

Update June 2019

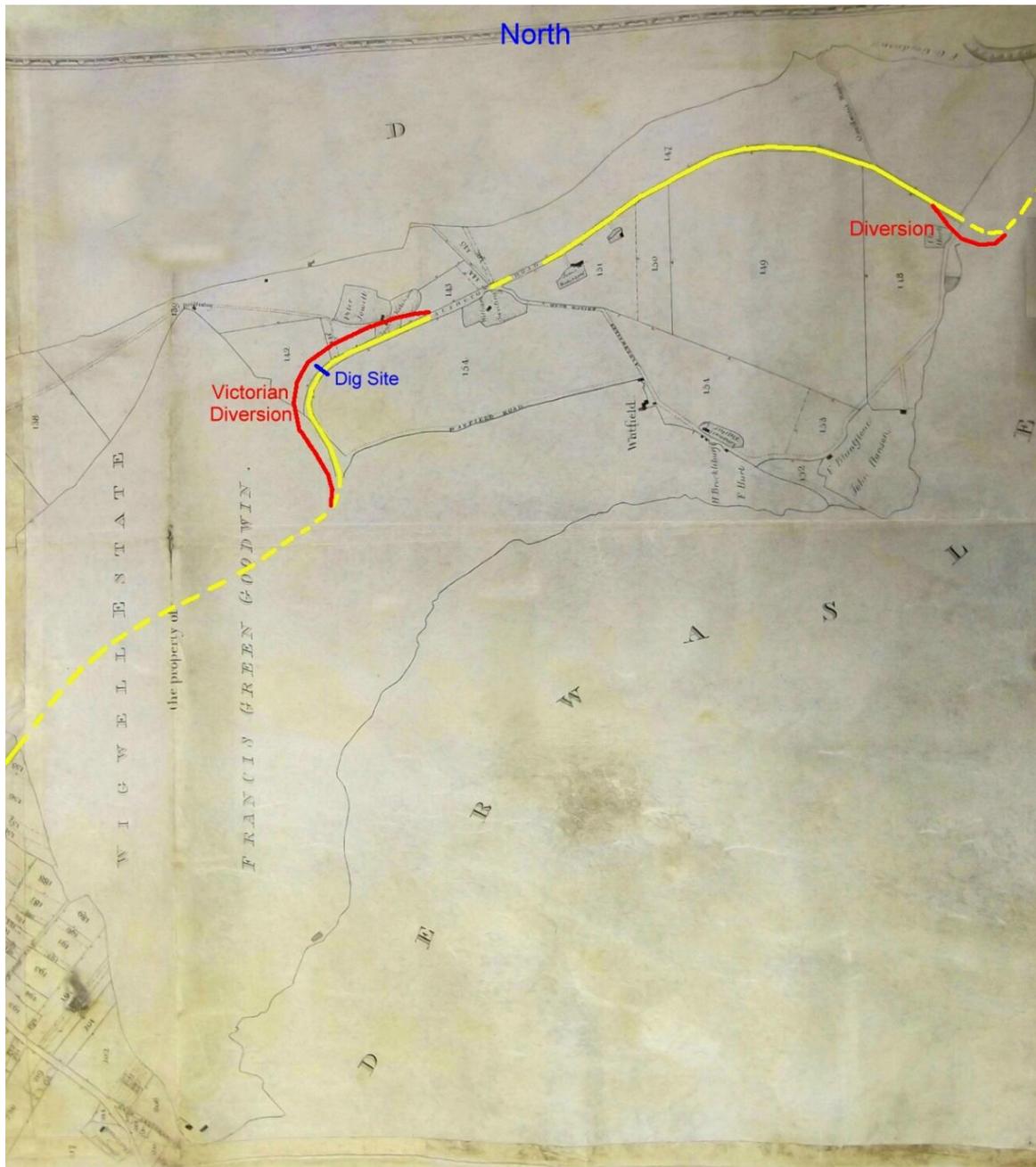
Examination of the road from Wirksworth to Whatstandwell Bridge.

The dig site, in hilly woodland at Hag Wood, is a former alignment of the 1759 Oakerthorpe to Wirksworth Turnpike, in the ownership of Mr Richard Marriott, whose permission was sought and kindly granted. The examination site was at SK 3122 5500 where the alignment runs on a terrace above and to the south of the modern road the B5035.

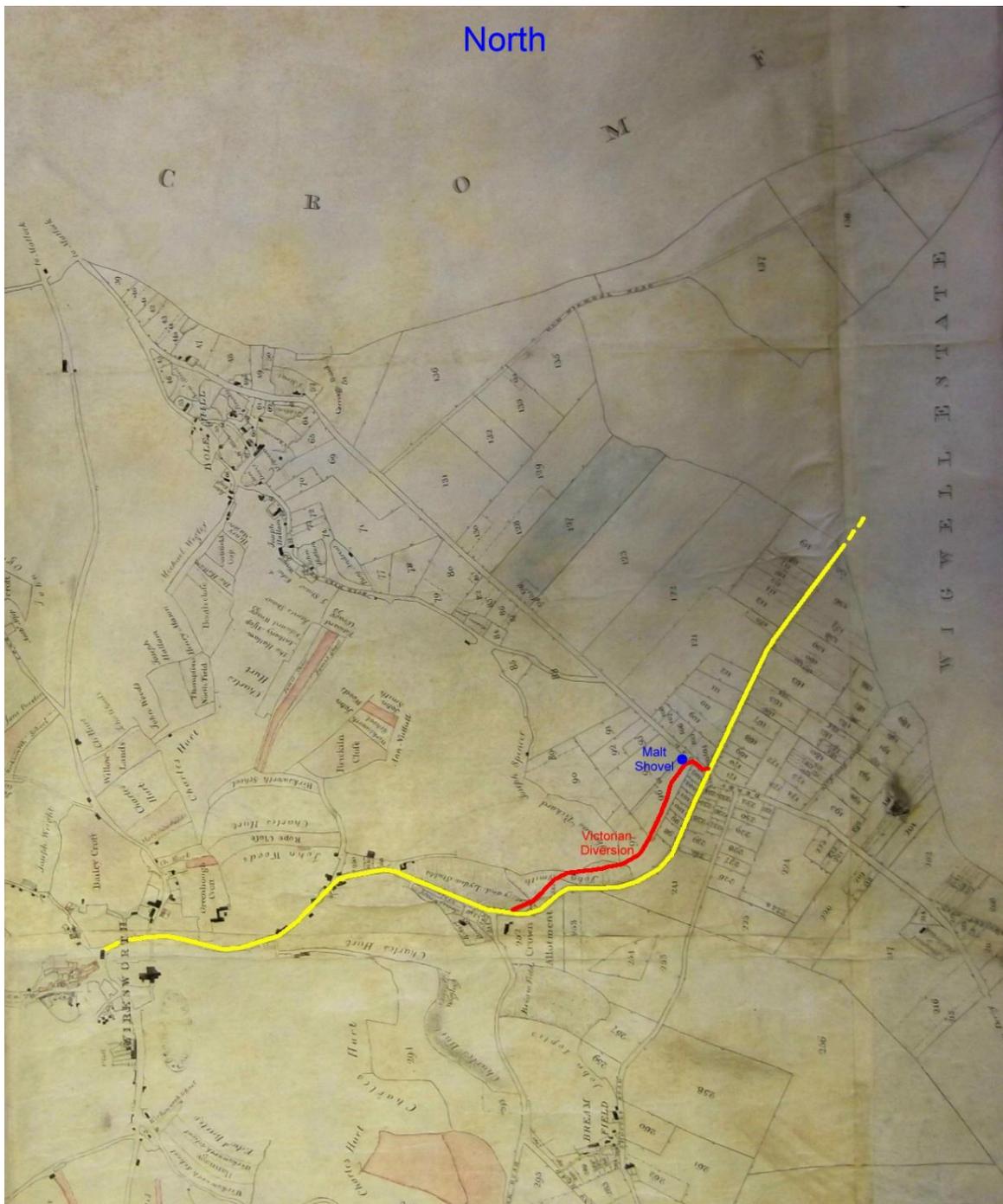
This update does not represent the final report.

Documents and maps.

The first accurate map to show the road is Burdett's Map of Derbyshire dating from 1767. For the sake of interest in local detail and the later boundaries of Wigwell Grange, the map used here is the 1806 Enclosure Map of Wirksworth.



1806 Enclosure Map of Wirksworth (Wigwell)



1806 Enclosure Map of Wirksworth (Wirksworth)

The road, from Oakerthorpe Crossroads near Alfreton to Wirksworth and Ashbourne, was part of the Second District of the Nottingham to Newhaven Turnpike, from an Act of Parliament of 1758. The Act was to repair and widen “an existing road”.

The status and origins of the “existing road” was part of the question this examination was intended to answer. The documentary and other evidence for the existing road is remarkably poor, but in all fairness, nor more remarkably poor than many other roads we have examined.

The Abbot of Darley Abbey and John de Stepul, perhaps of Steeple, Wirksworth, agreed the construction of a bridge at Whatstandwell in a charter of 1390 (Cameron, 1959). On a conceptual level, it cannot be the case that such an expensive effort for the time would be to construct a bridge if no major road served it and profitable tolls could not be made of it. Separately, a charter of 1398 refers to the “Kings Highway” as running over Northcliffe (Wirksworth Moor) and this may or may not be the same road to Whatstandwell Bridge (Thomas le Porter, 1398).

Victorian Diversions

This alignment of the road through Hag Wood was out of use by 1880 and the turnpike had a diversion cut through the nick of Hag Wood which is the current road, some time between 1856 and 1880. We feel that this was perhaps done around 1860 because at that date Wirksworth was thought to be connected to the railway station at Whatstandwell by a “conveyance” to

take people to the station (Sprenger, 2004). Whatstandwell Station was then one of the nearest passenger railway stations to Wirksworth. Consequently, the road was briefly important in the period between 1852 when Whatstandwell Station opened and 1867 when Wirksworth Station opened, so it appears the turnpike company diverted the road at Hag Wood and also at the Malt Shovel by way of "improvements". These diversions give the impression of attempts to ease the gradient but they are at the expense of increasing the curvature and the result, certainly of the Malt Shovel diversion, is of a miserable winding road on a far worse alignment than its original course permitted.

The examination

The examination took place on the 22nd of June and I am most grateful to Dean Smart, Ivan Wain and Richard Marriott for their assistance in what turned out to be quite an arduous dig due to the size of the road and some complicating factors.



Looking south along the original route from the dig site towards Blunderstone Lane and Watfield Lane

The original route turns in Hag Wood in order to avoid the hill in the wood and it takes what would have been the lowest achievable route at the time. The later turnpike diversion (the current B5035) digs out a nick lower than the original road. A trench was cut across the line of the road, north-south and this was initially not wide enough. The road, having finally found the edges, was 5.5 metres wide to its original extent, not including a widening. Bearing in mind that the turnpike Act stated that the purpose was to repair and widen an existing road, this is what examination appears to confirm. A prior existing road is overlaid by a minor (rather haphazard) repair at 1 m 40 cm from the joint of the main edge and a widening of 80 cm on the south side. These activities use substantially different materials, limestone chatter and sand, than the original road, which is composed of pink gritstone.



Section Trench looking north: the “widening” appears as grey limestone chatter at the bottom of the photograph at the joint of the pink gritstone of the main road edge.

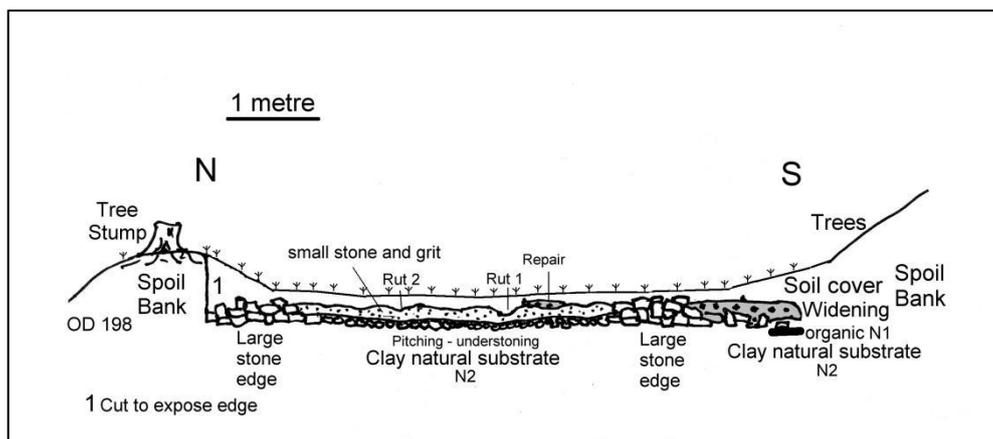
The section diagram shows the road. Setting aside the overlaying widening and repair, the main part of the road is composed of an original surface 5.5 metres wide with built up edges of large 10-15cm gritstone whose purpose appears to be to hold the agger in place and provide drainage. The central agger is composed of a base layer of gritstone pitching, that is to say a layer of medium 5-10cm gritstone, which is continuous from edge to edge and this pitching (understoning) forms the base for an upper layer of finer roadstone aggregate also of the same gritstone but in smaller 2-3cm pieces in a hard gritty matrix.

The road has at least two ruts and the major ones lie approx 1m 40 cm apart. None of the ruts have penetrated to the base layer. On examination of the “widening” this overlays the south end of the road. The material is starkly different, rammed white limestone chatter vs pink gritstone and the overlaid edge of the former on the latter was extremely obvious. The chatter extends some 80cm but when this was examined to verify its depth it was found that more large gritstone was under it to almost the same width as the chatter. It was not possible to explore whether this was also the case on the north side of the road due to a large tree stump. In terms of known turnpike activity e.g. Nottingham Third District at Bakewell, new parts of road were only built of one single gauge of stone and the edging of limestone chatter “mineral gravel” we found here might represent not road widening but (perhaps) a footpath at the side of the road (Thornhill, 1968). The agger of base and running surface appears to be a single unified period of work, there is no obvious second phase of activity of the main part of the road.



Clearing the pitching to ascertain the depth of the agger.

Further outcomes of the examination of the south end were that there are a series of layers which indicate that the topsoil was stripped off the line of the road before the pitching was laid, as a dark organic layer N1 which must have constituted the topsoil was present at this far edge. In the line of the agger however, this layer was not present and the gritstone pitching overlaid the substrate of natural streaky clay N2 directly, this implies the top soil was removed in the process of the building of the road.



Section diagram: Road at Hag Wood

Conclusions and discussion.

No dating materials were found during the course of the dig. The manner of the road construction (trenching, base stone surface, large edging and small stone gritty running surface) matches known Roman road construction in this area and the width of the road suggests a surprising level of importance. We believe that the substantially different “widening” and haphazard “repair” materials (limestone and limestone chatter) represent the activities of the turnpike company. The original road has very obvious built edges and these may represent efforts to keep wash-down off the road and also mark the road edges clearly: such edges and the two layer build of the road are not typically representative of known turnpike construction.

In the case of all the other Roman roads we have examined over the last 12 years, there has always been some prior work, even if such work was the merest discussion of possibilities by the historians of a past age, such as JC Cox or RWP Cockerton. In some cases there had been modest field work such as that conducted on The Street by archaeologists such as G Guilbert or J Lomas. In the case of this road, there is nothing.

If the balance of probability is that the road is indeed Roman we can at most only take it between Wirksworth and Whatstandwell Bridge. This is for several reasons. Firstly, no other examinations of this road have ever been carried out and anything on the east bank of the Derwent is wholly unknown. Secondly, we might assume that the road is conceptually being used for the transport of lead (mostly this was west-east) but a destination is obscure. Antiquarians have been known to discuss Crich as a Roman location but the evidence for that is poor and it cannot represent a destination. Realistically, only the fort at Pentrich on Ryknield Street (Castle Hill Camp, Conegrey Farm, South Wingfield) might faintly represent such a thing, it lies almost exactly due east of Whatstandwell Bridge as the crow flies, but the topography is unsuited to such a direct course and Pentrich is mostly considered to be a very minor fort.

A single examination cannot provide us with an entire road and we cannot provide a report without at least a second section examination to check our results *where there is nothing else available from other workers or professionals*. In addition a further documentary search is needed to see if any clues might be forthcoming as to where this road might actually go.

References

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Thornhill, R., 1968, Notes on some Derbyshire Toll Houses and Turnpike Roads, Derbyshire Miscellany, Vol. IV, No. 4, p.186-187.