

IX.—THE VALLUM AT WEST DENTON AND HEDDON ON THE WALL

John Tait

1. WEST DENTON

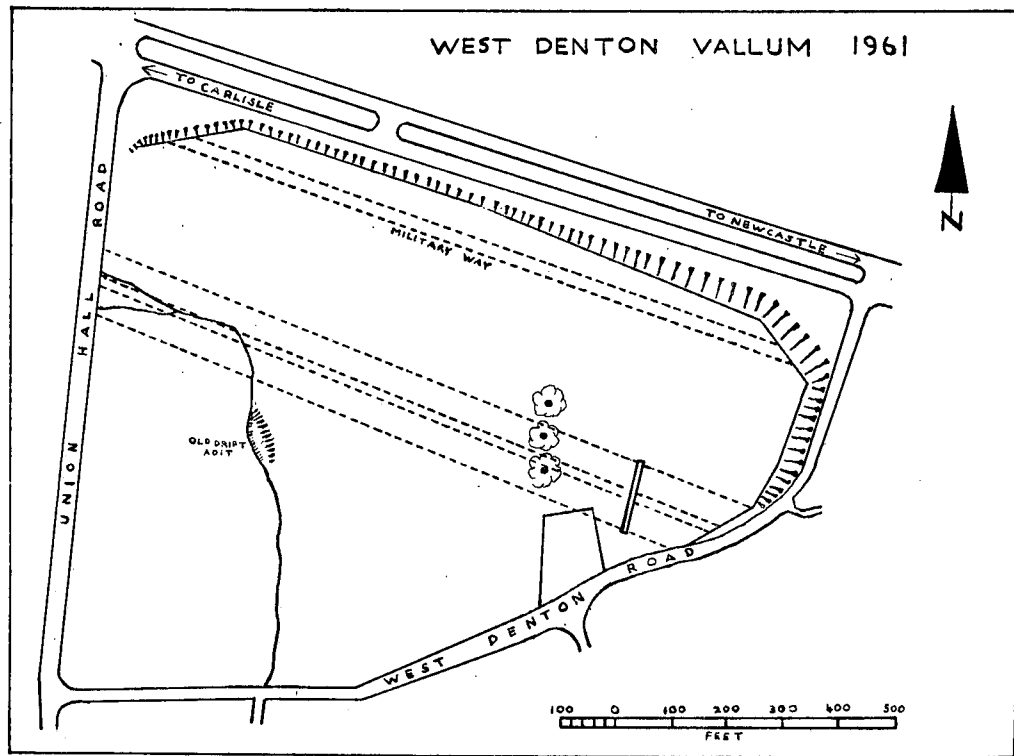
In February 1961 the cutting of a section across the vallum was undertaken by the writer on behalf of the Ministry of Works, on a site which was threatened by levelling for playing fields, for a new school at West Denton. The site, Nat. Grid. Ref. NZ 187658, lies within the triangular piece of land bordered on the north by the Newcastle-Carlisle road, on the east by West Denton Road and on the west by Union Hall Road.

During housing development west of Denton Burn down to 1936, five centurial building inscriptions¹ had been found on the line of the vallum, built into the inside faces of the north and south mounds, to the east of Copperas Lane. In 1953 another inscription² was found immediately to the west of Copperas Lane. West of the housing estate where not only the ditch and the mounds, but also the regular gaps in the mounds are still visible, the vallum maintains a straight line across the Sugley Burn ravine south of West Denton Hall, now St. Vincents Home, and over West Denton Road into the area due to be levelled, a total distance of about nine hundred yards. As undoubted vallum building inscriptions have been recorded in no other sector, it was thought that the present opportunity would be highly suitable to try to further our knowledge of the vallum and its builders, as the site now

¹ A.A.4, vol. XIV, 1937, p. 227.

² J.R.S., vol. XLIV, 1954, p. 105.

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threatened with destruction contained a four-hundred-yard length of the earthwork.

I would like to thank Mr. J. P. Gillam for his willing help and advice during the excavation and in writing this report, and also Mr. C. Anderson of the Ministry of Works, without whose co-operation in supplying a pump at very short notice the vallum ditch could not have been emptied.

THE EXCAVATION

The excavation took place between the 6th and the 18th of February, 1961, immediately after a fall of snow which left the ground in a very waterlogged state. Surface indications of the existence of the vallum were extremely slight and choice of position for the cutting was more or less dictated by the state of the ground. A shallow dip in the eastern part of the field appeared to offer the most likely place to find the mounds in position, and an eight-foot-wide trench was accordingly marked out. This was a fortunate choice as it proved to be one of the few places where both north and south mounds were intact.

THE SOUTH MOUND

The south mound was found to be 18 feet wide at the base and to survive to a height of 2 feet 2 inches. The core was of compact yellow clay retained on either side by turf revetments whose dark colour contrasted sharply with that of the core. The south revetment had been laid on the original turf line on which was a burnt area 18 inches in diameter and one inch thick. This original turf line did not extend under the core of the mound or under the north revetment. From this it would seem to follow that the south revetment of the south mound was built as a free-standing miniature turf wall on the natural vegetation before the growing turf was stripped from immediately north of it, which in turn was before any upcast was tipped from the ditch.

An unusual feature of the south mound was a stone capping about four inches in thickness, composed of small

slabs each roughly four inches square by half an inch thick and of a similar stone to that through which the ditch had been cut. As these stones were confined between the turf revetments, and did not overlie them, it would seem that this was an original feature of the mound. Few, if any, of these stones could have been displaced by ploughing as there was no spread on either side. Up to and including this capping, or bonding course, the south mound is intact as originally constructed though there is no evidence how much or how little has been lost from a higher level. A small trench which had been cut into the top of the mound contained a one-inch iron water pipe.

THE SOUTH BERM

The south berm, 32 feet wide between the mound and the weathered lip of the ditch, revealed nothing of note. A paved trackway eight feet wide ran along the berm eight feet inside the mound, some of the stones coming to within nine inches of the present surface. This was a fairly modern feature as a fragment of a Bellarmine jar came from amongst the stones. For the greater part of the width, the subsoil on the berm was sand, presumably disintegrated bedrock. From a point eight feet south of the weathered lip of the ditch the subsoil was clay, a few inches only in thickness, overlying the bedrock.

THE DITCH

Seepage of water caused some little difficulty in emptying the ditch but this was eventually overcome and the ditch was found to be 24 feet wide between the weathered lips, 7 feet 7 inches in depth from the existing ground level and cut in rock for almost the whole of the original depth ending in a flat bottom 7 feet 9 inches wide. The sides of the ditch though now in a rather soft and friable condition had been cut at an angle of 70 degrees. This angle is similar to that of the vallum ditch at Benwell³ and steeper than at Cockmount

³ A.A.4, vol. XI, pp. 176-184.

Hill⁴ where the angle was 60 degrees, but at both these sites, where the ditch widths are given as 17 feet 6 inches and 18 feet 6 inches respectively the subsoil of the ditch was clay. At West Denton it is unlikely that the original width of the ditch across the top was much more than 12 feet and this is identical with the width of the ditch at the vallum crossing at Housesteads⁵ where also it was cut in rock. It would seem to have been the normal practice of the vallum builders to dig a narrower ditch when cutting through rock. At West Denton the ditch falls exactly on the centre line between the mounds, giving a 35-foot berm on either side.

The filling of the ditch showed no unusual features. The bottom 3 feet 6 inches was filled with deposits resulting from natural silting. These were (1) blue-grey silt containing stones and coarse grit, (2) blue-grey silt alone, (3) grey-brown silt; the brown colour probably came from the disintegrating rock. These layers were overlain by a stratum of leached sandy soil which in turn was overlain by a layer of stiff clayey soil with a turf level on top. Above this was two feet of modern topsoil.

Inside the weathered north lip of the ditch some modern disturbance had taken place. A trench 6 feet long by 3 feet wide and 15 inches deep had been cut on a flat platform inside the lip. This trench contained dark soil, at the bottom of which was part of the bowl of a clay pipe.

There was no evidence that the ditch had ever been cleaned out or recut, nor any sign of a marginal mound on the berm.

The only find was a triangular shaped scraper of brown chert, with secondary working on one side, from the blue-grey silt 12 inches from the ditch bottom.

THE NORTH BERM

The north berm was 26 feet wide between the weathered lip of the ditch and the mound. A twenty-foot wide spread

⁴ J.R.S., vol. XXX, 1940, p. 164.

⁵ A.A.4, vol. XI, 1934, p. 185.

of stones, bands of shale, and water-rolled pebbles which merged into the north mound gave at first the impression of being a lightly metalled road, and possibly Roman. Evidence from another part of the site later showed that it is probably to be associated with early eighteenth-century coal working. As on the south berm, clay overlay the bedrock and extended from the ditch lip for about 16 feet. The subsoil on the remainder of the berm was sand.

THE NORTH MOUND

Unlike the south mound which was turf revetted, the north mound, 19 feet wide at the base and two feet high, was kerbed in stone on both sides. The core of the mound which overlay the original turf level, now represented by a thin grey band, was composed of a mixture of clay and sandstone. The kerbstones which remained in position were along the base of the mound, but many of the stones had rotted to sand. In section the revetting was difficult to distinguish except that it was much more sandy where the stones had rotted away than the normal accumulation of soil and sand overlying the berm.

THE LEVELLING OF THE SITE

Stripping of the topsoil from the site was started by the contractors, J. T. Cornish and Son, on the 15th of March and between then and the 6th of April the site was visited frequently.

After the removal of the topsoil and before the levelling started, the Ministry of Works arranged for the scraper to be taken along the inside of the mounds, taking off a few inches at a time to see if any building inscriptions could be found in position.

The first section dealt with was that to the east and west of the north end of the excavated trench, between the trees in the field and West Denton Road. To the east of the trench the material in the north mound was similar to that found in the trench, still kerbed in stone. This continued for 80 feet

before disappearing and leaving no further trace between this point and West Denton Road. Five feet to the west of the trench the kerbs changed from stone to turf and this continued almost to the trees where bedrock lay just below the surface.

West of the trees the north mound reappeared, this time in almost solid stone and 21 feet wide, running for several yards before the material changed again to sand and stones with a stone kerb, but now only 15 feet wide. Little trace of the mound was visible for the remaining 100 yards, except for an occasional stone which may have been part of the mound. Except for the 30-yard stretch just east of the trees, it would appear as if most of the north mound had been stone kerbed, as in the parts where the mound could not be traced there was no evidence of turf or in the subsoil.

The south mound also faded out at a point opposite where the north mound was lost near West Denton Road. The base of the mound was again found in position just west of the trees, still turf revetted. This showed for several yards before being lost owing to bedrock coming almost to the surface. Twenty yards further west it reappeared, still turf revetted, and ran on for several more yards before fading out. From this point to the boundary hedge at the west side of the field there was no further trace of it. The eastern half of the south mound had been turf revetted but it is unlikely that the western half had been as, like the north mound in this section, there was no trace of turf on or in the subsoil.

Unfortunately no inscriptions were located, but owing to the intermittent disappearance of the mounds, it would be impossible to state that they had not existed in this section of the vallum, as 300 feet has been given as the maximum length of a building unit⁶ and nowhere on the site did the running stretches of mound exceed this length.

MILITARY WAY

Towards the north of the field traces of a road were un-

⁶ A.A.4, vol. XIV, 1937, p. 230.

covered in three separate places, 24 feet inside the wire fence. This road, which was 24 feet wide, was constructed of fairly large stones set in the boulder clay. Although many of the stones had been removed by the scraper the impressions were left in the clay. No definite kerb could be seen, nor were any drainage ditches observed. This road, which lay 110 feet south of Hadrian's Wall and ran parallel with it, was probably the service road to the forts on the Wall or, as it is usually designated, the Military Way.

LATER REMAINS

At many points on the site areas of small coal and shale were found under the topsoil and it would appear as if the whole area had been greatly disturbed, possibly when the drift mine at the west side of the field had been worked. In the north-west part of the field an air shaft was disclosed eight feet below the surface. This was four feet square with corner posts, three of which had been broken by the scraper while the fourth remained in position. The filling was a blue silt.

A probable date for this coal working could be the early eighteenth century, as the scraper, in cutting through an area of small coal overlying the north berm of the vallum, revealed a sixpence of William III, minted at Bristol, and dated 1696. This activity in coal would also account for the lightly metallated road on the north berm noticed in the section cut the previous February.

2. HEDDON ON THE WALL

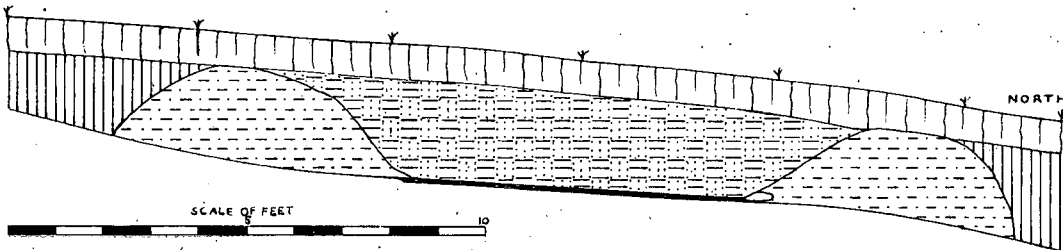
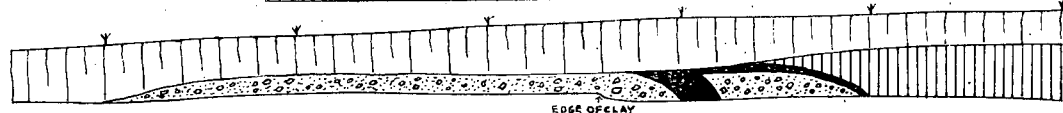
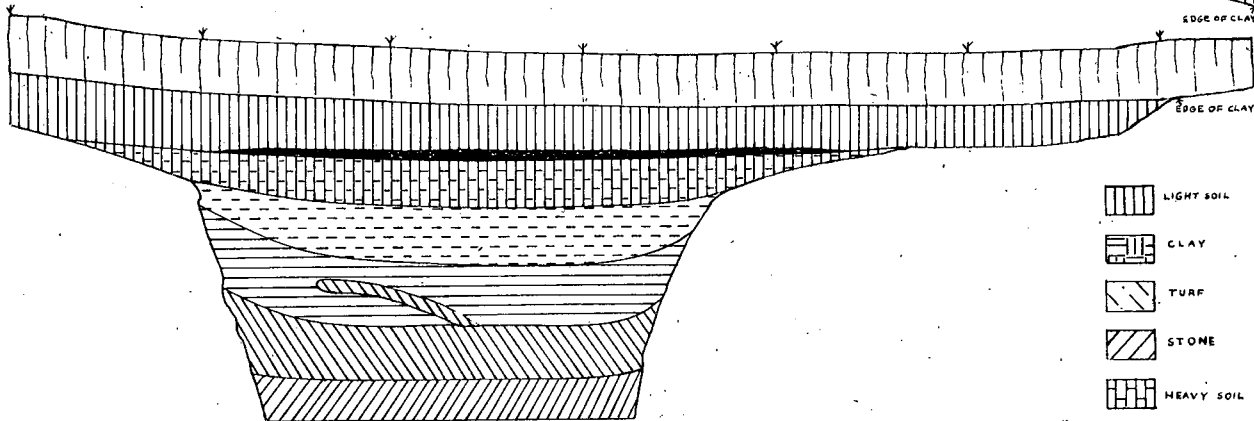
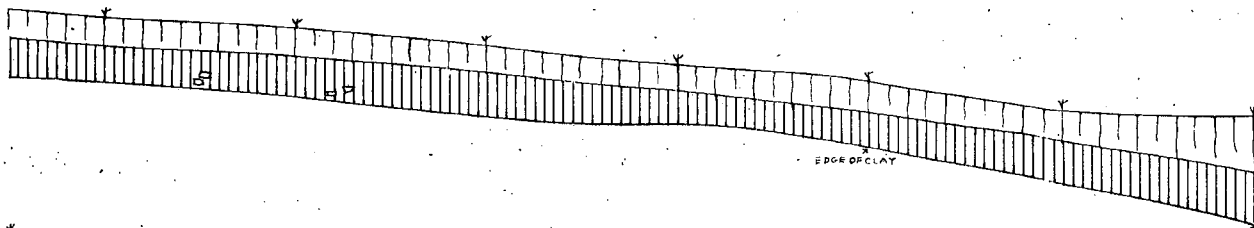
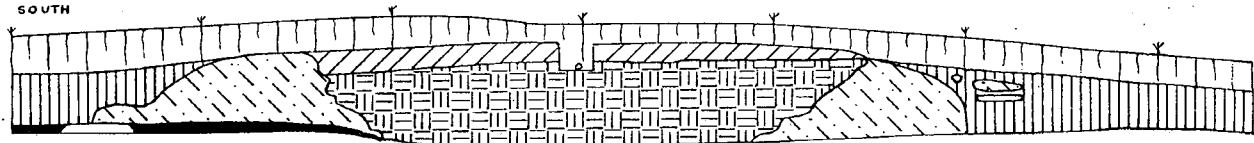
In November 1961 a watching brief was held on behalf of the Ministry of Works on a small building site at Heddon on the Wall, Nat. Grid Ref. NZ 135668. The site lies immediately south-west of the west end of the exposed section of the Roman Wall at Heddon.













When an area had been cleared for the foundations of an electric sub-station the south mound of the vallum showed

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SECTION ACROSS VALLUM

SOUTH



-  LIGHT SOIL
-  CLAY
-  TURF
-  STONE
-  HEAVY SOIL
-  LEACHED SOIL
-  GREY-BROWN SILT
-  BLUE-GREY SILT
-  GREY SILT AND STONES
-  SAND
-  CLAY AND STONE
-  SAND AND STONE

SCALE OF FEET



JT



in section about the centre of the cleared area. Unlike the stone-kerbed mound at West Denton where the stones were medium sized or small, this mound was kerbed with large, though irregular stones up to 18 inches in maximum dimension. The mound was 15 feet wide from the outside of the kerbs, and had a sand and stone core, presumably from a rock cut ditch. The mound overlay one foot of clay subsoil with a very soft rock showing below. The vallum ditch and mounds can be seen in the field immediately to the east.

Trenching for the foundations of bungalows on the same site also revealed the south mound in section, with the south lip of the ditch 36 feet from the inside kerb. The top of the ditch had been filled with stone and the north lip did not show. A short section of wall overlying the north berm and running north and south had post-medieval pottery associated with it. There were no other finds.

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