

The Roman Settlement at Lawrence Weston— The Alleged Road and the “1850” Pavement

By

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On the older sheets of the Ordnance Survey the straight bank in Lawrence Weston, properly known as the Mere Bank, is designated a Roman road. Mere Bank is slightly elevated above the surrounding flats and delimited on either side by a ditch or rhine. It runs straight from ST 540785 (about 20 ft. O.D.) northwards across the Severn Flats to about ST 526800, rather short of the Severn bank. Southwards, inland, it terminates in a small rectangular copse, which, on the larger Ordnance plans, bears the antiquity symbol and the caption, “Roman pavement discovered 1850”. The relevant O.S. records were destroyed by enemy action during the last war and the origin of both attributions is no longer known. The alleged road has been used as evidence for some theories on the siting of the Roman ferry terminus Abone and the crossing to the opposite shore.

During the construction of the Lawrence Weston Housing Estate in the years immediately following the last war, Mr. G. C. Boon, B.A., and the author found evidence of a Roman-British settlement stretching from Shirehampton to below Blaize Hill, lying in general between the 25- and 50-ft. contours, and including the villa in Kingsweston Park (Boon, 1950). Evidence for the settlement was quite intensive on the hillslope immediately south of the copse area, and both the copse and the alleged Roman road necessarily engaged our attention. Both the bank and copse were probed and the bank also trenched without finding any solid structure. Trenches for the construction of the new main road were carefully watched, and although a rubble layer was recorded in line with Mere Bank this had no definite structure, there were no associated finds, and there was nothing to suggest the foundation of a Roman road. Indeed this line of rubble coincides with a large field hedge and bank. At Lawrence Weston itself Roman-British sherds were found below the 25-ft. contour where they were sealed by alluvial deposits. Thus at a contour level similar to that of the Bank, Roman levels are well covered by alluvium and the Bank, if it were a Roman structure, could not show above ground level at the present day. Indeed, Mere Bank, like others along the Severn Flats, is a land boundary, but unlike these others is characterized by being unusually straight. Presumably, this last feature, coupled with early reports of the finding of Roman coins in

Lawrence Weston, led to the speculation that the Bank was a Roman road, which speculation passed into local lore and local histories.

Although we may be certain that Mere Bank is not a Roman road, the question of the "1850 pavement" remained open until recently. It was possible that the Roman occupation levels to the south did in fact extend down to the copse area. By way of a trial investigation borings have been

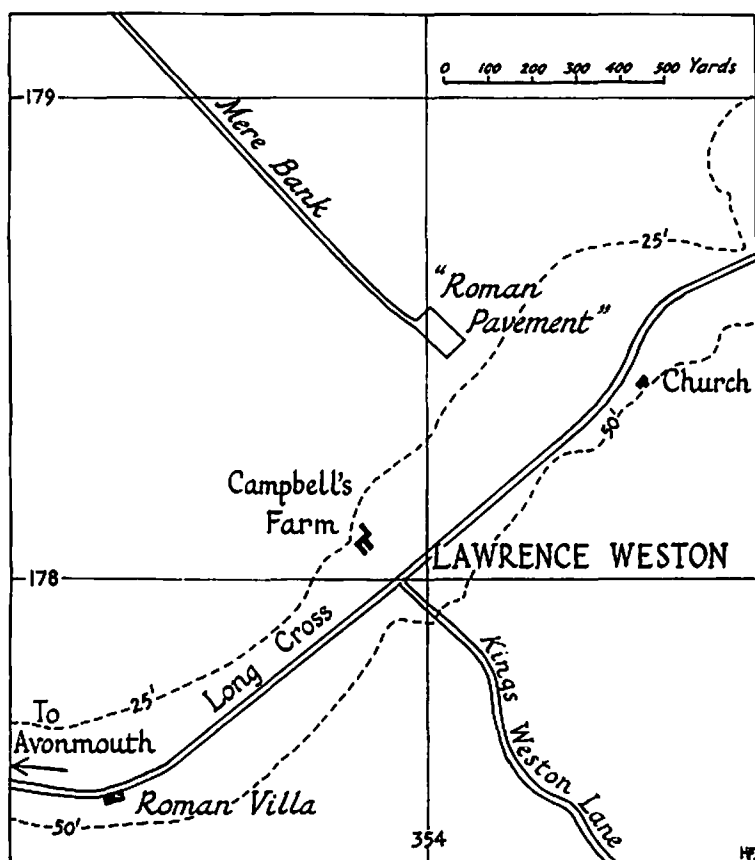


Fig. 29.

carried out both within and without the copse, using a peat borer, kindly made available by the Department of Botany, University of Bristol. The results of three borings are represented in the accompanying figure, and their positions on the plan marked. The minimum depth of superficial deposits within the copse is some three metres, all of which is formed of peats with some intercalated silts, and the whole covered by alluvial clay.

The alluvium extends farther south than the peat deposits. A boring south of the copse at ST 541784, approximately 25 ft. O.D., gave the section :—

0- 75 cm.	..	..	..	" hillwash "
75-125 "	..	..	..	alluvium
125- "	..	..	..	Keuper marl

while a section noted in 1949 at ST 544784 showed the edge of the alluvium overlapping the marl and marl subsoil, the whole covered by hillwash. Lying on the marl subsoil and covered by the alluvium was a single sherd of Roman ware.

The results of these borings indicate that the present-day 20-25-ft. contour represents the lower edge of the dry hill slope occupied by the Roman-British settlement and that the copse area was, and had been for a long time, sufficiently waterlogged to allow peat formation and had even been periodically flooded. In these circumstances it is unlikely that any building worthy of a paved floor would have stood on the copse area and this Ordnance entry must also be viewed with considerable doubt.

One must assume that a pavement was uncovered in 1850. Possibly a floor with associated coins was found on the hill slope to the south, or, since in 1850 mosaic floors would be more readily recognized as Roman pavements, one of the mosaics of the villa in Kingsweston Park had been uncovered. Certainly much of the villa had been disturbed by stone robbing and by field draining. The discrepancy in the recorded locality is not difficult to explain since the first survey of Gloucestershire took place in 1879, some thirty years later than the alleged discovery.

NOTE ON THE NATURE OF THE DEPOSITS AT LAWRENCE WESTON

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The deposits at Lawrence Weston are in some respects similar to deposits now being investigated in certain areas of the Gordano Valley, in north-east Somerset.

Boring results have indicated that in a number of places in the Gordano Valley, as at Lawrence Weston, the peat lies upon Red Keuper Marls and a clay layer. This clay layer contains a small sand fraction and may be a solifluxion deposit formed under periglacial conditions such as existed at the close of the last glaciation in this country.

The peat at Lawrence Weston is highly amorphous, and macroscopic remains, with the exception of wood, are absent. At present the thick peat deposits in the Gordano Valley have not been accurately dated, but there

is some evidence which suggests that the main peat-building phase occurred at a relatively late stage during the Post-Glacial Period, although there are indications that some of the bottom peaty deposits are of Late-Glacial or Full-Glacial character (*Fig. 30*).

The grey silt layer has not been found in the Gordano borings ; it appears to indicate a flooding horizon. The alluvial clay on the surface was probably deposited as a result of the Romano-British Marine Transgression. Alluvium of this nature has been recognized in many coastal regions in Britain and forms a thick layer at the seaward end of the Gordano Valley.

It is hoped at some future date to carry out further borings on the Lawrence Weston deposits.

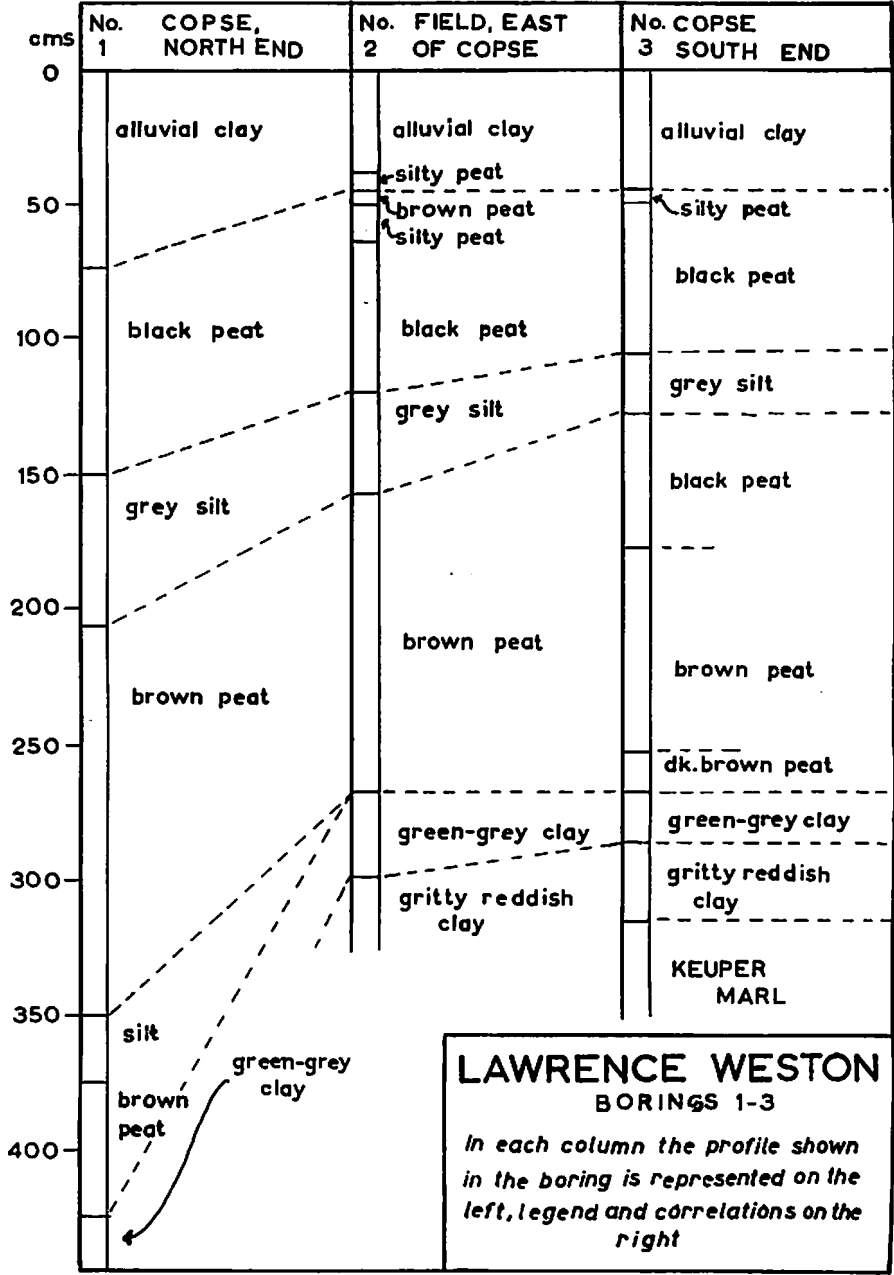


Fig. 30.