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Pathways to past ways. A positive approach to routeways and mobility

Martin Bell and Jim Leary

University of Reading, University of York

Abstract

This paper argues that by comparison with many other aspects of archaeology, trackways and mobility along them have long been neglected in the UK, and that this neglect came about following the publication of Watkins' *The Old Straight Track* (1925). Through new strands of evidence from many disciplinary sources, including from both social theory and science, however, we can chart a way forward. We offer here the first steps towards a positivist approach to past mobility.

Introduction

Despite a considerable focus on mobility in archaeology, recent research has tended to be lopsided with extensive work on migration revealed through ancient DNA and isotope analysis, while smaller, human-scale movements, specifically along routeways, are mostly ignored. Evidence of past trackways in Britain is extensive but fragmentary, dispersed and difficult to interpret, while some tracks, such as holloways, were created by the erosion of traffic and are negative features without fill which are difficult to date. Consequently, the challenges of identifying past routeways have often been emphasised, and there has been a tendency to focus on the fixed and more tangible elements of the past – on 'places' rather than the mobility to, from and around them.

Through a focus on sites, however, the physical evidence of bodily movement is removed from the discourse, and a stillness is imposed on the past. Even when the movement of people or objects is identified, it is the 'places' that are highlighted rather than evidence for the actual patterns of connectivity through which past communities encountered, perceived and contributed to the construction of landscape. We miss the action, the real life, if we do not look at paths and people's movements along them. Life unfolds, says Ingold, "not in

places but along paths” (Ingold 2011: 148). By shifting our focus to routeways, and mobility more generally, we can begin to re-animate the past.

Furthermore, the social, political and cultural aspects of movement along routeways are frequently overlooked in archaeology (Leary forthcoming). Mobility is full of significance and meaning and through movement a constellation of messages is communicated. It can be freedom and opportunity, just as it can be a form of control or, conversely, a way of resisting authority. Some movements are unrestricted, others bounded; some are hard, requiring exertion, and others are easy. Some people and groups conform to socially acceptable levels of mobility and others do not, and in these instances their movements may be seen as something to be controlled: Gypsy, Romany and Traveller groups, for example. Different mobilities often reflect inequalities of power within society, being more available to, say, one gender. Some people are also dependent on others in order to move, such as children and those of impaired mobility. Through inequalities of mobility and status, individuals gain access to different spaces (Cresswell 2006; Urry 2007; Adey 2010). Although there have recently been some perceptive investigations of mobility (e.g. Chadwick 2016), discussion of the topic in archaeological literature often remains frustratingly rational and abstracted from the actual experience of movement, especially when discussing prehistory. It is often framed as cost and benefit with strategies chosen logically for their functional practicalities and movement becomes an involuntary and behavioural reaction (Ingold 2004, 2011).

Mobility is so natural to us, so pervasive, as to be self-evident, but it is fundamental to being human. This paper argues that we need to re-focus our view of the past away from frozen places and stock-still sites to movement and mobility, developing an approach with a greater emphasis on patterns of connectivity. This could be called a ‘mobile archaeology’ or a ‘kinaesthetic archaeology’, and illuminates the most ubiquitous, and probably the earliest, way in which people structure and comprehend landscape, through the movement of their bodies. Frequent routes of movement are a critical element of niche construction, the process whereby organisms modify their own and each other’s niches (Olding-Smee *et al.* 2003). The study of patterns of movement is important, achievable and relevant to every part of the world and all periods.

False paths

One factor which helps to explain this neglect of movement and trackways for some 80 years, at least in Britain, is Alfred Watkins' *The Old Straight Track* (1925). Watkins was an amateur archaeologist and while his book was grounded in the Herefordshire countryside in which he grew up and reflects his love and empathy for that landscape, it came to totally erroneous conclusions (Bell 2020). He observed that some historic places could be joined by dead-straight lines. His argument was fatally undermined by the very varied character and date of the sites involved and the special and unsubstantiated pleading which permeates the work. The monuments include Neolithic and Bronze Age barrows, prehistoric settlements, boundary and waymark stones, Christian churches, medieval moated sites, avenues of trees, even isolated pines, and many others. The straight lines joining these places he called ley lines, which he regarded as ancient communication or trading routes. They went up hill and down dale with no reference to topographic barriers. He rationalised the inclusion of sites of widely different dates by arguing that, for instance, Christian churches were put on previously significant sites. However, why this should apply to moated sites and many others was not explained. Suffice to say there is no convincing evidence for the ancient ley routes which Watkins claimed.

Watkins opened the countryside to the popular imagination, and provoked widespread interest, and to this day his ideas are elaborated in a whole host of New Age theories. One can only speculate as to whether, if archaeologists in the 1920s had engaged more actively in critique of Watkins, his ideas would have proved so persistent. The pioneering field archaeologist O.G.S. Crawford dismissed Watkins' ideas (Hauser 2008) but refused to review *The Old Straight Track* in *Antiquity* which he edited. The first substantive critique of Watkins' ideas was published 58 years after his first edition by Williamson and Bellamy (1983) and that provides a systematic demolition of ley lines and the subsequent New Age ideas which has been built upon them.

Watkins' ideas were so significantly in error that they have proved a Upas Tree which poisoned the ground for research on routeways. Two pieces of evidence demonstrate the extent to which this occurred. Before 1925 the study of prehistoric routeways was for two decades an active field with some excellent empirically-based field surveys by pioneering archaeologists: Curwen and Curwen (1923); Williams-Freeman (1915); Crawford (1922); and Fox (1923). After publication of Watkins' book this promising area of research virtually

died. Instead, archaeologists like the Curwens focused on settlements, fields and burials; they continued to note the existence of short lengths of trackway adjacent to settlements but after 1925 seldom speculated as to how they related to wider patterns of communication (Bell 2020).

A second piece of evidence for the Upas Tree effect of Watkins' book is provided by comparison with continental Europe. Here the pioneering studies of Sophus Müller (1904) were followed by a steady stream of archaeological writing on past routeways, of which the work of J.A. Bakker (1976) is especially notable and draws on evidence for alignments of barrows and other monuments. This continues with well-attested routeways as early as the Neolithic in Denmark (Klassen 2014; Bang 2013). As Bakker (1991: 518) observes, in Britain the phenomenon of roads marked by monuments is "regarded with scepticism and its study seems somewhat neglected". The British literature does indeed exhibit marked scepticism concerning the difficulties of studying trackways. A pioneering study of roads and tracks by Taylor (1979, 1) noted on its first line the difficulty of investigating those of prehistory with all but a few being "impossible to date". Coles (1984: 1) has observed that discussion of roads allows "the prehistorian to indulge in conjecture unencumbered by the need to pay attention to observable evidence". Fowler (1998: 25) describes tracks as "the haunt of the romantic, the irrational and the obsessional". Bradley (1997: 81) says: "the recognition of ancient roads or trackways is notoriously subjective, and all too often turns out to be based on circular argument". As Fleming (2012) notes, archaeologists have never felt completely comfortable handling old roads and the subject has been left to amateurs.

Perhaps the main lesson from Watkins is that a feel and empathy for the landscape, whilst something of great value, is insufficient for an adequate appreciation of its origins. It comes back to the need for detailed examination of individual features, critique of ideas and interpretations and the need to develop a robust chronology and interpretative frameworks. Moving forward requires consideration of the full range of sources of evidence for past patterns of movement and the development of a practical toolkit of approaches for their application in the field and laboratory (Bell 2020).

Steps forward

Pessimistic views above reflect the position 20 or 30 years ago, and only now are our field activities catching up. This comes about because of the huge scale of some landscape excavations and because we can deploy a far wider array of dating techniques, including

radiocarbon, dendrochronology, optically stimulated luminescence and uranium series dating. Routeways can be investigated using a range of scientific approaches making it possible to achieve an understanding of movement in the landscape that seemed out of reach a generation ago.



Figure 1: Mesolithic footprint of a child aged 8-9 from intertidal sediments at Goldcliff, Wales (photo. E. Sacre).

Progress requires a conceptual shift from our focus on sites to a far wider landscape perspective. The study of routeways cannot confine itself to one period or a local scale; it is necessarily multi-period and multi-scalar, from individual footprint-tracks (Figure 1; Bell 2007) to long-distance routes. Environmental archaeology has often had a site-based focus. Now, as the density of investigated sites increases, it has become possible, in some areas, to develop a more spatial picture derived from multiple environmental sequences in an area, as demonstrated for instance by reconstructions of environmental change round Stonehenge and Avebury (Allen 2005). What has been insufficiently considered is that landscapes will be, at least partially, structured by linear patterns of movement between sites, and environmental disturbance will be concentrated along routes frequented by animals and people. Figure 2

shows an example: the map of a routeway in what today is Washington State, USA. It is marked by a chain of small prairies within the forest which First Nation communities burnt as they moved along the route, creating openings and woodland edge habitats which could provide resources on future journeys; a classic case of niche construction (Leopold & Boyd 1999; Bell 2020). Evidence for such patterns in the past could be obtained from vegetation patterns, non-pollen palynomorphs, geochemical analysis and sedimentary DNA.

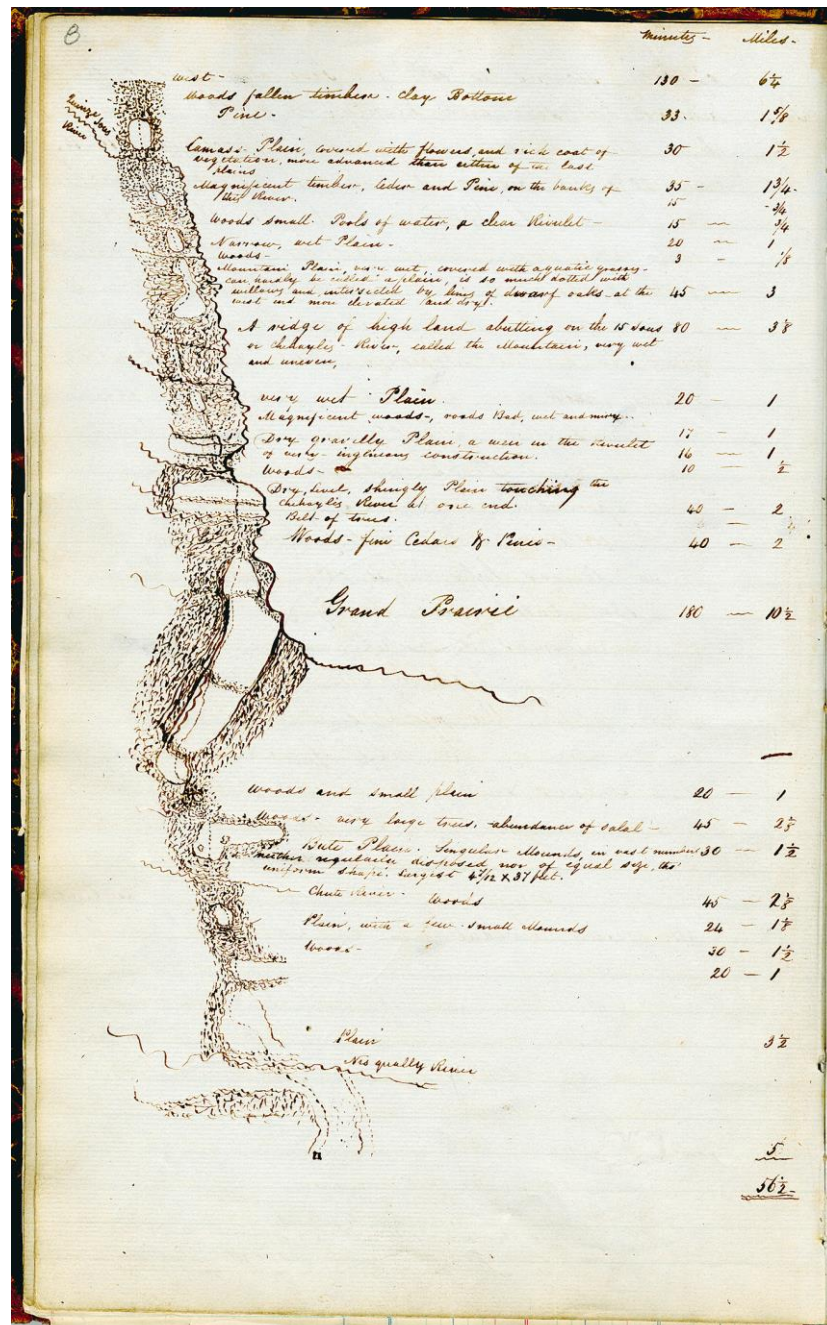


Figure 2: Map made in 1840 by James Douglas (Hudson Bay Company) showing a chain of prairies along the route from the Cowlitz Plain to the Nisqually River, today part of Washington State USA. (Map A/B/40/D75.2 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives).

There is also a need for research-led excavation specifically to establish the date and character of past routeways. Some of the cases most in need of attention are: droveways connecting uplands and lowlands, wetland and dry ground, and those associated with surviving coaxial patterns; routes associated with prehistoric bridges; possible routeways linking late Iron Age oppida; and those connecting terrestrial, riverine or marine transport. Dating can be achieved by developing a geoarchaeological approach focused on the sedimentary context of routeways and the composite landforms which they often represent, an approach which might be called archaeogeomorphology. In agricultural landscapes field investigation shows that holloways (Figure 3) are often not simply negative erosive features but have datable positive lynchets, marked by relatively level benches, running along their upslope flanks, and negative lynchets along their downslope edges. For instance, at Lyminge, Kent dating of a flanking positive lynchet using multiple dating techniques (Optically Stimulated Luminescence, artefacts, molluscan introduction dates and uranium series dating of land mollusc shells) has demonstrated that a holloway is of at least Romano-British, and probably earlier, origin (Bell *et al.* forthcoming).

Trackways have been more intensively studied in wetland contexts although their continuation onto dryland has seldom been much considered. Exceptions are Corlea 1 Trackway, Ireland, which Raftery (1990) suggested may have been part of a much longer route linking ceremonial centres, and Dutch trackways at Smilde which seem to form part of longer routes along sand ridges (Casparie 1987). Also in need of further investigation are the relationships between dryland routes and those involving rivers and sea (Haughey 2013). Many dryland routes may only make sense when they can be seen as parts of patterns of movement undertaken by boat. Significant river routes, such as along the Wiltshire Avon, can be postulated (Sherratt 1996) and are sometimes supported by artefact distributions which have also recently led to the identification of maritime landing and trading places (Bradley *et al.* 2016).

Archaeologists also need to work across periods. Ridgeways and prehistoric routeways tend to be little investigated, while Roman roads are well studied, but often in isolation without any real focus on the opportunities which their spatial relationships offer for establishing chronology. Ridgeways and other ‘natural routes’ should, however, only be accepted when they are substantiated by other forms of evidence for use in the period in question. Ridgeways have often been regarded as the main long-term routes of prehistoric movement in lowland England, but Taylor’s (1979) field investigations showed that evidence

for the so-called Jurassic Ridgeway was hopelessly weak. Other cases may be a little stronger, for instance the Wiltshire-Oxfordshire Ridgeway. Even here, however, the present routes seem to be post Bronze Age. The Pilgrim's Way where it was excavated on the high-speed rail route at Whitehorse Stone in Kent appears to be post-Roman (Booth *et al.* 2011).



Figure 3: A deeply incised holloway on South Downs escarpment at Saddlescombe, East Sussex. This route seems to originate in the Iron Age (photo M. Bell).

One of the contentions of this paper is that, in order to overcome the problems of investigating past routeways, we need to integrate the perspectives provided by both social theory and science. At times these two approaches have seemed to be in opposition. This may be achieved, in part, by following up the perspectives provided by phenomenological approaches (Tilley 1994) with detailed field investigation concerning the date and character of routeways. A topic particularly demanding of this integrated approach and also involving historical sources is the origin of droveways, which in the UK have often been considered Anglo-Saxon and medieval, yet there is accumulating evidence from areas such as the Weald of south east England that some had prehistoric origins (Bell 2020).

Roads and routeways were, and still are, social spaces that channelled diverse groups of people where they could mingle and meet as they moved. As John Evans (2003) has pointed out, movement along routes used for transhumance brought together individuals of different ages and genders, and being less frequent than routine everyday movement, as well as being in distant areas, it was somewhat removed from daily life. Strangers could find themselves spending time together and such transient comings would facilitate exchange of information, genes and objects. Ideas surrounding status and wealth could be explored during these times, and rivalries and squabbles over animals or common land could be thrashed out, while new friendships and relationships beyond the household and immediate community could be forged. The places where such meetings took place, especially the crossing places of long-established, distant routes, are likely to have accrued a special status through time. This may account for the reuse of much earlier Mesolithic sites by Neolithic tombs, or the creation of Avebury henge where two tracks implied by two pairs of opposed entrances crossed at an established grassland clearing (Bell 2020). Movement along routeways broadened the social realm; far from static, passive spaces, these routeways were the very stuff of life (Leary forthcoming).

The journey begins

Routeways connect people. They are mobile gathering places, and we inhabit them in motion. They are designed for movement; places of physical mobility – nodes of desire and connectors of different places and distant lands. They are more than simply functional marks on the landscape. Routeways shape how the traveller thinks, perceives and interacts with the world around them, and helps form their lives. They create certain views, which structure how a person or community understands their surroundings. Despite their obvious association

with movement, when viewed as history or archaeology, paths, tracks and roads tend to be seen as passive, static artefacts. They are anything but passive though; they act on people as much as people act on them. They have agency, structure our lives and are a critical part of our lived space. Roads are not separate from landscape, but a continuum woven within its fabric. Far from being a foreign intrusion into the natural landscape, roads grow organically from within it, and connect different aspects of people's lives.

An archaeology of mobilities can link science with social science, and links across different scales from small-scale movement to travel and migration, encompassing the movement of people, objects, and ideas. A mobile archaeology also embraces the political and differential politics of mobility, as opposed to seeing it as objective.

It is argued that by comparison with many other aspects of archaeology, trackways and mobility along them have long been neglected, and that this neglect came about following the publication of Watkins' *The Old Straight Track* (1925). New strands of evidence from many disciplinary sources, however, help to chart a way forward and we offer here the first steps towards a positivist approach to past mobility.

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