

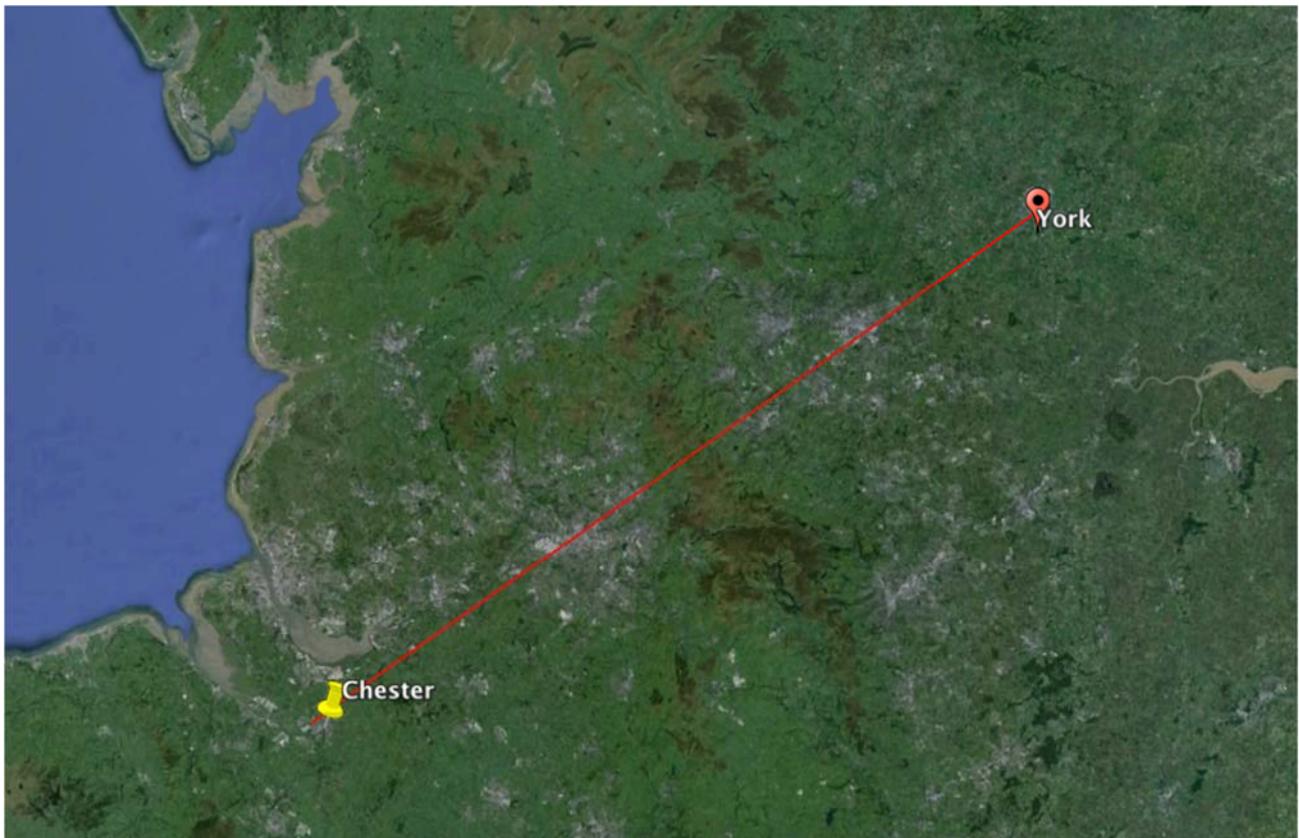
Romans and Roads

The May 2016 edition of *Current Archaeology* (Issue 314) offers a different focus on the Romans as road builders, and will certainly give the legions of Roman Britain fans, including the cohorts within the HDAS, some interesting new material on which to chew. For the emphasis is not on the construction of the roads, about which much is known and has been written, but on the more elusive role of the surveyors, whose skillful reading of the landscape set out the route to follow, prior to the arrival of the gangs of diggers.

The two authors of the article, after detailed study of maps and images from Google Earth, suggest that some of the roads at least were built after highly accurate, long-distance straight line surveys from point A to point B, perhaps a hundred or more miles apart. The Fosse Way or Dere Street from York to Scotland are cited as examples. The roads which were then built along this surveyed route did not always follow the straight line. The builders were pragmatic enough to alter direction when the topography demanded, or when it was necessary to link up with a settlement which lay off piste. What is not clear is the manner in which the surveyed route was marked, so that the line could be easily followed by the builders, or what time lag there might have been between surveying and construction.

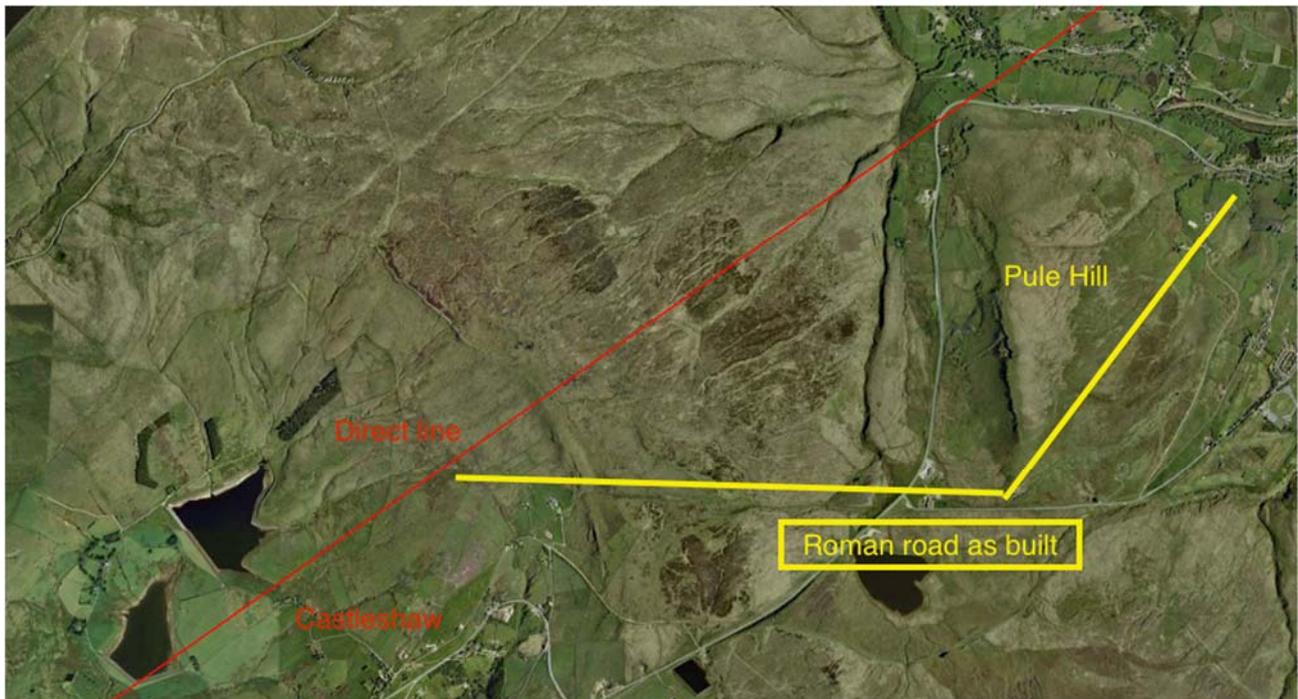
Unfortunately the article does not include "our" Roman road, i.e. the road which linked the legionary fortresses of Chester and York and which passed close by the fort at Slack on the western edge of Huddersfield. But it is interesting and instructive to apply the same tests to this stretch of road as the authors did in their article.

In this first picture we can see just accurately a direct route between Chester and York was achieved, a distance of just under 100 miles, a route which carried the road over the least



demanding and shortest Pennine crossing. The surveyors knew what they were doing.

Although our road quite closely follows this direct straight-line route there was of course no attempt to construct a straight road along this line, similar to the Fosse Way. This would have been impossible given the demanding nature of the topography through which the road passed. It was almost certainly surveyed in much shorter stretches to make life easier for the builders and to provide a road along which wheeled traffic could pass with relative ease. We can see this in the next image where the direct line passes close to the fort at Castleshaw. The road as built deviates in order to effect a more acceptable crossing of the Pennine peat bog. The obvious survey points in our area to achieve this were Millstone Edge on Standedge, Pule Hill/Worlow, Moorside Edge



and Wholestone Moor.

Some aspects of the surveyors' work still have to be explored. Did they make maps of the route as they surveyed, to be passed to the construction gangs who followed? Did they mark the route with some poles or beacons? How did they create in their mind's eye a large-scale image of the country so that they knew for certain that they were on course for York? Was this accuracy perhaps the result of a large team of men marking high survey points along the length of the route? In an age of GPS and satellite imagery we can only stand back and admire the astonishing scale of their achievement.

David Cockman for HDAS April 2016