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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE ROYAL MILITARY CANAL, NEAR HAM STREET

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INTRODUCTION

A survey of the Royal Military Canal, near Ham Street, (N.G.R. TQ 999322) was undertaken and a section excavated across the defensive works. This revealed the structural form of the nineteenth-century bank and road.¹

In advance of the construction of a crossing to carry the proposed A2070 Stockbridge to South Ashford highway over the Royal Military Canal, the affected earthworks were surveyed and a cross-section of the area excavated.

The investigated length of canal is situated approximately three quarters of a mile south of Ham Street on the edge of Romney Marsh, and is scheduled as an Ancient Monument (Kent 396J). All work was conducted by South Eastern Archaeological Services (Field Archaeology Unit, Institute of Archaeology) during June and July 1992 on behalf of Kent County Council, to a brief provided by the Kent County Archaeologist, Dr J. Williams.

The Royal Military Canal was constructed as a defensive work against the threat of Napoleonic invasion. It was designed by Lieutenant-Colonel John Brown to form a physical barrier between the vulnerable Dungeness coastline and the interior of the country, thus avoiding the destructive and unpopular measure of flooding Romney Marsh when invasion threatened.

The line of the canal stretches from Seabrook, through Hythe and along the northern fringe of Romney Marsh, until it joins the river Rother, which was used to form the defence as far as its junction with the Tillingham at Rye. The channels of the Tillingham and Brede were utilised as far as Winchelsea, from where the canal continues to its

¹ P.A.L. Vine, *The Royal Military Canal*, 1971, 97.

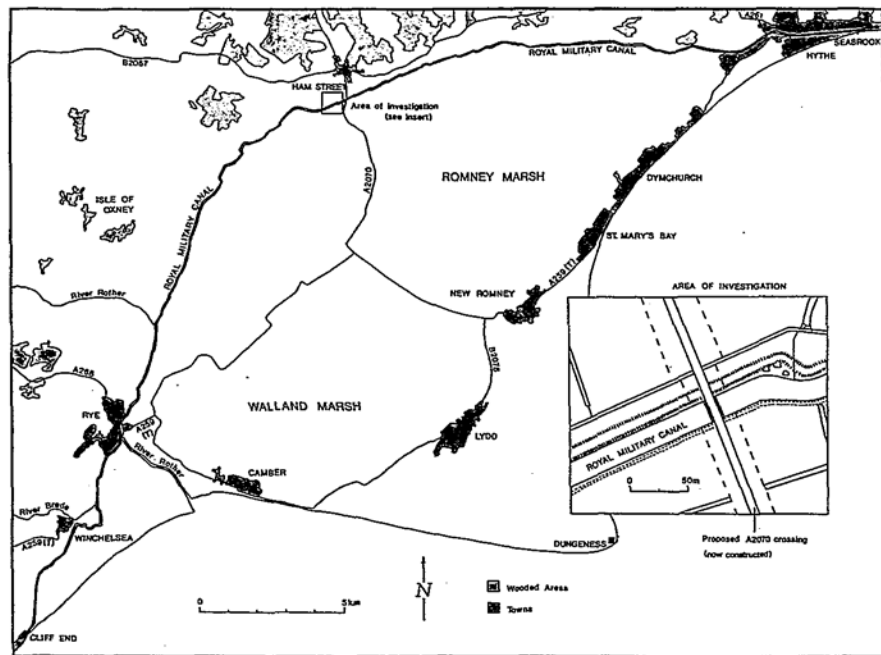


Fig. 1. Royal Military Canal – Location Plan 1992.

HAM STREET, ROYAL MILITARY CANAL

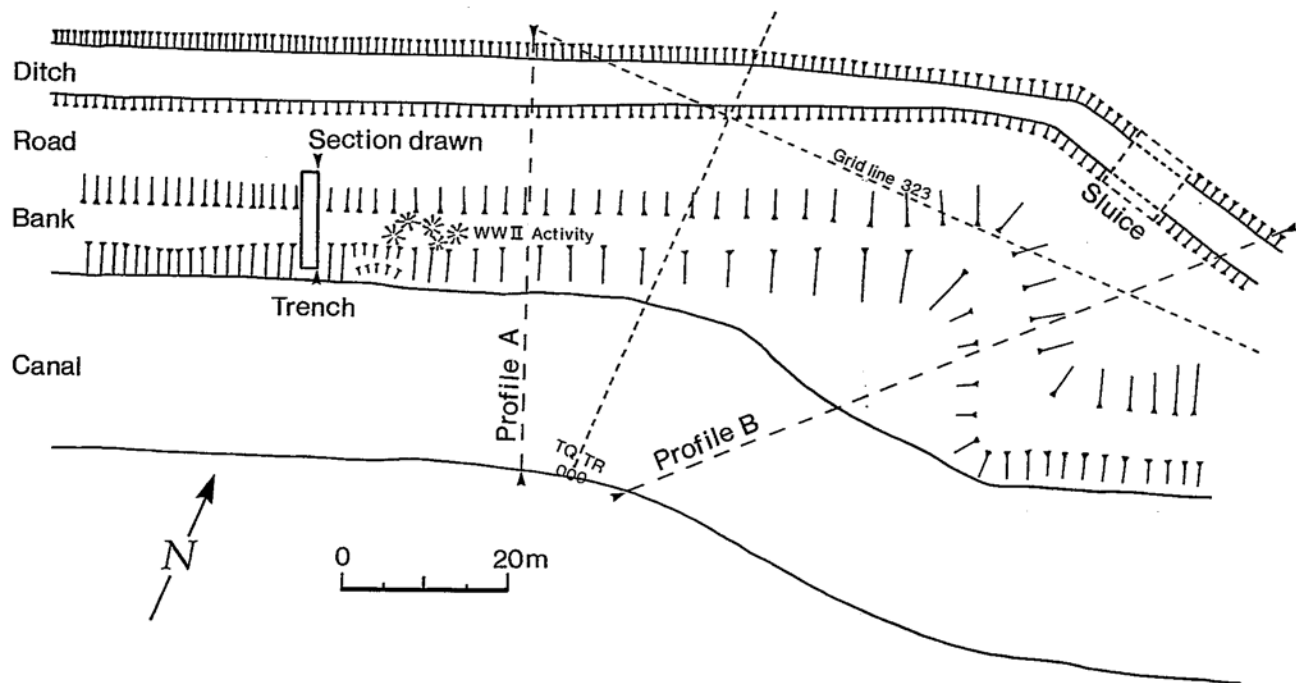


Fig. 2. Ham Street, Royal Military Canal – Plan 1992.

termination at Cliff End. This is a total distance of 28 miles, of which 22½ miles is formed by the canal itself.

The excavated earth was used to form a bank on the north side of the channel, and behind this a military road was built and a drain cut. A tow-path was also positioned on the south side.

The canal and its associated defences were constructed in off-set sections, which provided gun positions at each length, to flank the crossings, while troops could be easily transported by barge. Though cutting started in October, 1804, and finished in 1806, it was not until April 1809 that the Royal Military Canal could be said to be 'completed for the purposes of navigation and defence'.¹

THE INVESTIGATION

For most of the length surveyed, the canal and its related features run approximately east-west in parallel. However, east of the area of intended development, the bank and road turn sharply south, only resuming their former east-west alignment after close to 25 m. The bank becomes comparatively indistinct and noticeably shallower around this bend, with a wider top than previously recorded. Rather than following this course, the canal itself sweeps round the corner, creating an area of flat land between it and the rampart. In turn, the ditch behind the road turns approximately 30° south, continuing at this angle until it, too, resumes its former axis.

As previously mentioned, this shifting of alignment described above is a recurrent feature of the canal, designed to enable the positioning of artillery on the corner of each section of water.

The now-constructed A2070 crossing occurs at a point where the bank had already been damaged by a number of Second World War trenches when the Royal Military Canal reverted to its role as a second line of defence. A two-metre wide section was excavated by hand, across the line of defences (excluding the canal itself and the rear ditch) in an undisturbed location. The particular aims of the excavation were to investigate the structural, form and chronological framework of the works and any modifications.

It was confirmed that the bank had been simply constructed by mounding material, presumably extracted during the cutting of the canal. Three layers making up the original rampart were identified. The first of these (Context 6) was a compact, mid yellow-brown silty clay, to which had been added the main core of the bank, a compact, yellow sand with grey clay patches (Context 4). The final layer, deposited on the north side of the rampart, was a dark grey, compact clay with orange sandy streaks (Context 5).

¹ P.A.L. Vine, *The Royal Military Canal*, 1971, 97.

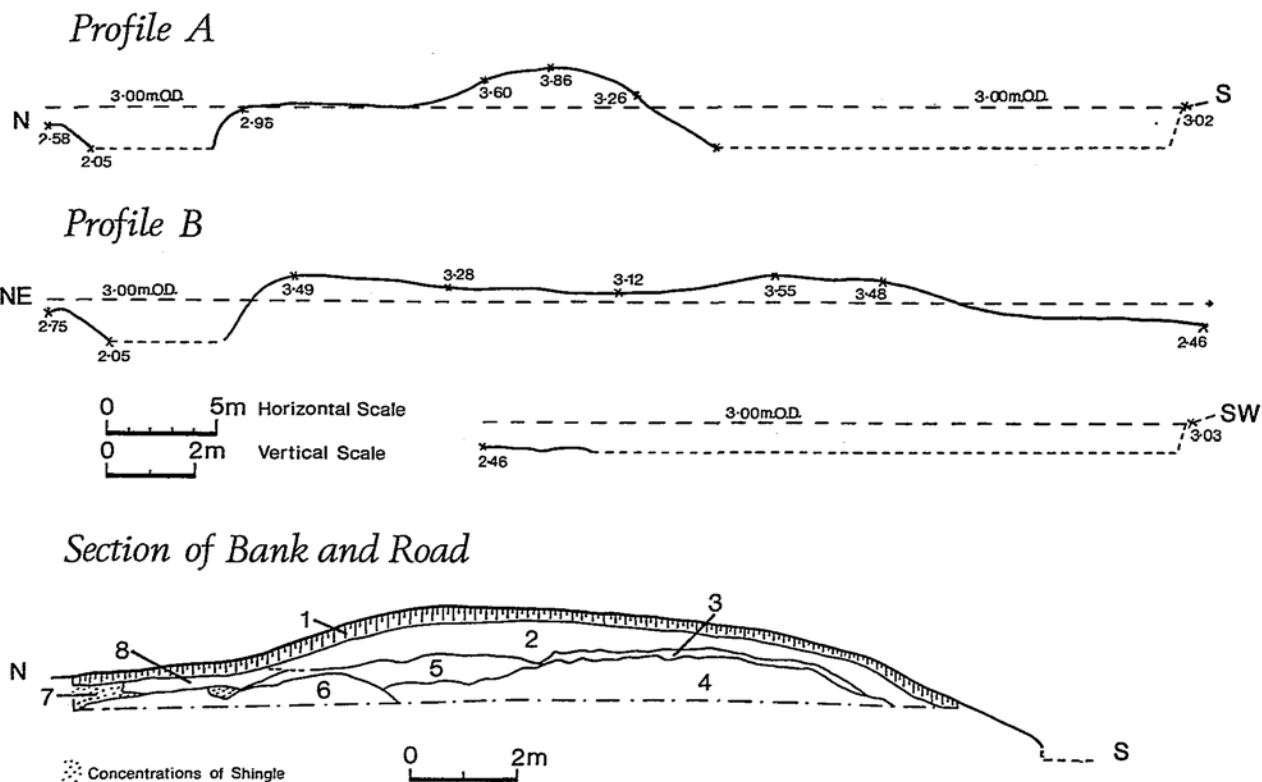


Fig. 3. Ham Street, Royal Military Canal – Profiles and Section of Bank and Road.

The existing base of the bank was approximately 10.5 m. wide in section, a figure presumably increased since construction, by soil slumping and crumbling. This process has inevitably been intensified by the early and continuing use of the rampart for grazing. The general profile was that of a bank with gently sloping sides, but steeper to the south, with a maximum height of 560 mm. being revealed by the excavation. These general characteristics serve to endorse the canal itself as the main barrier to an invading army.

No structural alterations to the bank were found and the only finds recovered were a number of *Scrobicularia* shells from Contexts 4 and 5. A thin, dark grey-brown silty clay layer was revealed (Context 3) overlying contexts 4 and 5. This contained only partially decayed short, straight lengths of an unidentified organic material, measuring between 20 mm. and 30 mm. in diameter.

It seems probable, therefore, that this is a relatively modern context, consisting either of material dredged from the canal and tipped onto the bank, an activity which took place regularly after the canal's opening or debris from tree and shrub clearance. The first of these possibilities could explain why Context 3 was only found on the canal side of the bank.

However, it is worth considering the evidence of Context 3 when taking into account that the canal's commissioners considered it necessary to counteract the tendency of the sandy banks to crumble, by means of a 'wicker framework'. Certainly, in the situation demonstrated by the section, the sandy material mounded by the water's edge would have benefited from this type of support. The clay contexts on the northern side of the bank would have been less of a priority for this treatment, being firmer and at no risk of collapsing into the actual canal.

The homogeneous nature of the recovered organic material would support the suggestion of a framework. However, for such a structure to survive for approximately 190 years, Context 3 would probably have to have been sealed by the hard, grey clay layer above it (Context 2). In addition to this, the small length of the individual pieces (the longest being about 300 mm.), and their large diameter, does not suggest wickerwork; longer, thinner, possibly flat pieces would have been more suitable. Finally, no logical pattern to the positioning of the organic material was discernible during excavation.

No evidence was found of either the paling, recorded as separating the bank from the road, or the fence on the canal edge.²

² *Ibid.*, 84.

The section was continued through the military road (Context 7) which was built of compacted beach shingle from the vicinity of Hythe, the size of the individual pebbles ranging from 5 mm. to 40 mm. Part of a horseshoe was also found in this context. The road was originally laid to a depth of 12 in. and lay over Context 6. This confirms what is known from documentary evidence, that the road was built only after the bank had been finished, with Lieutenant-Colonel Brown complaining that only 10 miles had been laid by autumn 1807.³

The obvious looseness of the shingle, made hard and smooth only by use, accounts for the presence and spreading of beach pebbles in Context 8.

The only finds recovered from the remaining layers overlying the original bank (Contexts 1 and 2) were some animals bones, an iron nail, and a section of clay pipe stem from the topsoil (Context 1).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank Dr J. Williams, the Kent County Archaeologist, and Jane Russell for preparing the illustrations.

³ *Ibid.*, 76.

