Before the Romans came there were already numbers of trackways in the neighbourhood of Banbury. These were the natural ridgeways which were in use in pre-historic times, many of which we are using to-day. In their earliest form they crossed no water, but followed the high ground where the going was good and firm. Already in pre-Roman days the smaller streams with firm banks and hard bottoms would have been passable, so that there was also a secondary pattern of natural ways.

In this district we have the great curve of the high ridges from Rollright and Over Norton by Edgehill to Preston Capes and Cold Higham. From Preston Capes a ridgeway zigzags south as far as Islip. Many natural ridges come off the main one on both sides, some of which are linked by easy fords. This gives us the system of many tracks going in a general direction of south-west to north-east, which was an old trade route from Bath to Lincoln, now referred to as the Jurassic Way. Crossing it is another group of natural ways with a general north and south direction, which in several places have been called 'Port Way'. In different parts of the country there are many other old roads with this name, which are certainly not connected; but at least it means the way was recognisable as an important road from Saxon or earlier times, and some, but not all, were Romanized. (1)
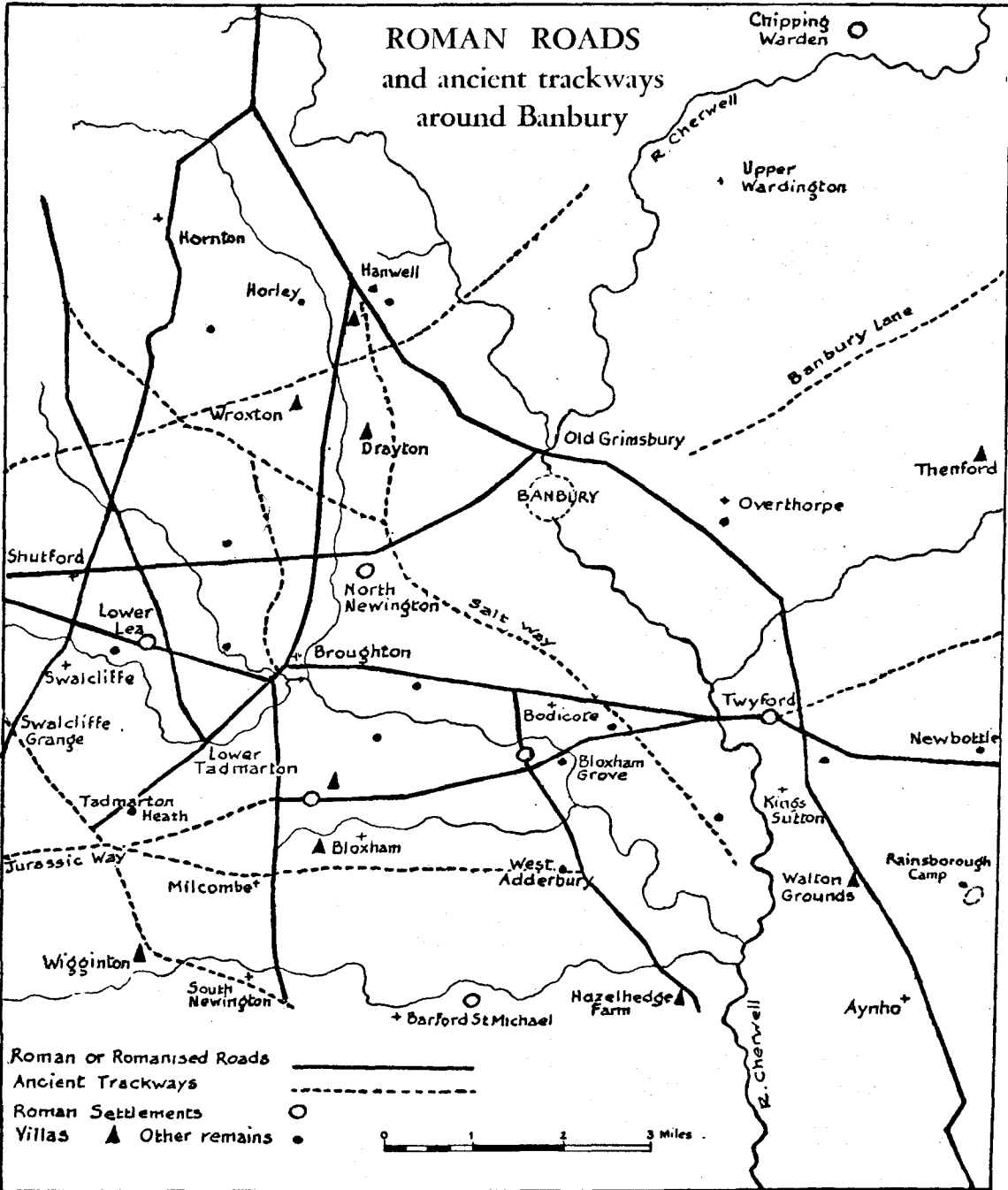
The River Cherwell is a great natural barrier, like the Thames and the Lea; they are boundaries because they are so hard to cross. A number of ridges concentrate on Somerton and North Aston, and at Somerton Mill there is a natural stone bottom to the ford; this makes it likely to have been an early crossing, probably pre-Roman. Wide, wet meadows and muddy banks and bottoms make it unlikely that the other Cherwell crossings were usable before the Romans improved them. The clues to the road system are Cherwell mud and the steep, deep, sudden valleys. It was quite possible to get about by going round by an easier way, or simply to keep to one's own neighbourhood, so that there are separate track systems on each side of the Cherwell.

When the Romans conquered Britain they made the big military roads, and numbers of less important but very necessary local roads for the needs of general communications. The Romanized Britons learnt how to make good surfaces, fords and small bridges, so that a network of local roads was developed, probably more or less on the lines of previous tracks. This means that there is much variety in the local structure and width even of the same road; and although some roads were superbly engineered by experts, others were natural tracks merely improved by trial and error until the best way was found. Although technically a Romanized track may not rank as a Roman road, when we want to understand life in Roman Britain we must include every section that shows the possible communications between settlements. We cannot believe that the people who lived in such well-built houses would be content to flounder in mud.

Three major Roman roads, Watling Street, Fosse Way and Akeman Street make a triangle just outside our area, but we have to account for the day to day communications of the considerable populations of our countryside. The Port Way from Kirtlington to Souldern was known in the 17th century and is a Romanized ridgeway. From Souldern to Walton Grounds a stretch of typical road has been known for many years. The Ordnance Survey map of Roman Britain shows a road from Droitwich and Stratford-on-Avon coming up from Whatcote by the ridge on the south of Compton Wynyates, crossing the Edgehill ridgeway at the White House and slanting down the side of the valley to Swalcliffe Lower Lea. This goes straight on by a lane but diverges from it on the hill-top to keep south of the stream which it crosses by an existing remnant of road to a bridge and fine sweep through Broughton Park and under the church to Bodicote and Twyford Mill, on through Astrop Park and up the hill to Newbottle Spinney and along the southern boundary of Hinton-in-the-Hedges. The country beyond has been heavily ploughed, but it probably kept to the high ground to Finmere. The easy gradients are well-engineered and a section in Astrop Park show a magnificent cambered structure 18 feet across. Twyford is therefore proved to be a Roman crossing. (2)

The Salt Way is certainly very ancient, but I doubt if it crossed the Cherwell before the Romans made the Twyford fords, and Nell Bridge is more likely to be a medieval crossing.

ROMAN ROADS
and ancient trackways
around Banbury

Chipping
Warden

R. Cherwell

Upper
Wardington

Hornton

Horley

Hanwell

Banbury Lane

Wroxton

Drayton

Old Grimsbury

Thenford

BANBURY

Overthorpe

Shutford

North
Newington

Salt Way

Lower
Lea

Broughton

Twyford

Swalcliffe

Newbottle

Bodicote

Swalcliffe
Grange

Lower
Tadmarton

Bloxham
Grove

Kings
Sutton

Tadmarton
Heath

Bloxham

Rainsborough
Camp

Jurassic Way

Milcombe

West
Adderbury

Walton
Grounds

Wigginton

South
Newington

Hazelhedge
Farm

Aynho

Barford St Michael

R. Cherwell

Roman or Romanised Roads
Ancient Trackways
Roman Settlements
Villas ▲ Other remains •

0   1   2   3 Miles

After Walton Grounds the road from Souldern goes straight over the hill between two knobs to King's Sutton, east of the present road, crosses the village, and then goes north keeping above the very wet valley, crosses a little stream in the same place as the road up from Twyford, then over the hill and down to a ford beside a bridge, touching the present road again near the southern end of Overthorpe and down to Grimsbury. The road pattern of this area has changed completely since a map of 1821, and that again was quite different from one of 1790, but scraps of former roads and numerous small signs piece themselves together into a very convincing line. (3) Grim is a name for the devil that the Saxons gave to large works that they had not made themselves. Old Grimsbury is a decided knob, where fences, walls and lanes may disguise an old settlement. The high ground each side of the Cherwell probably leaves as narrow a belt of flood-land as could be found, and the present causeway from the water-works to the wharf had apparently been there a long time before it was made so high. I studied directions and landmarks from many places, and then went to Hanwell Grounds, where a superb piece of Roman road survives, taking deliberate engineered angular bends so as to avoid steep ground as far as the top of Hanwell village, heading straight for the main road to Warwick along the ridgeway. There is no doubt that Grimsbury was the other big Roman crossing, and Banbury Lane comes down to it much straighter than it does to Banbury.

So far no Roman remains have been found in Banbury town, but a great deal in the country round about. Banbury Lane is undoubtedly very ancient, and is three pieces of ridges connected by natural ways. It certainly linked up with the routes to the north, but I doubt if there was a pre-Roman crossing at either Banbury or Grimsbury.

To the west of Oxfordshire the Jurassic Way was probably in use very much earlier than the north-eastern portions. From the Rollright Stones the ridge goes right on to Milcombe, coming down by two spurs, the more northerly of which was 'made' by the Romans and goes through the north of Bloxham to Bloxham Grove and Twyford.

From Tadmarton Heath the main ridge turns north-west past the Stour Well and Tyne Hill and up Edge Hill, to curve round by Nadbury Camp, down by Hanwell, Drayton and Crouch Hill to Twyford and Nell Bridge. The whole of this line still has roads or tracks on it. Another ridge turned off near Sunrising to Wroxton and North Newington, with a branch to Horley. An easily-found early track went down from Edgehill to Lower Tadmarton, which was made in Roman times without being given the typical engineered look. From just west of Wroxton an easy way joined the Salt Way above Withycombe, and it was not difficult to cross from Horley to Hanwell or Wroxton.

The pre-Roman route to the north-east probably started from a group of old tracks on the high ground west of Epwell and went across Epwell Grounds, north of Balscot and over a landscape now obliterated by iron-stone mining to Hanwell and Great Bourton. Keeping to the west of the Cherwell it crossed the smaller stream somewhere near Prescote and went up the still-used ridgeway to Appletree, Aston-le-Walls and on to Byfield. This way goes on to Daventry and Naseby and is a more natural line than Banbury Lane and Northampton.

From Brailes, Whatcote and Tysoe a number of steep but simple ridges come up to the extraordinary plateau surrounding Shenlow and the other round-topped hills. It was easy to pass between them south of Shutford. A good Roman road runs from Shutford eastwards along the upper side of North Newington and across the valley to the top of the hill south-east of Withycombe, where it takes a sharp turn down a straight line through Neithrop towards Grimsbury, to join Banbury Lane.

Many of these early ways are parallel and to make access convenient a road across was needed. 'Port Way' on an old map of Bloxham (4) gave a clue to such a road crossing over the lowest part of the ridge due south of Broughton. It comes from Akeman Street by the Chipping Norton road to beyond Kiddington, then down to Radford Bridge, across the Tew valley to the Deddington Road, takes a turn to the east, goes down the parish boundary to Buttermilk Farm and across to the Bloxham boundary. It approaches the south-west corner of Broughton Park by a double-ditched hedge to a fine junction with the road from Lower Lea and a sharp-angled turn by a fine piece of road leading to a wooden bridge. Instead of turning east, the Port Way goes north across the Park and remains as a footpath to North Newington. It can be traced faintly

towards Wroxton, where it seems to go under the dam of the lake. It is easily visible between the two bye-roads west of Hanwell, slanting up the hill from the ruined mill below the settlement to join the ridgeway.

Another entirely engineered road takes a short cut from Over Norton to Warmington, going by Hook Norton, Nill Farm, Swalcliffe Grange (where it is 10 foot wide), Swalcliffe Park, Shutford, Balscot, Hornton (where it is pack-horse width), and, at the edge of the hill beyond, it takes a sharp turn and goes straight to Warmington. The curious curves and angles are evidence of skilful planning across difficult country.

The main ridge from Tadmarton Heath comes down to Lower Tadmarton and was a made road going straight over the hill to share the bridge with the other two roads coming from either side to the road junction in Broughton Park. There its traffic could take the roads already described and go either to Grimsbury or Twyford. From the latter the ridgeway was made in parts and went up by Farthinghoe Lodge to a stretch of country full of old tracks and wide-verged droveways, some of which will probably turn out to be Romanized.

From Preston Capes the easiest gradient to the South went by 'Oxford Lane' to Helmdon and Brackley. In 1768 the turnpike from Brackley went by Ardley, Middleton Stoney and across an obliterated line below Bletchingdon to Gosford and Oxford. The road originally went straight across Middleton Park past the church and castle. As far as Middleton it could be a natural line, and is the sort one would expect to be Romanized. (5)

Several other ways from the north go down to 'London Ford' below Croughton, and so to 'Port Way' in Heyford and Ash Bank.

The known Roman road from Towcester through Bicester to Alchester across Otmoor appears to be roughly parallel; in reality it comes from quite a different part of the country. An old way, certainly made in parts and called Bucknell Port Way, leaves it at Fringford and goes to Middleton Stoney.

From Somerton a real ridgeway goes by Ardley and Stoke Lyne to Fringford and then along that old drove way through Poundon to the Claydons. This would also be linked with the north across Baynard's Green and Cottisford Heath, which was still open country in 1768. There was certainly an old road from Souldern through Fritwell and Ardley to Bicester. The last part of it was extraordinarily straight and can be traced right through Bicester into the road coming in from Akeman Street. This would have linked all the cross roads with Akeman Street and the east. Beyond Bicester the country is so wet that it must have been impassable till it was opened up by Akeman Street.

This shows communications on both sides of the Cherwell. There is one more important link across the Jurassic and Port Ways from north-east to south-east. This is the 'Welsh Way' that comes into our region at Wormleighton and has been found to be a real Roman road, going by Lower Boddington, Aston-le-Walls, crossing the Cherwell at Trafford House, through Culworth, Sulgrave, Stuchbury, Faulcot, along the high road and through Biddlesden and north of Buckingham to Stewkley and all the way to Verulamium. (6)

Probably there are more pieces of Roman roads to be found, and there are still many details to be explored with possibilities of unexpected discoveries. Meanwhile this gives some idea of the communications between the most populous parts in Roman times.

V. Wickham Steed.

REFERENCES

1. The Port Way is mentioned in Dr. Plot's Natural History of Oxfordshire.
2. Map Ref. 366512.
3. 1" Ordnance Survey Map, 1st Edition, 1820.
   Eyre and Jeffrys Map of Northamptonshire. 1779, revised 1791.
4. Bloxham Enclosure Award Map, 1801.
5. Thomas Jeffrys, Map of Oxfordshire, 1768.
6. Traced by field work of Charles Green of Wolverton and his colleagues, and in this area by myself.