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More 7

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The Ancient Roads of Britain were pre-Roman

By John Chaple

Britain, especially England, is renowned for its ‘quaint’ medieval villages, towns and cities. It is also known for its medieval winding roads and lanes.

But, are these roads really medieval? It is a deceptively simple question but one that is rarely asked, so how can you tell how old one of these distinctive roads is? The answer is as simple as the question – by looking at what came first. In modern times we have canals, railways and motorways and these when built had to cut through any existing roads just as you would expect. What happens if you do the same thing but instead look at the Roman road system?

Roman roads are well documented and are characterised by their straightness so it is very easy to check which came first the Roman road system or the medieval system, simply by observing which cuts through which.

The somewhat surprising answer is that the Roman road system cuts through the ‘medieval’ network in a very convincing way, proving that ‘medieval’ roads are at least two millennia old or earlier. This really ought not to be surprising as we know from chariot burials and the war chariots that greeted Julius Caesar during his invasion – at least four thousand of them – that the ancient British had chariots, so it is almost impossible to see how they could have not have had roads. The problem is that on the TV and in the media we are continually told that before the Romans arrived in Britain there were no roads at all and that the Ancient British were ignorant savages, but this really could not be further from the truth as they already had a very substantial road network, the so-called medieval network.

Although not a dramatic proof, the fact that these straight Roman roads can be shown to cut through ‘medieval’ roads repeatedly, should be enough to prove that Roman roads came second, that is, *after* the ‘medieval’ roads.

I have chosen to look at a section of Watling Street as it approaches London in what would have been Kent, although it would be possible to do this with any section of a Roman road.

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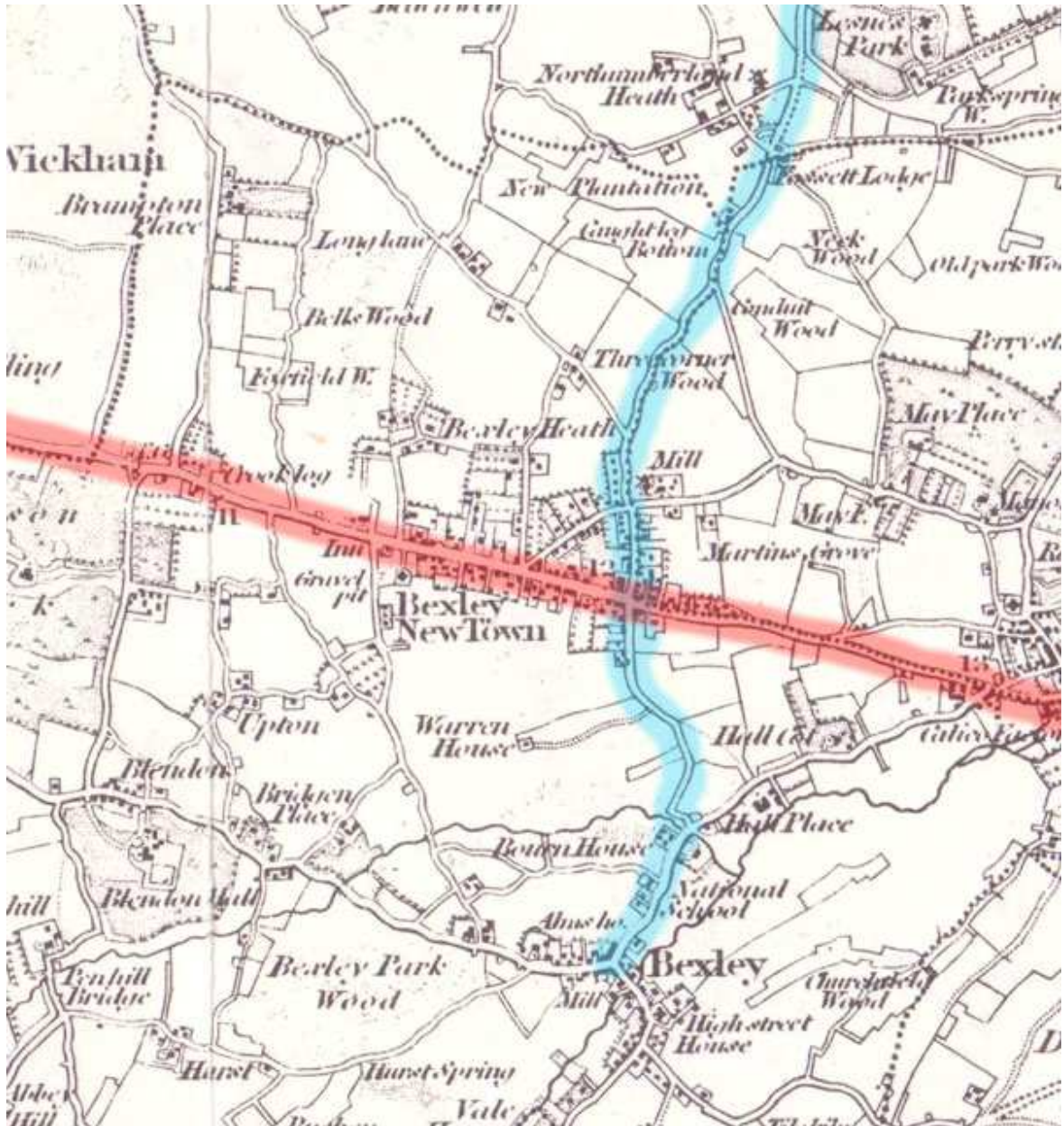


Fig. 1, Watling Street shown crossing an earlier 'medieval' type road

As Watling Street (highlighted in red) approaches Bexley New Town, the A220 (highlighted in blue) is clearly cut by Watling Street, this is the road from Erith to Bexley.

It is interesting to note that the town that has developed along Watling Street ought to be more recent than Old Bexley (as the 'medieval' village is often known) if Watling Street is indeed newer than the 'medieval' road. The district now known as Bexleyheath, is shown on this map of 1844, as Bexley New Town, which would not make sense if Watling Street were older than medieval.

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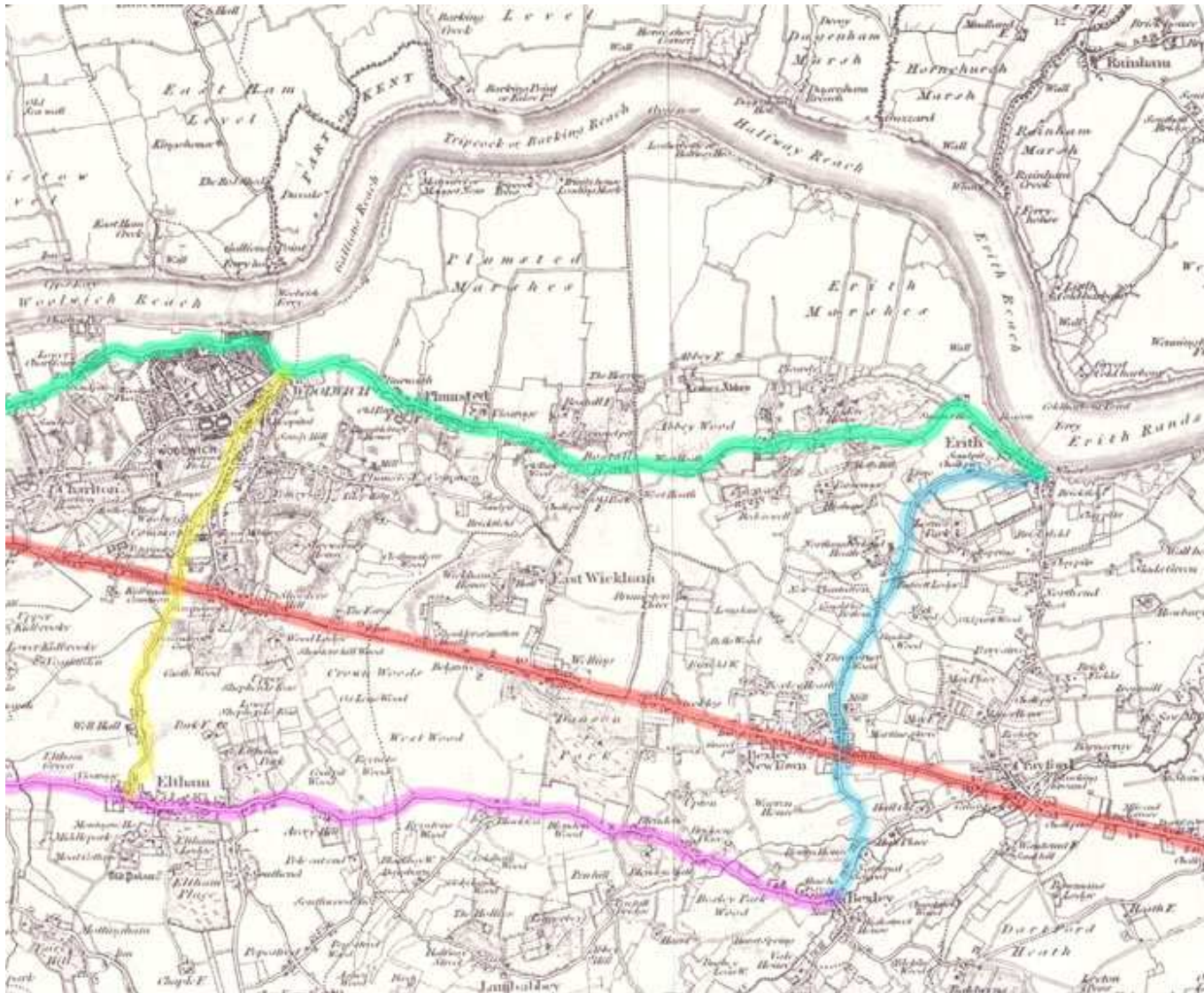


Fig. 2, this is the zoomed out view of the same area, Bexley is where the highlighted blue and purple roads meet.

The A205 (highlighted in yellow) is another example of a road being cut through by Watling Street.

The A206 (highlighted in green) which heads west to Greenwich and beyond is almost certainly the oldest road on this map. It is the ancient (south) Thames road, all the major rivers in Britain have important roads on both banks and these are likely to have been the first roads to have been made. Archaeologists agree that the first permanent settlers, the Neolithic people, arrived by boat, these were the first farmers. Before they got farming in earnest, in particular cutting down the dense woodland and forest, they would have lived on the banks of the Thames and hunted in the marshlands. Before the marshes were drained they would have been frequently flooded and virtually impassable except by boat, and so were in effect part of the Thames. The banks of the Thames would therefore be further inland than might be expected; the first dry land after the marshes and there are

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frequently cliffs, anciently cut by the Thames commanding fine views of the Thames Valley. Woolwich, Plumstead and Erith are examples of these early settlements.

All along this road there is direct evidence of early human usage – numerous artificial mounds and other ancient finds have been discovered along it. There have been extensive Roman finds along it too, showing that it was certainly in use in during that period. Further to the west at Deptford this same road has been archeologically investigated and was found to have extensive Iron Age pottery fragments. Off the map to the east but still on this road is Swanscombe where one of Britain's oldest inhabitants was found; Swanscombe Man.

This ancient road although very useful at servicing the Thames settlements was not a very direct route following as it does the meandering Thames. Further to the south is another road the A210 (highlighted in purple) which heads west through Eltham to Lewisham and beyond. This is a reasonably direct route and was probably developed as a short cut for the more ancient Thames road, nevertheless it is still an ancient road as the roads highlighted in yellow and blue meet it and yet are cut by Watling Street.

It is highly likely that most if not all of the crooked roads shown on this map are very ancient and were developed as the area was re-claimed for farming. As a rule of thumb, the more crooked the road the older it is, the straighter it is, the newer. Roads were already tending to straight before the arrival of the Romans and all known roads built after the Roman period were straight or at least composed of straight sections.

The examples of Roman roads crossing existing roads is only one kind of proof, perhaps a better proof is where known Roman roads join pre-existing roads.

A clear example of this is at Streatham, South London, where the A23 is thought to be Roman - and it *is* Roman to the south of Streatham and all the way to Croydon (the road highlighted in green on the map on the next page). But the original A23, the old Streatham High Road, continued to the south west along Mitcham Lane (the road highlighted in pink). The Roman road heading north from Norbury makes a beeline for the mediaeval church at Streatham and joins the old High Street with a very odd ramp-like road – it clearly joins an earlier road. Note how this earlier road is very sensibly routed along the side of a hill, notice too how similar in character Mitcham Lane and the old High Street are, proving that they were once the same road.

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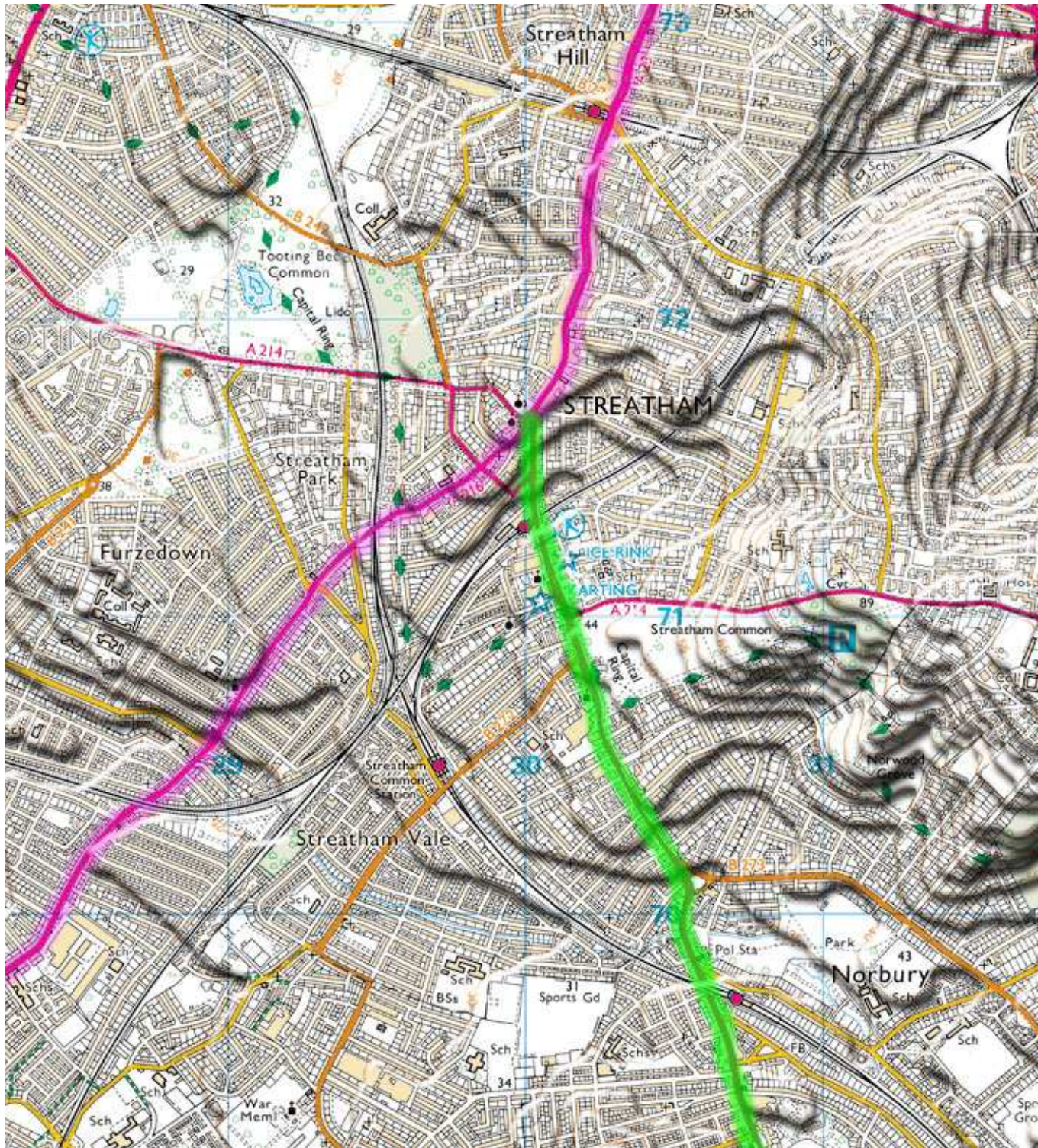


Fig. 3, a three-dimensional map of Streatham, South London

The sharp junction where the Roman road and the earlier road meet is very unusual. Because the junction is so steep the pavements are on two different levels and only meet at the tip of the junction. The reason for this is entirely due to the Roman road joining the

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earlier road and shows without doubt that the 'medieval' winding road came earlier than the Roman. To overcome this problem some steps and railings have been added, it's worth noting that this problem has been around for two thousand years, this solution is relatively recent. The photo is taken from the Roman road, confusingly known here as Streatham High Road, running through the middle is Mitcham Lane. In the background is the medieval church.



Fig. 4, this shows the unusual pavement levels where Streatham High Road meets Mitcham Lane.

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This map shows what is currently thought to be Britain's oldest trackway (highlighted in blue) and the worlds earliest 'prepared road type' found preserved in the marshes and is considered to be around 6000 years old; older than Stonehenge.

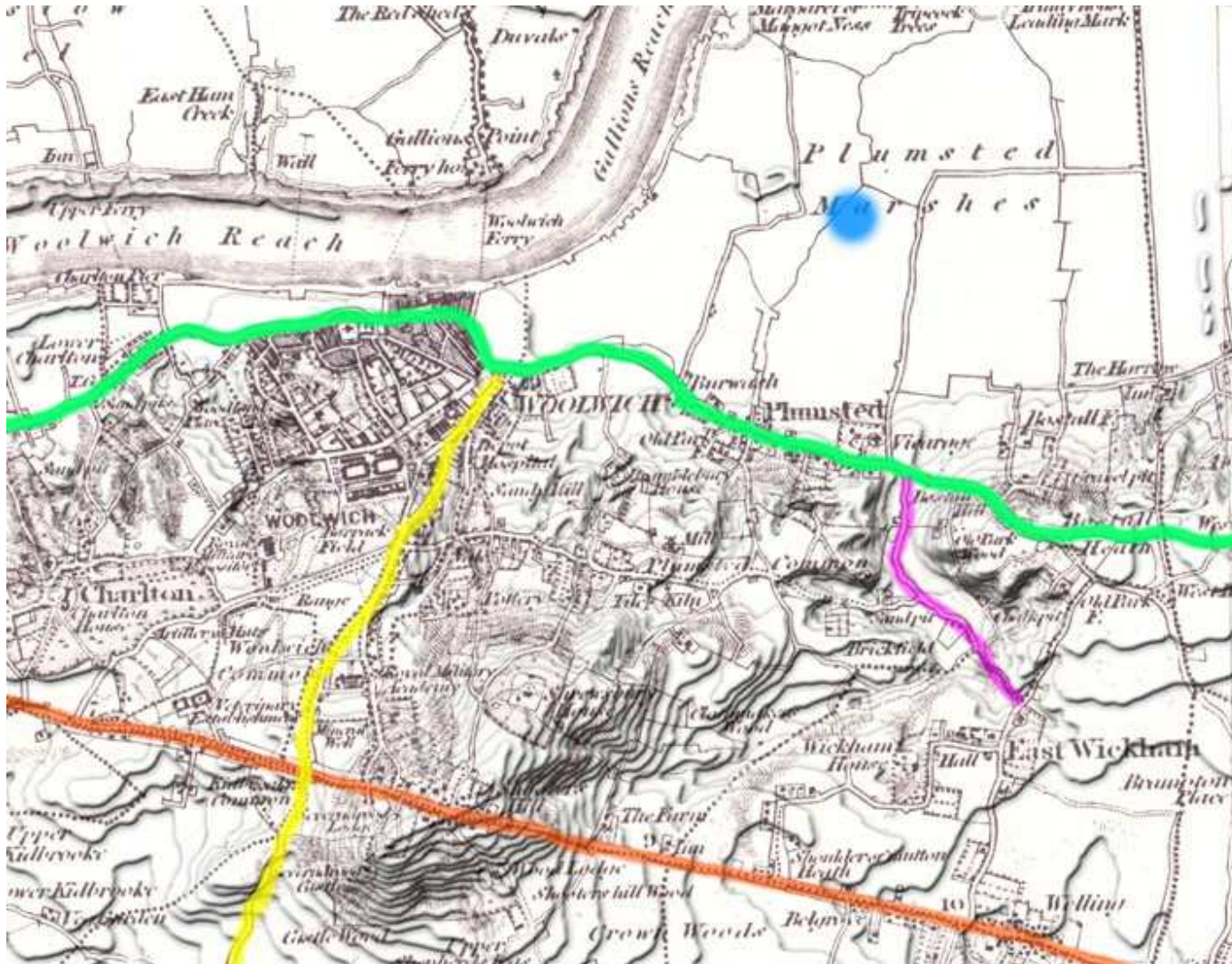


Fig. 5, a three-dimensional map of Woolwich and surrounds and is a close-up of the western part of fig. 2.

This is a shows the ancient Thames road highlighted in green again, this is an enlargement of the left-hand of fig. 2, the blue circle near the top centre where it says Plumstead Marshes is the rough location of this old trackway. It is however not much of a trackway more of a raised wooden path no doubt to improve access in the marshes. As ancient as it is it is unlikely to be older than the Thames road and would have once presumably linked to it in some way. Shown again is the Woolwich/Eltham road in yellow, notice how it skirts the bottom of the formidably steep Shooters Hill. The road marked in purple Wickham Lane fits so neatly in a valley that it to looks as though it is very ancient. It was certainly in use in Roman times as Roman coins have been found along its length and this is probably because it was used as a by-pass to avoid the steep Watling Street at Shooters Hill and it certainly doesn't look to be purposely built by the

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Romans. Notice too that this section links two ‘medieval’ churches. These ‘medieval’ churches are almost never found on Roman roads, except at highly important locations, and yet are far more common, and fit within, the earlier ‘medieval’ road system. This proves what has long been suspected that many medieval churches were places of worship long before they were Christian.

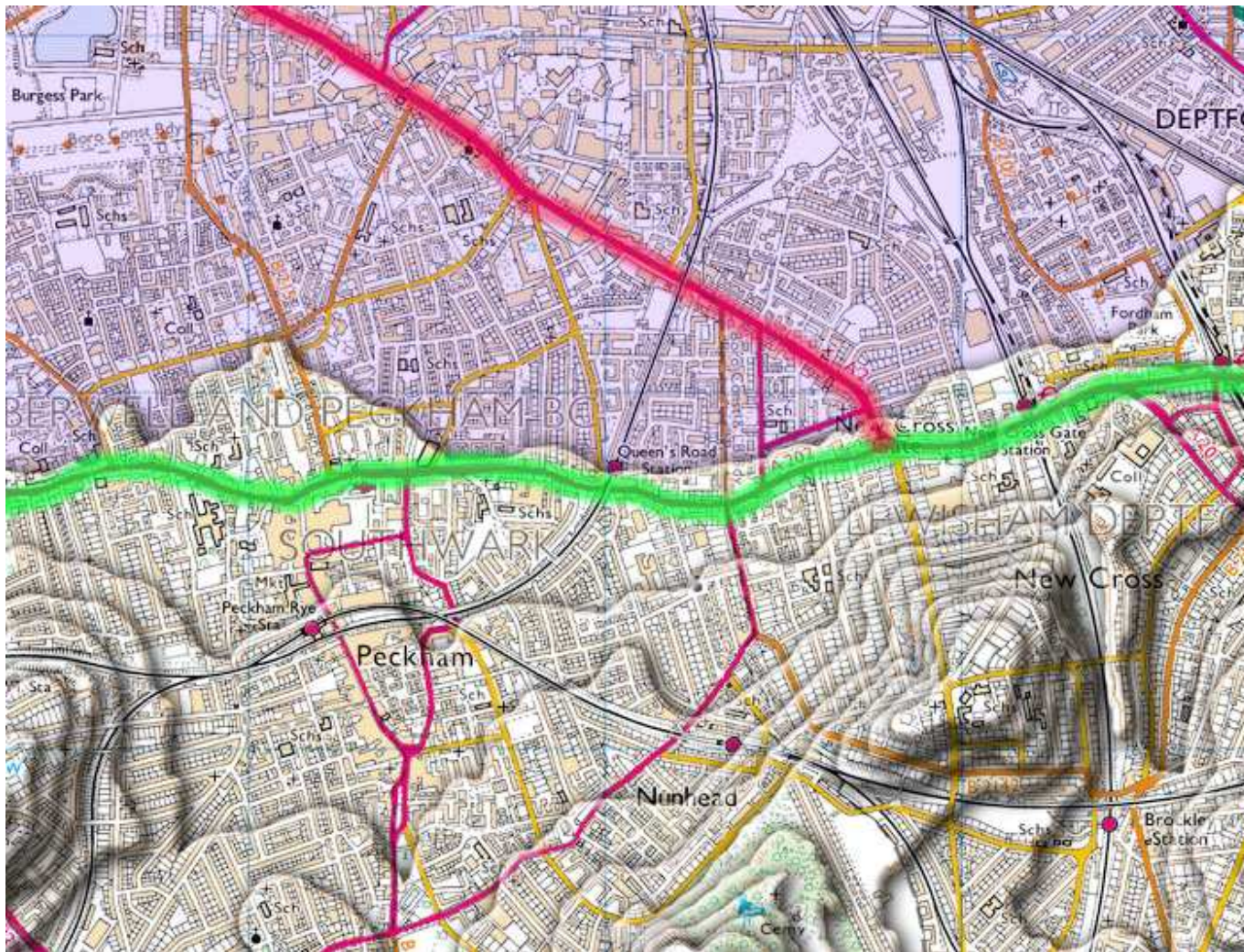


Fig. 6, the Roman Old Kent Road joining an earlier road at New Cross, South East London

This map shows the ancient Thames road again, highlighted in green, we are now a little further to the west that in Fig. 5. The Roman Old Kent Road is shown in red, the area shaded in blue at the top of the map represents the marshes, everything below 5m; the Thames is further to the north. Notice how the ancient Thames road follows the edge of the marshes.

At New Cross Gate, South East London something remarkable happens, the Roman road (circa 100AD) the Old Kent Road, meets this earlier road as a distinct ‘T’ junction (the road to the south in orange is modern). The Old Kent Road led to the Roman London

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bridge near the current London Bridge and made its way across the marshes until it got to firm ground where upon it joins the earlier Thames road. That it did actually terminate here can be proved by the remains of Roman pillars on either side of the end of this road, interpreted as a gate. This is picked up in the place name New Cross *Gate* and shows clearly that the Thames road is older.

All roads lead somewhere and so do these ancient roads, they lead to 'medieval' villages and towns, in fact many of these early roads are named after the places they lead to, for example, the road in fig. 3, Mitcham Lane is also known as Streatham Road depending on which end you are on. Therefore, now it is shown that 'medieval' roads actually predate Roman roads it is reasonable to ask were the towns and villages they served are also pre-Roman, and all the evidence suggests they are indeed older. It also neatly explains where the earlier Britons were living, often in the same 'medieval' villages and towns we still live in today. This earlier road system must have been used for something and they do seem to link settlement to settlement. There is historical evidence too, Julius Caesar would have passed through this part of Kent and he described it as full of cattle, and farmsteads at every turn and highly populated so these people would have needed to have lived somewhere.

Remarkably a lot of history of Britain before the Roman period has survived although currently most historians choose to ignore it. Most of these early histories of Britain start with a preamble of what Britain was like in ancient times, a brief description. Now you wouldn't expect ordinary villages or towns to be mentioned except perhaps if they were associated with an important battle or event but you do get the cities mentioned. The histories are surprisingly consistent and speak of the number of cities in Britain between 28 and 33, although one historian claimed there were 92 of which 33 were the most important, it is clear from the context that most of these cities were in existence before the Roman period. What is more many of them are named and there are several such lists

Caer Caint. Canterbury.
Caer Wyn. Winchester.
Caer Municip. St. Albans.
Caer Sallwg. Old Sarum.
Caer Leil. Carlisle.
Caer Odor. Bristol.
Caer Llear. Leicester.
Caer Urnach. Wroxeter.
Caer Lleyln. Lincoln.
Caer Glou. Gloucester.
Caer Meini. Manchester.
Caer Coel. Colchester.
Caer Gorangon. Worcester.
Caerleon ar Dwy. Chester.
Caer Peris. Porchester.
Caer Don. Doncaster.
Caer Guorie. Warwick.

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Caer Cei. Chichester.
Caer Ceri. Cirencester.
Caer Dur. Dorchester.
Caer Merddyn. Carmarthen.
Caer Seiont. Carnarvon.
Caer Wyse. Exeter.
Caer Segont. Silchester.
Caer Baddon. Bath.

Amazingly London is included, although this is only surprising as we are constantly told London was founded by the Romans (actually it was founded far earlier) and the founding dates for many cities are given. Perhaps the most surprising is that according to these chronicles Leicester was founded by the Ancient British king, King Leir, better known as Shakespeare's King Lear, before the traditional date for the founding Rome (circa 750BC). Yet Leicester doesn't seem like one of our oldest cities and this must mean that some of Britain's cities must be considerably older than this.

This is entirely consistent with the 'medieval' road system as these roads link these cities. So how old is this road system? The purpose of these roads was to connect the villages and towns together, but this was not just for humans but also for their livestock for getting animals to and from market and the other associated country tasks. As soon as you were growing crops and keeping livestock you needed some sort of enclosed fields to stop the crops from being trampled. Archaeologists agree that the chequerboard field pattern that Britain is famous for is pre-Roman and it has probably evolved from when the first farming occurred, in some areas this would date back to the first farmers in the Neolithic or New Stone Age.

All these enclosed fields (whether created by dry-stone wall, bank, ditch or hedgerow, etc) needed its own entrance and access. Every field would have been connected by paths, tracks and lanes, all eventually leading to the roads. That the roads were constrained by the field system can be shown from where roads pass through common areas, as there are no fields, the roads seem free to go as they please and often criss-cross commons and heaths alarmingly. This also shows that private property – land ownership goes back a long way in Britain. The field system is another proof that the 'medieval' road system is ancient as the field system is entirely constant with it, on the other hand Roman roads are often found cutting through the field boundaries showing that the fields were there first.

The reason these roads have lasted in use for so long is that up until recently they were still being used for their original purpose of moving livestock around and this practice continued until they were forced off the roads by the motorcar.

Actually this pre-Roman period was not much different to the period after the Romans arrived, much more sophisticated than is usually thought, so there ought to be some history of these people and remarkably there is, lots of it, the problem is that today's historians choose to ignore it. Remarkably, these histories have something to say about

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early British road building. They claim that the four major 'Roman Roads' in Britain were not built by the Romans at all but by the British around 400 years before the Romans arrived in Britain and long before the Romans themselves had started their straight road building. These roads were supposed to have been started in the reign of the ancient king of Britain King Molmutius, circa 450BC. They were finished under the rule of his son Belinus, who with his brother and some Gauls sacked Rome.

There is good evidence that Watling Street is earlier than Roman, where it crossed the Thames at Westminster it used a ford, as it is tidal here it is impossible to build a ford that would be high enough to be passable all the time so it could only be used at low tide. To get around this problem there was also a ferry, the ferry that gives Horseferry Road its name which was presumably big enough to take horses but it's not very Roman, the Romans would undoubtedly have built a bridge. In addition, at the termination of Watling Street at the north side of the Thames there is the remains of a pre-Roman tumulus or artificial mound the Toot Hill from which Tothill Street Westminster takes its name.

Also in this history is a Prince Camber and there is a district in South London called Camberwell and it gets its name from an ancient well located near the top of Camberwell's most prominent hill. Because Roman coins were found at the bottom of the well this proves that the village of Camberwell, since it takes its name from the well must be 2000 years old or older. Actually if the well is named after Prince Camber one of the sons of Prince Brutus (circa 1103BC), the legendary founder of London, it would take it back in date to around 3000 years ago. There is some evidence for this, the well is currently being archeologically dug and it has emerged that the large circular earthwork around the well could indeed be late Bronze Age, the correct date and the well itself has an internal diameter of over 7 feet, which does seem unusual.

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