Berks, Sheet XI, (1761).
4. Christopher Taylor, 'Roads & Tracks of Britain', Dent, London, (1979), p 52.
5. Margaret Gelling, 'The Place Names of Berkshire - Part Three, II', English Place-Names Society, (1976), pp 808-9.
6. Ian Mortimer (ed.), 'Berkshire Glebe Terriers 1634', Berkshire Record Society, 1995, Vol. 2, p.33.
7. Margaret Gelling, 'The Place Names of Berkshire - Part Three, II', English Place-Names Society, (1976), pp 908.



This article was reproduced from "The Blowing Stone" Spring 1988 (revised October 2000).

The Vale and Downland Museum is a registered charity (No. 270466) which aims to preserve and provide information and objects relating to the Vale and Downland area, Wantage, Oxfordshire.

The Museum encourages access to historical records for non-profit making purposes. This article may be used for such purposes, however the information must not be edited or reproduced for commercial purposes without prior written permission.

Vale and Downland Museum Trust, 19 Church Street, Wantage, Oxfordshire, OX12 8BL
 Telephone: 01235 771447 e-mail: museum@wantage.com