

The archaeology of ancient roads in Longridge and the Loud and Ribble Valleys

With particular reference to
Ribble Valley Borough Council Planning Application 3/2024/0623

The writer acknowledges that this document is long. The length is necessary because of a need to establish the archaeological context of this objection to the Planning Application.

A reader might eventually read the paper in its entirety, but the essence of the message might be obtained by reading until the word 'Break' and then skipping to the heading 'Conclusion', and then reading to the end.

Some of the world's most well-known ancient monuments lie within the English countryside. The mind jumps Wiltshire, and to Stonehenge, then to Avebury, or perhaps to Orkney and Maeshowe.

Many ancient structures consist, at least partly, of lines, or avenues. It is perhaps usual to think of such pathways in terms of communal religious ritual. In truth, we do not know their original purpose. Was it solely ceremonial? We can guess. We can hypothesise. We cannot know.

With other ancient trackways, it is likely their only purpose was for travelling from one place to another. That is not to diminish their significance. Those roads carried goods, people, and matters cultural. They were the information superhighways of generations uncounted.

Our remote ancestors' roadways were extensions of common sense. It was (and remains) obvious that it is a good idea to steer away from marshland. Those common sensical routeways persisted as generation followed generation, and as millennium followed millennium.

It might have been that the first travellers paid scant attention to planning for the future. However, the roadways founded by those primeval footfalls persist into our own time, by the customary usage of our ancient trackways.

Travel across the English landscape, and in the Loud and Ribble valleys, began very soon after glacial conditions ended, say 11,000 years ago. During that time of thaw and for centuries after, many acres of what is now productive farmland lay under shallow freshwater lakes. This was certainly the case in the Loud Valley. People, together with their animals, walked around the water's edges, and their footfalls are echoed in the road maps of today.

Break

It is possible to identify several stages in the development of roadways in the district in question.

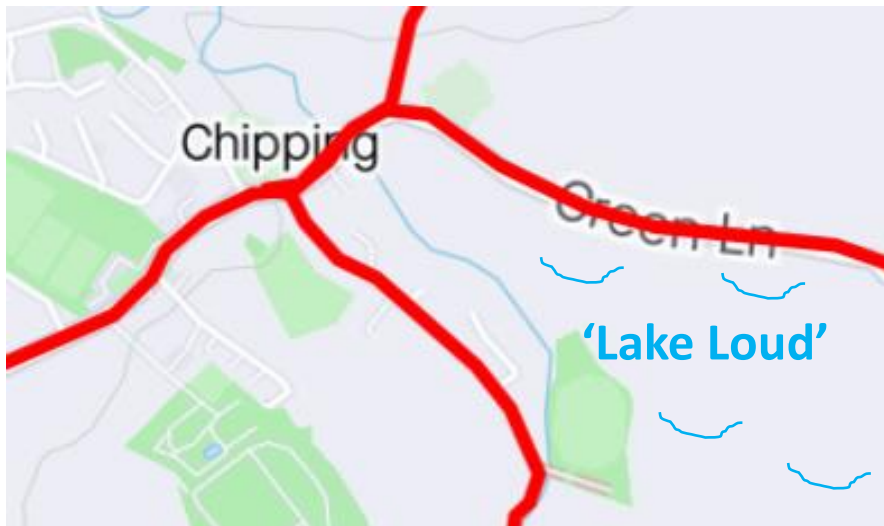
At all stages, long distance travel and contact was possible.

Primary stage.

Explorers and early hunter-gatherers.

Early visitors and temporary settlers in the area, not long after the most recent glacial event. Theirs were the first human steps around the vanished 'Lake Loud' (see below), and over convenient routes such as Birk's Brow, as they came and went from the area as the seasons changed.

Wild animals roamed the landscape. They too walked round 'Lake Loud'.



So far as primary stage trackways were concerned, there was no difference between the behaviour of the first people, and the animals.

The map of apparently modern roads entering and leaving the village of Chipping shows a clear outline of the

estuary of Chipping Brook as its waters melded into those of the long vanished 'Lake Loud'. The route is very ancient indeed, and possibly pre-dates any permanent settlement on the site of modern Chipping.

The roads to the left of the map reflect routes set down by those seeking (or coming from) destinations away from the lake, perhaps farmsteads such as Parsonage Farm

The ancient lanes and routes that survive into our time are certainly monuments to those distant people, and to the countless generations who have used the roads in the intervening thousands of years.

Eventually, the best routes became known. Perhaps it was at this stage when the advantage of crossing the fell at Birk's Brow, rather than struggling through the bogs and mosses at the end of the valley, was recognised. As soon as people recognised routes and discussed their relative merits, communal planning of migrations could emerge. Perhaps enhancements such as stepping stones began to be considered. By such behaviour early travellers passed from being users of landscape 'as found', and began to invest resources in route provision. They moved themselves out of equivalence with the behaviour of wild animals, and into tool making.

Secondary stage.

Settled Stone, then Bronze, then Iron Age farmers (largely subsistence)

Roads as manifestations of tool-making.

Piecemeal development and road maintenance begins, and this brings road making into the field of human tool-making. We might describe a road as a tool laid out in the landscape, the purpose of which is to reduce the transport cost resistance faced by travellers moving across that landscape.

Roads eased the progress of those passing between farms and other small settlements. Roads went from farmyard to farmyard, because that was where farmers set off on journeys, and where they wanted to arrive. Farms were NOT bypassed.

The effect of farmers' desire to travel from farmyard to farmyard can be seen in operation within the landscape to this day. As we pass along country lanes (of great antiquity) it might appear that farmers have built barns, shippens, parlours and sheds on both sides of the road.

The farmer driving animals across the road might look like an inconvenience to road users. That is to misunderstand the historical process involved.

The lane arrives AT the farm yard, and passes between the farmer's buildings. It is the travellers in the road who are the inconvenience, not the farmer, because those travelling along the road pass through what was once his contiguous farm yard.



The map shows Parsonage Lane passing through the ancient farmyard of Parsonage Farm.

The passage of the lane through the farm yard is an ancient usage.



The Lancashire County Council map of Public Rights of Way shows another ancient usage at Written Stone Farm, in Written Stone Lane in Dilworth Township, within Longridge.

The Right of Way next to the number '21' passes though the yard of Written Stone Farm, as it has done for centuries.

The landscape pattern, whereby roads passed though farmyards, has existed for many generations.

Tertiary stage.

Roman Imperial, in co-existence with traditional routes, as handed down from the secondary stage.

There was nothing haphazard about the construction of Roman roads. This was a huge and highly organised investment in social tool making.

A lidar¹ proven Roman trunk road passes close to Written Stone Farm, crossing the main road near the junction of the Clitheroe and Ribchester roads. Roman road builders had a different focus from that of local farmers.

¹ Light Detection and Ranging.

The Roman objective was establishment and maintenance of military dominance within a huge empire. They did not zig and zag, unless there was an engineering requirement, such as the angling of their road up the gradient of Longridge Fell, towards the summit at the junction of Green Lane and Higher Road, Longridge.

Ordnance Survey maps have a Roman road running away from Ribchester in the direction of Written Stone Lane. Those maps are incorrect, so far as military trunk roads (built with an imperial focus) are concerned. However, that does not mean the Romans did not pass along the line of Written Stone Lane. To assert that they did not would be as absurd as to say people of our own century only ever travel along Motorways.

The Roman fort at Ribchester was first built of wood. It was rebuilt in stone. From whence came their lime for mortar? Did the Romans start the lime industry in the Loud Valley, and use the packhorse route over Birk's Brow and Written Stone Lane? We have no evidence.



It is certain the Romans built the road over Salter Fell (see photo).

Was it was the Romans who started the Morecambe Bay sea salt industry?

The Romans could easily have operated salt laden pack horse trains over Salter Fell, and over Birk's Brow towards Ribchester. The ancient routes came to see saw the transport of many cargoes, they were many, and various in character. They changed with economic and social circumstances.

Quaternary stage Post Imperial farming and transport.

The last Roman Legion left Northern Britain in 383, and with them went the need to preserve a known-world empire by means of long-range road transport. The many routes and roads left by the Romans continued in use for native trade and military purposes. However, there was a strong reversion in focus, back to the Secondary stage, where the needs of farmers to get to and from their farmsteads, and markets became paramount.

Over Longridge Fell.

The ancient route from the Thornley in the Loud Valley towards Ribchester skirts the waterlogged valley bottom, and steers aloof from the wet ground, and particularly the perennial mires at the valley's end².

The old road follows the lower slopes of the Thornley Breast of Longridge Fell over Birk's Brow, before leaving the valley.

The departure of the route from the Loud Valley happens well before the end of the upland of Longridge Fell, which peters out well over a mile to the south west.

The route surmounts Birk's Brow, a hill with a gradient of c 16%, and a summit a little over 600 feet above sea level. That wayfarers preferred to climb such a hill, rather than travel along the valley bottom is an indicator of the repellent effect of the mires at the end of the Loud Valley.

The old road along the north western side of Longridge Fell starts just above the building now known as Thornley Smithy, which was probably once the manor corn mill. Route is an extension of Four Acre Lane, which stretches between the hamlets of Thornley and Wheatley.

Although it is a Public Right of Way, the entrance to the old road is uninviting to motor car traffic, because it fords the former millpond feeder stream, and does do through a zig-zag bend. In the past, crossing the stream would have presented little of an obstruction to pedestrian and horse traffic. Indeed, the narrowness of the road, in places, preserves the pre-automobile character of the lane. One can easily imagine trains of pack horses leaving Thornley and wending their way towards the steepness of Birk's Brow, with Ribchester Bridge and the South beyond.

Over the fell and far away

Leaving the summit of Birk's Brow, southbound, the ancient route continues down Written Stone Lane. Now an unpaved 'green lane' Written Stone Lane shows its great antiquity as a roadway by the depth by which countless hooves and feet have caused the lane to lie below the level of the adjacent fields.

Some south bound long distance pack horse trains carried salt. The Morecambe Bay salt industry ceased in the early 1600s. The decline had already set in with the emergence of competition from the Cheshire rock salt. However, the kiss of death came with a succession of violent storms in the early 17th century, which demolished the salt cotes, leaving the industry never to rise again.

Other pack horse trains carried lime, quarried and processed in the Loud Valley. Indeed, just above the line of the packhorse road, there were lime quarries and kilns both in the valley bottom, and on Thornley Breast.

The Thornley lime industry was huge, with some kilns matching the size of the furnaces used by iron and steel manufacturers. Local traffic carried farmers' grain to be dried by drysters in Dilworth (now a township within Longridge) before milling.

Amongst other commodities, coal came north over the packhorse trail.

Whatever travelled along the pack horse trail reflected the lives lived in every generation.

² Between Wood Hill and the bottom of Elm Brow.

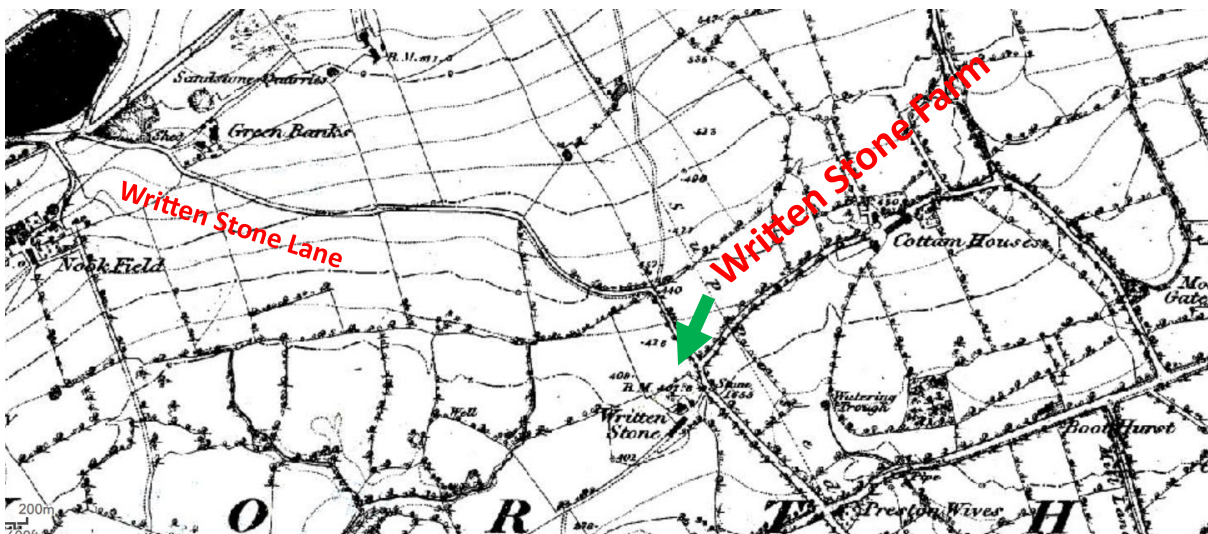
The width of the gap carved through the land by ancient traffic is just enough to allow a laden packhorse to pass. The photo of Written Stone Lane taken just above the farm illustrates the depth of the lane, worn deep by centuries of passing hooves and boots.



At the site of the photo, Written Stone Lane is easily deeper than a man is tall.

Conclusion

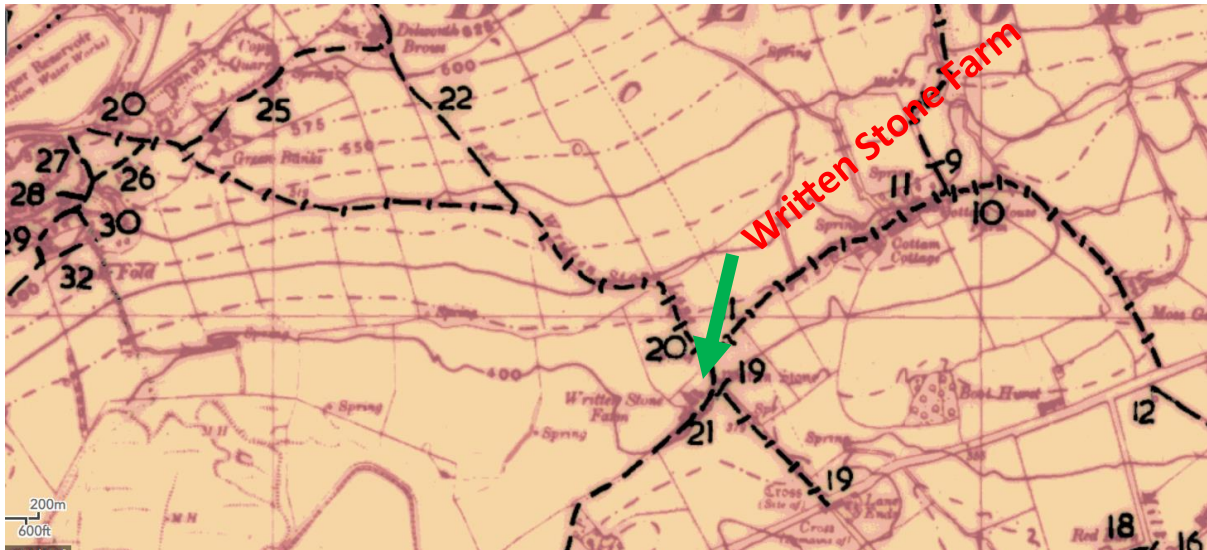
The Ordnance Survey map from the 1840s shows Written Stone Farm, with Written Stone Lane running roughly down diagonally from left to right.



The 1840s map shows a dense road network within the landscape.

There is a crossroads at Written Stone Farm, between the eponymous lane and the road leading to Cottam House Farm. Both lanes are in regular use today, in 2024. They carry traffic to and from the farms, in addition to frequent use by hikers, often in groups, but sometimes alone.

The current map of Public Rights of Way shows how the old network of roads projects into our own era.



Earlier in this paper, it was established that tracks and routes within the Loud and Ribble valleys are most ancient. Indeed, they may well date from the time of re-colonisation of the area, following upon the most recent glacial event of have affected the area. We can be sure that many of our trackways are older than Stonehenge, and the avenues which surround it, and other monuments much younger than the millennia old road network laid out by our long-lost ancestors. Their network of lanes is their only monument, just as much as Stonehenge is a monument to the vanished civilisation of Wiltshire.

Ribble Valley Borough Council Planning Application 3/2024/0623 includes a request for permission to divert one of our ancient roadways. The route in question involves an ancient crossroads with Written Stone Lane. This footpath is in use, and ought to be preserved for future generations, as earlier inhabitants have preserved it for the enjoyment of the living.

In the map, the blue line shows the current Right of Way. The red line shows the requested diversion of the ancient route. The red dash line shows the extent of the diversion to the footpath requested in the Application.



The diversion might not seem significant, but **the point must be made that no one would allow interference with Wiltshire ancient monuments. Interference with Lancashire heritage ought to be similarly forbidden.**

The ancient tracks are not mere two-dimensional shadows of a long dead past.

Today, we are in a fifth, or quinary stage of road building.

We invest in roads, which are just as much social tools as they were in ancient times, but engineers cater for mechanised modes of transport, because most mechanical transport cannot cross the landscape without provision of tarmacadam road surfaces. The 'addiction' to tarmac and motor vehicles has meant many ancient trackways have passed from their former use as major highways. The old lanes can be recruited into the modern road network, when necessary.

The ancient trackways are not mere two-dimensional marks on a map. They echo the vibrant, and very deep past of our ancestors, and their lives. The ancient roads ring with the echoes of trade in coal, lime, salt, corn and the cultures of people passing along those ways.

Should the ancient tracks suffer interference for mere cosmetic reasons? Please do not allow any unnecessary interference with the ancient roadways of Lancashire.

Jointly and severally, our old lanes are as much an ancient monument as Stonehenge ... indeed, they are much older ... but what is important to the inhabitants of the Loud and Ribble valleys is that *the ancient trackways are OUR Lancashire ancient monuments.*

Let them be.

Philip Smith

25th October 2024