

XIII.—THE ROMAN WALL IN WESTGATE, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE.

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The line of the Roman Wall through the central parts of Newcastle is a problem that has always excited interest. The early destruction of the Wall owing to the growth of medieval Newcastle has left nothing above ground to assist in defining the line. The speculations of the eighteenth and nineteenth century antiquaries and the records of chance finds, often vague and contradictory, were the only available clues for the solving of this interesting puzzle.

The first systematic attack on the problem was made by the North of England Excavation Committee at the request of the Northumberland County History Committee. It had been felt by the committee that although no surface remains of the Wall existed, the tracing of its filled in ditch through the modern city was possible by cutting sections across the line when and where access was available, and this idea was stimulated by a series of public utility excavations for the laying of mains and cables, and with the work on Tyne Bridge approach. These excavations revealed the subsoil on various sections and greatly assisted the committee to narrow down the probable and possible lines for the Wall ditch through central Newcastle.

In 1928, with the help of the Newcastle Corporation, the committee began a series of excavations. The filled in ditch and the remains of the Wall foundation were found in the east of the city on the west side of the Ouse Burn

valley in the grounds of St. Dominic's church. By cutting a number of sections the line was traced westwards below modern streets, houses and cleared areas, through the town wall at the Sally Port and into east medieval Newcastle. The line was then followed up Silver Street and into Painterheugh. The filled in ditch was finally lost on the east side of Dean Street, owing to the cutting away of the Roman surface to below the level of the bottom of the ditch. (*History of Northumberland*, vol. XIII, pp. 496-499.)

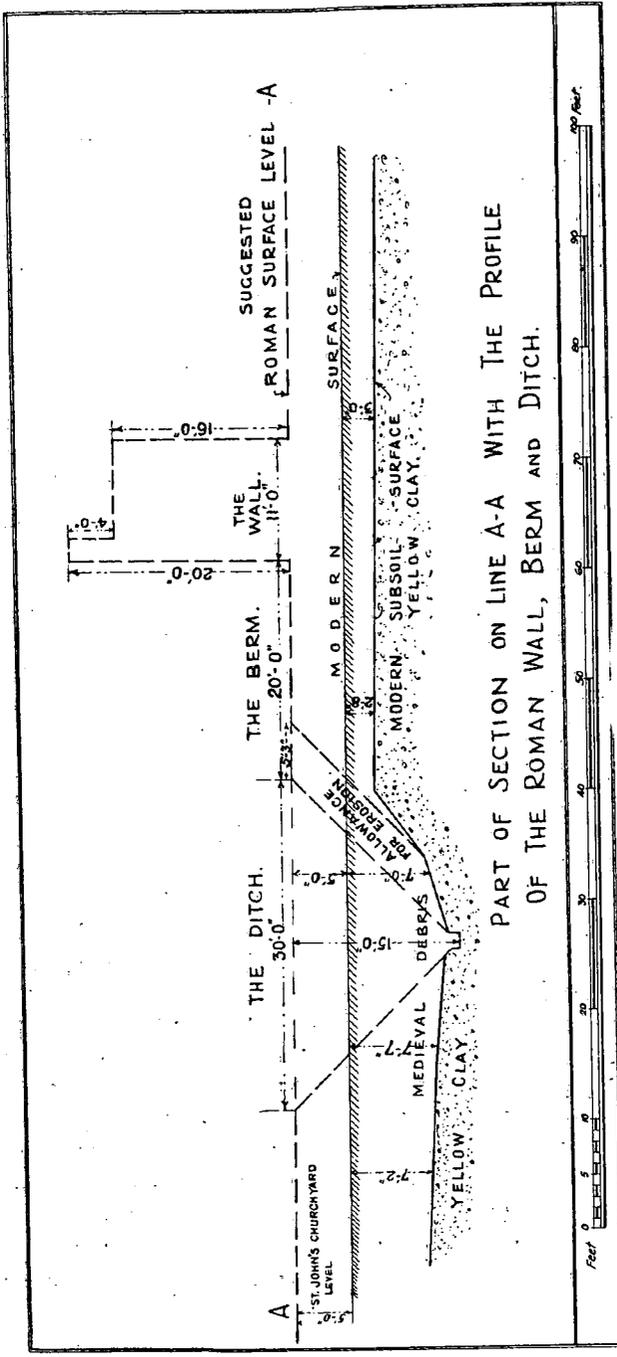
The line of the Wall in west medieval Newcastle was a more difficult problem as the ditch had never been definitely located. The existing evidence, collected by the Excavation Committee in 1928, showed that west of the medieval town an early trackway ran along the north side of the Wall ditch for many miles. East of the site of the West Gate and within the medieval town walls the line was more vague. A controversy through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on this point was left by Dr. Bruce in 1867 (*Roman Wall*, 3rd ed., p. 106, footnote) with the admission from the evidence then available that the line must have been on the south side of old Cross House; that site was on the north side of Westgate, and is now occupied by the modern Cross House and Cowen's statue.

After the Roman period the ditch of the Wall on Westgate Hill must have been gradually deepened and widened by natural causes, with a considerable spread of detritus at the bottom of the steep hill. The West Gate seems to have been placed on or near this delta-shaped deposit. The ruins of the Wall and its deeply eroded ditch down the steep hill from the top of Westgate Hill to near the site of the West Gate seem to have been a formidable barrier to all traffic. In medieval times the *Ald Hee Way*, the pack road from Newcastle to Carlisle, avoided the difficulties of Westgate Hill and Benwell Bank by deviating north-west from the West Gate up the line of Bath Lane, past the present Barracks to Cowgate, then west to near Slatyford, West Denton, and to the north bank of the Tyne at New-

burn. A deviation adding about half a mile to the distance between the West Gate and West Denton *via* the line of the Wall. The famous Military road was begun in 1751 at the West Gate (*Proc. Soc. Antiq. N.C.*⁴ I, 316). It utilized the deeply eroded line of the Wall ditch up Westgate Hill. This explains "the hollow way" appearance of Westgate on the Hill, and why the houses of Cumberland Row on the north side and their eastern extension are on ground well above the street level, with gardens sloping steeply south to the pavement.

In June 1929 the committee sank three shafts at the north end of a back street in Westgate. This back street joins the north side of Westgate on the west of St. Nicholas Buildings, near the Black Gate. These shafts revealed the north side of a deep ditch. The last and most southerly shaft was 33 feet from the Post Office railings at the north end of the back street, and was sunk to a depth of twelve feet without reaching the brown boulder clay subsoil, a subsoil found in the other two shafts at a depth of two feet and three feet respectively. The section exposed a compressed mass of debris more than eleven feet in depth, consisting chiefly of decayed vegetable matter, including the remains of nettles, moss, twigs and wood fragments mixed with soil, cinders and some medieval pottery.

In January 1934 the Newcastle and District Electric Lighting Co. Ltd. cut a trench and tunnels for a cable across Westgate and Neville Street from near the south-east corner of St. John's churchyard to the Central Station hotel, passing the west side of the Stephenson monument. (Plate XLII.) This excavation allowed the committee access to the subsoil across this area. Mr. N. S. Tennant, the general manager and engineer of the company, very kindly lent the committee every assistance possible in the examination, sinking shafts to test the depth of the subsoil, a stiff yellow clay, at several points and preparing a valuable plan and section of the work. The result reveals the south lip of a well-defined ditch in the subsoil, with its side lying at an angle of 35 degrees and falling to a depth of 7 feet from



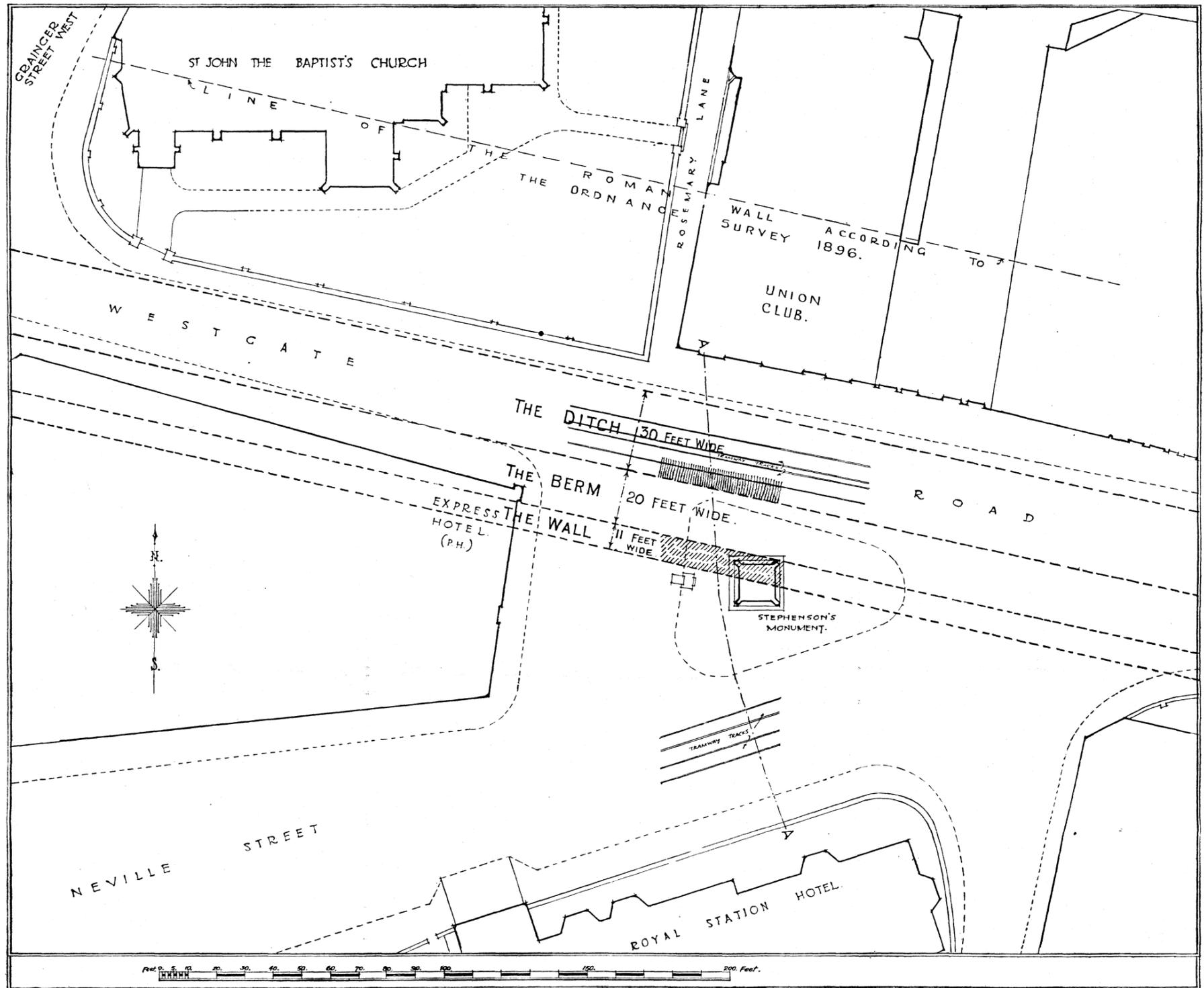
PART OF SECTION ON LINE A-A WITH THE PROFILE
 OF THE ROMAN WALL, BERM AND DITCH.

FIG. 2.

the modern surface, below the southern half of Westgate. (Fig. 1.) The north side of the ditch had been completely removed.

The bulk of the filling of this ditch appeared to be medieval refuse, ashes mixed with some ox bones, and pottery. The pottery with its greenish-brown glaze is typically late medieval with one early rim of late Norman or early English date of cream coloured ware with a dark faience, and one vessel base that may be Roman. The remainder of the excavation revealed no traces of any other ditch. Near the west side of the Stephenson monument many human bones were found in the subsoil as well as the foundations of two dry stone rubble walls, four feet wide, no doubt remains associated with the medieval hospital of St. Mary the Virgin which stood on this land (*Arch. Ael.*² XV, pp. 194-202). In Neville Street the subsoil had been much disturbed in recent times by excavations for mains and sewers. As the ditch of the Wall is normally about 15 feet deep and 30 feet wide with a V-shaped profile, we appear to have the remains of the Wall ditch below Westgate, at this point planed away to half its depth on its south side by the removal of the original surface. Thus there is no chance of finding any trace of the Wall foundation to the south of the newly found ditch. The surface of St. John's churchyard is five feet above the present street level near this point, and contained by a retaining wall. It is probable that the churchyard surface approximates the original land surface in medieval times. (Fig. 2.)

By placing the south lip of the newly discovered ditch on the plan of Newcastle and allowing 20 feet for the berm, the line of the Wall is approximately fixed for a considerable distance east and west of this point, because the Wall builders would never have constructed the work between the top of Westgate Hill and the Newcastle Fort (*Pons Aelii*) in any other way than by following a reasonably straight line. This straight line was plotted by the Roman surveyors as the most suitable route for the Wall, and our modern Westgate had of necessity to conform and follow



LINE OF THE WALL IN WESTGATE, NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE.

Based upon the Ordnance Survey Map with the sanction of the "Controller of H.M. Stationery Office."



a parallel to this line. The line of the Wall, now plotted on a modern plan for the first time in this district, passes through the site of the Stephenson monument and the Express hotel. (Plate XLII.) If the normal profile of the Wall, berm and ditch is applied to the newly found ditch section, we find either a large amount of the Roman level has been denuded or dug away, or an allowance must be made for yellow clay silt at the bottom of the ditch, indistinguishable from the subsoil except by cutting a special section. Possibly a combination of these two factors approximates the truth. Thus the line of the Wall is fixed with an extreme southern limit of 26 feet from the south lip of the newly found ditch, for in any case the maximum error cannot be more than 6 feet. (Fig. 2.)

If the line of the newly discovered ditch is produced to the east on the axis of Westgate it coincides in a remarkable way with the deep ditch already referred to and found by the committee in 1929 in the back street on the west side of St. Nicholas Buildings.

The Wall line as laid down on the Ordnance Survey is too far to the north (plate XLII) because it was assumed in the nineteenth century that Westgate, especially on the Hill, was made upon the original Roman communication road between turrets and mile-castles on the south side of the Wall. This popular theory is now obsolete; our local medieval roads never followed the Wall road for any distance, and when they did coincide with it they did so more by chance than by a desire to utilize any faint trace of the old Roman road surface.

