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Saving the Wall: Quarries and Conservation

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SUMMARY

Some of the most spectacular parts of the central section of Hadrian's Wall were threatened by quarrying in the 1930s and 1940s. This paper, written by one of the participants in the controversy, describes the way in which the conflict was successfully resolved.

We have to thank John Frederick Wake, Darlington engineer, for the Ancient Monuments act of 1931. His proposal in 1930 to quarry whinstone south of the Wall at Melkridge, which aroused a passionate debate between preservationists and those who welcomed the jobs it promised, not only drew attention to the fact that two quarries, at Walltown and Cawfields, had been slowly destroying the Wall for years, but that under the existing Ancient Monuments Act of 1882 the government's power to protect the surroundings of an ancient monument amounted to no more than the space to fence it in. The new Act, strictly speaking more germane to the Ministry of Health as a planning department, now gave the relevant minister, the First Commissioner of H. M. Works, power to make planning schemes and pay compensation.

Nothing happened immediately for those were the days of the Great Slump and the employment problem, and financial parsimony dominated government thinking. But officials of the Office of Works prepared a Preservation Scheme to deal with the quarrying problem that the Act was meant to solve. This controlled the whole of the whinstone area from Walltown almost to Chesters, but provided that the existing quarries might continue working till the end of their respective leases: Walltown 1981; Cawfields 1943. Likewise with Wake's

lease from Sir Hugh Blackett, expiring in 1949, but renewable for a further 20 years. He however began quarrying south of Hotbank Farm, destroying part of the military way, till 1942, when bought out by the National Trust. But his lease remained a threat since it might be bought by another quarry company.

The unpublished Preservation Scheme was not forgotten however. Ormsby-Gore, a preservationist First Commissioner of Works, put up a case for its publication to the Cabinet, only to be turned down, like other later approaches, on the grounds of expense and employment. Meanwhile the quarries demolished the Wall, but slowly, because of the depth of the sill. And no one seems to have heeded as no building was involved.

When, however, in 1938 the Walltown quarry reached a well-preserved section of the Wall, which included the important Turret 45a, a watchtower built before the Wall, the national finances were easier and a Preservation Order was made by which the Office of Works acquired the Wall, turret and mineral rights and the quarry was made to work further east where the remains were slight. Compensation was paid by the Treasury 'with the greatest reluctance' despite the approval of Parliament: £1,000 to the mineral owner and £15,000 to the company to cover the cost of realigning their plant. This was also on the understanding that they did not oppose the Preservation Scheme, which was at last published. But there was no prospect of it being confirmed with War in prospect.

Indeed the quarries were forgotten by the department (now called the Ministry of Works) till in February 1943 F. G. Simpson came to Rhyl (where sections of the department not directly concerned with the War were now

stationed) to say that a hundred yards of the Wall had been demolished at Walltown, where over 80 men were employed. There was less damage at the smaller quarry (35 men) at Cawfields, but there was a threat there to the viewpoint looking towards the milecastle. The reason for this sudden increased production was the demand for whinstone for surfacing RAF airfields. And the rate of destruction was further increased by the Walltown company merely skimming the top of the sill.

As it happened the senior civil servant at Rhyl, Dr. F. J. E. Raby, FBA, FSA, knew all about the quarry problem, for he had drawn up the Preservation Scheme. He wrote at once to his opposite number at the Treasury, warning him that despite the War – indeed because of it – the question of preservation had now resurfaced. He also made me write a long account of the Wall, which I am sure that no one ever read. He then sent me to our London headquarters and [Sir] Eric de Normann, the department's formidable under-secretary who, if anyone, could get the Treasury's agreement to pay the compensation that would certainly be involved. De Normann sent me at once to two men: John Dower and Dr. I. G. Moore.

John Dower, who was dying of tuberculosis, was a leading member of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government Post-war Planning Division. He had just completed his monumental report on national parks on which those institutions were based. He knew the Wall well, having married the eldest daughter of Sir Charles Trevelyan of Wallington and designed the Youth Hostel, Once Brewed. He was dismayed not just at the archaeological damage being done but by the threat to his proposed Northumberland National Park if we did not acquire Wake's lease at Melkridge. He was not only a magnificent moral support to us but saw that, throughout, we had the full support of his Ministry. Alas, he died before the Wall was saved.

Dr. I. G. Moore was a civil engineer in charge of the great Chilmark quarries. It was he who produced the practical solution to our problems and one reason I am writing this is because his name is not mentioned in the public

records, which have preserved only the legal and administrative papers. The Minister, Lord Portal, regarded the whole thing as a planning matter to be solved by finding another site to quarry, so Moore and I visited several possible sites, but none was any good. Moore then decided the Walltown problem, which was much the more serious, must be solved at Walltown.

There were in fact two problems: the immediate wartime supply for the RAF airfields and the future of the quarry and its workforce, which he suggested should be dealt with in two stages, which we adopted. The first was met by using a Preservation Order to stop the quarry going eastwards destroying the Wall but letting it go south as far as possible without seriously damaging the view from the south. This line, which was discussed with F. G. Simpson, gave enough whinstone not only for the RAF's requirements but for a year or two after the War while the company was preparing for Moore's second stage. This, known as the 'second lift', meant them working the stone to the base of the sill – hence the little lakes. Needless to say the company didn't like this and demanded vast sums in compensation, accepting eventually what was then a large sum of £60,000 to cover the extra costs of implementing Moore's second stage. But it provided years of employment for the workforce.

As soon as news got about that the quarries might close there began a public agitation like that which had greeted Mr Lansbury, the First Commissioner of Works, at Newcastle in 1930, but on a much smaller scale and virtually confined to Haltwhistle, whence many of the workmen came. As before, a member of the government came to calm their fears. This was the Parliamentary Secretary (in modern parlance Junior Minister) Mr George Hicks, Secretary of the Building Trades Union, who addressed a town meeting with the local M.P., Lt.-Col. Clifton-Brown, Speaker of the House of Commons, in the chair. The case for the workers, including those at present in the forces, was strongly urged from the floor and Lt.-Col. Eric Birley came from the War Office to speak on the other side. Mr Hicks assured



Fig. 1 Quarrying at Walltown. (Photo by Robert Spence; courtesy of the Museum of Antiquities of the University and Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne.)

his audience that there was no question of the quarries being shut down and that Haltwhistle was written on his heart.

De Normann, after a brief visit to the Wall, tackled the Treasury. His line was not whether but how soon the Wall was to be saved. This was accepted, a 'Parliamentary' figure of £100,000 agreed and the Inland Revenue told to estimate the probable cost. They suggested the alarming figure of £134,000 to extinguish all industrial activity in the Preservation Scheme area, but this was drastically reduced to something approaching the parliamentary figure by Moore's plan for extending the life of Walltown quarry and letting a small quarry continue working.

With the Treasury agreement there were then three interlinked courses of action: stopping the present destruction; confirming the Preservation Scheme; and getting rid of the Wake concession. As soon as the Minister told de Normann to proceed, the Preservation Scheme was confirmed – on 14th September, the Preservation Order being issued four days later. At the same time Wake agreed to sell, though it was not till 3rd June, 1944 that, partly thanks to Percy Hedley FSA, Sir Hugh Blackett's agent, he formally assigned his lease to us for £6,500.

When the Scheme was confirmed it occurred to me that the learned world knew nothing of what had been happening and I got permission

to go to Ian Richmond, then working in the Italian section of the Foreign Office, and with him compose a report for the *Journal of Roman Studies* in the section on Roman Britain in 1943,

I have said little about Cawfields since its lease was about to run out. It was worked by the Amalgamated Roadstone Corporation, a large organisation of which Cawfields was a minor unit. F. G. Simpson had taken a great interest in its workings lest the milecastle viewpoint be destroyed and had become friendly with the manager and we had none of the battles we had had with the Northumberland Whinstone Company at Walltown. In the end, on condition that the viewpoint was kept, we let the quarry continue for another year. Its mineral owners, with the charming title of The Lords and Ladies of Haltwhistle, received £3,000 compensation.

The Ministry's action preserved the Wall, provided employment for the working lives of most of the quarrymen and paid the Northumberland Whinstone Company in all some £75,000 compensation. A dozen years later the company, anxious to free itself from the restrictions laid down by the government, sought in vain to extend its workings. A final attempt in 1960, under the 1947 Planning Act, led to a

public enquiry, in which Ian Richmond spoke for the Wall, and a final refusal from the Minister of Town and Country Planning. His inspector declared that 'the effect of the proposed quarrying would be either to destroy a long length of Roman Wall or to drive a deep pit into the middle of the Roman defensive system. The setting of the Wall would be damaged, an unsightly quarry in a prominent position in a National Park would be extended and the Pennine Way would have to be diverted'. The Minister said that he had regard for the problem of employment, but considered that the proposed extension would do 'irreparable harm to a monument of unique historical importance and its setting in the Northumberland National Park. Moreover he noted the local planning authority's view that extension of the quarry could not be justified on the grounds of shortage of whinstone'. (PRO:HLG 89/855).

After many delays I wrote this account on what happened just three days before the 60th Anniversary of the Preservation Scheme. It is based partly on recollection, partly on the documents in the Public Record Office. I should add that I am grateful to my archivist, Miss Sue Rodwell, for her excavations there and in various other ways to Dr Grace Simpson and the staff of English Heritage.