

THE BISLEY PATH - AN ANCIENT ROAD FROM CORINIUM TO GLEVUM?

by Christopher Cox

INTRODUCTION

The search for, and apparent discovery of, ancient roads is, like chasing rainbows, an engaging and relatively harmless pastime - unless an imposing superstructure is erected on an untested, or even illusionary, foundation.¹ One such is the so-called Jurassic Way or Great Cotswold Ridgeway, now accepted (often uncritically) as a genuine long-distance track from Yorkshire to the South-west across the Midlands and the Cotswolds, and said to have been in use from neolithic times to the Iron Age.²

This nebulous Way will not be discussed here, but it must be said that actual evidence for it is exceedingly tenuous, that there is no consensus on the exact route apart from the stretch between Sapperton and Rodmarton, and as Christopher Taylor puts it '.... we can now see that the evidence for a real trackway was very slight, and that of Iron Age date slighter still'.³

will be noticed that both Painswick and Matson lie along the line of this route.

In the later eighteenth century it was, according to Fisher, the preferred route from Stroud to Cirencester, despite the turnpiking in 1751/2 of the road from that town through Minchinhampton.⁷ The Bisley Path was also turnpiked but authority extended only to The Gulph;⁸ although milestones were put on the whole route to beyond Bisley,⁹ they do not survive east of The Gulph, but are clearly marked on the Preliminary Drawings for the first OS 1-in map. Although it was still given as an alternative route to Stroud in bad weather (what on earth *were* the other roads like!) it was by then used less frequently and in 1814, when the Stroud-Chalford-Aston Down turnpike road was built, the Bisley Path was dispiked, and the road south of Cirencester Park realigned.¹⁰ Much of it has ceased to be a public highway, some of it has quite disappeared, but it was at one time, and for many centuries, a road of some importance.¹¹

But was it used by the 'Romans'? Arguments for this view will be based on two things: the topography itself, and the verified Roman sites along or very close to this road.

TOPOGRAPHICAL DETAIL

The main Roman road from Corinium to Glevum was Ermin Street, the alignment of which is largely followed today. Laid out as a typical military road, it is straight and all but unde-viating. Taylor warns against being led astray by geographic determinism, but as F.J. North points out, while long-distance thoroughfares may pay scant heed to relief and geology, these are often important considerations for shorter, more local, roads.¹² Thus we should not expect our local road to have looked like a 'Roman' road. For one thing it would hardly have been constructed in that fashion, probably was unmetalled, and may well have followed existing tracks from earlier times. When such roads cease to be used they tend to revert and may become unrecognisable.

So whatever the Roman alignment was, we should not expect it to have remained unchanged over the years.

The Romans made good use of wheeled vehicles, and to ascend a steep hill-side engineered 'finely constructed zig-zags' to ease the gradient, or made their road follow the curves of the hill-side itself, whereas the medieval traveller in these parts employed pack-horses or ponies.¹³ But even with the growth of wheeled traffic in the eighteenth century, carts and carriages continued to use the 'vertical' up-and-down tracks in the area of Stroud, as Fisher records.¹⁴ Examples to be seen are: the Nailsworth Ladder, the vanished road from Minchinhampton to Bristol just above Nailsworth (and faintly to be seen on Taylor's map of 1777), or the existing road up Rodborough Hill. The passage of innumerable sharp hooves, aided by winter rains, caused the development of many hollow-ways, as that from Bowbridge up past The Bannuts to Rodborough Common. Such hollow-ways appear on either side of the Frome crossing, testifying to extensive use in the not-so-distant past. But visible on the Preliminary Drawings on the western flank, and to be seen on the ground alongside the hollow-way on the eastern side of the valley, are zig-zags. It is faintly possible - no firm claim can be asserted - that these represent a continued use of Roman zig-zags as at Frocester Hill. This is

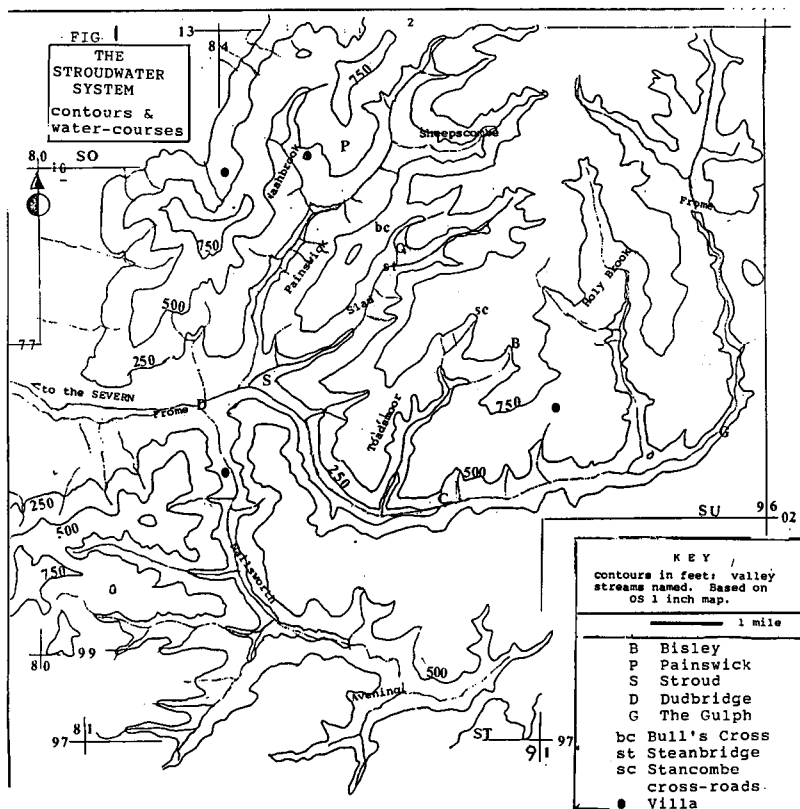


Fig. 1 The Stroudwater System

As Dr. Darvill and Dr. Della Hooke warn, it is very difficult to find, let alone to date, ancient trackways,⁴ and therefore this paper will merely offer a hypothesis (a plausible one it is hoped) of the use in Roman times of an authentic highway that was still used up to the end of the eighteenth century.

This is the route known in its eastern extremity as the Bisley Path, and for convenience the term will be employed for its whole length. It ran from Cecily Hill in Cirencester alongside the border of Cirencester Park and Oakley Wood to Park Corner, west of which it crossed the Frome (it was termed The Gulph in the eighteenth century), then the Holy Brook at Tunley and on to Bisley. The next crossing was of the Slad Valley at Steanbridge, after which came the climb up to (and down from) Bull's Cross, over the Painswick brook, up to the scarp edge under Painswick Castles (Kimsbury Camp) and so down and on to Gloucester between Upton St. Leonards and Matson.

J.C. Milner has argued that it was a medieval road, and the writer has suggested it was in use as early as the eighth century.⁵ In the seventeenth century Charles I passed this way from his night's stay at Sir William Masters in Cirencester, to Painswick where he stayed the next night before making his way to Matson House, his headquarters during the 1643 siege of Gloucester.⁶ It

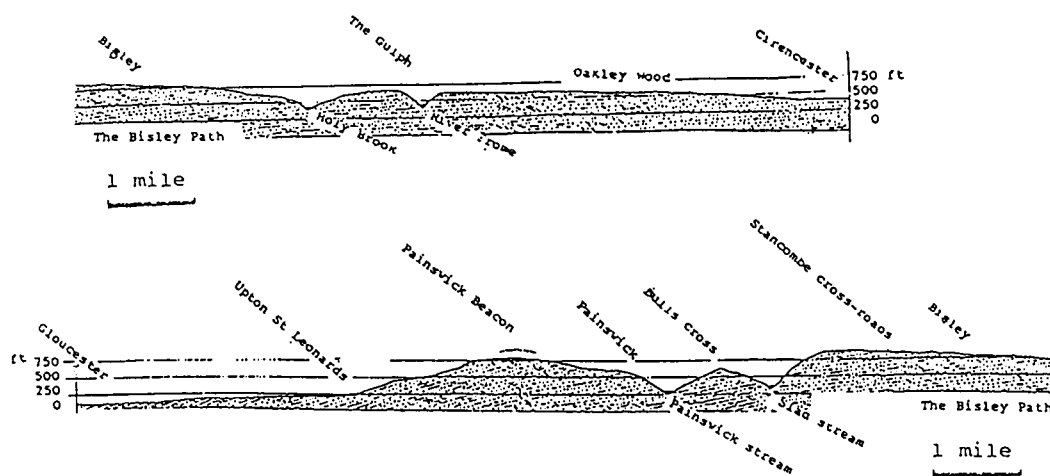


Fig 2. Section along the Bisley Path from Corinium to Glevum.

unprovable, and perhaps unlikely, as time and the absence of wheeled vehicles could well have obliterated the signs. Nevertheless ...¹⁵

The relief map shows that this is the likeliest route from the scarp near Painswick to Cirencester. One of the most important factors in determining a route is the availability of river crossings. The proponents of the Jurassic Way with its wide swing to the east round the Frome river system, lay much stress on the avoidance of steep valleys, and Grundy thinks that prehistoric routes followed the watersheds almost to the exclusion of other possible ways of traversing the countryside. Not so! Evan Hopkin, civil engineer, pointed out in 1805 that 'steepness (was) not of much consequence before the use of wheeled carriages.'¹⁶ Certainly, on foot or pony back, or for pack-horses, such a crossing was preferable to taking a much longer level circuit round. The essential thing was a ford with a firm, hard bottom, depth and swiftness of water being of lesser consideration. In the Frome valleys, such crossing places occur where the valley sides have been 'pinched', often by landslides, to give a narrow, firm-footed crossing, while usually the valley above and below is wider, and in past times would have been muddy, swampy, even covered by a shallow lake. Such fords were often bridged in medieval times, as at Bowbridge, Wallbridge, Dudbridge - and Steanbridge.¹⁷ There was also a footbridge at The Gulph.¹⁸ So this cross-country route would have been feasible in Roman times. Was there a need for such a track to be used?

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Roman settlement along the Bisley Path

Most of the following references are taken from the relevant volume of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments. Remember that only the most durable sites have survived, and there must have been (the word is used advisedly) a great number of smaller settlements, down to single farms and habitations, and that we know virtually nothing of these.¹⁹ It is as though all we could see of a great mountain range were only the few major peaks. We do not know what sort of local economy supported the great country houses, the equivalent of the mansions of the eighteenth century. This area of the Cotswolds was thronged with 'villas' and there would have been a multiplicity of inter-connecting local tracks and access roads.²⁰ It is not the writer's intention, by picking out a few Roman sites, to produce a sort of 'ley-line', but these sites, together with the continued existence of this route over so many centuries, lend at least a species of plausibility to the subject of this paper.

Ifold Villa At the edge of a ledge overlooking the Washbrook valley close to Painswick, its position is analogous to that of the Painswick House of the present day, close to the road from Gloucester to and through Painswick.

Brownshill Possibly a Roman cemetery? It lies on the opposite side of the valley. Further down, near Stroud, Roman pottery and iron slag were found in 1868 at - *West Grange House*.

Lillyhorn Nothing remains now, but it is the site of a large villa

near Bournes Green on the former Bisley Common. It was dug out in 1841-5 and like Ifold and Daglinworth was conveniently close to the road, giving access both to Corinium and to Glevum. It was also close to the ancient way going north across the Frome valley at Chalford for Birdlip.

Daglinworth A possible villa, about half a mile south-east of the parish church.

Of special interest for this paper are two other sites.

Down Farm, at the end of a spur between the two head-combes of the Slad valley, and reported too late

for inclusion in the RCHM volume, close to the Path and to the Steanbridge crossing. Villa or not, it is tempting to think of it as a convenient pull-up for carmen - travellers and stock, at the right distance from Glevum for rest and refreshment. Speculation of course - but just look at its situation!

Bisley Called by R. Leech a 'very large and enigmatic site', votive tablets, altars and gravestones have been found in the area.²¹ A former vicar of Bisley, the Rev. A.A. Allen, and a bit of an historian, told the writer that he not infrequently dug up bits of both Saxon and Roman stone carvings from his garden hard-by the church. This cannot be verified as he has since died.

One mustn't backdate Victorian revivals into the distant past, but it has been suggested that Bisley was the site of a 'holy well'²² and with the recent discovery of a Roman temple at Uley this is not entirely impossible. In any case the site would have been important, with its production of sculptures, for the market of Corinium, which must have cast a wide net by reason of its size, its commerce, administration, population, probably its town houses for the country gentry and a gentleman's club. The Bisley Path is the obvious route to that urban centre,²³ and the transport of heavy or bulky objects could have been one reason for easing the worst gradient, that at The Gulph.

It is interesting to note that Margary, in his diagram of his route 544, a minor Roman road, takes it along the Bisley Path for some distance. It is, he says 'supposed to have left Cirencester via Cecily Hill' for Coates, Rodmarton and Kingscote, but then inexplicably he depicts it as taking an abrupt left-hand turn for Coates. It would seem more likely that this minor road was a side-road off the more direct, straighter route westward. P. Isaac, writing on 'Coin hoards and history in the West', points out that villas were part of a town-oriented economy and depended on good communications for their standard of living.²⁴

CONCLUSION

Certainly Taylor's cautionary words should be borne in mind:²⁵

'The fascination of roads and tracks, and the excitement that the process of tracing them onwards across country gives, have all too often in the past resulted in complete mental blocks and visual blindness'.

Various attempts have been made to identify ancient tracks, especially the glamorous Roman ones, within our area. G.B. Witts' Roman 'road from Aquae Sulis to Glevum' has its points, a track along the scarp's rim is a 'natural' and probably is of considerable antiquity - there must be innumerable such tracks in use at different times - though the Fosse Way to Corinium from near Bath, and the present A38 south from Glevum to Abone (Sea Mills) on the Bristol Avon, would have been by far the more important roads.²⁶ St Clair Baddeley also took a hand, suggesting several minor Roman roads, such as Wick Street.²⁷ But as Aston remarks, the need for any such road at any one time must be taken into consideration.



Fig 3. Detail from Cary's Map of Mail Coach routes, 1816.

Such maps are often inaccurate and out of date. Note that this is not a map of turnpike roads. It does of course not include new roads built after 1816, but oddly omits the Nailsworth valley turnpike of 1780/81, and the Slad valley seems to have been destroyed by some geological convulsion. Perhaps here there is confusion between the 1800/01 Slad road and the road up Stroud Hill past Bisley to Birdlip - note Standcomb (sic) cross. The road from Cirencester to Stroud through Minchinhampton still shows the bend on the south side of the Park, which was eliminated after 1814, but the road is still shown through the Park, now a private road. The route goes into Minchinhampton, and shows the same bends that appear on Taylor's map of 1777. Again oddly, the 'by-pass' over Old Common is not marked, though it is faintly shown by Taylor. The whole of the 'Bisley Path' appears as a minor road, but only the continuation of Wick Street from Painswick to Gloucester is a mail (ie. main) road. (Salperton should read Sapperton - frequently confused on such maps, as is Eastington for Eastington).

This paper too is speculative, but the route called here the Bisley Path fulfilled a function over many years, and when the villas had vanished, estates, villages and large houses still remained and could be served by an existing, if deteriorating, track. But in the last two hundred years, the industrial valleys of the Frome overtook in importance and in the need for communications the largely agricultural plateau. Former centres such as Bisley declined,²⁸ and valley settlements such as Stroud were the more important. The former roadway ceased to be a through-way, and was fragmented into disconnected stretches of country lanes.

Nevertheless, taking together the various Roman sites on or near the line of the route, the fact that it was a much-used highway for several centuries, and the evidence of topography that it is the only really feasible way across the headwaters of the system of the Frome from east to west between Ermin Street and the route over the Minchinhampton plateau, it seems not unreasonable to think that the way called here the Bisley Path was in essence, and at certain points, the actual route used in Roman times between Glevum and Corinium for the villas and settlements between those two important urban centres.²⁹

REFERENCES

1. 'A great deal of rubbish has been written in the past about roads, particularly Roman roads and ridgeways ... Little attention is paid to why a particular road might have gone this way or that, what it was used for and which settlements it was linking'. M. Aston, *Interpreting the landscape*, Batsford, 1985, p 138.
2. C. Fox, A la Tène brooch from Wales ..., *Archaeol. Cambrensis* 72, 7th series, 7, 1927, pp 67-112, seems to have originated the phrase. G.B. Grundy wrote prolifically from 1917 on ancient tracks and routes, mostly in the *Archaeological Journal*, and W.F. Grimes detailed the whole Way, in *Aspects of Archaeology in Britain and beyond*, Edwards, 1951, pp 144-171. The concept is accepted by many authorities.
3. C. Taylor, *Roads and tracks of Britain*, Dent, 1982, p 32.
4. T. Darvill, Neolithic Gloucestershire, in *Archaeology in Gloucestershire*, ed. A. Saville, Cheltenham, 1984. D. Hooke, The reconstruction of ancient routeways, in *The Local Historian*, 12, 1977.
5. J.C. Milner, A medieval road to Cirencester, *Glevensis* 15, 1981. Also C. Cox, The Lypiatt Cross, *Glevensis* 19, 1985.
6. Iter Carolinum, in *Gutch Collectanea Curiosa* II, no xiii.
7. P.H. Fisher, *Notes & Recollections of Stroud*, J. Elliott, Stroud, 1871.

8. 25 G II c.13, 1751/2.
9. C. Cox, Milestones of the Stroud district, *TBGAS* 83, 1964.
10. 54 G III c. 80, 1814, confirmed by 58 G III c. 23, 1818.
11. See for example the distribution list of the *Gloucester Journal*, 24 April 1725. James Pewteris distributed to Painswick, Bisley, Cirencester .. John Butler to Stroudwater, Tedbury (Sic) ... ie. the Bisley Path was followed by J. Pewteris. I do not know how papers went to Stroud, but I suspect via Brookthorpe and the old road uphill to Huddingknoll Common, then down via Whiteshill to Paganhill and so to Stroud. A guess!
12. F.J. North, Geology for archaeologists, *Archaeol J*, 35, 1937, pp 106-149.
13. See eg. the well-known illustration of a weaver or merchant taking his cloth on pony back past Avening Church, from R. Bigland, reproduced in *VCH Glos 11*, facing p 144.
14. Fisher op cit p 151.
15. I.G. Margary, *Roman roads in Britain*, Phoenix, 1955. A.K.H. Evans, reviewing this book in the *Jnl of Transport History*, 2, 1955-6, says 'he makes it very clear that the Romans employed zig-zags or even curves, where the terrain required it'. See also footnote 23, McWhirr, p 132.
16. Evan Hopkin, *An Abstract of the Particulars* contained in a Perambulatory Survey of above Two Hundred Miles of Turnpike Road through the Counties of Carmarthen, Brecknock, Monmouth and Gloucester. Pointing out the most obvious defects, and also the improvements which may be made along this line of Road. Swansea, 1805.
17. *VCH Glos 11* gives a reference of 1358 for a bridge here (and dates for the others): Milner op cit says it was recorded earlier, in 1248. In other words, it was of some importance for traffic in the 13th century at least, and probably earlier.
18. *VCH Glos 11*, p 5.
19. See eg. K. Branigan & P.J. Fowler, *The Roman West Country*, David & Charles, Newton Abbot, 1976.
20. T. Darvill, op cit p 97.
21. R. Leech Larger agricultural settlement in the West Country, in *The Roman West Country*, ed. K. Branigan & P.J. Fowler, David & Charles, 1976. And see his Appendix II, handlist of villa sites.
22. R.C.S. Walters, *The ancient wells, springs and holy wells of Gloucestershire*. Bristol, 1928.
23. See A. McWhirr, *Roman Gloucestershire*, A. Sutton, Gloucester, 1986, chpt. 6, especially pp 132, 135.

24. P. Isaac, Coin hoards & history in the West, in Branigan & Fowler, op cit.
25. C. Taylor, op cit xii.
26. G.B. Witts, Old Sodbury and an ancient road from Aquae Sulis to Glevum, *TBGAS* 1883-84.
27. St. Clair Baddeley, A secondary Roman road system. *TBGAS* 51, 1929, and 53, 1930.
28. '... the town is most unfavourably situated for a market, being of very difficult access, by reason of the deep bottoms which environ it every way ...' Rudder op cit on Bisley, p 289.
29. The term 'Bisley Path' is really a misnomer when applied to the whole route given here, but is used for convenience for lack of a better.

See Note to Fig 3.

References from the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments volume, Iron Age & Romano-British Monuments in the Gloucestershire Cotswolds. 1976.

<i>Ifold</i>	SO 85781020 p 93.
<i>Brownhill</i>	SO 85500726 p 94.
<i>West Grange House</i>	SO 85000558 p 112.
<i>Lillyhorn</i>	SO 91320438 p41.