

The Chesterfield and Wirksworth Roman Road

Introduction

It has for over a century been felt that the road from Chesterfield to Wirksworth and Rocester was Roman and numerous authors starting with Sidney Addy in the Derbyshire Archaeological Journal of 1917 and RWP Cockerton, writing in the Journal in 1960, took this view. Yet, no archaeological work has ever taken place to investigate the road and it is therefore necessary to ask why Addy and, later, Cockerton held this opinion.

The origins of the view are that the Roman forts at Chesterfield and Rocester should communicate, that is to say be connected by a suitable road, for the mutual support of both forts. Not only was this a necessary consideration in times of hostilities, it was based on the need to provide supplies and messages between forts and to transfer troops when required. For these reasons Roman forts were normally constructed within a day's march of each other. A day's march in Roman army terms is considered to be 15 - 18 miles. However, the distance between the two forts is nearly 31 miles. This being so, both Addy and Cockerton felt we should expect to find a further fort about half way between the two. Cockerton felt that Wirksworth was a candidate for such a fort and Wirksworth is indeed a little under 15 miles from Chesterfield and a little over 16 miles from Rocester. In looking at the prospects for examining the road, the most suitable locations are near Wirksworth, where the historic route into Wirksworth along Dark Lane and Old Lane was not turnpiked nor is in use as a modern road, thus the structure of both lanes was available for examination.

Archaeological Examinations

Two section examinations took place to determine the origins. Both examinations produced alike results. The road has all the characteristics of Roman construction methods. The road is constructed of an agger or cambered surface of small limestone in a clay matrix, with a running surface 3 metres 80 cm wide.

Old Lane

The first examination took place in the grounds of the National Stone Centre, Porter Lane, Wirksworth, DE4 4LS, at SK 2857 5542 Ordnance Datum 239m on the 27th May 2017. Old Lane runs through the National Stone Centre on an approximate south-west to north-east direction and formerly crossed Porter Lane to continue over the crest of the watershed to descend Cromford Hill via Dark Lane. Old Lane was bypassed as the main road into Wirksworth from the north in 1793, by a new turnpike road which took a different line, slightly to the east: the 1793 turnpike is represented by the modern road down Steeple Grange into Wirksworth.

Old Lane is an unusually well-mapped pre-turnpike road. It first appears on the 1632 map of the Dovegang Sough of 1632, where it diverges from the lost road to Middleton-by-Wirksworth at Steeple Grounds. It appears again on Hutchinsons map of the Gell estate in Wirksworth of 1709 and both it and Dark Lane are given on the 1709 map of the Long Sough at Cromford. After that it is continuously mapped. In early maps it has no boundary wall at the point where we examined it and the eastern boundary wall of what is now the National Stone Centre only appears in the 1884 O/S map in relation to the now ruinous small hamlet at Coalhills.

The examination took a section across Old Lane south of Porter Lane where it diverges from the approach road to the National Stone Centre a short distance south of Porter Lane. Old Lane runs here besides the eastern boundary wall of the NSC. This section of Old Lane is still used as a footpath but has received no maintenance for an unknown length of years, therefore the road is no longer visible at this point and is buried beneath up to 20 cm of leaf mould where it runs through a wooded part of the grounds.

As the road is close to the surface and only covered with leaf mould, the examination was carried out by hand and was relatively easy to perform. At this point, Old Lane runs more or less north-south and therefore a trench east-west across the feature exposed the width of the road and some of the natural substrate beyond the western edge.



Old Lane at SK 2857 5542 looking south

The road is 3m 10cm wide from the eastern boundary wall its western edge. The boundary wall here is built against a bank, some of the stoning on the east side runs right up to and apparently below the wall (it is not advisable to undermine the wall). The presence of the bank would imply that the road cannot be much wider than 3m 10cm plus the width of the boundary wall 80cm. The boundary wall is built on top of up to 15 cm of leaf mould soil, implying that the road was largely out of use before the wall was built. This supports the map evidence, no boundary wall was mapped on the 1837 tithe map, but one was shown on the 1884 O/S map.



Old Lane in process of being sectioned, showing rut (east side)

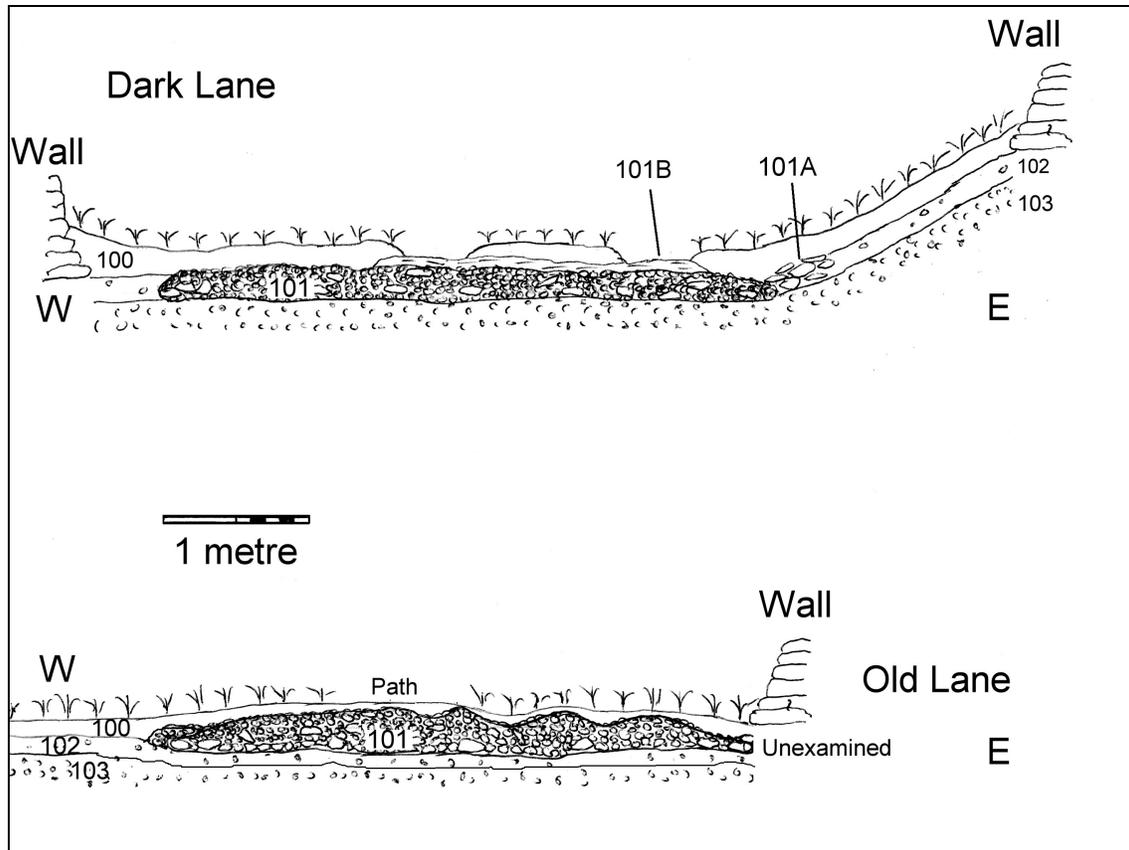
The upper surface of the road is composed of small limestone (mostly 3-5cm) which is in a slightly gritty gravelly clay matrix of a rather grey colour. The road has a number of ruts and a slight camber and this camber falls to both edges, so that on both sides there is a return to a natural fawn silty clay.

On the top of the camber the leaf mould soil is quite thin at 5cm. On the camber edges and to the natural on the west side, the leaf mould soil is up to 30 cm deep. Below the upper surface of the road, the stoning continues in a clay matrix and this becomes slightly more fawn. The stoning is extremely hard packed and the depth of metalling is approx. 20-25 cm in the camber and 10-15 cm at the edges. The western road edge is composed of larger stones 5-10cm. This is not continuous kerb in the modern sense, but does appear to serve as an edging to keep the main running surface in place. There are also some of these larger stones in the base layer of the road.

The natural substrate is a fawn silty clay with some stone down to 40cm but at this depth the clay becomes much more stony and slightly redder and harder, and also contains chert. The road appears to have been slightly trenched into the upper layer of the natural substrate.

The running surface of the road contains a number of uneven patches which may all be ruts but of the "main" ruts, the eastern one is 1 metre from the wall and its fellow is 1 metre 30 cm from it to the depth of rut centres. Although there is a slight colour change from the running surface to the rest of the road metalling, this appears to be a natural function of its use and does not appear to represent two different periods of activity or repair.

The only finds were two shards of tin glazed earthenware ("white ware") embedded into the top of the western main rut. This type of ware dates from between 1600 and 1800 and is very common both nationally and from our other examinations around Wirksworth. We conclude this represents a passing loss in the last major period of the use of the road and is not related to its construction date. In theory, although Old Lane was bypassed in 1793, it remained in use as a farm track and for access to quarries and a few houses at Coalhills between Wirksworth and Porter Lane. Old Lane was finally severed in 1990 by the construction of the National Stone Centre Discovery Building, immediately south of the High Peak Trail: it remains in use as a footpath.



Section diagram of Old Lane and Dark Lane examinations

Dark Lane

The second examination took place on Dark Lane, north of Porter Lane, Wirksworth, at SK 2886 5577 Ordnance Datum 212m on the 3rd and 4th June 2017. Dark Lane runs down Cromford Hill from Porter Lane on an approximate south-west to north-east direction and joins Cromford Hill main road north and west of Black Rocks picnic site.



Dark Lane at SK 2886 5577 looking north

The examination took a section across Dark Lane a little north of a field gate in the western field wall which gives access to a field containing a Lime Kiln with a medium-sized recently restored field barn, and close to the forefield of the Dovegang Sough in Doustonleys Close, now the site of a small industrial estate.

This section of Dark Lane is still used but receives no maintenance and the road is only visible as two stoned ruts in the grass. It is largely buried beneath 20-30 cm of grass, leaf mould and dark organic overburden. It is not recorded as a highway but it was rebuilt at its southern end in 1883 as a result of the construction of the Killer's branch of the Cromford and High Peak Railway and it survived as a road until Porter Lane and Cromford Hill received tarmac, probably in the 1920s (Tarmac was not invented in the modern sense until 1901 and didn't become common for road surfacing until between the two World Wars). Now it is simply classed as a track.

A trench across the feature exposed the width of the original road and some of the natural substrate beyond both edges up to the field walls.

The section is in all respects the same as for Old Lane, although because the boundary walls are 6m 60cm apart it is possible to see the whole width of the metalled agger of the road which is 3m 80cm from edge to edge.

On the west side of the road there are larger stones denoting the edge, which is 70 cm from the boundary wall. On the east side of the road there are also some slightly larger than average stones denoting the edge and for about 50 cm beyond this edge running up the base of the embankment are some loose larger flatter stones which seem to have no purpose in the running surface but might be an attempt to keep wash down off the agger.

The metalling is essentially the same as at Old Lane, that is small and occasional large limestone in a clay matrix up to 25cm deep and apparently laid and rammed into a cut shallow trench. This metalling is extremely hard and it is not possible to excavate it with a trowel, it is necessary to loosen it with a hand pick first. The appearance of the two modern ruts in the grass is deceptive, they are not in fact ruts but overlay the original metalling of the road and in fact protrude above that surface slightly. Only when examined was it found that some of this "rut repair" overlaid a slight actual rut on the east side, but in general this section of the road is not rutted in the way that its companion is at Old Lane. In addition, there is no N1 substrate between the agger and N2 substrate in the Dark Lane section. Given that the N2 substrate is harder than N1, this may account for why Dark Lane has no ruts – the totality of the structure is harder.

The repair is of various mixed and sized coloured limestone with patches of ash, which contained a very tiny piece of blue and white china. In the top surface was a shard of whiteware and the west side overburden contained the top of a heavy green glass bottle of a type common between the Victorian age and middle twentieth century.

On the west side the road is level with the underside of the western field wall, but on the east side, the road terminates in an embankment which runs up to the eastern field wall, the base of which is a metre above the road level.



Cleared surface of Dark Lane prior to examination looking east to embankment and wall. The natural fawn sandy clay is very obvious in the embankment in this picture

There were no ditches, however, in both locations the road lies on a gradient, at Dark Lane of 1 in 9 and at Old Lane of 1 in 20, sufficient to drain the road without additional works. Like the Street, there only appears to be one phase of activity, there is no Roman period rebuild.

We determine from this assessment that the construction of this road most closely resembles Roman construction techniques (rather than, say, mediaeval ones) and that given its existence is known in 1632, it is not, for example, a lost turnpike, but is indeed of Roman origins. The width of this road at 3.8 metres suggests a road of medium importance. It is certainly wider than The Street (2.8 metres at Minninglow) but not as wide as the Portway (6.15 metres at Ivonbrook Grange) or Rykniel Street (5.5 metres at New Tupton). The width of this road is a little above the minimum width required for a road capable of permitting two Roman carts to pass, which is considered to be 3.5 metres (Hutton, 2011).

Overview of the route: Wirksworth to Chesterfield

The route of this road from Wirksworth is as follows: Wirksworth church yard, Church Street, North End, Old Lane, Dark Lane, then in the route of the 1759 (Rowley to Wirksworth Moor) turnpike down Cromford Hill (with a slight variance near Cromford Almshouses), diverging from the turnpike at Cromford crossroads where it crosses what is now the A6. Past Cromford Mill, crossing the Derwent at Cromford Bridge and then proceeding over Starkholmes into Old Matlock and past the church, where it turns to allow for the gradient and a stream crossing and then across what is now the A615 Tansley Road, carrying on up Lime Tree Hill and then following the course of A632 (the 1760 Matlock and Chesterfield turnpike) over Slack Hill and north towards Kelstedge to Stone Edge turning eastwards and to Walton, where it is now called Matlock Road and Whitecotes Lane, but in the 1898 O/S map was called Walton Lane.



Looking south towards Slack Hill from Kelstedge (Image Credit: Alan Heardman)

At the modern junction of Matlock Road and Walton Road, the 1760 turnpike diverged northwards to join the 1759 Chesterfield to Herstone turnpike, this was probably a cost saving measure, it meant that less road had to be repaired at the Chesterfield end of the 1760 turnpike. However, there is no reason to suppose that the original course of Walton Lane is not the correct course of the Roman road and it certainly continues as far as Boythorpe Farm in Burdett's 1767 Map of Derbyshire. Here, at Boythorpe Farm, is the only real issue in the line which the road takes. Both in Burdett's day and in all later maps Walton Lane turned a tight left corner northwards up Boythorpe Road towards an equally tight right turn onto Saltergate. It is these turns which are slightly improbable in Roman road construction. They might possibly represent the correct course, but the topography here presents no serious reasons for such turns, therefore we have to postulate that the turns are not correct, for as a generality where this road turns in other places, such as in Matlock, this is due to topography.

From Boythorpe into Chesterfield

A conceptual alternative is that Walton Lane in its Roman form did not divert northwards at Boythorpe Farm, in that unusual tight right-angled turn, but may have proceeded straight forward down the escarpment in the contour (of the river Rother) to join what is now Derby Road (probably Rykniel Street) at Jawbones Hill. The gap is less than 500 metres and there are no obstacles to such a course in any of the maps prior to the Boythorpe housing area being built in 1923. That a section of otherwise well-engineered road appears either to take a hard turn or to be missing over such a short distance after such an apparent lengthy well-aligned continuation is unlikely. There are examples of where this kind of loss of continuity has happened in other locations, that is to say apparently inexplicable short-distance gaps, but these can be for a variety of reasons: anything from hillside slippage to landowners blocking a road so it doesn't run through their property, to a Roman road being stripped of its stoning to make or repair a turnpike. An example is the Portway at Bakewell, where it is not mapped by Burdett because it had already been superseded by a turnpike road before Burdett produced his map in 1767. In the case of the Portway some of its agger and route still exists and has been archaeologically examined where it is not mapped by Burdett. The opportunities to confirm such a view archaeologically at Boythorpe are unlikely to emerge though: the area is now wholly built up, but if ever elements of a former road come to light in someone's garden they should be taken seriously and properly recorded.

On consideration, therefore, we feel the balance of probability is that the Roman road from Wirksworth may enter Chesterfield via Boythorpe and Jawbones Hill and a junction with Rykniel Street which appears to come in here from the direction of Mill Lane at Tupton and Storforth Lane at Birdholme. Rykniel Street reaches the fort from the south via Horns Bridge and the course of Lordsmill Street (mediaeval Soutergate) where it was considered by Manchester University Archaeology Unit to pass the fort outside its east wall. (Civilian roads do not enter forts per-se). The Wirksworth route would not therefore reach the fort from the west along Saltergate. Even the course of Rykniel Street is in some doubt, because it is only archaeologically reported, from the south, as far as crossing Mill Lane (Patterson, 2016) and one theory has it bridging the river Rother twice to reach Lordsmill Street via Hasland. We take the view, however, that Rykniel Street would remain on the west bank of the Rother, even if this involved a curve to follow the contour of the valley: why build two unnecessary bridges?

Wirksworth to Rocester

The route which the road takes on its section between Wirksworth and Rocester is much more problematical than the Chesterfield and Wirksworth section. This is because there are two alternative possibilities:

1. Wirksworth – Carsington – Ashbourne – Mayfield Bridge – Rocester

or

2. Wirksworth – Kirk Ireton – Clifton – Roston / Norbury – Rocester

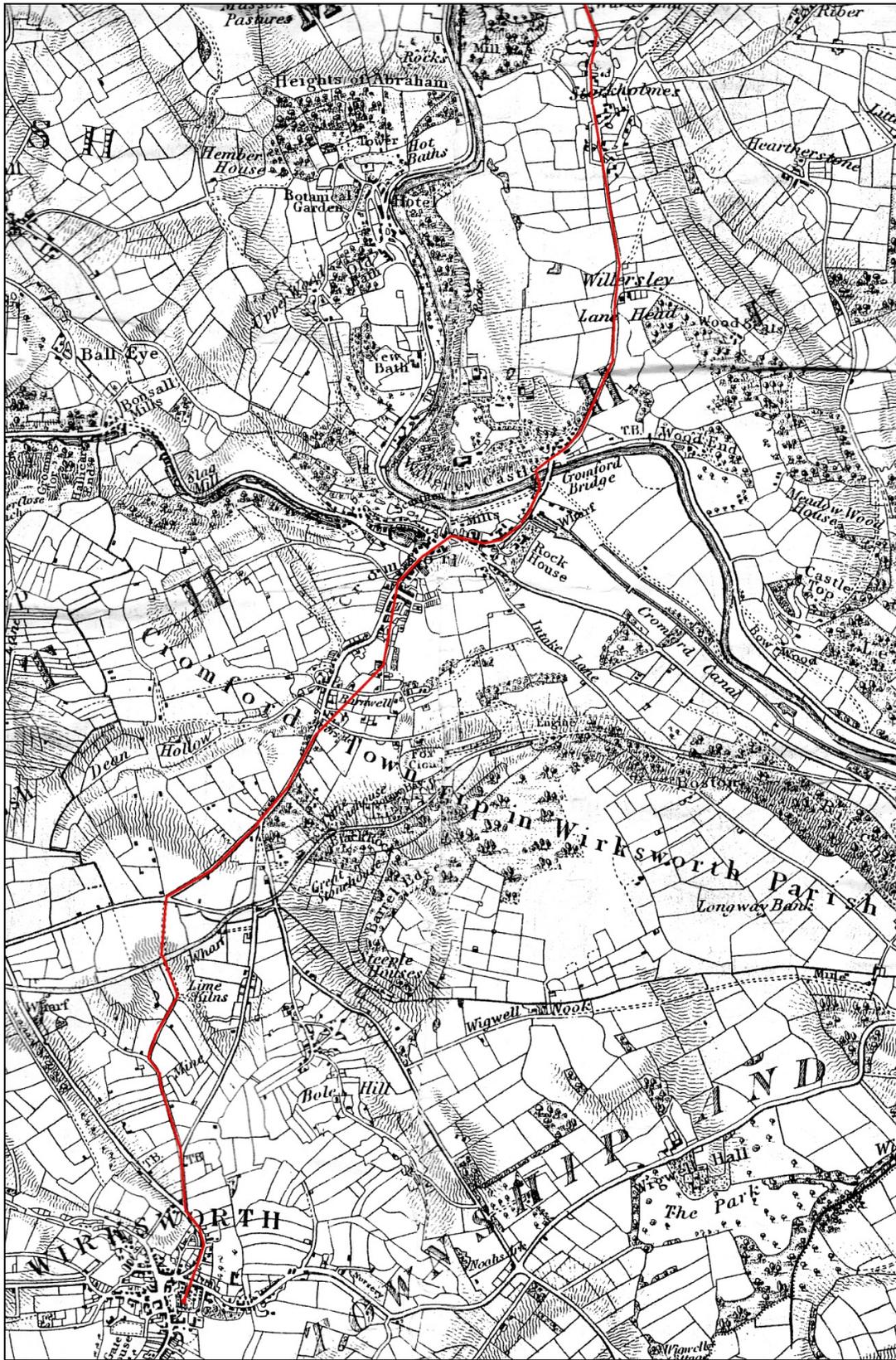
In both cases the routes are in use as modern roads and the possibilities for fieldwork are either extremely restricted or not available. We do not, therefore, have the opportunities or time at the present to examine these sections of the route. Cockerton took the view that the

route was via Mayfield but his view engages no archaeological resource of any kind and was dependant on rather meagre place name evidence.

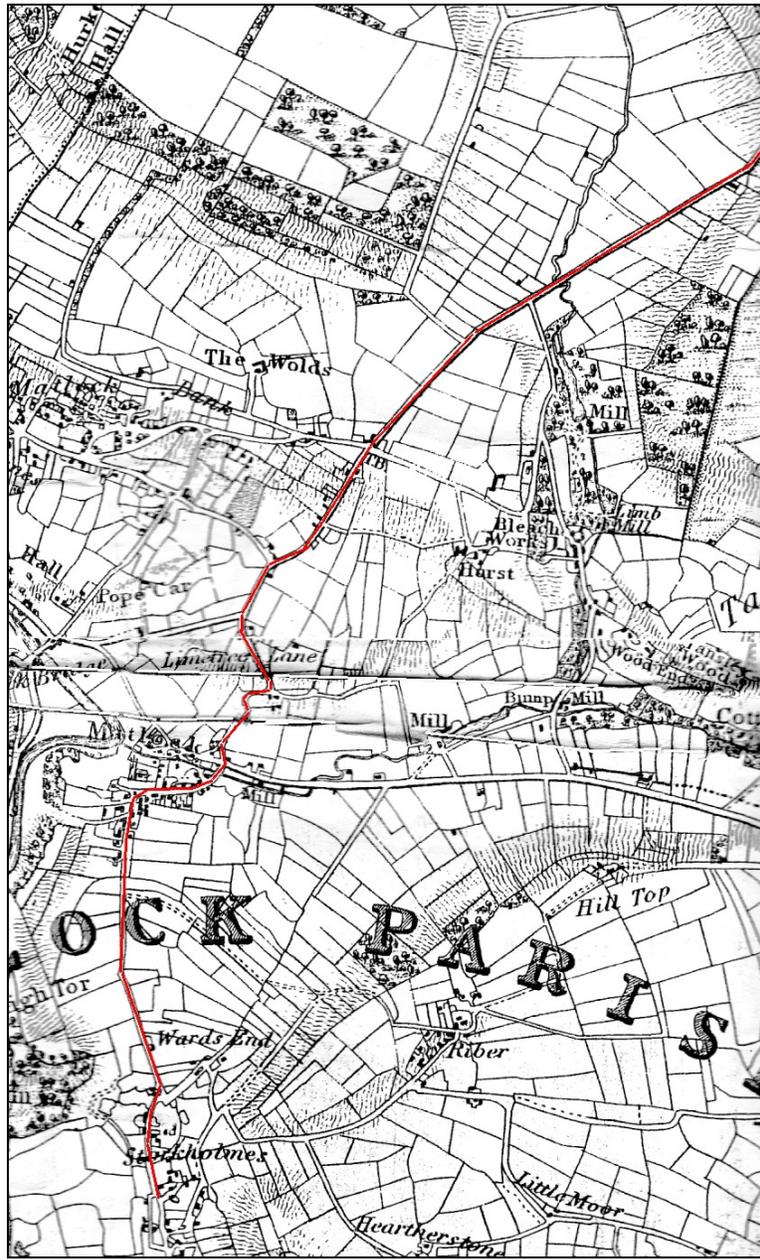
Appendices

Context Register of the sections:

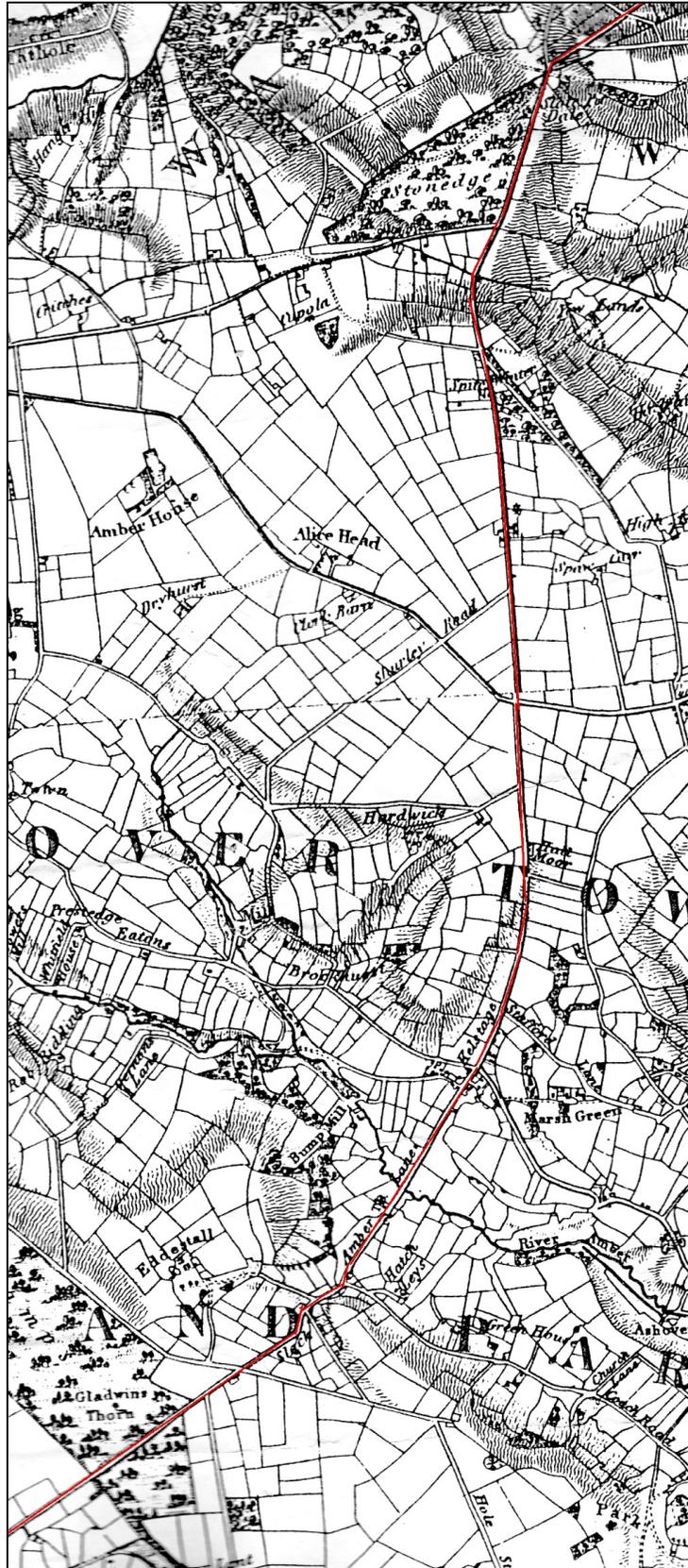
Context	Type	Description	Thickness	Depth from top.
100	Leaf mould overburden	Dark organic build up	5-30cm	0
101	Road	Limestone in a clay matrix, Smaller stones to the surface and some larger in the base of it.	10-25cm	5-15cm
101A	Loose Edge	Some loose medium sized stones lying between the overburden and the natural N1 with no obvious function except to mark the edge or perhaps as some attempt to keep water or wash down off the main surface of the road.	10cm	5-15cm
101B	Farm rut repair	Various colour and size of stones loose in an organic soil matrix as well as ash to fill the modern "ruts". These are not ruts at all except in the sense that the road surface is below the grass.	5cm	At top in rut.
102	Natural N1	Fawn sandy clay occasional stone	10-20cm	20-30cm
103	Natural N2	Very stony sandy fawn clay with redder matrix, some chert.	Unlimited	30 cm
104	Wall	Drystone Wall (Limestone).	N/A	N/A



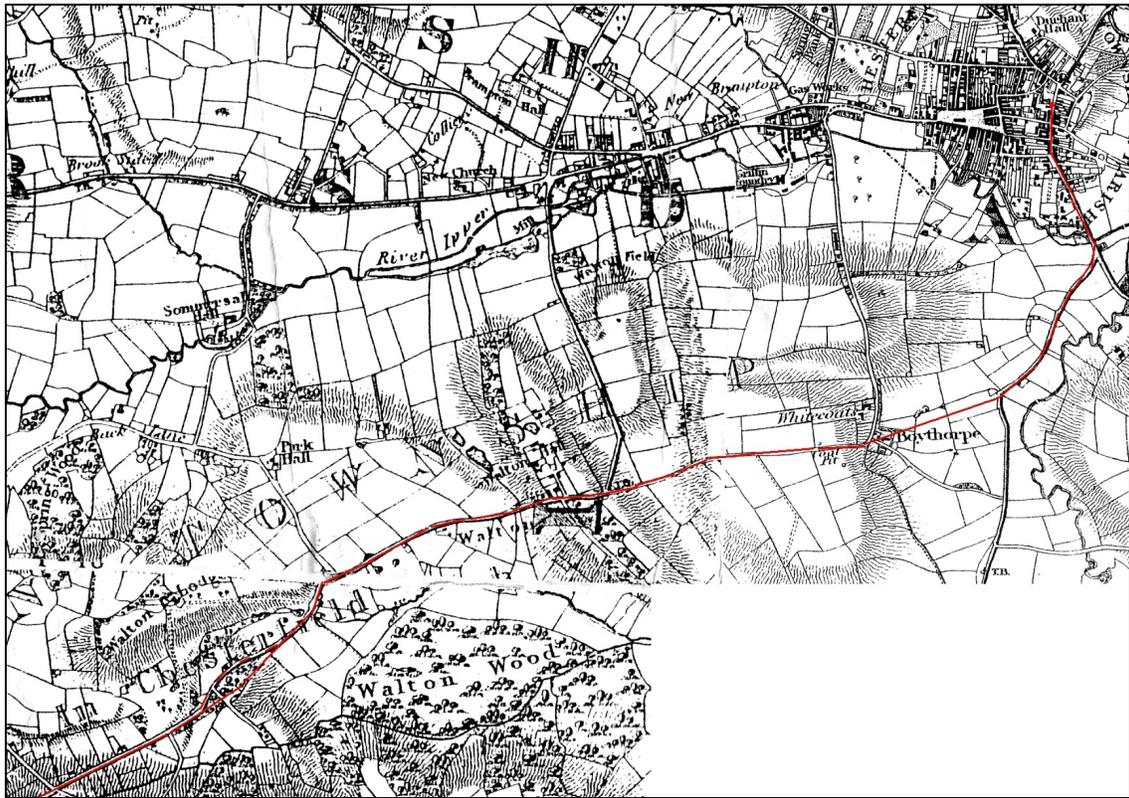
Map 1 – Warkworth to Starkholmes (Route overlaid on 1835 map)



Map 2 - Starkholmes to Slack Hill (Route overlaid on 1835 map)



Map 3 – Slack Hill to Stone Edge (Route overlaid on 1835 map)



Map 4 – Stone Edge to Chesterfield (Route overlaid on 1835 map)

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