

ART. VI – *The possible Roman road between Ambleside and the Keswick area; a discussion of the evidence and a consideration of remains on the north slope of Dunmail Raise.*

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**B**OTH Roman strategic patterns in Lakeland and modern common-sense suggest that a road should have existed between Ambleside and the region of Keswick.

When the north-west was penetrated in force, probably under Bonalus and certainly under Cerialis and Agricola, it seems that high Lakeland was bypassed, perhaps with more or less formal agreements being made with the local inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> However, after the withdrawal from Agricola's conquests, it was clearly essential to incorporate the massif fully into the empire. By the early second century, at the latest, Lakeland was divided up by a system of roads. In the east-west direction, there were roads from Kendal via Ambleside to Ravenglass, and from Penrith via the Keswick area to Moresby or perhaps to Papcastle. In the south-north direction, there was a road over High Street, and almost certainly another from Ambleside over Kirkstone to Old Penrith, perhaps added a little later.

These strategic developments involved driving roads over the passes of Whinlatter, Wrynose, Hardnott and Kirkstone (using the Stock Ghyll line from Ambleside, which is now and justly called The Struggle), and of course over High Street. All these routes were very much more arduous than the gentle crossing of Dunmail Raise.

In particular, the Borran's fort at Ambleside commanded mountain routes to the north over both Kirkstone and High Street, and to the west over Hardnott/Wrynose. Given the difficulty of all these routes, it is hard to believe that it did not also control a much easier Grasmere/Dunmail Raise/Thirlmere road towards Keswick (though it should be noted that the existence of a fort at Keswick remains a supposition, albeit a very convincing one<sup>2</sup>), and probably thence on to Caermote and beyond, the route that most emphatically cuts through the highland massif and surely the most obvious means of controlling it. Certainly, a road over Dunmail Raise would provide an infinitely easier route for wheeled traffic than the Kirkstone Pass or High Street, as any traveller on The Struggle will agree.

Although much out of favour in the first part of the twentieth century,<sup>3</sup> such arguments have enlisted distinguished academic support since.<sup>4</sup> Yet they are clearly deductive in nature, and cry out for supporting evidence in the form of substantial remains observed on the ground. But no early author was able to provide this kind of support, and the present writer has been quite unable to find record of any deliberate modern search for it.<sup>5</sup> This paper is the result of an attempt to correct this omission.

Clearly, there are problems in such an enterprise. Much of the hypothetical road is obscured, chiefly because the very convenience of the route has meant that the modern A591 and its turnpike predecessor overlies the likely line. Further, for a significant percentage of the route the activities of Manchester Corporation have either drowned that line or have created major disruption by the digging of the "cut and cover" sections of the aqueduct from Thirlmere reservoir to Manchester, as has happened to at least part of the likely line above Rydal Water. Yet further sections of

the putative road should lie across land that is now much “improved”, as in Rydal Park, or is very wet, as in the Naddle valley. Almost the only section of the suggested route where the natural line is not overlaid by eighteenth century turnpike and modern A591, drowned or disrupted by the activities of Manchester Corporation, or subject to the bogs and land-improvements of lowland areas, is the north slope of Dunmail Raise.<sup>6</sup>

This paper, therefore, after reviewing the pre-twentieth century and recent evidence for the road’s existence, attempts to provide further support for the claim that it existed by an analysis of the complex of road-remains to be found on the north slope of Dunmail Raise.

### **Pre-twentieth century evidence.**

Pre-twentieth century support for the existence of the road is unanimous, but no author, despite the notably bare land around Thirlmere and south up Dunmail Raise revealed by late nineteenth century photographs,<sup>7</sup> points to remains on the ground north of Ambleside.

The earliest commentator on a possible Keswick/Ambleside road is, not surprisingly, John Horsley. He wrote in 1733, before the relevant Turnpike Act of 1762 made upgrading of the Keswick-Ambleside road possible,<sup>8</sup> and was of course an antiquarian of the first importance nationally. His travelling was prodigious, and his knowledge of antiquities, especially along Hadrian’s Wall, very great. His comments will loom large in this investigation.

Horsley’s knowledge of the central Cumbrian massif appears quite understandably to be limited. Thus he gives no sign of knowing about the Ravenglass-Ambleside road, or even High Street. He also states that his comments are based on the work of an informant, albeit a trusted one. However, he offers three short passages on the road system in Lakeland, the first two of which are crucial. Since his work is not readily available, and some confusion has arisen over what he actually wrote, all three are here quoted in full. It should be noted in what follows that Horsley’s Elenborough is modern Maryport, and his old Penreth the Roman fort at Castleheads, on the A6 north of Plumpton.

The first passage, provided in the context of a discussion of the Hadrianic defences, simply notes “I must add farther, that there is a military way, tho’ now much ruined, which goes out from Old Penreth towards Keswick, but not quite so far west. This, I take for granted has joined the other way, that passes from Elenborough by Papcastle to Ambleside; and that a branch has gone off from this latter to Moresby”.<sup>9</sup> The second, written in his geographical section, amplifies his reasons for this certainty. “I have had certain information of two military ways in Cumberland, which go one of them south west from old Penreth, and the other south east from Elenborough. And as we are sure of a military way near Ambleside, pointing towards Elenborough, so I think it cannot well be doubted, but it must have gone that way: and I believe it is no less certain, that the other way from old Penreth has joined this not far from Keswick; for this, as I am certainly informed, is the course of it”.<sup>10</sup> This is almost immediately followed by the third, which adds nothing new. “The next station which appears this way, is at Ambleside in Westmorland. To this place I believe the military ways have gone, which pass by Papcastle, and through Graystock park”.<sup>11</sup>

The first two of these passages are of great significance.

Horsley's unnamed informant clearly believed that two Roman roads ran into Lakeland from the north-west and north-east, that they met near Keswick and that the conjoined road then ran south to Ambleside. Horsley twice describes the information as certain, and indeed where this information was challenged by the later writer Thomas West it has been found to be completely accurate.<sup>12</sup> There also seems to be an implication that the informant (and so Horsley?) knew the location of the key junction, given the assertion "that the other way from old Penreth has joined this not far from Keswick; for this, as I am certainly informed, is the course of it". This junction will be a key concern of Allan, below.

Horsley's testimony is obviously of the first importance, but its power to convince is limited by two concerns. Firstly, the failure to support his case with a report of remains well north of Ambleside, despite the fact that this report predates the turnpike, is striking. Presumably, and surely significantly, nothing was obvious on the ground even before the turnpike was built. Secondly, and much more seriously, Horsley makes clear that a chief reason why he can "take for granted" that the road existed is the fact that the road has been observed near Ambleside. "And as we are sure of a military way near Ambleside, pointing towards Elenborough, so I think it cannot well be doubted, but it must have gone that way". Now Horsley had no knowledge of what is now regarded as an almost certain road over Kirkstone, nor it seems of the entirely certain route over Wrynose and Hardnott that probably also approached the fort from the north. He could not know therefore that "a military way near Ambleside, pointing towards Elenborough" (i.e. north or north-west) is no evidence at all for his road to Keswick, unless the remains of the military way in question were located well north of the fort, beyond what is now Rothay Park.

The next relevant comment is by the Jesuit priest and prophet of the Picturesque, Thomas West, whose *A Guide to the Lakes* was published in 1778. His most endearing characteristic, and no doubt the basis for his popular success, is his irrepressible desire to tell us exactly where to go to find beauty, what to look at when we get to these locations, and even how we should appreciate what we see and hear. He is a committed teacher holding the hand of the uninitiated while he educates them in the picturesque – an instructor in an aesthetic. Yet he took what he refers to as "antiquities" very seriously. The editor of the 1799 edition feels forced to apologise for West's "predilection for antiquities", and revealingly adds, by way of excusing West's lengthy essay on the likelihood of a Roman fort at Keswick, that "the author always considered (it) as one of the best parts of his performance".<sup>13</sup>

West knew his Camden and Horsley, the latter well enough to correct him (albeit erroneously) as noted above. He was also aware of both the Kirkstone and Ravenglass Roman roads (though he thought the former ran to Brougham, thus demonstrating ignorance of its Matterdale element), and so knew that road remains lying close to the Ambleside fort but south of the modern village were not proofs of a road to Keswick. Indeed, with the small exception noted above he was aware of all the possibilities for Roman roads which modern specialists might consider. No reader can escape without shaken confidence from his categorical assertion that the defences at the summit of Dunmallet are the remains of a Roman fort,<sup>14</sup> though in very limited mitigation we should note that West's use in this case of "fort" rather than the term "station"

habitually adopted by him and other older authors for the Latin *castrum* is probably meant to convey that it was merely a strong or guard point. Yet even this major error reflects one of his virtues. For West is very strong on what might be called the geographical necessities of the Roman occupation, and suggests that a Roman Dunmallet guarded the Roman road he believed to run the length of Ullswater. His exposition of the geographical need for a “station” at Keswick is exemplary,<sup>15</sup> and *inter alia* provides an excellent theoretical argument for the need for a road thence to Ambleside. He is also fully aware of the place of local tradition in preserving knowledge, as his comments on the loss of any such tradition in Keswick amply demonstrate.<sup>16</sup> Further, he is capable of very accurate use of language in description of sites. Save for an error over the Furness link, to be discussed below, his account of Ambleside fort is a model of such writing, and a major help to modern researchers. It was, he says, “placed near the meetings of all the roads from Penrith, Keswick, Ravenglass, Furness and Kendal, which it commanded, and was accessible only on one side”.<sup>17</sup> The use of the plural “meetings” elucidates his meaning admirably, for there were certainly multiple junctions. And the very clearly expressed last clause pushes back by a full century the usually quoted first date for the suggestion that all the roads associated with the fort entered it from the east, including even the Ravenglass road, which would need to cross both the Brathay and Rothay rivers to do so.

West repeatedly asserts the existence of a road from Keswick to Ambleside, and given his local knowledge and sense of local tradition may reasonably be regarded as providing serious support for the hypothesis that a road did exist down this route. Yet it is quite clear that he has no remains on the ground to point to. Indeed, this is implicit in his intriguing comment that “in forming the turnpike road through Rydal, an urn was lately taken up, which contained ashes and other Roman remains, and serves to prove that the tract of the ancient road laid that way”.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, West lacked other concrete proofs.

In addition, West’s most obvious weakness must also be acknowledged, it being a tendency to be over-enthusiastic in listing Roman roads on the basis of his own logical deduction alone. Thus he records finding, on investigation, “the military roads from Papcastle, Ellenborough (i.e. Maryport), Moresby, Ambleside, and Plumpton (i.e. Old Penrith), all to coincide at Keswick”.<sup>19</sup> This is impressive, and most of these roads are now considered as certain or are indicated by some concrete evidence, but the suggestion that the road from Maryport to Papcastle ran on towards Keswick, whether going via Lorton to join that from Moresby, or running down the west side of the Bass Lake, or crossing to Caermote, is based upon West’s own deduction alone. He does not make this clear. Again, at Ambleside, the inclusion of a route from Furness (cf. above) must be based upon deduction only, for no remains are visible now or are likely to have been visible in West’s day. This tendency to claim that what *ought to be* actually *is*, must be borne in mind when weighing his belief that a road existed between Keswick and Ambleside.

Hodgson, in his book on Westmorland of 1803, does seem at first sight to be reporting on actual observed remains. He notes that “the paved way from the fort is still in many places visible towards Ambleside, where it branched off, one way to Keswick, by Grasmere, the other to Patterdale, via Kirkstone, from which last place towards Hartsop Hall it is eleven feet wide and in many places very apparent”.<sup>20</sup> This

is clear enough. Yet the change of tense, from the present of “is . . . visible” to the past of “it branched off”, and back to the present in “is eleven feet wide”, is worrying. The sentence may well be felt to be bringing together personal observation of road remains seen south of Ambleside village and again “towards Hartsop Hall” with a conviction that there had also existed a road from Ambleside to Keswick, remains of which Hodgson has not seen.

What then does the older record seem to be telling us? Summative comment must be phrased with caution. We find preserved in the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century record a consistent belief that there had existed a Roman road from Ambleside to Keswick. This consistency of testimony is striking, and surely must reflect a local tradition. Indeed, the significance of local folk-memory is as noted above a subject on which West in particular is fully alert. What is particularly noteworthy in both West and Hodgson is the apparently easy coexistence of this belief with the clear inability to point to remains on the ground north of Ambleside village, especially given the extreme bareness of the land around and just south of the old Thirlmere shown in old photographs. For both these commentators wrote in full knowledge that the discovery of the Kirkstone road had discounted as evidence all remains lying south of Ambleside village. This relaxed approach to the lack of visible evidence must surely imply that both writers assumed that remains of the road have been overlaid by the pre-turnpike and turnpike roads. Indeed, the same seems likely to be true of Horsley also, given the fact that he was informed of a junction between the Old Penrith/Keswick road and the northernmost section of the route (“This, I take for granted has joined the other way, that passes from *Elenborough* by *Papcastle* to *Ambleside*”), a junction which Allan will argue strongly (cf. below) lies on the line of the turnpike (which shares the pre-turnpike line) south of Castlerigg.

### Recent evidence

There are only two modern reports of evidence for the existence of the road. Both of them were published in the context of the study of other Roman roads.

At the north end of the route that evidence is significant, though complex and capable of rival interpretation. Allan deals with it in detail on pages 14-15 and again on page 53 of his very fine *The Roman Route Across the Northern Lake District*.

Allan notes that the line of the Roman road westward towards Keswick reached the foot of the Castlerigg ridge at NY 300 238.<sup>21</sup> He believes that the road then ran south-west on faint terraces to pass south-west of the stone circle, and then turned more to the west to meet the modern A591 where that road passes the farm-settlement now called Moor<sup>22</sup> but which Allan notes was almost certainly formerly known as Cust Farm (which might he speculates be a corruption of Cast, implying an ancient military post<sup>23</sup>), before the joint road plunged down the Keswick side of the ridge on what is still in places an impressive road base.<sup>24</sup> This of course agrees with Horsley’s description of the way the road from Old Penrith joined that from Ambleside, and Allan believes that Moor is the point ‘near Keswick’ but “not quite so far west”, where Horsley had been told such a junction occurred. Allan proposes that “the A591 may overlie on Castlerigg the Roman road from Ambleside (as it probably does for most of the way from Grasmere)”.<sup>25</sup> (The reader’s attention is drawn to the brave assertion contained within his brackets.) Allan also points out that the way the Old Penrith road

seems to make for this location, rather than taking a more northerly line, argues powerfully that an Ambleside/Keswick road already existed when it was constructed.

There is much in this argument. However, the evidence will bear an alternative interpretation in two respects. Firstly and more seriously, granted that the road from Old Penrith did indeed run past Moor, this does not necessarily imply the pre-existence of a road from Ambleside. For, as Allan notes, “from this particular site, with the trees cut down, there would have been visible most of the vale of Keswick and, beyond that, four miles west-north-west of Moor, the narrow Roman entrance at Hallgarth to Whinlatter Pass”.<sup>26</sup> It is at least possible that this consideration, of substantial importance during any time of unrest and most certainly during the process of conquest/consolidation, would by itself be enough to cause the Old Penrith road to be routed this way.

Secondly, it is possible for the determined to claim that the road from Old Penrith did not run this way at all but passed just north of the stone circle, that the faint terraces that ascend south-west up Castlerigg are not ancient, that the impressive remains that Allan notes running down into the Vale of Keswick west of Moor are simply remnants of the much later road from Ambleside and of nothing more, and that there is no Roman road-line anywhere near Moor.

These problems are both acknowledged by Allan, and like him the present writer is convinced by neither of them. However, they do unfortunately mean that Allan’s study of the line of the Old Penrith road in the Castlerigg area cannot be adduced to prove conclusively the existence of a Roman road from Ambleside to Keswick, so that substantial further evidence is needed if the existence of that road is to be categorised as probable or certain.

Much further south, very limited remains of the road leaving the Ambleside area heading north towards Keswick are reported by Richardson and Allan,<sup>27</sup> in the course of their description of the route to and over Kirkstone Pass. These remains, if verifiable, would be the only reported remnant of the road which cannot be dismissed as part of a different and already acknowledged road-line, since they lie between the foot of the Kirkstone route and the suggested junction at Moor. As such, they are of crucial importance to the present enquiry.

Richardson and Allan describe remains that start from the north edge of Rothay Park, “just over Stock Ghyll at 373 045. From here runs slightly west of north across a field for about 90 metres an intermittent low *agger* about 5.5 metres wide”. Such an *agger* could only be the road to Keswick, since they are able to distinguish between this and another “continuous *agger*, about 4.5 metres wide, which runs north-east for about 50 metres from 373 044 across a field (part of Rothay Park) just south of Stock Ghyll”, which clearly must be the start of the Kirkstone ascent. They are therefore able to “place” the crucial junction between the two roads. It is extremely difficult to locate remains on the basis of map references alone, or even of an annotated 1:25000 map such as is provided by Richardson and Allan. The simplified but large-scale diagram Figure 1 (which does not claim to be a scale-map) attempts to clarify the suggested positions of these remains on the basis of Richardson and Allan’s annotated map and text. Their text suggests that the northern *agger* should be aligned slightly more towards the north-west.

The outline of a football pitch adjacent to the Vicarage Road entrance to the park is shown on the diagram, to aid identification of the *agger* running north-east. This aid is

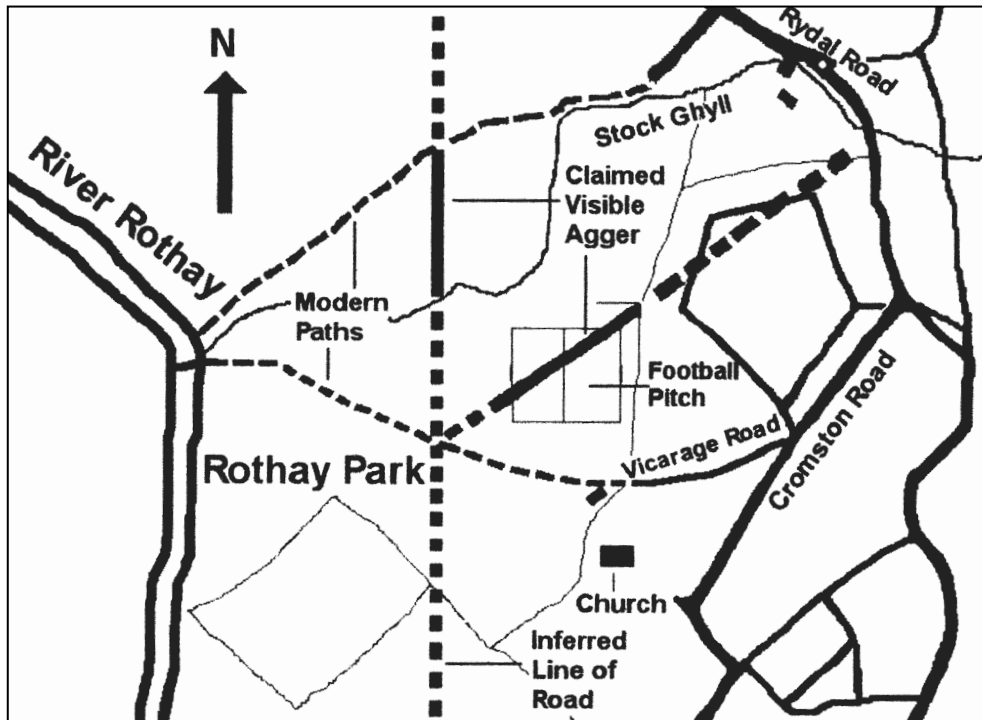


FIG. 1. Richardson and Allen's visible and inferred road remains at Ambleside.

necessary, as the subtle feature will seem far from striking to those used to viewing Roman remains preserved in less domesticated landscapes. Nevertheless it is visible running at an angle along the football pitch and a little south-west of it, in the form of a slight but consistent domed ridge running in the direction shown, and aligned exactly on the corner of the park. Not many football pitches can boast a Roman road running down them.

The direction and location of this remnant strongly support the hypothesis that it is bifurcating from a road running north towards Keswick as proposed by Richardson and Allan. It is thus a piece of indirect evidence for this northerly road, and, as at Castlerigg, for the Ambleside/Keswick road's predating the road that meets it. However, direct evidence could only be provided by the claimed "intermittent low agger about 5.5 metres wide" at 373 045, running nearly north. And this quite crucial remnant, despite most careful checking of the exact location of the reported remains, is untraceable on the ground.

Given this disappointing result, the reported remains in the Ambleside area can only contribute indirect evidence to the present investigation.

Cumulatively, the body of older and modern published evidence for the existence of a Roman road between Ambleside and Keswick can only be described as surprisingly weak, given the recurrent confidence that it did indeed exist. The weakness, of course, lies in the total lack of visible claimed remains between the foot of the near-certain Kirkstone road in the south and the suggested meeting with the

Old Penrith road in the north. It is for this reason that this paper attempts to provide further evidence in the form of visible remains on the likely line.

### **The complex of road remains to be found on the north slope of Dunmail Raise**

On the north slope of Dunmail Raise the modern road, a product of the Thirlmere reservoir scheme, and its immediate predecessor, both take a surprising and rather indirect line up the western or Steel Fell flank of the pass. It is very unlikely that this would be a Roman line, since it only became efficient with the making of a cutting in 1905. If a Roman road did ever exist over the pass, some remnant of it should be traceable in the fields east of and facing the modern road-ascent. Conversely, the absence of remains would argue significantly for the view that no road over this route was ever constructed.

### **An essential note on the Thirlmere Aqueduct and Dunmail Raise**

It is natural for any visitor to the north slope of Dunmail Raise, on observing the straight terrace rising opposite the modern road-line, to suspect that what is being seen is a product of the construction of the Thirlmere aqueduct across the pass. The suspicion will harden when the striking structure at the summit of the pass is underfoot. However, a reading of the official record of the whole Thirlmere project, the fascinating *History and Description of the Thirlmere Water Scheme* by Sir John James Harwood, repeatedly makes clear that the aqueduct is far beneath the Raise, in a closed tunnel that is three miles in length<sup>28</sup> and took four and a half years to drive,<sup>29</sup> rather than in a “cut and cover” filled-in surface trench.<sup>30</sup> The aqueduct operates by gravity, the key to its success lying in the fact that the modern surface of Thirlmere stands at the considerable altitude of nearly 180 metres, while even the water-company building discretely tucked below the west lip of the modern road very high on the Grasmere side is at only 170 m. (The Travellers Rest inn stands at below 100 metres.) In fact the aqueduct tunnel runs some 63 metres (206 ft) directly beneath the summit of the pass, which stands at 240 metres, and so can have no bearing upon remains found on the surface. An immaculate map provided by Harwood shows the exact line far beneath the north side of the pass.<sup>31</sup>

### **Surface remains**

The road history of the north slope of Dunmail Raise is long and very complex, and remnants of most of it are to be found on the ground.

Most of the modern road is the work of Edwardian engineers, undertaken as a part of the Thirlmere reservoir scheme in the first years of the twentieth century. There is limited modern work at the top of the pass, where the last burst of road-improvement in Lakeland resulted in some widening and the creation of a length of dual-carriageway that cut off the Dunmail cairn by the construction of a second carriageway on the west, or Steel Fell, side of the cairn. But after this, any “improvement” further north was abandoned, preserving the work of the Edwardian engineers on the north slope of the pass while incidentally creating a dangerous trap for the unwary motorist travelling north.



However, the Edwardian road was not the first across the pass, replacing an older turnpike road which itself replaced in the eighteenth century a much more ancient roadway of indeterminate origin.

The situation is best described as approached from the north.

A traveller from Keswick will pass Wythburn church and car-park on the left before leaving the Thirlmere reservoir behind, and then some 800 metres later will note the turn-off on the right to Steel End. In winter this junction provides adequate parking for the explorer. Immediately south of this junction a forest track rises gently on the left (east) of the main road, at first running almost parallel to it, while the main road itself bridges a major stream and then swings a little right through a short cutting (through a glacial moraine) very characteristic of the engineering of the railway age, before moving out onto the open hillside of the Steel Fell flank of the pass. The bridge bears the inscription "C C C RED BROW BRIDGE 1905". The left-hand strip map of Fig. 2, entitled "Current Situation", shows the layout.

The forest track is in fact the former road-line. It follows what was the only practicable route up the section of the pass north of Birkside Gill prior to the engineering of the cutting through the moraine, and is the line shown both on Donald's map of Cumberland of 1774<sup>32</sup> and on the much more detailed 1867 Ordnance Survey map of the line over the pass. (Readers may care to look at the latter on the web at <http://www.old-maps.co.uk>.<sup>33</sup>) It proceeds on the east side of the stream, exploiting the line of weakness which the stream creates and passes through what is now a forestry plantation. After nearly 400 metres it dog-legs sharply to the right, with much improved surface (as the forestry track swings away up sharply to the left), and then breaks out of the plantation onto open hill-side. This dog-leg is a historically crucial spot. Once on the open hillside, the road-way at once crosses Birkside Gill on a substantial bridge, named on old maps as Homesdale Green Bridge. This is the old turnpike-road bridge. The way is grassy, and there are a number of fences and pedestrian gates. A very substantial causeway runs on southwards until it is breeched by Raise Beck North, on the far side of which it can be seen rising to join the line of the modern road. It can readily be viewed from that road if traffic allows, simply by looking over the low eastern wall. Again, the left hand strip map of Fig. 2 below shows the arrangement.

The breach in the causeway reflects the fact that Raise Beck North did not exist prior to the creation of the Thirlmere reservoir, being a diversion of the original Raise Beck which ran down to Grasmere and which still exists, in diminished form, as Raise Beck South.

The by-passing of this section of pre-existing turnpike road and bridge in 1905 was surely due to two chief considerations. One must have been the fact that the diverted Raise Beck, which is a significant stream, would unavoidably cross the line of the turnpike road, necessitating a further major bridge. The other is that the turnpike makes a fairly steep ascent just south of the breach. The making of the cutting lower down the pass, a slight matter in the context of the creation of the reservoir and the aqueduct to Manchester, allowed a much more gradual rise into the pass, and a rather smaller bridge.

As noted, the Ordnance Survey map of 1867 provides the first fully detailed map

of the relevant area. The central strip-map of Fig. 2, entitled "Late Nineteenth Century", shows the main features shown on that map, including the field-walling that then existed. The exact date of the turnpike road hereabouts cannot be earlier than 1762, the date of the relevant Turnpike Act, and Donald's map of Cumberland clearly indicates that its building preceded his date of survey, in 1770-71.

As noted, the turnpike followed what was the only practicable line up the lower part of the pass, north of Birkside Gill, prior to the creation of the cutting. No explanation is therefore needed of its line north of the dog-leg. The line southwards from the decisive right-bend at the start of the dog-leg remains a mystery. The change of alignment was clearly made to allow the turnpike to switch to the western flank of the pass. Yet there seems no obvious reason why the turnpike could not have continued up the east flank of the pass, on a more direct, shorter, and indeed less steep line. It is clear on the ground that an earlier version of the road up the pass has indeed taken the direct, eastern line. It is with this earlier version of the road up the pass that the remainder of this article is concerned.

Nothing remains of an earlier crossing of Birkside Gill, which would have been upstream of Homesdale Bridge. Nor is there any sign of a roadway for the first 150 metres southwards. However, after 150 metres a road line will be seen rising very gently from the flat valley bottom, just where the possible remains of a dry-stone cross wall can barely be discerned. If in doubt, the line will be found to commence directly below (i.e. due west of) a junction of minor drainage ditches on the steep slope to the east, a junction which creates a distinctive "V" of streamlets. It is possible thereafter to follow what is a well-graded and notably direct line right up the pass to its summit, though its outline has been much softened by time. The roadway seems to have been cut into the hillside on its up-hill side, its western (down-hill) edge being built up where needed by substantial terracing. Each field wall in turn crosses the line of its gentle ascent: clearly each of these cross-walls originally obstructed the road though the first two, those north of Raise Beck North, are now much broken. The layout is shown on the right-hand strip map of Fig. 2, entitled "Old Road remains marked on simplified twentieth century map-base", above. Apart from one short section of difficulty, no problems will be encountered in following this roadway right up to the spot where Raise Beck North, a creation of the Edwardian engineers, cuts across it, nor in tracing the very striking remains lying south of that stream.

The short difficult section, no more than 150 metres in length overall, lies north and immediately to the south of the point where the road line reaches the first cross-wall, and is shown as a discontinuity on the right-hand strip map of Fig. 2. Here there are major problems of interpretation as the terrace traverses quite steep ground, problems which appear to arise due to soil-slippage and flooding in the past.

At the northern end of this section, the terrace-line up the pass becomes first faint and then almost untraceable on the traverse of steepening ground. As the terrace fades, major dry-stone protrusions are visible just below the line, as if serious soil slippage has here exposed the stone underpinning for the terrace. The position of these protrusions, dropping quite noticeably towards the south, suggests that the terrace always dipped here, in order one may speculate to avoid the steepest of the ground being traversed. Then a very well preserved rising track appears beginning a little below and ahead of the last of the dry-stone remnants. This rising track lies on a solid and strikingly well preserved rising section of terrace, the dry-stone support

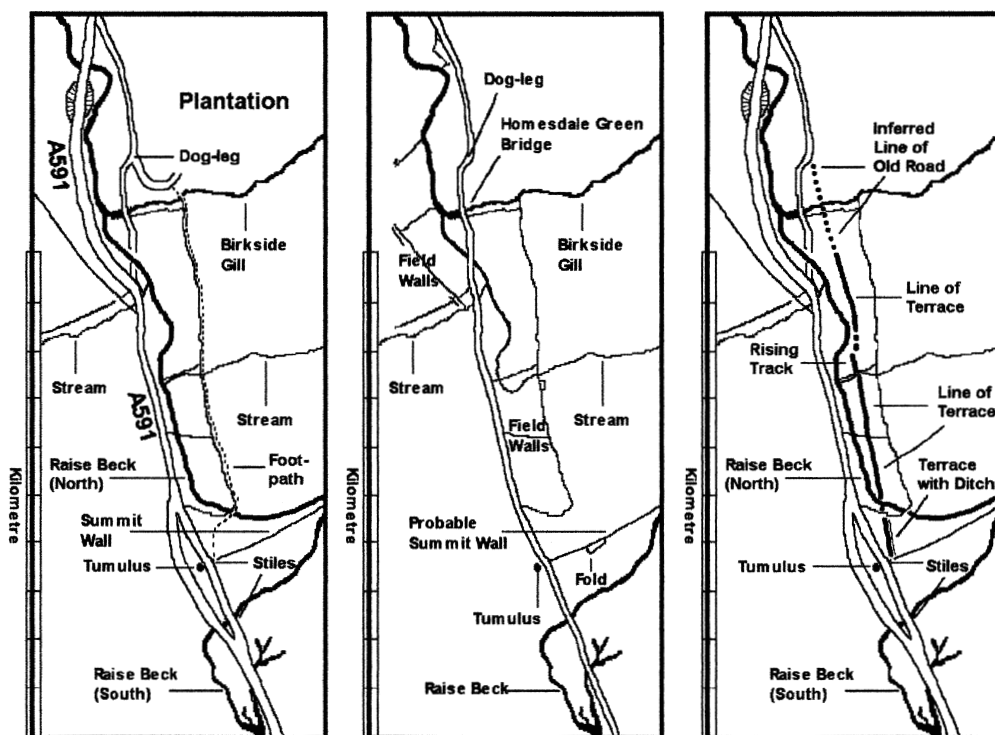


FIG. 2.

Current situation

Late Nineteenth Century

Old road remains marked on  
simplified twentieth century  
map-base

clearly visible on its western face for part of its length. The dip in the main terrace could perhaps have connected, at some date, to the north end of this rising terrace, but such a connection is not now visible. Instead there is a short but clear gap and a slight discontinuity of levels. Indistinct remnants of trackway suggest that the most northerly and lowest tip of the rising track has been accessed at some stage direct from the valley floor, which is close below. The layout is shown in Plate 1.

In interpretation, it is clear that complete certainty cannot be achieved here. It does seem safe to suggest that major soil slippage has occurred as the main terrace begins to traverse steep ground in its ascent of the pass, with some stone terrace-base consequently exposed. Beyond this, three possible explanations exist of what is seen on the ground. One possibility is that the rising track is original, a recovery of height after a dip in the line made necessary by the need to avoid the steepest of the ground. In this case all the terrace-work would be of the same date, and the gap in the line a product of erosion. A second possibility is that the original line was higher and so more direct, and that ground-slippage on the traverse of an impracticably steep slope forced some re-alignment at an early stage, creating through this process a dip in the roadway and a subsequent recovery of height via the rising terrace. In either case it can be postulated that a convenient and now faint link from the flat but boggy valley floor below developed at a much later stage, to allow access to the rising track and

thence to the upper part of the pass-ascent when time and soil slippage had made the original line higher up the slope difficult to use. The third and most plausible possibility is that both the rising track and the well-preserved terrace on which it stands are much more modern than the main terrace-line, constructed as a repair at some later date to allow continued use of the southern section of the old road up the pass by means of direct access from the flat valley floor when the lower northern part had decayed. No doubt some of the stone from the old terracing would have been utilised in the building of the new rising terrace.

Whatever view is taken of this difficult section, some brief further puzzlement will arise at its southern end where the rising track reaches the cross-wall. Luckily, this does not involve further serious problems of interpretation. As the cross-wall is reached, there is a striking change in ground level extending some 30 metres up the pass. It is clear that a massive weight of debris has been washed down from the flank of the Helvellyn massif at some point in the past, unsurprisingly given the near-precipitous slope of the mountainside above. This has left a markedly raised fan of debris lying across and burying the old line, as is quite clearly seen from the main road opposite. A stream cuts through this debris-fan. The cross-wall stands on top of the debris-fan, which must therefore predate it, while both the original top of the rising track and the continuing terracing running southwards on up the pass are quite clearly overlaid by it. Evidently, the roadway up the pass, at some date after the building of the rising track, has been overlaid by flood-debris brought down by the stream. As clearly, a rather crude attempt has been made to raise the top of the rising track by means of a cap of exposed dry-stone work, allowing it to surmount the debris-fan (see Plate 2). This work, which leaves the rising track with a pronounced lip at its upper (southern) end, suggests an attempt to keep it useable on what must have been a very limited basis. Just beyond the cross-wall, the stream descending the hillside now cuts deeply across road-line and debris fan alike. However, this cutting is certainly modern, since the 1867 OS map shows the stream looping further to the north (see central strip-map of Fig. 2), on a much gentler line still traceable on the ground.

South of this short problem area the terrace continues as before, undisturbed by any obstructions until cut emphatically by the excavated channel of Raise Beck North.

The line of the terrace is so direct that it is likely that most observers have assumed, as did the present writer, that it marks the line of the aqueduct. Very obviously, it is aligned upon the turnpike at the north end of its strange dog-leg nearly a kilometre north of the pass-summit.

It is clear that this must be the line of the pre-turnpike road. What cannot however be fixed readily is its ultimate age. Several factors suggest great age. Throughout the long section north of Raise Beck North, the old road is always markedly less sharply delineated than is the abandoned section of turnpike. Where it traverses steep ground, as noted above, the terrace exhibits such severe soil slippage as to become difficult to follow. And the passage of time (and much water) has totally removed all remnants of the crossing of Birkside Gill and all visible signs of the road in the first 150 metres south of its bank. Self-evidently, the old road predates the turnpike itself. Beyond this, all that can be said with certainty is that it follows inexorably a very direct line towards the pass-summit from the only possible "pre-cutting" route past the moraine at the foot of the pass, that it displays the marks of considerable expertise in its use of stone-built terracing, that its creation must have involved a very substantial effort of expertly



PLATE 1. The rising track just north of the first cross-wall, looking south-east.



PLATE 2. The dry-stone cap superimposed on the rising terrace at the first cross-wall, looking east.

directed labour, and that it has suffered very considerable attrition.

Anyone following this route up the pass will eventually find the major obstruction of the man-made Raise Beck North crossing the line, with the quite steep opposite bank shows the striking remains of a flat-bottomed cutting which briefly loops south-west (see Plate 3), no doubt to mitigate the steepness of what is now the south bank of Raise Beck North, and with a major cross-wall just beyond obstructing the view further ahead. Unless willing to attempt to climb over the handrail onto the footbridge that exists where that wall crosses the beck, an exciting and not quite safe challenge, it is in all but very dry weather necessary to retrace one's steps and make a separate approach to the pass summit to view the remarkable remains between this wall and its lesser twin at the summit of the pass. The layout, again, will be found in the right-hand strip map of Fig. 2.

The remains south of Raise Beck North up to the pass summit are so impressive as to justify separate consideration. They are best approached from the summit itself, which will probably be reached either via a small stile opposite the Dunmail Cairn or after a short walk from a more substantial stile just south of the place where the modern road crosses Raise Beck South. Either route will bring the visitor to the south side of the summit wall, which contains a convenient kissing-gate.

To step through this gate is to step back in time.

The explorer at once finds him or her self on a substantial dry-stone structure. It is clearly a road, running in a completely straight alignment almost due north, dropping with the fall of the pass in that direction, and lying precisely in line with the terrace ascending from the north. It is significantly raised above the extensive fan of debris, brought down by Raise Beck in the past and gently sloping down towards the west, across which it runs. The whole structure is very substantial indeed, clearly involving massive human effort. It is at the present date dry in all weathers, though it may have been less so before the creation of Raise Beck North.

The first impression is of solidity and of excellent preservation. On the right (the eastern, uphill side) there is a notably straight-edged ditch, marked by a line of marsh-grass. To the left of this the main structure is also dead straight in its line. It stands considerably proud of the land-surface along the eastern ditch, and there is a very noticeable drop-away from its western (downhill) edge. The overall effect is of a raised though grass-covered roadway rather than simply a flat terrace. The covering of soil and moss is everywhere quite thin, overlaying a surviving surface of unshaped but hard-packed stones, of varying size, which is visible in many places. It is clear that the surviving structure is made up of much the same assorted worn stones as the underlying and surrounding debris-fan. Indeed at one place some 60 metres north of the summit-wall a scarp where the up-slope scree appears to have been pulled out to provide material for the adjacent road may be noted. There are quite clear signs of kerbing on the uphill side, abutting the ditch. The western (downhill) edge is much more irregular, giving the impression that significant robbing-out has occurred along this edge (the remains are conveniently close to the dry-stone wall than runs beside the modern pass-road). The distance between surviving road edges is about 4 metres at the maximum. The eastern ditch is choked with moss and marsh-grass, but like everything hereabouts it has a hard base of stone.



PLATE 3. The flat-bottomed cutting on the south banks of the modern Raise Beck North, looking south-west.

In several spots the stone upper surface of the roadway has been removed, probably by robbing out, creating sharp edges to the ensuing depressions on the surface. Some of these, especially that nearest the summit wall, are small, while others involve several square metres of surface. Most contain marsh grass.

Despite first impressions, on careful inspection signs of very significant age become obvious. There has been considerable spread of material out over the road edges, creating a domed effect only partially limited by the sharpness of the eastern ditch-edge and by the western cutaway. Further, this doming is asymmetrical, in that everywhere the cross-section of the road-surface shows a high point at or very close to the eastern edge, close to the ditch, and a gentle slope down across the road. This is consistent with surface layers being washed across the road and thence down over the western edge. There may even be a western ditch beneath this spread, though visible remains do not suggest that this is more than a faint possibility. The debris-fan across which the road runs has over the years been subject to significant though quite shallow erosion due no doubt to flooding by Raise Beck, a phenomenon seemingly ended by the cutting of Raise Beck North. This erosion takes the form of a number of shallow channels, and these tend to run over the road, no doubt a consequence of the choking of the ditch. These channels on either side of the road are in any event associated with slight changes to its level, and some marsh-grass on its surface, though not with any very striking damage to its basic structure.

As noted, the road lies exactly in line with the terrace ascending from the north, the quite remarkable summit section ending sharply a few metres short of the first cross wall on the Thirlmere flank, in a broken edge and a very striking drop in level, one of

the clearest examples of robbing-out for the purposes of walling that the present writer has seen. The considerable depth of the stone road-basing is here evident. The total distance between the two walls is some hundred metres. Immediate beyond the northern wall is the flat-bottomed cutting, itself impressive and well worth the detour via a nearby fence which is necessary to reach it, on the down-slope of what has become the artificial stream's nearside bank.

South of the summit wall there are almost no remains. A major branch of Raise Beck appears to have been cut off by the creation of Raise Beck North, and the old channel and numerous other smaller channels have deeply scoured the debris-fan in the past. If the road from the north continued south on its previous line, it would in any event, immediately south of the wall, have been destroyed by the works associated with widening of the modern south-bound carriageway.

It may appear on first inspection that a change of alignment occurs at the exact top of the pass, the new alignment southwards taking a rather more easterly direction. But on examination a very large boulder, surely deposited by glacial action rather than by flood, sits on what would in that case be the eastern edge of the road-base. It seems therefore safe to assume that the pre-turnpike road came together with the turnpike line just to the Grasmere side of the summit, and that all remains of the old road have been completely destroyed by modern road-work at the top of the Grasmere descent.

## Conclusions

The evidence of older writers and that of Allan, both alone and in conjunction with Richardson, provide significant support for the hypothesis that a Roman road ran between Ambleside and Keswick. However, there are problems with much of the older testimony, and the modern evidence is indirect. At all times the lack of clear remains on the ground limits the confidence that can be placed in evidence for the road. This paper has attempted to overcome this problem.

Unless substantial and perhaps inconclusive excavation is undertaken lower down the pass<sup>34</sup> there is no ready way of fixing the ultimate age of the old roadway up the north side of Dunmail Raise, save through a consideration of its line, planning, and solidity of construction, plus the clear signs that it has been subject to long attrition by the elements. Whoever made the road up the north side of the Raise and, above all, the remains between of Raise Beck North and the pass summit, appears to have been an engineer, with the capacity and training to plan an efficient line and the ambition to create the remarkable stone structure which is preserved over the summit. Clearly, he also had command of a sufficiently large work-detachment to build substantial terracing, to make an impressive cutting, and to accumulate a massive road base close to the summit.

These factors limit the possibilities severely. As Hindle says, "Very few roads are known to have been built in the Middle Ages; new routes simply came into being when people used them often enough",<sup>35</sup> and, somewhat more caustically, "medieval roads were fundamentally different to their Roman predecessors; medieval roads were not engineered but made and maintained themselves, and were thus very different to those Roman roads which remained in use".<sup>36</sup>

If the road cannot be medieval in origin it does of course remain possible that it was first constructed in the two and a half centuries immediately prior to the creation



of the turnpike, to replace a medieval track. Yet the striking and pervasive signs of attrition visible throughout its length must militate against acceptance of this hypothesis. Further, it may be felt that there is limited likelihood of a new major road being constructed between Keswick and Ambleside in this period to the high standard of engineering found here. The impressive nature of the surviving remains seem more consistent with the continuing use through the early modern period of an already existing major structure, and where necessary the piecemeal repair of that structure. The rising track is most readily interpreted as an example of such a response to the deterioration of an ancient terraced roadway where it traversed steep ground. A last possibility is that an old track has at some stage been upgraded as a mine road. But Harwood's map, which records mine workings, does not show any such workings above the pass,<sup>37</sup> and Adams' exhaustive record of mining sites in the district contains no record of a mine-site near the top of the pass.<sup>38</sup> Nor would the alignment of the road fit this interpretation.

It is hard therefore to escape the conclusion that the outstanding summit remnant, and almost all the rest of the six hundred and fifty metre long section visible on the pass-ascent, are probably a Roman road, although used and repaired until the making of the turnpike in the 1760s or early 1770s.

This paper has not aimed to be conclusive. Rather, it has sought to strengthen significantly the empirical case for a Roman road down the central fault-valley of Lakeland by providing supporting evidence at a key location in the long-neglected central section. The remains on the Raise provide this support. Indeed, the hundred-metre-long section at the summit of the pass may be felt to carry us very close to the conclusiveness which was not sought.

Standing on the stone road at the summit of the pass, it is very hard to believe that these remains are not Roman, so strikingly similar are they to authenticated remains elsewhere in Lakeland. It is as such that they are here presented for evaluation. At the very least, they buttress considerably Allan's hypothesis that the Old Penrith to Keswick Roman road is joining a pre-existent route from Ambleside south of Castlerigg, and provide support on the ground for the general hypothesis that north of Grasmere much of the modern A591 and most of its turnpike predecessor are on a Roman base.

The site on Dunmail Raise, being approaching a kilometre long overall, provides a fascinating opportunity for exploration and consideration by anyone prepared to operate on foot, though stout footwear is certainly recommended except on the outstanding summit section. Parking on the hard verge beside the north-bound carriageway at the pass-summit is possible, but only given extreme care. Parking at the northern foot of the pass is much easier, especially in winter. Raise Beck North can be forded dry-shod in dry weather, but not at all after heavy rain.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am seriously indebted to Paul Jeorrett and his colleagues at the library of the North East Wales Institute of Higher Education, Wrexham, for their efforts in pursuit of the texts by Harwood, Horsley and West.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> See Potter, T. W., *Romans in North-West England* (1979), 356-358 and Shotter, D. C. A., *Romans and Britons in North-West England* (1993), 13-19 for a discussion of what we know of this process.
- <sup>2</sup> See Allan, T. M., *The Roman route across the Northern Lake District* (1994), 15 and 54, for a recent discussion of this issue, and West, T., *A Guide to the Lakes* (1778), 145-147. [This text is not available at the British Library, but copies are held at Carlisle (2), Barrow-in-Furness and Keswick libraries] for a full and early statement of the argument. All page references to West, here and below, are to the 1799 edition of his guide.
- <sup>3</sup> For a full discussion of this rather unfortunate lapse by Haverfield in particular see Allan, T. M., *op. cit.*, 3-4.
- <sup>4</sup> Birley, E., "The Roman Fort at Low Borrow Bridge", *CW2*, xlvii, 15-16; R. L. Bellhouse, "The Roman road from Old Penrith to Keswick and beyond", *CW2*, liv, 22; Richardson, A. and Allan, T. M., "The Roman Road over the Kirkstone Pass: Ambleside to Old Penrith", *CW2*, xc, 107; Allan, T. M., *op. cit.*, 2, 15. I am indebted to Allan for direction to the first two references.
- <sup>5</sup> The two pieces of modern evidence which have been reported, both discussed below, were presented in the context of the study of other Roman roads.
- <sup>6</sup> The other section clearly inviting investigation is the somewhat indeterminate line between Rydal Hall and the environs of the Swan Hotel, east of Grasmere village. Not all the likely route above Rydal has been disturbed by the aqueduct. However, a number of frustrations are likely to meet the researcher, not least the simple uncertainty in many places over where a road might lie.
- <sup>7</sup> Harwood, Sir John James (1895). *History and Description of the Thirlmere Water Scheme* (1895), 36 (very strikingly), but also 38, 51, and 60.
- <sup>8</sup> Hindle, B. P., *Roads and Trackways of the Lake District* (1984), 150.
- <sup>9</sup> Horsley, J., *Britannia Romana* (1732), 112 [usually found in the 1970 facsimile edition].
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 482.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 483.
- <sup>12</sup> Bellhouse, R.L., *op. cit.*, 23.
- <sup>13</sup> West, T. *A Guide to the Lakes* (1799 edition), 148.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-147.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-76.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.
- <sup>20</sup> Hodgson, J., *Westmoreland: or, Original Delineations, Topographical, Historical and Descriptive of that County, the result of Personal Survey* (1803), 219.
- <sup>21</sup> Allan, T. M., *op. cit.*, 14.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.
- <sup>27</sup> Richardson, A. and Allan, T. M., *op. cit.*, 107.
- <sup>28</sup> Harwood, Sir J. J., *op. cit.*, 218.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 159-160.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.
- <sup>32</sup> Donald, T. (1774), *The County of Cumberland*. ed. P. Hindle, under the title of *Historical Map of Cumberland, 1774* in CWAAS Record Series. Vol. XV (2002).
- <sup>33</sup> Visitors to this site will be asked to enter a place-name or a full numerical grid reference. 332839, 512666 will be found to be a convenient first choice for the latter.
- <sup>34</sup> Obvious locations for any excavation would be the considerable area of soft ground south of Birkside Gill, and the lower part of the terraced ascent.
- <sup>35</sup> Hindle, B. P., *op. cit.*, 46.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.
- <sup>37</sup> Harwood, Sir J. J., *op. cit.*, 30.
- <sup>38</sup> Adams, A., *Mines of the Lake District Fells* (1995), 159-60.