

THE GREAT CENTRAL TRACKWAY—DARTMOOR.

BY ROBERT BURNARD.

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ALL that is known of the Great Central Trackway is contained in Rowe's *Perambulation of Dartmoor*. It is described as follows :

“The most extensive trackway which has come under our notice is one which is supposed to traverse the forest in a line, bearing east and west, from Hamilton to Great Mistor. Considerable portions of the line can be traced in a direction corresponding to these points, but a large extent of it rests rather upon the testimony of tradition than upon the evidence of existing remains. The oral topographers of the uplands recognize this trackway as the *equator of the moorland region*, all above it being considered the *north*, and all below it the *south* country, a circumstance which, though it affords good evidence of the antiquity of this relic, might be supposed to give it the character of a boundary rather than of a road ; but which will have less weight in this scale when we consider how frequently antient roads are found to form boundaries between parishes, manors, and other divisions of country. This trackway may be observed in high preservation coming down the northern slope of Chittaford Down, towards the banks of the East Dart. Here it can be traced for a considerable distance, and is visible running due west, through Hollocombe, and up the opposite hill to Little White Tor. Down the common, towards the Dart, it bends towards the north-east, but in the level near Post Bridge, it takes a direction southward. With some difficulty it may be detected through the boggy meadows below Hartland farm. The peat cutters are reported to come upon it below the surface in some places ; nor is it at all unlikely that the encroachments of the vegetation, which in some instances are only partial, should in others have extended over the whole breadth of the trackway, and thus have obliterated all traces of it in the lower grounds.”

With this information Mr. R. N. Worth has hypothetically connected this trackway with the Fosseway, which it is supposed ran from one end of our island to the other, and, as will be seen later on, with success.¹

With this slender material I determined to thoroughly investigate the matter, and this preliminary paper is the result of many days' wandering over the Moor in search of one of the most interesting relics it possesses of a long bygone age. In this search I have been greatly helped by the Rev. John Shattock, and Mr. John Shattock, both of Post Bridge. These gentlemen have taken a kindly and lively interest in my labours, and have rendered much assistance in obtaining information from the moormen, and tracking out the causeway in places where all traces of it have been almost obliterated.

In many places it has entirely disappeared, sometimes by sinking bodily into the bog, or removed by turf cutters and wall builders. It is a fine deposit of handy stones, and has been extensively drawn on by the inhabitants of the Moor. In Webb's Marsh at Post Bridge the trackway is thus utilized, and it was from this point that I determined to start my investigation in a westernly direction. Here the removal of the stones has exposed a good section of the causeway, and it will be observed that the width of the paved way is just ten feet, whilst the depth in the centre is about two to two and a half feet. Rough stones, just as they are found on the surface, have been rudely built in so as to form a solid bottom. There are no traces of the covering of finer material forming the surface, but this could easily have been supplied by means of gravel. I have assisted in making a roadway myself formed in this manner, and it is firm and hard, freely drained, and free from mud. Compared with a Roman road, consisting of several courses of carefully built-in material, this section shows a crude, but effective construction, and one adapted for the best use of the only available matter to be had along the line of route. In soft ground the causeway generally appears to be most perfect, for it has sunk out of reach of the weather. On hard ground, owing to weathering action and surface disturbances, the trackway presents in many places the appearance more of a boundary than a causeway—a confused mass of stones of all sizes, the whole being from eight to ten feet wide, and heaped up from two to four feet above the ground level. This is so striking that, had I not traced such a portion to another

¹ Ancient Recorded Topography of Devon, *Trans. Devon. Assoc.* xvii. 351.

Sketch Map
of Great Central Trackway,
Dartmoor

EXETER ●

● CHUDLEIGH

RIV. TEIGN

HARTLAND

POST BRIDGE

GREAT MIS TOR

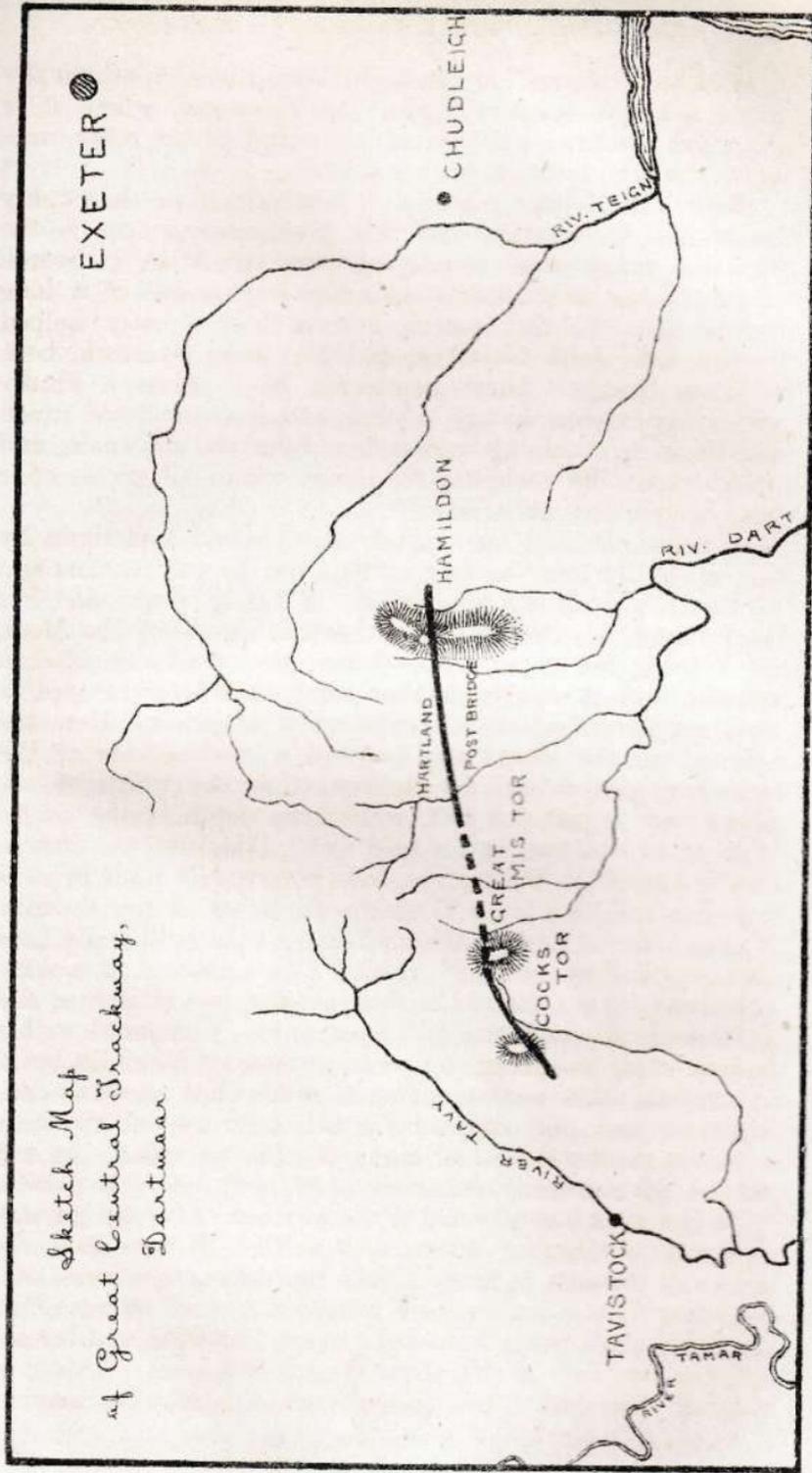
COCKS TOR

RIVER TAVY

TAVISTOCK ●

RIV. DART

RIVER TAMAR



which was undoubtedly a causeway, I should never have felt confident that the assumption of a trackway was absolutely correct. The effect of the weather on Dartmoor is often underrated, and its action on a raised causeway for very many centuries can hardly be realized. In Webb's Marsh the trackway is barely visible, and in many places between it and the East Dart it has disappeared, but it can be traced down to where it crosses the Stannon Brook, and from thence through the former river by a ford adjoining what is locally known as Still Pool.

Rowe, referring to the Cyclopean Bridge observes that the "ancient structure bears more east and west than the modern bridge, and probably thus points to the great central trackway which passes over Chittaford Down."²

I fear this paragraph is largely responsible for the popular notion that this bridge is of great antiquity. It is often referred to as aboriginal British work, and various conjectures have been hazarded as to the manner in which its massive stones were placed in position. It can claim no antiquity through connection with the Great Central Trackway, for the point at Still Pool, where the latter crosses the East Dart, is fully five hundred yards north-west of the bridge. It was used as a pack-horse bridge a little over a century since,³ and it was probably erected for this purpose, *perhaps* in mediæval times, when it may have replaced a timber structure which left its mark on the name of the village—Post Bridge.

There are several similar bridges on the Moor connected with pack-horse roads, and it is tolerably safe to assume them to be fairly ancient, but not of great antiquity.

Bridges of a similar character have been built quite recently on Dartmoor—an example of this may be seen under Ledder or Leather Tor.

From the East Dart the trackway is faintly visible crossing the corner of the last field of the Archerton estate on the right bank of the river. Nearly halfway up this field it emerges on to Chittaford Down, where it is ultimately lost in a turf tie. It can, however, be easily picked up later on in undisturbed ground, and followed without the slightest difficulty down to the headwaters of the Cherrybrook, when it climbs the steep up to Little White Tor, where it is lost.

It runs into the centre of the Tor, and appears to end

² *Perambulation of Dartmoor*, 173.

³ Jonas Coaker, now eighty-nine years old, informs me that his mother has often ridden over it on her way to Moreton market.

abruptly. This puzzled me for a long time; for the most diligent search on the slopes of the hills and in the valleys of the West Dart and Cowsic failed to discover the continuation westward. I noticed that the summits and slopes of the hills facing the west and south-west were seamed and scored in all directions by the action of the weather on the black peaty soil, so that if the trackway had formerly existed here at all, it had probably been long since destroyed. What increased the mystery still further was, that the eastern slopes were not so weathered, but were smooth, hard, and free from clatters of rock, so that here at anyrate the line of trackway should be visible. Not a trace of it, however, was to be seen, and the closest examination of Little White Tor gave no clue why such an important road should terminate in such a place. I determined therefore to try forward, and my next attempt was to pick it up further west. For this purpose I carefully searched the neighbourhood of Steeple and Rolls Tors, and was duly rewarded by finding the missing link running up the slope of Rolls Tor, where it was again lost in the clatter and boulders forming the summit of this elevation. The point where it evidently crossed the Walkham is one thousand three hundred yards, as the crow flies, above Merivale Bridge, and the outer wall of the most northerly field of Shillapark Farm appears to be built of stone taken from it; for where the wall ceases the trackway begins. At the crossing-place in the river there is a confused mass of large boulders, which may have been stepping-stones, or the ruins of a primitive bridge. Although lost on Rolls Tor, and with no sign of it on the western slope, it was again plainly visible running up the eastern side of Cocks Tor, which it crosses near the southern summit, proceeding down the western face, passing a hut circle in close proximity, until it is finally lost in the cultivated country near Tor Town, heading straight for Tavistock.

It is necessary now to return to Webb's Marsh, Post Bridge, and follow the trackway eastward.

It crosses the road between St. Gabriel's Church, and the Methodist Chapel, close to the garden attached to the latter and sweeps up over Merripitt Hill, crossing the Walla Brook five hundred yards below Statts Bridge, and follows the boundary wall which runs close to Golden Dagger Mine, where it is lost in the workings, to re-appear for a short distance up the opposite slope of Challacombe Common. It is very difficult to follow the track all through this section,

but here and there it can be made out, and the blanks can be filled in. The boundary wall near Golden Dagger is built partly on the causeway from stones taken from it.

On ascending Hameldon it is again picked up; for here the causeway is well defined and easily followed. It is readily recognized at the head of a bog situated just midway, but rather below Hameldon Tor and Hameldon Cross, or about six hundred yards south of Grimspound.⁴ The further it proceeds the better it becomes, and it again assumes more of the character of a paved causeway of about ten feet in width, and raised in the centre some two feet above the ground. Crossing Hameldon it runs down its eastern slope into a deep gully, where for a short distance it skirts the brook, and crosses the Widecombe road about two hundred and seventy yards north of Higher Notsworthy, close to a moor gate. It then ascends Heytree Down, where it has been utilised as the northern boundary of what were formerly three fields, but which are now thrown into the common. The trackway appears to have been heightened by trenching on each side, and piling the stones and earth higher in the centre, but even with this alteration it can be recognised, and all doubt about it is easily dispelled by following it almost yard by yard to the perfect section on the summit of Hameldon. At the eastern side of Haytree Down the track is lost in two cultivated fields and a small wood, which are wedged in between it and Cripdon Down. It heads for Chudleigh, where I hope to trace it later on.

The ancient map of Dartmoor, which has been minutely examined and described by Mr. Spence Bate,⁵ shows a road crossing the Forest from a point between Great Mistor and North Hisworthy, and proceeding by the heads of the Walkham and Tavy until it emerges in the north-eastern boundary between Hound Tor and Therlestone, which latter place may be identified with Watern Tor, or as Mr. Spence Bate contends, with Scorhill.⁶

This ancient road does not correspond with the trackway, for although both commence crossing the western boundary of the Forest near each other at Great Mistor, they do not follow the same course, and the latter quits the forest on the eastern edge, some six or eight miles south of Hound and Watern Tors.

⁴ There appears to be no connection between this ancient pound and the trackway.

⁵ *Trans. Devon. Assoc.* v. 510.

⁶ *Ibid.* v. 523-525.

There is no doubt that this ancient map of Dartmoor, or at any rate the portion depicting the Forest, is of mediæval antiquity, and if the trackway we are now examining had existed as a "going concern," it would have figured on it, or have been mentioned in the Perambulation it illustrates. Its absence, if any reliance can be placed on this crude map, indicates that centuries since this causeway probably existed much in the same ruinous and forgotten condition it now presents.

There is nothing local in the character of this trackway.

It heads for Exeter, *viâ* Chudleigh, on the east, whilst it undoubtedly proceeded to Tavistock on the west, and thence through the Tamar on into Cornwall, where, I have reason to believe, it has already been observed, but not recognized.

This road was for through traffic, and its course and continuity is such that its identification with the Fosseway is complete.

The assumption of Mr. R. N. Worth, that the trackway briefly noticed by Rowe is none other than this interesting road is thus correct; and the contention of the same gentleman, that what we may call the older Totnes is really the ancient name for the south-western promontory of England, and not merely the town of that name, and that when the old chroniclers spoke of the Fosseway as running from Caithness to Totnes, it was intended to mean from the northern point to some place in western Cornwall.

The late Mr. Davidson, in his paper on Teign Bridge,⁷ conjectures that the ancient road from Exeter westward, was through Chudleigh and over (or through) the Teign at this point, but being found inconvenient, the Roman engineers thought it worth while to effect a lower crossing over the Teign, and thus, amongst other things, get a shorter route to Totnes.

The foundations of a Roman bridge on the site of the present Teign Bridge were discovered on rebuilding in 1815, and thus Mr. Davidson's hypothesis of an older road passing through Chudleigh is confirmed by the existence of the trackway I have attempted to follow and describe.

The total length of the trackway which I have traced across Dartmoor is about eighteen miles.

⁷ *Trans. Devon. Assoc.* xvi. 451.