

ART.V– *A Roman Road from Kendal to Ambleside. A field survey. Part 1: Kendal to Broadgate.*

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THE precise course of the Roman road between the known forts at Kendal and Ambleside has long been lost. Many years ago, Mr J. Marsh reported an agger as being visible in fields (now overlaid by a housing development) north-west of Kendal's Watercrock fort, but with little else of the route recorded. In September 1989 the writers began an attempt to re-locate it.

Research was mainly carried out from public roads, footpaths, or rights of way. Much gratitude is owed to the land-owners and farmers who generously allowed inspection of their fields.

The search began where in low sunshine, a narrow linear plateau was observed from, and running roughly parallel to, the A591 Kendal By-Pass, in a field midway between Low Plumgarths and Helsfell farms, at OS 496942. When visited on foot, the configuration was found compatible with typical Roman road construction, and although ill-defined on the surface, dimensions suggested an agger width of around 23 feet, roughly 7 metres. At the time of writing, none of the route under discussion had yet been the subject of archaeological excavation, so dimensions here given are necessarily open to revision.

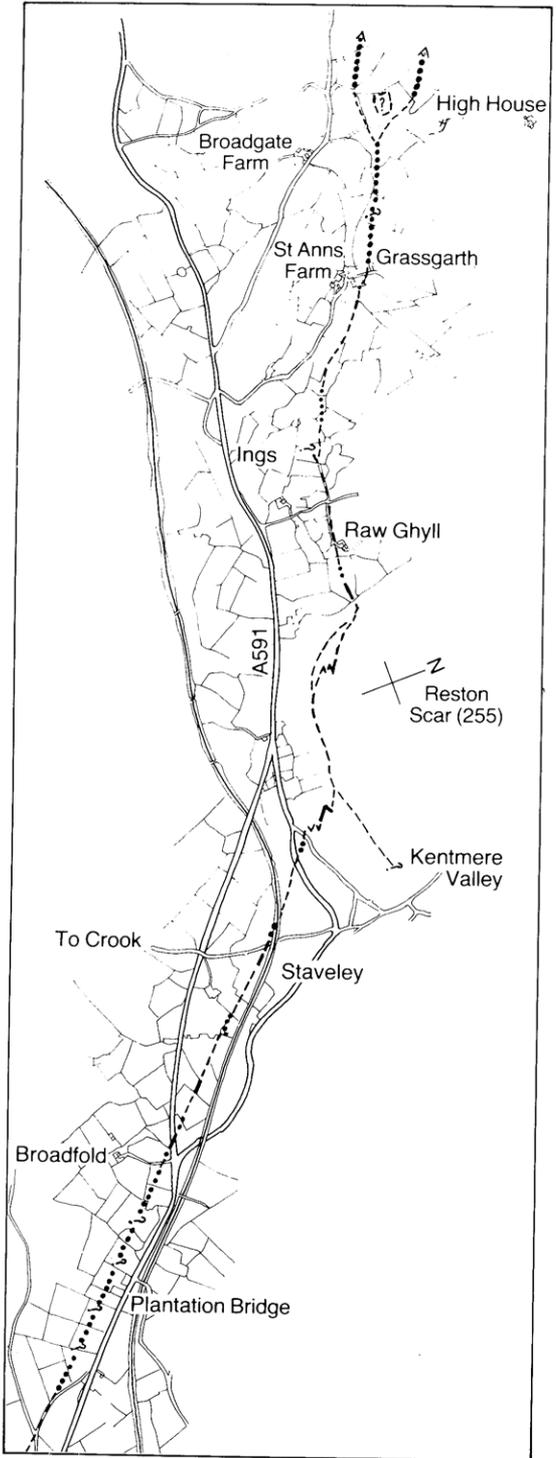
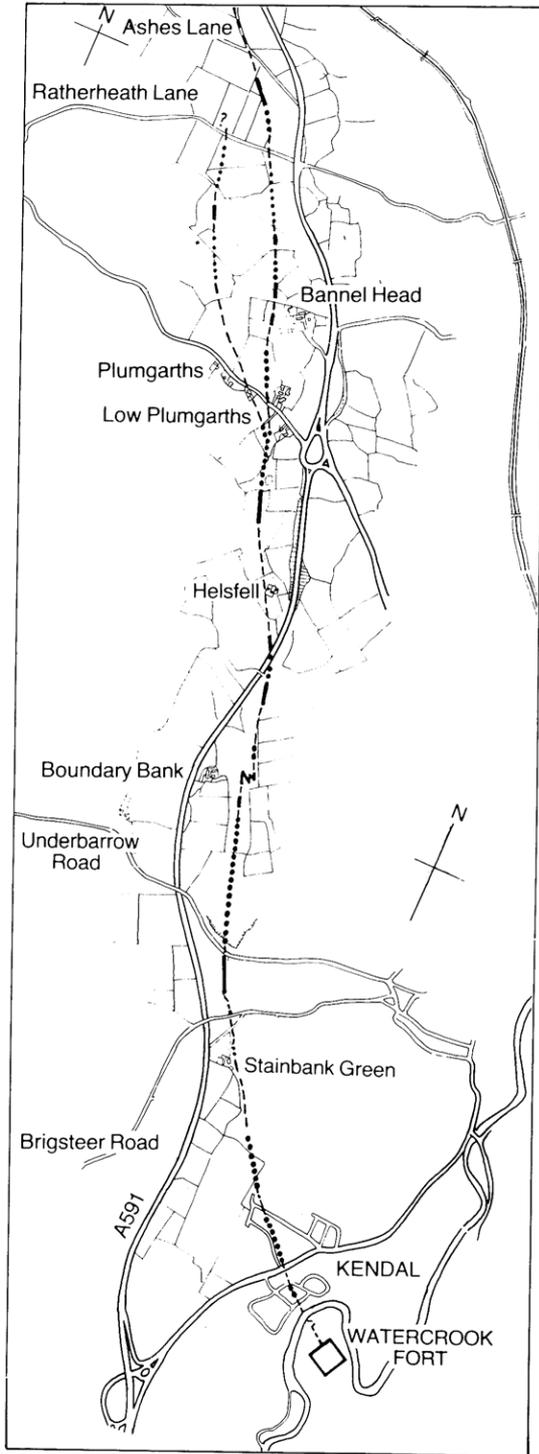
The alignment was initially followed in a south-easterly direction beyond those visible remains, for the most part using archaeological dowsing techniques developed by the writers on a variety of sites. Using 'angle-rod' dowsing instruments however, features such as Roman roads or forts (i.e. banks, ditches and/or stonework), give quite distinctive 'readings' compared to Medieval or later work, even where nothing remains visible on the surface, and do so (most usefully, though undoubtedly mysteriously) even if the entire structure has long been ploughed out. The ability to dowse has therefore particular practical advantages in this kind of field research, and is today much used in other archaeological and professional work.¹

It is proposed here to describe the re-discovered route as far as the vicinity of Broadgate Farm, starting from the Kendal (Watercrock) Roman fort. For the sake of clarity, since other local Roman routes are currently being explored by the writers, this section was dubbed 'K-A1'.

Watercrock to Helsfell

On leaving the north-western side of Watercrock fort, an immediate difficulty was encountered. During the intervening 1,600 years or so since the fort was in use, the River Kent has eroded the outside of its curve round the fort, the present bed now lying considerably north-west of its 'Roman' position. By cutting into the hillside on its west bank, it has formed today's almost vertical cliff, some 4 to 6 metres high.

Nothing remains visible of a Roman ford or bridge-works, but by employing dowsing



Visible Road ————— Dowsed Road - - - - - Assumed Road •••••

Sketch Map drawn by N. Gledhill.

techniques with extreme care, indications of the position and width of the river when the fort was in its heyday were traced, as was the site of what may have been a timber bridge. Excavation would naturally be required to verify this.

Proceeding from the fort, the roadway seemingly reduced in width from a little over 7 metres to 5 metres on reaching what appears to have been the bridge structure. The Roman-period riverbank was located by dowsing at 76.5 metres from the fort wall, the Kent's width apparently having then been in the order of 29.5 metres.

Once on the far bank (some 40 metres closer to the fort than the present near bank, and today indicated by a well-defined rise in the field), the agger traces again indicated reversion to a standard width of approximately 7 metres.

It seems likely that, starting in Roman times so much nearer to the fort than at present, the hill north-west of the river sloped upwards from a bank appreciably lower than the present cliff. Even so, immediately upon leaving the (?) bridge, readings suggest that K-A1 began a brief zig-zag climb, at which intriguing point the writers lost the trace, owing to the present position of the river.

The roadway was detected again up on what is presently the far bank, where it crosses the wooded strip at the back of a modern bungalow, No. 10 River Bank Road. It was found to be back on the alignment initiated from the fort.

Passing close along the bungalow's northern gable and across River Bank Road, K-A1 then ran diagonally under the next block of houses, crossing Bellingham Road at the point where the latter bends from north-east to east. It is then followed by the line of houses on the north-east side of a cul-de-sac opposite, up to the (modern) A6 road to Kendal, which it crosses east of Lumley Road (under the gateway of No. 90). The route then apparently passes immediately behind the houses on the north-east side of Lumley Road, until the latter curves away left.

The Roman trace was next detected traversing Stonecross Road at an angle of approximately 40° from No. 37 to No. 36 on the opposite side, and was again picked up at No. 37 Collinfield. Here it seemingly continues under a modern house coincidentally named 'Stoneleigh'.

Although this has yet to be checked, the route from here would seem to lie north-westwards across the open farmland after skirting the northern side of the hill at the back of 'Stoneleigh'. Heavy ploughing during intervening centuries has here (and elsewhere on the route) removed the majority of visual evidence.

The next group of buildings on the alignment was found to be Stainbank Green, at OS 505918. 'Stainbank' complies with a large number of place names associated with Roman roads having 'stain', 'stane', 'stone' or 'ston' as part of their spelling.

K-A1 here runs a few yards clear of but parallel to the hedge running north-westwards towards the farmhouse. For a short distance its agger in part then bears the present public footpath, and in certain conditions indications of the right-hand fosse are visible in the surface contours of the field alongside the pathway. Where the path bends into the farmyard, K-A1 continues straight, closing with and joining the farm's driveway just before the lane to Ghyll Brow comes in from the east.

From this point to where it meets the old (now abandoned) part of the Brigsteer road, the Stainbank Green drive appears to be on the Roman road, whose line then continues (invisibly) across the triangular field into the new embankment now carrying the re-routed Brigsteer road upwards to bridge the A591.

On the far side, a modern ramp slopes down in a north-westerly direction to provide access to further fields. K-A1 appears to have been close east of the start of this ramp. A hump under the first hedge on the right may be over the agger, which has otherwise been utterly dug away.

The route now bends slightly round the head of a natural ravine, at last emerging more visibly beside a long stone wall running north-north-west, the Roman foundation still forming a good footing for the farm track (OS 503921). The line follows the west side of the wall straight uphill, crossing the Underbarrow Road immediately west of a small stone shed at the tightest part of the wide bend, 400 metres from the bridge over the A591. A look southwards over the wall from the road by the shed is rewarding in certain conditions.

North of the Underbarrow Road much quarrying has taken place, but the course of K-A1 was next traced crossing the centre of the northern wall of a long narrow field, south-east of the farm interestingly called Boundary Bank. Once again, a distinct rise under the stonework betrays its position.

The route now edges gradually towards the north-eastern corner of the next field. Here, where some early edge-banking is still visible, the writers were surprised to find the Roman road doubling back in an impressive zig-zag, up the scarp and onto the high field above Boundary Bank (OS 501931). The present farm track still makes good use of the Roman work for the main leg of the 'Z' (visible from the Kendal By-Pass).

K-A1 is again faintly discernible to the eye in places up on the limestone plateau as it angles gently towards the long stone wall on its north-east side. The northern end of this wall apparently uses the Roman road as its footing (OS 500933).

Running downhill now, still in a generally north-westerly direction as if toward the Kentmere Valley, the alignment dips into the angle of the field formed where the deep cutting of the Kendal By-Pass closes with it from the left. The line of the Roman roadworks can just be made out on the outcropping limestone.

Passing under a wall at the end of this field to the right of a wooden stile (where a rise in the wall-footings again indicates its position), the alignment crosses heavily disturbed ground, and is then diagonally cut by the 'ravine' blasted out for the By-Pass. At this point it was hoped that sections might be visible in the cutting's faces, but the bedrock extends to the surface, and alas nothing remains.

There is a footbridge over the By-Pass at OS 499935, and the trace of the Roman road was picked up some 95 metres north of its western end, yet again in the form of a slight rising of the ground under the stone boundary wall. For some 200 metres more, its course is occasionally discernible as it extends north-north-westward, eventually passing the western corner of Helsfell farmhouse garden.

The next large ('T'-shaped) field is where at OS 496942 the writers first noted the levelled strip from the A591, as previously described. A row of four trees here marks its eastern edge for a space, and beyond the northernmost end wall, the alignment appears to pass close west of a small private reservoir (OS 496944).

At several points from Watercrock, the width of the agger plus its drainage ditches was detected as being 7 metres, frequently with a pair of flanking ditches some 10 metres (roughly 33 feet) to either side of the central arrangement. These dimensions appear to hold good with only a few exceptions throughout the entire length of K-A1.

Helsfell to Staveley

Between Helsfell and Low Plumgarths there is a 'fork' in the system; one branch-road passes directly under the line of the eastern group of houses west of Plumgarths, before obliquely crossing the Crook Road and the fields beyond. At OS 489954, approximately 165 metres north of Bank End, it can clearly be seen as a raised causeway in a dip. The writers have yet to trace this particular route any further. It may prove part of that noted by Arthur Thornton,² as discovered during road construction south of Moss-side House, near Staveley. If so, it would appear to run more or less in parallel with the route described below. Three such parallel systems have so far been found by the present writers along the route of K-A1.

The other (?original) branch of the Roman road, after the fork at Low Plumgarths, crosses the B5284 Crook Road diagonally at the entrance to Plumgarths Farm (OS 494947). In the field west of Bannel Head, some 150 metres from the house (between the letters 'a' and 'n' of 'Bannel' on the O.S map³ at approximately OS 491952), an increased scattering of stones betrays the alignment as it approaches a short hedge. The latter here turns at right-angles to itself and follows the north-eastern side of the agger for 30 metres.

K-A1 appears to continue in its north-north-westerly direction over a rise in the next enclosure, and beyond into a large, irregularly shaped sloping field. This is identifiable on the map⁴ as being over-printed with a blue block containing the letter 'P', west of the A591 Windermere Road, and roughly 1 km north-west of the Crook Road roundabout. Again a generous scattering of stone at OS 491954 renders the course of the Roman road vaguely 'visible', a little north of the public footpath.

The route is now crossed by a hedge in a dip, then climbs towards a stone barn on the crest of the small field south-west of the junction of Ratherheath Lane and the Windermere Road. The alignment passes close along the barn's eastern wall, 'under' Ratherheath Lane and thence up onto the rough ground of the curiously named Scream Point, re-aligning more nearly north-westwards by the corner of a field wall projecting into the area on the left.

It now descends the slope of rough ground in the form of a clearly discernible ramp (OS 488961), to a point roughly half way along the north-south stone wall which ends at the bend of an obsolete loop of the original Kendal/Windermere Road.

Coming in at the fork into Ashes Lane, the Roman course was detected continuing directly under the straight central part of the loop for some 200 metres, parallel to the present A591. The edge of this obsolete roadway has at its far end been revetted, and is much higher than the level of the adjacent quadrilateral field, diagonally across which K-A1 now invisibly proceeds. (Surface levels seem to have been altered very considerably, maybe when this stretch of the (old) Windermere Road was being constructed.)

The course of K-A1 continues over lumpy ground, passing approximately 200 metres south-west of the bungalows at Plantation Bridge, and was re-detected obliquely crossing the new Staveley By-Pass 60 metres west of the drive to Broadford Farm.

The alignment now enters the first field east of the Staveley road-end, some 50 metres from the road-junction. Its position can be observed from within the field as a low rise in the foundations of the intervening stone wall, at OS 476974. It has otherwise been obliterated by ploughing.

At approximately OS 475975, in the field entered by overhead electricity lines coming in from the east (and turning almost parallel to its alignment), the northern edge of the agger is again discernible as a levelled ridge. It was here seen to be heading in the direction of the short length of clearly visible (and mapped) ancient 'green' stone-lined track which angles steeply up a small field on the flanks of Reston Scar, north of the western end of Brow Lane (OS 465985).

Continuing to converge slightly with the aforementioned power lines, K-A1 approaches the bulge of the next field wall at OS 474976. A newly dug and re-filled trench was noted crossing the Roman alignment, and a much greater concentration of small and larger stones was to be seen here than elsewhere along the trench's length. These were considered compatible with the sort of gravel surface and edging often typical of Roman road construction.

The modern 'Dales Way' cuts through an arch in the embankment carrying the Kendal/Windermere railway at OS 977473, as does a small but lively beck on its way down to the nearby River Kent. Some 100 metres upstream (roughly south) of the archway, the ruins of what may have been a ford once edged with large stones are discernible in the water, and the trace of K-A1 leads precisely to this point.

A brief zig-zag appears to have been necessary up the west bank of the stream, the regained alignment now gradually converging with the present line of overhead power-cables. The final pylon supporting the latter stands in a triangular area of rough ground immediately behind the electricity sub-station on the east side of the Staveley to Crook road, south of the bridge carrying the railway. Here the agger remains prominently visible as a sizeable ridge in the rough ground. (OS 470979)

Staveley to Broadgate

The modern road coming in to Staveley from Crook is in a slight cutting where the Roman alignment crosses it, some 23 metres south of the railway bridge. Although it looks impossible nowadays due to massively modified topography created when embanking the railway, K-A1's trace was further detected behind the nearest bungalow to the railway, and again north of the railway line. Here it cuts obliquely across the road called Beck Nook, from Nos. 47/48 to No. 24. Nothing of it is visible at any of these points.

Crossing the footbridge over the River Gowan some 40 metres downstream of the Roman route, the writers eventually dowsed K-A1's alignment emerging from under the old mill building which now houses an electricity workshop, where a wide concrete pathway from a personnel entrance lies.

From here the trace angles under the modern road, heading, as it has for the last 3 kilometres, directly towards the raised grass track high on the side of Reston Scar. The surprise is that on approaching what is now Brow Lane, K-A1 veers to the left, crossing the lane some 75 metres inside the latter's western end. On looking down over the roadside wall at this point (in the direction of the electricity workshop) a distinct rise in the ground-level can be seen under the wall footings, but the rest of the large enclosed field to the south and east has in the past been heavily ploughed, so nothing else shows.

The angle at which Brow Lane is crossed was interpreted as the commencement of a series of zig-zags up onto Reston Scar. A slight flattening of the incline in the very

bottom left-hand corner of the field on the high side of Brow Lane possibly indicates one edge of the Roman surface.

Having continued a short way into what are now private gardens, the route turns hard right and its trace was found angling back towards the middle of the same field, above Brow Lane. Almost halfway across, a sharp left turn was traced, heading briefly back towards the west field wall, then a further hairpin to the right is followed by another left, taking the route almost into the north-west corner of the field. Some of this can just be made out on the ground.

Beyond the corner it meets the foot of the clearly defined grass track edged with low stone walls. These appear to have been added perhaps as recently as early Victorian times, and the lowest section bends southwards off the Roman line. Furthermore, the Roman agger was here traced at the usual 7 metre width, much wider than the existing track, which only uses its south-western side. Surface slippage has apparently covered the 'uphill' side.

At the top of the stone-edged track, the Roman route can be seen bending once more sharply away to the north-east. Before reaching the present gateway in the wall ahead, however, K-A1 makes one final left turn, to where its solid footing benefits a different gateway, into the uppermost field at about the 160 metre contour. Here it is nowadays crossed by the pipeline carrying water to Manchester, and a few metres further on appears to have been joined from the east by a more minor Roman road. In part still used for access to reservoirs on Reston Scar, this latter route was traced back down to the Kentmere Valley. To avoid confusion, the writers dubbed it 'RS-KM'.

K-A1 on the other hand now turns west, and after passing under the north-west corner of this top field, is still made use of by farm vehicles as it climbs to a natural shelf skirting round the face of Reston Scar, more or less on the 175 metre contour. From Reston summit, this alignment is quite apparent. (The Manchester water pipe is downhill of the Roman route, along the top edge of the wood above Reston Hall.)

When deserted by the shelf, K-A1's trace descends slightly to a steeply sloping part of the Scar face now covered by fallen scree, the upper part of which is grass covered, and therefore probably of some antiquity. Initially, and totally by dowsing, the Roman track was nevertheless followed to where it kinked briefly northwards to ford a minor beck. This section was unexpectedly found to have narrowed to an agger-width of only 4.5 metres (less than 15 ft).

It was observed that here, as elsewhere on the Scar, the edges of the trace were often marked by straight rows of ant-hills, whose small brown inhabitants seemingly enjoy the good drainage afforded by the underlying stonework. This oddity frequently rendered the alignment apparent in areas where it was otherwise utterly invisible.

The route is now crossed by two stone walls 190 metres apart, the second marking the boundary between lands farmed by Mr Swindlehurst of Low House, Ings, and Mr Gorst of High Reston Farm. Both gentlemen showed much kind interest in the research, as indeed did Mr Black of Scroggs Farm, Staveley, who works the remainder of Reston Scar, and the writers are most grateful for their permission to study the area.

Before the route on Reston Scar was inspected, Mr Gorst had allowed a search over his land to the north-west, and the site of the roadway had been clearly located meeting that (far) side of the boundary wall at approximately OS 457989. Sadly, this proved to be some 50 metres further north than the research work on the Scar itself now indicated.

Clearly something had happened, and it was only when the writers started at the northern-most wall-crossing point, and back-tracked on this higher alignment in a south-south-easterly direction, over Mr Swindlehurst's land, that the probable reason became manifest.

The upper route was traced back, slightly climbing, for some 180 metres, to where an impassable crag projects from the extremely steep incline of the hillside. At this point the roadway was found to have plunged downwards in a four-part zig-zag, only 5 metres wide, to where the eastern of the two afore-mentioned walls crosses it. Here it seemingly regained its original width of 7 metres.

With difficulty, its course was now dowsed across the largely overgrown face of ancient scree-fall, angling gently down to where it finally became one with the section already found, at OS 460986. The writers conjecture that this upper, wider route was the original, but while still in Roman use, was obliterated by the fall of scree, perhaps owing to a small earth tremor. It would be reasonable to assume that the foot of the scree was then by-passed by the construction of a new, lower line (now also covered by scree). The fact that the lower route is significantly narrower for much of its length, may suggest less traffic than was originally envisaged.

Immediately over the Swindlehurst/Gorst boundary wall at OS 457989, the edge of the upper road is defined by a break in the rock forming the left (south-west) side of a levelled area. The route now heads north-west at an elevation which it will more or less hold as far as Allen Knott. Joined by the narrow lower section, it fords the first of two becks, just north of a prominent boulder, the bedrock in the first beck bearing signs of having been hammered level.

Of necessity K-A1 then had to be kinked briefly northwards to find a suitable way across the second, deeper-cut beck, before settling on a westerly course where it is crossed by the wall at OS 456989. Beyond this wall, the levelled alignment can be seen heading directly for the barns at Raw Ghyll farm, a grassy bank clearly marking the revetting on its south side. This banking is visible from the A591, in the second field east of Raw Ghyll.

The writers have reason to believe the Romans may have built an even later roadway crossing the Gowan about a kilometre west of Staveley, and coming up to join the above route in the vicinity of Raw Ghyll; but research remains to be done in this area.

West of Raw Ghyll, the Roman foundation is used by the present farm lane heading due west. Being narrower, the lane uses only the southern half of K-A1 for a good deal of its length. Near the farm the underground water pipe feeding the Manchester supply from Windermere crosses Raw Ghyll lane, and therefore the Roman road. It was noted that in a number of areas along the route under discussion, pipeline engineers, electricity engineers, and Roman surveyors from time to time, have selected the very same sequences of contours and straight sight-lines for their work.

Where the east-west lane from Raw Ghyll is crossed by a north-south lane at OS 451990, a levelling can be seen to the north where the agger plunged down to ford (or just possibly, bridge) the beck tumbling down from beyond Low House. The east-west lane remains on the alignment for a further 200 metres, at which point the lane terminates in a field gateway. Beyond this the Roman route forks, one branch swinging away south-westwards, and work is in hand to learn its destination.

The main course of K-A1 curves slightly to the right, and was next traced crossing the

lane to Hugill Hall at OS 445992. To the south-south-east, a flattened area skirting round the slope of the field betrays its track, a small re-alignment having taken place in the intervening stretch.

At OS 443995 the agger was again observed as a rise in the footings of a stone wall, on the north side of which a farm track has been constructed by removing topsoil (and the stones and gravel of the Roman road). A knob of bedrock now stands proud on the exact line of K-A1, making its existence here look utterly unlikely, but the dowsed trace was followed quite firmly on to Grassgarth. Here it appears to have zig-zagged sharply down a steep rocky dip towards St. Ann's Farm, where the writers again detected it crossing the farm lane immediately south of the barn.

The route from here leads downhill, maintaining a generally north-north-westerly course, and then rises again towards High House Lane, which it meets approximately 400 metres north of Broadgate Farm.

At this point, the writers detected yet another divergence of traces, each crossing the lane which runs from Broadgate Farm to High House. One was measured as being slightly less than 7 metres wide at OS 435998, while the second, at OS 435999, appears to splay out from a full 7 metres to around 10 metres, before bending away from the first at about 45°. As will be described in Part 2, the two routes eventually run virtually parallel and between 300 and 350 metres apart, until they pass either side of Allen Knott, perhaps indicating the process known as 'centuriation'.

The more southern, slightly narrower road was traced (occasionally visible) from High House Lane to the end of the route described by Mr Arthur Thornton.⁵ The more northern route was followed by the present writers, again both visually and by dowsing, beyond Allen Knott, and downwards to ford the Trout Beck at OS 409020, now on its way to Ambleside. The intention is to report on this and the remaining section to Ambleside Fort as fully as possible in the near future.

References

¹ Tom Graves, *Dowsing and Archaeology* (Turnstone Books, 1980)

² A. Thornton, 'The Roman Road between the Forts at Ambleside and Kendal', *CW2*, lxxxix, 37-40.

³ O.S. 1:25000 Outdoor Leisure Map Sheet 7, English Lakes-South East

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ A. Thornton, *op.cit.*

