

MITEBANK FORD
East Kerb of Causeway.
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Photo. by Mary C. Fair.

ART. XX.—*An Ancient Ford of the River Mite.* By
MISS MARY C. FAIR.

Read at Grange-over-Sands, September 18th, 1928.

THE ford here described was noticed some thirty years ago by my late father and myself when fishing on the river Mite from Ravenglass. A venerable heron, alluded to locally as "Jammy Hernsew," took up his position, evening after evening, on what looked like conveniently placed boulders showing through the mud of the river channel at low tide. Observation of this bird and his vantage point revealed that the "boulders" were not the work of nature, but the massive kerb-stones of an elaborately constructed causeway, forming a ford carrying some long-forgotten highway across the river. My father at the time suggested that this was the ford by which the Roman Road passed North from Ravenglass to Moresby, but for a while other matters (including the Great War) intervened, and nothing much was done in the way of examining the possibilities of the place.

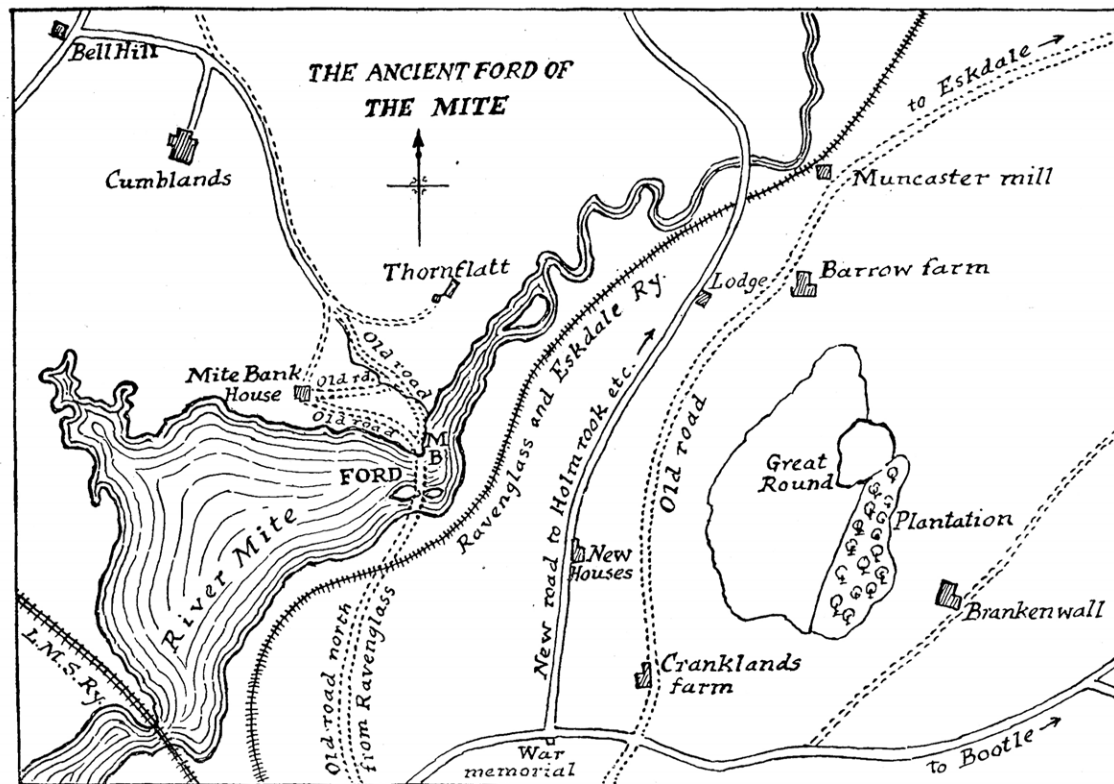
Now rains have descended and floods have scoured the river channel with such effect that several points of interest have been revealed by the washing away, for a few tides, of the mud concealing the causeway, which has shown up exceptionally plainly for what it is (or was, perhaps), a massively constructed work, enabling the crossing of the river Mite (the bed of which is mostly of soft mud hereabouts), to be made with safety and comfort at low tides.

The ford at the present time seems to have dropped out of local memory, and I have not seen any notice of it in topographical notes or descriptions of the district. Even Dr. Parker had not noticed its inconspicuous existence.

It is not marked on the 1 in. to the mile O.S. or the 6 in. to the mile O.S. The situation of the ford may be seen on Sheet LXXXII, N.E. of the 6 inch Cumberland O.S. at the point where the river widens out into a muddy lagoon at Mitebank Marsh. Here, under the *E* of the lettering of "River Mite" a lozenge-shaped sandbank is indicated, with a smaller one almost adjoining it on its east side. Between these two sandbanks, pointing almost due north, lies the causeway of the ford. The accompanying sketch map roughly indicates the ford and its surroundings and general course.

The causeway in the river bed would appear to have been constructed of blocks of stone finished with massive kerbs on either side; a quantity of stone metal is visible on the river-bed here suggestive of perhaps concrete or heavily rammed gravel as a surface. As the causeway leaves the river-bed the recent floods have chewed out a bite from the North bank, where along the edge of the muddy bank (indicated by *MB* on sketch map), the road is seen, its east kerb having fallen into the river recently. This section shows as a line of heavy, flat stones forming apparently the road bed, with another layer some 18 inches or 2 feet (of similar stones), above. It is not possible to see of what the intervening material consists, as owing to mud it cannot be approached closely enough for making out small details, but the two layers of large, flat stones are clearly visible from the opposite shore at low water.

It is of interest that during all the time I have known of this ford I have never seen it used (save by "Jammy Hernsew" and occasional adventurous cows), but last week, after I had been discussing it with a local wild-fowler, I saw him cross the river by it, easily and comfortably, except for the mud which has accumulated upon the causeway especially on its North approach. This man was interested, and showed me where the old road came



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down to the river (leaving Ravenglass at a point near the Grove, formerly marked by a gateway and a farm building), coming up on the North side on Mitebank Marsh, where it swings West towards a now deserted tenement known as Mitebank House, just before reaching which it winds easily up a grassy knoll (where its course is plainly visible under the turf), joining the lane leading from Cumblands to Thornflatt. It then heads towards Holmrook Shallows, where there was the first good ford* of the river Irt, probably joining the present high road somewhere north of Bell Hill. It will be seen that if the alignment Ravenglass-Moresby be plotted this ford is almost on the line taken, if the line be carried from the ford of the Esk at Waberthwaite Church *via* the Roman Bath Building at Walls. Overlooking it is the plateau on which is Great Round, on which it is very probable indeed the Romans had a look-out and signal post from which they could communicate with Moresby and other stations. On the S.E. slope of this plateau is a house called Branken Wall, suggestive of Roman connection, for somewhere in the construction of its buildings, as I was informed by the late Lord Muncaster, Roman building stones had been identified.

There is mention of Mitebank (? Ford) in a list of tolls collected at Ravenglass Fair in 1800, 1s. 2d.; the toll collected at the more modern ford (still in use, just west of the L.M.S. viaduct) over the Mite, known as Saltcotes, being 10s. 6d. (these *Trans.* N.S. xxi, p. 247). Two customary tenements known as Mitebank are dealt with in the Notebook of William Thomson of Thornflatt, which is a small estate overlooking the Mite, N.E. of the ford (these *Trans.* N.S. xiv, p. 291).

The present Ravenglass-Holmrook road *via* Muncaster

* There was a tidal ford available at low water over the Irt near Hall Carleton, N.W. of that tenement. It is marked on the 1" to the Mile O.S. Map, Barrow-in-Furness and Coniston, Sheet 18.



MITEBANK FORD.
West Kerb of Causeway.

Photo. by Mary C. Fair.

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mill (where the Mite is crossed by a bridge) is known as the "New Road," and has I conclude, been constructed within the last hundred or hundred and fifty years, possibly during the period when commons were enclosed and many roads were made. Seventy years or so ago there was a road running a few hundred yards east of the present War Memorial—Muncaster Mill line, which road has now totally disappeared together with two tenements situated near it, Cranklands and Barrow Farm. This old road turned eastwards at Muncaster Mill, running up into Eskdale on the south side of the Mite under Muncaster Fell. During the digging of a very deep drain for an engine pit at Murthwaite stone-crushing station of the Ravenglass and Eskdale Railway, a well-made road was cut through, with a good stone foundation and surface of rammed gravel. Have we here the main Roman Road leading from Ravenglass to Hardknott and Ambleside?

Much pack-horse traffic came into Ravenglass from Drigg *via* a pack-horse bridge over the Irt south of Drigg Church which is still there. Bell Hill and many of the Carleton Green tenements were taverns in pack-horse days, where trains of pack-horses could wait for the tide at Saltcotes or Mitebank to be low enough for the crossing. The Saltcotes-Bellhill road suggests that it may have been made sometime during the latter part of the 18th century or commencement of the 19th century. The Saltcotes ford and "road to Whitehaven" are shown on Lawson's Chart, 1803 (these *Trans.* N.S. xxii, p. 105), so the route was evidently in use then. It is now a well made road, but of little use as motors cannot ford the Mite even at low tide. Horse drawn traffic uses this ford regularly. In Robert Morden's map of Cumberland (Camden's *Britannia*, 1695) the bridges over the Irt at Holmrook and Santon Bridge are shown; no bridges or fords are indicated over the Esk, and Saltcotes ford over the Mite is not indicated; about the position of Mitebank Ford, however, there is a

break in the heavy black drawing of the river course which may indicate that the river can be forded there.

Should facilities be available for the study of old estate-maps and plans of this district, further information may be extracted therefrom concerning this Mitebank Ford. If any of our members know of such I shall be most grateful for any information, or particulars of likely sources of such information.
