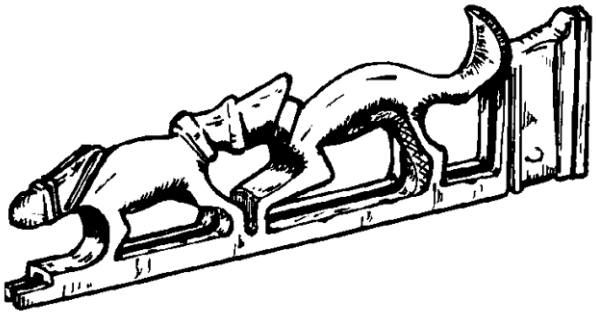
Ampthill & District Archaeological



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An Archaeological evaluation of an ancient

track between Flitwick & Shefford

1965

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Summary

A field walking exercise and an aerial survey to verify a Roman road suggested in the book *Roman Roads in the South-East Midlands* by the Viatores, Gollancz 1964, led to an excavation that proved the existence of an ancient track but suggested a revision of the alignment should be made over some two miles.

Introduction

The Viatores identified the road under investigation, as No. 176 in I.D. Margary's system for the roads of Britain. It is 29 miles long and runs between present day Little Brickhill in Buckinghamshire and Arrington Bridge in Cambridgeshire. The extent of this investigation was from Flitwick to Shefford in Bedfordshire with a particular concentration in the Chicksands area. Local historical sources were searched, maps and aerial photographs studied and an excavation was carried out on the borders of Speedsdairy Farm and the Chicksands Priory Estate.

Research and Field Survey.

A search through aerial photographs showed crop markings to support a track or road following the "176" alignment along the modern Manor Way in Flitwick and Ruxox Farm Flitwick (photo 1) both known Romano British sites. Scorch marks have been recorded running across a field in Clophill at TL100384 and a section of road metal observed in a ditch crossing this field. Photos 2 & 3. The scorch marks were roughly in alignment with the modern agricultural track way that runs to Speedsdairy farm shown on the Map 1.

A quote from the Viatores: *"Just north of Speedsdairy farm the road changes alignment abruptly through 70 degrees and then runs in a south-westerly direction along the farm approach road as far as Beadlow Lodge where it turns back again through 65 degrees and points directly at Shefford. For two miles the modern road A507 into Shefford is well raised with a marked camber. It has already been remarked that this road was never turnpiked and also appears on early maps. Therefore there can be little doubt to its Roman origins".*

A detailed search of early maps by the writer does in fact throw some doubt as to the origins of the two miles of the A507 road referred to. It certainly appears on the 1799 Enclosure map of Shefford but cuts through earlier enclosed fields making them odd shaped and unbalanced e.g. East Northy field. Furthermore the Jeffrey's map of 1765 shows a road or track continuing the alignment from Speedsdairy farm passing to the north of Chicksands Priory and does not show the road following the modern A507 alignment.

Observations made while walking the fields between Speedsdairy farm house and the boundary of Chicksands Estate following the alignment of the road shown on the Jeffrey's map were considered significant. The farm track was bounded on each side for several hundred metres by fully mature oak trees and was raised above the surrounding fields (photo 4. taken 1965). Stones and gravel could be seen in the ploughed fields between the end of the track and the Chicksands border Photo 5. Deep ploughing had spread the scatter but it still made an impressive line that stood out very clearly as the field dried out after rain.

The farmer, the late Mr. G. Chisholm informed us that the field had been ploughed from old pasture at the outbreak of World War II. He also said that a row of ancient oaks was felled at the same time to clear the way. Just off the alignment a 2nd century type bronze pin was found on the surface. In a field to the North of Speedsdairy farm a scatter of 2nd/3rd century Romano British pottery was found.

Excavation.

Permission was obtained to dig a trial trench where the scatter ended at the Chicksands Estate boundary. The section was cut immediately beneath the fence where it would not have been subjected to deep ploughing.

The trench was cut 6700mm x 60mm, a section looking east is shown in (fig. 1). It soon became clear that a foundation of heavy stones and gravel made up the basis of the road which was approximately 4570mm wide, including a ditch on the north edge. Two ruts gave evidence of use with repairs of heavy stones in one and a layer of gravel in the other. At least one heavy stone showed signs of wear from wheels. The fill of the ditch (photo 4) included some fragments of brick and limestone clunch (not native to this area.)



Photo 1. Aerial photograph of Ruxox Farm taken in 1965, showing crop marks on a general alignment joining with New Road. Similar marks can be seen on other photographs taken at different times.

Artefacts.

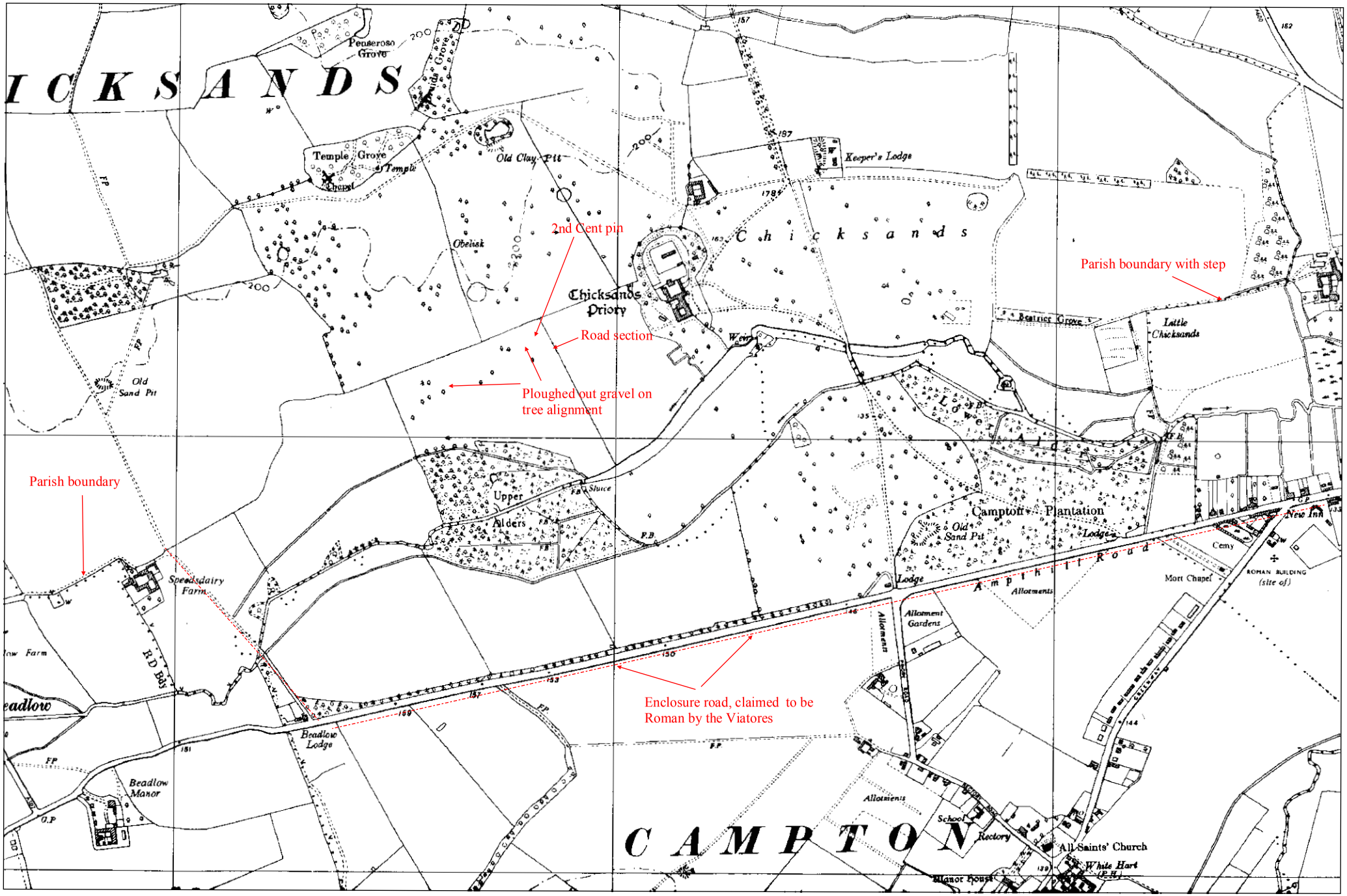
The only recognisable artefact was an iron ox shoe (two per hoof), found in the north rut. It had a nail head still in position and an oblong hole where another had been. Fig. 2.

Comparison of collated evidence with a 6" OS map last revised 1936 (Map 1).

When the position of the section, the ancient oaks and the stone scatter is plotted on the first edition OS map an alignment becomes clear. It picks up parish boundaries that suggest features in the 9th Century*. To the west the boundary follows the farm track while to the east on the same alignment the parish boundary picks up another track way through Little Chicksands. Here the parish boundary has a significant step crossing the track at right angles, this must surely suggest the start and finish point of the original land survey starting and ending on opposite sides of the track.

Conclusions.

The road alignment is obviously ancient as witnessed by the old oak trees existing when the survey was carried out and those individually marked on the first OS map, which were destroyed at the start of World War 11. The date can be further pushed back at least to the 9th Century by the association of the parish boundaries. The road section is consistent with a classic Roman road except that only one ditch was evident. It was in use for



Map 1. Showing location of section & other relevant indications.



Photo 2. Crop mark in field at TL100384, looking east towards Beadlow. Short hedge line in mid picture indicates location of ditch with road metalling.



Photo 3 Continuation of crop mark beyond ditch in the next field.

a long time as road repairs had taken place and the only artefact found, an ox shoe, could have been of Roman or Saxon in origin.
There is ample evidence of Roman occupation in the area and the alignment suggests an obvious need for revision to the Road 176 in Margary's system for the Roman Roads of Britain.



Photo 4. Track looking west towards Speeds Dairy Farm.



Photo 5. Stone scatter on field. Looking west from section.

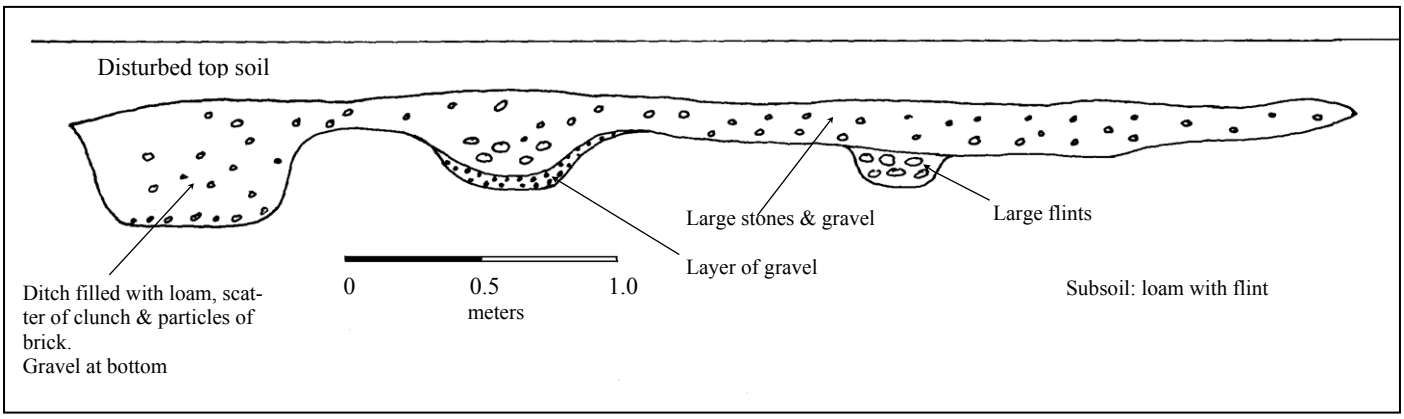


Fig. 1 Section through road facing east.

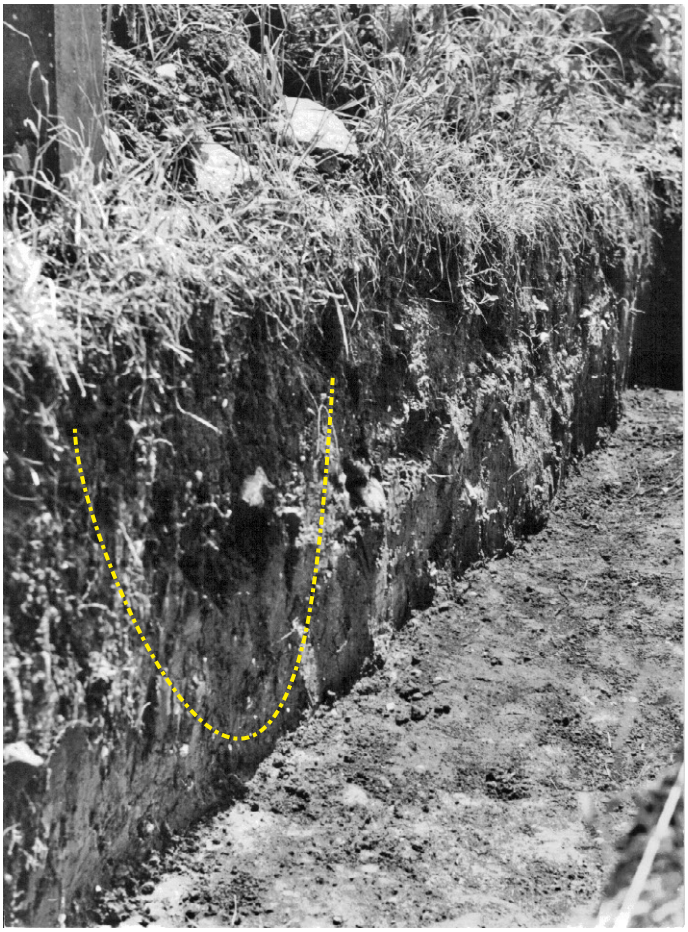


Photo. 6. Section through road showing wheel rut - below the fence post.

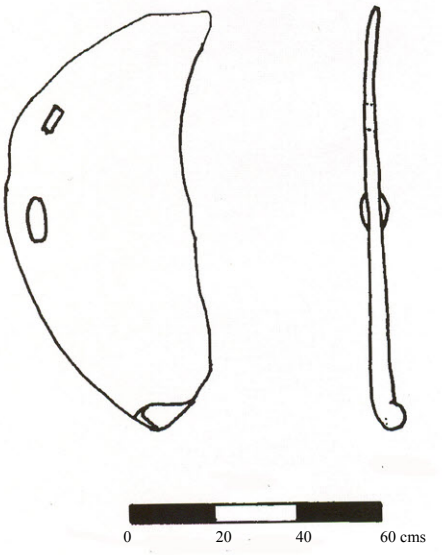


Fig. 2. Half an oxshoe.



Photo 7. Heavy stones in wheel rut.

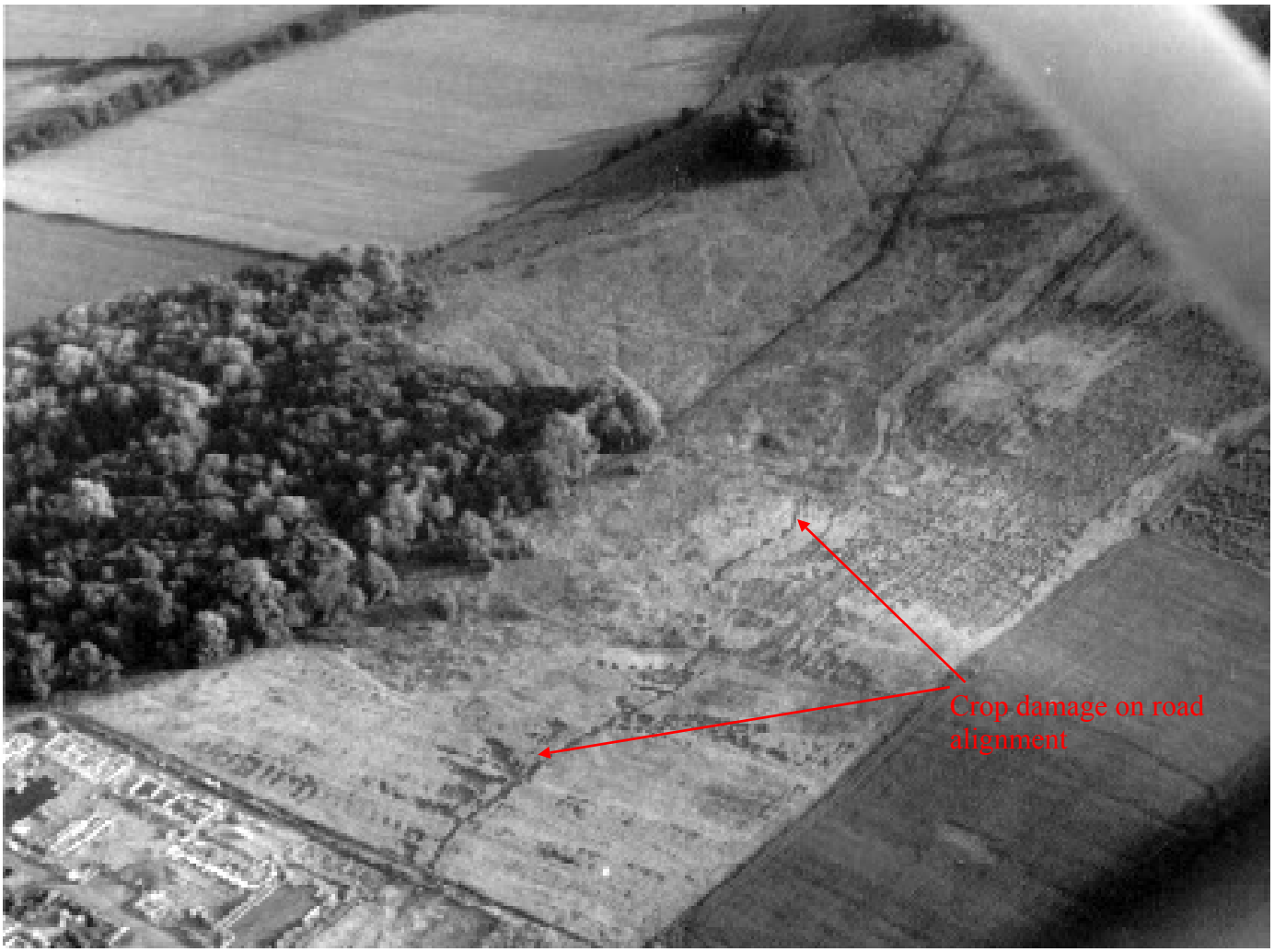


Photo 7. Aerial view in 1970's . Damaged crop follows alignment of road.

Observations made since the original survey.

A photograph taken in the 1970's (photo 7) shows that the buildings on the Chicksands Priory Estate have been extended further west covering the site of the excavation. A line of storm damage in the corn crop picks up the alignment of the road exactly. It is reasonable to assume it was caused by a weakness in the crop due to the underlying road metal.

The field at TL 100384 has since been quarried away for fullers earth and reinstated.

Map 1 ©Crown Copyright. Reproduced by permission of Ordnance Survey®.

Photographs from the author's collection.

Thanks to the late G. Chisholm for permission to field walk and excavate the site.

Ref. Roman Roads in the South-East Midlands by The Viatores Victor Gallancz Ltd 1964.

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