

## THE ISLAND ROAD

*Evidence for its course in the Parish of Sturry*<sup>1</sup>

By DAVID S. STAFFORD

*Object* : To determine the exact course and nature of the stretch of the Roman "Island Road" lying between the junction of Vauxhall Road with Sturry Road (166594) and the "Swan Inn", Sturry (177603).

The methods used were searching for surface evidence, probing, and actual excavation at intervals along the conjectural route.

EVIDENCE FROM THE SURFACE : (proceeding towards Sturry from Canterbury).

An R.A.F. aerial photograph shows a pale streak along the conjectural alignment in the arable field to the north of Marsh Farm. Between the Tank enclosure and Providence Place there is a flat depression about forty feet wide clearly visible along the alignment. Probing across this line proved the existence of a hard surface at a depth of about a foot below present-day ground level, flanked by silt-filled ditches.

It was across this depression that Trench III was dug.

From here, the alignment coincides for about a furlong with the Sturry-Fordwich-parish boundary, which is laid along the southern filled-in side ditch. The owner of Providence Place Nursery informed me that in the course of his work he discovered a band of gravel twenty-eight feet wide at a depth of two feet beneath the present site of his glasshouses. It seems significant that this band of gravel follows the conjectural alignment.

Between these glasshouses and the Junior King's School grounds, neither probing nor searching the banks of the Stour has produced any signs of metalling, perhaps because the river has changed its course since Roman times.

In the Junior King's School grounds, the only place where surface evidence can be traced is on "The Hamel" (177603), a field between the "Swan Inn" and the early Tudor tithe barn. Here, in hot summers, the withered grass clearly marks the course of the alignment, which is precisely that of the Sturry-Westbere parish boundary. At this point, therefore, the conjectural alignment has continued from

<sup>1</sup> All names mentioned are those on the 6 in. O.S. sheet Kent XXXV S.E., save for the "Swan Inn" and "The Hamel".

The six-figure numbers in brackets are the O.S. six-figure references.

Drawings of sections, plans and finds from excavation are deposited in the Royal Museum, Canterbury.

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the west, where it lies under the northern end of the tithe barn, across The Hamel, along the short stretch of Sturry High Street past the Post Office, thence through the station yard, finally taking up the present-day alignment of the Island Road. The approach to the station yard is marked by a low agger which may represent the Roman Road.

### THE EXCAVATION

Three trenches were dug across the line just described. Trenches I and II were dug upon The Hamel. Many fragments of Tudor tiling, much poorly fired brick, and a noteworthy quantity of fire-reddened stones and pebbles occupied a distinct layer, four to six inches below the surface in each trench. This layer is presumably waste material from the building of the Tudor barn. Four to five inches below this Tudor layer in each trench a hard gravel surface was encountered.

In Trench I a layer of cambered gravel, some six to eight inches thick and nineteen feet wide, rested on a bed of stones and flints four to six inches thick. From beneath this came a few small rather indeterminate fragments of pottery, which Mr. Frank Jenkins, F.S.A.,<sup>1</sup> has identified as probably of the late First or early Second century A.D. The composition of the gravel corresponds with that found locally in the quarries on the high ground south of Fordwich, and not with the deposits which lie in the flood plain of the valley. It would therefore seem that the material was not a natural deposit but had been carried to the site from elsewhere, especially as the pottery was found beneath it.

The section of Trench II (sixty-four feet to the west of Trench I) showed a flat surfaced layer of gravel some ten inches thick and thirteen feet wide, set on a layer of stones and flints. Part of the base of a small medieval pot was found lying on the surface of this gravel. The gravel was dirty in appearance, and there was a black deposit on the natural clay beneath the layer of stones. A sample of this deposit was tested for manganese dioxide and produced a positive result. This is interesting because this chemical occurs in certain quarries in the area (e.g. Homersham west pit), and may indicate the source of supply of the gravel.

Neither section revealed any signs of side ditches.

Trench III was cut half a mile west of The Hamel, at Providence Place and 19 feet to the east of the Tank enclosure wall, across the wide depression already described.

Gravel similar to that found in Trench I, but rather more sandy, lay at a depth of one foot below the surface, under a scatter of clay pipe stems, broken tiles, brickbats, and fragments of pottery typical of that

<sup>1</sup> Recently of the Royal Museum, Canterbury.

PROVIDENCE PLACE, STURRY. O.S. 6" SHEET KENT XXXV S.E. GRID REF. :170597  
 SECTION ACROSS THE LINE OF THE ROMAN ROAD BETWEEN CANTERBURY AND UPSTREET

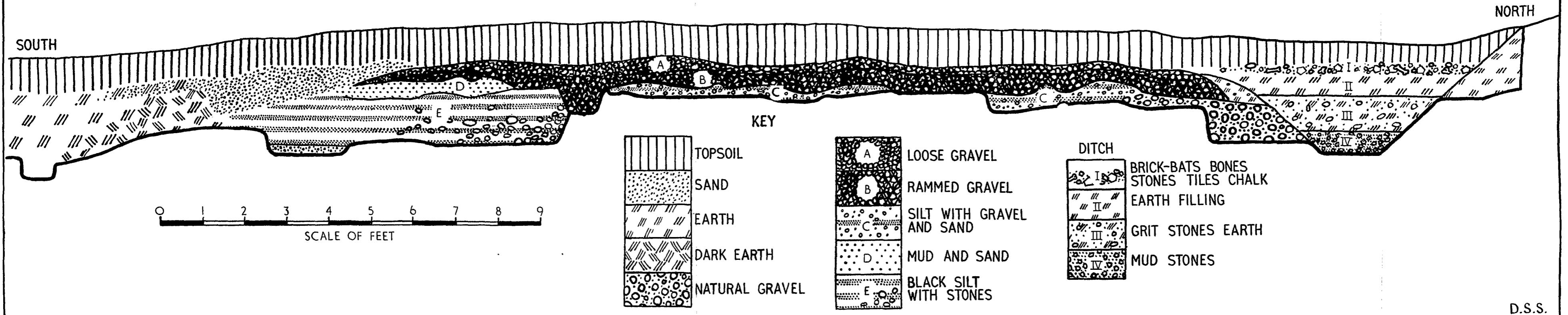


FIG. 1.

D.S.S.

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produced in the last two centuries. This gravel (Layers A and B) proved to be about eight inches thick and 21 feet wide, and covered a second spread of gravel, 12 feet in width (C). This was considerably broken up, and contained flints, silt, sand and mud. At its southern edge was a filled-in wheel rut. The southern edge of the layer above it (B) covered a quantity of sand and mud (D), the latter containing fragments of thin flat tiles. Layers B and D sealed a deposit of evil-smelling black silt (E), which yielded a quantity of clay pipe stems. The north edge of Layer B rested on the natural gravel.

Beyond this edge of Layer B was a ditch some 4 feet wide at the top, with sloping sides and a flat bottom, cut into the natural gravel. The upper filling of this ditch consisted of clean soil about 7 in. thick, which

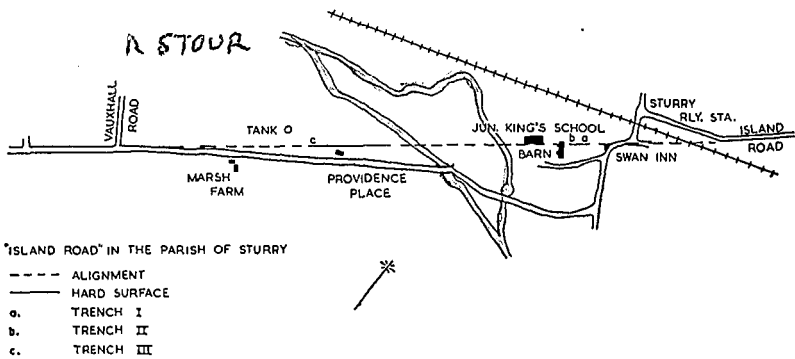


FIG. 2.

sealed a layer of stony gritty dark soil about 7 in. thick. Below this was the primary deposit of mud and stones about 6 in. thick, resting on the flat bottom of the ditch.

Resting on the outer lip of this ditch were a fragment of hand-made tile and oyster shells.

Since the gravel in Layers A and B is quite different from the natural gravel, it can hardly represent upcast material from the original excavation for the ditch, but must have been brought to the site from elsewhere. At the extreme south end of this section, the area was found to be much disturbed with tile fragments occurring at all levels. Thus it is impossible to say whether a similar ditch lay along that side of the gravel or not. Perhaps for the same reason, the excavation here revealed no sign of stratification. The absence of a ditch may therefore be due to the activities of gravel diggers in more recent times, creating a hole in which the black silt (E) accumulated. The unpleasant nature of this silt suggests that it was left open for a considerable time.

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### CONCLUSIONS

Before excavation, surface evidence and probing had shown a wide band on an alignment between Sturry Road, west of Vauxhall Road, in Canterbury, and the Sturry-Westbere parish boundary, where it goes through Sturry station yard, before joining the modern Island Road, which continues the main alignment.

The excavations on the Hamel showed that the band of gravel had been artificially laid, and had fallen into disuse as a road (if such it had been), to be finally covered by an accumulation of earth several inches thick. The precise date when this occurred is uncertain, but it seems to have been before the early Tudor period. If this is so, then it is not unreasonable to suppose that the gravel must have been laid down at an early time. Since the sections are layered, and, in Trench I at least, cambered, and on the presumed course of the Roman road, it seems likely that these features represent sections of the Roman "Island Road" to Thanet.

The reason why no traces of road metalling were found between the two branches of the river is most likely that changes in its course have swept all evidence away.

At Providence Place, it is clear that Layers A and B cannot be of the Roman period, because they overlay strata containing recent material. If anything remains of a Roman road at this point, it will be the ditch and the confused layer (C) of gravel, sand and silt, broken by the passage of time and traffic. The upper layers were probably destroyed by later excavations for gravel, represented by the wide depression which follows the alignment in this area.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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