

"I've Got a Roman Road in My Back Garden": Roman Roads Around Brecon

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I actually heard an old lady say that in Cambridge in my student days. She was mistaken, but we didn't disillusion her. This paper provides a brief account of the structure of a Roman Road and describes what is fact and what is fantasy about the routes of the Roman roads around Brecon.

Roman roads have held a fascination for more than a millennium. The Anglo-Saxons gave names to some of the major ones - Watling Street, Stane Street - and the continued interest in an ill-understood and distant past has led to numerous inaccurate or fanciful names and identifications. These include the several Caesar's Camps in southern England (Iron Age enclosures), or the Devil's Quoits which occur in Pembrokeshire, Oxfordshire and Cornwall (Neolithic or Bronze Age monuments), or Arthur's Stone above Dorstone (a Neolithic chambered tomb). Kenneth Grahame (of *Wind in the Willows* fame) in his essay *The Golden Age* called one chapter "The Roman Road", though there is little Roman about the content.

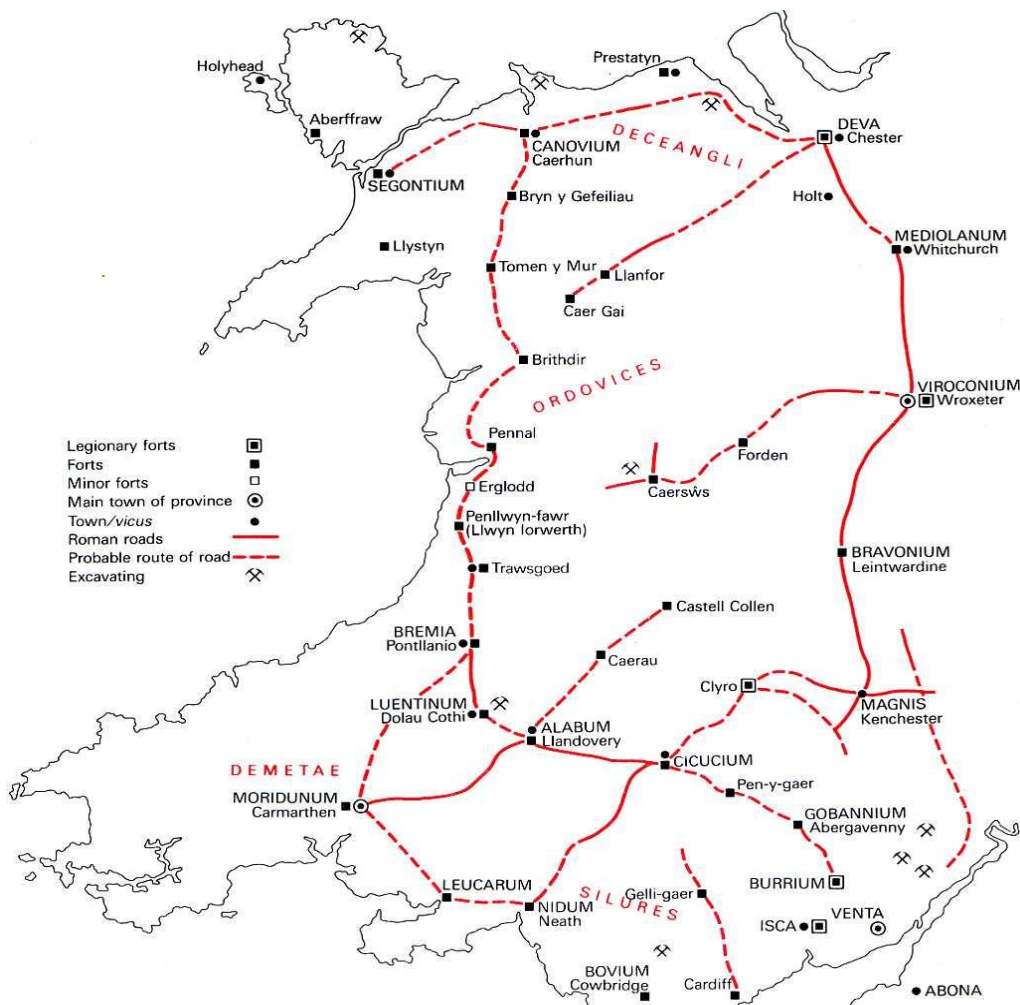


Fig. 1. The pattern of Roman roads in Wales as at present understood. Only the continuous red lines have any certainty.

There has always been a tendency to regard any apparently old, or long-distance or through road as Roman. The first edition of the Ordnance Survey map of Roman Britain marked as supposedly Roman, a track over Long Mountain (east of Welshpool), seemingly because it appeared to be continuous. Closer to home, the path up the spine of Allt yr Esgair, eight kilometres east of Brecon, is still marked as Roman on some maps, though the actual Roman line almost certainly stayed roughly where the A40T is now, passing the site of the Victorinus stone near Scethrog. In his monumental 2-volume work of 1957, *Roman Roads in Britain*, Ivan Margary carried the process a stage further, frequently relying on approximate alignments of lanes and hedgerows for which there is no actual evidence of a Roman origin. South of Brecon he accepted the Miners' Track as a Roman road, but that too lacks evidence. His numbering of roads has however endured and is used to this day.

So how can a track be confirmed as Roman? There is little difficulty when it is close to and aiming at or leaving a Roman destination. Mortimer Wheeler was able to trace the Roman road north-east from Y Gaer, the important Roman camp at Aberyscir, just west of Brecon, for more than a kilometre, which he confirmed by excavation in two places. Roman roads can have a definite structure. On flat ground they are generally raised on an *agger* (a low causeway, *Fig.2*). Excavation (whether deliberate or the result of other activity, as with the gas pipeline) can reveal a packed stone surface, often with kerbstones and side ditches (*Fig.3*).



Fig. 2 The agger of the Roman road crossing Mynydd Illtyd, seen as a low bank. This section is scheduled and is easily accessible from the road as it approaches the cattle grid near Cwm Camlais castle.



Fig. 3 The road just north-west of Y Gaer crosses from left to right, exposed in 2007 during pipeline excavation. The surface is of packed stone, and the kerbstones can be clearly seen, as can the nearer and further side ditches.

In the less hilly landscape of England roads can be straight for long distances, but even in the more demanding terrain of Wales they often proceed in short straight stretches, changing alignment at high points where needed (Fig. 4). Curves are not common. Aerial photography has contributed much to locating Roman remains in the last three decades, for example a number of roads to the north and west of Breconshire, and in particular the astonishing evidence for buildings within and outside the Roman fort at Pen y Gaer near Tretower.

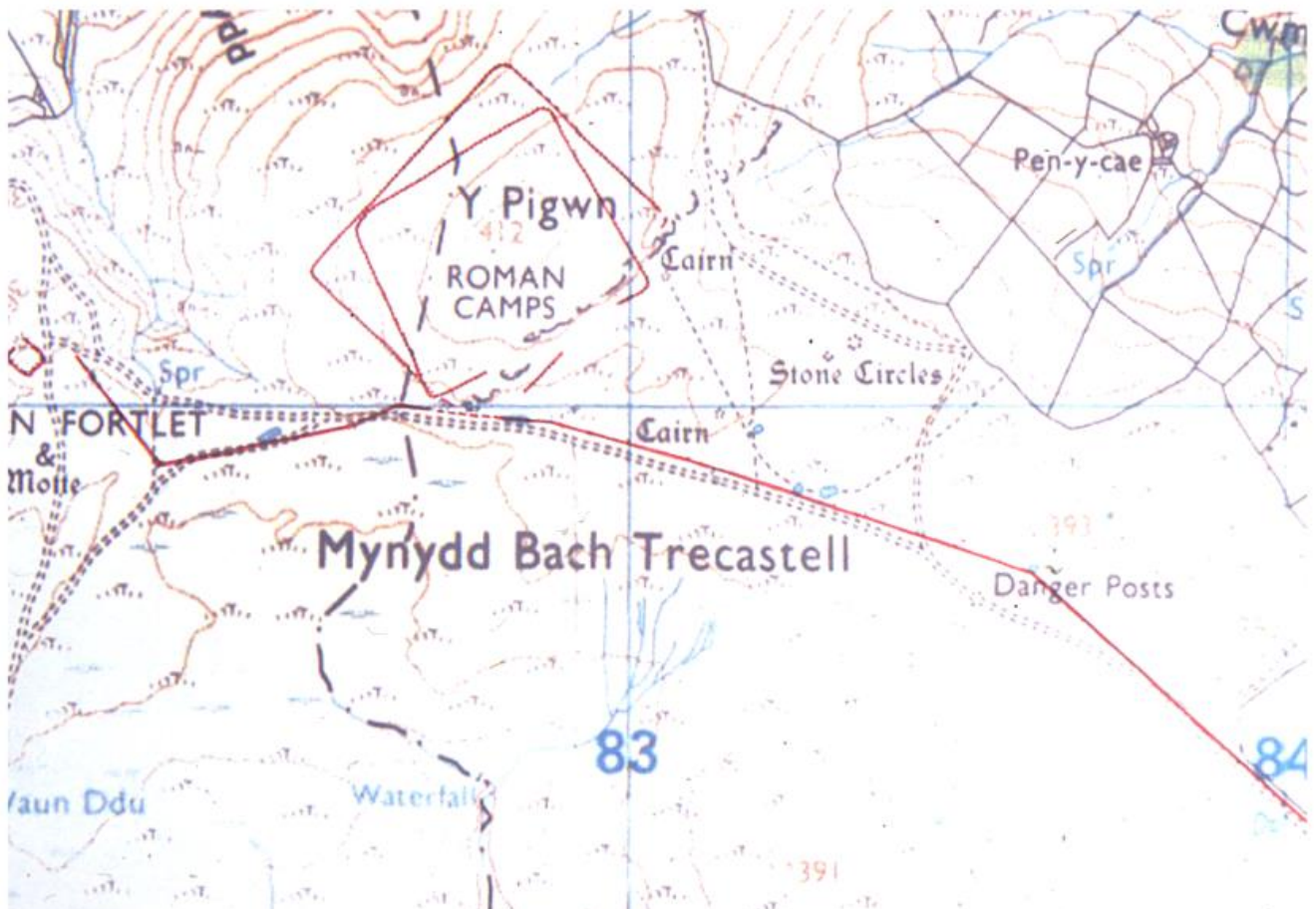


Fig. 4 The line of the Roman road across Mynydd Trecastell appears as a series of straight sections alongside the later track, and zig-zags round the head of the abrupt valley at the left-hand edge of the map.

THE FOUR MAIN ROMAN ROUTES AROUND BRECON (Fig. 5)

In general, the approximate Roman routes around Brecon are not in doubt, but except in one case, there is virtually no evidence of where the road actually lay. Four main routes are known to have converged on Y Gaer, from the south-west (Coelbren), the north-east (Clyro), up the Usk valley from Abergavenny, and from the west (Llandovery). There will have been others, e.g. from due south or due north, but their routes and even their existence are wholly unconfirmed.



Fig. 5 The Roman roads around Brecon (extract from the O.S. map). Only the road to the fort at Coelbren is known with any precision, marked by the continuous red line.

Y Gaer - Coelbren. This is the only well-attested road, known in detail over most of its length. The first few kilometres from Y Gaer are uncertain, but it soon emerges on Mynydd Illtyd as a clear *agger* (Fig. 2), marked on the Ordnance Survey maps, and from there on its course can be traced. It is particularly clear and impressive close to the fort at Coelbren. Several sections of its course are scheduled ancient monuments.

Y Gaer - Clyro. Though the route is certain, the road itself is largely unknown. Wheeler identified the section north-east from Y Gaer, confirmed by his excavations. Margary traced the supposed road all the way to and beyond Clyro using lanes and hedgerows, but his identifications are wholly without evidence. A Roman road surface was identified north of Three Cocks in the pipeline excavation, but this does not appear to be part of that route.

Y Gaer - Abergavenny. This is equally uncertain, even close to the fort at Pen y Gaer. Ordnance Survey maps optimistically mark lanes close to Pen y Gaer as a Roman Road, as they do over the Allt, but evidence is lacking. The Victorinus stone at Scethrog and the milestone from Millbrook (Fig. 6) were presumably close to the actual road.

Y Gaer - Llandovery. The pipeline excavation of 2007 uncovered a section of road north-west of Y Gaer (Fig.3), but thereafter the exact course is speculative until it appears clearly on Mynydd Trecastell, nearly out of the county, as a series of straight sections of *agger* (Fig. 2, Fig. 7). From there on it can be traced most of the way to Llandovery.

Although aerial photography will, in suitably dry years, undoubtedly lead to the discovery of previously unknown Roman features, the valleys around Brecon are largely followed by modern roads which may well have destroyed any traces of Roman roads – and, unfortunately, if it isn't there you can't find it and excavate it!



Fig. 6 The Millbrook milestone. The text reads IMP(erator) C(aesar) FL(avius) VAL(erius) CONSTANTIVS "The Emperor Flavius Valerius Constantius" (A.D.296 - A.D.306). This probably celebrates the recovery of Britain in A.D.296 after a revolt, and shows that the road was still being maintained at that date.

Fig.7 The Roman road enters the photograph high left and crosses the corner of the Roman camps at Y Pigwn, which have been damaged by later tilestone quarrying. It then continues close to the top centre of the photograph, before turning around the valley and vanishing high right.

It can be seen as a series of straight sections, contrasting with the meandering course of the later track. This section can be seen in Fig.4.



For references, see *Brecknock: Hillforts and Roman remains (RCAHMW 1986)*, and more recently *Roman Frontiers in Wales and the Marches (Burnham and Davies 2010)*