

Roman roads in the weald a presentation to the U3A Local History Group March 2013

For me this project has been a personal as well as a physical journey.

My family moved to Edenbridge when I was a child, and we joined the Historical society, who invited some interesting speakers. The speaker that made a huge impression on me was Ivan D. Margary, an expert on Roman Roads. I am indebted to his guidance, and the record of his thorough investigations and field work shown in his book, Roman Ways in the Weald, which I have used in my research over the years.

Mr Margary detected the existence of the London- Lewes Way over Ashdown Forest from aerial photographs taken in the 1930's and subsequently excavated and surveyed extensively along the route, recording his observations in his book section by section onto Ordnance Survey maps.

Peter Jeffery joined me on this recent revisit and put a lot of work into our presentation to the group.

After the Romans invaded Britain in AD 43, the armies constructed a network of roads and military support structures to subdue the native population. Later however they began exploiting the resources, including in the Weald the Iron from the foundries and corn from the south.

Early man had made ridgeways along the chalk downs and the sandstone, which run mostly East /West across the Weald, the Romans needed to connect London with the coast and they built several roads on a North/South axis to transport these heavy goods more easily.

The Romans did not have compasses to help them but it would appear relied on sighting from high point to high point, using an instrument called a Groma, based on 4 plumb lines. Teams of men would use the Groma to line up series of poles to plan the route they wanted.

After clearing the land of trees and undergrowth, they constructed parallel ditches around 60 foot apart to drain the highway which was built on a solid foundation of the local natural rock, topped and tamped down with small stones and where possible the slag-waste product from the iron furnaces that were situated along the chosen route. The mound created was known as an Agger .

After the Romans left Britain the roads started to deteriorate due to lack of maintenance, and hedges grew up over the soil naturally deposited on the hard surface, these straight lines were often used as property and parish boundaries, and the hedges on the line of the Roman road can often be seen now.

The closest Roman road to Crowborough and the one that Mr Margary had discovered is known as the London –Lewes Way, it is roughly followed by the B2026 which winds from side to side. I have concentrated on a short section nearest to us from Duddleswell to Holtye.

If you study the 2 ½ inches to 1 mile, Ashdown Forest Explorer Map, the Roman Road is shown with a faint dotted line, using this, alongside Google Earth, you can follow the route, but nothing can beat searching on the ground, pushing through undergrowth and studying the banks of streams for clues.

We will start at the staggered crossroads connecting Crowborough to Nutley on the B2026, where the Roman Road comes up the slope from the south, and there is a hedge on the line. Then diagonally across the crossroads and into the forest near Camp Hill, there are signs in the bracken here, and at the Car Park named Roman Road a cleared heather covered mound of the agger can be seen. The road follows the ridge through the fork in the modern road, and then parallel to B2188 until it reaches Five Hundred Acre Wood, where the road angles towards Chuck Hatch and stays on this line right through Edenbridge.

As the Roman road crosses a stream in a deep gully near the Chuck Hatch road, Peter and I found some fascinating terraces cut to assist the climb up the following bank, (they are clearly shown on larger scale maps) this did involve quite a bit of scrabbling around ! The Roman road crosses the B2026 here and over the next part as it crosses Gallipot Street and then the old railway line, there are a number of hedgerows grown on the line of the road.

After going through Hartfield keep on the B2026 until Butcherfield Lane. Searching here, following the line of the Roman road, as it passed along the edge of a recently ploughed field, I found small pieces of iron slag, broken away from the surface of the Agger. The line of the road crosses Butcherfield Lane, over a small stream, passing close to Bassett's Manor. Upstream from Bassett's Manor, a Roman Iron furnace site has been identified at Cansiron near Hammerwood.

On the modern A264 near the White Hart at Holtye, a sign has been placed by the Sussex Archaeological Society in a layby on the south side. This shows a footpath down the slope, to the section that Mr Margary had excavated during the 1930's. This area at the field bottom is now surrounded by undergrowth, but the road surface is kept clear so the hard clinker covered surface can be seen.

Mr Margary remained the unchallenged expert in his field of Roman Roads in Britain during his lifetime, but more recently the Culver Archaeological Project near Barcombe, Lewes has uncovered a different part of the London Lewes Way, a Roman Villa and a Bathhouse near Barcombe Church.

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