



ROMAN ROAD

BOWGREAVE

A WYRE ARCHAEOLOGY BIG DIG

Sept – Oct 2016

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1 BACKGROUND

David Ratledge's years of research into Lancashire's Roman Roads has benefitted much from the increased accessibility of LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging), a process that uses laser beams projected from equipment on an aircraft which then receives the returned 'echo' from the surface below. This can reveal features not visible to an observer on the ground and even surfaces hidden under foliage and grass. The application to the search for Roman roads, characterised by a raised *agger* and side ditches has brought brilliant results. One discovery has been confirmation of the line of the road linking the Roman depot at Walton le Dale to the fort at Lancaster. David's findings are now to be found on a

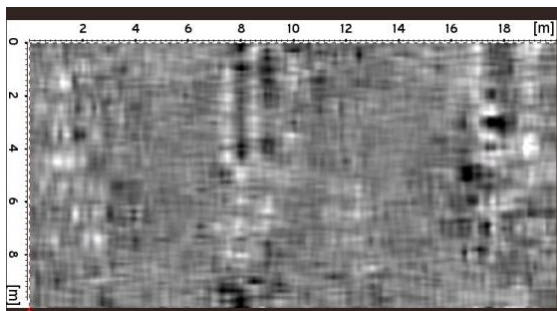
dedicated website 'Travel With The Romans' (www.twithr.co.uk) [Previously on the Roman Roads Research Association's website].

The image above looking south from Garstang shows how the line of the road approaches Garstang where it crosses the River Wyre close to the council car park. The LiDAR trace of the *agger* is in the centre of the picture. It was seen by Simon, one of our members who was then a member of staff at Garstang Community Academy who noticed the line appeared to run close to, if not actually under, his History classroom (*Right*).



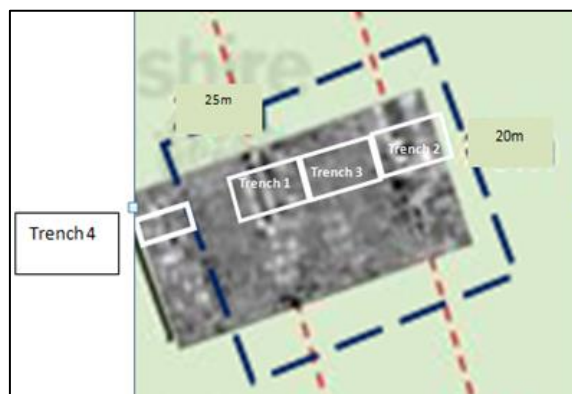
Simon's Headteacher, unsurprisingly, refused permission for him to investigate on school property but Simon was able to make contact with the owner of a piece of land along the line to ask if she would allow us to firstly survey the field in question and possibly proceed to an excavation.

Simon, Chris and Dave H of WA accompanied by David Ratledge conducted an initial visual survey of the potential site (*Right*) which yielded no definite result. We were pleased a few weeks later however to have assistance from Wigan Archaeological Society in using their GPR (Ground Penetrating Radar) to identify a number of 'targets' for excavation and, after submitting a detailed project plan and supporting documents, approval was given for a 4 day BIG DIG from 23rd to 26th September, at the end of which we were required to return the field to its previous undisturbed state.



GPR Trace

The image (*Left*), produced by GPR, shows centre and right the probable road ditches at a depth of 82cms. (*Below*) Project plan showing planned trenches and suspected line of the road.



2 EXCAVATION

The Bowgreave Big Dig began on Friday 23rd September 2016 with fine weather. As planned, 2 trenches were opened each 4m x 3m over the middle and eastern anomalies identified by the Wigan AS GPR.



Trenches 1 & 2

Note baulk in each trench and neatly stacked turves to right of T1 furthest from camera.

The trenches were excavated by spade/shovel to below the plough-soil and then by trowel. A 60cm baulk was left unexcavated lengthwise in each trench (*Left*).

At a depth of around 37cms in both trenches, was found a layer of cobbles of an average diameter of 15-20mm. These were laid on a bed of sandy clay of a red/orange colour (*Below*).



The concern was that rather than being parallel, the outer edges of the features in the respective trenches appeared to be converging to the NNW and, more puzzling, when the 3rd planned trench was opened between these first two, there was no evidence of any surface at that depth. Nor was there evidence of ditches bordering the supposed road, as had been suggested by the GPR survey. Nevertheless by Day 3, Sunday 25th September, there had been exposed a substantial cobbled area in T2 (*Right*).



On site discussion began to consider the possibility that any Roman road surface may have been destroyed by ploughing and what had been exposed was perhaps the cobbled surface of an old farmyard or track.

Intermittent showers had proved a handicap, despite having a heavy duty shelter, and it became apparent that the dig would have to be suspended for Monday when heavy rain was forecast. The landowner agreed that we could return on Tuesday 27th in order to backfill part of the trenches and replace turves. She also kindly agreed to our returning the following weekend with a proviso that the field would be returned to its original state by the afternoon of Sunday 2nd October.

Over the week, however, heavy rain proved a real problem as the trenches, despite being covered, acted as sumps into which water drained resulting in the need to bail out before further investigation (*Right*).





With the landowner's permission we opened a 4th trench over the anomaly located closer to the gate in which the only feature was a scatter of larger cobbles at a depth of about 1m that were interpreted as natural, possibly glacial in origin (*Left*). It must be said, however, that this trench was excavated during a period of very heavy rain and that the only way to counter that was to dig out part of the trench to act as a sump. Consequently, the area

exposed was limited to about 0.5m square.

After bailing out the main trenches and part backfilling to reduce water influx, it was possible to excavate the eastern extremity of Trench 2 and the western end of Trench 1. In the further excavation of Trench 2 we were able to expose more of the cobbled surface described above. Here, it became apparent that the surface had been subject to damage that had removed part of the edge resulting in an almost 90 degree 'bite' out of the surface (*Below left*). On further excavation it was observed that the actual original edge was in fact orientated almost exactly N-S and parallel to the feature in Trench 1 (*Below right*).



In the western extremity of Trench 1, at a depth of around 0.8m, was revealed a layer of larger cobbles of average diameter 30-40mm (*Below*). Their arrangement did not appear to be random leading to a suggestion that this might represent part of the foundation layer for the road structure. The depth at which these were found also suggested that, when attempting to find the side ditches, the excavations had not been deep enough to locate them.



Finally, as promised in the project plan, albeit two days beyond the original 4 days allocated, the site was returned to its 'original' state (*Left*). However safety fencing had to be left for a few more days and marker flags were left around the excavation since the soft mud remained up to 0.5m deep and could have proved hazardous to anyone walking or even driving a tractor across the field.

3 FINDS

Physical finds were mainly limited to those normally found in farmers' fields: bits of willow pattern pottery, odd pieces of maybe mediaeval or earlier pot, glass, bone but very oddly no clay pipe fragments. Obviously the former farmers of Garstang were non-smokers!

One interesting find from Trench 2 pictured right raised questions in view of its size and almost perfect spherical shape. Is it or isn't it a (Roman) sling shot?



4 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Bowgreave Big Dig was another learning experience. The project plan had been based on what was thought to be reliable evidence in the form of LiDAR traces and GPR survey and was carefully drafted to meet the concerns of the landowner. The trenches were laid out as planned and excavated to what was believed to be an appropriate depth. However, the poor weather from Day 3 proved to be a handicap and the need to bail out the trenches before further excavation plus a tight time schedule probably led us to curtail the dig without locating the boundary ditches which either lay just outside our excavated area or were deeper than anticipated. We were also confused and misled by the nature of the exposed surface. Since it didn't correspond to what we had expected to find we had doubts as to what it was, thinking we had uncovered a farm courtyard.

On the positive side, there was a lot of interest from local residents at least in the first few days and the landowner was most supportive, although she insisted that there should be no publicity or identification of the exact location. We were also delighted to have a number of new diggers joining us from Wigan AS, local students and other keen amateurs.

Fortunately the discovery of the edge of the road and its N-S alignment on the final day gave us the evidence, albeit somewhat circumstantial, that we had in fact confirmed the route of the major N-S Roman road as being on the line identified by David Ratledge.



The site photographed from almost from the same point. Left: 23 Sept 2016. Right: 20 August 2020

5 DIG TEAM

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David Hampson August 2020
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