

Back in Time - 40 -The Excavation of the Roman road in Ellesmere Park – 2005

by John Rabbitt

The Roman road that traverses the Three Sisters field is quite unique, located in the suburbs of Manchester, it has survived in remarkable condition since it was constructed in about 200AD.

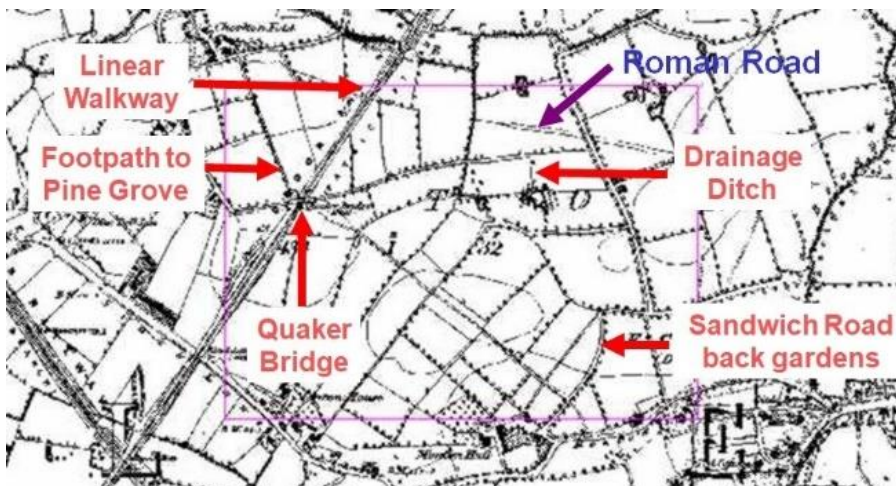
I had always been interested in archaeology and intrigued by the fact that a Roman road was part of the history of Ellesmere Park. When Channel 4 announced that in the summer 2005 they were going to screen the Time Team 'Big Roman Dig', it was fitting to excavate our Roman road as part of this Time Team initiative.

The Roman road had previously been excavated in 1973 by a group of students from the newly built Eccles College under the direction of John Aldred. In 1973 there was no accurate surveying of the road carried out and its precise location was not recorded, apart from the fact that it went across the Three Sisters field not far from the College.

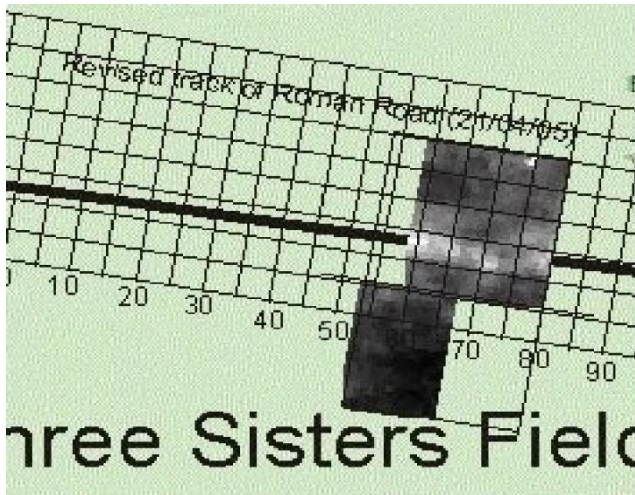
I decided to mount a major excavation of the road over a two week period (27th June to 11th July 2005) and involve as many of the local schools as possible to give school children first-hand experience of an archaeological dig. In the months before the dig took place I worked closely with Salford City Council, the Salford Rangers, the Utility Companies, the County Archaeologist, Norman Redhead, and a host of sponsors who very generously gave over £2500 to fund the project.

The County Archaeologist put me in touch with the Wigan Archaeology Society who had a vested interest in our Roman road. The Roman road through Ellesmere Park connected Mamucium (Manchester) with Coccium (Wigan). The Wigan group had spent many years digging around their locality looking for positive evidence of the road. The Wigan group were very helpful supplying advice and equipment and teaching us the correct techniques for excavating an important site such as the Three Sisters.

The dig started on 28 June 2005, fortunately throughout the two weeks of the dig we were blessed with fine weather. Over the dig I scheduled visits from five primary schools as well as Eccles College and Wentworth and Oakwood Schools; over the two weeks in excess of 190 youngsters came on to the site, and quite literally got the hands dirty.



The annotated 1848 O.S. Map shows the track of the Roman road in relation to local features in Ellesmere Park.



A base line and grid was set up on the field and a geophysics, ground resistance survey was undertaken by the team from Wigan on 27 April 2005. The results of the survey were superimposed on to an accurate map of the site, the geophysics result was very encouraging. The bright regions were high resistance areas, indicative of underlying stone or similar material.



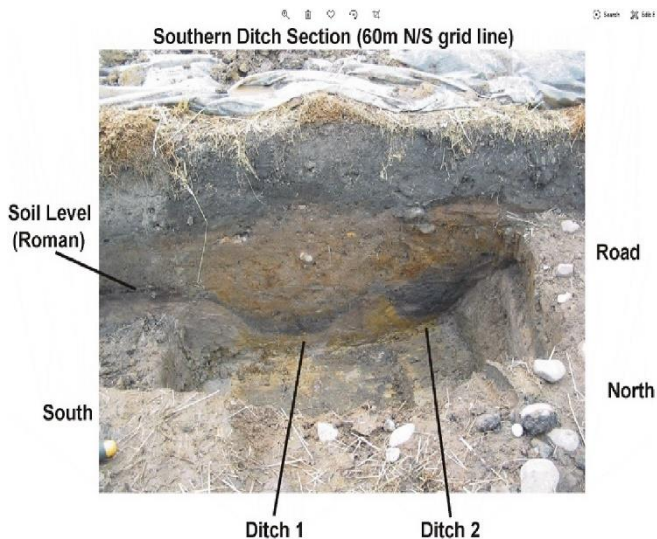
We now had a very good idea where to start to excavate the road. We planned to dig two trenches, the 60m trench would be across the geophysics bright region, the 20m trench would be a section through the road to the west (the road section was advised by the County Archaeologist). At 82m along the base line to the east, two small test pits were to be dug to locate the ditches of the road at calculated positions, assuming the road ran in a perfectly straight line.



Excavations started on the 28th June 2005. Initial probing of the ground soon confirmed the depth of the road. It did not take long to uncover the road as it was only approximately 40cm below the surface. It is remarkable how shallow the road is below the surface. This indicates that the Three Sisters field has never been heavily ploughed in 1800 years.



It did not take long to find the classic drainage ditches on either side of the Roman road. The ditches of our road are remarkable. The ditches were so clear it looked like they had been painted on the sides of the trenches. The dark line you can see running to the top edge of the ditch is the decayed vegetation which was growing when the ditch was cut.



A remarkable find in the 60m trench was the discovery of a double ditch on the southern side of the road. After much deliberation (archaeologists very rarely agree) it was finally decided that both the ditches were dug at the same point in time. The ditches tended to be dug first, the spoil being thrown into the centre of the road to form the agger, the raised centre section of the road. We suspect that the line of the ditch at this point was not quite right so a second ditch was dug to correct the misalignment.



Knowing the location of the ditches in the 20m and 60m trenches it was possible to calculate where to put a small test pit to locate the ditches at the 82m line. I calculated that at 82m the southern ditch should be at 10.17m from our base line, I was about 7cm out! The dark band in the photograph is the damp silt lying in the bottom of the Roman road ditch.

The school visits were a great success, particularly as the Romans feature strongly in the primary school National Curriculum.



We made provision for wheelchair access to the site to enable pupils from Oakwood High School to visit the dig. When some of the very handicapped children came to the site the staff were amazed how, given a trowel and a kneeling pad, they really engaged with uncovering the road.



We made a replica of a Roman groma surveying instrument which many of the pupils enjoyed using. They were fascinated to know that the Roman surveyors would have used exactly the same instrument on the Three Sisters field 1800 years ago.



Over the two weeks of the dig we had streams of people visiting the site. The notice board we erected and handouts we printed were very useful otherwise we would have spent all our time talking to people about the Roman road and not digging!

We had visits from the experts. In the photograph on the left, Norman Redhead, the County Archaeologist, is pointing out a large cut and shaped granite block we found in the line of the ditch.

Joe Martin the Conservation Officer for Salford is on the left and Mark Hayward from the Wigan Archaeology Society is on the right.

The objectives of the Roman Road project were:

- 1) to raise the awareness of this important archaeological site in Ellesmere Park;
- 2) to involve the residents and the wider community in the project;
- 3) to enable the local schools to have access to a real archaeological site;
- 4) to accurately plot the track of the Roman road to ensure its protection.

I think we achieved all these objectives in July 2005.

The importance of our 120m long Roman road should not be underestimated. To my knowledge there is no other Roman road in a suburban area of such a significant length. I would be surprised if there was any Roman road in the North West in such good condition. Certainly my friends at Wigan A. S. have never found one. Most of the original Roman roads have either been converted to straight dual carriageways or they have been ploughed out and lost to agriculture.



As a final gesture, with the residue of the funds from the Roman road project, we purchased the stone seats near the ponds to remind everyone of the existence of this important archaeological site.

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