

## Notes

### New light on a suspected Roman road between Ratcliffe on Soar and Leicester

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#### Introduction

For several years a short section of road running north from the village of Kegworth has attracted attention as part of a possible Roman route/road. In 1982 Peter Liddle, of Leicestershire Museums Archaeological Survey Team, went as far as suggesting (1982 p.31) that the road may form part of a route running south from Ratcliffe on Soar, continuing through the hills of Charnwood Forest, and eventually on to the city of Leicester (*Ratae Corieltavorum*). He did, however, point out that this was a conjectural hypothesis requiring further investigation.

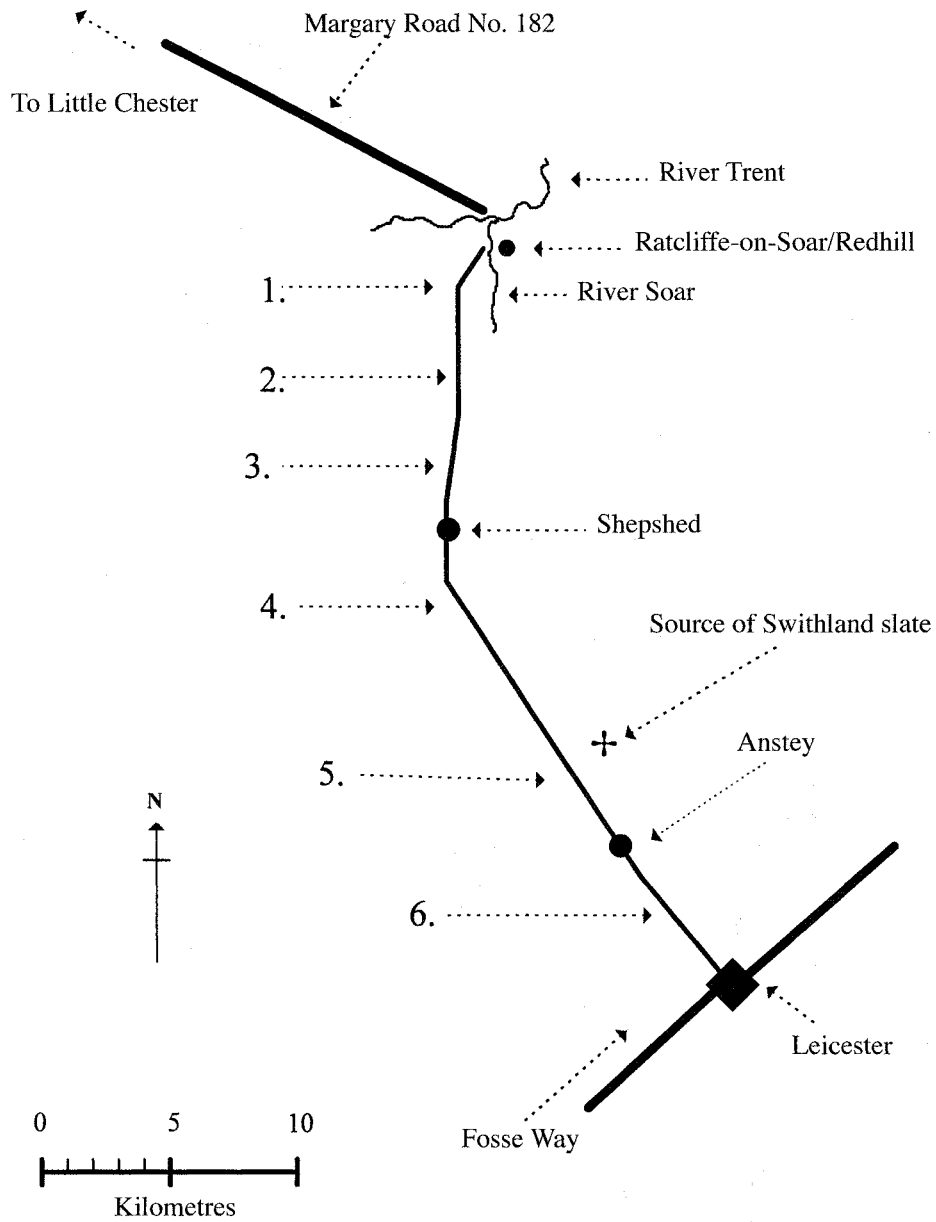
As part of examination requirements for a qualification in Archaeological Studies (Cambridge University Local Examinations Syndicate: A-Level Archaeology), the present author has recently undertaken a programme of research examining evidence for antiquity along the length of this suspected route. This research involved fieldwork, examination of local records, consideration of place-names and inspection of aerial photographs. An important part of this work was also to evaluate the context of this suspected route in order to determine if circumstantial evidence lent weight to the idea of an ancient route, Roman or otherwise. This paper is a summary of the main findings and conclusions of this research. The full report is available in the County Sites and Monuments Record.

#### Main findings

The illustration shows the possible course of the suspected route between Ratcliffe on Soar and Leicester. The list below acts both as a key for this illustration, as well as the briefest of discussions as to the possible significance of various points; those requiring a more thorough discussion are directed towards the full report. Some readers may also wish to view *Ordnance Survey Path Finder Sheets* 853, 874, 894; all grid references quoted refer to these sheets.

**1. Long Lane, Kegworth** - The 'aggered' (i.e. raised and cambered) profile of this road and its straight alignment have undoubtedly contributed to suggestions that its origins lie in the Romano-British period. A faint 'parch-mark' showing on an aerial photograph of the area at SK 489 292 (Black and white, Hunting Survey Ltd. 1969 Run 20 - 0884: Leicestershire County Council), would appear to indicate that the road once extended to the very banks of the River Soar, at a point just south of the Romano-British settlement at Ratcliffe on Soar/Redhill, Notts. (Liddle 1982, p.31; Todd 1991, p.113). On a slightly different alignment, Nottingham Road, London Road (A6) and a track/footpath (SK 487272) continue the southern route of Long Lane through and beyond the village of Kegworth. How well these represent the precise alignment of any ancient route is perhaps debatable; it is not unreasonable to suspect that urban development within the village has caused a certain amount of warping to the alignment.

**2. Public footpath between Kegworth and Long Whatton** - A badly eroded agger-like earthwork is visible along the public footpath running south of Kegworth at SK 486



The postulated route between Ratcliffe-on-Soar and Leicester (*Ratae Corieltavorum*) showing its relationship to known stretches of Roman road and its proximity to the confluence of the River Trent and the River Soar. Anstey and Shepshed are shown for purposes of geographical orientation. The numbers shown in the illustration refer to sections of the route discussed in the main text.

257. It is extremely difficult to comment on the precise significance of this feature without recourse to excavation. Interestingly, however, this feature does correlate well with the alignment of Long Lane, suggesting that if this road did originally extend in a reasonably straight southerly manner, then any surviving physical remnants should appear at approximately this point. At SK 487 245, a section of parish boundary runs along the alignment of the footpath for approximately 100 metres. Some parish boundaries date back to the eighth - tenth centuries AD and can thus suggest antiquity of roads, tracks and footpaths (Bagshaw 1979, p.19). The contemporary footpath bends around a small spinney at SK 488 244; visual examination of the spinney, however, revealed a well defined footpath of indeterminate date, continuing the alignment indicated by the earthwork and parish boundary. The footpath continues towards Long Whatton where it meets Mill Lane. It is interesting to note that this road awkwardly staggers as though conforming to an existing route or pattern of land use/ownership (perhaps itself dictated by, or using as a convenient boundary, an existing road/route).

**3. Long Whatton to Shepshed** - If the alignment of the public footpath north of Long Whatton is followed south, it is notable that the alignment is continued by a section of footpath and field boundaries south of the village. Such a precise correlation between these two sections of footpath, which today are separated by the village, would suggest that the two features were once one continuous route. It is important to note that this alignment passes through a field (SK 484 230) containing the visible remnants of ridge and furrow ploughing. This latter feature provides a very broad *terminus ante quem* suggesting that any route passing through this field went out of use, at least in a southerly direction, at some time during the medieval period. No archaeological or cartographical evidence for a continuation of the route towards Shepshed is visible south of this point, suggesting that intensive agriculture has destroyed any evidence of the route. Nevertheless, during the construction of the M1 motorway in 1964, members of Shepshed Archaeological Society reported observing what they believed to be a road surface, between Oakley and Piper Woods (Green 1964, pp.49-50; May 1965, p.7). Details of their discovery are imprecise but would appear to suggest a continuation of the route towards the village of Shepshed.

**4. Shepshed to Bradgate Park** - The reasonably straight alignment of Ingleberry/Benscliffe Road (B5330) running south of Shepshed, is a feature which, as in the case of Long Lane, has made it a likely candidate for those attempting to suggest a Roman road within the area. The road can actually be traced back to Leicester Road within the village of Shepshed, itself a straight section of road, running north towards Oakley and Piper Woods. Notably, Leicester Road occupies a natural ridge-top position; such topography provides natural drainage, making it the ideal location for a route/road in any age. Straightness of alignment in a road cannot, however, be seen as conclusive evidence of Roman ancestry; indeed, parliamentary enclosure roads of the 18th and 19th centuries have been mistaken for Roman roads on this basis (Margary 1967, p.514). However, W. King's map of 1806 (Crocker 1981, p.53) clearly demonstrates that Leicester Road, Ingleberry Road and Benscliffe Road were in existence at least two years prior to the parliamentary enclosure of Charnwood Forest c.1808 (*ibid.* p.55). John Prior's less detailed map of 1779 shows most (but not all) of Ingleberry/Benscliffe Road at an even earlier date (*ibid.* p.51). Even so, we cannot assume that the straight character of this route is not, at least in part the product of 'modern' refinement. This road is not particularly raised in profile (*i.e.* aggered), but again, alterations within the last few centuries may be responsible for eroding any older physical characteristics this

route may have once displayed. Intriguingly, a document of c.AD 1240 mentions a route between Old John Hill and Shepshed (Forsyth 1974, p.3); it is possible that this refers to the route which today bears the nomenclature Ingleberry/Benscliffe Road. A map of c.1858 (Anonymous, 1858) shows a faint continuation of Benscliffe Road entering Bradgate Park at SK 523 117, although the physical characteristics of this 'feature' cannot be assessed due to the modern use of this area as a public car-park.

**5. Bradgate Park to Anstey** - A footpath which exits Bradgate Park at SK 537 097 and is accompanied by 400 metres of parish boundary, correlates in alignment with Ingleberry/Benscliffe Road suggesting that these features represent one continuous route. Importantly, the name Bradgate means 'broad road' (*brad - gata*) (Bourne 1981, pp.23-4), or possibly, 'broad gap' (*brad - geat*) (*ibid.* p.32); in either case, the implications of this name for the inference of an ancient route are obvious. A well defined footpath runs through the park linking Benscliffe road to the footpath and parish boundary, although this feature does not bear the physical characteristics usually associated with Roman roads.

**6. Anstey to Leicester** - Two dark parallel lines, approximately 100 metres in length, show on an aerial photograph (Black and White, Hunting Survey Ltd. 1969 Run 17 - 2006: Leics.CC.) at SK 543 092, and these correlate well with the alignment of the footpath/parish boundary which exits Bradgate Park. It is difficult to establish their precise nature without recourse to excavation, but they may represent ditches running either side of the route. It is noteworthy that this cropmark is overlain by ridge and furrow, suggesting that if this feature does represent an ancient route, then this section of it was destroyed at some time during the Middle Ages. This alignment is continued further by a footpath which crosses Rothley Brook at SK 553 092. Packhorse Bridge, which crosses the brook at this point, is believed to be 14th century in date (Anonymous 1988, p.8) although, it is possible that this replaced an earlier bridge or ford (*cf.* Rackham 1986, pp.261-2). Interestingly, the name Anstey appears to have a connection with ancient routes (*see, inter alia,* Cameron 1996, p.162; Atkin 1998, pp.83-98), and no less than eight (57%) of the fourteen places with this nomenclature are known to be associated with Roman roads (Atkin 1998, p.84). The tracing of ancient routes into the city of Leicester itself, is a notoriously difficult matter due to the effects of many centuries of urbanisation and alteration to existing routes (*cf.* the 'Mancetter road' - McWhirr 1967, pp.1-5; Gartree Road - Margary 1973, p.215). In this case, however, Anstey Lane (B3527), by nature of its continuation of the evidence described thus far, would appear a likely candidate. A section of parish boundary (SK 555 083) suggests the possible antiquity of this road, and a field abutting Anstey Lane at SK555 084 bears the name Short Port Field (LLRRO, FNS Anstey); such a name may have derived from reference to a 'port-way', or long distance portage route (Cameron 1996, p.160).

### Conclusions and discussion

Before considering the implications of the known Roman (and earlier) context of this route, it is prudent to interpret what the evidence described thus far may suggest in terms of a 'date' for the route's origin/existence. The parish boundaries at SK 487 245 and SK 537 097, suggest an early medieval date for the sections of route along which they lie (*i.e.* between Kegworth and Long Whatton, and between Bradgate Park and Leicester). Disruption of the route by medieval ploughing at SK 484 230 and SK 543 092 also suggests that if this route was once a single entity then it is most likely to have

been so no later than the early medieval period. The earliest known documentary reference to the place-name Bradgate is AD 1275 (Bourne 1981, p.32); however, the Old English linguistic element of the nomenclature betrays the possibility of an earlier origin and, therefore, the earlier existence of a route. The same can be said of the place-name Anstey, whose earliest known documented reference dates to AD 1086 (*ibid.* p.29). Therefore, on the basis of archaeological evidence (excluding context), cartographical and place-name evidence, it does not appear unreasonable to suggest that the route discussed here is at least early medieval (*i.e.* pre-AD 1066) in date.

The aggered profile of Long Lane and the straight sections of this route (*cf.* Long Lane, Ingleberry/Benscliffe Road, footpath and parish boundary exiting Bradgate Park, etc.) are suggestive of Roman ancestry but not conclusively so. The proximity of Long Lane to the confluence of the Trent and the Soar (*i.e.* in a potential flood area), may have ensured that a raised profile was a prudent/necessary choice for a route of any date. As regards the relevance of straightness, the shortest distance between any two points is a straight line making it a desirable alignment in any period. To suggest a Roman (or earlier) origin/usage of this route, it is, therefore, essential to examine the route within its known archaeological context and it is to this which we shall now turn.

Relating this suspected ancient route to its archaeological context is fraught with difficulty. Several of the parishes immediately adjacent to the route (such as Hathern) have received minimal fieldwork, whilst the largely pastoral nature of Charnwood Forest has ensured that this area has yet to be examined by local field-walkers to a satisfactory degree. We must, therefore, be aware that the known sites in the areas through which the postulated route passes, represent a site discovery pattern as opposed to a true site *distribution* pattern.

In spite of these difficulties, several inferences can be made from the known context of this suspected route which would appear to increase the likelihood of a Romano-British provenance. Firstly, the route connects the Roman town of Leicester (*Ratae Corieltavorum*) to the Romano-British settlement at Ratcliffe on Soar/Redhill, Notts. (Liddle 1982, p.31; Todd 1991, p.113). One kilometre to the west of this settlement, at SK 482 294 lies a villa and small settlement site (Clay 1985, pp.17-26; Todd 1991, pp.88, 105-6). This route may also have provided a convenient link (see *illus.* 1) between the Fosse Way at Ratae (Leicester) and a road (Margary No. 182) running between Ratcliffe on Soar/Redhill and Derwentio (Little Chester, Derbys.). The connection of this route to the River Trent should not be underestimated; indeed, the Roman road from *Derwentio* to the Trent has always been traditionally interpreted as evidence of the importance of riverine transport during the Romano-British period (Margary 1967, pp.310-11), although on the evidence presented here, it would seem that at least one other road extended from its terminus at Ratcliffe on Soar. The fort at Little Chester appears to be the only fort within Corieltavian territory which was maintained (as part of the Pennine fort system) after the military left the region *c.*AD 80 (Todd 1973, pp.32-3). It is possible that the Corieltavi were keen to continue trade links with the military after this date, and the Corieltavian sites to the south of the Pennines (including Leicester) would have been part of the military's supply system, willingly or not; a route between Leicester and Ratcliffe-on-Soar would allow such a link to be maintained in a very direct manner.

A recently discovered site at Shepshed (SK 456 186), only 2.5 kilometres from the route postulated here, has produced finds of pottery from kilns at Hazelwood and/or Holbrook, Derbyshire (Dr. R.J. Pollard, pers. comm.); this further strengthens suggestions of a route between the north of Leicestershire and south Derbyshire during the

Roman period. This site is still in the initial stages of investigation, but from the evidence recovered thus far it is possible that this site was either a villa or tile production site (Anonymous, 1998); in any event, the site would have required the proximity of a road or trackway such as the one considered in this paper.

The most graphic evidence for a route between Leicester and south Derbyshire, however, manifests itself in the distribution of Swithland slate. Alan McWhirr (1988, pp.1-7) has produced the most thorough discussion of this material's use during the Romano-British period and has pointed out that the slate is most likely to have been transported by road (*ibid.* p.4). The distinctive character of this slate allows its source to be established as a discrete region around the village of Swithland, only 2.5 kilometres from the route discussed in this paper (*ibid.* p.2) and slate of this type been recovered from Roman sites at Little Chester (Derbys.) (*ibid.* p.5), Kegworth (Crocker 1981, p.136), as well as sites situated along and east of the Fosse way, including Leicester (McWhirr 1988, p.5). In considering this, it does not appear unreasonable to suggest that the route under consideration here was used to transport Swithland slate north-west to Little Chester as well as south-east to Leicester and beyond.

Having established a claim for the existence of this route during the Roman period, it may be appropriate to consider the possibility of an even earlier origin. Our knowledge of prehistoric settlement is at least as incomplete (if not more) as that of the Romano-British period. However, prehistoric settlement/activity can be substantiated at various points along the route. Charnwood Forest has been recognised as an important source of stone since the Neolithic (Taylor 1979, p.14) and one can presume trackways to, and through, the region from at least this date. Evidence for pre-Roman settlement is available at the Lockington villa site (Clay 1985, pp.17-26), Long Whatton (SK 482 211) (Long Whatton Parish SMR, LMARS), Beacon Hill (Liddle 1982, p.17) and Leicester (Todd 1991, pp.52-3). All of these sites are within close proximity to the route discussed here; however, to use this as a basis for suggesting that the route was a link between these sites would be dangerous - the contemporaneity of these sites is questionable, and as noted previously, they fall within a site *discovery* pattern. They do, however, affirm the presence of prehistoric settlement/activity along the length of this route, and we can, therefore, reasonably assume that trackways were in existence across the region prior to AD 43.

Where topography plays a major part in the selection and repeated use of certain favourable routes (doubtless in the case of Charnwood Forest), then it does not appear unreasonable to suggest that in such areas, existing trackways are likely to have been at their most influential upon the Romano-British road/route system. If we consider that as much as 22.5 kilometres (79%) of this route 'survives' as either a footpath, track or roadway (a route which, it has been suggested, may be at least 1600-2000 years old) then its suitability as a route can be in little doubt. In considering this, and the points outlined above, the suggestion of a prehistoric origin for at least some of this route certainly bears comment.

The possibility of a prehistoric origin raises the question as to whether or not such a route can aptly be described as a 'Roman road'. The route's lack of place-names deriving from Old English linguistic element *Stræt* (*i.e.* Street, Strett-, Strat-) is notable; even examination of the Women's Institute field-name surveys (LRO, Anstey, FNS 1a, 2, 3; Kegworth, FNS 159; Newtown Linford, FNS 236) and a tithe map pertaining to the Parish of Shepshed (LRO, Ti 289/1) failed to produce evidence of this nature. *Stræt* is a nomenclature element which has proved to be highly indicative of Roman roads in the past (for discussion of the term's relevance see, *inter alia*, Margary 1973, p.26; Bagshawe

1979, p.18; Cameron 1996, pp.155-160), and its absence along the length of this route may suggest that it was not perceived as being 'Roman' during the early medieval period. The name 'Bradgate' may also be suggestive here of a route, which at least in part, was not a highly engineered *constructed* affair, but moreover a tract of land both suitable and used as a route-way. However, the aggered profile of Long Lane, Kegworth, as well as the straight alignment of this and other sections, may suggest that at least some of the route was 'Romanised' some time during the first-fourth centuries AD; this is certainly a practice which has been noted elsewhere (*cf.* Rackham 1986, pp.256-7).

One final and important point, is that this research is not intended to be the final word on the matter of an ancient route through Charnwood Forest. Sections of the route postulated here may be revised by future discoveries and research, but minor corrections will not necessarily undermine the hypotheses outlined in the concluding sections of this paper. An important element of these investigations was to determine if there is a legitimate claim for the existence of a route/road of Roman date across the area, and then interpret the implications of such a route within its archaeological context. It is my firm belief that this has been achieved on both counts. Indeed, it is hoped that when Charnwood Forest and its surrounding area are more satisfactorily examined archaeologically, the existence of such a route will play an important part in our evolving understanding of the area, not only during the Roman period, but also (especially considering the tantalising possibility of a prehistoric origin) a selection of other periods.

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