

XIII.—THE STANEGATE AT CHESTERHOLM.

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The following abbreviations are used in papers XIII and XIV :

AA¹⁻⁴ *Archæologia Aeliana*, 1st-4th series.

PSAN¹⁻⁴ *Proceedings* of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1st-4th series.

OS Ordnance Survey.

VCH The *Victoria History* of the counties of England.

To east and west of the fort of Chesterholm (*Vindolanda*) the course of the Stanegate, or Roman road connecting the early forts across the Tyne-Solway gap, is well known; it keeps practically straight for three miles westwards to Haltwhistle burn and for over five miles eastwards to Newbrough. But for the first three-quarters of a mile eastwards from the fort to the signpost under Barcombe the road keeps altering its course to descend to the burn and then climb the steep hillside. MacLauchlan¹ admits that this sector is uncertain, and marks the "supposed course" north of the milestone and mound, called by him a *tumulus*, near the junction of the two burns; and then takes it by an almost straight line to the signpost under Barcombe. In 1912 Mr. F. G. Simpson had some trenching done in the fields east of Bradley burn and plotted a course for the Stanegate for inclusion upon the 25-inch OS map (see fig. 1). This course ran south of the

¹ *Memoir written during a survey of the Roman Wall* (1858), 41; *Survey . . . of the Roman Wall* (1857), plate III.

milestone and mound and thereafter kept just south of MacLauchlan's line.

There is, however, an alternative route. On the level ground half-way between the milestone and signpost a pronounced ridge, resembling a Roman road, makes a diversion to the north from the Ordnance Survey line. In July and September, 1935, and September, 1936, the writer, working on behalf of the Durham University Excavation Committee, surveyed and examined by excavation these two routes, and in this article describes their course, structure, and relationship.

The course of the road.

In order to verify the course of the road, which is by no means straight, some twenty small trenches were cut, which determined one kerb, usually the north, or at least the edge of the road-metalling (see fig. 1). A start was made near the signpost on the east at the junction of roads from Bardon Mill, Newbrough, and the Military Road. Here the south kerb of the Stanegate was exactly in line with the south wall bounding the road from Newbrough, and showed the continuity of the course. Across field no. 139 (Nb. NXC 5)² the road veers slightly south. On reaching the field-boundary it turns north through 20° and becomes a well-marked ridge as it traverses the level eastern third of field no. 141 (Nb. NXC 5). It then enters a slight cutting and swings south through 30° down the slope. In field no. 143 (Nb. NLXXXIX 8) it keeps a gentle southward curve until it passes south of the small copse (no. 144) at the bottom of the field, and so reaches the Bradley burn and the Roman milestone. Between the copse and the burn the ground is wet and too much disturbed to yield any trace of the road.

Just at the point where the road crosses the burn, the banks are revetted for a width of 14 ft. by some large boulders, averaging three to four feet cube. Presumably

² OS 25-inch map, ed. 1921, of Northumberland. (Nb.)

these are the rough abutments for a timber bridge which must have spanned the eight-foot gap across the burn.

Immediately west of the burn the Roman milestone is reached, embedded in the north edge of the road, which was verified at four points in this sector. After passing the milestone the road swings slightly north and aims for a point just south of the modern bridge over Brackies burn. It is probable that it continued its bend a little further to the north and so crossed the burn at the site of the modern bridge, but the present roadway has obscured all traces. Westwards from the Brackies burn the ground rises sharply, and the modern road runs in a cutting, deepened about the end of the nineteenth century; then it makes a slight angle to the south as it passes the fort of *Vindolanda*. Within this angle two trenches were cut, which revealed the northern part of a cambered surface of packed stones. Although this mass of packing had no kerb, and only slight traces of a gravel surfacing, it is difficult to explain except as a road. Accepting this as part of a road, the Stanegate is shown to have kept as straight a course as possible, making only two changes of direction between the milestone and the fort. This is a better line than that provisionally sketched on the OS map, of which the gradient is impracticable. Furthermore, excavations³ carried out in April, 1936, by Mr. Eric Birley to the north of the existing fort tend to show that the earlier fort extended across the provisional road-line.

The structure of the road.

The pronounced ridge of the alternative route mentioned above was tested by three main cross-sections in field no. 141; they are numbered I, II, and III in fig. 1. Search was made for an accompanying ditch by continuing a trench for 30 ft. to the north in section II, and 20 ft. to

³ This excavation continued the work upon the series of circular buildings discovered in 1934-5 (see AA⁴ XIII, 240-1). Foundations of a further circular building were revealed, reaching to a point 25 ft. north of the existing fort-wall.

the south in section III, but with negative results. Section IV, in field no. 143, was cut in the lower field to give additional confirmation of the character of the road. This proved to be 18 ft. 6 in. wide, with a high camber, large sandstone bottoming, and a definite kerb on the north. The following paragraphs deal only with sections I-III, which are set out as diagrams in fig. 2 for purpose of comparison (plate xxv, 1 and 2).

First in order of construction came the solid bottoming of the road laid upon the clay subsoil. It was formed of a compact layer of sandstone blocks, anything from 6 to 12 in. square. On the north it was bounded by a straight kerbing of the best blocks. In section II a rise in the level of the bottoming at a point 2 ft. from the north kerb appeared to form a secondary kerb for retaining the upper layers; this feature did not occur in the other sections. On the south none of the three sections produced an undoubted kerb, although one was found at certain other points near by. In section III the bottoming was 20 ft. 6 in. wide, and formed a homogeneous layer, though varying from 4 to 1½ in. in depth. In section II it was approximately 24 ft. 3 in. wide and seemed continuous, although the last 6 ft. on the south were less regular. In section I the north part of the road, for a width of 16 ft. 6 in. was very well laid, whereas the remaining 5 ft. 6 in. on the south were so irregular that they seemed to be an addition to the original work. Section III represents the average width of the road, as was proved by opening both kerbs at three other points.

The second layer of the road-material was a cambered bank for carrying the upper metalling. The material was clay in sections II and III, but turf in section I.⁴ It is unusual for turf to be used in the centre of Roman roads. Sir Cyril Fox⁵ gives an instance from Worstead Street, a Roman road on the Gog-Magog hills, but in his diagram

⁴ Mr. I. A. Richmond made this identification.

⁵ *The Archaeology of the Cambridge Region* (1923), 129.

describes it as "earth (turf?)." A similar effect would be achieved by using peat, as was done on High Street in Westmorland, which runs from Windermere to the neighbourhood of Penrith. In 1898 Dr. G. B. Grundy⁶ sectioned this road, and found a layer of peat between the bottoing and the upper metalling; the Roman date which he assigned to it has been accepted by Dr. R. E. M. Wheeler.⁷

Third came a compact and well-cambered layer of small sandstone, averaging two inches cube. This appeared to be the original upper surface. In course of time the wear upon it demanded repairs. These are most clearly shown in section II, where a thin layer of clay was placed above the sandstone in order to carry secondary, but similar metalling. In section III the north half of the small metalling was of limestone, the south of sandstone. It is uncertain how far these represent repairs.

It will be noticed in the diagram (fig. 2) that in section III there appears to be a still later phase which was separated from the limestone and sandstone layer by an uneven band of earth. This occupied only the southern 10 ft. of the road-structure, and was composed of ill-compacted sandstone of irregular size. It resembled the metalling of the Ordnance Survey route. A careful examination of the junction of the Ordnance Survey route and the alternative route was made by cutting a trench for 35 ft. along the axis of the OS route as far as the junction. It showed that the OS road was a slight structure, which, at a somewhat higher level, butted up against the uninterrupted south kerb of the alternative route, and overlaid it. Without doubt the OS road was subsequent to the other.

The Ordnance Survey line.

The structure of this secondary road may now be con-

⁶ *Cumb. and West. Trans.*, series I, xv, 360.

⁷ *Royal Comm. on Hist. Mons.*, Westmorland, xlv.

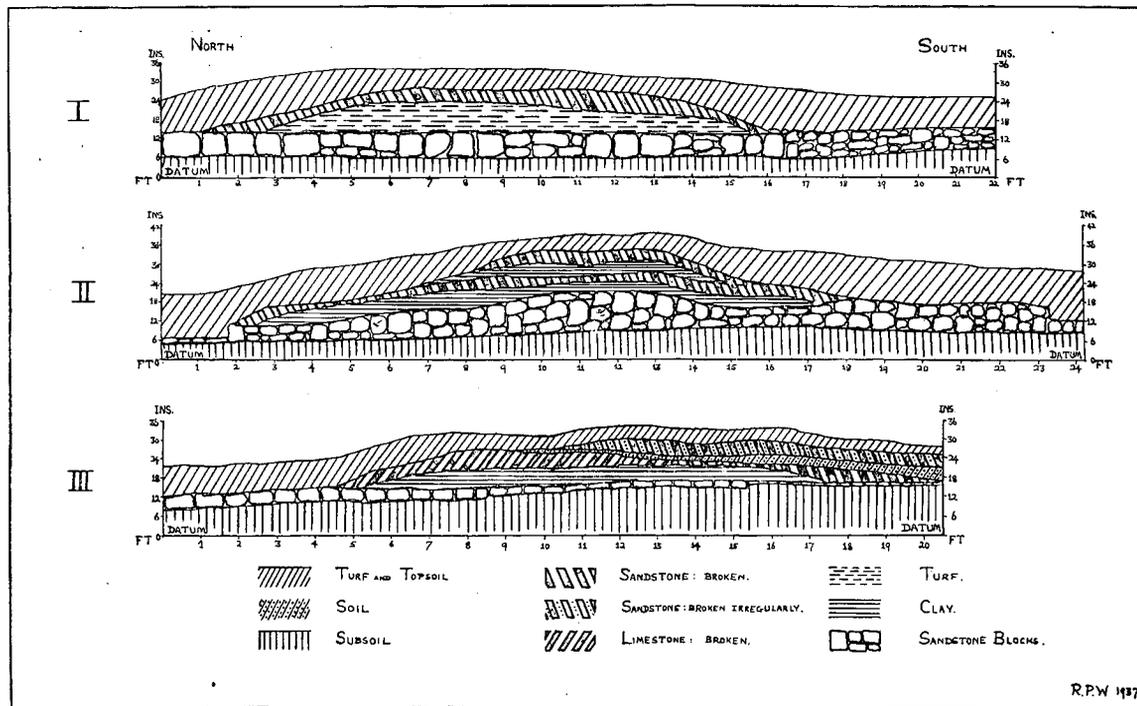


FIG. 2. CROSS-SECTIONS I-III OF THE STANEGATE AT CHESTERHOLM.

sidered. It was tested by eight trenches, but only three of these require mention. In section v (see fig. 1), the best of those cut in the upper field, no. 141 (Nb. NXC 5), there was a three-inch layer of small sandstone, about three inches cube, placed directly on the clay subsoil. Traces of gravel suggested that there may have been some upper surface. The width was 9 ft., and there was no camber or kerbs.

Section vi was cut in the lower field, no. 143, where the OS map marks the western end of the ascertained course of the road. Once more it consisted of small sandstone laid upon clay subsoil, to a depth of 4 in. over a width of 7 ft. 6 in., but without bottoming, camber, or kerbs. Section vii tested this route lower down the field: here the width was about 20 ft., due perhaps to the need for packing the side of the road owing to the southward slope of the ground. There was a slight camber, but no kerbs or bottoming.

The cross-sections i-iv reveal a well-engineered road, with solid, well-laid bottoming, a packing course, and a firm surface, having a pronounced camber and definite kerbs on one side at least. No ditch, however, was found. The lay-out of the road is in straight stretches, and forms a continuous link between the signpost and the Roman milestone. It is independent of the extensive "tramways" and routes existing on the hillside in the nineteenth century, when lime-kilns were established and supplied by means of special approach-roads. This system is quite separate, and is proved to be subsequent to the road described above by the way in which the "tramway" in the lower field, at a point 60 ft. west of section iv, makes a cutting 6 ft. deep across its course.

Except for the absence of ditches, the alternative road has all the marks of Roman construction, and agrees in general with the Stanegate as found at Haltwhistle burn⁸ and on the west bank of North Tyne.⁹ The minor differ-

⁸ AA³ v, 256-8.

⁹ AA⁴ XIII, 201-5.



FIG. 2. THE STANEGATE AT CHESTERHOLM. SECTION II. FROM NORTH.



FIG. 1. THE STANEGATE AT CHESTERHOLM. SECTION II. FROM SOUTH.

ences may be taken as due to the material available and presumably to the squads of men assigned to building each sector. We may therefore accept the new route laid down on the map (fig. 1; marked as "Track of Stanegate") as a Roman road and, therefore, as the Stanegate proper.

The work at the junction of the two routes near section III showed the Ordnance Survey route to overlie the other and to be of very inferior structure. Sections v-vii fail to provide the ordinary marks of Roman roads, for they lack solid bottoming, camber, and kerbs. No other evidence is available for placing the road either within or outside the Roman period, and therefore its date may be left indeterminate.

The writer wishes to thank Mr. Eric Birley for granting permission to excavate and full facilities for the work; also Mr. I. A. Richmond and the Rev. T. Romans for helpful advice.