

ART. XVI.—*The Tower at Gillalees Beacon, called Robin Hood's Butt.* By I. A. RICHMOND, M.A., F.S.A.

THE literature of Roman Cumberland often mentions this remote tower. Bruce dramatised it in a lithograph,\* and Haverfield† excavated it; but the excavation produced nothing immediately recognisable as Roman and Haverfield's cautious account may be quoted here.

“ There is on Gillalees Beacon, close to the supposed line of the Maiden Way, a lonely ruined structure of stone, which Mr. Maughan and others after him have held to be a Roman watch-tower. Mr. Maughan gives it no name; an estate map of 1830, belonging to Lord Carlisle, calls it Robin Hood's Butt, and the appellation seems to be still known in the neighbourhood. We had long desired to excavate it, and an opportunity offered this summer. It proved to be a nearly square building, with walls 32-34 inches thick, and measuring externally on the north side 18 feet, on the east 19 feet 10 inches, on the south 17 feet, and on the west 20 feet. The walls are built of stones in regular courses; the highest part being on the west side, where the outer face showed 10 courses and foundations, making in all 5 feet, 9 inches. A considerable quantity of fallen stones lie around. In character the masonry seemed quite indistinctive, such as might or might not be Roman, except that a few stones and especially a quoin at the south-west corner suggested modern tools. There is no door or visible entrance anywhere; the interior is bottomed with clay which had probably been brought there, and the highly experienced drainer who dug the structure out suggested that it might be a reservoir for water. Certainly there is a small spring inside which hindered our operations a little. No minor remains of any kind were found, unless two tiny bits of a red stuff which might possibly be tile or brick. The ground all round the structure

\* Bruce, *The Roman Wall*, 3, pp. 264-5; lithograph faces p. 264.

† These *Transactions*, o.s., xvi, 82-3. Mr. James McIntyre points out to me that Haverfield re-iterated his opinion in *Ibid.*, n.s., xvi, 282*n*, while reviewing the possibility of a comparison with the Gask House posts, but thinking them to be rare.

seems to have been very slightly hollowed when it was constructed, not in the manner of a ditch, but perhaps to provide the above-mentioned clay. The position of the structure is curious. It commands a wide-spreading view to south and west, as indeed does all the hillside near it. Many points of the Wall from Winshields to the Solway can be clearly seen from it, and in particular the site of the fort at Birdoswald, from which in turn the little mound which marks the ruin can be easily described. But its view in the opposite direction is extremely brief."

Thirty years ago, the analogies to this tower were unknown or unrecognised. Now we can quote a good many, and from this very district. The dimensions and masonry exactly match those of Mains Rigg\* tower (disc. 1928) on the Stanegate, of the Walltown Crags tower† (disc. 1912) and the Pike Hill tower‡ (disc. 1931), both once isolated, on the Wall, and of the freestanding towers§ (disc. 1870), which continued the turret-system of the Wall along the Cumberland coast. Further, the lack of a door, which puzzled Haverfield and the experienced drainer who worked for him, is also a feature of Mains Rigg and the coastal towers, which are dissociated from any regular frontier-line, and is a device to prevent them from being rushed when occupied, or from being entered by unauthorised persons when not in use: they were no doubt accessible by a ladder, like Irish round towers. Finally, Haverfield's field-observation was not at its best when he observed that the hollow round the tower was not in the manner of a ditch. A ditch or drainage-channel round this tower is clearly visible, interrupted by a little causeway in the centre of the east side, as was noted by Mr. F. G. Simpson, Mr. James McIntyre and the writer. This is the side of the tower that faces the Roman road, which we traced running towards

\* *Ibid.*, 2, xxix, 314-15. The ditch at Mains Rigg encloses a space 55 by 65, over ditch-centres; here the dimensions are approximately 45 by 45.

† Walltown Crags, *Arch. Ael.* 3, ix, 68, fig. 5.

‡ *Ibid.*, N.S., v, 124-9; interpreted in *Ibid.*, N.S., xxix, 144-8.

§ *Transactions*, N.S., xxxi 46.

Spadeadam on the traditional line: only the bottoming, however, is left and the remains strikingly resemble those of the Brougham-Low Borrowbridge road, above Crosby Ravensworth, or Wade's Causeway above Wheeldale.

So the tower may be accepted as Roman, of a kind common both on and near the Wall. What, then, was its purpose? This must be related to its peculiar situation, noted by Haverfield. Towards the north, the outlook is very limited: to the west, the view is extensive, but the Wall is very remote: eastwards, the range is confined to the adjacent hill above White Syke: on the south, the Craggs and Birdoswald are in full view, but the tower directly faces Birdoswald, for which the Roman road so exactly aims. It may be assumed, then, that Birdoswald was the objective of signals from this tower.

It is equally certain that in the other direction Bewcastle, occupied, as a lost inscription\* attests, under Hadrian, must have been the intelligence-centre at the north end of the line; but, if so, why is the tower in its present position? For, at first sight, it seems certain that anyone wanting to signal from Bewcastle to Birdoswald would have placed their tower on the sky-line, whence messages could be picked up in either direction, as, for example, from the sites of Walltown Craggs and Pike Hill. But as already noted, these two towers are associated with a regular frontier-line, and it must be emphasised that in this respect they differ from Robin Hood's Butt, both in position and purpose. Their function is to signal along the frontier-line when that line is being attacked or crossed, and at this stage of danger it is essential that the signals should be widely seen by all concerned. For this has a double effect: the enemy know that they have been seen and that retribution is coming, while the garrison

\* *C.I.L.*, vii, 978; Horsley, *Britannia Romana*, 192, n. 45, xlvi; cf. *Transactions*, n.s., xxii, 184. For pottery of about this time, see *Ibid.*, n.s. xxxi, 145n.

knows in the least possible time what has happened. But Robin Hood's Butt is part of an advanced intelligence-service, whose efficiency consists in rapidly conveying news to the right quarter unbeknown to the enemy. Now signals from the *summit* of Gillalees Beacon could be seen for miles both to north and south, and were thus seen in the Middle Ages; but they were then a general warning to the country-side, not a special alarm to a waiting garrison: this distinction contains the essential difference between the mediaeval March and the Roman *limes*. Accordingly, it becomes evident that Robin Hood's Butt, situated a little way down the south slope, is to be explained as a signal-tower transmitting from Bewcastle to Birdoswald signals invisible from the north. How, then, did the messages reach the tower from Bewcastle? Obviously, by horse or by a patrol, but *not* by further towers. These do not exist, and, if they did, their presence would destroy the whole significance of this isolated example, so admirably designed for secret work.

But the existence of such a tower, explained by the tactical considerations here outlined, has a bearing upon the position and function of the two forts which the tower connects. It has often been remarked that the lay-out of the whole Birdoswald sector is peculiar. The Wall in this sector, as no-where else along its course, cannot be evacuated easily, because retreat from it is barred, except at a limited number of points, by the Irthing Gorge: in other words, this particular sector is a death-trap, from which there is no easy escape. It is therefore vitally necessary, as in no other sector of the Wall, to have warning of enemy movements well in advance. To operate effectively in the Birdoswald sector it is essential to know what is happening behind the shoulder of Gillalees Beacon; in fact, an adequate intelligence-service there is the real condition of holding

this sector successfully, and this need must explain why Bewcastle continued to be held\* when other posts beyond the Wall had been abandoned.

Yet no situation is too dark to be turned to advantage. If the outlook from the Wall in the Birdoswald sector is blind, the approach to the Wall is also full of traps. No sector is better adapted to the laying of ambushes than this one, and, once this fact is realised, the precise reason for the carefully-concealed signalling between Birdoswald and Bewcastle becomes plain. In any other sector it would be impossible to lay an effective ambush outside the Wall, for the country is too open and visibility too good: only a sudden sally from milecastle gates could be expected to succeed there. But, anywhere between Pike Hill, Birdoswald and the King Water, a well-laid ambush could not fail to be repeatedly successful: and it cannot be doubted that Robin Hood's Butt is part of the machinery for ensuring that such a trap should be well laid, all unknown to the enemy. The perfecting of this scheme of defence would also explain the eventual stationing at Birdoswald of one of the large garrisons on the Wall.

\* *Ibid.*, xxix, 145ff.