

ART. VI – *A Roman Road from Kendal to Ambleside. A Field Survey Part 2: Broadgate to Ambleside*

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THE attempt to re-locate the route of the Roman road between the known forts at Kendal and Ambleside was commenced by the writers in September 1989. Part I, “K-A1 – Kendal to Broadgate”, was reported upon in these *Transactions*.¹ The remainder of the route “K-A2”, is described below.

Research, using both visual and archaeological-dowsing techniques, was principally carried out from public roads, footpaths, or rights of way. Particular gratitude is owed to the land-owners and farmers who in addition generously permitted inspection of their fields.

Broadgate to the Trout Beck

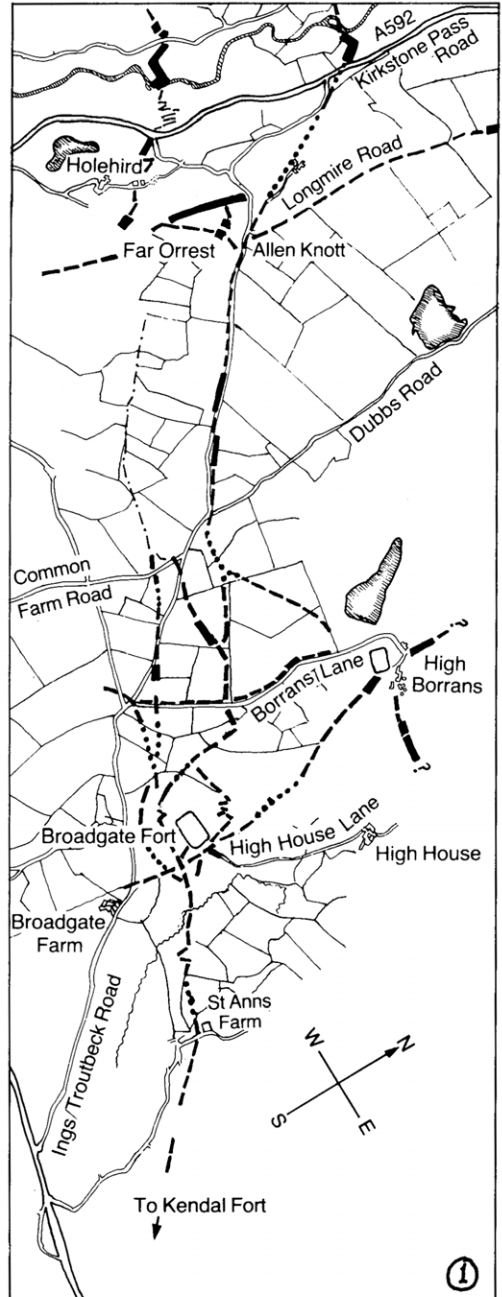
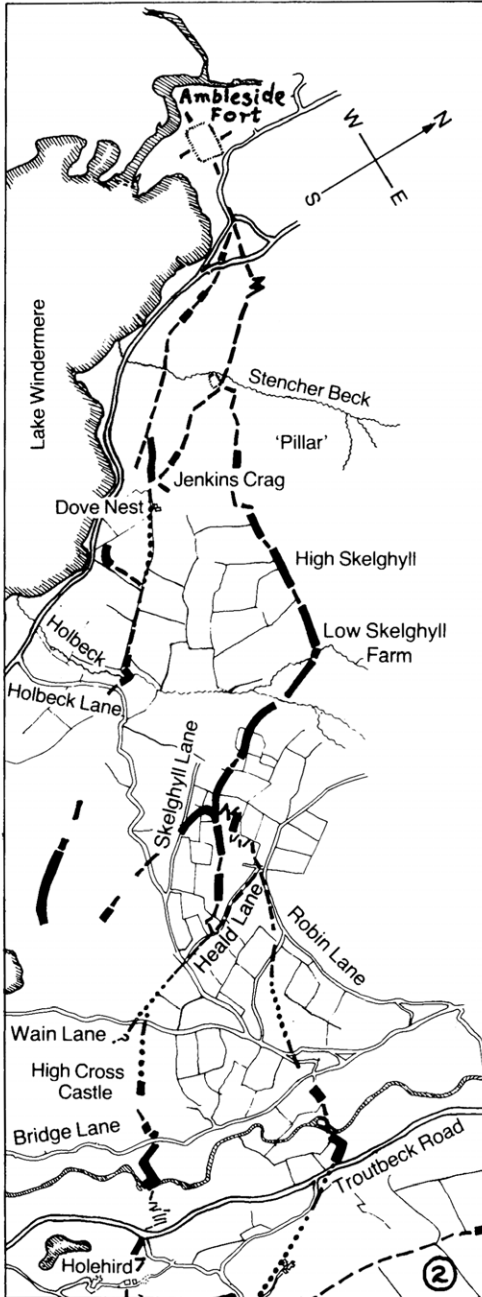
In Part I, “K-A1” was described running downhill from St Anne’s Farm (OS 441996) in a generally north-north-westerly direction. At OS 437998, it fords a beck close south of a waterworks overspill tank. What appears to be original stonework edges the ramp on the western side of the stream.

Heavily overlaid by modern tipping, the course of the roadway thence rises unseen towards High House Lane, approximately 100 metres from which K-A1 was recently found to divide not into two, as stated in Part I, but into three.

The southernmost branch, which the writers have dubbed “v.T”, crosses High House Lane (itself apparently on a Roman alignment at this point) some 300 m north of Broadgate Farm, and (see below) was found to be an extension of the route discovered by Arthur Thornton.²

The wider central route, K-A2, which crosses High House Lane some 60 m north of the southernmost route, is flanked by a stone wall running uphill, then traverses the north-east end of a farm track before making five (now invisible) zig-zag legs up the incline in the next field. Surmounting this, it continues in a north-north-westerly direction into a dip, beyond which it is joined by a link-track (q.v.) branching off the northernmost of the three original divisions.

The northern branch crosses High House Lane 400 m north of Broadgate Farm at OS 435999, passes under the wall on the west side of the lane, then bends sharply right parallel to the east face of the “ancient walled enclosure” first noted by Mr Thornton.³ At the north-east corner thereof, this route itself splits into three. One heads towards High House, a short length of the agger remaining exposed to view near the eastern field wall. The middle (and widest) way veers west of north towards High Borrans, where a short section is also discernable, and where outlines of a small two-ditch fort or camp were found by dowsing. The third, very minor and tortuous track (perhaps civil rather than military), winds westwards over rough ground to rejoin the central roadway of K-A2, at OS 432001.



Thorntons Route - - - - -

Visible Road ————— Dowsed Road - - - - - Assumed Road •••••••

Sketch Map drawn by N. Gledhill.

Broadgate Fort?

The writers also investigated Mr Thornton's "enclosure", and were able visually to make out three curved corners underlying the more recent rough walling. The arc of the fourth (N.E.) corner was found by dowsing. A single encircling (presently invisible) ditch, six geometrically positioned gateways, and two small areas of what may prove to have been hypocaust bases were also detected, one of the latter outside the enclosure itself, in an area of uneven, stony ground crossed by what appear to be ancient drainage trenches.

The complex is strongly suggestive of a standard Roman fort, only slightly smaller (approximately 10,043 m²) than that at Ambleside (approx. 11,914 m²). The indications of six Roman-period roadways converging on the area may imply an establishment of some importance. The writers are most grateful for Mr Thornton's work and co-operation concerning this unexplored site.

From the above, it can be seen that the Roman "through-route" from Kendal to Ambleside divided at the Broadgate site into two roughly parallel roads ("v.T" and "K-A2"), averaging 300 m/350 m apart, until they pass either side of the hill-fort on Allen Knott.

Mr Thornton's Route ("v.T")

After crossing High House Lane near OS 435998, this southern and slightly narrower of the two principal routes angles through a field, and across the south-west end of a farm track, before traversing lumpy terrain towards Borrans Lane. It crosses this 90 m north-east of the Ings/Troutbeck minor road. The latter itself runs straight for 150 m directly over the Roman alignment, starting at OS 428001. Looking back from here, south-south-eastwards into the corner of the field on the north-east side of the modern carriageway, the agger may be observed as a low ridge in the grass.

At the north-western end of its straight stretch, the Ings/Troutbeck road bends right; the Roman course, approximately 6.5 m wide, continues straight. A slight rising of the ground under one field wall is the only visible indication east of the Moorhowe/Common Farm minor road. Over the west wall of the latter, as noted by Mr Thornton, is a clearly visible strip of agger (now barely 5 m wide), crossing a small depression on a westerly heading. Immediately beyond this, a short curve of Roman road, which links the main section of K-A2 (see below), also remains visible.

Mr Thornton's route ("v.T") continues west-north-west as he described, then north-westwards, to a point 300 m south-east of Allen Knott, at OS 416007. The present writers happened upon its north-western continuation just beyond Far Orrest farm (OS 413008), while working on another suspected Roman roadway coming from Bowness-on-Windermere up to the west flank of Allen Knott ("BW-AK").

Further west, near the Far Orrest access drive above Holehird Gardens, "v.T" can be located visually as a levelling of the slope beneath the south-western boundary wall. Used briefly by the farm lane, the Roman trace was then found to wind down towards the Holehird out-buildings (OS 411010). Further hairpin bends were traced in the next field, where it becomes a short length of still-used track, just before diagonally crossing the artificially raised modern A592.

Plunging even more steeply down the fellside in ten more invisible but very tight zig-zags, it encounters the Trout Beck immediately west of the cottages at OS 408012.

There are no clear indications of the method of crossing this often turbulent torrent, but the route was again detected on the west bank at a height suggesting the employment of a bridge. Large boulders and bedrock shelves on the alignment, plus a division of the stream such as is sometimes formed in the lee of a bridge pier immediately below that position, may be significant.

Once across the beck, the route made a small hairpin bend, on the eastern edge of which a stone-built aperture extends under the revetment of the Roman road. Its somewhat collapsing sides are corbelled inwards from a lower width of some 90 cm, to a height of about a metre, extending inwards about one metre. Opening directly onto what is virtually a precipice, its purpose and date are puzzling.

The roadway (varying between 3.4 m and 5.5 m wide), climbs westwards up the steep side of the gorge, plainly visible for 90 m as a single, sweeping track among the trees, to where it bends more northerly into a sloping field at OS 407012. Passing close above a stone-lined natural spring, it ascends on a visible platform, and crosses Bridge Lane under the field gate and the High Cross Castle Youth Hostel entrance.

Traced round two further zig-zags, “v.T” straightens just clear of the artificial embankment of the castle’s carriage-terrace. At some stage, a short stretch was used as a footpath from the house to the main gate, and lines of moss over stone in two separate places (one well off the remains of the pathway) betray the Roman edging.

The route passes north of the castle, then close south of the septic tank in the next field (edge banking discernible), before heading north-westwards, flanked by a field wall. Flattening of the contours was noted under the next cross-wall. The flanking wall continues to follow “v.T” until the latter crosses Wain Lane at OS 402015.

Curving more northerly along a further field wall, it climbs to cross Holbeck Lane at OS 401018, after which an ancient walled track, Heald Lane, still uses the Roman footings. Within a few metres of Robin Lane, at OS 399022, a continuation of it is joined by the aforementioned wider roadway of K-A2.

Some 250 m lower down Heald Lane than the above junction, “v.T” turns slightly left across a field, and under a gateway into a walled enclosure. At the far end of this it enters a National Trust wood, skirting the hillside in a clearly defined, curved pathway for some 120 m before hill slippage obscures it. At the far boundary wall of the wood (OS 397021), revetting of its “downhill” edge is still visible. Beyond the wall, grass-covered remains of a ramp may be followed towards a small stone enclosure in the next field. At this point it joins the upper “main” route of K-A2.

The writers construe the stretch from Heald Lane as a later “short-cut”, avoiding the considerable hairpin bends of the main route which are described below.

K-A2 from Broadgate to Holbeck Bridge

The wider of the two main Roman routes (with agger-plus-ditches width readings of 7 m), crosses High House Lane as earlier described, and passes just east of the Broadgate “fort” up onto higher ground.

Over the wall on the west side of where it eventually crosses Borrans Lane at OS

430003, part of the agger may be made out, built up and revetted where it traverses a dip. The route now proceeds invisibly, abreast of the long stone wall running towards Moor Howe.

At the far end of this large field, K-A2 veers slightly left, and in the next enclosure describes a double bend down an incline, half way along which, at OS 428004, it divides. From below, it appears as a ridge in the grass. The left-hand branch heads approximately due west to the southern corner of Bishop Plantation, angles obliquely across the Moorhowe Road, and just before the modern junction with the minor road to Common Farm, zig-zags down and across the latter into the field below, where as previously stated, traces of it can be observed curving round to join "v.T".

The main K-A2 alignment from the bifurcation at OS 428004 swings back onto its old west-north-westerly alignment (along the field wall) and holds this until just before it is crossed by the next wall. A slight re-alignment westerly was here traced, leading onto Moor Howe itself. A minor Roman roadway from High Borrans, 800 m to the north-east, joins it at this point.

K-A2 was next discovered at the conjunction of Dubb's Road and Moorhowe Road, where it has had briefly to divert south of the true alignment to avoid outcropping rock on the flank of Moor Howe. 200 m beyond Dubb's Road, at OS 422007, the Moorhowe Road makes a slight bend left-and-right, and in the field to the north-east, one side of the agger and its bordering ditch remains visible as a low ridge and shallow linear depression in the grass.

The remainder of the Moorhowe Road appears to have been constructed over the Roman foundations until it passes close north of Allen Knott. About 1.5 kilometres past Dubb's Road, over the wall on the south-west side, the Roman footings may be observed as a flattened area where the modern road surface has wavered slightly to the right.

North of the rocky bluff of Allen Knott, approximately 50 m before the junction with Longmire Road, K-A2 veers north-westwards into the field north of the modern roadway.

The route passes south-west of Low Longmire farm, to be briefly used once more by the modern Ings/Troutbeck road, before traversing under the A592 Kirkstone Pass road at OS 411019. From here it descends to the Trout Beck via the same winding route downhill taken by the present public footpath.

After winter rain had eroded the surface of the latter, a water-worn "section" was noted beneath the modern path, cutting through a neat layer of small stones compacted into a harder, coarser substructure; exactly similar to construction found elsewhere on the Roman route. Some sizeable lumps of iron slag had been dislodged from this layer, possibly originating from works at Allen Knott.

On reaching the Trout Beck at approximately OS 409020, the modern pathway crosses on two wooden bridges, but dowsing revealed that while the Roman crossing started at the same point on the east bank, its line diverged across the central island to meet the west bank marginally upstream of the existing bridge system. From here K-A2 aligns exactly with the straight part of the present lane, and so climbs to meet the Troutbeck Bridge to Troutbeck road. Its continuation is currently followed by field divisions, while the modern lane veers right.

A minor zig-zag raises the route across Bridge Lane (south of Town End) at OS 407019, and another takes it under Holbeck Lane, 100 m westward, at OS 406019. From

here K-A2 curves up and around the contours, meeting the present Robin Lane at approximately OS 401022. This uses the Roman course for barely 100 m, before veering away north-westwards, while K-A2 again holds directly onwards, crossing the top of Heald Lane, as mentioned above. It is here joined by the small link-road coming up from "v.T".

Continuing westwards over a rise, K-A2 then hairpins rapidly down a natural dip (OS 398022), at the bottom of which, close to the small stone enclosure, it is met by "v.T". At some stage, from a point half way down the dip, K-A2 was given an alternative descent, breaking northwards for 100 metres, then dropping in further zig-zags to meet the (?)earlier way, close south of the house named on large scale maps as "Primrose Cottage". Surface slippage obscures both routes.

Another Roman roadway (BW-SL) was detected joining K-A2 here, coming up from the south under the Primrose Cottage driveway. When traced back, the origin was found to be Bowness-on-Windermere, 6 kilometres to the south-south-east.

From in front of Primrose Cottage, at OS 396022, the course of K-A2 now becomes plainly visible for quite long stretches, first curving north-westwards, then passing along a field wall at the end of which edge-banking and the remains of some excellent paving were noted. Beyond the field gate some 80 m further on, one curving edge of the route is visible.

Across the next two fields, almost the full width of the Roman road still shows as a grass-grown track curving northwards to Low Skelghyll farm, at OS 394026. Passing behind the present farm house, it may again be spotted slanting along the contour, to meet and subsequently be used by Skelghyll Lane.

It must be pointed out that with the exception of the one section in the National Trust woodland mentioned above, from Robin Lane to Low Skelghyll the route described crosses strictly private land. There is no public access, nor is it encouraged; the writers were very privileged to have been granted special access to complete their research, for which they are extremely indebted to the farmer.

Fortunately the two sections showing as "green lanes" on either side of Low Skelghyll farm house can be very clearly viewed from the public footpath on Skelghyll Lane near the Holbeck bridge.

Holbeck Bridge to Stencher Beck

The course of K-A2 crosses the Holbeck at OS 392028, alongside but upstream of the present bridge, and remains defined with varying accuracy by Skelghyll Lane in a westerly direction, though over-built by parts of the present High Skelghyll farm buildings.

The modern lane continues westwards as guidance, following the natural contours forming the south-eastern end of Wansfell.

At OS 386029 the Roman route departs suddenly from Skelghyll Lane, and was traced skirting downhill round a large rock outcrop in a series of four quick hairpin turns. It is re-joined by the modern lane immediately east of Jenkin's Crag, which latter forms a fine natural viewpoint overlooking the northern half of Windermere. From here the

Ambleside Roman fort is well in sight, as are Belle Isle and the Falbarrow area north of Bowness.

Dowsing techniques indicated that what may have been a rectangular wooden structure once stood on the rock surface, keyed into six still-visible rock-hewn post-holes. (Jenkin's Crag would seem a sensible site for a Roman signal station, but no other visual evidence could be found.)

Where K-A2 passes close north of Jenkin's Crag, the National Trust has cleared and in part renovated the pathway, bringing to light a few metres of quite typical Roman-type construction, edged with narrow, stone lined ditches. As in other parts of K-A2 in this awkward terrain, width varies as it squeezes between outcropping rocks. Measurements at one point were as follows:

North-side fosse 25 cm wide, with side-depths of 46 cm (rock-cut) and 26 cm (stone-built); an agger width of 4 m 25 cm (over 5 m near-by), now surfaced with compacted clay and small stones; and a south-side fosse 28 cm wide, with side-depths of 23 cm and 25 cm, both stone-built.

Although heavily reconstructed, large stone blocks separated by comparatively long, narrower ones form the ditch banking, where it was not rock-cut. Mr David Owen of the National Trust, who supervised the work, assured the writers that each of these edging stones was replaced exactly as it was found.

From Jenkin's Crag, K-A2 continues with Skelghyll Lane until the latter forks northwards at OS 382030, to zig-zag down to a bridge over the cascading Stencher Beck. The Roman road continues straight, but descends very steeply, cut through bedrock, now bare. There is evidence of tooling, and (surprisingly, considering the alarming incline of this short stretch) traces of what appear to be rutting by iron-shod tyres, where surfacing material had worn thin in antiquity.

On approaching the bridge, the writers were puzzled to find the dowsed trace of K-A2 turning sharply downhill instead of crossing the beck, then descending parallel to the stream for some 75 m to OS 381030. At this point it bends sharply right, and crosses via a natural rock ford. Several interesting features were here noted.

Firstly, just before the crossing, K-A2 is joined by a track (a footpath today, yet seemingly of Roman origin), linking it again with the aforementioned Bowness/Ambleside Roman road, BW-A, just above Dove Nest, some 500 m through the wood to the south-east, and near which an almost undamaged 10 m length of agger-and-fosse remains visible.

Secondly, the footings of a rectangular structure, measuring approximately 11 m × 11.5 m, were noted by the downhill side of the bend. It appears to have had a central division, and outworks off its northern corner. Large trenches (waterways?) lead round and from the latter, and traces of what may have been conduits were dowsed right across the K-A2 roadway from a small, round, flat area. This was interpreted as having been the site of a (now totally blocked) regulating pond with weir and millrace; all features suggesting the remains of a watermill – in some way associated with the Roman road.

Stencher Beck to Ambleside

Having forded Stencher Beck, K-A2 loops briefly uphill, still used for about 50 m by

the continuation of Skelghyll Lane, before striking across a level strip of woodland. Levelling was noted beneath a stone wall some 10 m south-west of the present lane.

The traces proceed (invisibly) across an open field in a generally west-north-westerly direction for a further 70 m, fording a minor beck at a particularly level place, and thence to the top of a dip in the field's contours. Dowsing techniques clearly picked out a six-bend zig-zag taking the road down the dip, to what is presently the boundary wall of a bungalow ("The Moorings"). Below the latter, K-A2 cuts westbound across the A591 at OS 378033.

Heading straight towards the Ambleside fort (now a mere 450 m distant), its line was further dowsed across the modern car park, near the gateway of which it is joined by BW-A, the Roman road from Bowness-on-Windermere. (The writers have traced a Roman route running the length of the lake's east side from Newby Bridge, near which they have recently found traces of two Roman forts, on which they hope to report, along with that roadway, in due course.)

At Waterhead, K-A/BW-A together proceed due west, passing over a rise immediately on the northern side of the present A5075, which has been cut into the bedrock. The final stretch was then traced across the parkland and field to the eastern gateway of the Ambleside fort, following almost exactly the line indicated by H.S. Cowper, in the illustration accompanying his paper on Roman Finds at Waterhead.⁴

Discussion

A great deal of K-A, the Kendal to Ambleside Roman road, has been rendered invisible by overgrowing, surface slippage, erosion, or total removal by man, not to mention being largely un-maintained for some 1,600 years. The writers are impressed by how much can still be seen, particularly towards the Ambleside end.

The entire route is fraught with difficulties presented by the lumpy, rocky, and often boggy Cumbrian terrain, aggravated in Roman times by indigenous oak-scrub and woodland. The superlative technical abilities of the Roman surveyors and engineers, more used as they were to driving ruler-straight highways through the country south of Cumbria, is demonstrated by the fact that despite the steep topography encountered, K-A is never more than 2.5 kilometres off the direct 19.2 km line from fort to fort. The total distance by the Roman route is approximately 22.8 km, whereas the shortest distance by modern roads is 23.1 km.

Most of the zig-zagging sections constructed by the Romans on steep inclines have been eroded away or covered by land-spill. The indications found suggested extremely brief and often surprisingly numerous diversions from the principal alignment of the route. Today's road engineers would take much longer "tacks", to use a nautical analogy, with fewer hairpin bends, if traversing the same slopes. The writers conclude that Roman engineers bore in mind the need to clear the ground on either side of their route to the usual bow-shot distance, and that this considerable work was minimised by zig-zagging inside the narrowest possible lateral parameters.

Fords and bridges seem to have been employed as necessary, and there is evidence of good flat paving in some places and pebble surfacing in others, as well as much rock-cutting. Wayside springs, often stone-lined, are plentiful.

The incidence of dual or parallel routes may perhaps be the result of original roads being superseded for various reasons, during the 300 or so years of Roman occupation.

Dowsing techniques, which tend to show up these ancient routes where visual checking is either impossible or less easy, are currently resulting in the discovery of an astonishing (not to say embarrassing) number of hitherto unsuspected Roman-period roads and forts in the area. Roads constructed later display notably different dowsing characteristics.⁵

These findings would seem to suggest a significantly larger military presence in south-east Cumbria than was previously estimated, together with a sizeable civil population supplying the Roman troops.

Notes and References

¹ *CW2*, xci, 49–57.

² *CW2*, lxxxix, 37–40.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *CW2*, ii, 31–37.

⁵ Roman roads consistently show typical statutory widths throughout their lengths, depending on their status, except where topography causes unavoidable constrictions. The writers have detected what appears to be a narrow outlying “berm” or drainage trench (?), always on the uphill side but quite usually on both sides of all Roman roads they have inspected. This is invariably at a distance of 12½ paces (10 metres) from the fosse bordering the agger, regardless of road status or width. Later roads do not display this feature and are of comparatively random widths.

