West Northamptonshire Salt-Ways

There are three principal sources of sodium chloride, known simply to modern man as 'salt', these are the sea, inland brine springs and subterranean deposits. The actual process of obtaining salt from salt carrying water, aka brine, is by evaporation. This can be achieved by either laying the brine in flat pans, either man made or natural and then letting natural warmth cause the water to evaporate, not reliable in a temperate climate like ours, or by adding a heat source to accelerate the evaporation process. The earliest record of salt manufacture was in the Neolithic period at Lunca, Neamt County, Romania in 6050 BC[1].

Before the advent of freezing and other forms of food preservation, salt was vital to humanity to ensure a year round supply of food. As a child I recollect my mother salting down surplus runner beans in vast quantities of salt so that we could have them during the winter months. Another classic example of the modern day use of salt to produce year round staple food is the Portuguese salted cod or 'bacalhau', when cooked properly difficult to differentiate from fresh cod. To satisfy this demand significant economies developed not only to ensure the production of adequate quantities of salt but also to transport it to where it could be marketed and provided to the end user.

It is perhaps misleading to highlight the earliest record of salt-production as this would seem to indicate that it was the origin of all subsequent salt manufacture anywhere. I would say that the use of salt evolved simultaneously from the advent of man, and animals, perhaps the initial source of salt was from naturally occurring surface supplies in such places as the Etosha in Namibia although these are relatively low percentage sodium chloride and contaminated with other 'salts'. The instinctive need for salt to improve the health of the body is perhaps demonstrated by the way that animals are known to have 'salt-licks'. Perhaps the following sentence paraphrases the need for salt more than any other, *"In every age that we can trace man has left indelible evidence of his need for and effort to obtain common salt, sodium chloride"*[2]

Within the British Isles there is evidence of a salt industry on the Essex coast in the Bronze Age where excavations of various burnt mounds, known collectively as 'Red Hills' have revealed collections of ceramic (briquetage) material that was used both to form the furnaces to generate the heat for the accelerated evaporation process and also the containers to hold the brine during the process and form the mould for blocks of salt post-evaporation. There were two important objectives during the process, to make the salt as dry as possible to decrease weight but also to ensure that that the blocks were robust enough to face prolonged transport by basic means. Coastal salt production occurred at many locations around Britain, specifically in areas with extensive mud flats, river estuaries etc.[3]

It does however appear that the alternative source of salt originating from inland brine springs occurred at various locations across England.[4] These locations, to be viable for salt production, had to have sufficient levels of salinity to produce economic quantities of salt. Where there were lower levels of salinity the waters were more favourable for bathing, hence the rise of Bath for that purpose. The two principal sources of inland salt producing brine were at Droitwich and Cheshire, this was before the extensive reserves of rock salt were identified at the latter with mining there commencing in 1670.[5]

Droitwich quickly became a substantial source of inland salt production. To provide a means to

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1 Antiquity Vol 79 No 306 December 2005 (via Wikipedia)

2 PP 1 Salt and the Domesday *Salinae* at Droitwich AD 674 – 1690 Hopkinson B., (Droitwich Brine Springs & Archaeological Trust with the Worcestershire Archaeological Society) - 1994

3 Salt Production, Distribution and Use in the British Iron Age – Dphil Thesis (Kellogg College, Oxford) Kinory, J. L. 2011

4 Hopkinson B. PP3

5 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salt_in_Cheshire

distribute this salt a network of routes, known as 'salt-ways' quickly grew across the country although where available water courses were utilised as well. With Droitwich these routes spread across middle and southern England. During the Bronze and Iron Ages there is no documentary evidence of the salt trade, firm evidence must rely on archaeological evidence although observation of landscape features can provide strong indications of early routes.

Whilst Droitwich was the closest location to west Northamptonshire for early salt supply there is evidence that salt from Cheshire entered the area as well in the Middle Iron Age. As mentioned previously a proportion of salt was transported at that date and later in ceramic containers. These containers were used to boil and evaporate the brine, the subsequent salt being retained in them as dry blocks for transport, probably by pack-horse or carts as will be seen later in levels of tolls in the 14th Century. Elsewhere some salt was transported in 'organic' containers. The fabric of the ceramic containers between Droitwich and Cheshire was significantly different, that from Droitwich being known as 'briquetage' [handmade ceramic containers] whereas that from Cheshire was know as 'stony VCP' [stony very coarse pottery – again handmade but distinctly different from the Droitwich fabric.].

Stony VCP fabric has been found at one location only in Northamptonshire although it has been identified at locations, along the Welsh borders, Severn Valley northern midlands and elsewhere. The Northamptonshire examples were located at Crick Covert Farm on the site of DIRFT, the majority of this assemblage are described as being later in the Iron Age but two sherds were discovered in very early contexts, one from the Early Iron Age, one from the Earlier Middle Iron Age. If these contexts were correctly sealed then these are the earliest finds of this fabric in the Midlands.[6] The 'DIRFT' Iron Age complex is described as a possible Iron Age cattle ranching area,[7] perhaps it is not surprising that considerable quantities of salt would have been required for food preservation.

Some research has been done and comment made into an Iron Age salt - trading model of down the line exchange whereby salt was traded for other items, with perhaps the trading carried out at specific locations, e.g. hill – forts.[8] With salt being transported in briquetage containers if travelling from Droitwich evidence of fragments of these containers would be diagnostically helpful. There is however little, if any, evidence of this material being found in west Northamptonshire. It is possible of course that the salt blocks were being transported in organic containers that have since decomposed, additionally little excavation has taken place on Northamptonshire's hill-forts and other possible trading centres to establish the presence of briquetage.

Moving into the Romano-British era there is distinct evidence of salt production and the enhancement of some routes to move the salt to important destinations. This can be demonstrated by the road from Droitwich to the Roman town of Alcester and the roads radiating from there in various directions, not least to Stratford on Avon. It is from there that this paper will focus on the salt - way that headed virtually due east from Stratford - on – Avon towards Northamptonshire, I shall give this route a descriptive name for the purposes of this paper – *'The Mid- Northamptonshire Salt – Way'*. Fig 1

It is perhaps appropriate if, to save duplication, I refer the reader to Blisworth Parish website to an excellent article by Tony Marsh whom I did work with on local salt-ways some years ago. This article does fill in some gaps and paints a good picture. I agree very much that Salcey Forest is an important feature in the local salt trade, not least because of its significant Iron Age activity,

6 Morris, E. in The Iron Age and Romano-British Settlement at Crick Covert Farm, Northamptonshire. (Excavations, 1997 – 98) DIRFT Volume 1. Hughes, G. & Woodward A (Archaeopress 2015) pp 58

7 Origins, Development and Abandonment of an Iron Age Village, DIRFT Vol 2, Masefield R., Ed & others. (Archaeopress – 2015) Chap 7.

8 Kinory Chapter 4

including two hill-forts.[9] Was it a central trading place?[10]

West Northamptonshire is populated with several hill - forts that whilst not directly on the 'designated' salt – ways are linked to them by early routes and could have been 'central trading places' during the Iron Age. This probably also applies to 'undefended' trading areas as well. Discussion is made as to issue of distance affecting the viability of the salt trade from Droitwich[11], Mantles Heath where the possible bifurcation to be discussed below occurs is only approximately 75km from Droitwich, albeit at the lower levels of viability but not beyond. Fenland coastal produced salt would be at least 120km from the same point even if travelling in a straight line. It does seem therefore that Northamptonshire must have been at the economic extremes of the salt trade wherever it originated.

Documentary evidence to prove the existence of at least some of the salt – ways becomes more evident during the Anglo – Saxon period and later, included in these documents are Anglo – Saxon Charters, evidence of rights to charge tolls and early maps.

The earliest written mention of the *'Mid Northamptonshire Salt – Way'* is in Anglo – Saxon Charters[12] [13] that align it in part to the course of The Great Way. This latter route appears to be a major long distance track carrying various trades on essentially a SW – NE route, albeit with various offshoots and crossroads to several points of the compass.

We will now focus on what is identified as a significant track (hereafter 'the projected route) that heads from the Great Way and the salt – way, from the north - westerly corner of Mantles Heath where the parishes of Preston Capes, Everdon and Farthingstone make a common meeting point. In fact the Great Way and the south - easterly heading of the Salt - Way from Mantles Heath form parish boundaries, a sign of antiquity both for the boundaries and the tracks themselves.

The projected route leaves the Great Way and heads to the north – east whilst the 'mainline' of the salt - way turns to the south – east; the Great Way heads on to the east. Our projected route way it passes the site of the now deserted medieval village of Snorscomb before heading along the current road to Dodford. Fig 2 Here it perhaps achieved its objective of reaching the north bank of the upper reaches of the River Nene and the opportunities for trade this presented. Crossing the Nene as high as this offers protection from the effect of adverse weather on the river further to the east which would have presented less opportunity to cross during periods of wet weather.

As our route progresses it follows the minor road from Dodford to cross the modern Watling Street today by way of a staggered junction at 'Skew Bridge', the point where the Street crosses the main railway line. Before the railway this would not have been a staggered junction but a direct crossing for our route over the Watling Street. Once to the east of Watling Street the route follows the another minor road until it crosses the road from Flore to Brockhall. Thereafter it becomes a 'green' lane or field road to head on to meet the current road from Norton to Duston by way of an angled junction that heads towards Duston and Upton. This road is the course of the 'Roman' road between the Romano-British towns of Bannaventa and Upton.

There are landscape features that tend to mark the antiquity and significance of this route. Two features with names that allude to it being in existence at an early stage, to the south of the road, between Watling Street and the Brockhall to Flore road there is 'Green Lane Spinney' and further on to the north – east where the projected salt – way joins the 'Roman' road there is to the south

9 https://blisworth.org.uk/images/Articles/droitwich.htm

10 Kinory pp 95

11 Ibid pp 110

12 Anglo Saxon Charter for Badby and Newnham dated AD 944 - see 'Some AS Estates and Their Boundaries' Brown, A. E. & others in Northamptonshire Archaeology 12 pp 155 – 176 (Northamptonshire Arch Socy 1977)

13 Anglo Saxon Charter for Stowe dated AD 956 – see 'The Stowe Charter – a revision and some implications' Brown, A. E. & others in Northamptonshire Archaeology 16 pp 136 – 147 (Northamptonshire Arch Socy 1981)

'Waydale Hill'. At this latter point the 'way' passes through a gentle valley or 'dale'. Fig 3 Returning to the east of the Brockhall road the 'way' runs adjacent to the Whilton Brook to its source at a spring, the point where three parishes, Flore, Brington and Brockhall meet; as mentioned previously, indications of significance and antiquity. As will be seen from there is an unusual field structure for a part of this section that provides a series of narrow linear fields to 'contain' the 'way'. Fig 4

The route from here follows the Roman road to Upton where it is known that there was an early Iron Settlement and Romano-British trading town. Some activity in this area continued into the Anglo – Saxon period but it appears that the centre of activity moved to the east to form the town of Northampton.

The antiquarian writer and traveller Edward Pretty FSA reports in 1847[14] three records of a salt toll imposed on traders in Northamptonshire, two of these were sited on our route, the other was on the principal, previously discussed route, at Litchborough.

The details of these toll points as recorded by Pretty are:-

p*p 162 - Muscott*

In the 3rd Edward 111 (1329) Sampson Gervays was requested to show cause why he claimed to have frank-pledge of his free tenants, and 'weyf'[sic] in his fee of Muscote, with a toll of one halfpenny of all carts loaded with salt which should pass through his said fee. To these liberties he pleaded immemorial custom, and he had his claim allowed.

pp 147 - Upton

Nicholas de Chaunceus 3 Edw. III (1329) claimed 'toll of such fish and salt as passed through the manor of Upton for sale, viz. of every cart-load of fish one penny, and of every horse load one farthing; of every cart-load of salt one-fourth part of a bushel of salt, and of every horse load one farthing'.

pp 171 - Litchborough

In the reign of Edw. III. Geoffrey de Cornwall, as guardian to Peter, the heir of Richard Malore, claimed toll of a peck of salt from every wagon laden with salt which passed through the town of Lichborow; but his pretensions seem to have been unsupported.'

Taken together these do indicate that there was still a significant salt trade in the area at that time, the comment in the toll at Muscott that *'he pleaded immemorial custom'* seems to indicate that there was antiquity to this trade in 1329.

In the Lidar record for Little Brington[15] it is noted that there appears to be a forked extension of the projected route towards the NE to the north of the Roman road. This must be an ancient route that became disused or superseded at an early stage as it is overlain by medieval (13th C) ridge and furrow that can be seen in the Lidar. Figs 5 & 6 This is confirmed by mapping elsewhere.[16]

To prove the full extent and longevity of the Northamptonshire salt trade further research is required to consider the purpose and extent of the trade from Cheshire. It does seem that for the western and southern parts of the county the Droitwich trade played a significant source for centuries on definitive routes. It is now important that archaeologists identify and record all finds

14 Wetton's Guide to Northampton and its vicinity, Pretty, E FSA (Republished by SR Publishers 1969)

15 Lidar data 1m DTM 2019 data DEFRA

16 An Atlas of Northamptonshire – The Medieval and Early Modern Landscape Partida, Hall & Foard (Oxbow 2013)

of briquetage and Stony VCP fabrics to help establish the extent of this trade and whether it diverted from the routes into trading and holding locations, both hill-forts and undefended settlements. Also what happened in the Romano-British period, did the supply remain the same? We have no evidence either in the immediate post Romano-British period nor does Domesday mention salt in this area. This is an important topic as salt was fundamental to life.

Dave Hayward MBE
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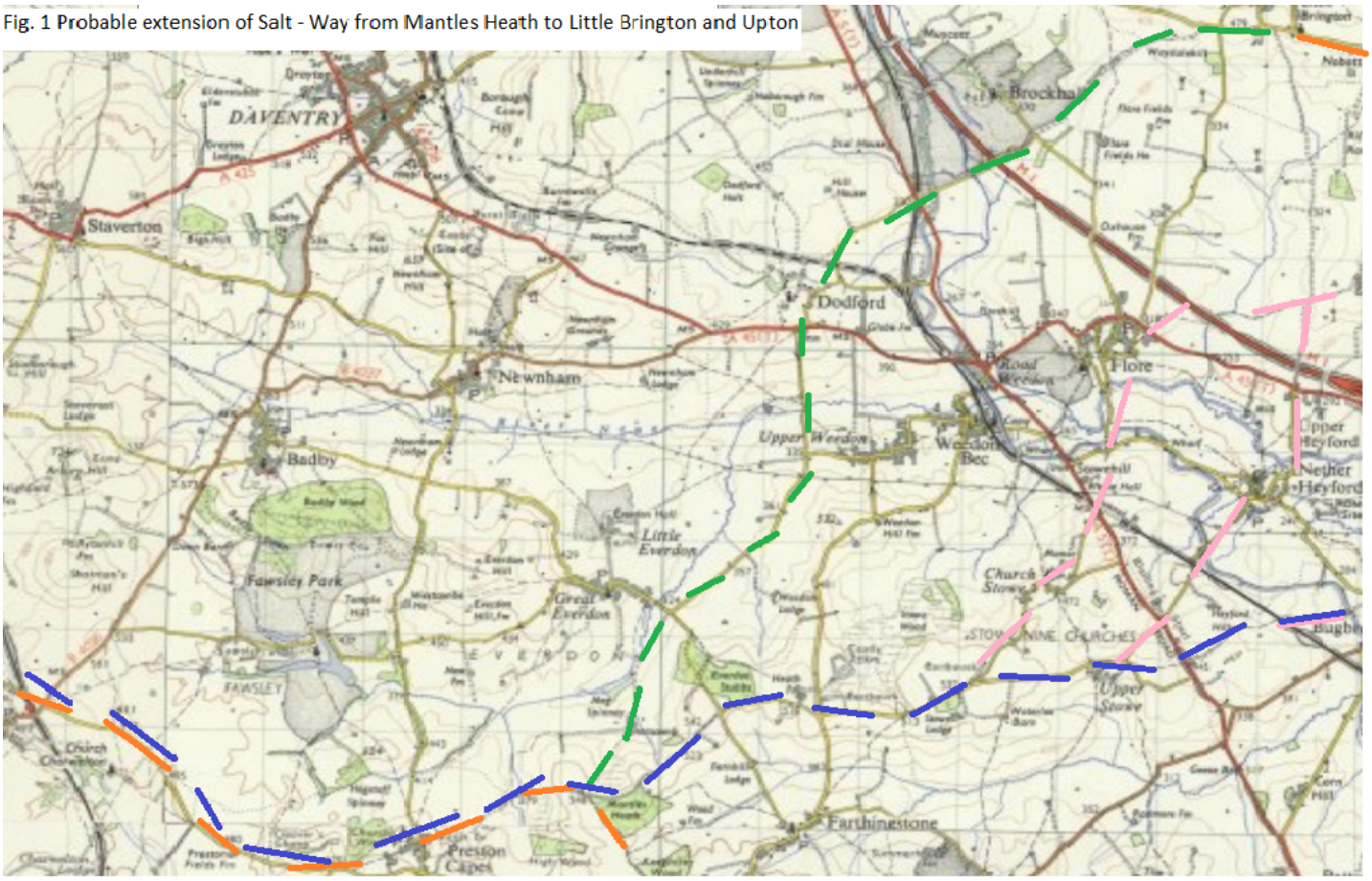
Fig 1 Salt-way from the west

Fig. 1 Probable extension of Salt - Way from Mantles Heath to Little Brington and Upton



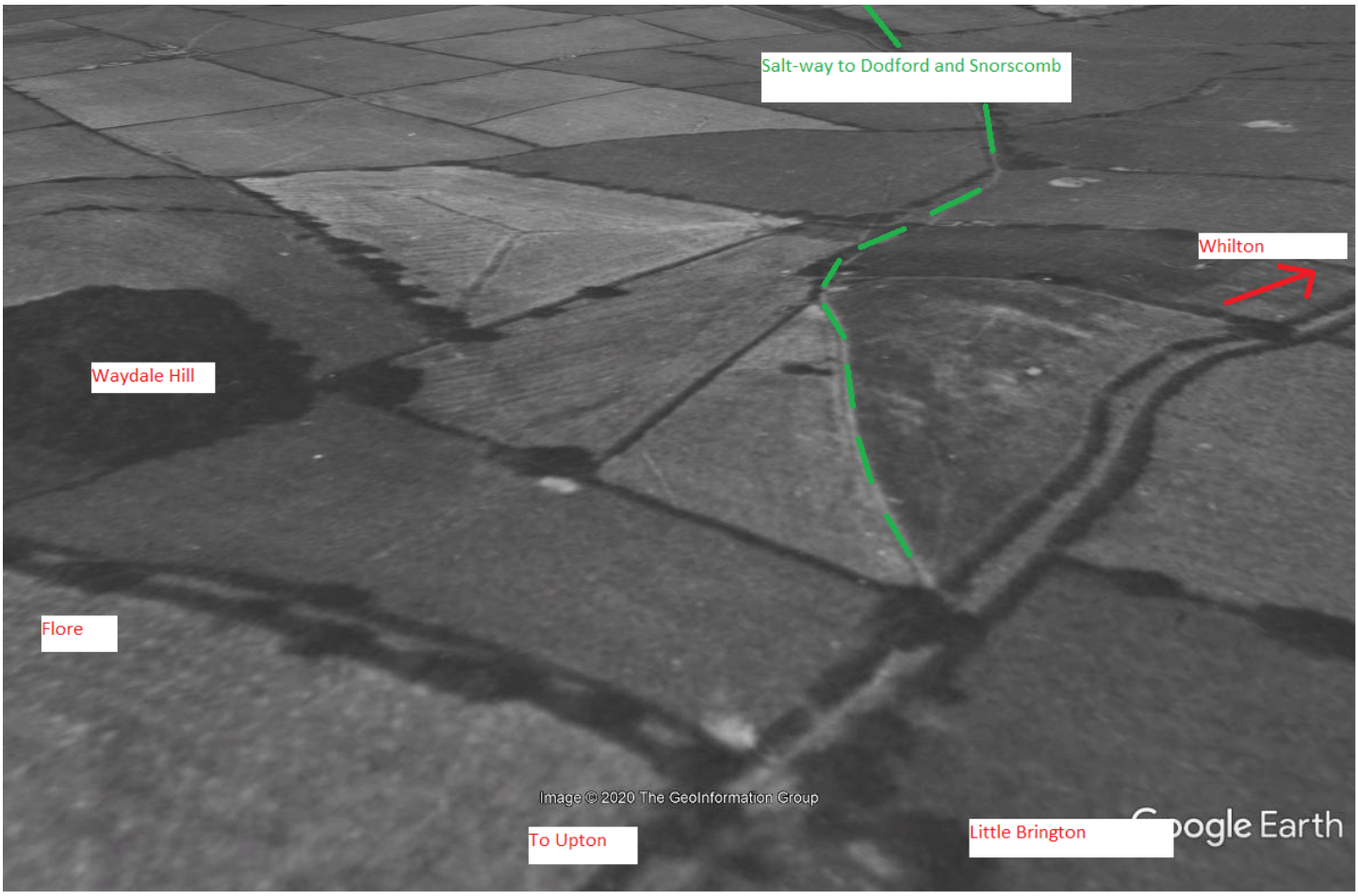


Fig. 2 - Salt-way joining Bananventa to Upton Roman Road at Little Brington

Google Earth 1945

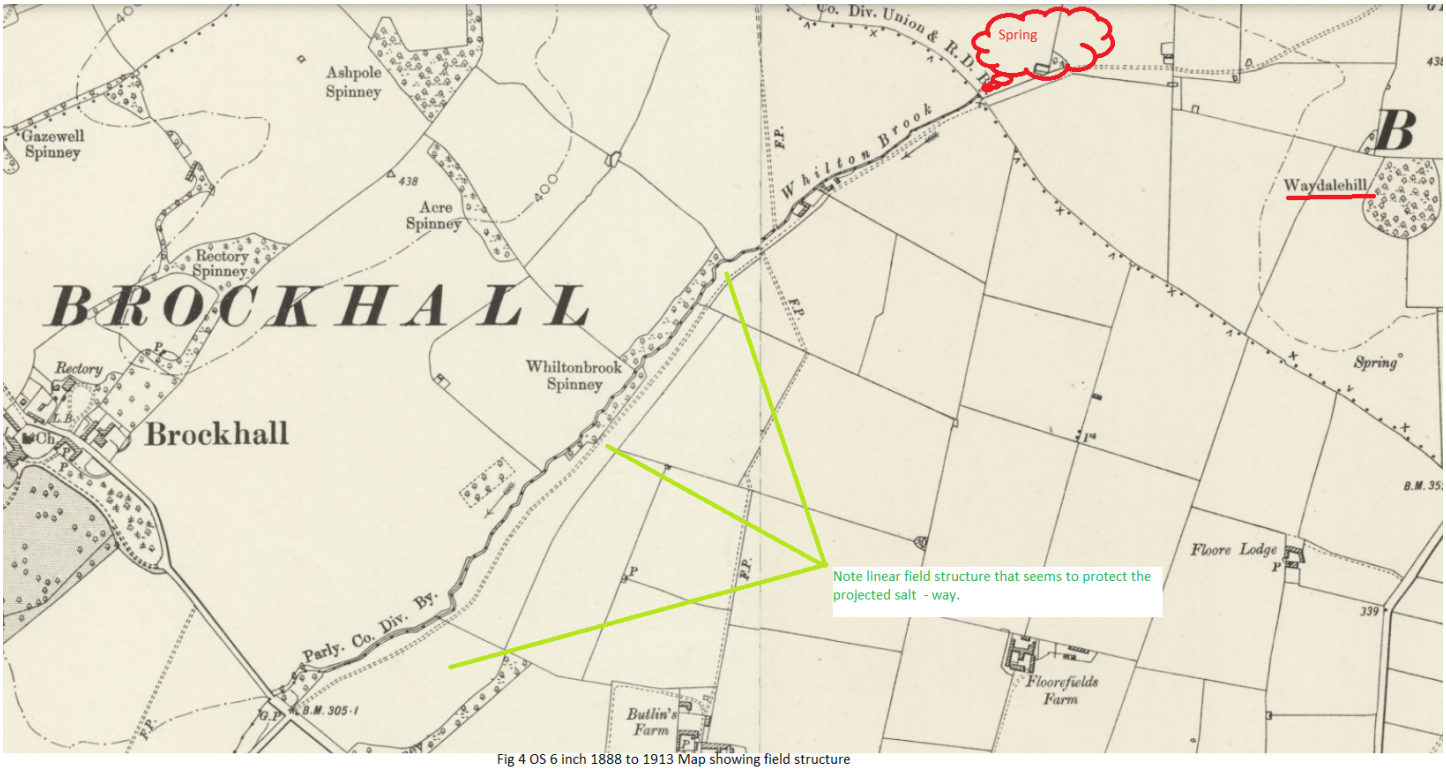


Fig 4 OS 6 inch 1888 to 1913 Map showing field structure

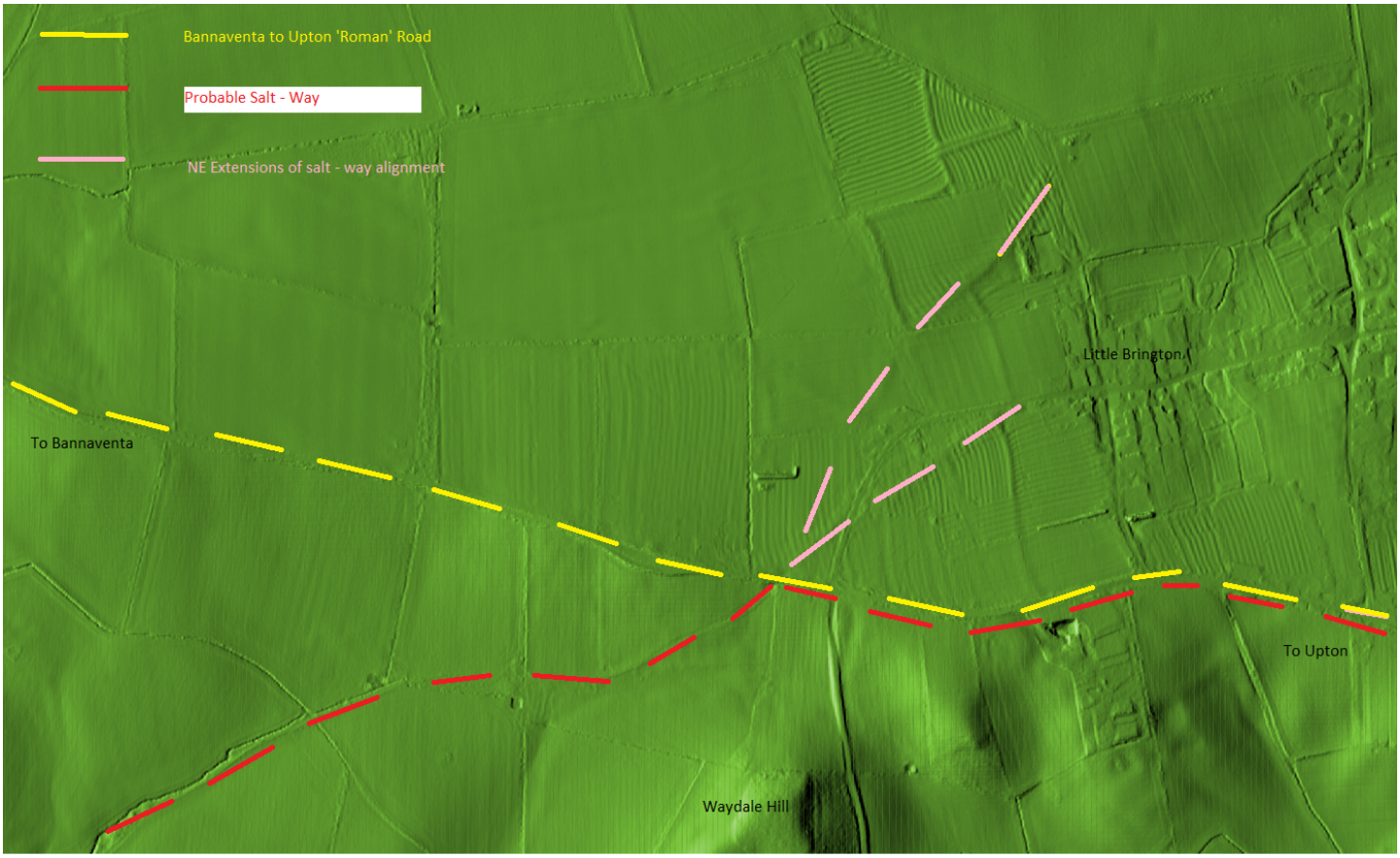


Fig: 5 Lidar 2019 DTM 1m showing projected salt- way with possible NE extensions at Little Brington

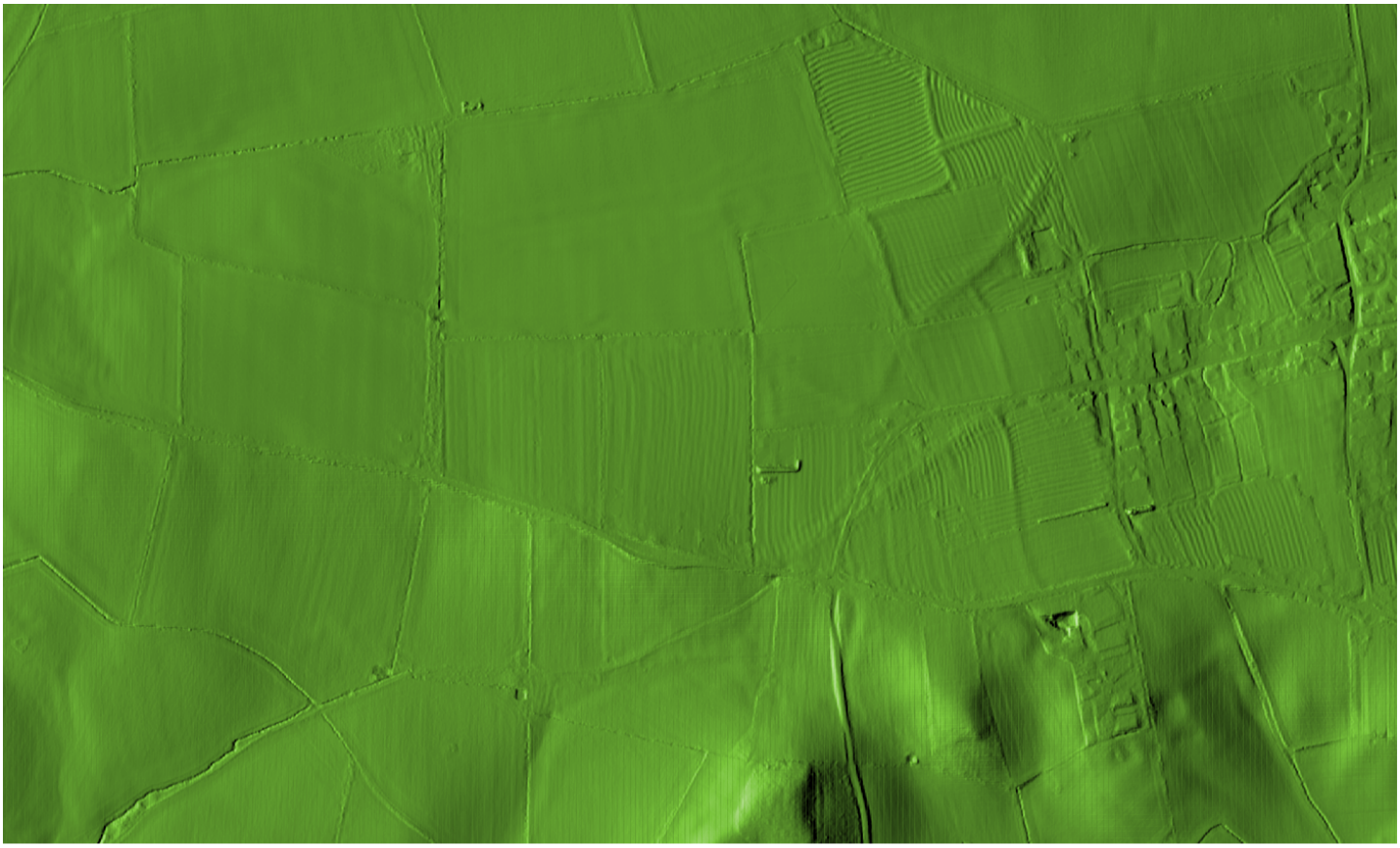


Fig: 5 Clear vision of Lidar in Fig: 4.