

I Hadrian's Wall Began Here

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Thirty three years ago the first writer prepared a diagram for this journal plotting the different types of milecastles, turrets and curtain wall together with building inscriptions on Hadrian's Wall and, on that basis, dividing the Wall into legionary lengths.¹ A particular problem emerged: the sector Wall-miles 7–22 appeared to form one block of 15 miles divided into 3 five-mile legionary lengths mainly built to the original broad gauge. But why did this sector not begin at Newcastle (about MC 4), where, it was believed, a new bridge was constructed across the Tyne? The belief that the Wall was originally planned to end at Newcastle was strengthened by the conclusion that the eastern four miles to Wallsend were an addition because they were all built to the later narrow gauge. The only answer offered was that the three or so miles from Newcastle to 7 were erected in a first, short season, immediately following surveying.²

The second author, on considering the evidence for the eastern Wall miles has reached the conclusion that the Wall was planned from the beginning to start at Wallsend and the next paper in this volume seeks to justify this conclusion. It, of course, makes no more sense for a three-legion block to run from Wall-mile 7 to Wall-mile 22 when the Wall starts from Wallsend than if it started at Newcastle. But this argument does underline the significant point, that the Wall line must have been

surveyed in advance and the milecastles (and presumably turrets) marked out from one point of origin: that point, we would argue, was Wallsend. Within that framework, the army could have started building anywhere, but why not build from the end of the Wall rather than start at an anonymous point elsewhere? There ought to be a sensible reason for the sector 7–22 to be chosen as the first to be built. That reason is indicated on the 1968 diagram but was not recognised then. Between the legionary lengths 17–22 and 22–27 lies Portgate on Dere Street. In the eastern sector, it was at this point that the legions, marching up Dere Street, the main road from the south, met the surveyed line of the future Hadrian's Wall, for there was, as yet, no lower bridging point. This would be the logical place from which to start building, and was surely the start point for the building of the stone wall: hence the sector running eastwards from Dere Street for 15 miles was built first.

In 1968 it was argued that the legions then moved to build westwards from 22 to the Irthing (about MC 49), later returning to extend the Wall eastwards from Newcastle to Wallsend. However, at that time existing evidence for some narrow gauge in the sector 7 to 22 was ignored.³ Thus, it might even be possible to argue that sector 22–27 west of Dere Street was built at the same time as Wall-miles 12–22. On that basis, an alternative view for the building of Hadrian's Wall might be:

	1968	2001	2001 alternative
Preliminary season:	4–7	—	—
1st season (122?):	7–22	7–22	12–27
2nd season (123?):	22–27 + 36b–49	22–27 + 36b–49	7–12 + 36b–49
Then:	Decision to build forts on the Wall followed by decision to reduce the width of the wall.		
Subsequently:	complete 22–49 and build 0–4	complete 7–49 and build 0–7	complete 7–49 and build 0–7

This uncertainty does not obscure the basic conclusion: the starting point for the construction of Hadrian's Stone Wall was the Portgate on Dere Street. Possibly the starting point for the Turf Wall was therefore the gate through the Wall on the road leading north from Carlisle. Finally, it may be asked why this simple, obvious, indeed elegant, solution was not reached earlier. The answer, we suspect, lies in our blinkered belief that the building of the Stone Wall had started at the bridge over the Tyne in Newcastle. In fact, the bridge need not be Hadrianic but might be contemporary with the Antonine fort at Newcastle and have no relevance to a presumed starting point of the Wall.⁴

NOTES

¹ J. Hooley and D. J. Breeze, "The Building of Hadrian's Wall: a reconsideration", *AA* ⁴, 46 (1968), diagram facing 102.

² *Ibid.*, 111.

³ E. Birley, *Research on Hadrian's Wall* (Kendal 1961), 84.

⁴ F. Haverfield, "An inscribed slab mentioning the second, sixth and twentieth legions from the River Tyne", *AA* ², 25 (1904) 143, n. 4, cited in the latest discussion of the bridge in P. T. Bidwell and N. Holbrook, *Hadrian's Wall Bridges*, London (1989) 101–3. For the date of the fort see: Paul Bidwell, *Hadrian's Wall 1989–1999*, Carlisle (1999), 97–99.