

X.—FOUR LAWS, 77 NY 905830

Michael Binns

A Roman signal-post of a type unique in Britain was identified some years ago by the late Sir Ian Richmond on Dere Street near Four Laws farm, West Woodburn, in Northumberland.¹ He recorded the site as a row of seven circular stone-edged platforms, roughly in a north-south line on top of, and almost parallel with, the Roman road. He noted that the platforms were about ten feet across and eight feet apart, and they were then in such a condition that he could draw the individual stones to form fairly complete circles. However, today the platforms are difficult to see, perhaps from damage caused by tanks when the field was used as an extension of Vickers' adjacent testing ground during the last war,² but probably also because they are simply becoming overgrown. For while the northernmost platform has almost gone, the third platform from the north proved to be tolerably complete immediately below the turf.

The site lies in fact on the land of East Chesterhope farm, being some 220 metres north-north-west of Four Laws farm, and about the same distance west of the modern road, the A68. The platforms are between 115 and 155 metres north of the south-west corner of a large wet field of poor grass and reeds, and between 11 and 17 metres east of the west field wall, roughly opposite a wide gateway inserted in the wall during the war and therefore not on Richmond's plan. The field slopes gently down from east to west and because

¹ *NCH*, XV (1940), 100-102, with plan.

² Cf. Richmond in *The Archaeology of Roman Britain*, revised edition by B. G. Collingwood and I. A. Richmond, 1969, pp. 65-66.

of the wetness of the field this has caused the east ditch of the road to silt up completely at this point, and the western edge of the road to slip away slightly, as appeared in the excavation.

When the second, third, and fifth platforms from the north were examined, the relationship of the platforms to the road became quite clear. The platforms proved to be purely surface features, lying in the turf layer or in the topsoil, and being only one stone deep. They were separated from the road surface by 10 to 15 centimetres of soil, and so were definitely constructed after the road had gone out of use and had become overgrown. There were no small finds to give any closer dating, but the fact that the silting along the east edge of the road was complete before the platforms were built points to the lapse of some longer period of time between the disuse of the road and the construction of the platforms. This would then explain why the line of the platforms is not quite parallel to the line of the road, and why, while the more southerly platforms lie completely over the road surface, the more northerly ones lie increasingly over the east ditch: whoever built them intended to take advantage of the firm foundation the road would provide, but could not see precisely where the road surface was.

What the platforms really are is not clear. They are plainly not Roman. Professor Birley and Mr. W. Dodds have suggested stack bottoms, the bases of sow kilns, and the remains of post-Roman cairns. Stack bottoms seem unlikely, as the land hereabouts will produce nothing worth stacking, and the high, exposed situation seems unsuitable for building stacks, anyway. One would expect to find quite distinctive evidence for sow kilns, but this did not happen in spite of careful excavation, while there was no obvious convenient source of limestone hereabouts and no apparent reason why limestone should be specially brought here from elsewhere. Perhaps the best explanation is that they are the bases of cairns, robbed for building the adjacent field wall, though why there should have been seven arranged in a line is not

FOUR LAWS: South section of trench across Dere Street.

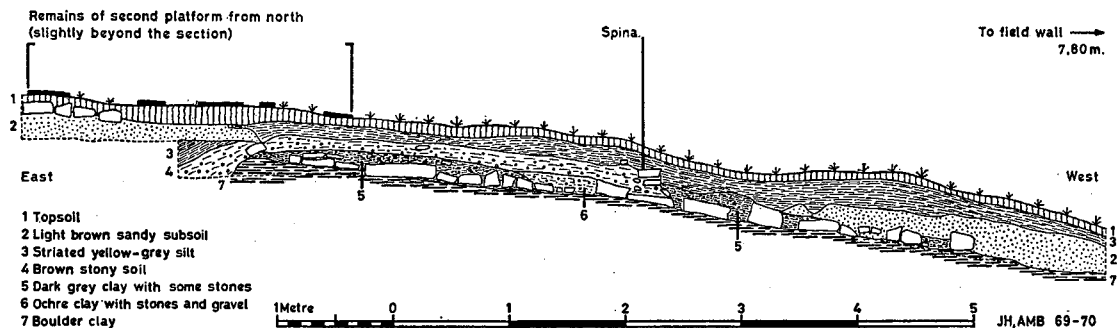


FIG. 1

clear—perhaps there was some mystical connection in the number.

A trench, which had been cut 150 metres north of the south field wall, across the apparent site of the second platform from the north, but which proved to lie against its northern edge, was extended westwards across the road. The foundation was found to consist of a layer eight to ten centimetres thick of large flattish stones about 20 centimetres across, though some reached as much as 40. It had been laid on the boulder clay subsoil after removal of the turf and was covered and packed with smaller stones set mainly in dark grey clay. At the centre of the road was a *spina* of very large stones,³ which had retained on the eastern side a layer of brownish soil full of small stones, though this had been washed away on the western side. A layer of striated yellow-grey silt covered the stony layer and spread down over the western half. This silt layer was quite distinct from the rather sandy subsoil, and was checked by trial holes elsewhere along the road and in the field.

The roadway as found was 6.25 metres wide, but the *spina* was west of the centre, which suggested that some of the bottoming, which was all that remained in place on the western side, had slipped away. If that were so, the original width would have approached seven metres.

I must express my sincere thanks to Mr. W. Robson of East Chesterhope for very kindly allowing me to dig at my own convenience, and for giving me useful information about the site; to Professor Eric Birley, Mr. Wilf Dodds, Dr. J. C. Mann, Dr. B. Dobson, and Mr. R. P. Wright, who all generously offered constructive advice and encouragement at different stages; to John Hinchliffe, who did much of the drawing; to Paul Yeoman especially and to several other friends who came and dug; and above all to Maurice and Hazel Hodgson for providing the means for the excavation.

³ Though at the particular point where the south section crossed it (see fig. 1) there was a cluster of smaller stones instead.