

On an Ancient Road between Glastonbury and Street.

BY JOHN MORLAND.

AS every one knows, the hills and rising ground on which Glastonbury now stands originally formed an island or a group of islands, rising out of the mere or swamp, which surrounded it during the winter and possibly in summer also, before the embankment of the river Brue, and of the Parret, about Burnham. To obtain access to this island at all seasons, raised roads or causeways were required, and these causeways would naturally be carried across the narrowest stretches of swamp or moor. Thus, at a very early time the high land of "Wearyall," or "Wirral," would be connected with the rising ground about Street, for at this point the swamp was less than half a mile wide; Street is, in fact, much nearer to Glastonbury than any other rising ground.

The existing road from the south-western end of Weary-all Hill starts from Northover, and is carried nearly in a straight line across to Street turnpike; it is called pre-eminently "the Causeway," and has the reputation of being a Roman road. It crosses the Brue by "Pomparle's," or "Pemperel's" bridge, the name being derived from *Pons Periculosus*; the bridge was, however, rebuilt and much widened early in the present century. Though of reputed Roman origin, I am not aware that there is any evidence of Roman or even of ancient work in the structure of either the road, as it now exists, or of the bridge.

A few years ago, when the meadows to the east of this causeway were being drained, an old road buried under the soil, was cut across in many places, and was thus traced from the river Brue, on both banks of which it can be seen, nearly up to Street, as will be seen from the plan herewith; it is about 45 yards from the present road, runs nearly parallel with it, and is buried from 18 inches to two feet under the present surface.

As the drains which cut across it were shallow, they did not enable one to examine the structure of the road fully; but, besides the stone used, which was chiefly much weather-worn blue lias, many pieces of timber were found, some used as piles, others running across the road, and yet others longitudinally. The surface of the road was rough, but one observer tells me that he was able to distinguish wheel tracks. I regret I cannot at present corroborate this from my own observation.

The direction of the road is nearly due north and south. If it were further continued southward, it would strike, firstly, Street Cross, where the Somerton and Bridgwater roads divide; then the fields now known as Portway, and then the gap over the Polden Hills, at Marshall's Elm, over which the Somerton and Ilchester road passes. Near this point a Roman villa was discovered some years since. If continued northward, it would first cross a pasture, and so reach the foot of Wearyall Hill. Its direction afterwards is not clear.

It may be as well to note here that Mr. J. G. L. Bulleid informs me that an old road in the direction of Wells was cut across when the railway was made near the present Wells turnpike road.

On the occasion of the meeting of the Archæological Society at Glastonbury, it seemed fitting to do something further to examine the road, although, as will be seen, many points were left unsettled.

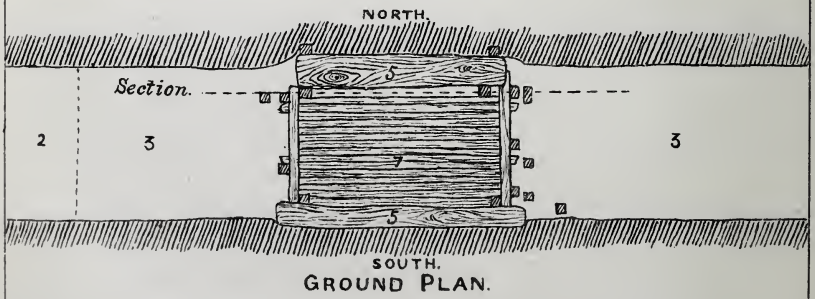
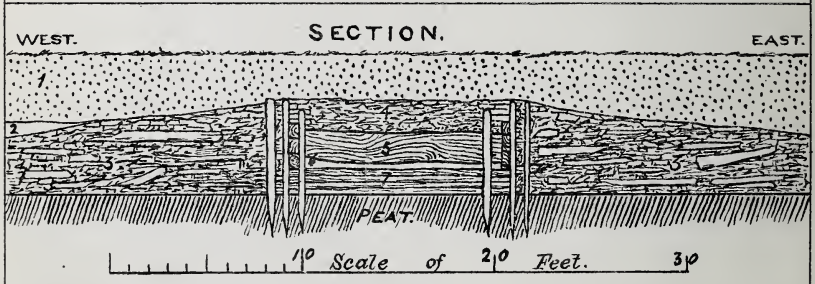
The point chosen for the examination was about 20 feet south of the present river bank, and 45 yards east of Pomparle's bridge, before referred to. I regret that when the Society viewed the spot the surface only was uncovered, as the internal structure proved to be much more interesting.

I may now describe the details of the section thus made last autumn, premising that this section may or may not represent the general structure of the road. My own impression is that the work at this point, being near the river, or at all events at a low part of the valley, was probably of a more substantial

ANCIENT ROAD BETWEEN GLASTONBURY AND STREET.



A-B Ancient Road as identified. C Site of Section.



- 1. Clay deposited by River.—2. Pond deposit.—3. Embankment of Road.
- 4. Stones.—5. Oak trees.—6. Concrete.—7. Round sleepers with brushwood.

Barnes & Panton

character than the average, although the general structure was similar; the general appearance of the remains, both in the drains before mentioned, and in the banks of the main drain, called the "new cut," leads me to this conclusion.

Commencing then from the base, black peat was found at a depth of seven feet from the present surface; upon this peat were laid transverse lengths of timber and boughs, in the rough, and with the bark on; these sleepers were generally 12 to 14 feet long, they were chiefly of alder, though there was a little oak and fir, and intermixed with the timber some brushwood; the whole mass was 18 inches thick, and the workmen described cutting through it as "quarrying wood." It struck me that there was a possibility that this basal portion was really a yet more ancient road itself; a corduroy road, in fact, like that between Westhay and Meare, described by Mr. Dymond, and that the super-structure may have been of later date, the newer road taking the older, possibly British road as a foundation. The width of this base would be about 15 feet. Above this mass of cross timbers there was a thin layer of concrete, much decayed, except where protected by the upper timbers. On each side of the mass, oak piles, averaging five inches by six inches, seven feet long, and well squared and sharpened, evidently by an adze or similar cutting tool, were driven down two feet deep into the peat. The plan shows the cross sections of the piles, of which there were 17 in the 10 feet length of road explored. Most of these piles were solid, but a few had oblong mortise holes well cut obliquely through them and as these holes had no relation whatever to the structure, and were empty, it was evident either that some old material had been used up, or that some new material had been spoiled in the working and then utilized as piles. It struck me that such pieces of obliquely-mortised oak might very probably have been used in making a wooden bridge, or have been prepared for such a purpose. The clean cutting of these oblique mortises shows the possession of

sharp cutting tools, such as one would scarcely expect to find used anterior to the Roman occupation.

On reference to the section and plan, it will be seen that the chief purpose served by the piles was to keep in place the upper wooden framework of the road, which I will proceed to describe. The sides of the road were formed of squared oak timbers, those taken out were seven feet long, and about 7×11 and 7×9 inches square. There were three on each side placed above one another, thus forming the sides of a trough 30 to 33 inches deep, the bottom of the trough being the concrete before mentioned. It is possible that there was yet another squared timber used to form the sides, as the upper ones remaining were much decayed; if so, the sides of the trough would be raised to the surface of the road, and be level with the tops of the piles. At each side of the excavation, *i.e.*, to the north and south, heavy timbers or balks of oak were found—one of which was two feet in diameter—running across the road, into which the side timbers were notched; but in no case did we find any evidence of pegging or nailing. On examining, however, one of the side timbers, I discovered that a hole, quite round and $1\frac{1}{2}$ inch in diameter, had been made through it, which was filled with an oaken pin which fitted most accurately; there was also in this piece another hole, empty, about three inches deep. As the peg or pin was not continued beyond the side timber in which it was found, and did not fasten it to anything, I think we have here also some old material used up in the formation of the road. The accurate boring of the timber, and the close fitting of the wooden pin show a dexterity in the use of tools which would not discredit a modern joiner. I regret that the examination could not at the moment be continued further north or south, to determine whether the side timbers were continued beyond the excavation, but we can only conjecture that they were so.

The whole space between the timbers, and above them to the surface of the road, was filled with stones, not of very

large dimensions, mostly perhaps a foot long. These stones were roughly piled by hand against the sides, but had been shot in promiscuously in the centre. By this filling in a stone road was formed, 12 feet wide. The stones were fragments of lias and rhaetic limestone, such as would be obtained by surface diggings on the Polden Hills near Marshall's Elm, where the road would cross the range. So, if the road was made from its southern end, the stone might have been brought over the portion of the road already completed, from some of the numerous surface diggings which are seen along that ridge. Some of the stones turned up in the previous drainage cuttings were of later lias age, and were probably brought from the Glastonbury end for subsequent repairs. The surface of the road where we excavated had evidently been considerably washed, but it had the appearance of having been levelled and consolidated by smaller stones spread over the surface. In the excavation a few large flat stones were found resting on the surface of the road, at such a distance from one another as to serve for stepping-stones, and such probably they were, carrying one's thoughts back to the time when the few inhabitants picked their way across the morass after the causeway had fallen into decay, and before that still darker period, when all remembrance of the site of the road was lost.

East and west from the piles outwards sloped long embankments formed of brushwood and stones and logs of wood, amongst which were to be found the tops of the piles which formed the road, and which had evidently all been cut down to its surface level; these tops yet shewed the dents of the rammer, and from their position shewed that the embankments were not an afterthought, but that they were formed at the same time as the road itself. These slopes probably extend about 30 feet on each side of the road, and rest as the road itself does on the solid black peat. As these slopes thin out as they retreat from the road, it will be seen that over the lowest portions there must be an accumulation of nearly seven

feet of deposit, probably not quite so much, because the centre of the road where the weight is very heavy, must have considerably depressed the surface of the old black peat on which it rests. For the most part this deposit consists of a stiff unctuous clay, such as is always deposited at the present time whenever the river overflows. Towards the west, however, there was under this a blackish deposit full of *planorbis*, *valvata*, and *cyclas* shells, which live in stagnant water; there must therefore at this point have been a pond separated from the river by an embankment. On the upper side was found in the lower portion of the embankment, some brown peaty or vegetable matter unconsolidated, but no black peat was seen anywhere above the level of the road, in fact all across this valley there are always some feet of clay above the foundation peat. As however the road rests on peat it is clear that the surface of the ground when the road was made was morass, and the formation of peat was continued to that date; but at this exact date the formation of peat ceased, and in its place clay was deposited. Is this a mere coincidence? or is there a connection between the road-building and the cessation of peat? I believe that there is a very intimate connection between the two facts, the connecting link being that the road-builders also embanked the river. After the river was embanked the growth of the sedge and plants which form peat would be checked at once, and finally they would be killed out, finer grasses forming pasture taking their place, whilst at the same time the frequent flooding of the land would then as now, constantly add to the mass of clay resting on the peat, till the soil was finally by this means raised above ordinary flood point. That the great mass of clay covering the peat of many square miles in extent, and of an average depth probably of not less than five feet, should have been deposited in the last 1500 years, may excite surprise, but those who examine the river at flood time will see that it holds a very great deal of mud in suspension, depositing it in every still bay, or on the flooded fields, and

forming mud banks far out in the Bristol Channel. To what extent the embankment was carried by the road-makers would be an interesting subject for investigation. Probably the diversion of water into the mill stream at Clyse Hole was a work of later date; this could easily be proved by tracing the road across the field to the foot of Wearyall, and testing its relations as to position with the millstream. If this is so, the embankment probably followed the old course of the river from Plungen to Clyse Hole, taking the curve under the Tor and Wearyall Hill.

If, as I conclude, the road-makers were Romans and that they also embanked the river, it is morally certain that there was a bridge over the river, for the Romans were great bridge builders. In this situation it is probable the bridge would be of wood, if for no other reason than that it would be difficult to obtain sufficiently sound foundations for a heavy stone bridge. It would be extremely interesting to discover the exact site of the old bridge, the original *Pons Periculosus*; it is possible all the remains may have been destroyed, but yet a strict search could scarcely fail further to unveil the past history of the district. The remains excavated were so solid, that to some the idea of this being a part of a bridge head was suggested. It may have been such, but there is no proof. The stonework towards the river did however seem to disappear rather suddenly beyond the oak trunk figured on the plan; if this were the bridge-head, however, it is difficult to explain the rather considerable quantity of stone shewn on both banks of the river.

During the excavation careful watch was kept for any remains in the rubbish, but nothing of importance was seen—one or two iron nails, about two inches long, on the surface of the road; a few pieces of common pottery, probably modern drain-pipes; and a part of a very flat horse-shoe, were all the manufactured articles found. A few bones, amongst which were one or two human bones, and a fragment of coal complete the list.

It appears strange at the first sight that the builders of the present causeway did not appropriate the materials of the old road in making the new one, or indeed why they should have chosen a slightly different course, instead of building on the old foundation; but it seems to point to the possibility that in the troublous times after the close of the Roman occupation, the road was absolutely lost sight of; the land had returned to wildness, although the embanked river remained to tell of the conqueror's handiwork. Then when once more the country was settled, under the sway of the Abbots, a new road with a new bridge was built across the levels, but the road-makers were at the time entirely unaware that they had an excellent foundation within a few yards of them. This does not seem by any means an unimportant point, for the loss of any remembrance of such a solid and useful piece of engineering points not merely to a disturbed state of society, but to the absolute removal of one race or set of inhabitants and their replacement by another, for even a few inhabitants would be quite able to hand down the history of the site of the work from one generation to another. Are we then to believe that this complete break took place when the Saxons conquered the country? If so the continuous Christian occupation of Glastonbury, which has been so lovingly asserted, would rather seem to mean that one Christian race was extirpated by another Christian race, rather than by a heathen one, in which case it probably fared as badly with the British priests as with their flock. The restoration of the date of the present causeway would possibly throw light on general as well as on our more purely local history.
