

## XV.—THE SOUTH-WESTERN SECTION OF THE DEVIL'S CAUSEWAY.

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The following abbreviations are used in papers xv and xvi :

- AA<sup>1-4</sup> *Archæologia Aeliana*, 1st to 4th series.  
NCH *Northumberland County History*.  
OS Ordnance Survey.  
PSAN *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne*.

The Devil's Causeway is a Roman road which is usually taken to start from a point about four miles north of Corbridge,<sup>1</sup> and which takes a north-easterly and northerly line to Tweedmouth, thus traversing some fifty-six miles of Northumberland. Parts of its course can still be seen, and the line given by MacLauchlan for much of the remainder is in all probability quite correct. But very little excavation has been done upon it, and in particular confirmation is needed for the first five-miles of its course on the south.

John Warburton<sup>2</sup> is the first to mention this road, in a letter to Roger Gale on 5th January 1717-18, and plots its course on his map of Northumberland (1716), but makes it begin at Portgate, on the Wall. Horsley<sup>3</sup> gives a few details for it, but thinks that it was not Roman, owing to the absence of Roman forts or antiquities upon it. On the map he marks a "military way" from Chesters to a

<sup>1</sup> OS 1-inch map, 7

<sup>2</sup> Surtees Soc., vol LXXX, 81.

<sup>3</sup> *Ined. Contrib. to the Hist. of Northd.* (1729). Published by J. H. Hinde. Horsley, *Brit. Rom.*, 449; 158, map 1.

point on Watling Street two miles north of Bewclay, and to the continuation of this line to the north-east applies the name Devil's Causeway. Warburton<sup>4</sup> in his later work copies these details. Armstrong<sup>5</sup> (1769) makes the Causeway begin at Bewclay, and Roy<sup>6</sup> agrees with this.

MacLauchlan<sup>7</sup> made a full survey of the Causeway in 1857-9. He found no clear evidence for the first two miles of the road, but considered<sup>8</sup> that Armstrong was probably right in making Bewclay the starting-point. The first piece of evidence which MacLauchlan gives is the name "Cobb Causeway," which on an old map was applied to the road which crosses the marshy ground three-quarters of a mile south of Ryal. For the next three miles further north he quotes no certain evidence, but gives the probable course. North of the high ground at Tongues the road had been found at Mount Huly, Boghall, Brandy Well Hall, and Bradford-Edge.

The course given on the OS maps agrees with MacLauchlan except that the section between Cobb Causeway and Tongues is represented by double lines, implying certainty, whereas the more certain section north of Tongues is marked by a single line.

Haverfield,<sup>9</sup> while accepting the northern half of the Devil's Causeway, says that "there is as yet no adequate proof of a road diverging from Dere Street at Bewclay and running north-east and north towards Whittingham."

#### THE EXCAVATIONS.

The purpose of the excavations about to be described was, first, to examine the course and structure of the Causeway in the sector where traces had been found or

<sup>4</sup> *Vallum Romanum*, 51; and folding map.

<sup>5</sup> *Map of Northd.*

<sup>6</sup> *Military Antiquities*, 103.

<sup>7</sup> *Memoir written during a survey of the eastern branch of the Watling Street* (1864), 1, and *Map*, sheet 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Memoir on a survey of Watling Street*, 22.

<sup>9</sup> NCH x, 464.

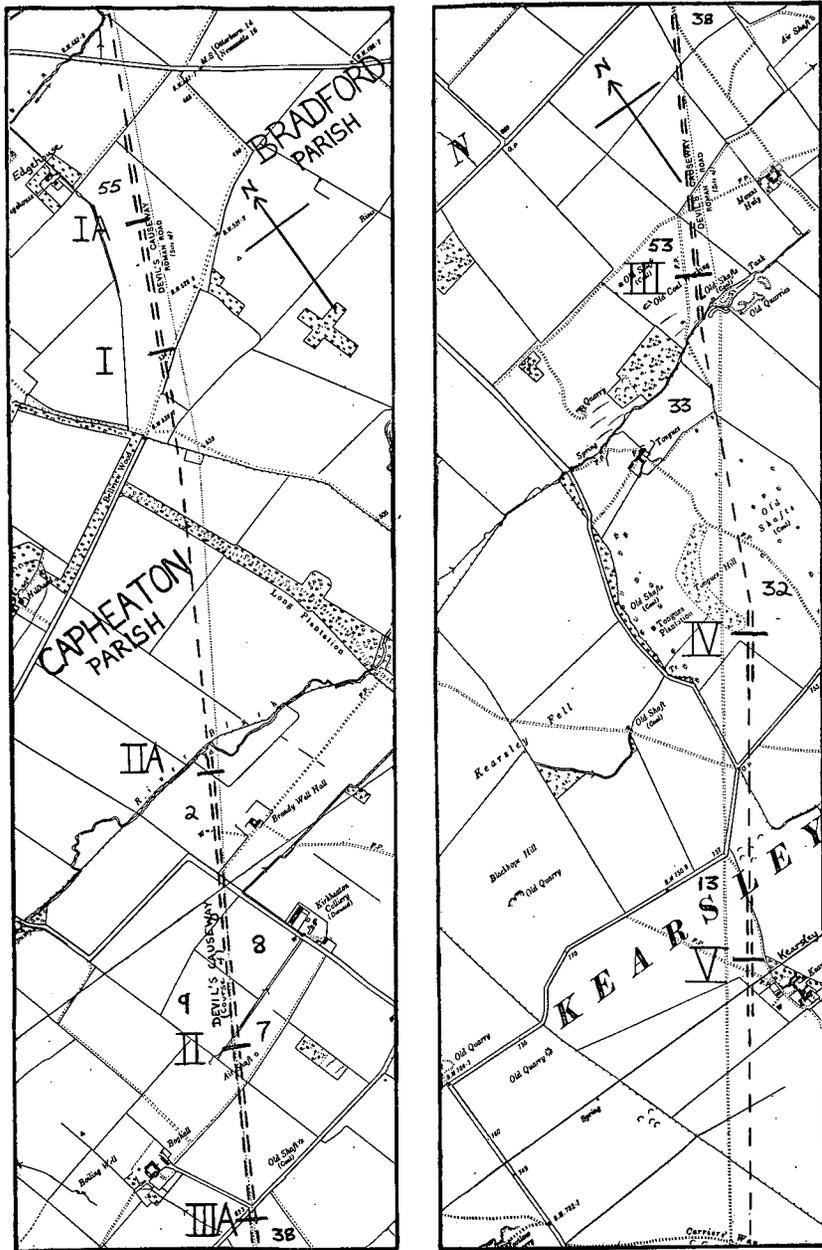


FIG. 1. THE DEVIL'S CAUSEWAY FROM CAPHEATON TO RYAL.

Scale: 3 inches to 1 mile. Reproduced from the 6-inch OS map of Northumberland nLXXV NE, SE (ed. 1924), with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.

reported by MacLauchlan, and, secondly, to investigate the traditional line further south to see whether it could be connected with the Roman main road, Dere Street.

After the necessary field-survey, the excavation was done in July 1937 by the present writer with labour supplied by the Durham University Excavation Committee. Seven cross-sections were cut, numbered I-VII in figs. 1 and 3. Supplementary trenches, mostly for finding the kerbs, are indicated by the letter "A."

(a) *Bradford Edgehouse.*

A beginning was made near the sixteenth milestone from Newcastle on the Otterburn road. At section 1, in field 55,<sup>10</sup> the road was formed of a single layer of 6-in. sandstone blocks laid carefully on the clay subsoil. Excellent kerbs were found on the east and west (plate xxv, fig. 1), but there was no trace of a ditch although a trench was cut for 20 ft. to the east of the east kerb. The road was 23 ft. 8 in. wide. Here and there on the surface of the blocks there were small 2-in. cubes of sandstone which suggested that the road may once have had an upper layer. At section 1A both kerbs were found, and the course from the Poind and his Man near Bolam to section 1 was shown to be straight.

(b) *Brandy Well Hall.*

Continuing southward, the road turns a few degrees to the west on the high ground on the parish boundary. After crossing the river Blyth the stones of the road are visible in field 2 (section II A). In fields 8 and 9 west of Kirkheaton colliery remains of the road were ploughed<sup>11</sup> out about 1923. In field 7 the mound of the road is very well preserved. Section II was cut here to provide the most detailed cross-section of the road (fig. 2 and plate xxv, fig. 2). The bottoming, formed of 6-in. sandstone blocks

<sup>10</sup> The field-numbers are from the 25-inch OS maps.

<sup>11</sup> Information from Mr. W. Lamb.

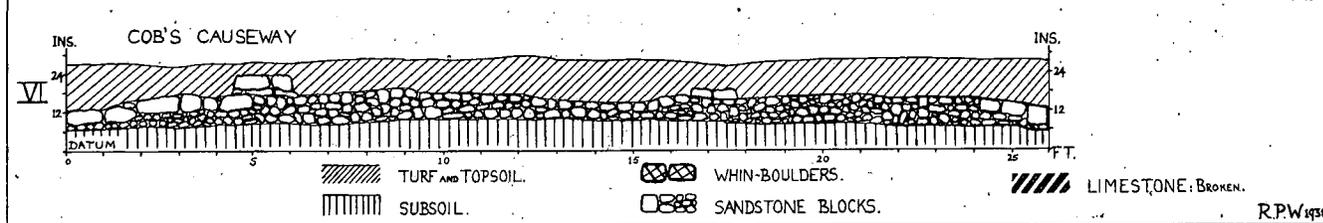
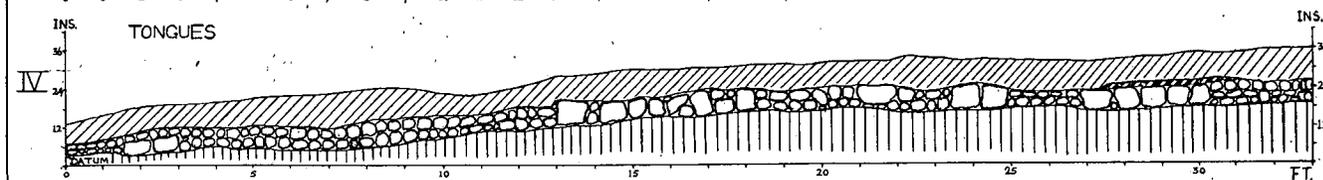
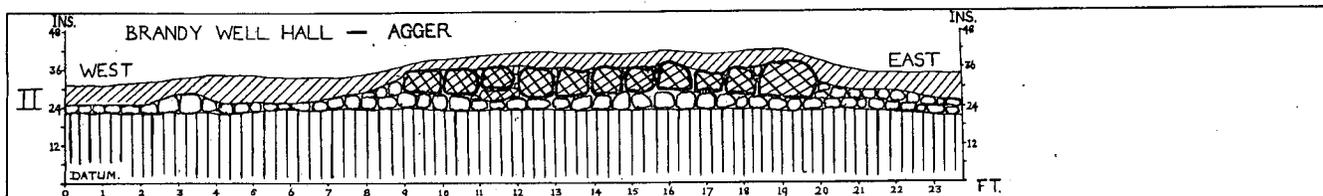
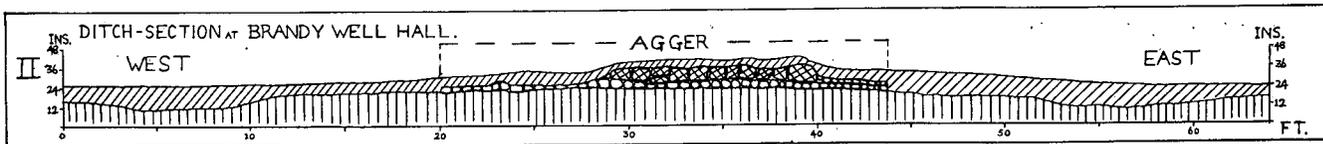


FIG. 2. CROSS-SECTIONS OF THE DEVIL'S CAUSEWAY.

laid on the clay subsoil, was 23 ft. 9 in. wide, but lacked well-defined kerbs. In the centre came a massive upper layer, which was composed of whin-boulders averaging 10 inches cube and in some cases weighing as much as one hundredweight. This "pavement," which was bedded down on the bottoming by some clay, was 11 ft. wide and was packed in on the east by a shallow upper layer of the bottoming. The road showed no signs of wear and appeared to be all of one build. It is unusual to have such a massive upper layer, but the road-builders may have found this easier than quarrying and breaking up the sandstone for small metalling. The remains of very shallow ditches were found to east and west, beginning about 9 ft. away from either kerb.

(c) *Mount Huly.*

In field 38 the road is still preserved under 9 in. of turf, and in June its track can be seen by the abundance of the buttercups. At section III A both kerbs were verified, and showed the road to be 25 ft. 6 in. wide.

Section III was cut in field 53. The bottoming was 18 ft. wide and 6 in. deep. The upper layer was 15 ft. 6 in. wide, 7 in. deep, and had no camber.

(d) *Tongues.*

After crossing the Coal burn the high ground marked by the crescent-shaped wood of Tongues is reached. At this point MacLauchlan makes the road swing to the west. It is the right place for such a change of direction as there is a clear view to the north, and looking south it is possible to see Bewclay and the high ground beyond.

After disproving the OS line, a long series of trial-pits was dug before the road was found at section IV (fig. 2). It was 33 ft. wide and formed of a single layer upon the clay. 10-in. sandstone blocks interspersed with smaller metalling occupied the central 17 ft., and on either side there was a well-compacted strip of 4-in. cubes of sandstone

in a layer 7 in. deep. On the east there was a 2-in. layer of limestone chips above the sandstone. No kerbstones were found.

(e) *Kearsley*.

Section v was cut in field 13 and yielded traces of the road. The 8-in. sandstone blocks were much decayed and formed a roadway only 11 ft. wide. There was no clear trace of it further to the east. This section served its purpose of locating the road and falls into line with the sections at Tongues and Cob's Causeway.

(f) *Ryal*.

A series of trenches, running east from the OS line, was cut in field 87 in the hope of finding the road in fair condition. At one point (VI A) a pack of 6-in. sandstone blocks only 5 ft. wide from east to west was found lying immediately on the solid natural limestone. While the evidence is insufficient to prove this to be part of the road, it seems hard to account for the presence of this mass of sandstone in any other way. It is, however, 40 ft. east of the straight line between sections IV, v, and VI.

Section VI (fig. 2) tested a strip of hard pavement revealed by probing in the angle of field 73, which is called Cob's Bank. Excavation showed it to be a metalled road (plate xxvi, fig. 1) 26 ft. wide laid on subsoil clay and built as a single layer of 3 in. cubes of limestone and sandstone, averaging 8 in. in depth. The western 6 ft. were covered by some 12-in. sandstone blocks, which may represent a kerb. It is not clear whether there ever was an upper layer right across the road, for it is possible that only light metalting was used owing to the marshy nature of the ground. At section VI the east kerb was buried beneath a bank, but details of this kerb and the width of the road were secured by trenching a little further south. The modern road lies immediately east of the Roman line and appears to have kept this course for centuries, to judge by the parish-

boundary which here follows its east bank. Probing showed that the Roman road continued straight for the next 115 yards southward till covered by the modern road.

(g) *Shellbraes.*

In answer to enquiries, Mr. W. H. Tweedy, tenant of Shellbraes, showed the present writer where he kept encountering a band of sandstone in tilling field 135, where the natural limestone is close to the surface. Some random blocks of sandstone were visible across a strip of turnips, and a little excavation, at section VII A, showed that they had been dislodged by cultivation from a pavement of 5-in. sandstone blocks which was 5 in. below the surface and 21 ft. wide, though lacking definite kerbs. Section VII was cut 45 yards to the south, where a similar layer of 5-in. sandstone blocks covered the natural limestone. The width was only 12 ft., and though search was made to east and west no definite kerbs were found. One stone at the east edge measured 12 in. either way, and marked the approximate limit of the metalling which was bared for 7 ft. to the south, but, owing to the shallowness of the soil, the removal of the rest of the road by ploughing may have taken place on either of the sides.

While sections VII A and VII were sufficient to prove the existence of the road, they were too incomplete and close together to give an exact position for the road to the south. Four lines of trial-pits were cut in the same field where crops permitted, full allowance being made for the uncertainty of width at section VII and for the possibility of a further swing to the west. No trace was found, presumably because removed by ploughing.

Owing to extensive quarrying at Shellbraes the next site available for excavation was field 115, on Great Whittington Town-farm. Here a line of trial-pits tested the ground for 475 ft., starting east of the most easterly line projected from sections VII A and VII and continuing to a point 40 ft. west of MacLauchlan's conjectural line as laid down



on the OS map. The results were negative, suggesting that here, too, ploughing had removed all trace.

It is unfortunate that extensive quarrying and ploughing at Shellbraes should have removed traces of the road just where it appears to be swinging further west. Further excavation was not possible without widening the front beyond practicable limits. Two lines of pits were cut in field 1 at Todridge, to test MacLauchlan's line, but with negative results.

South of Shellbraes there is no positive evidence for the road. The most likely line is undoubtedly the high ground on which Bewclay and Rose's Bower stand, as Armstrong and MacLauchlan thought. MacLauchlan<sup>12</sup> suggested that Bewclay would form a good site for a fort, but considered that the remains on the ground were inconclusive. The feature marked on the OS map north of the farm appears to the present writer to be a ruined field-wall. Furthermore, no remains indicating Roman occupation have been found on the site. Admittedly the road between Bewclay and the west end of Bower plantation is straight and would form a good line, but in all the trenches which have been cut alongside this narrow road in connection with the wireless transmitting station (opened in October 1937 between Bewclay and Rose's Bower), no considerable amount of sandstone or even worn limestone has been found. Yet it is likely that such traces would have appeared at the sides of the 10-ft. modern road if a 24-ft. Roman road were really concealed beneath it.

In structure sections I-VII provide the main features of a Roman road, namely kerbs, camber, bottoming, and straight lay-out. There is great diversity of construction, although they are included within a space of six miles. They do indeed lack a smooth top surface of either gravel or small metalling. But it must be remembered that at section II (Brandy Well Hall) such metalling would

<sup>12</sup> *Memoir on a survey of Watling Street*, 22-3.



Fig. 1. ROMAN ROAD, DEVIL'S CAUSEWAY, AT BRADFORD EDGEHOUSE LOOKING EAST.



Fig. 2. ROMAN ROAD, DEVIL'S CAUSEWAY, AT BRANDY WELL HALL LOOKING EAST.





not combine so well with a bed of large blocks as with smaller material, and therefore would more easily be dislodged by weathering. Secondly, in other sections ploughing will often account for its disappearance, especially as the top layer may well have been thin to economize the labour required for breaking up the stone.

The excavations not only confirmed the evidence for the road between Bradford Edgehouse and Mount Huly and revealed its structure, but also proved the traditional line between Tongues and Shellbraes to be substantially correct, and showed that the Devil's Causeway not only came east of Grindstone Law, but also began a slight swing westward at Shellbraes. It is to be hoped that at some time draining or some other operation will give a clue towards securing the evidence for filling in the last mile or so of the course of the road to Dere Street.

The writer wishes to thank the landowners who granted permission to excavate: Mrs. Aynsley for Mount Huly; Sir Hugh Blackett, Bart., for Ryal (South Farm), Shellbraes and Great Whittington; Mr. G. Dinnin for Kearsley; Mr. W. Gibson for Todridge; Mr. W. B. Havelock for Ryal (East Farm); Mr. W. Lamb for Brandy Well Hall; and Mr. J. A. T. Middleton for Bradford Edgehouse and Tongues. In addition he thanks all the tenants concerned for granting full facilities for the work, and also Mr. W. P. Hedley and Mr. F. G. Simpson for valuable help of various kinds.