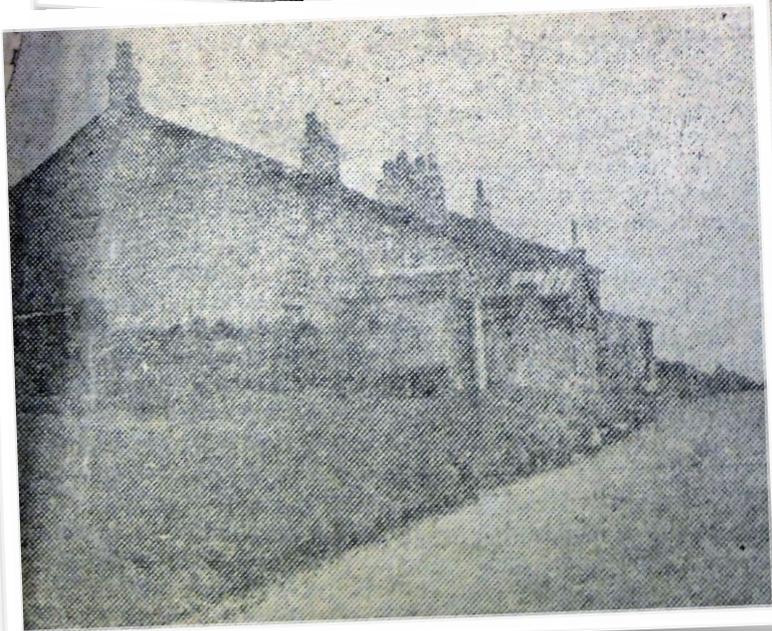
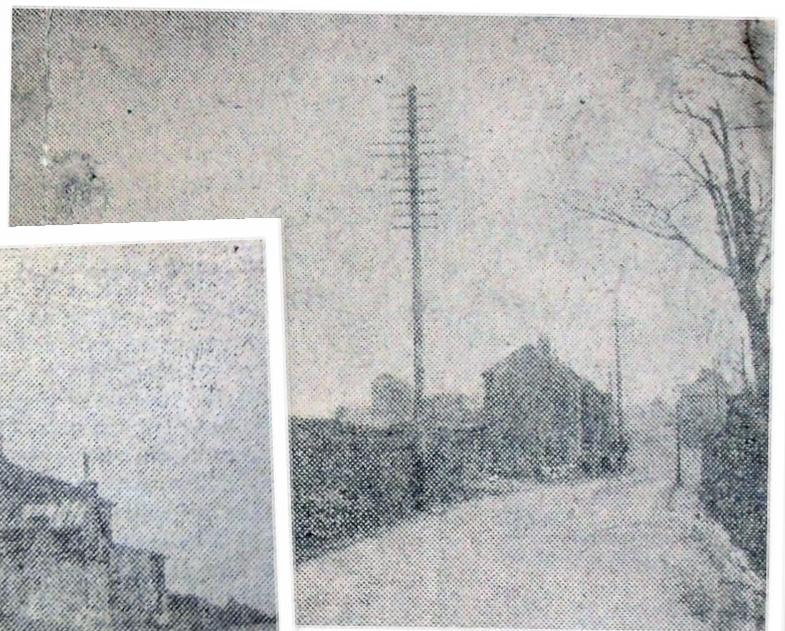
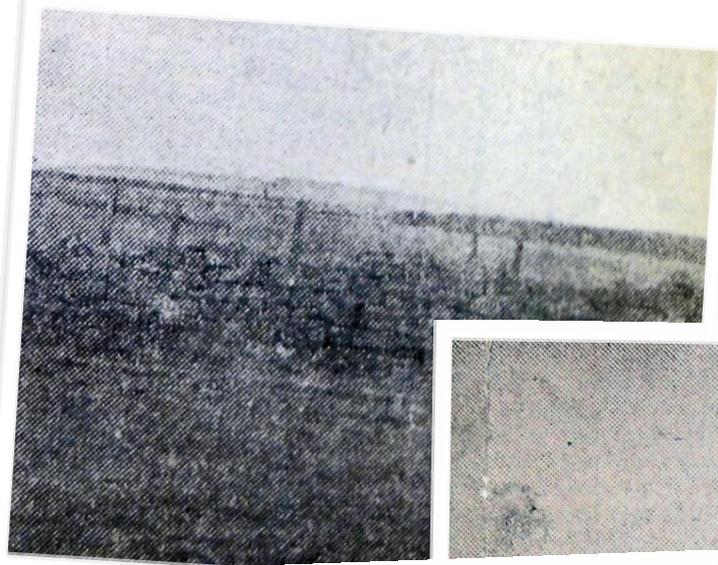


# *Bits of Old Darwen*



## V. Tracking the Romans

*The personal side of old Blacksnape has been told. What of the old Roman road - with all its history and all its mystery? Let Mr Roscoe S. Ashton tell the story of the road, of which he has made a full and careful study.*

Despite the opinion of several eminent antiquaries upon the Roman road at Blacksnape, says Mr Ashton, I have never been satisfied that the stretch of modern highway between the Grimes Hill brook and Set End, running along the loftiest part of the high ground which bounds the Darwen valley on the east, follows the exact line of the Roman engineers on the Manchester to Ribchester road. It is a matter of antiquarian importance, though the two are never more than one hundred yards apart.

Having first read the opinions of well-known writers on the subject, I made a survey of this portion of the road. Standing at Set End at the point where the tramline from Darwen crosses on its way to Hoddlesden, the first thing that strikes the observer is the straightness of the piece of road for some distance on either hand, which compares strongly with the tortuous course through Blacksnape village. The first houses in this hamlet are on the left-hand side, and the road swerves to the right in order to pass along their face, and on in a series of jerks up the hillside, the cottages straggling along it, until it drops out of sight over the brow of the heights. The point at which it disappears is obviously to the right of, and lower than, the highest point of the ridge, which swells away in a great "hog's back" on the left.

Walking along the flat at the foot of the village, it is at once noticed that the first two cottages, round the end of which the road bends to the right, are clearly very much older than those which follow. The age of a double house which stands back from the road at this point is not so obvious. Following the road towards the summit, attention is drawn to the fact that beyond the Red Lion public house it becomes sunken some five or six feet below the level of the adjoining fields, and also that the longitudinal ridge of the hill is tending further and further away on the left until, when Drummer Stoops is reached, it is about one hundred yards from the highway.

Here, then, we have three obvious facts which do not conform with the known principles which invariably guided the Romans in the engineering of their principal military ways. In the first place, the course is not rigidly straight, as was always the case between their viewpoints. In the second, the road, for a long stretch, is sunk below

the surrounding level, an odd treatment for a road in a hostile country, designed for military use, offering, as it would, an excellent opportunity for a surprise from a foe concealed in the woods with which the hillside was then clothed; and thirdly - the most uncomfortable of all - the line fails to take advantage of the highest portion of the whole ridge, from which an extensive view upon all sides is obtainable, a point which the engineers would certainly never have failed to seize upon.

Accepting a large portion of the straight piece of road in the neighbourhood of Set End as being in all likelihood the exact line of the older road, and making a pointer for the highest portion of the ridge at Rushton Heights, now occupied by the reservoir which supplies Blacksnake with water, we get a theoretical site for the old Roman road, which, after passing by the houses standing back at the foot of the village, would run up the fields behind the cottages upon the left-hand side of the modern road. What evidence does such a line offer of a raised, paved, military way - or agger? At first sight none. Centuries of building operations and cultivation have long ago obliterated all superficial traces of the excellently-constructed, paved way which existed. Once it fell into disuse its well-cut stones would offer a tempting quarry of ready-prepared material for anyone who wished to build in its neighbourhood; its foundation of gravel would be as readily carted away by farmers for agricultural use, and unless it happened to make a convenient boundary line and become the site of a fence, its desecrated skeleton would be filled in and smoothed to the surrounding level, in order that the surface of the fields might be unbroken. In places, too, the plough would take its share in disseminating the lingering traces of its once imposing, straight, white line.

An examination of Heys-lane, which falls into the Blacksnake road some sixty or so yards below the Red Lion public-house, showed, thirty yards from its junction with its more important neighbour, and just at the point where it crosses the ridge of the hill, distinct traces of a prepared gravel foundation in the grassy space between the used roadway and the upper wall. Looking down the fields in the direction of Set End, I found that the straight piece of the modern highway pointed to the exact spot upon which I stood, and also that it was in correct alignment with the reservoir upon the hilltop. The old houses at the end of the village are upon this line. In the fields above Heys-lane I discovered nothing to confirm my suspicions that I was on the right track, but on the other side of the hill, below the reservoir where the land falls away in the direction of Grime Hills, I made a further suggestive discovery. Opposite the last houses on the right of the modern road a cart track joins the highway, having an earthen fence, faced with stone, upon its left hand; the latter is evidently very old, and in a tumble-down condition. One hundred yards along it the random walling changes to a

wall of hand-squared stones, extending some yards, and then becomes random as before. A glance up and down the hillside showed that this occurred exactly on my theoretical line, which at once suggested that what I had chanced upon in the old wall was actually a number of pavers from the vanished road. Possibly in facing with stone an old earthen fence the waller had found, at a point where it crossed the Roman line, a small portion of the ancient road undisturbed, and had promptly built in its pavers at the place where he discovered them. The piece of the wall they comprise measures eighteen feet. Next to the Grime Hills Mission Church that wall on the left hand side of the modern road is, for a long distance, composed of well-prepared, squared stones, and the old group of buildings on the brow of the hill where the road falls sharply to the bridge over the brook is almost wholly composed of paver-like stones. These old houses, with the exception of that portion which embraces the Crown and Thistle public house, are in ruins.

I called upon the family of Fish, of Baron's Fold, who have lived in the same house on the hilltop for generations. I explained my errand and immediately received from Mr William Fish full confirmation of my deduction with regard to the course of the ancient highway.

Mr Fish told me that the Roman road took the line I had laid down through the fields behind the fold, and crossed the ridge on the site of the present reservoir. His grandfather could remember it being used as a "gell track", namely, a pack-horse road. At the side of the old road upon the hilltop his grandfather discovered the foundations of an ancient building, which proved to have been an inn, an ancient place of call where doubtless generations of drovers and pack-horse men had made merry. All trace of it has been destroyed by the excavation for the reservoir and the coal pits surrounding it.

The puzzle of how the old, well-made highway came to be deserted, and how the necessity arose for the engineering of a new road, was made plain by Mr Fish. It appears that coal was discovered, close to the surface, upon the crown of the hill over which the Roman road ran, and Mr Fish told me that the whole of the summit became honeycombed with pits, many but a few yards deep. As a lad he was down several. All are now filled in, and in some cases all trace of them removed. Here, then, is good reason for the diversion which the modern road-builders were compelled to make from the Roman line, for the shallow workings caused the surface to cave in in all directions, and rendered it a quite unsuitable line for a road which was to bear heavy traffic. When all the coal had been won the shale heaps were used to cover up the old road and fill in the disused shafts, in order that the fields might be extended and brought under grass,

so that to discover any signs of the .... road trenching would be necessary. Its pavers having been removed for building, wherever the land fell, the foundation of rammed gravel and broken stones would wear rapidly under the iron-shod feet of pack-horse and drover, and rain and frost would play havoc with the loosened surface. Old Mr Fish spoke of it to his sons as having become hollowed, and the above explanation accounts for its changed aspect in his lifetime. Smiles says that the present road was engineered and built by a famous blind man, John Metcalf, of Knaresborough. What has been the history of the change from one road to the other? The old military way became a pack-horse track, and was probably so used, say, from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. At some time during this lapse of four hundred years, later probably rather than earlier, coal was found to underlie the crown of the hill at Blacksnape, and it was at once sunk and tunnelled in all directions. These shallow workings rendered the road unsafe, and here and there it caved in. Accidents happened to passengers on dark nights, and pack-horses failed to take the new tracks formed around the holes, and were engulfed. The road acquired a bad name, and became deserted for a new track, roughly parallel, which was made upon the hillside below the danger zone. This, being unmetalled, rapidly became a V-shaped hollow. It would probably embrace any houses which had been built near to the new industry of coal-getting. There were none on the crown of the hill or along the actual ridge of it for a long distance on either side. It offered a ready-drawn line for old John Metcalf to follow when he came to construct the new road. Such a theory accounts for the deeply sunken aspect of the road above the Red Lion Inn.

In widening the bottom of the rough pack-horse track for the foundations of his new road, the contractor threw all his waste material upon the lower or western side and it is this line of excavated sand and clay which has been mistaken by observers for the raised agger of the Roman way, running between the houses of the village. Their writings have biased those who have followed them. Old Metcalf's embankment of rubbish, being upon the exposed western side of the new highway, offered some protection to travellers, the situation being very bleak and would give the road more shelter than would be possible.....(worn bit of page)

... foundations upon the Roman road for these old roads have often been so used by medieval builders - or else their back premises face it. The latter assumption would cause it to run between them and the houses standing back ... by themselves, a not unlikely possibility; or probably it is these last which are placed in ... this relation to it.

Some of the placenames on this windy height are most suggestive. Set End may be a nickname of quite recent date, and merely refer to the paving of the upper portion of

Pole-lane, itself a diversion from its original course, which at one time fell into that ancient thoroughfare at the point where a footpath now joins it at the side of the Corporation pump-house. This suggestion, however, is open to the objection that at this point .... the setts cease, and so the name would apply to either end of a newly-made road. Possibly it indicates a point on the Roman highway where the paving of setts came to an end, the rest of the surface having been removed for building purposes at the time the name originated.

Another curious name on this short stretch of road is that of "Temple", given to the highest point of the ridge above the village, a word alien to the language and religious customs of the country. This odd name may have reference to some long-vanished religious building which at one time occupied the ridge, some roadside shrine, or even a Roman post-house, having a colonnaded portico, some ruinous remnant of which might have suggested the site of a temple. We know that the inns and post-houses on the Roman military way were an important link in the splendid road system which the Empire's soldiers had evolved, and that high crown above Drummer Stoops with the suggestive name of Temple, would seem to be a self-chosen site for such a building.

It seems odd that this curious name, "Temple", should recur in the name of a farm in the village of Tockholes, away beyond two valleys to the west. Is there any possible connection between these two namings? Let me examine the evidence. From the highway at Drummer Stoops an old road descends the hillside at right angles in the direction of Jack Kay's reservoir, the tremendous depth to which it has carved itself attesting to its great age. Crossing the south-eastern arm of the reservoir, it joins the modern main road from Bolton to Darwen a hundred yards .... The Grainings Farm. From this point it followed the main road down to Watery Lane, or took a line along the upper portion of the cemetery to join the continuation of Watery-lane behind Whitehall House, and so on through Printshop, Bury Fold, Radford Head, Pinfold, and across the Sunnyhurst Clough the present road on the top of the Dean reservoir embankment is the original line and over the hill into Tockholes. On this last hill the road bifurcates, one line tending more to the north, to pass through the heart of the quaint, straggling hamlet, and upon this branch-road stands the once prosperous but now decayed building bearing the queer name of "Tottering Temple Farm".

A local jingle included it with two other oddly-named farmsteads which occur near together upon this road below the old ruin. It runs:

Theer's "Silk 'Aw"

An' "Weasel o't Waw"

An "Tottering Temple"

....

The old road which comes up Watery-lane and follows the line that has been sketched out above is almost undoubtedly older than its feeder from Drummers Stoops. It is conjectured that it is the ancient "Limmersgate" Lime Gals (ponies) way, which crossed North Lancashire from Rossendale to the neighbourhood of Preston, and was possibly used from Saxon times, if not earlier. It was a convenient cross-country route through the heads of many prosperous little valleys, and all its features, its deep-sinking on Pickup Bank heights and Pole-lane, the very old buildings which stand on or near it, attest its ancient origin, whilst here and there other very old and deeply-cut roads branch from it.

The point I wish to make in labouring the question of the great age of these two particular roads is this: the Limmersgate was undoubtedly used as a pack-horse track through many centuries. Its tributary from Drummers Stoops was probably of similar origin, though not so old, and would be used by those who were making their way to Preston from the neighbourhood of Bury and beyond, or by people travelling in the reverse direction. Granting the great length of the history of these ancient thoroughfares, what of the men who used them? Rough characters for the most part, no doubt; pack-horse drivers, cattle-men, and pedlars, with a small sprinkling of ordinary foot passengers and mendicants. Now the wit of such men was (and is) proverbial, and that bandied about by gentry of such kidney would not lack local allusions. Has some facetious drover or pack-train man in time long past likened an ill-built or badly-thatched farmhouse at Tockholes to the decaying remnant of a "temple" at Blacksnape, and so provided a nickname that has stuck through the years?, "Tottering Temple" is obviously a name given in some such way.

Attempting to trace the line of the Roman highway from Set End to the point at which it passes out of the township of Eccleshill into that of Lower Darwen, over the boundary formed by the Waterside Brook, we find that from the point at which an old by-way from Hoddlesden to Darwen crosses it, the modern road bends to the left in order to embrace the upper portion of old Chapels, while the Roman line points for Brocklehead Farm and Harwood Fold. The fields across which it took its way offer scarcely any indication of anything to suggest that a road once crossed them. The stone walls, by which they are divided, do not appear to contain any specially dressed stone and the contour of the land upon the straight line that the road should have taken is of every shape but the right one. At the junction of the old road from Hoddlesden with the modern one, mentioned above, Mr Abrams thought that he could detect signs of a hard pavement in the .....(page worn away) .... should enter it, but recent alterations at this

point, involving the carrying back and curving of the wall and the widening of the road, have obliterated all traces of anything of the kind. On a footpath from Hoddlesden at the lower end of an adjoining field there is a stretch of gravel near to an old coal pit and ruined building which may be a pointer, and on an old road which crosses our line at right angles in the field above Brocklehead Farm there is again a suggestive tongue of gravel stretching out from its foundations, under the former site of a wall or earthen fence that once bounded it, but which has been removed. Mr Abrams speaks of visible remains in the corner of the field at Harwood Fold, and of a flagged way down the fields towards the railway, but nothing of the kind is visible now. Apart from a footpath from Brocklehead Farm to Harwood Fold, which runs for some distance upon the approximate line, there is no superficial evidence of note until the railway to Hoddlesden is passed, and here a right-of-way across the line leads us to the site of a disused pit. Leaving this upon the left, one has a straight piece of road, some two or three hundreds yards in length, running down the fields to join the modern highway above Davy Field Farm, at the point known locally as the "Flash".

The foundations of this road are suggestively wide, for it is the exact line of the ancient structure, which has from time to time been repaired as it became worn by the heavy traffic occasioned by its use as a coal-pit road. It has also been used as a secondary road for the quarry upon the west side of the hill above the railway, and it may be that this same quarry was first opened by the legionaries for the purpose of constructing their great work. Apart from the quarry, coal has been mined in Eccleshill for three hundred years, and probably this portion of the road has served older pits than the one beside the railway, and therefore centuries of wear and tear, and their necessary accompaniments of repairs, may have completely renewed that portion we are considering. This short, straight occupation road exhibits clearly the only visible remains of the original line in the whole of its course between Grime Hills beck and Grimshaw brook.

When Mr Just surveyed the Roman way seventy years ago, the tenant at Davy Field told him that constant renewals of the surface of the coach road, where it passes the farm, were occasioned by its being built upon the unyielding pavement of the older highway, and this foundation had to be removed in order to remedy the trouble. Some years ago the surface of the Roman work was exposed by excavations for sewers at the point where the road from Guide and Blackamoor to Lower Darwen crosses it, and Darwen gentlemen who saw its surface six or eight feet beneath the present level, said that when its pavers were removed it looked like a modern macadam road. One of the setts obtained from this excavation was in the possession of the late Rev. H. H. Moore,

vicar of St. John's, Darwen. For a short distance beyond Davy Field the two roads seem to run one upon the top of the other, until at the brook the present one bends to the left, having its bridge below the elbow which the stream's course makes at this point. That of the Romans, however, deviates not a hair's breadth from a right line, and indications in the near field and the remnant of its embankment upon the far side of the stream clearly show its bold and unswerving route. Whether a bridge carried the road over the brook or whether there was merely a paved ford, nothing remains to suggest. Probably in the great lapse of time that has taken place .....(page worn away).