IV.—THE WREKENDIKE AND ROMAN ROAD-JUNCTION ON GATESHEAD FELL.

By R. P. Wright.

[Read on 31st January 1940.]

The following abbreviations are used:

AA *Archæologia Aeliana.*
OS Ordnance Survey.

This paper deals with the Roman roads from South Shields, Chester-le-Street, and Newcastle and their junction on Gateshead Fell at High Eighton farm,[1] three and a half miles S.S.E. of the Roman bridge-site at Newcastle. The line of the Wrekendike is well known,[2] for it has been adopted by the modern road for five miles. No examination was made of its course within two miles of the fort at South Shields. Its western end joins the Roman north-south road (from Newcastle to Chester-le-Street) near High Eighton farm, at a point two hundred yards west of the Long Bank, which was the main road to Newcastle until the diversion from Birtley to Low Fell was opened in 1826. The north-south road is mentioned by Horsley,[3] Bruce,[4] and Longstaffe.[5] Bruce and Longstaffe say that it had recently been ploughed up in the field south of the junction, but in their maps they mark the southward continuation by dotting a line through Portobello[6] and Picktree, half a mile

[1] One-inch *OS* map, 7, J9.
[2] Hodgson in *AA*[1] II, 123-36, who discusses its course near South Shields.
[3] *Brit. Rom.*, 104, 452.
[4] *Roman Wall*, 2nd ed. (1853), 299.
[5] *Arch. Inst.*, Newcastle vol. for 1852, p. 62.
[6] One-inch *OS* map II, A10.

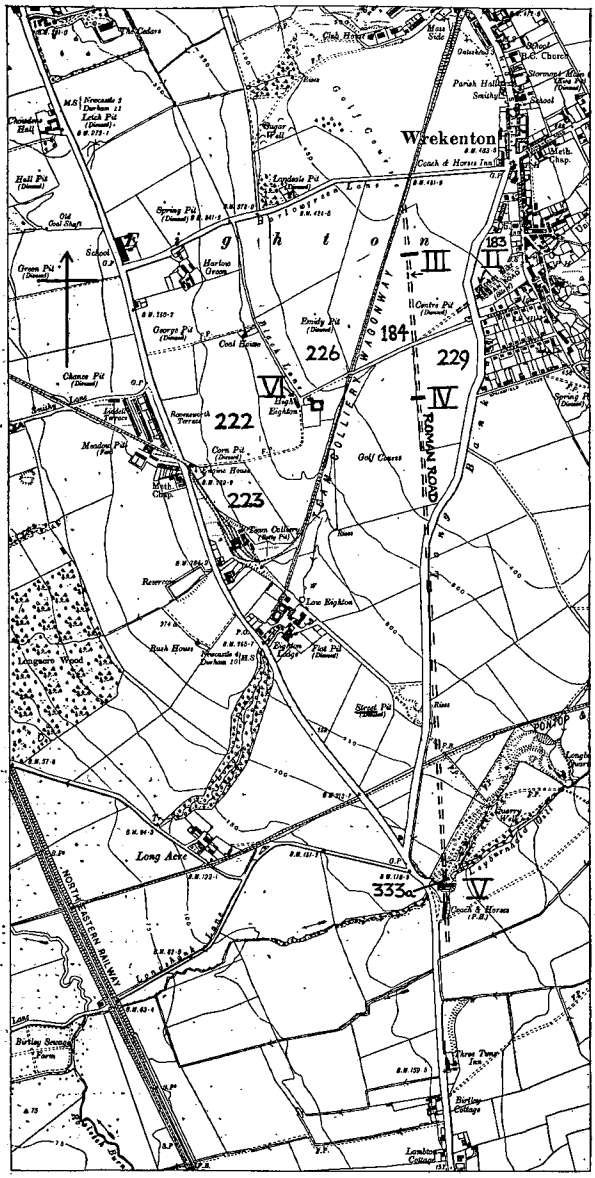

FIG. I. ROMAN ROAD-JUNCTION ON GATESHEAD FELL.

Scale: 3 inches to 1 mile. Reproduced from the 6-inch *OS* map of Durham VII SW (ed. 1921), with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.

east of its true course. For it is clear that the Roman line is represented by the modern main road between Birtley and Chester-le-Street. Not only is the line straight for three and a half miles, but it is named " Street Way " by Ogilby[7] in 1675 and is flanked at its north end by an old colliery " Street pit."[8]

Excavations were made by the present writer on behalf of the Durham University Excavation Committee between March 1938 and June 1939 to examine the structure of the roads and in some cases prove their course. The six sections are numbered in roman figures and all but the first appear on the map, fig. 1, p. 55. Sections I-V gave positive results and are shown in diagram on p. 59, fig. 3.

Section I was cut in a small enclosure, field 140,[9] belonging to the London and North-Eastern Railway Company at White Mare Pool, three miles north-east of sections II-IV. The intersection of the Wrekendike, the Gateshead-Sunderland road, and the Newcastle-Leamside railway line has preserved a short stretch of the Wrekendike from interference by road-making in the past century. The ground lies low at this point and is soon water-logged, as was found during the excavation. The cross-section did not, therefore, show a normal structure, but one suited to wet ground. Bottoming of 10-in. grade sandstone blocks with good kerbstones had been laid for a width of 16 ft. in the wet clay; above this came a 10-in. band of mixed clay. The cambered upper metalling, which was retained by good kerbstones, especially on the south, was formed by 4 inches of broken yellow sandstone. Then came a new surface indicated by mixed clay packing and 5 inches of 4-in. grade sandstone. The surface had been further remade by a 4-in. layer of modern furnace-ashes.

A further feature indicated post-Roman usage. A well-preserved horseshoe was found embedded in the layer of

[7] *Britannia*, 5, pl. v.
[8] Fordyce, *Durham*, II, 640.
[9] Field-numbers are taken from the 25-in. *OS* maps. This section was 50 yds. west of the north-east corner of the enclosure.

broken yellow sandstone four feet from the south kerb. It measures $4\frac{3}{5}$ by $4\frac{4}{5}$ inches, weighs $7\frac{3}{4}$ oz., has six nail-holes, fullering (or grooving), calkins, and shows little sign of wear. Mr. William Bulmer has kindly made the accompanying drawing:

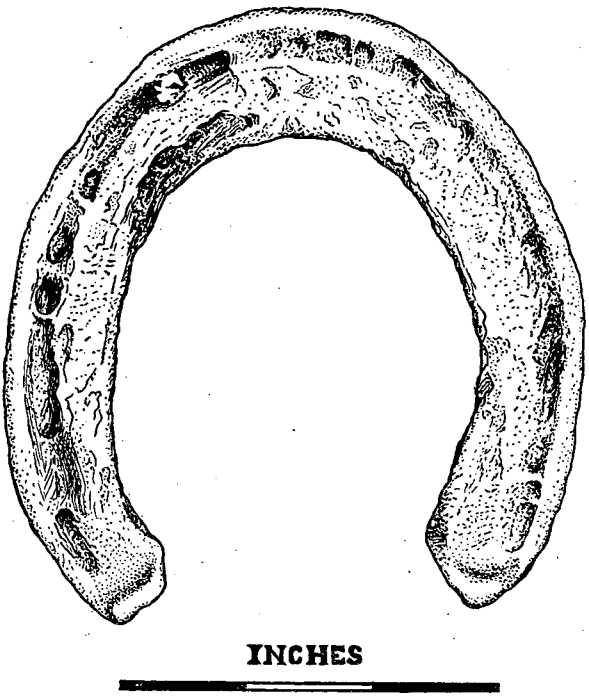

FIG. 2. HORSESHOE: SCALE $\frac{2}{3}$.

Dr. Gordon Ward, of Sevenoaks, Kent, has kindly considered the details of the shoe and thinks that it is a late Tudor type.[10] It is easy to imagine how the shoe could be lost in post-Roman times when the road was soft and thus become embedded in a Roman level. The massive south kerb and absence of any earlier road-surface beneath the two

[10] For types of horseshoes see Ward, *Lancs. and Ches. Antiq. Soc.*, LIII, 140 ff.

sandstone layers leave no room for doubting the Roman date of the broken sandstone layer. It is, however, easier to think that the layer of 4-in. grade sandstone was added after the horseshoe had been lost rather than to regard it as part of the Roman structure.

Section II showed the structure of the Wrekendike just east of the Long Bank in field 183, where the mound of the road is still very pronounced. The site chosen had in 1937 been enclosed from the field to form the garden for the house of Mr. Thomas Peacock, junior. The road (see diagram, p. 59) was 19 ft. wide with a 4-in. layer of bottoming: the central seven feet had 6-in. and 8-in. grade slabs, while the rest was of 4-in. grade. The upper layer was of small sandstone and had been well cambered, but was heavily worn in the centre. The kerbstones were large 12-in. grade sandstone blocks and were part of the upper surface, and not of the bottoming. The need for bedding the kerbs may explain the smallness of the bottoming at either side.

Sections III and IV were designed to prove the road to north and south of the junction. Mr. A. G. Pyburn, of High Eighton farm, gave great assistance by pointing out where a band of stone always caught his plough in field 184, and by recalling how his grandfather had taken up parts of the road south of the junction and used it to repair the modern road from the Long Bank to his farm. On an old estate-map in his keeping, field 229 is called the "Old Road field," and 228 the "Long Bank field"; presumably the Old Road is distinct from the Long Bank, or turnpike. Section III was 17 ft. 6 in. wide and built in three layers of 6-in. and 8-in. grade sandstone blocks: only one layer was left on the west, and the kerb was small. On the east the edge was exposed for 7 ft. and four kerbstones were found in line. There was no small metalling on the surface, but this may have been removed by ploughing. The line of the road was confirmed by finding the east edge 180 ft. further south. Though probing further north failed to show substantial remains which would merit excavation,

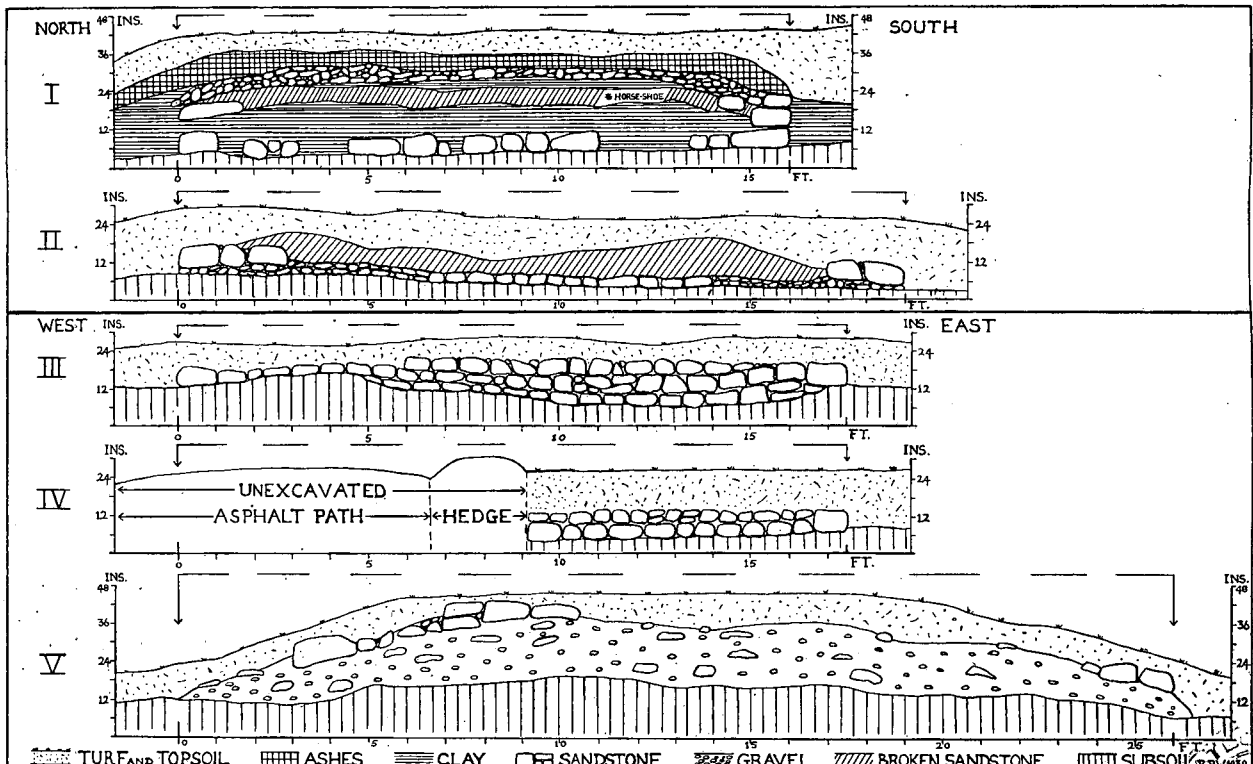

FIG. 3. CROSS-SECTIONS OF THE WREKENDIKE AND CONNECTING ROADS.

the mound of the road can be seen clearly under certain crops, as for instance when crossed at right-angles by turnip-drills. No traces could be found further north across the golf-course and Mossheap quarries. On the hill-top the road would veer west and follow the traditional course down Gateshead High Street to the Roman Tyne bridge on the site of the nineteenth-century Swing Bridge.

South of the junction the line of the road is marked by the old field-hedge, but the western side of the Roman road is now covered by an asphalt path which gives access to the gardens of the houses called Chambers Crescent, built about 1923 and not here marked on the map. In the garden of no. 15 a cross-section (no. IV of our series) of the east half of the road was obtained (see pl. VII, fig. 1). It was built in two layers of 8-in. grade sandstone blocks and had a fine east kerb (see diagram, p. 59). Only eight feet of the road-width were accessible, for the hedge and asphalt path covered the other half. Section IV closely resembles III in structure, and its east kerb aligns exactly with the junction and the east kerb of section III. They form part of a single scheme.

Section V was cut near the Coach and Horses Inn at the north end of Birtley. Here, in field 333a, on rough ground beside Leyburnhold Gill, there was a partly artificial causeway thirty yards long, standing fifteen feet above the Gill, and dropping to ten feet at the crossing-point. Large metalling can be seen and probed at many places on this causeway. The road was 26 ft. wide, a reasonable width considering that it was banked up. A cambered mound of gravel, 18 in. deep at the centre, had been laid on the sandy subsoil. There was no bottoming, but the lower part of the gravel contained some 6-in. blocks. The gravel itself made a smooth surface for the central part of the road, but a band of 12-in. grade sandstone blocks had been laid on top of the gravel for 6 ft. on the west, and 2 ft. on the east, thus forming kerbs to the road, as in section II. The built-up causeway shows that there must have been a small bridge

across the Gill. The field south of the Gill now stands at a much higher level than the causeway, as ploughing has worked several feet of soil on to the road. North of the causeway probing revealed no sure traces of the road, but the map (p. 59) shows how sections III and IV align with section V and the modern road further south, and suffice to prove this to be the Roman line.

The search for a fourth road proceeding west from the junction proved negative. Horsley (1732)[11] says that from South Shields the Wrekendike " seems to be continued all the way to *Gateshead-fell*, for the space of five or six miles. From thence it goes towards *Lamesby* " [*sic*] " and *Kibblesworth*, which it leaves a little to the south. It was very visible all the way not very many years ago, before *Sir Henry Liddall* inclosed and improved these grounds. . . . This way passes on towards *Bemish*, and I make no doubt has gone forward to *Lanchester*." Longstaffe[12] quotes W. Barkus, of Low Fell, for the finding of the pavement " in building the new engine-house in a field from High Eighton." He admits he had not seen its traces further, but thinks its western route tolerably certain. The old *O.S.* six-inch map (ed. 1862) marks the sinuous line from High Eighton to this engine-house at the south-west corner of field 222 as " Wrekendike," but this is not repeated on later editions. Hodgson[13] recollected having had the pavement of the road shown to him on the south side of Blackburn Fell (which lies a mile west of Ravensworth Castle), but this would be over three miles from the junction and is too vague and unspecific. Other writers rely to a great extent on the place-names and think that a road between the " junction " and Lanchester is very probable.

Longstaffe's evidence about the colliery engine-house can easily be explained. This house, which was built in the middle of the nineteenth century, was in use till 1937.

[11] *Brit. Rom.*, 451.
[12] *Arch. Inst.*, Newcastle vol. for 1852, p. 60.
[13] *AA*[1] II, 135.

It lies in a straight line with the cart-road which forms the south boundary of field 222. It is highly probable that this road was slightly diverted to vacate the site most suited to the colliery-engine, and that metalling of probably eighteenth-century date was encountered where the road had run and was regarded as Roman, although no Roman road would here make two sharp turns as the farm-road does.

To test Horsley's statement three methods were used. It was assumed that the road would run in a straight line westwards from the junction, but that it might have swung a few degrees north or south at the junction. It might be found within a wide arc. A trial-trench in December 1938, cut at VI in the ploughed field no. 222 immediately west of the farm-road from the junction to High Eighton farm-house, was negative. A second negative was obtained by observing the work undertaken by the Team Colliery Company in 1937 in cutting back the ground to north and east of their sidings in field 223. This work ran from the old engine-house for about 130 yards east and south towards the colliery buildings. The absence of any metalling showed that no Roman road had swung at the junction so as to pass south of this engine-house. Probing in field 222 for two hundred yards northward from the engine-house was also negative and supported the statement of Mr. Pyburn that he had encountered no material resembling a road either in that field or in 226. To carry the test further north, the west edge of field 184 was probed for 120 yards north from the wagon-way bridge, with negative results. Nor, again, was there any visible mound leading west from the junction, although the mounds of the Wrekendike and northward road were evident. The field-work, therefore, gave no support to Horsley's idea of a westward road at this point.

It is not clear how far west Horsley saw definite traces of the road. He speaks rather vaguely of Lamesley and Kibblesworth, and seems to have seen the line no further

than certain grounds which Sir Henry Liddell had enclosed a few years earlier. At the end of the nineteenth century, and probably long before, the Ravensworth estate[14] was bounded on the south by High Eighton farm, Smithy Lane, and Lamesley station. It cannot be proved that at some earlier date the estate did not extend further south, but it seems more likely that Horsley was referring to enclosures no further west than High Eighton. Hutchinson[15] in a note dated 1750 mentions "Lord Ravensworth's new enclosures" east of the Long Bank, and gives details for the Wrekendike as far as the junction but no further west. Longstaffe could produce no evidence for prolonging the road, apart from his statement about the engine-house discussed above. Accordingly, until some reliable section of a westward road is found in this vicinity or further west, we must regard the westward road as not proven despite the statement of so great an authority as Horsley.

The nature of the road-junction may now be considered. The structure of sections III and IV and their exact alignment mark a unity of building, whereas the Wrekendike may perhaps belong to a different period; too much stress, however, should not be placed on the structural features. The junction is a poor vantage-point, being restricted in its view to north and east. It was placed there, and not further north, because the shortest line from South Shields along feasible ground impinged at this point. We know that a road ran from Binchester,[16] a Flavian fort, towards Chester-le-Street, which was probably Flavian. We now see the road-connection between Chester-le-Street and the Flavian fort of South Shields. So far Lanchester has produced nothing earlier than Hadrian and seems to have been an addition on Dere Street. Even if it be maintained that the road from Chester-le-Street to Newcastle was not made in this form before Hadrian built his bridge at Newcastle

[14] Mr. J. E. Stafford kindly gave access to maps.
[15] *Hist. Durham* (1787) II, 487.
[16] *AA*[4] XIV, 194.

(*Pons Aelius*), where his frontier-wall was at first designed to start, yet there are better ways of linking Lanchester and Dere Street with the eastern route than by crossing the wet Team Valley near Lamesley. A road connecting Lanchester and Chester-le-Street would seem more likely, or, failing that, a route might come in from the west at one of several places along the north-south road without necessarily making for the High Eighton junction-point, where there is no inhabited site to attract it.

Three Roman roads radiate from High Eighton, to Newcastle, South Shields, and Chester-le-Street. There is as yet no positive evidence for the route of Horsley and later writers aiming westward for Lanchester or indeed any part of Dere Street.

The writer wishes to thank the London and North-Eastern Railway Company and Pelaw Main Collieries Ltd. for granting permission to excavate, and Messrs. G. R. Brundle, Thomas Peacock, junior, and A. G. Pyburn, and Mrs. Straughair for full facilities. He also gratefully acknowledges help of various kinds given by Mr. J. E. Stafford, Mr. I. A. Richmond, and the Rev. T. Romans, and the voluntary labour of Messrs. G. T. Batey, J. P. Gillam, M. Rowlands, and Frederick A. Steer.