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The Fosse Way at Culkerton Wood

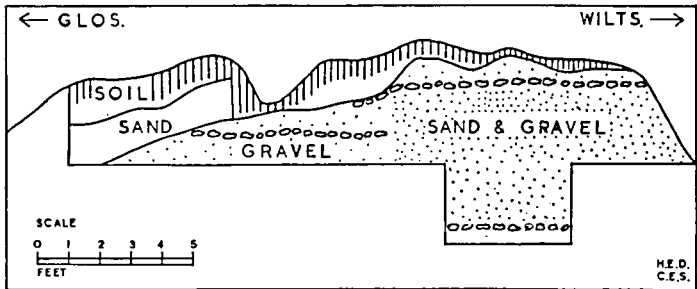
by C. E. Stevens
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THE FOSSE WAY AT CULKERTON WOOD

by C. E. STEVENS

For ten miles southwest of Jackment's Bottom the Fosse Way runs on a line remote from modern habitation and even from modern traffic, and there are few sections of it which, while maintaining almost uninterrupted the line, show more clearly a Roman road in its medieval decay and disrepair. In normal circumstances there seemed nothing to disturb the picturesque solitude of this ten-mile sector. But these days are not normal,



and the wayfarer now finds himself at once in the middle of a military aerodrome, and though this ancient right of way is still maintained, it is patrolled by military police. The work of Roman Legionaries sees now the newest engines of modern war.

The makers of the aerodrome, however, have assisted the archaeologist by cutting roads across the line of raised ridge to which Codrington had directed attention, and by kind permission of Wing-Commander Tompkins, the author was able to clean up and measure a section where the contractors had exposed it. In the circumstances thorough excavation was naturally impracticable, nor

could levels be taken from a datum, but with the assistance of Miss Donovan it was possible to clear a face of the causeway down to the level of the contractors' road and to explore in one place down to the natural subsoil. The result, therefore, though incomplete, is worth recording, especially as the contractors' road has been widened for the use of the aerodrome, and the measured section no longer exists.

The farm road has intruded upon the causeway on the Wiltshire side, so that it is impossible to establish the overall width, Roman construction being only observable for a total width of 18 feet 10 inches. Across this distance the make-up of the road consisted of alternate layers of thin limestone flags and more or less gravelly sand, the whole resting on about 6 inches of decomposed 'brash' over the limestone. The lowest layer of flags was laid immediately upon this 'brash'. As already remarked, it was impossible to work down to the subsoil over a wide area. Nevertheless the level of the contractors' road cannot be far above it, so that it is likely that this lowest layer of flags was laid in an excavated trench. Parallels for such excavation have been observed elsewhere. The next row of flags, about 3 feet above the last, was noted as not being continuous across the section, its place being taken in the centre of the road by a mass of rammed gravel and sand. The circumstance is certainly curious, but was very carefully observed and may still be checked by examining the hole constructed for a stand-pipe a few yards from the point at which the section was made. It seems, however, to be purely of local significance, for another contractor's section about 200 yards further south (where the author was able to make some slight examination), shows an analogous layer of flags extending over a width of 27 feet. It is hard to say whether this layer of flags is a relic of an original road-mass, or whether it is a constructional device (like a bonding-course) to hold the

concrete together. It was hardly possible to do more than expose the section of it, but it did not appear to have been a road surface.

The uppermost layer of flags 1 foot 8 inches higher than the last, extended from the side of the farm road 7 feet 9 inches across towards the Gloucestershire side, at which point it appeared to slope downwards, eventually meeting the second line of flags. Disturbance, however, consequent upon the building of a field-wall (itself now demolished to make the contractors' road) makes it difficult to establish this. Above there were scanty traces of the sandy gravel which presumably formed the road surface of the Fosse, at least in its final period. The sand, observable on the left (Gloucestershire side) of the drawn section presumably represents washed down material from the causeway.

The uppermost layer of flags with gravel overlying them was also observed in approximately the same relative position in the other contractors' section, which was partially cleared.

This length of road alongside Culkerton wood offers fine opportunities for a methodical and detailed examination of the Roman construction, and we must hope that a time will come when such opportunities may be taken.