THE ROMAN FORD AT IDEN GREEN, BENENDEN

CECILY LEBON

INTRODUCTION

Iden Green ford and subsequent bridges appear to have crossed a tributary of the Rother's Hexden Channel at N.G.R. TQ 50133225, and close to a boundary stone inscribed with the names of three Hundreds, Cranbrook, Rolvenden and Selbrittenden, now somewhat worn and damaged.

Following its course from north to south, one can see the ancient road marked by traces of iron slag at intervals in the east bank of a hollow way which runs southwards from Seven Acre Shaw to Stream Farm, with the present-day footpath parallel to it on higher ground at the edge of field 103 (Fig. 1). On plot 102, when barns were recently rebuilt, their foundations and drains went down into burnt earth of undisclosed depth immediately west of the presumed line of the road. Containing hardly any iron slag, the feature may possibly indicate a brick-making site for the building of the early eighteenth-century Stream Farmhouse and for the adaptation of the older, timber-framed farmhouse (on Plot 125) which was soon afterwards converted into three labourers' cottages. On the 1769 mapping by Andrews, Dury and Herbert (Fig. 2) the old farmhouse is named Pruiny Hall. It is now again converted into a single dwelling which appears near the western edge of the location map (Fig. 1). The confluence of several potentially useful streams and a network of tracks converging in the vicinity suggest a history of early clearings and the pursuit of economic activities such as stone-quarrying, brick-making and iron-working, besides the agriculture and stock-rearing which persist.

In a nodal position, as seen on Fig. 1, a conspicuous feature is the small, roughly pentagonal, enclosure where the excavations were undertaken in close proximity to the boundary stone. The main

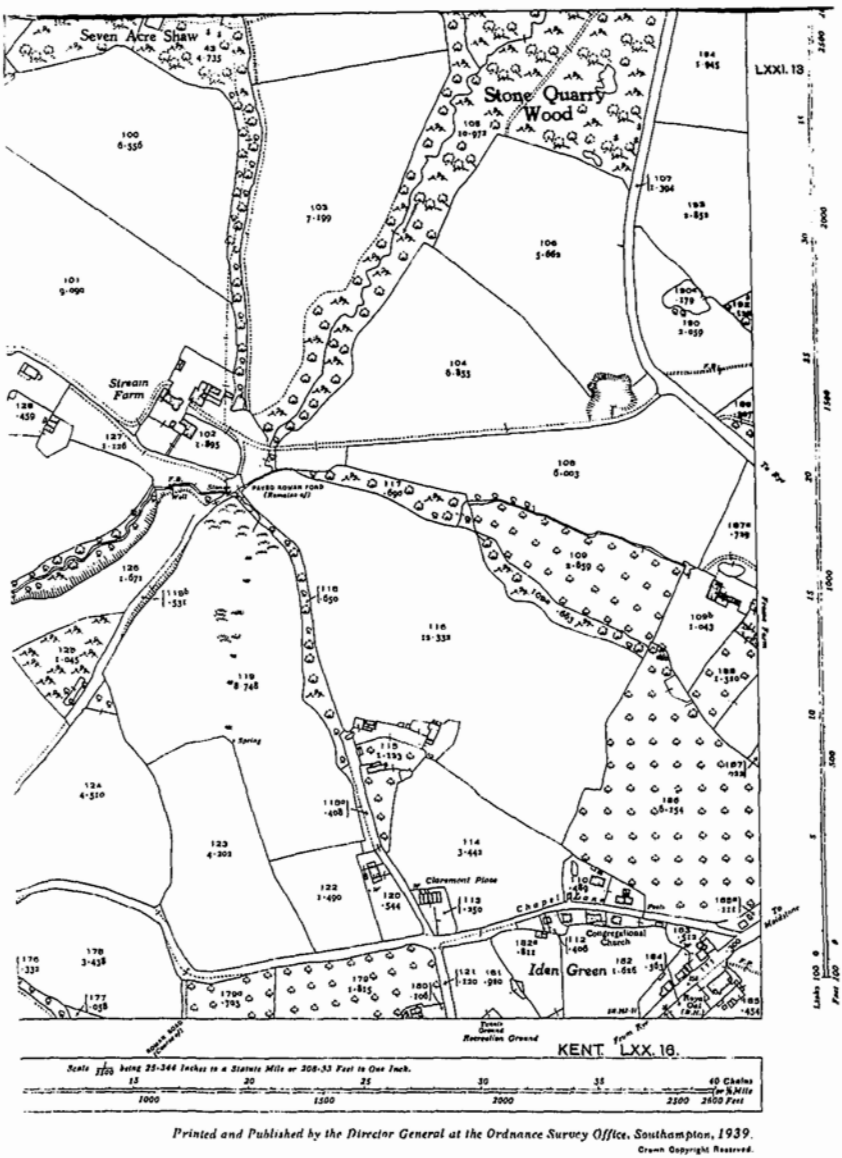

Fig. 1. Location of Ford Site and associated Roads. (O.S. map, 1:2500, 1939. Crown Copyright reserved.)

Fig. 2. Andrews, Dury and Herbert Mapping, 2 in. to 1 mile, 1769; from sheets reproduced by H.H. Margary, 1975.

stream flows in a deep course bending to border two sides of the plot which is now overhung with trees. Other features are two old farm gates with a disused cart track between them crossing the northern portion of the plot; and a timber bridge constructed a few years ago and replacing an earlier footbridge, to allow cattle to pass to and from the old lane (118) and the field adjoining the lane (119). Stream banks are fenced only on the far side of the water course. Although open to the enclosure, they are steep except at one spot where it is easy to descend to the stream by a trodden slope. Much of the area on both sides is often waterlogged, and during the 1980 and 1981 seasons was frequently invaded by cattle.

In the south-western quarter of Fig. 1, No. 118b is a lane which on the ground looks like an old carriageway, bordered with trees and displaying outcrops of Tunbridge Wells sandstone in its banks and similar, but detached, stones here and there underfoot. Strangely, its stony surface does not reach to the stream side opposite the site enclosure, but it peters out as the lane opens into the marshy strip alongside the south bank. At its other end this lane leads into Coldharbour Lane which crosses the south of the map as a continuation of Chapel Lane.

A more obvious and relevant route for our purpose of discovering the point where the Roman road crossed the stream is the old, deeply sunken and tree-lined lane, 118, leading up to Iden Green from the present and former bridges on the south-east side of the site enclosure. It is called Field Farm Lane, and is not now a public footpath. Drainage from field 119 has created a seasonal tributary which flows down the lower part of the lane; and, usually, a great deal of mud impedes the way. However, further up on the gentle climb the road is clearly founded on, or has cut down into, natural sandstone which also outcrops in its banks. After passing Field Farm (115), it goes on to form a cross-roads at the junction of Coldharbour Lane and Chapel Lane, and another where it crosses Mill Street obliquely, having formed one side of the triangular shape of Iden Green hamlet (Fig. 2). The next mile is known as Standen Street and consists of a long descent converging towards the Hexden Channel and in the direction of Newenden which had a wharf and market, granted to Christ Church, Canterbury, before the Norman Conquest.

Prior to the coming of Benenden's turnpike roads, for which a trust was set up in 1768/69, the way south from Hemsted Manor in the parish of Benenden was via the ford (or a bridge replacing it) and across Iden Green where there was a choice of Mill Street southwards or Standen Street continuing south-eastwards. (In Fig. 2 Standen Street is named Saunding Street). This was surely the route taken by Queen Elizabeth I when she rode with a large retinue from Hemsted

to Northiam and Rye on her Progress in the summer of 1573. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, before Hemsted was sold to Benenden School, estate and domestic servants living in Iden Green made regular use of Field Farm Lane in going to and from their work. In the 1960s local people still frequented it for leisure walking and children for playing in and exploring. One Iden Green boy found there a Roman coin, said to have been dated by the British Museum to A.D. 208. The lane has probably been in continuous use from Roman to recent times.

On the southern margin of Fig. 1 the Ordnance Survey marks 'Roman road (course of)'. This shows conformity with the track adhered to by Margary on a course which takes it for granted that the road did not veer just before the stream crossing, but plunged straight across, continuing due south 'up the spine of the spur',[1] etc. It is strange that he made no comment on the obvious and currently used Field Farm Lane, although elsewhere he looked carefully at possible tracks branching towards harbour sites. He may have relied too much on the impressive photograph by Crawford (Plate I) which he published as Plate XV in his *Roman Ways in the Weald*. This photograph has been calculated to date to 1935 on the basis of the present age of one of the boys who appear in the scene. Crawford, Margary and subsequent commentators, as far as I know, accepted without question the supposition that the array of massive slabs then protruding at high level along the north bank and recorded in the photograph represented *in situ* the remains of an original north–south ford, the stream having, since the ford went out of use, cut down its bed to a much lower level. This assumption is questionable on a number of grounds:

(i) The line of the Roman road credited by Margary for a mile or two south of the ford site rests on rather slender clues; e.g. 'agger by hedge'.[2] Furthermore, two bits of negative evidence may be adduced. Doubts were raised when no trace of ancient road remains was found during replacement of the old hundredal bridge near Watermill House, Mill Street, in the 1970s; nor did any appear when a gas-main trench was dug across the alleged line in the north of Sandhurst parish.

(ii) From a viewpoint on the excavation site looking south across the stream, the supposed course seems topographically improbable owing to the marshy state of the opposite landing ground and, 650 m. beyond, to a steep bank where the spur

[1] I.D. Margary, *Roman Ways in the Weald* (1948), 220.
[2] Margary, *op.cit.*, 224.

PLATE I

Part of Ford Paving, photographed by Crawford in the 1930s. Reproduced 1984.

rises as a formidable barrier. Indeed, test holes were dug at intervals on the flat 'landing' ground beyond the south bank of the stream and no hard core was encountered.

(iii) It is important to consider where the camera was pitched in 1935 and how restricted the view is (Plate I). A longer shot might have revealed where, and in what direction, the ford stones had crossed the stream. As it is, with the forward slabs cut out, the picture leaves uncertain which way this stream-side part of the paving was intended to make the passage across. Although not shown in the photograph, it is close to the foreground that the stream makes a big right-hand bend, compelled by the force of a tributary entering opposite and running out of the lower stretch of Field Farm Lane, fed by field drains. Unfortunately, on the projecting bank at this bend, already subject to much erosion by water, a tall alder has been allowed to grow up and its roots have disrupted and dislodged most of the ford stones seen in the right fore-ground of the photograph.

(iv) If the row of stones seen in the north bank towards the left side of the photograph were in fact an undisturbed part of

the ancient ford, it is conceivable that they were aligned *along* the course rather than across it and that the stream has eaten away the *side* of a causeway below the bend as well as through it further upstream. Alternatively, there may have been originally, or at a subsequent repositioning of these stones, an intention to use the place beside the ford for industrial or domestic purposes requiring hard-standing close to the water; for example, for brick-making, laundering, watering animals and other farm work.

Crawford who first identified the features he found on this site as a Roman ford, seems to have carried out an excavation on the north side of the stream and found a pavement of roughly-squared stone blocks.[3] The paved area measured 5.72 m. east to west along the north bank and 3.89 m. from north to south. He exposed a wooden post lying horizontally under the paving and 51 cm. below its top surface. He must, therefore, have taken up some of the stones, but presumably replaced them in back-filling. However, by 1980 most of the paving-stones visible were lying in the stream. It is not unlikely that others had been furtively removed to serve as doorsteps and in gateways. A Benenden resident recalls by name a farmer who carted away at least one load of paving-stones to break up for road- and yard-making. Thus, the array of large slabs had vanished before the 1980–83 excavations. A half-sized slab was lying on the ground beyond the bridge at the entry to Field Farm Lane; and another was observed on the near side at the foot of the alder tree. This latter may be reckoned as the sole survivor *in situ* of those in the right foreground of Crawford's photograph. One or two smaller, rounder stones are firmly clasped in the roots of the alder.

Margary described the paving stones as sandstone, instead of paludina limestone, locally known as Bethersden marble. His accuracy in following the Roman road immediately south of Iden Green ford is now called into question; yet, to do so is not to forget how faithfully he examined the great network of roads for clues, which he clearly defined, to the benefit of future field workers.

THE EXCAVATIONS, 1980–1983

Towards the end of 1979, it was recognised that the Iden Green ford remains had greatly deteriorated over the previous thirty or forty years. Trees had grown up to maturity, with thick roots penetrating where there had been an intact pavement, and many of the paving

[3] Information from O.S. site card in National Monuments Records.

stones had slipped into the water-course or disappeared entirely from the scene. The stream banks had been severely cut back to provide sufficient emplacements for a new bridge of heavy timbers; and cattle passing over the bridge were churning up the ground on either side.

In 1980, after permission had been obtained from the landowner and tenant of the scheduled site, and with the consent and encouragement of H.M. Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, brief excavations were undertaken during two years with the help of Mr. Peter Rowe, then headmaster of Cranbrook School, and a few of his pupils. In 1982 and 1983 some members of the archæological group associated with Tenterden Museum assisted on several occasions.

At the outset only two parallel trenches, outlined on the plan (Fig. 3) as Areas I and II, were opened. The hard layer in Area I was found, where intact, to be buried only 5–15 cm. It consisted mainly of angular stones, typically 3–6 cm. in dimensions, mixed with pebbles, a little slag, fragments of roofing-tiles, bottle- and sheet-glass, crockery, clay pipes, brass curtain-rings and bits of bicycle: in short, domestic and builders' rubbish, dating to no further back than the eighteenth century.

The layer had evidently been cut into and turned over during some previous excavation in the central and western portion of Area I along its northern side near the boundary stone, although it seemed unimpaired closer to the stream bank and the western fence. At the west end a little patch was scraped right up to the brink in order to investigate a comparatively small paving stone sticking in the bank with its flat top about 10 cm. below the excavated surface. After probing to discover its extent, this rare stone was left *in situ* and not further exposed for fear of spoiling what might prove in future to be important evidence of ford structure.

Area II also contained a top layer of road stones with the same range of relatively modern rubbish, but its metalling was continuous along the trench for nearly 4 m. It was spread directly on a lower layer of similar metalling resting on clay at the west end and on a rust-coloured, hard substance at the east end. The whole area became waterlogged before it could be recorded properly. By probing, however, we found another hard layer beneath the west end clay and rightly suspected it might be continuous with the third hard surface found further east, although there without clay overlying it. In an attempt to drain Area II, we cut a narrow trench joining its east end with that of an extension to Area I where we had discovered hard, reddish slag, horse-shoes of various sizes and pieces of leather boot. These finds might not be ancient, but they were lying lower than the top metalling.

The ground surface and the upper road levels both sloped down-

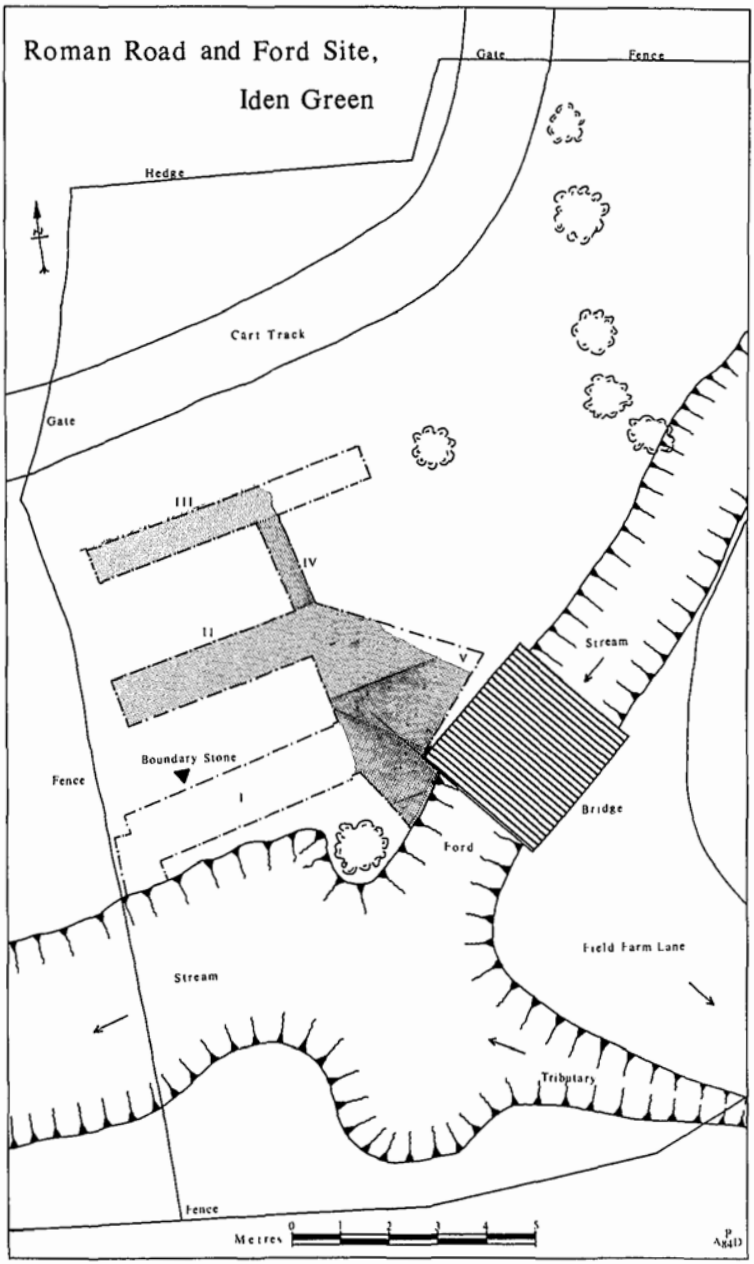

Fig. 3. Roman Ford Site: Plan of Excavations, 1980–83.

wards in Areas I and II. Was this feature a part of the camber of a north–south aligned road, or did it simply show that the post-medieval road was heading downhill to a ford or bridge situated, as today, upstream and east of the hitherto assumed place for the Roman crossing?

Complying with a request from the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, we 'rescued' six of the largest Bethersden marble slabs out of the stream and buried them in Area II in 1981.[4] As to the original use of these much displaced paving stones, it is tentatively suggested that they may have served as pedestrian causeways on the upstream side of the road-like part of the ford used by carts, riders and animals. Such a construction would strengthen the crossing in times of spate.

After the first two seasons, the site was freed from the passage of cattle. It became a priority to open up a wide area near the bridge, Area V on the plan (Fig. 3), in order to see more of the spread of iron ore and slag, and to obtain dating evidence. The layer has been represented on the plan by stippling which does not appear in Area I because there we refrained from digging below the upper metalling, noting that it had already been much cut into.

The road was undoubtedly based on a natural layer of iron which, although of geological origin, was apparently supplemented by slag. The bed seems in most places to be composed of iron nodules and slag more or less cemented by iron pan, presumably deposited from iron salts carried in the water which flowed over a wide area for centuries, and still does at times.

Topping up with loose, small particles of road material and domestic rubbish could never have been a successful method for durable road repairs near the ford, since ordinary, small stones and rubble, as well as light articles dropped, would be carried into the water, particularly at a low part of the bank just downstream of the modern bridge.

The evidence has already pointed to an early ford having led into Field Farm Lane. Standing down in the stream and examining the banks carefully (Plate II), one could see an outcropping band of iron, 10–20 cm. thick, running horizontally half-way up the north-west bank from where a modern drain-pipe projected under the bridge to its obliteration among the exposed roots of the alder tree, a distance of about 2.40 m. (unfortunately cut at both ends). The opposite bank showed a corresponding, but thinner, band, both under the wooden

[4] The stones are all about 16.5 cm. thick. The largest has a maximum length of 87 cm. and a width of 66 cm.

PLATE II

(Photo. N.R. Aldridge)
Roman Hard-core, seen outcropping in Stream Bank.

bridge and where the almost vertically cut bank turns away up the tributary on the threshold of Field Farm Lane.

A paving-stone lying under the bridge may well have been part of the causeway. Another lies on the surface where Field Farm Lane begins. It is probable that the ford was a structure about 3 m. wide and that its length was greater than a span which could easily be bridged, supposing the stream to have been wider than today and no less liable to flooding.

Near the north-east corner of Area V silty clay replaced the iron surface and gave it an edge pointing to where the drain-pipe emerged under the bridge. So here is only a recent drainage trench and not the edge to the original road which is more likely to be found intact further back from the ford.

CONCLUSIONS

Map and field work on the course of the Roman road or roads through Iden Green have been combined with excavations to investi-

gate afresh the site and structure of the Roman ford in the valley between Hemsted (Benenden School) and the Iden Green ridge.

The course south of the ford can hardly have been up a steep spur where no track remains, as claimed by Margary. An old lane to the south-west of the ford seems more likely to be medieval or Tudor, for it shows no similarity of metalling, nor continuity with the Roman levels north of the stream. But the sunken lane to the south-east of the ford vicinity does contain iron nodules and slag similar to that composing the earliest road surface found north of the stream. I now believe that Field Farm Lane dates from Roman times. It was part of a route which passed through Iden Green hamlet and continued via Standen ('Saunding') Street towards a wharf on the Hexden, probably above the site of Hope Mill where the marshes begin (Fig. 2).

The position of a road junction to link Iden Green with Bodiam, on the main Rother, remains uncertain and perhaps less important, considering that iron and timber for export would tend to be taken to the nearest navigable river. Thus, long overland haulage would be avoided wherever possible, especially by the well-organised *Classis Britannica* which was active in the eastern Kentish Weald as well as in Sussex.

Although evidence does not warrant the easy assumption that the *Classis Britannica* constructed the Iden Green ford, certainly by-products of local iron-works were used there.[5] The ford was built up on foundation materials similar to those of the roads it connected. There is a conspicuous out-cropping of a stratum of iron substances under, and immediately downstream of, the present-day bridge. This, I suggest, was the basic ford material which carried some of the massive paving-slabs now widely dispersed. The valuable 1935 photograph showing a pavement fails to provide sufficient evidence for deciding the direction of the crossing. It is quite consistent with postulating a passage south-east into Field Farm Lane, as today. In fact, the slope of the pavement appears to descend that way, i.e. towards the camera. Today, this is the general trend of the surface and of the layer which formed the foundation of the Roman road. The excavation was too late to find the pavement intact.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the Honorary Editor, Mr. A.P. Detsicas, who drew the excavation plan from my poorly executed version; and to Mr.

[5] On Little Farningham farm in Cranbrook, some fifty CL·BR stamped tiles were found in association with Roman iron-working two miles north of the ford site. (*Arch. Cant.*, lxxii (1958), lx–lxii.)

N.R. Aldridge for photography and other work on the site; also, to Mr. H.H. Margary, Mr. H.W. Edwards, executor of O.G.S. Crawford, and the Director-General of the Ordnance Survey for permitting me to use already published material among the illustrations to this article.