

# THE OLD ROYAL ROAD

## IN ROMAN FOOTSTEPS FROM WINCHESTER TO OLD SARUM

FROM A CORRESPONDENT

Street lamps were still burning in Winchester when I left by the West Gate and took the line of the Roman road to Old Sarum. As I climbed out of the town I followed what seemed to be just another pretty suburban road until the houses ended beyond Teg Down. Then a deliberate change in direction with persistent straightness ahead gave me an austere reminder of Roman purpose.

After three miles of hard walking the modern road slanted off and I walked on more pleasantly over grass. I saw the Roman ridge clearly along the edge and then across a corner of West Wood, where the Forestry Commission has thoughtfully left it untouched.

Keeping the ridge well in view, as a green wave through moving grass, I walked round to a windbreak. Then with Forest of Bere Farm away to my right, and the yew-covered down on my left, I made for a stand of fir trees through the dark depth of which a dramatic point of light indicated the course of the road. From behind the bank of down a clear-voiced cuckoo was calling continually. I thought the setting straight from Malory, even before I recalled the link with the Arthurian legend from which this is still known as the Old Royal Road of England.

Beyond the firs a lane for half a mile appeared well raised on the Roman foundation. Where the lane curved I took a bearing and reached a point on Ashley Down by going round a large planted field. Then tracing a vague terrace upwards between sombre yews and brightly budded white-beam I reached the wooded crest.

That was a good moment. I found the ridge as a stony arch fully 30 feet wide and several feet high running slightly downwards through the trees. It was almost covered with windflowers and primroses.

In such a peaceful place I soon had a strange reminder of that brilliant day before the first general night attack on London. Under the trees I noticed a small grey stone carved in a simple style—"To Four Unknown German Airmen, 23 August, 1940."

### WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR

The danger averted in my own day now seemed somehow more real, as I stood on that same road by which William the Conqueror probably travelled to Sarum in 1086 to receive oaths of allegiance, and which Roman invaders had made a thousand years earlier still.

Reaching the buildings of Hoplands, I saw the trimly shaven ridge across the lawn and traced it easily on through a wood. Across a narrow valley it became faint, and then I lost it completely in the red soil of ploughed fields.

It was not until I had walked by compass for about a mile, and crossed over two roads leading down to King's Somborne, that I struck the end of a hedgeline which looked significant and gradually revealed the ridge. I saw the shape of the road quite plainly near two farm buildings just before I slanted across A3057 to a corresponding hedgeline beyond.

With the gables of the houses of Horsebridge showing below the slope to my right, and with Compton Park spreading splendidly on my left, I reached a point commanding the lush valley of the Test. I readily imagined the Roman surveyor standing here and wondering how and where these glittering streams could best be crossed.

For the last seven miles I had noticed his absolute precision in directing his line towards the East Gate of Old Sarum, still 12 miles away. This river crossing now made him change his course slightly more

north-west. Taking this new line I went down by an old wall of Horsebridge Farm and over the railway near a signal box.

Across the water meadows I used my compass for most of the way. There are now three streams and I could only try to guess whether the Romans had gone over or through them. Seeing the current tugging at the weed tresses in the main channel I certainly thought this too strong and deep to be forded.

With another change of direction slightly to the west I left the river bank and went across fields to the right of Bosington Farm. Sloping up from the valley to a modern road on the line above Broughton I saw but few traces until nearing Hildon House. There I followed a broad ridge showing finely under beeches.

Passing out of the trees near a 1750 boundary stone I crossed B3084, seeing continual traces over a low, clipped hedge. Beyond a fork and a yew-lined rille of lane I followed a high, broken bank down between fields. Avoiding ploughland on the far slope, but keeping the ridge in sight, I regained my course at Buckholt Farm. This stands so high that I could see the line on a rise two miles ahead.

Dropping to Lower Noad's Copse I found the road as a narrow and impressive spine. Nearer the border from Hampshire into Wiltshire it became lower, and as it sliced through the widely scattered Winterslow villages the straight lanes and field paths seemed almost the only signs. I could not walk there without having Hazlitt much in mind and I had hoped to find his "Middleton Cottage". In my search I saw from a venerable "Sarum Cottage" and a very modern "Roman Way" that the old road is still not forgotten.

### ALMOST AERIAL VIEW

Leaving the high Winterslows by a terrace under Hare Warren I had almost an aerial view over miles of fields. Growing crops hid any traces just below, but a far hedgeline marked a new course almost due west and passing near lonely Dunstaple.

There I soon saw signs of the road along a field path. It became plainer among barbed wire behind new houses on Winterbourne Down. In the dark wood beyond it was a shapely brown ridge under firs. Rising then into a timeless stretch I was treading a carpet of goose grass shining in the sunlight and laid between mysterious junipers and dusty looking wayfaring trees.

I passed to the right of a new bungalow and had a fine ridge almost all the way across the great hollow of Stock Bottom. From the skyline frieze of telegraph wires I saw that I was nearing A30 and I was glad to cross and leave that busy road behind me.

With the wide valley of the Bourne at my feet I now had my first view of the wrinkled mound of Old Sarum still three miles away. As I looked, I found it hard to realize that the first Romans reaching this very point must have seen that mound there then and already very old.

With a slight change of direction I walked down into the level sun. Beyond the railway line to London I went on through the village of Ford nestling around the crossing of the Bourne remembered in the name. At the end of the day I found the far rise a long mile until I had the sudden consolation of seeing Old Sarum just ahead.

The dark mound seemed almost within hail. I thought of all the travellers through long ages reaching here by evening and seeing the guards on patrol just as I now saw the dark shapes of people strolling along the ramparts. Those people would have seen me clearly in the sunlight before I passed into the shadow of the earthworks where the East Gate had once stood.