

THE ROMAN ROAD FROM COLCHESTER TO MERSEA.

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IN the interesting and stimulating paper on "Roman Roads in Essex" by Mr. Miller Christy, he deals, under 'Route 7,' with the road from Colchester to Mersea Island.¹

Although, we gather, in general agreement with the late Dr. Laver as to this 'Route,'² Mr. Christy found himself obliged to confess that he was "unable to follow his route with complete confidence." Careful study of the map, I think, shows a marked divergence between these two antiquaries, for a good part, at least, of the route followed by the presumed Roman road to Mersea. Both of them, however, had made a study of the ground.³

I approach the subject myself from a different standpoint: for, although I have not studied the ground, I find that there is something to be learnt from books or maps published in the eighteenth century. It is somewhat strange that neither of these two writers has made use of this evidence, so far as I can find.

Morant, who probably knew the ground, and in whose time (1768) the traces of roads may have been less obscured than now, makes a definite statement on the subject under West Mersea (vol. i., p. 427*b*). We find him writing as follows :

The causeway leading hence to Colchester, is from Peete-bridge, by Peete-Tye, cross Abberton-Green, over Manwood bridge, by the side of Blackheath, and enters the town on the east of St John's Abbey.

This statement is most precise, and the places named enable us to trace this 'causeway' either on Chapman & Andre's map⁴ or on that which faces the title-page to Mr. Cutts' volume.

Mr. Christy's statement that "according to Mr. Laver's view, the road emerged from some (*sic*) south gate of the Roman City," is

¹ *Trans. E.A.S.* (1920), vol. xv., pp. 210-211.

² Mr. Christy cites (pp. 197, 210) Dr. Laver's paper as "N.S., vol. iii., pp. 131-133 (1889)." This is the date given on the title page of the volume, but I find (on p. 179) that the paper was actually read at Colchester 11 Aug., 1885. This is of some importance because the book on *Colchester* by the Rev. E. L. Cutts (a former hon. sec. of our Society) was published in 1888. Mr. Cutts referred to Dr. Laver as his informant on Roman roads (Preface).

³ A sketch map of a "supposed Roman way from Colchester to Mersea" is prefixed to Dr. Laver's paper on "The Rampart, Berechurch park," in *E.A.T.*, vol. ix., pp. 327-329.

⁴ Although this map was not published till 1777, it was made from a survey taken in 1772-4.

not quite exact. What that writer stated was that from "St. Botolph's Gate issued the road to Mersea Island." From there, he held, it followed what is now the wall bounding the grounds of St. John's Abbey on the east. This is precisely the line given by Morant, but traced from north to south. It is when we reach Plum Hall that the line forks. From this point the *eastern* 'route' is that which Morant gives: the road passes, by the east side of Blackheath, to Manwood Bridge, where it crosses the Roman river. Thence it runs across "Abberton Heath" (to the east of Abberton), by Peete Tye, to Peete Hall, and so to the Strode and Mersea Island. The *western* 'route' is that which Dr. Laver adopted. For a mile and a half (or a little more), it ran, more or less, southward to Monk Wick, where it again becomes distinctly traceable.¹

From this point, Mr. Christy writes, of Dr. Laver's 'route,' it followed a raised causeway, still usable, along the eastern side of the park of Berechurch Hall, and ran on as far as the bank of the Roman river (p. 211). This route is well shown on the map in Mr. Cutts' book, where it is sharply defined. Mr. Christy, however, observes in a foot-note, of this 'raised causeway,' that he has "never been able to see it." It is here that one of my sources seems to prove helpful; for, on Chapman & Andre's map, we find a faint line, running south from Monk Wick to the Roman river, and marked "ancient intrenchments." Dr. Laver admitted that "in two fields the plough has considerably levelled it."

At the Roman river the crossing-places of these two 'routes' would be nearly a mile apart; to the south of that stream we find them clearly converging; for at Abberton the distance between them was only some half-a-mile.² Where they actually met is by no means plain to me. As to his own (the western) 'route,' Dr. Laver's conclusion was as follows—Abberton church, he held, actually stands upon it; but "beyond Abberton church the traces are lost." The line, however, would "pass near the old Parsonage house of Abberton, on the top of the hill," and thence, possibly, by Peete Tye; "but we get nothing distinct until we come to Peet Hall Causey." Peete Hall was the starting-point of Morant's 'causeway' to Colchester, from which we started. The sketch map, however, which Dr. Laver appended, shows that, coming down from Abberton, his line struck Morant's 'causeway' no further south than Peete Tye itself. These Essex 'causeys' were dear to

¹ Vols. iii. [N.S.], p. 131; xv., p. 211.

² This is well seen on Mr. Cutts' map.

Dr. Laver's heart.¹ To continue the quotation from his paper, we read that "if there was nothing more to lead us, this term would, as elsewhere, give a clue; from this point to the Strood I think we are again on our road, much of it being raised," p. 132).

I gather from this passage that he was clearly unacquainted, as indeed I suspected, with Morant's *dictum* on the subject.

Thus far I have been dealing with two 'routes' to Mersea, namely the *eastern* road, which Morant styles a 'causeway,' and the *western*, which, according to Dr. Laver, ran independently from Plum Hall to Peete Tye, where it rejoined the other. I hasten, however, to add that this route is much interrupted and difficult to follow, as his own map shows,² and that he certainly looked on it as the *only* 'Mersea road' as he does not even mention Morant's 'causeway.'

Mr. Miller Christy's 'Route 7' appears to me to involve a *third* and more western line (p. 211). He thinks it equally likely that the road emerged from the town by the Balkerne gate or the Schere gate, and ran southwards across a piece of country, where, for about two miles, there is now no sign of a road. At Maypole farm, however, a modern road appears and runs for about two miles further south (a parish boundary coinciding with it most of the way) to near Butler's farm, thence continuing by Peldon to the Strood.

Such a route would take a wholly independent line, from its point of departure to the Strood mill, opposite Mersea. With regard to part of it forming a parish boundary, this, no doubt, is so, for about two miles south of the Roman river; but it is more remarkable that Morant's 'causeway' route appears to form a parish boundary for virtually the whole way from Peete Tye Hall till it enters the borough liberties and St. Giles' parish.³

How far this is proof of a road's antiquity I do not presume to say; but Dr. Laver's middle route does not, I believe, form such a boundary anywhere. It has, however, if we can trust Mr. Cutts' map, a fairly straight course from Colchester to the Roman river. Mr. Miller Christy lays stress on the 'straightness' in Essex of Roman roads (p. 193), but this is not a feature of his own suggested

¹ When recently studying these 'causeways' as indicating Roman Roads, I started from the well-known 'Stane street' (running east and west) which is styled *Calcea* (i.e. a causeway) in John's charter of 1204. Whether, as Dr. Laver implies, a 'causeway' had always been a Roman road is, perhaps, hardly certain. Our latest instalment of *Essex Fines* shows us a 'Norton causeway' at Norton Mandeville (vol. ii., p. 45), but even Mr. Miller Christy has not found there a Roman road.

² Mr. Cutts' map of this 'Roman way' shows an impressive, unbroken line, as far as the Roman river.

³ It divides Langenhoe, Fingringhoe and East Donyland, to the east, from the parishes to its west, more or less.

line, through Peldon; nor does Dr. Laver's own map of his road give us a straight line. Morant's 'causeway' follows a fairly straight line from Colchester to the Strood, save for a decided swerve where it crosses the Roman river. Mr. Miller Christy makes an interesting observation (p. 193, *note*) that "some slight diversion for a short distance is usually observable wherever one of our Essex roads of Roman origin crosses a stream, however small," owing to the nature of the ground.

It is to be wished that those who have an intimate knowledge of the district would make a fresh examination of what I have here shown to be *three* alternative 'routes.'

[I have left this paper exactly as written and as read at the last annual meeting, which illness prevented me from attending. A newspaper report informed me that, on that occasion, it was attacked with some vehemence by one speaker, for its alleged inaccuracies and errors. These I have not detected after careful examination. My object was to draw attention to two additional sources of information, *viz.*, Morant's evidence in 1768 and Chapman & Andre's *Atlas* a few years later. I expressly left to others the examination of the ground.]