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The Faversham Society
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Deconstructing and reconstructing 'Watling Street'

A support paper for the FSARG 3rd season of
Preston: a most peculiar parish

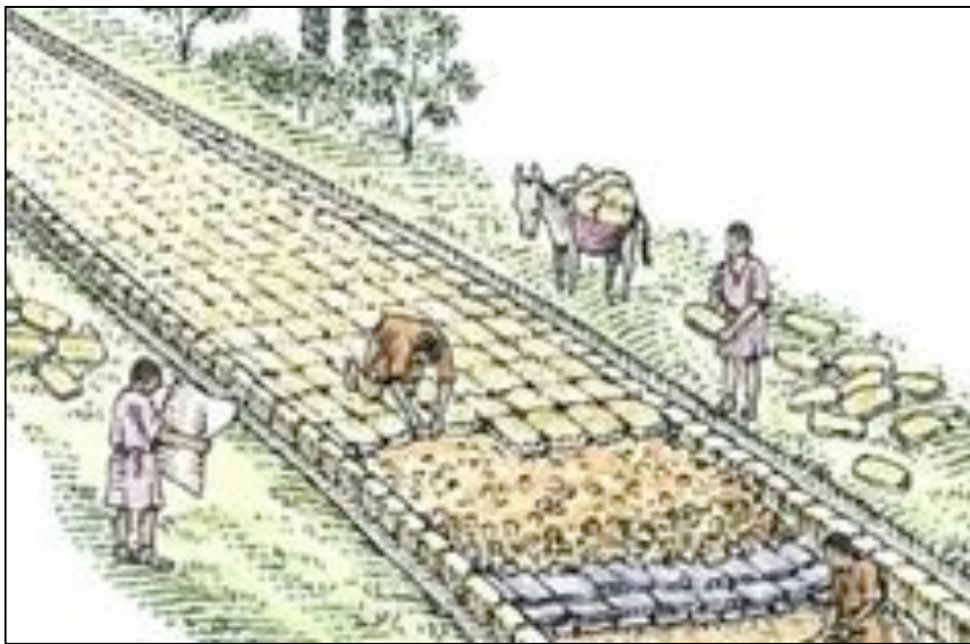


Fig 1: Romans building a road: from *Ancient Rome for Kids* website¹

¹ www.pinterest.com

Deconstructing 'Watling Street'

Every primary school child knows about Watling Street. It is probably the best known of all the famous roads built under the Roman occupation of Britannia. The Kentish section, we all know, is the route that the conquering legions of Claudius took on their way to the crossing of the Thames to get to what is now Colchester, crossing the Medway at what became Durobrivae (Rochester). They were following, many popular historians will tell you, an ancient route way running along the dip slope of the North Downs.² It is the road used by William the Conqueror after the battle of Hastings when he worked his way along the coast to Dover and turned left for London. Chaucer's Pilgrims used it to travel from Southwark to Canterbury to attend the shrine of St Thomas Becket³. It came to be called the Great Dover Road in the turnpike heydays of the 18th- early 19th century. In Canterbury and London there are streets which even now are called Watling Street. What is there left to find out?

The first thing to point out is that the name itself is not Roman or even Romano-British, but Saxon in origin. Its ancestry is thought to be related to the Old English word *wealhas* meaning foreigners (also the origin of the terms *Wales* and *Welsh* and many other names for non-Saxon entities) - in full, the Street of the *Wealingas* or *Watlingas* people⁴. This name does not necessarily originate in Kent, of course, Watling Street runs north westwards through the Midlands to the Welsh border and beyond as the A5.

Secondly, there is no solid evidence that the Roman road followed an ancient route way. As Biddulph says in his discussion of the findings at Springhead from the large scale excavations in 1998-2003 in advance of the new high speed rail line, 'care must be taken to avoid presuming roads into existence' evidence for an Iron Age precursor to Watling Street remains elusive'⁵ The fact that late Iron Age settlement finds have been found in Rochester⁶ and Canterbury⁷ underneath the Roman road is a different matter, and does not in itself prove a direct Iron Age trackway link in between.

Secondly, the Roman road did not go into Roman Londinium, but is thought to have crossed the Thames at the most convenient point at Westminster (see fig 2). Mattingly and Jones argue that this seeming by-passing of Londinium is related to the prior establishing of the Westminster crossing, with the site for the city chosen a little later.⁸ So in a sense Watling Street is the Londinium bypass, just as the joke in Faversham is that the A2 is the Roman bypass for Faversham (though for different reasons, see later). So the Pilgrims setting off from Southwark were not using Watling Street, to begin with anyway.

² e.g. MILLETT M 2007 in 'Roman Kent' in *The Archaeology of Kent to AD800* ed John Williams KCC: Maidstone p 148

³ see LAWSON & KILLINGRAY 2004 *An Historical Atlas of Kent* KAS: Chichester p47

⁴ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and many other authorities.

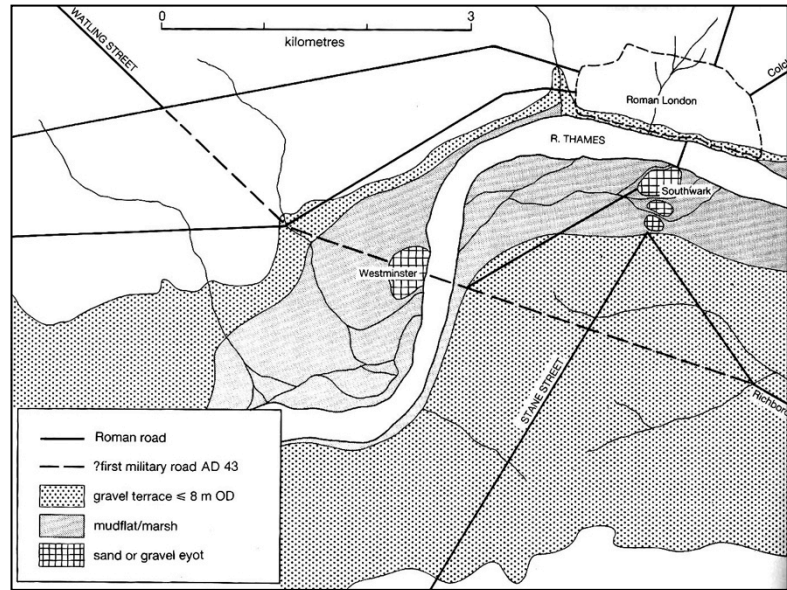
⁵ BIDDULPH E 2011 'Roman Settlement in the Ebbsfleet valley in Regional Perspective' in *Settling the Ebbsfleet Valley Volume 1: the Sites* Oxford & Wessex Archaeology: Oxford pp 243-248

⁶ HARRISON A 1991 'Excavation of a Belgic and Roman site at 50-54 High Street Rochester' *Arch. Cant.* **109** (1991) pp 41-50

⁷ BLOCKLEY K et al 1995 'Excavations in the Marlowe Car Park and surrounding areas' in *The Archaeology of Canterbury* Vol 5, Canterbury

⁸ JONES B & MATTINGLY D 1990 *An Atlas of Roman Britain* Blackwell : Oxford p170

Fig 2: Roman London showing Watling Street passing to the west⁹



Another more drastic and startling diversion takes place further east in Kent. The stretch of Roman Watling Street between Dartford and Strood was displaced in the post Roman period by a major route way via Gravesend¹⁰. By AD1293 at the latest (first known documentation) the Long Ferry was running down from London to Gravesend on the Thames and from Gravesend the road ran to Strood over the chalk hills. The stretch of Watling Street between Strood and the Darenth crossing was to be found only in parish boundaries and footpaths until 1924 when the A2 was constructed. Therefore Chaucer's pilgrims would have approached Rochester Bridge from the west using quite a different route to that used in Roman times, at least for the London to Rochester stretch (see Fig 3 for a detailed map of the diversion) .

East of Rochester Bridge the course of the Roman Road does not seem to have been abandoned in this extreme way. Nevertheless, it cannot be assumed that it is underneath the present day A2. As Tatton Brown pointed out in a much-needed paper in 2001¹¹, there is surprisingly little archaeological evidence for the Roman Road itself and outside the towns it is hardly been seen at all in modern times.

In fact, Tatton Brown argues that during the early to mid Saxon period Watling Street in Kent must have become just a green lane or track way. It had lost both its purpose (long distance communications) and its maintenance. Interestingly, in Faversham we had come to the same conclusion independently, simply because early Faversham has no structural relationship to Watling Street, hence the Roman by-pass joke. The Saxon centre of Faversham lies at the lowest crossing point of the Westbrook. During the early- mid medieval period, the theory is that the east to west route used this crossing and ran along the creek heads to the west (Oare, Conyer, Milton, Iwade, Halstow etc) reaching the lowest crossing point of the Medway at Rochester. Indeed, Tatton Brown points out that it is in the Faversham to Milton Regis stretch of the north Kent coastline that this use of the so-called Lower Road and abandonment of Watling Street is most evident, with the earlier churches and settlement, right up to Domesday, being along this sea-orientated coastal route way (see fig 3).

⁹ JONES & MATTINGLY 1990 op.cit. p170

¹⁰ HISCOCK R 1968 'The Road between Dartford, Gravesend and Strood ' Arch. Cant. Vol 83 p 229-246

¹¹ TATTON BROW T 2001 'The Evolution of Watling Street' in Kent Arch. Cant. Vol 121 pp1210133

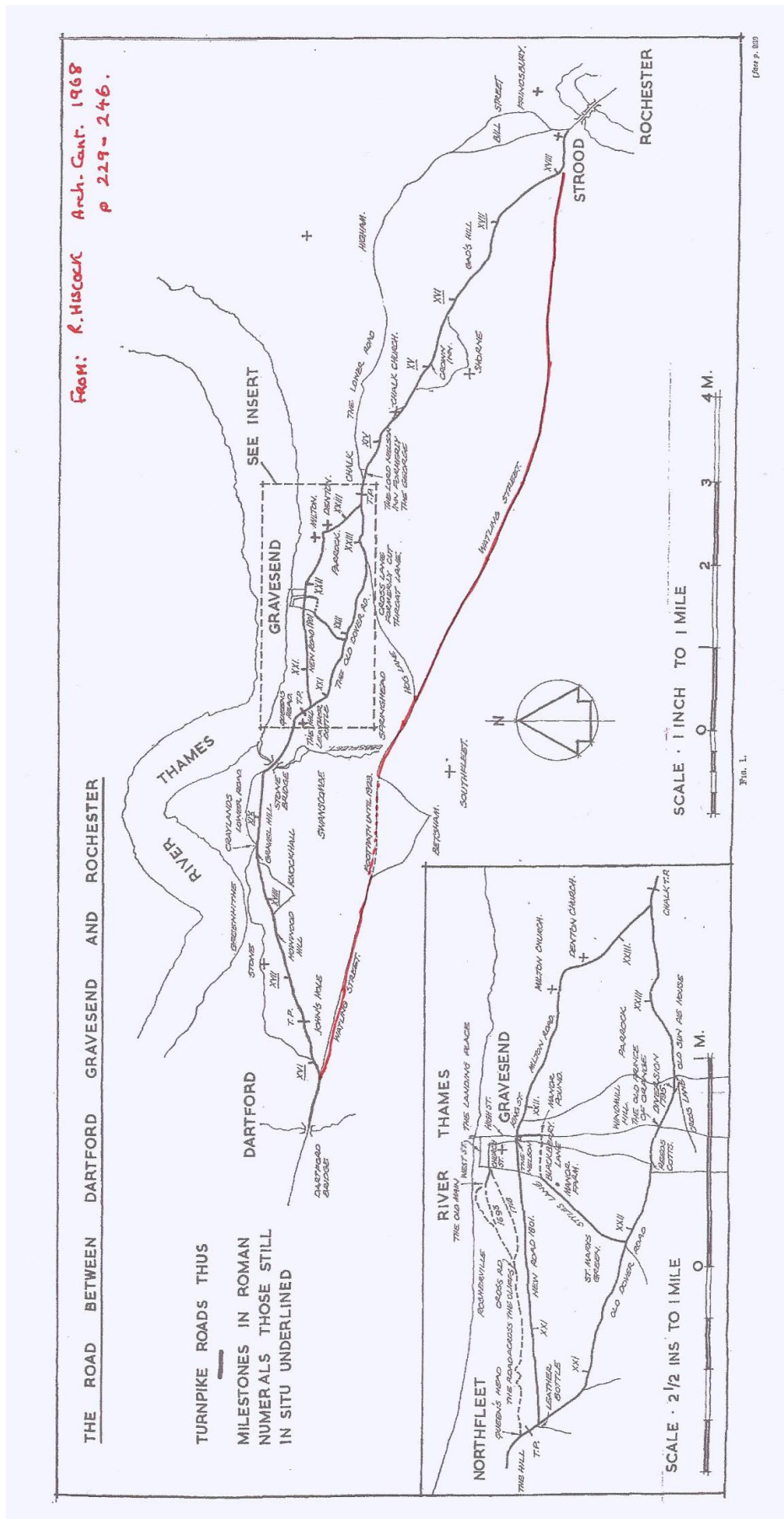


Fig 3: The road between Dartford, Gravesend and Strood up until 1924. Watling Street, not a main road at this time, is shown in red.

There are, however caveats. Welch, writing about early to mid Anglo Saxon Kent in 2007¹², points out the apparent clustering of the cemeteries along line of Watling Street, especially along the Canterbury to Dover section. (Fig 5) This is true of the well known Faversham Kingsfield cemetery although all evidence (admittedly slender) points towards the actual Saxon period settlement being down on the Creekside¹³. This clustering does suggest a respect for the old Roman road (the 'work of giants'?)¹⁴ even if it was not used much for everyday purposes. The fact is that as far as I know, there has been no archaeological investigation of the sequence above the Roman road in rural areas where Saxon continued usage could be perceived. In the old Roman towns, black earth deposits and sometimes the use of the relatively debris free road for Saxon period burials and sunken featured buildings has been noted e.g. in Canterbury but I have yet to see a report on post Roman road sequences in a rural area at least for Kent.

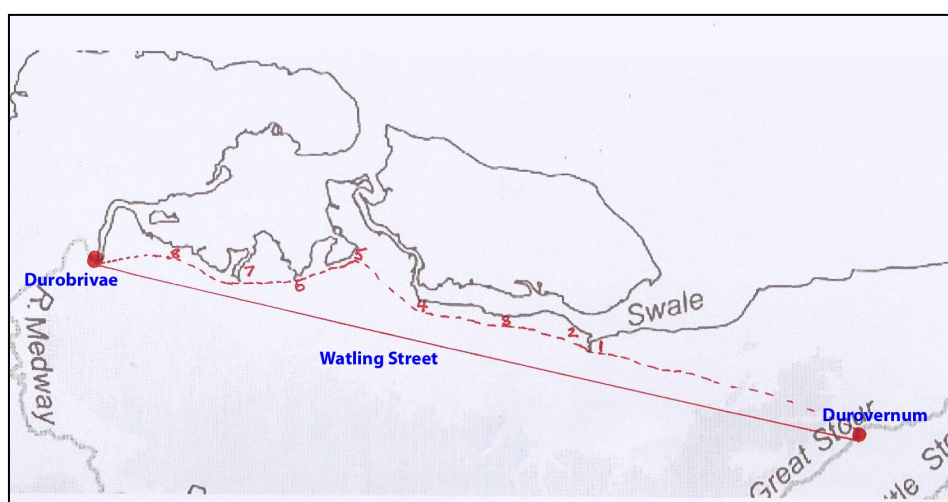


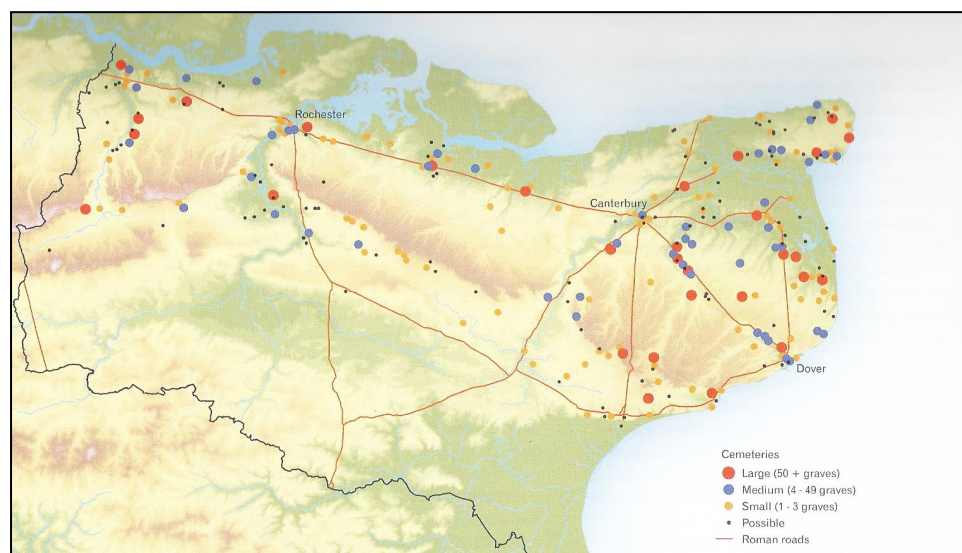
Fig 4: Watling Street and the 'Lower Road'

1. Faversham Creek
2. Oare Creek
3. Conyer Creek
4. Milton Creek
5. Iwade foreshore
6. Halstow Creek
7. Otterham Creek
- 8 Gillingham foreshores

The 'Lower Road' still exists today for the most part.

Fig 5: Anglo Saxon Cemeteries and Watling Street¹⁵

The clustering along the line of Watling Street is more pronounced on the Dover to Canterbury stretch.



¹² WELCH M 2007 'Anglo Saxon Kent' in J. Williams ed. op.cit. p 197

¹³ FSARG Hunt the Saxons project and summary, 2005-7 www.community-archaeology.org.uk

¹⁴ BRADLEY S (ed) 1982 *Anglo Saxon Poetry*: Exeter Chronicles poem 'The Ruin' p 401

¹⁵ WELCH M 2007 op.cit. p 197

A further period about which almost nothing is known outside the main towns yet which must have been very eventful in North Kent is the period of the Viking incursions: this covers both the early long ship version in the later 9th century and the more organised invasions of the late 10th- early 11th by Swein and others.¹⁶ Elsewhere in northern Europe this is a time of resurgence in the growth of towns and trade, when the mid Saxon wic (beach markets) and dispersed settlements were being replaced by 'proper' centres of trade and crafts¹⁷. North Kent however was, as it has ever been, highly vulnerable to invasion from Europe and the 'barbarian north': it is hard to imagine much movement along the 'Great Dover Road' at this time, and indeed the continued existence of any kind of settlement or religious foundations outside fortified places is hard to imagine. Archaeology of this important period in north Kent is difficult to find even in towns like Canterbury which are known to have been sacked.

For the section of Watling Street between Rochester and Dover the problem does seem to be one of drift rather than abandonment. By the 13th century, the cult of St Thomas had brought this section of the route way back into full use, as is evidenced by foundations such as the Hospital of St Mary, Ospringe and the chapel known as Schamel at Sittingbourne¹⁸. Indeed, the very emergence of Sittingbourne as an entity (as opposed to Milton, the wealthiest royal manor in the Domesday Book but just too far off Watling Street to have any future) shows how the 'old road' had revived.

By around AD1500, the cult of Becket is in decline, but the re-establishment and maintenance of this route way has ensured that it continues to be dominant (although note that the Gravesend diversion will hold until the 20th century). In the 18th century comes the Turnpike era, with the Chatham to Canterbury the first road to be turnpiked in North East Kent in 1730.¹⁹ The era fizzled out with the arrival of the railways in the 1850s and responsibility for roads was passed on to the public sector.

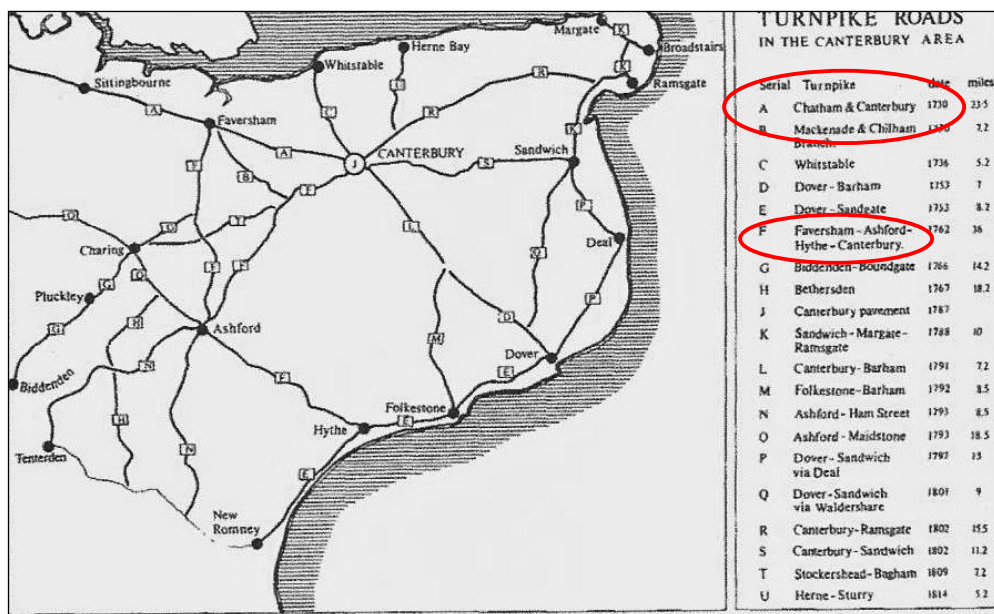


Fig 6: Turnpike roads in the Canterbury area

Faversham lay on the Chatham to Canterbury turnpike, but was also involved with two other routes and their Trusts. One of these was based in Ashford (Faversham-Ashford - Hythe-Canterbury turnpike) and also, more relevant for Watling Street, a small Trust running the

¹⁶ see LAWSON & KILLINGRAY 2004 op.cit. p32 for useful maps

¹⁷ CLARKE H & B AMBROSIANI 1995 *Towns in the Viking Age* Leicester University Press: London

¹⁸ Described by CLANCY J on the [Sittingbourne-me](http://sittingbourne-me.com) website, history section, along with interesting discussion of Watling Street in Sittingbourne

¹⁹ PANTON F 1985 'Turnpike roads in the Canterbury area' Arch. Cant., Vol 102 pp171-195

Makenade (sic) - Selling - Chesham route, set up in 1837 as an independently run branch of the Chatham to Canterbury turnpike.²⁰ This route started at Macknade Corner where there was a tollhouse, with another in Selling. Milestones are another relic of these days - Panton in 1985 says that they are still in place along the stretch Canterbury to Ospringe but this observation has not been fully updated.

Reconstructing Watling Street

For this section I am going to focus in on the stretch of Watling Street running through Preston next Faversham, but first we need a summary of the various 'spottings' of the actual Roman Road up until now. Tatton Brown says ...'it is surprising that so little work on the archaeology and early history of this route [in Kent] has been carried out'²¹: he was writing in 2001 - is this still true?

At a number of places, Watling Street has been identified. There have been a number of sightings, at Greenwich, for example²². In Canterbury the path of Watling Street is known with some confidence and the most recent sightings were in 2014, one during community archaeology excavation in the Westgate gardens²³ and another in London Road north of the Westgate Towers.²⁴ There are claims of sightings at a crossing of the Darent in Dartford²⁵. Rochester is much less investigated than Canterbury, and the course of Watling Street down Chatham Hill and to the lead up to the bridge is largely unknown - Tatton Brown suggests that the earliest route has since been drowned by relative sea level rise due to isostatic subsidence - but has been glimpsed in Rochester High Street²⁶.

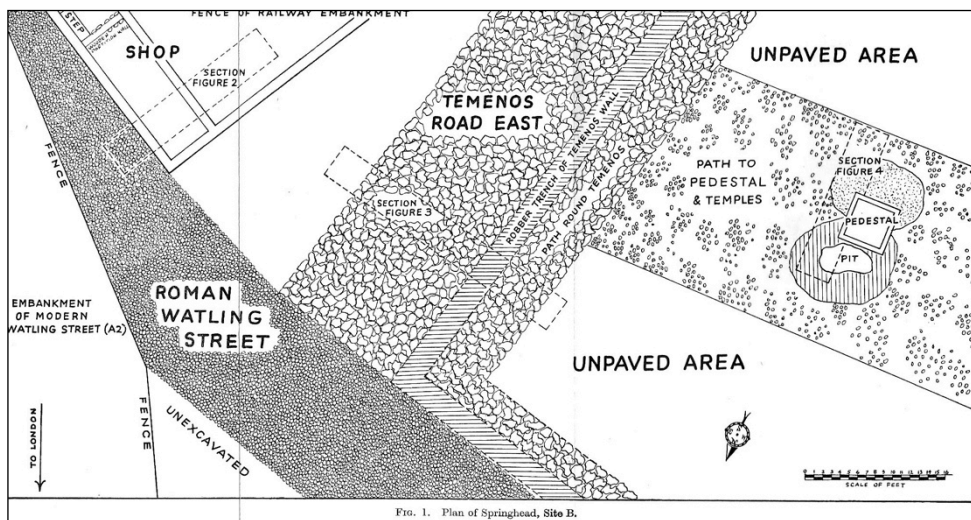


Fig 7: a plan from the early days (1950s) of the Gravesend Historical Society

The most important rural sightings have been at Springhead (Vagniacis) near Northfleet. There, early excavations by the Gravesend Archaeological Society in the 1950s-60s first mapped the road disappearing under the newly enlarged A2 (Fig 7)²⁷ but the investigations have greatly benefitted from later large scale excavations generated by the building of the high speed railway²⁸. The

²⁰ PANTON F op.cit. p

²¹ TATTON BROWN 2001 op.cit.

²² BROWN GARY 2002 'Roman Greenwich' Arch. Cant. Vol 122 pp289-301 (on Roman Roads)

²³ ARRON CLARK 2014, volunteer at site, pers.comm.

²⁴ BENNETT P Friends of CAT Newsletter, Winter 2014

²⁵ HISCOCK R1968 op.cit.

²⁶ HARRISON 1991 op.cit

²⁷ PENN W S 1958 *The Romano-British Settlement at Springhead: excavation of the Watling Street, Shop and Pedestal Site B.* Gravesend Historical Society. Reprint from Arch. Cant. Vol LXXII pp77-111

²⁸ ANDREWS P et al 2011 *Settling the Ebbsfleet Valley Volume 1: the sites*

Roman occupation here was followed after an interval by Saxon settlement but general environment rather than road communications is seen as the attractor -indeed Hardy and Andrews see no direct link between the two phases²⁹

Elsewhere as far as I can see, the main sightings have been in the Faversham area, between Syndale and Brenley Corner, with nothing else (this seems unbelievable, I know, but I've have checked the HER, and other sources e.g. Arch. Cant., range of historic aerial photographs and I would very much welcome records of any other rural sightings along the Chatham to Dover stretch.).

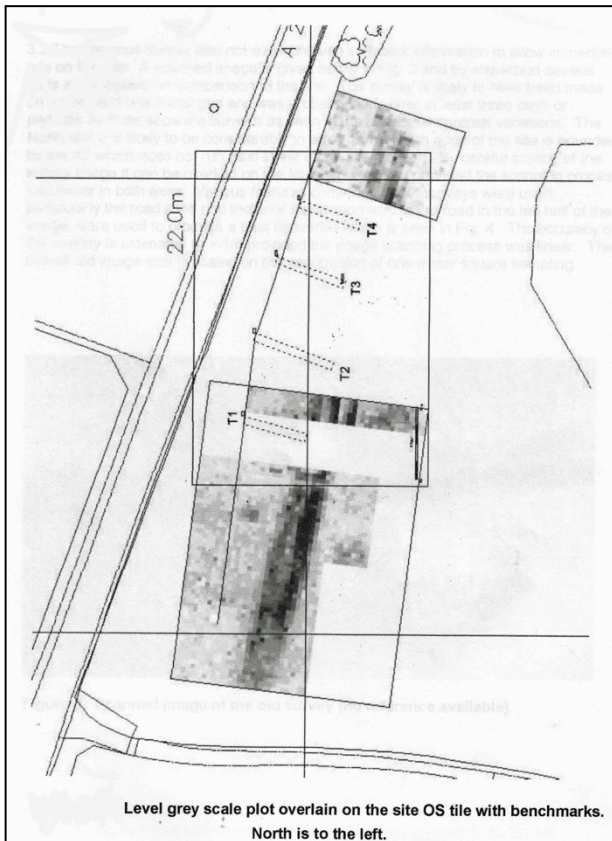


Fig 8: A georesistivity survey at Syndale, near Faversham

The most extensive sightings have been at Syndale, thought to be the 'Durolevum' mentioned in the late 2nd century Antonine Itinerary. The most dramatic example came from a geo resistivity survey carried out recently by students of the Kent Archaeological Field School.³⁰ This shows a substantial road lying at minimum 35 metre south of the present route of the A2, converging slightly further west to a distance of 24.5 metres minimum later excavation revealed this feature to have a metallised surface.

This metallised surface was also observed in 1993 in trenches dug along the route of an impending gas pipeline, also at a distance of 35m from the present road.³¹ and just to the west of the

resistivity survey are shown in Fig 8.

In the nearby village of Ospringe, small keyhole excavations by FSARG in 2008 gave us two possible sightings of Roman Watling Street.

In 2008, we had a glimpse of a substantial flint -pebble cobbled surface (Fig 9b, overleaf) in Keyhole 44, 22.5 metres south of the A2 and just south of the Maison Dieu/ Hospital of St Mary of Ospringe complex (see fig 9a, overleaf)³². The layers immediately above the cobbles contained medieval and Roman pottery with no later material. Nowadays, the medieval Maison Dieu lies to the south of the A2 with the main body of the Hospital of St Mary of Ospringe lying to the north: it is an interesting thought that the present A2, cutting through the former Hospital, might date from the post dissolution time, and that in the active time of the Hospital, the whole complex lay to the north of the road in use.

²⁹ HARDY A & P ANDREWS 2011 'Saxon, Medieval and Post-Medieval' in *Settling the Ebbsfleet Valley Volume 1: the Sites* Oxford & Wessex Archaeology: Oxford p 292 on 'Continuity of Occupation'

³⁰ Carried out by the students of the Kent Archaeological Field School

³¹ SIBUN L et al 2001 'Excavation at Syndale Park, Ospringe' Arch. Cant. Vol. 121 pp171-196.

³² FSARG website www.community-archaeology.org.uk 'Understanding Ospringe' project 'Report for Keyhole K44 at 21 Ospringe Street'

Another more substantial glimpse came in the rear garden of a south of the A2 house in 2009 where an extension had just been built (Fig 9c). Here not only could the edge of the road be seen (the extension had covered the rest) but there was an adjacent ditch³³. This ditch contained a large amount of main period AD1300-1400 Tyler Hill medieval pottery, (Fig 9d), implying that the roadway and ditch were in full use during the medieval period.

The Brenley Corner sighting, unfortunately, is less useful only because I have been unable to trace a published or indeed unpublished report³⁴ on these excavations which took place 1973-4, lead by Frank Jenkins, in connection with the creation of the A2/M2 junction. It is lodged in the HER, however, in fair detail³⁵ and does sound like a particularly interesting Roman site with ironworking and a possible shrine. A metalled road is mentioned but I cannot tell whether its orientation is appropriate for Watling Street without a map: someone please help!

Here, then, is solid evidence for the original road and maybe even its medieval direct descendant, running to the south of the present road. Now for some negative evidence: no trace of the Roman road has been found to the north of the A2 along the Syndale to Brenley stretch. There have been two commercial digs, one where Preston Lane joins the A2³⁶ and another on the western corner of the Love Lane/A2 junction³⁷. Both of these were substantial development plots. In the first case, no archaeology of any kind was found due to the site having been scraped for brickearth. In the second case, the archaeology was only post medieval.

On the immediate south side of the A2 there has been no substantial development since PPG16 came in in 1991, so no commercial investigations. Indeed, most of the south side remains free of any kind of development except in the Preston Village section. The plan for FSARG in 2015, then, is to develop a sampling method whereby geo-resistivity surveying can be used to test as much of the south of road stretch as possible, starting with the football ground area where six Roman inhumation burials at Mill House about 45 metres south of the A2³⁸ imply a road somewhere in between them and the A2. The survey will then spread into other zones as circumstances permit.

If this survey actually finds a road, further action would be needed to plan a new project.

Dr Pat Reid

March 2015

³³ FSARG website op.cit. Understanding Ospringe project Keyholes K63 and 63T

³⁴ Brief reports in 2 editions of *Archaeological Excavations*, published 1973 and 1974, have proved elusive - out of print?

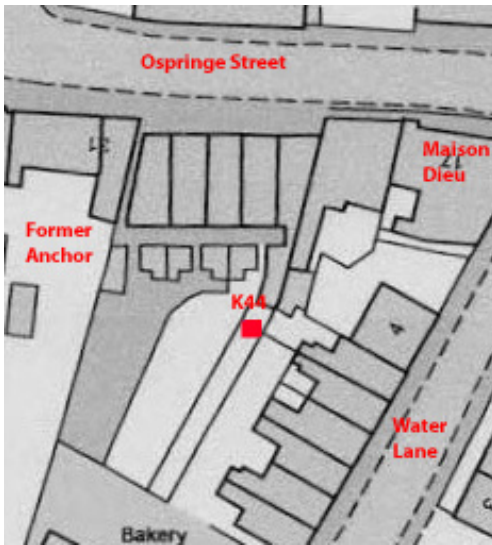
³⁵ KCC HER TR05 NW5 Roman ironworking site; section of Roman road; Belgic sherds; possible shrine

³⁶ SWAT archaeology c2009, unpublished report

³⁷ Canterbury Archaeological Trust 2005 *Watching Brief on land at Orchard Cottage, Love Lane, Faversham* unpublished report

³⁸ HER TR 06 SW21 4/5 Roman Inhumations at Preston Mill 1860

Fig 9: Possible glimpses of Watling Street in Ospringe



a) Location of Keyhole 44 in relation to the Maison Dieu and A2



b) A possible glimpse of Watling Street



c) The edge of the Roman and/or medieval Road is nearest with a shallow ditch beyond and a deeper one still further. The road edge showed layered impacted chalk and gravel.



d) medieval pottery from the adjoining ditch

Addendum

It is worth noting that the future of the areas to the south of the A2 is currently, under the Swale Local Plan, largely protected from development. Even so there are two proposals floating around which would involve land next to and south of the A2. One is the hotel-pub proposal for the former Nursery at Macknade Corner and the second is a proposal for 60+ houses on another defunct Nursery at Norton. Both of these would require professional archaeological investigations and our preliminary work could be helpful.