

VI.—HOUSESTEADS WEST DITCH AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO HADRIAN'S WALL

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The relationship of the fort at Housesteads to the curtain wall has long been discussed. The discussion is summarised here because it is scattered and few will have followed its trail from the beginning to what may now well be its end.

Collingwood Bruce¹ remarked that "no one can doubt that the station was rendered complete before the Wall was annexed to it and yet no one who examines the whole subject will fail to see that, but for the Wall, the station of Borcovicus would never have existed". He illustrates his first point by a woodcut of the north-west angle of the fort standing 7 courses over two offsets with the Wall itself butting against it, also 7 courses but with only one offset shown. Possibly by artistic license the stones of the fort wall are, with only one exception, of the small, square shape. The present face includes a number of larger, longer stones.

The discovery of turret 36B and the broad wall foundation underlying the fort² made it evident that the planning of the Wall was earlier than that of the fort. But the fort itself was earlier than the revised plan which called for the narrow Wall. The alteration of the angle-tower position at the north-east corner demonstrates this. The east ditch "runs out on the slope down to the Knag Burn"³ and does not approach either the broad foundation or the Wall, so its place in the sequence is not in question but it must be contemporary with the west ditch and this is another matter.

¹ *Roman Wall*, ed. 3 (1867), p. 181.

² *PSAN*⁴, X, 274.

³ *AA*⁴, X, 83.

In 1932 as a result of excavation it was said⁴ that "the extreme end of it (the west ditch) had been filled in to take the foundation of the Wall" (narrow Wall to be understood, the broad foundation was not located) and later in the same paragraph the comment is made that "there could be no point in leaving a space between its end and the edge (of the escarpment) unless it was for the Wall when it came". The relationship is seen as contemporary in planning and in execution the ditch preceding the building of the narrow Wall, with a marginal construction error. This interpretation shows in the first published plan, dated 1945,⁵ where the ditch with a neatly rounded end runs slightly under the narrow Wall and with the addition of the outline of the broad foundation by that time proved to exist within the fort. The comment in the 10th edition of the *Handbook* p. 122-3 that "the west ditch leaves a space for the Wall to pass between its end and the precipice", is amplified in the 11th edition p. 128 to read "the west ditch cut into the broad foundation while leaving space ...". This is repeated in the 12th edition. Stevens' suggestion of a "demarcation dispute"⁶ here is based on the 1932 statement, repeated in the *Handbook* and its plans. The evidence does not allow the most recent suggestion (AA⁴, XLVI, 106, note 19) that "no broad foundation was laid here, the ends of the fort ditches were overlain by the narrow Wall".

A re-examination of the problem seemed vital as there was no contemporary published plan or photograph of the original excavation and it had been undertaken before there was any reason to look for the broad foundation in this sector. The Ministry of Public Building and Works⁷ was able to undertake this with the kind permission of the owner, Miss Trevelyan, and the tenant, Mr. Carr. The area excavated (fig. 1) was larger than that dug in 1935. Surface

⁴ AA⁴, X, 84.

⁵ J. C. Bruce, *Handbook to the Roman Wall*, ed. I. A. Richmond, 10th ed. (1947), p. 113.

⁶ C. E. Stevens, *The building of Hadrian's Wall* (1967), p. 34.

⁷ Mr. I. W. Stuart kindly took charge of this part of the season's work.



1. Ditch, seen from the top of the Wall



2. Ditch looking east, showing broad foundation

HOUSESTEADS WEST DITCH

indications are definitely against the possibility of more than one ditch and no attempt was made to locate an outer one. An area was stripped and showed the south outline of the broad foundation, removed by the ditch diggers, running not quite parallel with the face of the narrow Wall. The foundation itself does not seem to have been constructed. Between the edge of the broad foundation, in which is a small amount of grey clay and cobble, and the foundation of the narrow Wall, which is deeper than the broad, was natural, orangeish-coloured soil with only occasional patches of clay on its surface. There was, if anything, more clay outside than within the foundation. Two large boulders did not seem to be a deliberate feature but in their natural position from which the foundation gang had not bothered to move them. The builders of the narrow Wall would hardly take the trouble to remove the broad foundation and then re-dig for their own foundation, so a further complication is added to the detail of the building of Hadrian's Wall. (Plate X)

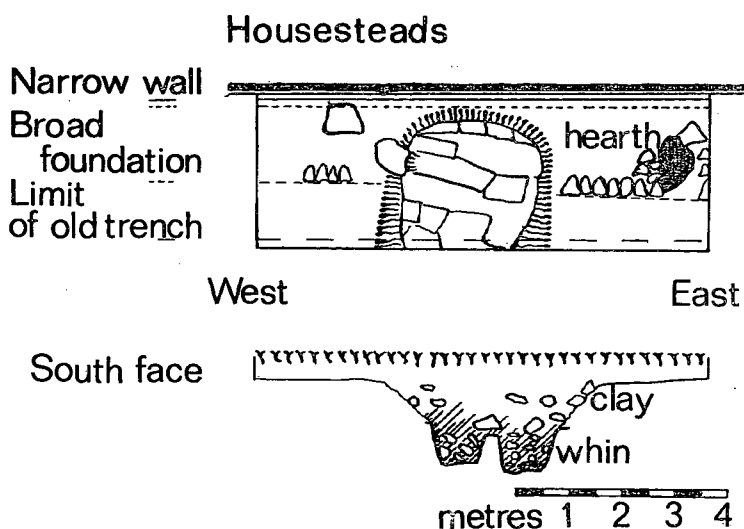


FIG. 1 HOUSESTEADS WEST DITCH

The Wall has a projecting foundation as well as two offset courses on the stretch uncovered. The courses rise slightly at the point where it passes the ditch end and there is a patch of grey clay here under the foundation. This is not in the ditch top, nor is it upcast from the ditch. There is some clay, associated with the broad foundation on the site. The whin is very close to the surface here and the undulation and the clay packing could be to carry the Wall across a weaker patch of soil between the rock projections. Why the two works should approach each other so closely is not clear. The fort Wall and the curtain Wall make a sheltered point, where a large fire was built after the broad Wall foundation had been declared useless, and it may have been feared that an enemy could collect a small force unseen here below the angle tower. On the other hand there are surface indications of civil settlement buildings allowed very close to both Wall and fort ditch. The relationship here of Wall and ditch contrasts with that on the east side where there is a considerable gap between the two and there is no obvious and satisfying reason.

The ditch is a most unmilitary-looking work, cut into the whin with some difficulty. The lower part is nearly vertical and the bottom very irregular with a projecting piece of rock in part of it (fig. 1). Its depth is about 2 m. and its width at the top the same. Probably no two sections cut across it would correspond because of the nature of the rock. The ditch is recorded only north of the west gate and north of the east gate and it may well be that at Housesteads, as at Limestone Corner, the digging party admitted defeat. The upcast from the ditch was probably carried into the fort to use as part of the rampart backing. There is no sign of it on the lip.

The north end is rough, more squared than rounded. It comes up to the narrow foundation but misses it. Either the ditch was there first and the Wall party could see it, or the Wall, foundation at least, was constructed and the ditch party worked up to it. The evidence at the north-east corner

showing the fort earlier than the narrow Wall suggests that the fort ditch was also likely to precede the Wall.

The problem of the sequence of events in this small corner remains unsolved. There can be no proof which came first, ditch or Wall.

