Lost Lines, Living Land: Roman Roads Through Kelsall and Nettleford Wood

ABSTRACT

This paper examines a contested stretch of Roman road alignment through Kelsall, Cheshire, and compares it with the better-evidenced yet still problematic junction at Nettleford Wood on the Deva–Condate route. Drawing on repeated fieldwalking, LiDAR analysis, historic Ordnance Survey mapping, and long-term landscape observation, it explores how Roman roads—once vital arteries—can vanish almost entirely from the modern landscape, leaving behind fragmentary traces, inherited assumptions, and memory.

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Roman roads are often presented as fixed, engineered certainties. In practice, many survive today only as conjectural lines on maps. This paper argues for a cautious, landscape-led approach, using two Cheshire case studies to demonstrate how cartographic memory can outlast physical survival.

2. The Kelsall Alignment: Field Evidence and Its Absence

The Roman road traditionally shown passing near Northwood Hall, Kelsall, is marked on Ordnance Survey maps as a ‘Roman Road (course of)’. Repeated fieldwalking along this alignment reveals no surviving agger, no cambered surface, and no gravel scatter. The land is frequently saturated—conditions Roman engineers generally avoided for primary routes.

A hedge line along part of the route forms a modest raised bank, approximately one metre thick, but this is consistent with post-medieval enclosure rather than Roman construction. LiDAR analysis shows no linear relief indicative of a Roman agger or flanking ditches, suggesting that the mapped route reflects inherited cartographic interpretation rather than demonstrable archaeology.

Figure 1. LiDAR-derived hill shade of Nettleford Wood showing a confirmed Roman road junction. Engineered cuttings and linear relief are clearly visible. The lower route, heading toward Winsford, shows strong continuity; the upper route, traditionally aligned toward Northwich, lacks consistent earthwork expression.

3. Nettleford Wood: Certainty at the Junction, Uncertainty Beyond

At Nettleford Wood, LiDAR data confirms a Roman-engineered junction, including evidence of bedrock cutting and surviving earthworks. Two routes diverge: the lower road toward Winsford follows a straight alignment later reused by a modern road; the upper route, commonly labelled Watling Street, is far less

evident on the ground.

Despite long-term observation across multiple seasons, the upper alignment shows no surviving agger or persistent LiDAR trace. Only intermittent cropmarks visible in dry years suggest its possible course, raising questions about later erosion, agricultural levelling, or misalignment in historic mapping.

Figure 2. Historic Ordnance Survey mapping near Kelsall showing ‘Watling Street (Roman Road)’. The dashed line denotes a conjectural course rather than excavated confirmation, illustrating how assumed alignments become embedded through cartographic repetition.

4. Mapping, Reuse, and Agricultural Erasure

The disappearance of these roads is particularly striking given their prolonged reuse into the medieval period, and in some cases until the establishment of turnpike toll roads. Modern agricultural practices—ploughing, drainage, and field consolidation—have levelled aggers and infilled ditches, redistributing construction material across the landscape.

Figure 3. Detail of the Nettleford Wood junction area showing divergence of routes. The modern road overlays the lower Roman alignment, while the upper route persists only as a mapped hypothesis, with no surviving physical expression across adjacent fields.

5. Discussion: Memory, Cartography, and Loss

These case studies highlight the tension between archaeological evidence and cartographic memory. Maps preserve lines long after the land has forgotten them. Ditches that once held the debris of daily movement—tools, footwear, fragments of lives—have been churned, scattered, and anonymised.

Conclusion

The Kelsall and Nettleford Wood sections demonstrate the need for humility in reconstructing Roman road networks. Certainty at a junction does not guarantee clarity beyond it, and mapped alignments should not be mistaken for surviving reality. Accepting uncertainty is not a weakness, but an honest engagement with a landscape continually reshaped by human activity.