

SECOND THOUGHTS ON STROOD'S 'CAUSEWAY'

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In a report entitled 'Roman Discoveries in 1897', George Payne¹ thus described the Roman crossing of the Medway at Rochester:

'A wooden bridge built upon piles was thrown across the river Medway. On reaching the Strood side of the river their engineers were confronted with a marsh about 355 yards wide. This difficulty, as the sequel will show, they boldly overcame by constructing upon the alluvial deposit a magnificent causeway.'

He went on to describe how, in the course of laying a storm-water drain across Strood High Street in 1897, the workmen 'cut through the entire depth of the causeway to the mud at its base'. They had cut this section opposite the junction of Railway Street (now Station Road) immediately to the west of the railway bridge over the High Street, an area now completely remodelled, so that the site, shown in Fig. 1 as Site A, is now covered by a traffic island. Payne recorded the stratification thus:

	<i>Depth</i>
'1 Layers of post-Roman roads	2 feet 8 inches
2 Paved surface of causeway	6 to 8 inches
3 Small pebble gravel, mixed with black earth, rammed	9 inches
4 Flints, broken fine	7 inches
5 Rammed chalk	5 inches
6 Flints, whole, and rough rag, bits of Roman tile	3 feet 6 inches
7 Marsh mud, containing numerous oak piles about 4 feet in length, with pieces of wood laid at intervals across them, or perhaps they were originally made fast with nails.'	

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, xxiii (1898), 4.

He added:

‘About seven square feet of paved way were quite perfect up to the line of the footpath on the south side of High Street. At a distance of 3 feet 4 inches from the modern kerb was a wheel track, grooved by wear to a depth of 2 to 3 inches and 4 inches in width. . . . The approximate width of the Strood causeway was about 14 feet.’

A six-foot square of this cobble-paved way, with its wheel-track, was carefully set in concrete and moved to the garden of Eastgate House Museum, Rochester, where it may still be seen. Inevitably, the rut in it was soon described in a local guide as having been ‘made by the Roman chariot wheels’.

Payne reported that coins of Nerva, Antoninus Pius, Gordianus and Maximianus were found in Layer 6. These span the whole of the second and third centuries, and there is no record of any Roman finds above Layer 6. Today, one would not hesitate to say that the paved surface, Layer 2, on this evidence alone could only be late Roman or medieval and could not be the surface of the first-century road. The evidence of Layer 7 suggests that the conquest road at this point may have been a low timber-and-brushwood causeway across the mud flat between the bridge and the future site of the Angel.

In the same report, almost casually, Payne mentions a second discovery (Site B):

‘Simultaneously with the excavations in Strood High Street the strip of road between the western end of Rochester Bridge and Messrs. Aveling and Porter’s Engineering Works (now Winget’s) was opened for the purpose of laying a large gas main. Here the workmen cut through a paved road which gradually sloped diagonally from the Roman causeway to the river. It resembled the latter in every respect so far as the operations permitted it to be seen, and the writer was led to the conclusion that it might have been a landing place connected with the river.’

If only Payne had seen Site B before he had seen Site A he would surely have reached a different conclusion about both of them. As it was, he tried to relate his second discovery to his ‘magnificent causeway’ of Site A, and failed to make sense of it. Yet until 1856, well within the recollection of some of his contemporaries, the strip of road that covers Site B had formed the approach to the stone bridge of 1392 which crossed the Medway about fifty yards upstream from the site of its Roman predecessor. The conclusion that this Site B paving was part of the approach to the bridge of 1392 appears to be inescapable, and we have Payne’s own statement that it resembled that of Site A ‘in every

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respect, so far as the operations permitted it to be seen'. This leaves little room for doubt that the wheel-rutted cobbled paving found at Site A is not Roman but medieval.

Cubitt's bridge, which succeeded the medieval bridge in 1856, reverted to the Roman alignment of Rochester and Strood High Streets. By 1969 the growth of traffic led to its duplication, which involved the widening of Strood High Street as far west as the railway bridge. Between Site A and Site B a pedestrian underpass was made, regarding which Col. E. T. L. Baker reported²:

'The deep foundations for the pedestrian underpass at the Strood end of the Bridge approach revealed cobbles some 2 to 3 feet below the existing surface, appearing to be on the line of the diversion of the High Street made in 1392, when the medieval bridge was built. Very little, if anything, appeared of the line of the possible Roman road to a bridge roughly on the present line.'

The presence of the cobbles confirms the evidence mentioned above; the absence of evidence of a Roman road is not inexplicable. During the foundation work on Cubitt's bridge in 1856 a curious piece of evidence had come to light and was thus recorded by James Phippen³:

'During the excavations at the Strood end of the bridge the workmen, at 18 feet below the surface, came down upon some trees in a horizontal position. They were chiefly hazel, with leaves and nuts on them. The leaves were brown and on being exposed to the air soon became dust.'

This interesting observation raises more questions than are relevant to the present discussion, but at least it suggests that the surface on which these trees lay was below the depth of 13 ft. reached by the modern pedestrian underpass.

The cobble paving revealed in 1897 at Sites A and B, and in 1969 at the underpass, may then be regarded as part of the western approach to the medieval bridge, and therefore of the late fourteenth century; but at Site A this paving was superimposed on the indubitable Roman Layers 6 and 7. Sandwiched between this Roman base and the late-medieval paving, Layers 5, 4 and 3 seem to bear witness to consolidation work carried out during the intervening millennium, when the water-level was slowly rising.⁴

The Roman alignment of Strood High Street persisted through the

² *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxv (1970), 191.

³ James Phippen, *Descriptive Sketches of Rochester, Chatham and their Vicinities* (1862).

⁴ J. H. Evans, 'Archaeological Horizons in the north Kent Marshes', *Arch. Cant.*, lxxvi (1953), 103-46.

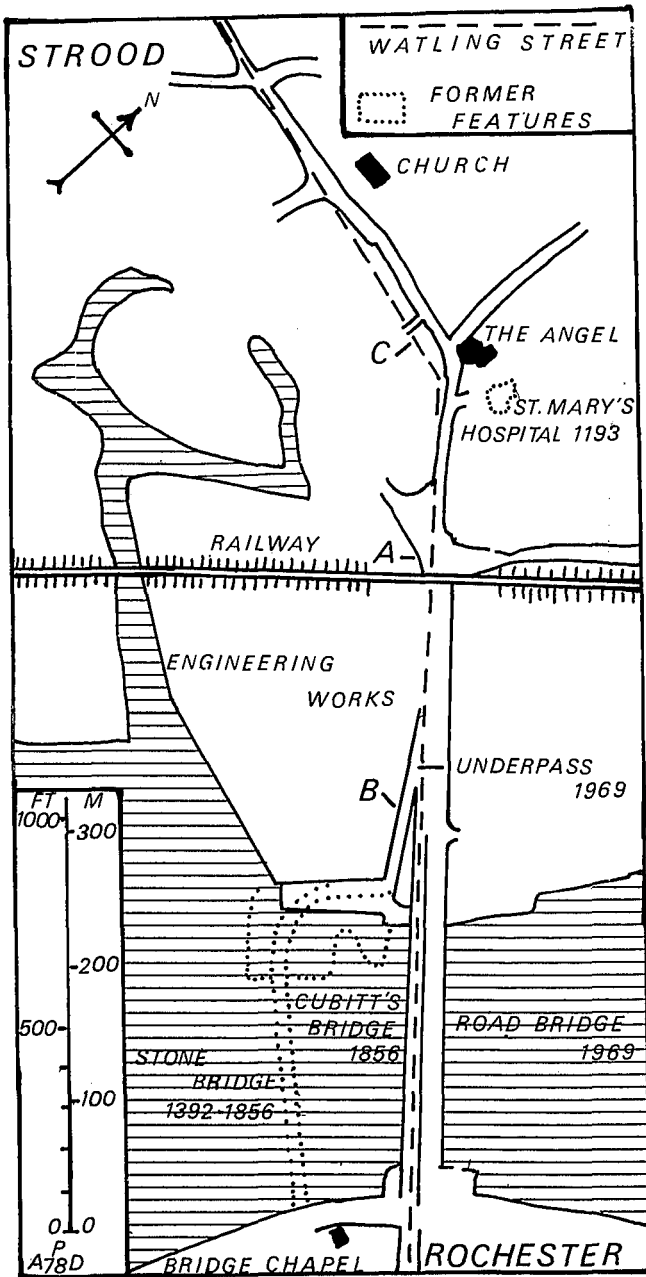


Fig. 1. Strood High Street and Rochester Bridge.

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deepening mud of the Middle Ages, and in 1193 Gilbert de Glanville, Bishop of Rochester, established St. Mary's (or Newark) Hospital at the drier end of High Street, probably just beyond the reach of the floods. In 1968, Harrison⁵ traced the walls of this now vanished hospital down to '9 ft. below the modern surface and still above foundation level, which suggests that the water-table must have been considerably lower in the thirteenth century'.

Here, at the Angel, the Roman route had to cross a stream that came down the present line of North Street, and here it turned west for the ascent of Strood Hill. Its line runs at first beneath the shops that now line the south side of High Street. In 1899 Smetham⁶ wrote:

'In excavating a cellar some thirty years ago under the house (No. 97) opposite the Angel Inn, portions of the old Roman pavement were discovered (it still remains *in situ*) about five feet below the present level. The same fact was also revealed in rebuilding the premises Nos. 107 and 109 on the same side (south) of the street, five or six doors further up.'

Part of this feature is still visible in the cellar of No. 109 (Fig. 1, Site C), now an off-licence, to which access was kindly allowed to the writer by the manager. Along the foot of the southern wall of the cellar it forms a low step, 2 ft. wide, rising some 3 in. above the rest of the floor. Its edge is of brick, but there are stones where it disappears under the cellar wall, which stands on it and conceals its full width. It may possibly be medieval, but it is 5 ft. 6 in. below street level and its surface corresponds to the Roman occupation level at 8-9 ft. O.D. found by Harrison in 1968 in his excavation of the nearby site of St. Mary's Hospital. Its edge is 33 ft. south of the shop front and parallel with it. The other cellars mentioned by Smetham have now been filled in but, so far as one can judge from the short length visible at Site C, its edge points directly at the road up Strood Hill.

The lowest layers of Site A confirm the traditional line of Roman Watling Street through Strood from the bridge to the Angel. It appears that the cobble paving of Sites A and B, and the underpass, is connected with, and not older than, the bridge of 1392. The cellar feature at Site C is consistent with the Roman occupation level and with the alignment of Watling Street from the Angel to Strood Hill.

It is hoped that this re-interpretation of the evidence will not be regarded as derogatory of the devoted work of George Payne, but it needs to be made, if only because the piece of pavement – fortunately

⁵ A. C. Harrison, 'Excavations on the Site of St. Mary's Hospital, Strood', *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxiv (1969), 139-60.

⁶ H. Smetham, *History of Strood*, (1899).

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uninscribed – still lies in the garden of Eastgate House, and because Payne's account of this mythical Roman causeway was copied by Codrington,⁷ and Codrington quoted by Margary.⁸

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⁷ T. Codrington, *Roman Roads in Britain*, (1903), 44.

⁸ I. D. Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain*, (1955), 52.