

XII.—FIFTH REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS AT HOUSESTEADS.

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[Read on 31st March 1937.]

The following abbreviations are employed :

- AA¹⁻⁴ *Archæologia Aeliana*, first-fourth series.
HB²⁻⁹ Bruce, *Handbook to the Roman Wall*, second-ninth editions.
HN Hodgson, *History of Northumberland*, part II, vol. iii (1840).
RW¹⁻³ Bruce, *The Roman Wall*, editions of 1851, 1853, 1867.
WB Bruce, *The Wallet-Book to the Roman Wall* (1863).

I. THE GATEWAY IN THE VALLEY OF THE KNAG BURN.

The fourth report on the Durham University Excavation Committee's work at Housesteads collected and discussed the evidence for the character of a number of structures that had been examined or recorded in an earlier period; at the beginning of 1936, the same committee was invited by the Housesteads Management Committee to undertake the re-excavation of one of those structures, the gateway through the Wall in the valley of the Knag Burn, rather more than 100 yards north-east of the fort;¹ and I now present a report on the results of that excavation.²

Since its discovery in 1856, the gateway had become so overgrown that, in compiling our fourth report, we were

¹ Cf. AA⁴ XII 245-6.

² A preliminary report has appeared in *Durham University Journal* XXIX 342 (R. P. Wright), and a summary of the evidence is given in the *Guide* to the site issued in 1936 (E. Birley), p. 23.

compelled to rely on John Clayton's plan and description, neither of which seemed entirely satisfactory; but there seemed enough evidence to show that the existing gateway could not be original Hadrianic work, and in consequence we suggested that there might be the remains of an earlier structure of the same type underlying it, or that the Wall originally ran through without a break. The excavation of 1936 showed that the latter explanation was correct. No earlier structure underlay the guard-chambers that Clayton found and excavated in part—his workmen, we found, had not dug down as far as the deep foundations of the western³ tower; but in the gate-passage, and serving as a southern offset to the Wall as reconstructed when the gateway was built, we found the remains of the "narrow Wall" (here 7 feet 4 inches thick); and in the eastern tower there remained a short length of the "broad foundation." To the east of that tower, the lowest course of the original Wall forms the footing course of its successor for 6 feet; beyond that, as was shown by a trial excavation conducted by Mr. Parker Brewis and myself in 1931, the original Wall has been completely destroyed, and the existing structure seems assignable to John Clayton's workmen.

The plan and elevation here reproduced as figure 1, and the photographs on plate XXIV, render a minute description of the gateway unnecessary, and it will be sufficient to refer to the main features of its construction; Clayton's excavations had removed all traces of occupation but for a couple of tiny scraps of pottery, and there was no stratification left for us to examine or describe.

The builders of the gateway had removed most of the original Wall at the point selected for the gate-passage: on the east side one, on the west side two courses remained; on this remnant they laid the foundations for the outer arch, rectangular bases of carefully dressed freestone

³ For convenience, the Wall at this point is assumed, in the text, to run east and west; as fig. 1 shows, N. in the text should more correctly be ENE., and so on.

blocks, projecting from 5 to 8 inches outwards from the Wall (plate xxiv 2); the superstructure does not sit symmetrically on these foundations, but that happens so frequently in Roman work that there is no need to assume a difference of periods. The towers flanking the passage butt against the remains of the original Wall, but are of one build with the superstructure of the gate-passage; they are provided with 3-foot doorways (which are rather nearer the northern than the southern end), and seem to have had wooden floors resting on the offsets, 3 inches wide, that run round the inner side of their walls—on the north side; the remains of the original Wall provide an offset up to 6 inches wide. Below the offset, in the western room, we found a variety of filling material, which included a considerable number of walling stones, but no occupation-matter, until foundation level was reached at a depth of rather more than 4 feet on the west side.

The gate-passage had been arched at its inner as well as its outer end; here no special bases were provided for the arch to rest on, but the elaborate substructure of the south front, required to counteract the slope on which the building was erected, made such additional support unnecessary. This substructure is represented in elevation in figure 1; the water level is now so high that we were not able to obtain a photograph of it—the excavation had to be carried out in the month of January, in the face of snow and biting wind, and thick ice had to be removed each morning before the water could be baled out. The order of construction is self-evident; work began at the west end, with a course of large blocks, at first 1 foot thick, but tapering to nothing at 11 feet 6 inches. Another course of similar blocks, now 10 inches thick, extended nearly 4 feet further east, as ground level rose; above that, small ashlar in courses 5 inches thick was considered sufficient on the west side, except below the west side of the arch, while the big blocks continue on the east side, some laid lengthwise and some as throughs. These blocks are well

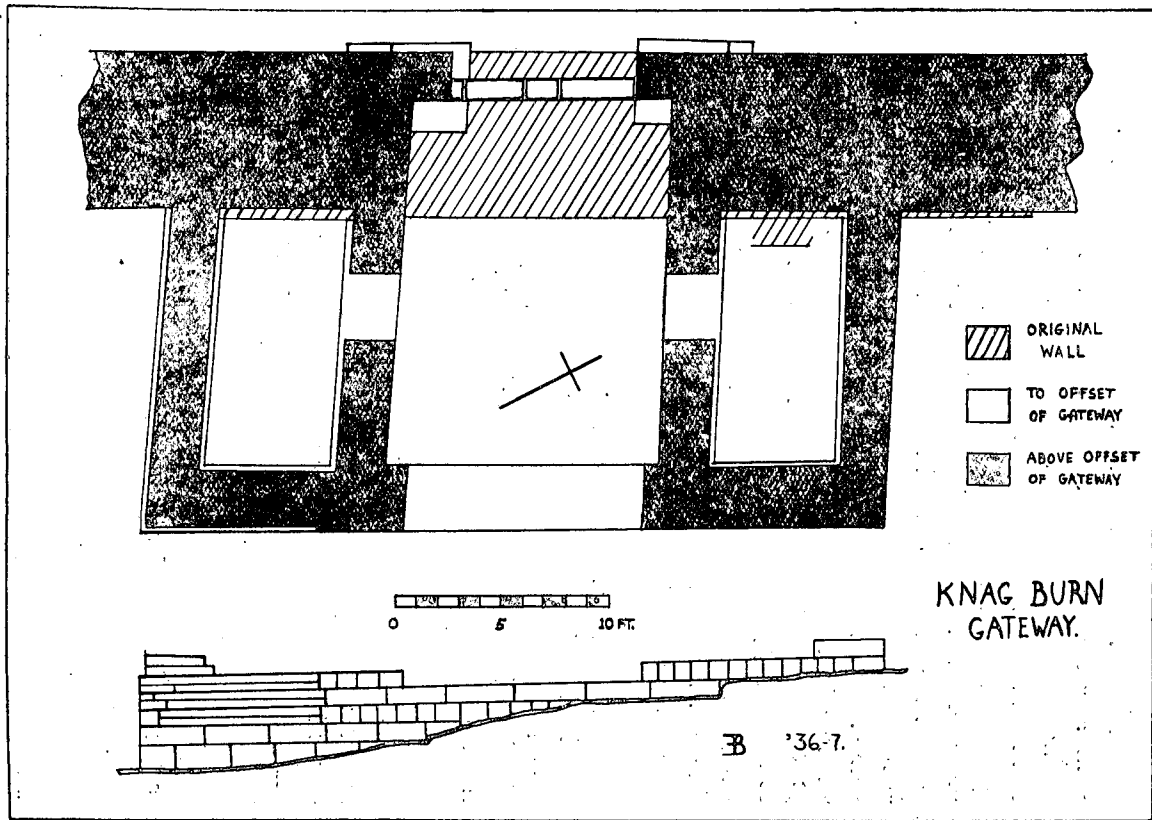


FIG. I. 1:108.

dressed and carefully laid; it is unfortunate that the modern water-level is too high for more than the top courses of them to be left exposed.

In the northern archway, the lowest course on either side has an 8 inch chamfer, and the piers project 1 foot 8 inches into the passage; above that course, as may be seen in plate xxiv 2, though Roman masonry has been employed intelligently, the existing structure must be ascribed to John Clayton; further to the west, in the same photograph, Clayton's Wall may be seen diverging somewhat from its Roman predecessor, which is heeling over slightly to the north. The gate-stop and sill-stones rest immediately on the remains of the original Wall and, at the west end, on the pier-base (plate xxiv 1).

The "coins of Claudius Gothicus and Constantius" recorded by Clayton show that the gateway was in occupation at least in the fourth century; but we are left without direct evidence for the date of its construction. It is clearly later than the time of Hadrian; equally, it is unlikely to belong to the Theodosian restoration on the Wall, that is marked by the complete blocking of many milecastle gates, and it can hardly have included the provision of a new gate here. There remain, as possible occasions, the restorations that we have learnt to associate with the names of Severus and Constantius Chlorus.⁴ The absence of evidence for more than one period of occupation, and the presence of a coin of Constantius, may be taken to incline the balance of probability in favour of Constantius rather than Severus; and that possibility is strengthened by two pieces of evidence from elsewhere. First, it is in the early years of the fourth century that the civil settlement at Housesteads seems to have been enlarged considerably,⁵ and it might be thought that its expansion was a direct consequence of the provision of a gateway for civilian traffic through the Wall bringing fresh trade to House-

⁴ Cf. AA⁴ vii 168-9, HB⁹ 7-8.

⁵ Cf. AA⁴ x 89, xi 186, xii 249.

steads. But the second piece of evidence is perhaps more cogent: the nearest analogy, in plan, to the Knag Burn gateway has been assigned, on what seem sufficient grounds, to that period. The north-east gate of the fort at Malton, in the fifth of its seven main phases,⁶ was strikingly similar in design to the Knag Burn gateway, with the inner as well as the outer end of its passage-way arched over, and with similar narrow guard-chambers (though the treatment of the outer archway may have been different, and the passages between the two archways expanded, to form a court rather than a mere roadway); this gate, according to Mr. Corder's convincing account, was built as "part of a very complete rebuilding of the fort . . . not earlier than the end of the third century"; the later phases at Malton seem to belong to the period from Theodosius onwards, so that we may accept without question the attribution of this one to the period *c.* A.D. 300-69,⁷ whose outset was marked by extensive Constantian repairs or rebuildings all over the northern military command.

The Knag Burn gateway, therefore, may be assigned with little doubt to the same scheme of confident restoration as the work at the outlying forts recently examined by Mr. Richmond,⁸ and its provision adds to the evidence already available for the originality and vigour of that "amiable character"⁹ Constantius Chlorus.

II. THE WEST AND SOUTH GATES OF HOUSESTEADS FORT.

While I was collecting materials for a memoir of Anthony Hedley,¹⁰ I came across a passage in Richardson's *Local Historian's Table Book*,¹¹ describing the

⁶ Philip Corder, *The Defences of the Roman Fort at Malton*, pp. 47-8 and fig. 10.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁸ AA⁴ XIII 170-198.

⁹ Bury's *Gibbon*, sixth edition, I 394.

¹⁰ AA⁴ XIII 152-169.

¹¹ Historical Division, iv 182, extracted from "Local Papers."

anniversary meeting of this society held on 5th February 1834: "Mr. Adamson read the report, which embodied an account by the rev. John Hodgson, secretary, of the excavations carried on at the expense of the society, aided by a voluntary contribution, in the Roman station Borcovicus, at Housesteads, in the years 1830, 1831, and 1833, and of the researches made by the rev. A. Hedley, at his station of Vindolana, or Little Chesters, and by the late Mr. Crawhall, at Amboglanna or Burdoswald"; the hope of finding material relating to Vindolana not subsequently embodied by Hodgson in his *History*¹² led me to search among the historian's papers, recently added to the Black Gate library after their long seclusion among the archives of the County History Committee; and though I was unsuccessful in my immediate search, I had the good fortune to light upon that portion of Hodgson's paper which related to Housesteads, together with the careful plans which he had furnished to illustrate his text. The plans of the west and south gates of the fort are of sufficient value to be reproduced here, for the additions to the Hadrianic work that they record have long been cleared away, and in the case of the west gate in particular their removal resulted in a serious misunderstanding of what had happened in Roman times.

1. *The west gate.* The excavation of this gateway in 1833 is described in some detail by Hodgson in his published account;¹³ but that account lacks the clarity of the version in the newly recovered manuscript: "We left it (*sc.* the gateway) only imperfectly opened but enough so as to show that it had been walled up inside and outside, and the space within these walls filled up . . ."; the accompanying plan, in faint pencil on very thin paper, shows how far the excavation was carried, and distinguishes carefully between original and later masonry: figure 2 is reduced to 2/3 linear from a tracing of it, with an

¹² HN 195-202.

¹³ HN 187.

elaboration of its conventions and the addition of a north point and a scale. The published account, though less precise in its terms, still showed clearly enough that the

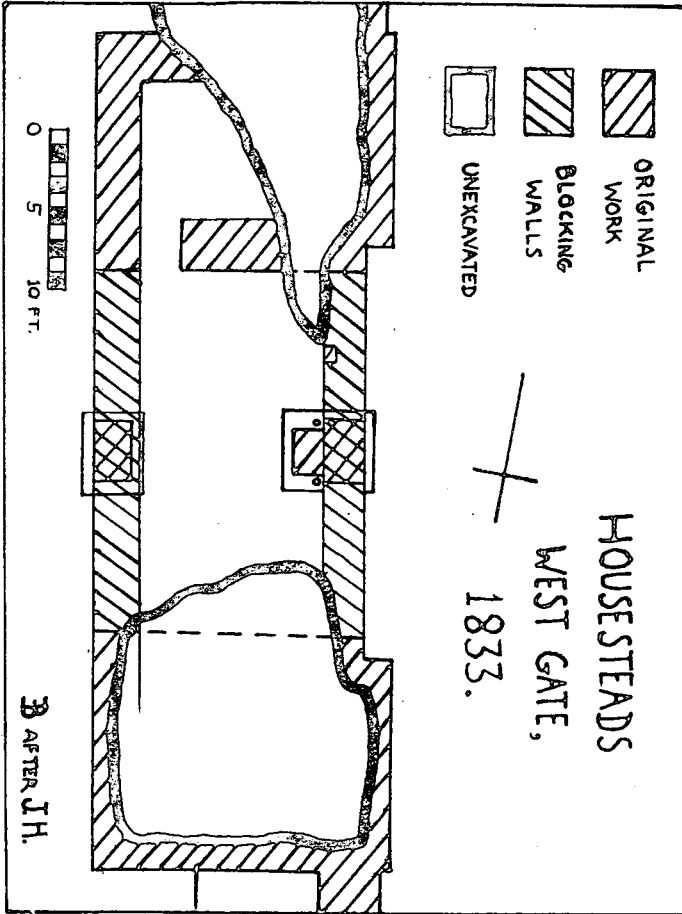


FIG. 2. I:144.

gateway had been completely eliminated in the Roman period; but a time was to come when Hodgson's evidence was neglected, and a different conclusion arrived at.

The excavation of the west gate was resumed by John

Clayton in 1850 and 1851,¹⁴ and an account, illustrated by a somewhat conventional plan, was given by Bruce in the first edition of his *Roman Wall*:¹⁵ "The southern entrance of the outside wall has alone, as yet, been entirely cleared of the masonry that closed it. . . . It is not improbable that this rubbish (*sc.* filling the interior) may have been . . . thrown here when the gateway was walled up"; that is to say, the fact of both gate-passages having been walled up is accepted, though without reference to the evidence of Hodgson's excavation. The second edition of Bruce's work involved a recasting of his description, and an alteration to the woodcut that had provided the plan in the first edition:¹⁶ the wall blocking the inner end of the northern passage was eliminated from both text and plan, and instead of describing the complete walling-up of the gateway, Bruce now put forward the view that "one half of the gateway has been blocked up. Some skill is manifested in doing this; for the entrances which are opposite to each other are not both blocked up, but those which are placed diagonally; the forcible entrance of an enemy would thus be made more difficult." The same fancy is perpetuated in the subsequent editions of Bruce's works,¹⁷ and it was not until professor Collingwood took Bruce's text in hand, in the light of the surviving remains and Bruce's own woodcuts,¹⁸ that the fact of the complete elimination of the gateway was once more emphasized, and the additional point made, that the south portal had been blocked with better (and presumably earlier) masonry than the north. If Bruce in 1853 had not rejected his own observations of 1851, it might have been argued that the publication of Hodgson's plan of his incomplete excavation would have prevented so regrettable a loss of knowledge.

2. *The south gate.* This was excavated by Hodgson,

¹⁴ R. C. Bosanquet in AA³ xxv 202.

¹⁵ RW¹ 216-220.

¹⁶ RW² 182-5.

¹⁷ WB 127; RW³ 181-3; HB² 138; HB³ 149, etc.

¹⁸ HB³ 124.

first in 1822, then in 1830;¹⁹ the work done in the earlier year is described in the first volume of our transactions,²⁰ where a sketch drawn from memory serves as an illustration; the same sketch re-appears in Hodgson's *History*, although the excavation of 1830 and the examination of the east and west gates in 1833 had demonstrated its inadequacy; but the paper read in 1834 was accompanied by a good plan, reproduced here as figure 3. The plan demonstrates—what Hodgson only discovered in 1830—that the eastern portal of the gateway had been walled up in Roman times; further, it indicates with some precision the extent to which that part of the site had been examined by him. The manuscript gives fuller particulars than the published accounts; the following points may be noted: (i) The west guard-chamber of the gate was cleared out, “but nothing curious found within it. No doorway was found into it, but within and without on all sides but that next to the gateway, it was filled up with soil and blue clay,” just as the towers of the west gate had been; this may represent the abolition of the guard-chamber, but it might also signify nothing more than the raising of the original floor-level. (ii) The medieval building attached to the south of the east tower was “partly cleared out,” and Hodgson gives a careful description of the way in which its floor had been adapted to the southward slope.²¹ (iii) The kiln inserted in the east guard-chamber of the gateway is described more fully than in the *History*, but since that, also, appears to be medieval,²² the description need not be quoted here. (iv) The oven, shown at the north-east corner of the tower, is described in the following terms: “the remains of an oven of sandstone laid in flat courses horizontally one over another and highly

¹⁹ HN 186.

²⁰ AA¹ I 267-8.

²¹ Cf AA⁴ IX 234 for recent digging inside this building.

²² Cf. Bosanquet in AA³ xxv 282-5, where the evidence is discussed in detail; it is only in the case of the oven that the appearance of Hodgson's plan suggests an earlier period.

reddened by the action of fire"; this may well have been Roman if, as the plan suggests, it was partly destroyed by the construction of the kiln.

Since we have had occasion to criticize Bruce's interpretation of the structures at the west gate, it is proper to add that, in the case of the south gate, he noted that the east portal had been walled up, and acutely observed that this walling-up "must have been done before the houses in front of it were built, the foundations of which are now to be seen";²³ reference to the plan of our recent excavations in the settlement will show the justice of this observation²⁴—and it may be added that those excavations also suggested a date for the walling-up. For it will be noted that, of the buildings lining the eastern side of the main southward street, not only nos. I and VIII (shown by antecedent material to belong to the time of Constantius Chlorus) but also no. II (whose occupation began in the early years of the third century) lie astride the natural line of a road issuing from the eastern portal of the fort gate. But the eastern portal itself, now that the blocking wall has been removed, proves to have carried considerable traffic before it was walled up; so that we must conclude it to have remained open throughout the second century, only to be converted into a guard-chamber in the Severan reconstruction.

The manuscript account of the east gateway is less full than that printed by Hodgson;²⁵ and though his plan gives useful details, it need not be reproduced here, since (in that case) Clayton did not remove the walls blocking the south portal. It must be added that at both east and west

²³ WB 125 (cf. also RW³ 185); no special reference is made to this gateway in RW¹; in RW² 185 the "moss-trooper's house," which Hodgson had thought to be Roman, receives its true interpretation for the first time, and reference is made to the remains of suburban structures; but of the gateway itself it is only said that it "exhibits most of the arrangements which have already been described in the western"—an unfortunate comparison.

²⁴ AA⁴ XII, plate XXII.

²⁵ HN 186-7.

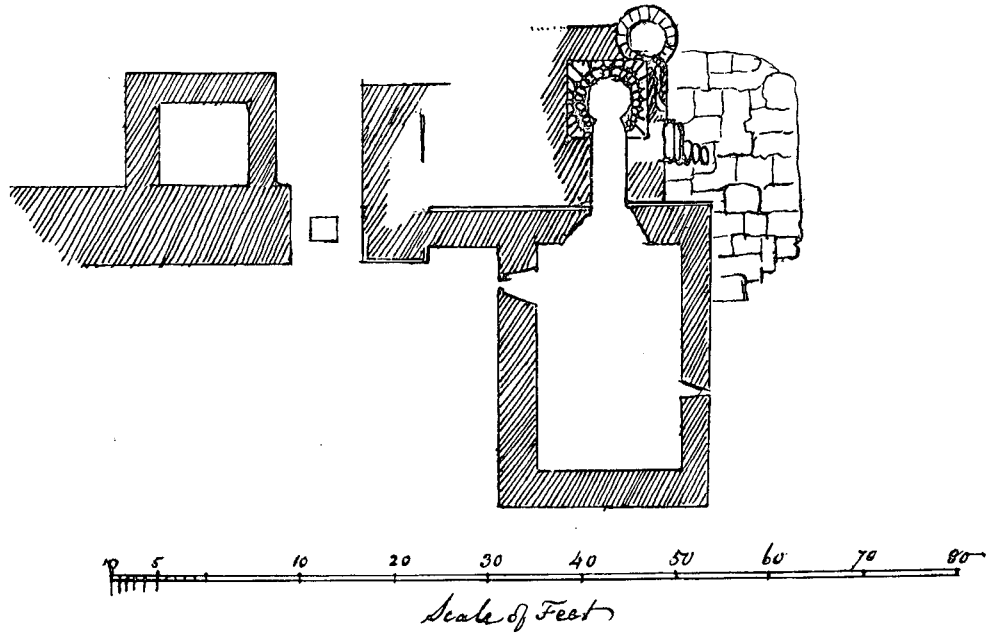


FIG. 3. JOHN HODGSON'S PLAN OF HOUSESTEADS SOUTH GATE.

gates, the walling up of the south portal seems assignable to Constantius rather than Severus,²⁶ while the east portal of the north gate was walled up in the time of Hadrian, before it could be completed to the original design;²⁷ that is to say, there is no necessary indication of any particular date for such blocking: Housesteads itself has examples attributable to every period from Hadrian to count Theodosius.

²⁶ Since, as prof. Collingwood points out (HB⁹ 124), the threshold at the west gate had been raised, and worn, before the south portal was walled up; in other words, the blocking followed the second, not the first period. The east gate is in the same condition.

²⁷ *Journal of Roman Studies* XXI 218, where it is wrongly concluded that the blocking of gates elsewhere belongs to the same phase. I hope to deal with the evidence from other sites, in collaboration with Mr. Richmond, in the near future.



Fig. 2. KNAG BURN GATEWAY, DETAIL OF WEST SIDE FROM NORTH.



Fig. 1. KNAG BURN GATEWAY, VIEW FROM SOUTH-EAST.

