

ART. XXII.—*Eskdale Notes*. By MARY C. FAIR.
Read at Carlisle, September 10th, 1925.

I. THE ROMAN ROAD AT RAVENGLASS.

DURING the drought of the past summer the Rev. W. S. Sykes and the writer paid a visit to Ravenglass, for the purpose of identifying some landmarks in connection with research amongst medieval records which Mr. Sykes is studying. Our object led us to the shore from whence we followed the field path beside a little stream (probably known anciently as "Hulot Beck"), under the railway, across Walls Drive and across a large meadow. As we considered the contours of this meadow the question of the Roman road from Ravenglass eastward cropped up and Mr. Sykes suddenly said he believed we were standing on it. The long-continued drought certainly had revealed a cambered causeway over boggy ground, a ditch and agger on either side, the road surface under the turf being composed of pebbly gravel locally known as "shillies." This track is 22 feet wide, the ditches are eight feet wide, the aggers nine feet wide. This road continues straight for nearly sixty yards, pointing towards a line which would pass between Muncaster church and the Castle. It then makes a slight bend towards the south ending abruptly, and long and careful search has entirely failed so far to pick up the trail. Almost at the point where the direction changes southwards, however, there is an ancient road (hollow now in the turf; has a gravel surface been removed for other purposes?) leading into a curious levelled platform with rounded corners where there are traces of masonry foundations and a suggestion that there has been a ditch

around. In its midst is a large boulder of greyish Scaffell stone and a pillar of red freestone, the latter having obviously been used at some time for hanging a gate or door. It bears traces of carving on one side, but most of it has been rubbed away by cattle. From this spot the field path from the shore leads via a north-easterly course on the slope of the hill passing up a wooded ghyll to join the high road just beyond the War Memorial. Does the field path represent the line of the Roman road from Ravenglass to Eskdale. It is possible, for I have been told that in this field "somewhere behind the Grove" traces of a wide, gravelled road were met with many years ago during field-draining operations.* The line indicated passes close to the most easterly of the ponds in the deer-park and so to near Muncaster church; but so far there seems to be no trace of any road on this line after the disappearance of the road already referred to, and I am beginning to think that the footpath represents it.

It would appear that the Roman station at Ravenglass was one of some importance for a fragment of finely carved red freestone (probably from a pillar-capital moulding) has been found on the shore, work which would hardly be so elaborate in the case of an ordinary cohort fortress.

II. ST. CATHERINE'S HOLY WELL.

A tradition of a Holy Well, commonly called St. Catherine's has been preserved in Eskdale through many generations, and it is stated that water from it was formerly used for baptism at the church; there also at one time existed a tradition that the ancient cross of red freestone, now on the east end of the church roof, came from some building which stood on the site.

* Compare these *Transactions* N.S. *xix*, 19. The track however, described above, is nearly a quarter of a mile north of the line marked by Mr. McGilchrist as leaving the fort in a N.E. direction.

The site is in a stinted pasture belonging to Kirk House, Arment House (modern name; this tenement was formerly spelled Harmitt Howe or Harmoth Howe), Christ Cliff, and Dawson Ground (now the Woolpack Hotel). Paddock Wray and Borradaile Place also had rights which were at some time compounded for by enclosure.

The hill on which this pasture lies is bounded on the south by the river Esk, on the north by the modern highway through the dale, part of which may be the Roman road, and on the west by the church-road from Boot. Beside the river Esk runs an ancient church-road from the Woolpack and at the other side of the river a branch goes *via* Doctor's Bridge (an excellent example of the ancient packhorse bridges of the district, widened for wheeled traffic in the middle of the eighteenth century, by Dr. Edward Tyson of Penny Hill) to Low Birker, Under Bank, Dalegarth Hall and the moor road to Birkerthwaite, High Ground and Ulpha.

The hill itself has two principal summits, Cross Howe and Harmot Howe. Connected with it in addition to the two above names are the church or chapelry of St. Catherine's and Kirk House (or Hows?) with, between them, Bell Hill where formerly "Cattie Fair" was held yearly and St. Catherine's Well.

It was supposed by both the Rev. W. S. Sykes and myself, following information derived probably from the Rev. W. S. Calverley, that the site of the well was close to where Cockley Lane enters the stinted pasture, a rock close to the enclosing wall of a little wood known as "Mean Wood," having a small spring issuing from beneath it; but Mr. Towers Hartley of Kirkhouse pointed out that a site a little higher up the slope, nearer Harmot Howe, was the traditional place. Investigation with the spade was agreed upon in order that Mr. Sykes' sojourn in the Dale might be taken advantage of, so that he could direct operations.

The Vicar of Eskdale (the Rev. J. W. Hall), has marked the commencement of his ministry by infusing a spirit of research into the old tradition and it was therefore fitting that his spade should turn the first sod of the excavation.

Mr. Towers Hartley led the party (The Revs. W. S. Sykes and J. W. Hall, Mrs. Sykes, Miss Fair and Miss Hill) to the flat terrace or shoulder of the hillside about 150 feet above the river Esk, almost due east from the ancient church of St. Catherine. From this terrace a fine view is obtained of the church and also the eastward fells and the crags south of the Esk while shelter is given from the north by Bell Hill and Harmot Howe. A space here has evidently been cleared from boulders and levelled, but it is now boulder-strewn in a manner that clearly indicates the existence of ruined buildings. In wet weather the site is damp and boggy, probably from the overflow of the well. A wall of rough boulders has surrounded the enclosure with what appears to be an entrance at the north-west, and there is distinct trace of a drain leading from the well site, out at the south-west corner and down the hillside into Mean Wood. Inside the garth as well as the well site are small circles of stones very suggestive of huts—three, perhaps four.

The well itself presented the appearance of a group of stones surrounding a swampy patch in which rushes were growing. The whole place was very dry after weeks of drought.

As digging proceeded it was noticed that several of the blocks were rudely hammer-dressed, and it dawned on the excavators that before it had partly caved in there had been a roughly circular chamber, some three feet in diameter, formed of heavy blocks of stone behind which masonry packing supported the north wall of the garth. Many big stones had to be laboriously hauled aside for the safety of the diggers, and it was then noticed that a rude stairway of boulders (five in number) led down into the

basin which at the depth of three feet four inches rapidly became wet, water trickling from under a very large boulder. Investigation revealed that this and other stones of heavy if rude masonry were massively set in a foundation of puddled clay. Mr. Towers Hartley now made a find. As he groped in the clay, under the big supporting boulder trying to trace the source of the water supply, at a depth of about four feet nine inches he came across wood, apparently something of a solid description but rotten with centuries of soaking in wet. Portions were recovered, carefully washed and dried and proved to be fragments of oak bearing tool marks. One piece was a dowel pin, otherwise the purpose of the fragments could not be identified. Was there a wooden conduit?

At this point digging had to be abandoned as a storm came up over the fells, but it may be that further evidence will be obtained. We can hardly, however, doubt the purpose and character of the site.

ADDENDA.

I. THE ROMAN ROAD AT RAVENGLASS.

It had been hoped to dig a section across the portion of the road seen by Mr. Sykes and myself during the drought, to confirm the surface indications. Unfortunately this has not been possible up to the present, but will be done as soon as an opportunity presents itself. It should be added that the line of the Roman Road from Ravenglass to Eskdale by the late Mr. McGilchrist was nowhere verified by the spade, and is in several places quite off the line of road where it (the road) *has* been so verified, Mr. McGilchrist having been led astray by cart roads leading to bloom smithy sites, etc., or to abandoned or vanished farm steads.

II. ST. CATHERINE'S HOLY WELL.

Further exploration here has been held up owing largely to unsuitable weather conditions. It has been ascertained that the drain from the Well spring does not run into the Mean Wood coppice but turns directly down the fell slope by a gully facing towards the church. On the slopes of this gully are remains of old walls of indefinite and fragmentary description, and on a knowe there is a suggestion of a possible circular formation. The Holy Well was last cleared out sometime in the first third of the last century by Mr. Tyson, of Wha House, and it is said that water from it was used for baptism by the Rev. Aaron Marshall, Priest of Eskdale for 44 years who got together many notes (his MS. was unfortunately lost) of Eskdale antiquities. The use of the water for Baptism has been resumed by the present Vicar, Mr. Hall.
