



DEAN ROAD BETWEEN SOILWELL AND OLDCROFT, FOREST OF DEAN, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

WORK CARRIED OUT BETWEEN 25 JULY 2016 AND 23 OCTOBER 2016

DEAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL GROUP

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1.0 SUMMARY

1.1 A small scale exploratory excavation was undertaken in 2016 by the Dean Archaeological Group along the course of the Dean Road between Soilwell and Oldcroft in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire.

1.2 The excavation exposed a length of a kerbed and paved area of road c.2.45m in width on a north-south alignment. To the west and immediately adjacent to the kerbed road, a cambered stone cobbled surface (c 5.0m wide) was uncovered, also on a north-south alignment. This may be a different and possibly earlier phase of road construction. No artefacts were recovered to date either surface and the relationship between the two could not be properly determined.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Site location

2.1 The site is located at approximately NGR 364508 205897 on a public footpath between the Old Dam Road, Soilwell and Philip's Close, Oldcroft (Fig. 1). The footpath is fenced on both sides and crosses farmland: mostly pasture. In places kerb stones are visible and stone paving can be seen under a thin layer of topsoil.

2.2 The underlying bedrock geology of the area is mapped as Brownstones Formation – Sandstone, Micaceous (Red, brown and purple fluvial sandstones with red mudstone interbeds); a sedimentary Bedrock formed in the Devonian Period (BGS on-line Viewer, 2017). Outside of the line of the public footpath, the loam topsoil was consistent across the site with a depth of between 100-200 mm. A natural substrate consisting of an orange-brown clay was encountered approximately 300 mm below ground level.

Site history

2.3 The route way known as the Dean Road is said to run between Lydney and the former Roman settlement at Ariconium near Weston under Penyard in Herefordshire, providing a link between the iron mines at the former and the smelting furnaces at the latter. Kerbing and paving stones are visible in some places along the route, notably at Blackpool Bridge, some 3 km north of this site.

2.4 In 1985 the Forest of Dean Local History Society undertook an excavation of a small section of the road between Blackpool Bridge and Soudley (SO 6566 1003). In 2014 Cotswold Archaeology carried out an archaeological evaluation at Highfield Lane, Lydney at a place where it was thought to cross the line of the Dean Road although no physical evidence was found. (Walters 1985; Cotswold Archaeology 2014)

2.5 The construction date of the Dean Road has never been proved or, indeed, that the line of the Road represents a single phase of construction. It is now generally

accepted that the exposed kerbing and paving stones are post-medieval in origin but that it is possible that the line of the kerbed road, or parts of it, follow much older established route ways. Arguments have been put forward to date the road to the Roman period but no conclusive archaeological evidence to support that premise has been presented.

3.0 OBJECTIVES

3.1 To date the Dean Road at this location through the recovery of datable artefacts.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

4.1 All trenches were hand dug and all finds recorded. Excavation was undertaken stratigraphically and planned to be taken down to bedrock. Written and drawn records were kept and a photographic record was maintained throughout. No palaeoenvironmental samples were taken.

4.2 The site archive (including artefacts) will be deposited with the Dean Heritage Centre.

5.0 RESULTS

Fieldwork

5.1 Work on the main excavation commenced on 25 July 2016 and was completed on 23 October 2016. During this period ten Test Pits (TPs) were also excavated, of which four, (TPs 7-10) were dug to the north of the main excavation area (Fig. 1 & 2). The work was not continuous and was carried out at weekends dependent on weather and availability of personnel.

5.2 The main area of excavation was sited at approximately NGR 364503 205882. The removal of a thin layer of topsoil exposed a 9.70m (north to south) stretch of kerbed road, approximately 2.45m in width. The southern part of this section was paved with medium-sized sandstone blocks but these did not continue in to the northern section; here the surface consisted of irregular and smaller sandstone pieces set in orange brown silty sand (Figs. 3, 4 & 5). Kerb stones were visible in the grass to the north of the main excavation area (Figs. 6 & 7).

5.3 By removing further topsoil, the main area of excavation was extended at the southern end both to the west (length 7.50m x width 1.50m) and to the east (length 3.60m x width 1.40m). TPs 1, 2 & 3 were excavated in the western extension and TPs 5 & 6 were excavated in the slightly lower eastern extension. TP4 was excavated in the surface of the kerbed road.

5.4 The western extension revealed a cobbled surface that appeared to run immediately parallel and adjacent to the kerbed road. The surface was cambered and had a width of 4.70m when measured from its western edge to the kerb stone of

the paved road (Figs. 8 & 9). However, if the cambered surface found in TP4 (see below) is added the width increases to 5.30m. The construction of this surface, which has no kerbs, is very different from the relatively flat paved surface of the kerbed road.

5.5 A similar stratigraphy was recorded in TPs 1- 10 with the natural substrate, comprising firm orange brown clay, overlain by friable orange brown silty sand which was in turn sealed by a loose, dark brown loam topsoil.

5.6 TPs 1, 5, 6 were dug in the expectation of finding evidence of drainage ditches to accompany the western side of the cobbled surface (TP1) and the eastern side of the kerbed road (TPs 5 & 6). No evidence was found for ditches or any other archaeological features (Figs.10, 11 & 12).

5.7 TPs 2 and 3 revealed that the cobbled surface consisted of small to medium rounded sandstone cobbles compacted on a layer of silty sand which in turn overlays a sub base of larger irregularly laid stones: both rounded and angular. This sub base foundation sits on the natural clay substrate (Figs. 13,14,15,16 & 17).

5.8 TP4 also exposed the edge of a cobbled surface below the paved kerbed road which may be a continuation of the surface in TP2 and TP3. No dating evidence was found for the construction of either road and the relationship between the two is unclear. However, it does appear that the kerbed road overlays part of the cobbled surface, or at least material that has spread from it, suggesting that the kerbed road is of a later date (Figs. 18 & 19).

5.9 TP7 (NGR 364511 205916) and TP8 (NGR 364517 205913) were positioned approximately 23m to the north of the main excavation area. Both exposed cobbled surfaces of similar width (3.25m and 3.0m respectively) but no kerbs were found at either TP. The surface in TP7 was consistent with that uncovered in TP2 and TP3 and is believed to be a continuation of that surface (Fig. 20).

5.10 TP9 (NGR 364551 206071) and TP10 (NGR 364556 206073) were also located along the projected route of the kerbed road some 160m to the north of TPs 7&8. No archaeology was located in TP9 but in TP10, approximately 5m to the east of TP9, a 2.45m wide cobbled surface was revealed but no attendant kerbing was identified (Fig. 21).

5.11. The various datasets from the investigation are presented in the appendix section; Soil stratigraphy (Appendix 1) and Trench Register (Appendix 2).

The Finds

5.11 The only finds were a small pottery sherd of circa 19th Century black-on-white transfer printed ware (approximately 1cm x 1cm) and two small pieces of bloomery iron slag. All were recovered from the surface of the excavated kerbed road.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

6.1 The discovery of a cambered cobbled surface to the west and immediately adjacent to the kerbed road offers the possibility of a second road that also travelled on a north-south alignment although over what distance is not known. This cobbled surface had no kerb stones and no drainage ditches were identified.

6.2 The exposed area of kerbed road had a flat profile and is consistent with the section of the road surface exposed at Blackpool Bridge some 3km to the north and also with the section of road exposed between Blackpool Bridge and Soudley in 1985 (Walters 1985). No associated drainage ditches were recorded.

6.3 The construction methods used for both surfaces were markedly different leading to the possibility that they were built at different periods, although there is no evidence to indicate when either surface was constructed or what the timeframe between the two might have been. The evidence of a cambered stone layer in TP4 appears to indicate, at that location at least, that the kerbed road had been built over the eastern edge of the cobbled surface. This would seem to be further supported by the fact that the stone surface in TP4 does not extend across the full (east-west) width of the test pit, and that the profile of this layer correlates with the line of the surface camber shown in the section drawing (Fig 22). The fact that the stone layer does not extend across the full width of TP4 may also suggest that the kerbed road is not built on a stone foundation which would be consistent with the results of the excavation undertaken at Soudley (Walters 1985).

6.4 However, this is a lot to surmise from one small test pit and it may equally be true that the context exposed in TP4 is part of the kerbed road construction.

6.5 Evidence of a cobbled surface was found in TP7 but not in TP9. Lidar evidence appears to show a divergence between the two road surfaces approximately 80m to the north of the main excavation. The western route (the cobbled surface/road identified in TP2, TP3 and TP7) may lead towards a small quarry c. NGR 364458 206129 or possibly continue northwards skirting the side of the valley of the Plummers Brook (Fig 23). If this is the case it could explain why no evidence of a cobbled surface was found in TP9.

6.6 The eastern route enters a shallow holloway c. 20m from the north of the main excavation on the projected route of the kerbed road. Cobbled surfaces were exposed in both TP8 and TP10 but no kerb stones were identified. The fact that no kerbs were found in TP8 is noteworthy given that it was located a short way into the holloway and that kerb stones were visible in the grass between the main excavation area and the beginning of the holloway (Figs. 6 & 7).

6.7 There was a marked difference in the condition of the kerbed road exposed in the main excavation area. The southern end had a relatively flat paved surface whereas the northern end was more cobbled and rutted (Figs. 3 & 4). The surfaces uncovered in TP8 and TP10 were also cobbled rather than paved.

6.8 The change in the surface composition of the kerbed road at this point may represent a deliberate decision to alter the construction technique just before the road headed north down an increasingly steep slope, or, the slope itself could have been responsible for additional wear and tear. The latter may also have resulted in subsequent repairs and resurfacing. Further excavation between TP8 and TP10 could help to resolve this puzzle.

7.0

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

7.1 Dean Archaeological Group would like to thank Richard Morgan, Lydney Park Estate for allowing us to excavate the site. We would also like to acknowledge the advice and assistance of Jon Hoyle, Gloucestershire County Archaeology Service.

7.2. The excavation was directed by Phil Riches and this report was written by John Izzard. Clive Osborne produced the photographic record and the excavators were: Phil Riches, Ken Eames, Stuart Cox, Terry James, Ian Dean, Adela Arga, Clive Osborne, the Smith Family, Marline & Mike Wilkinson, Jane & Ian Baird and John Izzard.

8.0

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Gloucestershire Historic Environment Record:

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HER 448: *A section of [possible] Roman Road at Blackpool Bridge*

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Appendix 1: Soil stratigraphy

The soil stratigraphy for TPs 1-6 was the same in each case. TPs 7-10 were not excavated down to the natural substrate.

No archaeology was identified in TPs 1, 5, 6 and 9.

	Description	Compaction	Colour	Approximate depth
(1)	Topsoil: loam	Loose	Dark brown	100 -200mm
(2)	Silty sand	Friable	Orange brown	50-100mm
(3)	Clay	Firm	Orange brown	Natural substrate

Appendix 2: Trench list

The main area of excavation at approximately NGR 364503 205882. TP1-6 were located at that site. The remainder are as follows:

TP7 (NGR 364511 205916)
 TP8 (NGR 364517 205913)
 TP9 (NGR 364551 206071)
 TP10 (NGR 364556 206073)

TP	Description
01	1300mm long x 940mm wide x 550mm max depth.
02	900mm long x 800mm wide x 400mm max depth.
03	800mm x 600mm + 400mm x 1500mm. 400mm max depth
04	1530mm long x 1050mm wide x 310mm max depth.
05	1000mm long x 850mm wide x 650mm max depth.
06	1000mm long x 1200mm wide x 650mm max depth.
07	3.2M long x 0.5M wide x 0.020M max depth.
08	3.0M long x 1.0M wide x 0.020M max depth.
09	3.0M long x 0.5M wide x 0.030M max depth.
10	3.0M long x 0.5M wide x 0.030M max depth.