

## IX.—A ROMAN SITE ON DERE STREET.

BY E. J. W. HILDYARD.

The little Roman site, generally known as Apperley Dene, was first brought to my notice some years ago by our curator, Mr. W. Bulmer, and in 1949 Mr. G. A. Cowen (brother of our vice-president) showed me the site and kindly took the preliminary steps towards securing permission to dig. In 1951, thanks to a grant from this society, I was able to follow this up and conduct the excavation now to be described.

My grateful thanks are due to the landowner, Major-General R. E. Laycock, C.B., D.S.O., who gave permission to dig and also generously subscribed towards the work, and his agent, Mr. D. W. H. Crocker, who helped in various ways: to the tenant, Mr. F. C. Batey, of Kipperlyn, who both allowed the interference to his intensive cropping, caused by the dig, and made no claim for compensation, and to his son, Mr. Alan Batey, for many kindnesses. In the actual work of digging valuable assistance was rendered by Mr. G. V. Snowdon, of Stanhope, and also by my woodman, Mr. A. Appleby. On the technical side Professor I. A. Richmond kindly visited the site and has made many valuable suggestions embodied in this report, and Mr. J. P. Gillam also visited the site and has kindly contributed an exhaustive report on the meagre haul of pottery. In the section of Dere Street Mr. R. P. Wright gave great assistance and Sir Walter Aitchison, Bt., kindly paid us a visit.

I am also grateful to Mrs. Bulmer for her efforts to find me accommodation, and finally my special thanks are due to Mrs. Batey, by whose great kindness I was a guest at

Kipperlyn for the first fortnight of the dig, and thus solved this problem. The paid labour was most satisfactory, in which connection Messrs. Bell and Robson deserve mention.

#### THE SITE.

The site lies on the west side of Dere Street (see fig. 1) (which is here running S.E.-N.W.) between Corbridge and Ebchester, about  $5\frac{1}{2}$  miles from the former and  $3\frac{1}{2}$  from the latter. It was first noticed by Horsley who thus describes it: "The Military Way, having crossed the Tyne proceeds towards Ebchester; about  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile north from Whittonstall is a remarkable turn in it, and at this turn an exploratory fort of about 30 yards square. The situation of it is high and the prospect large: and near it is a tumulus which I found to consist mainly of stones, covered with green turf."<sup>1</sup>

Both the "fort" and Dere Street with its bend are marked on all scales of the O.S. and on the ground the site appears as a small, square plateau surrounded by a broad but shallow ditch which is scarcely visible on the north side owing to the sharp falling away of the ground.

The turn in Dere Street, in the form of a slight embankment, can still plainly be seen whether the field is under grass or plough, but the tumulus seems to have disappeared. The site stands on a low hill just above the 400ft. contour, overlooking on the north the confluence of the Stocksfield and Lynn burns. Except towards the north and north-west the "prospect" is not really very large. The field of vision down Dere Street southwards ends in about a mile at Whittonstall bank (700ft.) which blocks the view to Ebchester. On the west the ground is rising and on the east the outlook is confined to  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile by Apperley Bank.

Apart from the general size and shape of the site nothing definite was hitherto known about it. The National Grid Reference is 45/056581.

<sup>1</sup> *Britannia Romana*, 1732, Book III, p. 398.

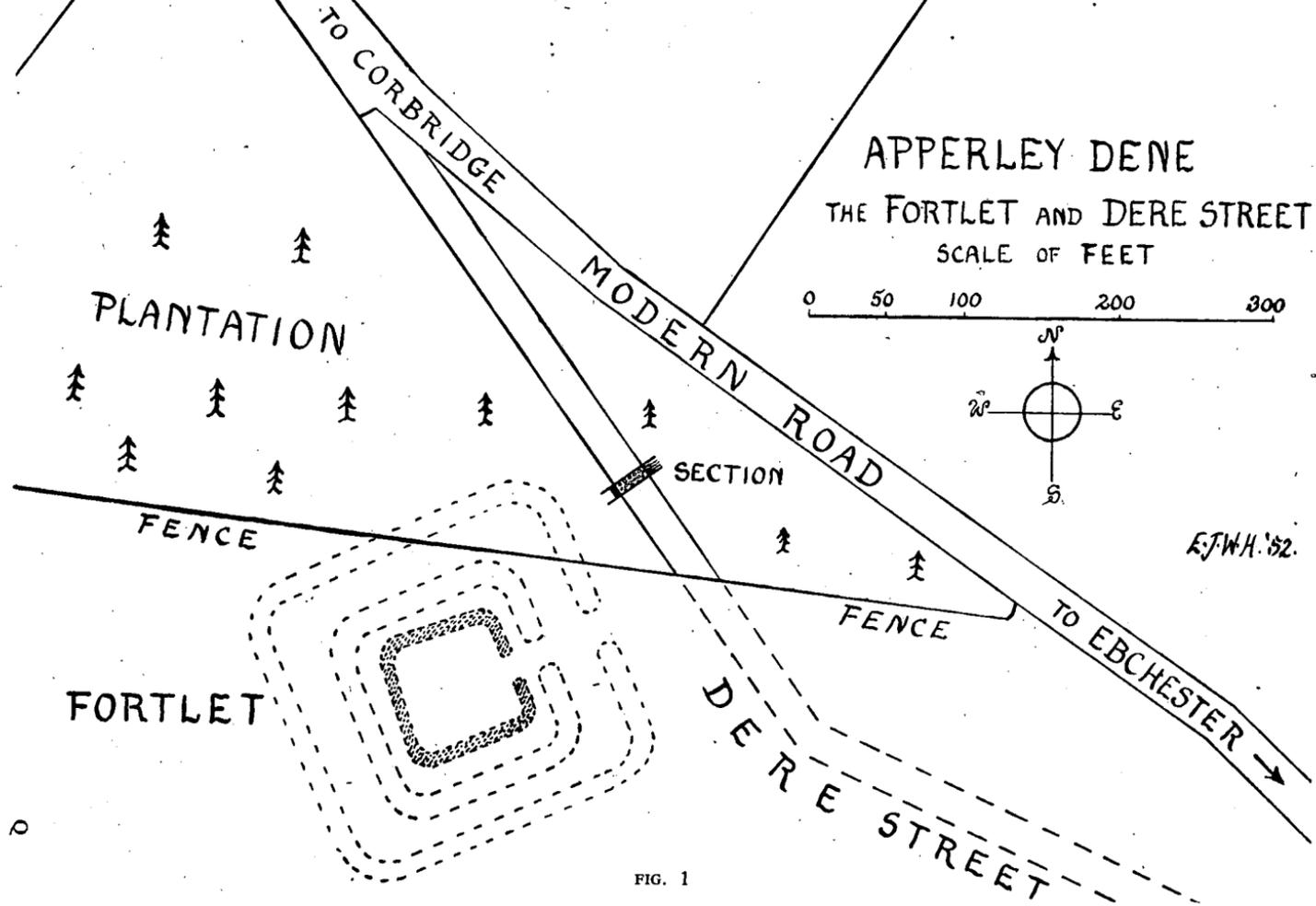


FIG. 1

## APPERLEY DENE 1951

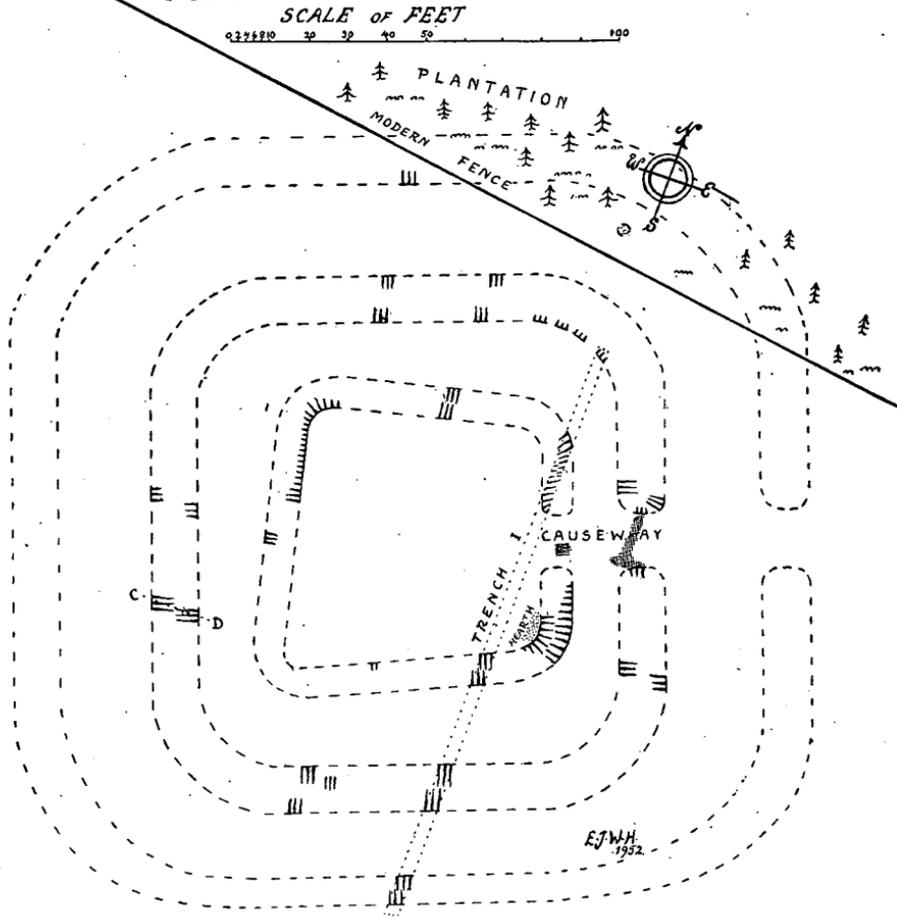


FIG. 2.

## THE EXCAVATION.

It had been intended to carry out the excavation in the late Spring of 1951 but, owing to the wet weather, we confined ourselves to digging trial holes on April 25th/26th before the work was begun in earnest after the first crop of

grass. Digging was resumed on June 25th and, including filling in, continued until July 27th. During most of three weeks the writer had three men working, the rest of the time, one. Rain interfered to some extent but, considering the wet summer, we were reasonably fortunate. The section of Dere Street was dug on October 11th/12th, bringing the total up to 29 working days.

*The Trial Dig.* The trial work in April consisted of three short lengths of trench in line with each other across

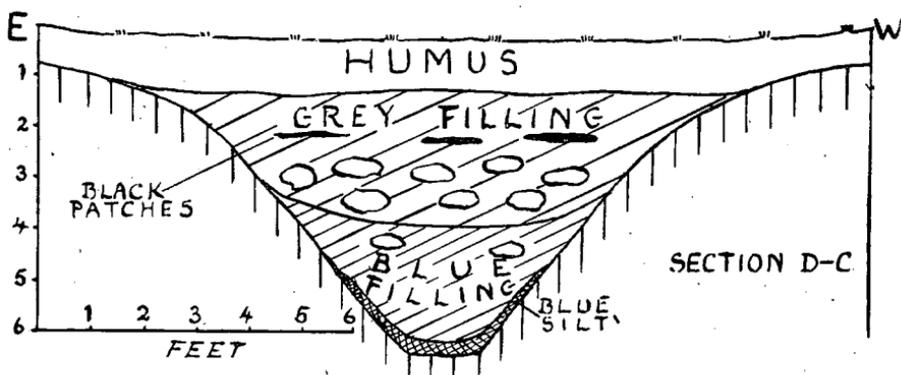


FIG. 3

the southern "defences". The most southerly (C) struck the middle of the ditch. Below the humus came some 2ft. of reddish clay filling, in which was found a piece of XIXth century pottery and a worked flint (the only flint found on the site) patinated pink by the clay. Under the clay filling came a band of black ash, several inches thick, on each side of the ditch centre which was filled in with stones. These were found by protecting a roughly flagged drain with which it was not thought advisable to interfere at this stage. The stones and drain were set in light-coloured, grey, sandy clay.

The second trench (B) which began 10ft. to the north revealed 5-7ins. of humus overlying clay. At one place there

were three stones laid end-on in rough herringbone fashion with a larger stone behind them, raising hopes that something might remain of bottoming to a wall or rampart. The third trench (A), beginning 25ft. from the south end of B, just caught the beginning of a depression in the clay which proved later to have been the edge of the foundation trench.

While we were digging the tenant of an adjoining farm told us that he could see nothing dissimilar in B to what he had encountered many times on his own farm on which he had carried out extensive drain digging. He confirmed that the normal stratification was 9ins.-1ft. of humus under which came yellow clay changing to blue, the depth of the deposits varying. Beneath came a hard, compact mixture of decayed sandstone, pebbles and clay. Three small holes dug outside the site in other parts of the field proved this to be the case.

The trial dig had, in fact, given a very fair impression of the site, and the picture was not encouraging. In the interior there was, on average, even less humus than outside, clearly there would not be much left of any structures.

*The Main Ditch.* When digging was resumed the first aim was to define the true size of the work by taking one complete cross section of the "rampart and ditch" and tracing the lips of the ditch on the other three sides at two places on each side. The trenches were laid out in a grid plan, parallel or at right angles to each other. It was intended that they should cross the ditches at right angles and according to the map<sup>2</sup> the fort was set nearly parallel with the plantation fence, but excavation proved it to be inclined nearly 30 degrees to the west. Reliance on the map rather than on careful observation on the ground resulted in the trenches crossing the features of the site at an angle. The plan (fig. 2) which shows the pieces of ditch and other features actually dug, reveals this at a glance.

The depression, which is visible on the ground, marks

<sup>2</sup> Ordnance Survey, Edition of 1921. 25 ins. scale, Northumberland NC1, 12.

the position of what may be called the main ditch. The section of it revealed in the long trench (TR. I, fig. 4) confirmed what had been seen in the trial hole. It was about 12ft. broad and rather over 6ft. from the present surface at its maximum depth. The filling was lighter than in the trial hole, but otherwise similar, the black bands and stone layers covering the field drain reappeared. After getting lighter grey in colour, the filling gradually became bluer, the lower portions being marked as "Blue Filling" on the section (fig. 4). In fact, however, the filling changed gradually, the colours merging slowly into one another. At the very bottom a layer of blue sandy silt lined the lower portion of the sides and the central channel. This was about

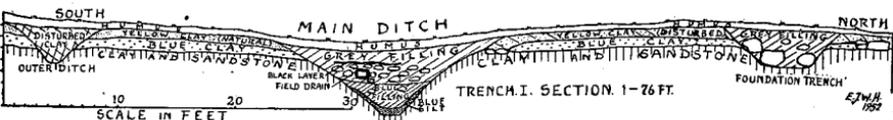


FIG. 4.

1ft. 3ins. across. The ditch was V shaped as far as the intractable sub-soil would allow. A second full section of the main ditch TR. V, Section D-C (fig. 3) was taken across its western length. Results were precisely similar except for the absence of the flagged drain. Apart from a large part of a tree root and one or two small pieces of wood in the blue silt at the bottom of TR. I there were no finds of any sort.

It was not always easy to drop on the lip of the ditch immediately and the numerous cuts, 3ft. 6ins. wide on either side of it, averaged 7-10ft. long. In all cases the ditch was dug out to the full extent of the trench, usually to a depth of  $3\frac{1}{2}$  to 5ft.; its filling was uniform with that in the full sections. It was intended thus to allow the maximum opportunity for finds but in fact only one sherd, of red ware, was found in the main ditch; this was near the north side of the entrance. (TR. IX.)

The main ditch enclosed a rectangular and nearly square

area 116ft. by 108ft., the N-S axis being slightly longer. The rounded corner was investigated by short trenches at the NE angle.

*The Interior.* The stratification revealed by TR. I also proved disappointing. Rather to our surprise, there was nothing that could be identified as a wall or rampart. On the section (fig. 4) the band of yellow clay inside the main ditch is marked as disturbed, but in fact only the top few inches beneath the humus were affected. It was thought at first that the compact blue clay layer beneath might be rampart material, but after it was removed down to the lower subsoil there was no reason to think it had ever before been disturbed. There was no sign of an original ground surface and the same clay was afterwards found outside the main ditch. It may be noted that the yellow merged almost imperceptibly into the blue clay, but it was not practicable to indicate this on the section. In any case, the blue clay was irregular in depth. In TR. I, if it had been part of the eastern rampart, it should have been thicker on the east side of the 4ft. trench. In fact the opposite was the case. The only sign of any laid stones were those in the clay on the lip of the main ditch and this was a feature observed in most of the short trenches.

*The Outer Ditch.* TR. I was continued south in a search for an outer ditch and this was duly found 15ft. from the main ditch (see fig. 4). But it was a very minor affair, scarcely 4ft. deep and 8ft. wide, and the composition of the clay filling was so similar to the natural material (and no silt could be detected at the bottom) that it appeared that this ditch was not long in use and had been filled from its own excavated material. Later the lip of an outer ditch was struck on the north, near the plantation fence. From what was seen of it this ditch appeared to be similar in size and filling to the main ditch, but time did not allow of further investigation.

Results were so unpromising by the middle of the second week that when Professor Richmond visited the site he supported the excavator's view that further effort would be wasted, apart from clearing up one or two points still doubtful. One of these was a dark area in TR. I, 22ft. behind the main ditch. When dug out this proved to be a shallow, flat-bottomed "depression", some 4ft. deep and 8ft. broad at the top, crossing the trench like the main ditch. The filling was very similar to the main ditch, greyish sandy mixed loam and clay, but the lower portion was filled in with stones, some of them larger than any found in the main ditch.

*The Causeway.* TR. I was continued for another 40ft. of featureless humus and subsoil. There were occasional stones or cobbles but nothing that gave any indication of intentional arrangement. But when the point had virtually been reached, at which further work would seem fruitless, the picture began to become rather clearer.

Owing to the siting of TR. I the entrance had not been found, but in the extreme end of one of the cross trenches on the east (TR. IX) a curve in the side of the main ditch was detected. This was at once tested and the causeway, with the ends of the interrupted main ditch on each side, were revealed.

There was no sign of metalling or road foundation, but the interruption, 12ft. broad, in the main ditch, was clear. TR. I, continued yet further, now struck the dark filling already encountered and it was realized that this must be the east side of the same "depression" whose south side the trench had already crossed. The filling was similar and, at last, a few scraps of pottery appeared.

*The Foundation Trench.* It only remained to recover the plan of the "depression" of which, of course, there is no surface indication, though, as most of the paid labour had been dispensed with before these unexpected compli-

cations, it was not possible to do this as thoroughly as might have been desired. Enough had been seen in TR. I to show that this also was interrupted by the causeway, but the point was checked by a short trench in the middle of the break. A considerable area at the SW corner (TR. XI) was opened out where both sides of the "depression" were investigated. The stone filling and the shallow flat-bottomed section (see fig. 4) made it apparent that this "depression" must have been the foundation trench for the wall of the post, though nothing but a confused jumble of stones now remained. This stone filling was unusually dense at the SW corner and on the inner side was an area extending some 6ft. northwards and at least 4ft. broad and 6ins. deep of clay burnt a bright red, indicating the presence of some hearth or oven. Immediately over this clay the main bulk of the pottery, including the orange bases was found (see p. 237) as well as fragments of a few *tegulae*.

A full section of the foundation trench was also cut on the north side. Here the filling was similar, but the number of stones much less. One scrap of mortarium was found. The NW corner was also recovered and the ditch lip followed southwards some 25ft. The foundation trench was found to be slightly irregular in plan, its internal dimensions being calculated at  $66 \times 68 \times 60 \times 58$ ft.

#### CONCLUSIONS.

As this was a site never hitherto touched, it was hoped to recover its plan and discover its purpose and, perhaps, its date and length of occupation. Excavation soon showed that little was left to provide information but, as can be seen in fig. 1, the plan of the post, ditches and entrance has been recovered and fairly conclusive deductions can be made on the other points.

There is little doubt that the main ditch must have been more prominent in Horsley's day and we may, perhaps, choose the Napoleonic era as the time of the great levelling.

If the blue silt represents the time when the main ditch was open and the blue filling the accumulation of subsequent ages, then we may assign the stone layers and field drain and filling above to early XIXth century activity, when much of the walls may have been robbed to fill the ditch. As to the interior, Mr. Batey admits to heavy cultivations within the last few years and the removal of a good many stones, further destroying the meagre remaining evidence.

Nevertheless, it might have been expected that post holes would have shown in the clay subsoil and the complete absence of any signs of mortar<sup>3</sup> and the remarkable paucity of pottery, in view of the considerable amount of soil uncovered, all point to a very transitory occupation.

Clearly, from its size, the site is one of the class known as "fortlets", a term which covers various purposes from coastal defence, such as Cardurnock, to provision of assistance or shelter to convoys as at Chew Green<sup>4</sup> or for a signalling system such as Bowes Moor<sup>5</sup> and Roper Castle in the Stainmore Pass. These sites in general are "now widely recognized as typical of the Antonine Age",<sup>6</sup> but they also appear in other periods such as Chew Green II which is Agricolan.

There is, however, one strikingly similar site known, that at Barrock Fell<sup>7</sup> in Cumberland. A comparison of the plans reveals a strong likeness, in both cases, a small, nearly square post surrounded by two ditches, the entrance being in the middle of one of the longer sides. At Barrock Fell, as at Apperley Dene, the ditches were "roughly dug" and the square drainage channel, absent at the former, was scarcely recognizable at the latter. Both posts are irregu-

<sup>3</sup> Possibly due to the acidity of the soil.

<sup>4</sup> C & W<sup>2</sup>, XLVII, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> *Arch. Aeliana*, 4th series, XIV, p. 146. Apperley Dene has been compared with the earlier fortlet, Chew Green II. See also *History of Northumberland*, Vol. XV, p. 70.

<sup>6</sup> *Aspects of Archaeology*. I. A. Richmond. "A Roman Arterial Signalling System," pp. 295ff.

<sup>7</sup> C & W<sup>2</sup>, XXXI, pp. 111-118.

larly set within their ditches, there was no earthen "rampart" behind the walls and such masonry as was left was rough and undressed. Of the interior of both sites it can be said that "no floor levels or structural remains of any kind were discovered" and that they must have contained "nothing but slight hutments". Equally striking is the correspondence in size, Barrock Fell measuring about 63ft. by 55ft. Both posts are much smaller than the second-century fortlets.

In view of the majority of "fortlet" sites the story told by the pottery seemed at first surprising. Although there are one or two pieces that may date before A.D. 300, the fourth-century character of the group as a whole is well marked. Here again the analogy with Barrock Fell is striking. At that site, pottery was slightly more plentiful in relation to the amount of soil excavated but it yielded only 48 pieces and of these no less than 42 were of calcite gritted ware, which also appears prominently in the list given below.

The presence of early strays is usual even on the latest Roman sites. One much worn and battered Samian sherd appeared at Barrock Fell and so did others at Goldsborough and Scarborough.<sup>8</sup> This did not prevent the excavators assigning Barrock Fell to the activities of Count Theodosius about A.D. 370 and though Apperley Dene may be rather earlier, the resemblances are so strong that there cannot be much difference, nor can the site have been occupied for a long period owing to the scarcity of remains.

As for purpose, the position of Apperley Dene, no less than the absence of any sign of a signal tower, rules it out as a signal post, but like Barrock Fell "it may have been an element in a chain of signal stations though not itself a signal station". At any rate, its position on the main trunk route to the north connects it sufficiently with the convoy or police service to make it unnecessary to seek another explanation.

<sup>8</sup> Goldsborough Report, p. 222.

## A SECTION OF DERE STREET.

Since my first visit to the site in 1949 the eastern half of the little plantation on the bank north of the "fortlet" has been cleared and replanted, thus clearly revealing the course of Dere Street, undisturbed, as in the field above, by cultivation. After the "remarkable turn" opposite the entrance in the east side of the fortlet, the road has veered about 25° further north and takes a straight course which, after an interval of 140 yards, has been adopted by the modern road. In the course of clearing the plantation,

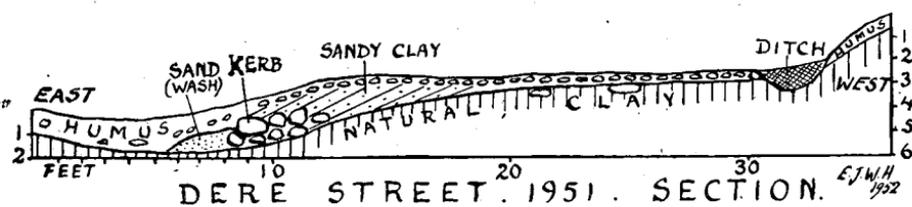


FIG. 5

rubbish has been collected and burnt in places on the road itself, thereby revealing the metalling that lay immediately under the grass.

As few sections of Dere Street in this region are available for excavation and very few, in fact, have been dug, it was thought worth while to cut one on the slope. Accordingly, on October 11th the surface of the road metalling was cleared for a width of 4ft. from one side of the road to the other and then a trench, 2ft. wide, was cut through the metalling down to undisturbed subsoil. For this cross section of the road see fig. 5. On the next day Mr. Wright<sup>9</sup> visited the site and exposed a length of 5ft. of the eastern kerb, which proved to have been in two layers.

Hopes that the road might be well preserved here were

<sup>9</sup> Mr. Wright has kindly co-operated in compiling this report on the road.

disappointed and the section reveals little but the method of construction. This was very simple and consisted mainly of cutting back the slope on the west side and using the excavated material (marked in the figure as "sandy clay") to embank the eastern or downhill side of the road. To retain this material a heavy kerb of sandstone blocks, averaging  $8 \times 10 \times 6$  ins., had been placed in two layers for a width of 4ft. On the eastern side of this kerb lay a deposit of sand which, in the course of time, had been washed off the road. The western kerb had not survived.

The road was 22ft. wide, which tallies with the normal width of Roman trunk roads such as the Devil's Causeway in Northumberland. The only metalling which had survived was a scattering of smallish sandstone, usually flat and of an average size of 2 to 3ins., which lay on the subsoil of boulder clay. This material was too inadequate to be the upper surface of a trunk road, even if traffic in Roman and medieval times had worn it down. There was no trace of bottoming to form a foundation course, and yet it is highly unlikely that this road could otherwise have stood the heavy traffic and avoided serious wear, at least in the centre.

The easiest solution is to suppose that the builder, or repairer, of the modern road, which here runs in a loop some 30 yards further to the east, used the Roman line as their quarry for material, in, say, the XVIIIth century, and left behind the scatter of sandstone described above.

In its present state the road lacks a camber, except on the eastern margin. On the western or uphill side, there is a small drainage ditch, about 2ft. wide and 9ins. deep, but it is hard to know how far its contour has been altered when it was recut in modern times for draining the plantation, as can be seen a little further north where its line continues.

## NOTES ON POTTERY FROM APPERLEY DENE.

BY J. P. GILLAM.

The total yield of pottery was 62 fragments, many very small, and the largest only four inches long. The surface of almost every piece had been softened and altered in the ground. These scraps come from something like 20 separate vessels, some represented only by single pieces. No vessel has anything approaching a complete section. There are only four rims, and of these only one is at all distinctive. The value of the group as evidence is then very strictly limited, though within these limits a few points emerge clearly. A description of the deposit follows:

Three fragments of a vessel in imitation of Dragendorff's Samian form 38, a hemispherical flanged bowl, in a yellowish white fabric with a chocolate colour coating, the fabric usually called Castor ware. Such imitations were common in the last third of the fourth century, and the fabric, coarser than that of the Castor<sup>2</sup> beakers of the second and third centuries, persisted until the end of the Roman period. *cf. Oswald and Price*, pl. LXXII, no. 14.

Six fragments of coarse fabric, once calcite-gritted but now pitted with holes. They come from the body of a large hand-made jar; there is nothing to show the type of rim. The fragments do not join, and they vary in colour from a muddy grey to black, and may therefore represent more than one vessel. While calcite-gritted jars were common in east Yorkshire throughout the Roman period, they were exceedingly rare in the region of Hadrian's Wall until late in the third century, and only became common late in the fourth.

Three fragments of a white mortarium with small black grit. They appear to come from a pipeclay mortarium of one of the types common from the late third century until the middle of the fourth, rather than from one of the later Crambeck types.

Two fragments from the shoulder of a black cooking-pot, perhaps once fumed and burnished but now with a matt surface. The rim is missing, but from the break it appears to have joined at an angle which would place it early rather than late in the fumed-ware series, that is nearer to A.D. 120 than to A.D. 370; greater precision is not possible.

A jar rim in a soft light grey fabric which would not look out of place in the Hadrianic level of a milecastle. There are also five wall fragments from a soft light grey jar. *cf. AA<sup>4</sup>*, xv, 231, no. 22.

A jar rim in an orange fabric with a light grey core. There are also a rim, the mere edge of a vessel, too small to be drawn or

described, and ten wall or base fragments from two separate vessels in the same orange fabric with a grey core. Neither vessel can be dated with any confidence, though both seem to be earlier than the fourth century.

Two complete bases from small flagons in orange fabric, together with eighteen tiny wall fragments in the same fabric.

Two large and two small fragments from three separate grey jars with plain bases.

Six fragments of grey or brown pottery, probably from separate vessels, but too indeterminate even to describe.

A piece of green window glass with an annealed edge showing the start of a corner; it is smooth on one side and sanded on the other.

To sum up, the whole deposit is Roman; there can be no doubt that the site was occupied in the fourth century, and possibly throughout that century; earlier pieces, perhaps from as early as Hadrianic-Antonine times, are also present. Further than this it would be unwise to go; even this is an opinion based on somewhat slender evidence.