

The case for a Roman Settlement existing close to the site of the former Terry's Works on Bishopthorpe Road.

Hopefully many of you will have read the report written by John Stevens and Maeve Morris about their research into the history of the Terry's factory site, in it they acknowledged that I believed that a small Roman settlement may have existed in this area¹ : as a consequence of this I felt that I should elaborate upon this matter and share my thinking with a wider audience.

As many of you are aware I tend to be more interested in the mediaeval settlement of our area so Romans are a bit early for me, but as part of my dissertation project of 2020,² I had to look at the earlier settlement of our area in order to see what influence it may have had upon the mediaeval landscape and it is upon this research that I base my belief for there being a Roman settlement close to Terry's factory.

Terry's site lies on high, relatively well drained land (part of the glacial moraine) 2km to the south of the city of York. To the west lies the Knavesmire, which was 2000 years ago a seasonal, shallow lake and to the east lies the river Ouse, which at the time was bordered by tidal marsh and meadow. Thus we can picture the potential occupation area as a narrow spine of land extending along a north/south axis, a landscape which mirrors that on the western side of the Knavesmire where we find the 2nd century Roman settlement of Dringhouses.

Dringhouses possesses one very obvious characteristic of Roman presence, namely a road. The road to Tadcaster was designated road 10 by the Royal Commission for Historic Monuments³ and was the only road that they identified on the sw side of the river Ouse that headed towards the south. Although historians thought that a road might exist which roughly aligned to Bishopthorpe Road, it was believed that it was likely to be a minor one.

So do we have a Roman road? And if so where is it and where does it go?

In 1975, Warwick Rodwell undertook an examination of known Roman milestones and their relationship to the Antonine Itinerary.⁴ He found that a milestone found near to the fort at Castleford stated that the distance to York was 22 Roman miles. After careful research Rodwell concluded that the stone referred to an as yet unknown road between the two sites must exist as the distance to York via Tadcaster was a greater distance. H.G Ramm suggested that a route from Castleford *crossing the river Wharfe in the neighbourhood of Bolton Percy would approach*

¹ Stevens, J & Morris, M. 2024 "The Chocolate Works, York - Change through Time" p9. <https://www.clementshallhistorygroup.org.uk/blog/recording-changes-in-south-bank-at-the-chocolate-works-york/> accessed 7-8-20204.

² Batchelor, Simon (2020). "Urbi et Suburbi: The Landscape and Settlement of York, south-west of the river Ouse, between the 9th and 16th centuries." www.etheses.whiterose.ac.uk .

³ "An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the City of York: Volume 1; Eburacum, Roman York." p2, fig 2. (Royal Commission on Historical Monuments/HMSO 1962).

⁴ Rodwell, W. 1975. *Milestones, civic territories and the Antonine Itinerary*, in *Britannia*, Vol 6 pp 78-101.

*York along the line of the present Bishopthorpe Road.*⁵ would better meet the distances recorded on the milestone.

In 1981 during a watching brief on the deep sewer work under Bishopthorpe Road, a compact cobbled surface some 2 metres below the current street level was observed, this discovery resulted in the lead archaeologist suggesting that a road, provisionally numbered 12 in the RCHM(E) scheme, may exist and given research the research undertaken by Rodwell and Ramm that it may head towards either Castleford or Doncaster.⁶

The work outlined above suggests that we have evidence of a possible Roman road passing through Middlethorpe, My own work based on the examination of historic plans and maps suggests a possible alignment for this road.

If you examine a modern plan of our area you can see a straight boundary is visible, running from Cherry Hill Lane to Reginald Grove. This same boundary is visible on Lund's Survey of Micklegate Stray⁷ so is at least 350 years old. It is almost certain that the later development of the area was influenced by this boundary; it can also be suggested that such an obvious and almost straight boundary has been influenced by an earlier feature. Furthermore this boundary follows the contours of the landscape rather than climbing the steep escarpments of the glacial moraine as the modern road does. This would suggest that this boundary may represent the "ghost" of our Roman road.

Such "ghost" roads are not unusual for York; the modern Tadcaster Road runs slightly east of its Roman counterpart, the A19 between Bootham Bar and Water End sits almost directly on top of one of the Roman roads leading to Catterick and the road to Malton can be traced through the Groves via a number of narrow public lanes⁸.

While Ramm suggests that ultimate destination of road 12 may be Castleford or Doncaster a more obvious destination en route would be a military site in the Acaster area (-caster placename elements regularly coincide with former Roman military establishments), close to the confluence of the Ouse and Wharfe, providing an important control point for trading and supply vessels needing access to the two important Roman settlements of York and Tadcaster.

⁵ Ramm, H.G. 1984. *The Dual Cross Milestone and Roman Roads west of York*, in Addyman, P.V. & Black V.E. (eds) *Archaeological Papers From York Presented to M.W.Barley* (York Archaeological Trust) p 45b.

⁶ Brinklow, D. 1986. *Main Roads serving Roman York*, in, Brinklow, D., Hall, R.A., Magilton, J.R. & Donaghay, S. 1986. *Coney Street, Aldwark, Clementhorpe, Minor Sites and Roman Roads.*(York Archaeological Trust) p 101.

⁷ Lund Jr., J. 1772. *Micklegate Ward Stray 1772, based upon a plan of 1719 by Robert Kershaw, with 'some alterations and additions'* (Explore York Libraries and Archives.)

⁸ Brinklow, D. 1986. *Ibid*, pp 84-101.

Excavations carried out at 292 Bishopthorpe Road (St. Chad's Wharf) in 1998, revealed some evidence of Roman activity in the form of a few sherds of Roman pottery and tile along with some cobbles⁹.

In 2005 York Archaeological Trust undertook excavations on the Terry's Factory site ahead of its redevelopment. The trenches revealed a number of linear features, identified as boundary ditches running both parallel and almost perpendicular to the current alignment of Bishopthorpe Road. Their regular spacing suggests the presence of human activity and they have been interpreted as field boundaries. These features contained pottery dating to the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD giving us further evidence for human exploitation of the area.¹⁰

The area around the Terry's site was extensively exploited for gravel extraction and records of Roman finds exist from the late 18th century. Two letters from Dr. John Burton reveal that during excavation for gravel *about a mile and a half south of York near Middlethorp*. that beneath the topsoil *...lay many fragments of Roman Urns, and other earthen ware of a large size...* Following further investigations Burton records the discovery of a complete ceramic vessel and the recovery of a large number of ceramic sherds, some of which were of *... the most beautiful red colour...* From these he was able to reconstruct *...two bowls, that seemed capable of containing two quarts each. The outsides ornamented with raised work, representing various sorts of animals, as lions, foxes, cranes, and even men and women.*¹¹ This is a clear description of Roman Samian Ware.

RCHM(E) records that further finds of pottery, metal objects, oyster shells and a great deal of cattle bone have also been found in this vicinity.¹²

Perhaps the most significant finds indicating the presence of a settlement in this area are those of human beings themselves. RCHM(E) record that the remains of five individuals have been found in the area of Old Nunthorpe/Terry's factory, in 1813 two coffins containing bodies preserved in gypsum "*found in a field between Old Nunthorpe and Middlethorpe*". In 1826 two further coffins were found in the same field and, they record, in 1839 it was reported by the Yorkshire Philosophical Society that "a skull and a coin of Gothicus [emperor 268-270] were found near Campleshon Road"¹³. To date these are the only human remains found in the area,

Given the presence of human remains, pottery, food waste, metalwork and evidence of deliberate land division there is a strong case for the existence of a small settlement in this area.

⁹ Ottaway, P. 2011. *Archaeology in the Environs of Roman York: Excavations 1976 - 2005*. (York Archaeological Trust) pp. 268 - 269.

¹⁰ Ottaway, P. 2011. *Ibid.*, p.270

¹¹ "*Extract of two letters from Dr. John Burton, of York, to Dr. Ducarel, concerning Roman Antiquities discovered in Yorkshire, 1770*", in *Archaeologia, or Miscellaneous Tracts relating to Antiquity*. Vol. 2, pp. 181 - 183. (Society of Antiquaries of London: 1773).

¹² Eburacum, p63b

¹³ Eburacum, p108b

Unfortunately this may well be difficult to prove archaeologically, much of the area around the Terry's factory has been quarried for sand and gravel, the excavations of 2005 showed that the Terry's site itself had been extensively levelled and the owners of York Racecourse have carried out an extensive drainage and levelling scheme on Bustard Field so that it can be used as a car park. This means that the most likely areas where Roman archaeology may survive is beneath the surviving pockets of Mediaeval ridge and furrow field systems, some of which may soon be under threat of redevelopment in the future as they lie behind Terry's car park.