

ART. IV.—*Excavations in High House paddock, Cumberland.* By BRENDA SWINBANK, B.A.

Read at Carlisle, May 3rd, 1952.

DURING the Centenary Pilgrimage of Hadrian's Wall, in July 1949, a new hypothesis as to the origin of the Vallum was outlined, namely that it was constructed along a line which had already been utilised by a "service road".¹ This hypothesis was not indeed original in its general conception, since antiquaries as early as John Horsley had noted that the course of the Vallum formed an excellent line for a road; but it was not until 1949 that an attempt was made, in the light of recent research on, and the progress of knowledge of, the Hadrianic frontier, to explain the lay-out of the Vallum in terms of the contemporary road-system. It will be convenient to quote Mr Birley's formulation of the hypothesis:—

"The line selected for the Vallum was that which had already been chosen for the Wall's immediate line of communication, which will be designated *the service road*; the general suitability of the Vallum's course for a line of communication has long been recognised, and excavation has now revealed the service road in many places, running on the south berm of the Vallum and sending off branch-roads to the forts and milecastles. The places where the close proximity of Wall and Vallum to one another has compelled the Romans to modify their basic designs . . . , and the pre-existence of the service road, and its selection as the line round which the Vallum was to be constructed, seem to provide the only logical explanation of the uncomfortable proximity of the two barriers in such stretches."²

The strongest evidence for the existence of a metalled service road was undoubtedly the heavy road-bottoming discovered on the south berm of the Vallum at High House

¹ Cf. Eric Birley, *The Centenary Pilgrimage &c.* (1949), 23 f.

² *Ibid.*, 24.

in 1936 and described in these *Transactions* in the following year.³ Excavation of the milecastle causeways at High House and Wallbowers had demonstrated the presence of gravel on the south berm of the Vallum at those points; and at a point 40 yards east of milecastle 50 (Turf Wall), surfacing was uncovered, apparently continuing in spasmodic patches further eastwards, on the south berm. In High House paddock both berms were trenched, at 75 and at 110 yards west of the east fence of the paddock:—

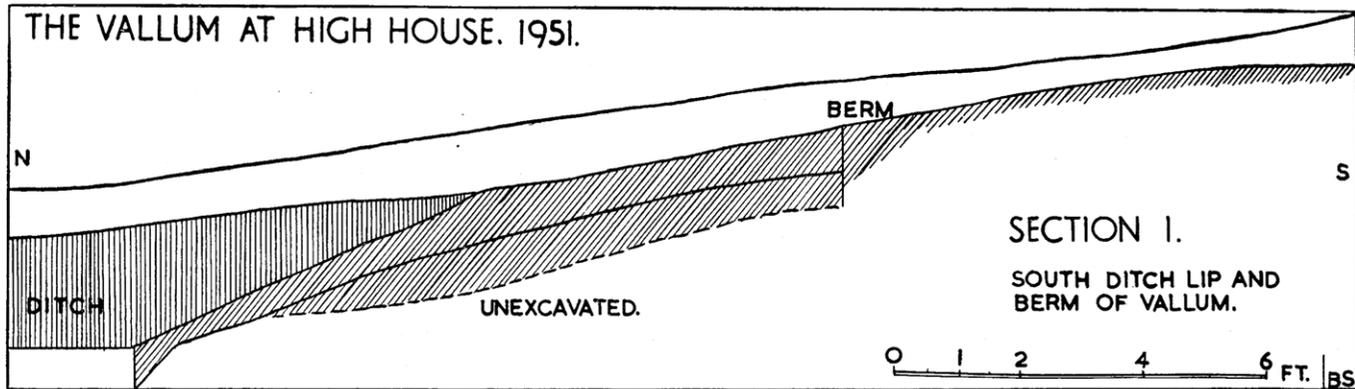
“Here the ground is sandy, and heavy road-bottoming, at least 18 feet wide, was discovered; while the south mound had also been revetted in stone, six courses of the clay-built walling remaining in position. This treatment of the south berm is so far unique, and will undoubtedly repay further study. The north berm, on the other hand, revealed no surfacing; while the north mound was kerbed with humus.”

Since no photographic record had been taken, the writer (then engaged in a comprehensive study of the Vallum and its problems) decided in 1951 to follow up the work of 1936, uncovering this road on the south berm and attempting to discover its relationship to the stone revetment. If the road were found to have preceded the revetment, the pre-existence of the “service road” would be virtually proved.

THE EXCAVATIONS.

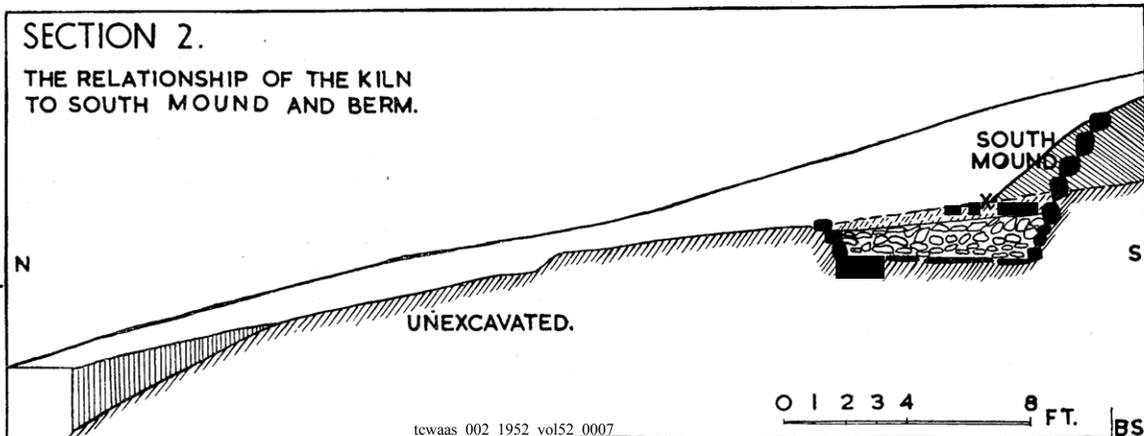
Trench I (fig. 1, top) was placed 84 yards west of the east fence of the paddock, between the old trenches of 1936, of which the more easterly was clearly visible on the ground. It seemed a strong probability that the road and revetment would be revealed, therefore. The trench was cut to cover the south lip of the Vallum ditch, the approximate position of which is visible on the surface, and to uncover any road-bottoming which might exist across the south berm. It should be remembered that at this point the Vallum slopes down considerably from south to north.

³ CW2 xxxvii 170 f.



KEY.

-  SUBSOIL.
-  GREY SILT.
-  MOUND UPCAST.
-  SUBSOIL REMOVED.
-  GROUND LEVEL & TOPSOIL.
-  KILN MASONRY.
-  DEBRIS.
-  X MOUND EAST OF KILN.



tcwaas 002 1952 vol52 0007

FIG. 1

The top-soil, of greyish-brown, light soil, soon gave way to a sandy, orange-grey material with very sparse, small stones set upon it. This was traced on its gradual slope downwards to the north for approximately 15 ft.; at that point its gradient altered to a sharper angle downwards, and a thick layer of grey silt, clearly representing the ditch-filling, commenced. The ditch had obviously been accumulating silt up to modern times. The slope of the sub-soil was still so gradual, and so unlike the standard original profile of the ditch, that it was in part removed in order to discover whether a more convincing lip existed. Further down, a sharper edge of pink boulder-clay was uncovered, but the softer, grey "sub-soil" ran right over it. Southwards, on the ditch-lip and berm, there was no distinct line between the "sub-soil" and the pink clay, but the two seemed to merge, suggesting that they were one and the same. The lack, not merely of heavy road-bottoming but even of light metal-ling, was unaccountable.

A gap of 2 ft. 6 in. was left at the south end of Trench I, and then Trench II was cut, 13 ft. long, to investigate the junction between the south berm and the south mound of the Vallum. The core of the mound, which was only partially uncovered, was of solid greyish-yellow material, clearly sub-soil dug from the ditch; it gradually became pinker towards the top. Immediately to the north of the mound a light grey material, with a clayey feel, abutted on to it; this was presumably a humus revetment. It diminished in thickness northwards, for a distance of 6 ft., but at 5 ft. from the south edge of the trench definite cobbling (pl. I, fig. 1) was set upon this light grey material as it gradually diminished. Both it and the cobbling petered out at approximately 9 ft. 4 in. from the end of the trench, and the sub-soil then resumed its natural course — a grey-yellowish or light brown pebbly, clayey substance, comparable to that of Trench I: mixed looking, but very solid and at least 2 feet thick.

E

There can be no reasonable doubt that the cobbling had been placed by human agency, and that it was part of the patrol-track, set immediately north of the south mound; but what was more important was, that neither road-bottoming nor revetment in stone was present. To avoid further waste of time, the more easterly of the 1936 trenches was next re-excavated.

The masonry revetment and mass of "road-bottoming", extending for 9 ft. to the north (i.e., to the limit of the trench), were soon uncovered. On the west side of the trench six courses of masonry were visible, on the east side only three, and they seemed to be falling outwards from their original position. But in the process of cleaning the revetment before photographing it, it became clear that the "falling" masonry was not in fact falling, but was proceeding in a curve to the north-east—and it was soon apparent that the so-called revetment was in fact a circular structure, set against the south mound. The light-coloured humus revetment of the mound had been partially cut away to allow the insertion of the wall of the structure, a kiln (cf. section, fig. 1, bottom, and plan, fig. 2). The whole of it was excavated, and the masonry was found to be neatly coursed, well-dressed ashlar typically Roman in execution. Eight courses existed just west of the original trench, but by and large only three or four courses remained on any but the southern side. It was clear, too, that the sub-soil of the south berm had been cut through to take the base of the kiln. Just east of its wall, the curve of the south mound, undisturbed since its original construction, reached the sub-soil at approximately the level of the top of the sixth course of stones (numbering the courses from top to bottom). Within the walls, at roughly the bottom of the sixth course, the "road-bottoming" commenced. On excavation it proved to be merely fallen masonry and débris from the walls of the kiln, and emphatically not a road surface. Its limits were within the kiln wall, roughly 9 ft. in diameter across the base.

PLAN OF KILN AT HIGH HOUSE.

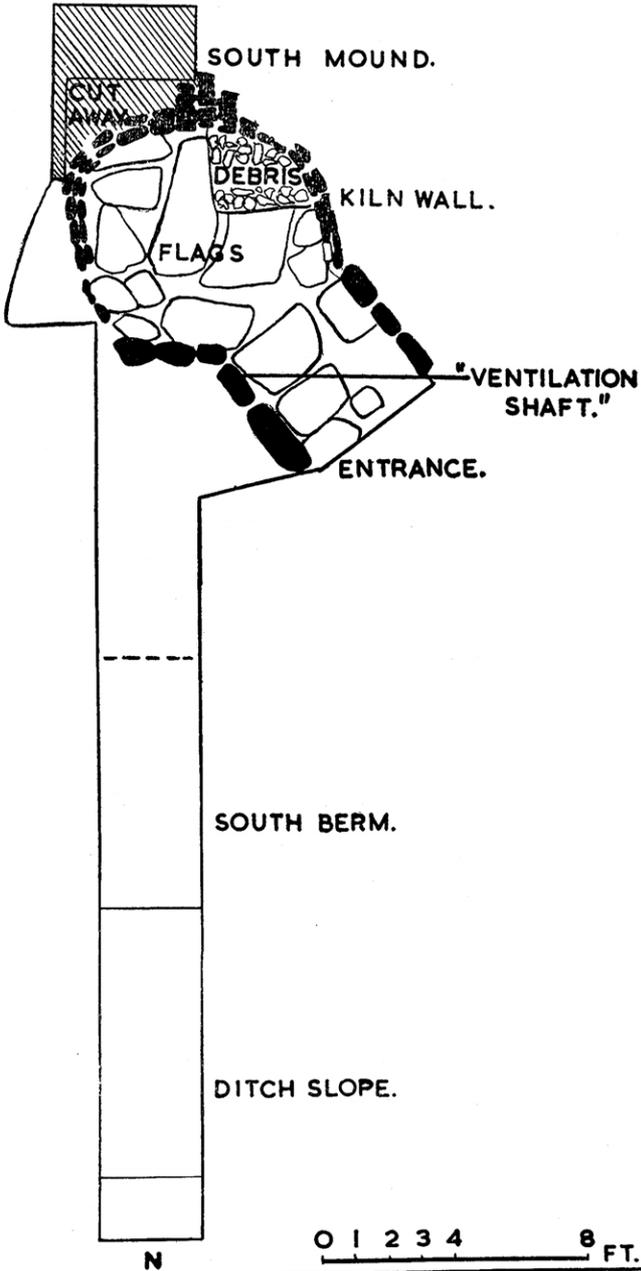


FIG. 2

Practically all the débris was removed, in order to exhibit the floor of the kiln—whinstone slabs covered by black, slushy silt, which also covered the débris. In the gaps between the slabs, and on the floor, was a softish pink material, of which a sample was taken for analysis⁴; with it was a small branch of some kind of wood.

The entrance was a small flagged passage, flanked by two walls which joined the oval kiln on the north-west. The large masonry of the passage-walls ended distinctly and simultaneously. Large blocks of building-stone filled the entrance, looking almost as if they were deliberate packing, though they were conceivably fallen material. On its east wall was a kind of flue or ventilation-shaft, which extended only for the width of the wall, and stopped short at the sub-soil bank of the south berm, behind it. It apparently had not reached the open air; its purpose is not clear (cf. pl. III, fig. 2).

The trench was extended due northwards, to uncover the south berm and the lip of the Vallum. The sub-soil was a greyish-orange boulder-clay, similar to that in Trenches I and II. The masonry of the kiln on its northern side reached slightly above the level of the berm, into which it had been inserted. The kiln occupies the position of the patrol-track, and may well have removed its cobbling. Apart from sparse natural pebbles, there was no sign of metalling across the south berm. The latter's slope is here considerable, as far as the lip of the ditch, where once more the sub-soil was traced gradually down the ditch-slope; the ditch itself was filled with grey silt (cf. sec. 2, fig. 1, bottom).

The report on the work done in 1936 did not state whether the second trench dug in that year exhibited the same phenomena as the first. It was not possible to detect the old trench in 1951, but a small trench was cut at approximately 110 yards west of the fence: only sub-soil, without metalling or cobbling of any kind, and a reduced mound with no stone revetment, were discovered.

⁴ Cf. Dr Smythe's report, p. 54 below.

CONCLUSIONS.

The most convincing evidence for a substantial road along the south berm has thus been destroyed. Similarly, the only evidence for a stone revetment of the south mound has been proved incorrect.⁵ These two facts must necessarily alter or modify any conception concerning the nature and purpose of the Vallum. That a patrol-track existed, at least sporadically, has been confirmed, however.

The presence of a kiln does not in any way affect the purpose of the Vallum, for it is clearly later in construction than the latter, utilising and cut into the south mound and berm. Its neat masonry is clearly of Roman date, but in post-Roman times it would have been a simple matter to remove Roman masonry from milecastle 50 on the Stone Wall, only a stone's throw away, in order to erect a kiln in this more sheltered and therefore more suitable position. Similar but not identical kilns have been discovered in Roman structures *per lineam Valli*—two in Housesteads fort, one in Great Chesters, one in the thickness of the Wall itself at Heddon-on-the-Wall; and there is a recently discovered example in the east rampart of Birdoswald fort (which provides the closest parallel to the present kiln, though its entrance is quite different). It is unjustifiable, however, to assume that because similar structures have elsewhere been revealed in a Roman context the kilns must all be Roman. In every case they destroy some Roman structure, and can thus be late Roman at earliest. One of those at Housesteads is clearly medieval. Moreover, recent research⁶ has shown that corn-drying kilns “in recent times. . . were to be found throughout the west from the Shetlands to Ireland and Wales”. That the High House kiln was for corn-drying seems a reasonable supposition, though there

⁵ In May 1952 the writer discovered genuine stone revetment of the Vallum mounds close to milecastle 23, in Northumberland.

⁶ Cf. Sir Lindsay Scott's paper in *Antiquity*, 1951, 196 f.

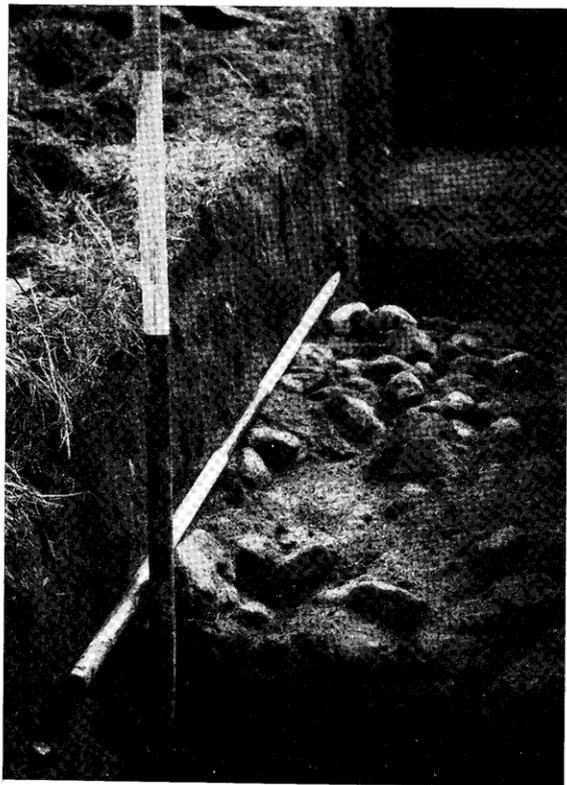
is nothing (except the low temperature of the firing of the kiln-lining) to support a definite conclusion. Dr Smythe's analysis, quoted below, makes it certain that the kiln has not been associated with either lime-burning or metal-working. It seems likely to have been connected not with the garrison of milecastle 50, but rather with a farm at High House, but whether with the existing one or a predecessor, it is impossible to judge.

The writer wishes to thank Mr Eric Birley and Professor I. A. Richmond for their help in the formulation and discussion of these conclusions.

APPENDIX.

Dr. J. A. Smythe, formerly Reader in Metallurgy at King's College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, has kindly provided the following analysis:—

“The sample is kiln-lining, fired at a very low temperature and still containing a good deal of the wood with which the clay was reinforced. It has not been associated with either lime-burning or metal-working.”



PL. I, 1.—Cobbling in Trench II.



PL. I, 2.—Kiln set in south mound, looking south.



PL. II, 1.—Kiln, looking south, showing debris.



PL. II, 2.—Kiln, debris and flagged floor.



PL. III, 1.—Kiln entrance looking north.



PL. III, 2.—Ventilation shaft in kiln entrance.