

ART. V – *The Roman road from Ravenglass to Ambleside in Lower Langdale: a suggested surviving fragment*

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**D**ESPITE traversing some of the most visited landscape in England, the course of the Roman road from Ravenglass to Ambleside has never been definitively fixed in lower Langdale, between Skelwith and the Ambleside fort. This paper attempts to resolve that difficulty, placing the road on the south bank of the Brathay at a point well downstream of Skelwith. Such a placing has implications for river crossing arrangements at the head of the lake during the Roman period.

R. G. Collingwood, writing in *Transactions* in 1921, discussed the whole route of the Roman road from Wrynose to the fort at Ambleside.<sup>1</sup> Unable to find physical remains for most of its course, he offered a “reconstruction”.<sup>2</sup> After the road reached the low land of Langdale proper at Colwith Bridge, he proposed that it mounted Colwith Brow up the very obvious terrace (still the only road shown on the 1850 OS map<sup>3</sup>), and then descended on and just below the line of the modern Coniston road to Skelwith, a route partly followed by modern tracks. From Skelwith, he acknowledged that a line running south of the Brathay and so heading directly east to the fort was the most direct route, but was able to find “no trace of any road along the south bank . . ., though the opportunities for observation are extremely good”,<sup>4</sup> and met the same difficulty in the wide and often flooded meadow that lies immediately opposite the west gate of the Ambleside fort. Given the absence of remains, he with seeming reluctance proposed a crossing of the Brathay at Skelwith, and a route eastward from there on the north bank, crossing the Rothay “presumably by a ford”<sup>5</sup> close to the site of the modern bridge which gives access to Langdale.

Writing in 1947, I. A. Richmond<sup>6</sup> was chiefly concerned to offer an account of the central section of the route from Ravenglass to Ambleside, this being then under threat from forestry. The account of that section of the road is detailed and is based on explorations in the company of local enthusiasts. As a brief coda, and on the basis, as he points out, of three days of walking alone, Richmond offers his ideas on the route east of Wrynose. Although accepting Collingwood’s identification of road remains in Little Langdale beck, he systematically rejects each of Collingwood’s suggestions as to route. Of the proposed section from Colwith to Skelwith, after examining the tracks, he “was not only unable to discern any hint of Roman structure, but came to the very firm conclusion that no earlier structure had occupied their line”.<sup>7</sup> He proposes an alternative and roundabout route keeping close to the river all the way to Skelwith. He then rejects as firmly a route on the north bank of the Brathay between Skelwith and Clappersgate: “Any course along the north bank between Skelwith and Clappersgate seems out of the question. The existing narrow road had to quarry away some heavy bluffs at Nanny Brow and Brunthow Crag”.<sup>8</sup> Inescapably he must therefore nominate a south bank route, although he does so only tentatively: “It may however be suggested that east of

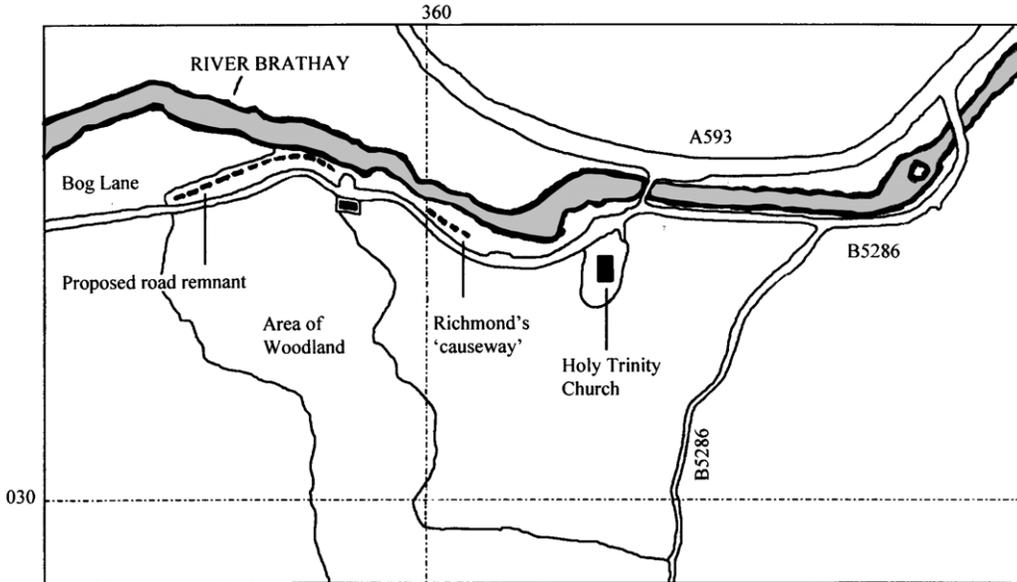


FIG. 1. Schematic map of section of the suggested Roman road fragment.

Skelwith Bridge a course slightly north of Bog Lane is possible, and it may be observed that to north of this modern road, in the bend just west of Holy Trinity Church, there are indications of a causeway over sixteen feet wide.”<sup>9</sup>

I. D. Margary in general reverts to Collingwood’s line but, perhaps wisely given the tone of debate, avoids making any suggestion as to which bank of the Brathay the road may follow east of Skelwith.<sup>10</sup>

The present paper seeks to confirm Richmond’s suggestion of a course north of Bog Lane, on the basis of strikingly well preserved remains lying in woodland some 0.5 km further west than his “indications of a causeway just west of Holy Trinity Church”.

### Location

Holy Trinity Church stands on the south side of the Brathay some 0.5 km west (upstream) of Clappersgate, on the more easterly of two rock bluffs running down to the river from the south (NY 362033). It is readily reached over a footbridge across the Brathay from the A593. It overlooks a paved minor road, Bog Lane, which runs westward along the south bank of the river towards Skelwith.

Just west (upstream) of the church the river bows briefly to the south, Richmond’s “bend just west of Holy Trinity Church”, while the lane takes a more pronounced curve in the same direction. It is towards the western end of the area of woody waste-land thus created between road and river that Richmond’s suggested causeway is to be found, at about NY 361034. The alleged remains are still quite visible from the road, though they are now far from striking and are certainly ambiguous. Upstream of this bow the river runs dead straight north of west for some 500 metres.

Some 200 metres west of the church the second bluff descends to the river from the south, Bog Lane climbing over it. West of this bluff Bog Lane runs across fields between stone walls on a straight course south of west. It is round the base of this western bluff that the remains discussed in this paper are located, most notably at and around NY 358034. Conveniently for identification, a row of cottages now stands on the south side of the modern road, half-way across the western bluff, with private parking opposite. The remains described all lie west of these. A permitted path now allows convenient access from west and east to the chief remains.

The oldest available OS large-scale map, that of 1850,<sup>11</sup> shows Bog Lane and nearby field/wood boundaries to be as now, but does not show the cottages nor of course the permitted path.

### The Site

Approaching the site from the west, as Bog Lane reaches the wooded western bluff and climbs eastward across it, a permitted pathway (NY 357034) allows access down to the left. This at once descends towards striking signs of an extended terrace running south-west to north-east, the western end of which appears to have been eroded away by the rill running to the west of the bluff. The whole extended structure is heavily wooded, and difficult to access in summer. Its south-western end is difficult to access in all seasons and also involves a slight trespass. The line of the structure suggests that it previously continued westward under what is now the wall of Bog Lane (on a pre-1850 line).

The terrace is dry in all weather and river conditions, appears to be of compacted gravel, is seven to eight metres wide, and to the south-west end its surface is noticeably domed in cross-section. On its north-west (down-slope) edge it is supported by a substantial kerbing of weathered stones, beyond which lies a narrow alluvial meadow on a lower level, with the river beyond. The kerb and terrace run dead straight for some 120 metres from south-west to north-east, after which there is a slight change of alignment towards the east, starting a straight section of a further 94 metres, closing steadily with the river. There is then a short break of two metres in the north-west kerb where the stone edging appears to have been bent back at some stage like a half-open door to allow access to the river. Thereafter there is an immediate further 30% turn towards the east. The remains continue on a further straight alignment of 36 metres to the end of the bluff, which is then rounded in a 17 metres long bend. The width round the headland appears to be reduced to just under five metres.

As the terrace approaches the end of the bluff, and so nears the river, the north-western kerbing becomes much more substantial, rising above terrace level until it is a major buttressing barrier of up to one metre high as the rock that ends the bluff is approached and rounded. Bare rock of the Borrowdale series on the right is cut back probably by glacial action; the effect is to allow almost level access round the end of the bluff. There is bare rock underfoot in places, with signs of scouring by the river in spate, and there is no longer any substantial sign of gravelling or other road base. To the east of the bluff the permitted path departs right to return to the modern road, and the remains are immediately overlaid by a built-up parking place for the cottages. We are now some 300 metres east of Holy Trinity church, and only about

200 metres west of the beginning of the “indications of a causeway over 16 feet wide” reported by Richmond, the gap comprising a section of bare weathered rock with small trees immediately adjacent to the river.

Figure 1 is a somewhat schematic map of the relevant area, with both the proposed road remains and Richmond’s “indications of a causeway” marked for clarity.

## Discussion

There are clearly large-scale remains of an old road round the bluff north of the Bog Lane. The 1850 OS map demonstrates that any such roadway had been superseded by 1850, since it shows the modern road-line only. Yet the remains appear strikingly well-engineered for a medieval or early modern structure. They appear to comprise a very substantial and well drained terrace along the base of the bluff at its western side, some seven to eight metres wide for most of its length and buttressed by a kerb to the down-hill side, on a series of straight alignments, and in all some 270 metres in length. The remains are almost completely level, large scale, consistent in width with remains on Wrynose described by Richmond,<sup>12</sup> and on straight alignments. They are proposed as remains of the Ambleside/Ravenglass road.

The date of the barrier round the end of the bluff, which is presumably a (very necessary) protection against flood damage, is intriguing. It continues the kerbing, and appears to be made of similar and no doubt immediately local material, probably won from the adjacent alluvium. Its construction must have involved much labour. It may be of much later date than the terrace, added as late as the early nineteenth century to protect a roadway much damaged over centuries by the river in spate, but it is intriguing to speculate that it may in fact be Roman. In any event, it must precede the creation of the current road which itself occurred at a date before 1850.

## Implications

If the identification of the terrace as Roman is accepted, it confirms Richmond’s suggestion that the line of the Roman road from Ravenglass to Ambleside ran south of the Brathay between Skelwith and Holy Trinity Church. This has implications for the river crossings at the head of the lake, for to get from this terrace to the fort requires at least one bridge. As Collingwood noted in his paper,<sup>13</sup> neither the Brathay nor the river created by its junction with the Rothay are fordable. Indeed both can have a most impressive flow for long periods in winter. At least one bridge must therefore surely have existed, either to the east at or near NY 372034, carrying the road directly to the fort after a causeway crossing of the water-meadow that lies opposite it, or else northward across the Brathay carrying the road on its way to a crossing of the Rothay close to the modern Langdale Bridge (which stands at about NY 372039). Given the strikingly large northern extent of *vicus* development now known at Ambleside,<sup>14</sup> and the frequent modern inundation of the water-meadow opposite the fort to the west, it is perhaps more likely that the road took the northerly route, crossing the Rothay by ford or more probably by a second bridge.

An ancillary point may cast some light on why Collingwood was unable to find any traces of the road in the riverside fields just downstream of Skelwith. There appear to be vestigial remains of kerbing, similar to that found at the site described above, in the gully that lies east of Skelwith Fold farm and below the modern Bog Lane as the latter rises south-west towards Skelwith Fold, within the edge of what the 1850 OS map calls Hunter How Coppice at NY 353032, close to the 50 metres contour. A very tentative suggestion may therefore be made that remains of the road should be sought south-east of Skelwith just above the 50 metre contour, and not down on the river bank. If the Roman road ran at this height, it would certainly explain an odd anomaly of the road down to Skelwith from Coniston via Colwith Brow as shown on the 1850 OS map. This road did not then approach Skelwith directly, as it does now, but passed to the south, at about the 50 metre contour, Skelwith being reached by a lane running due north down to the river crossing. This lane still exists. This curious arrangement would be explained if the 1850 road was following a Roman alignment near the 50 metre contour.

### Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> R. G. Collingwood, "Explorations in the Roman Fort at Ambleside (fourth year, 1920) and at other sites on the Tenth Iter", *CW2*, xxi, 24-29.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.
- <sup>3</sup> OS map, sheet 2; Lancashire, 1850.
- <sup>4</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *op. cit.*, 25.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup> I. A. Richmond, "The Roman road from Ambleside to Ravenglass", *CW2*, xlix, 15-31.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> I. D. Margery, *Roman Roads in Britain* (1967), 389-390.
- <sup>11</sup> OS map, sheet 2: Lancashire 1850.
- <sup>12</sup> I. A. Richmond, *op. cit.*, 19. 21.
- <sup>13</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *op. cit.*, 25.
- <sup>14</sup> R. H. Leech, "The Roman Fort and Vicus at Ambleside: Archaeological Research in 1982", *CW2*, xciii, 51-74.

