

IX

INSCRIBED STONES ON THE HARBOTTLE HILLS, NORTHUMBERLAND

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IN THE hills south of Harbottle¹ in Northumberland are a number of inscribed boundary-stones the functions of which are not immediately apparent. It requires no great perspicacity to interpret TC on a stone as Thomas Clennell² but, when others are discovered inscribed C and Q, HAL and HAR, and a succession along a road, the first with A on one side and Bid on the other, the next Bid on one side and Bar on the other, a third with Bar on one side and P on the other, and finally one with P on one side and LS on the other, some comprehensive explanation must be sought. (See Plate IV.)

Figure 1 shows the dispersal of these stones like some constellation over the Harbottle Hills.³ It will be seen there are some subsidiary groupings, as well as the principal system lying along the Swire,⁴ ending just before Pit Houses. At the southern edge is a TC grouping, picked up again with two stones at Midway Nick, a nick in the skyline halfway between Harbottle Crag and the Crowstone. There are two isolated C/Q stones near Hatchmeadow Well, which has no meadow but is the source of the Sealburn, and an isolated TC stone near the footpath from the Drakestone to the Lough Strands. Below this, running down to the Barrow burn is an N grouping. There are two blank stones on the Swire on the Bar section, and an isolated stone inscribed B propped against a boulder at the foot of Yearning Crag. Finally there are three stones on or near the main road up the valley.

The late Mr. Tom Carruthers,⁵ whose father farmed Barrow for over forty years, was able to give the traditional explanation of the stones along the Swire, for this section of which he had the alternative name of "The Old Coal Road". Each of the townships with the right to win coal from the workings at East Wilkwood was required to maintain a marked section of the Coal Road. The townships were Alwinton, Biddlestone, Barrow, Peels and Linsheeles. The derivation of road-maintenance from the right to win coal proved to be not quite direct, though the two are associated. Meanwhile this established that, on the inscribed stones along the Swire, A stands for Alwinton, Bid for Biddlestone, Bar for Barrow, P for the Peels, and LS for Linsheeles. Mr. Carruthers was also able to recall that the roof-timbers on Pit House survived into the nineties of the last century.

There are substantial variations in the standard of construction of the road, suggesting a corresponding variation in the degree of interest of the township concerned. In some parts it owes something to a rudimentary form of civil engineering, for example in the easterly part of the Peels section the upper end of a deep



a. From this stone to Pit Houses the road was maintained by the township of Linsheeles.



b. At this stone begins the section maintained by the township of Barrow.



c. The stone at the foot of the road.

STONES ON THE OLD COAL ROAD, HARBOTTLE

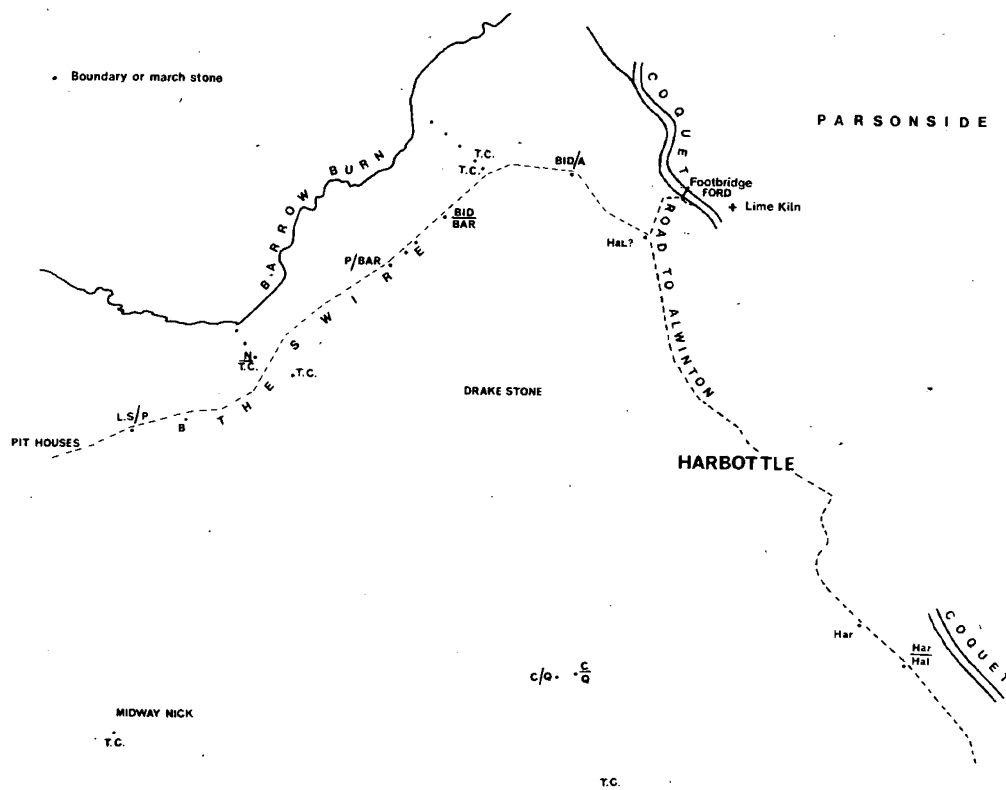


Fig. 1. Distribution of boulder-stones on Harbottle Hills (Scale as fig. 3).

cleugh has been built up to take the road crossing. Further on, however, where the same section crosses very wet areas, Lough Strands and Well Strands, nothing seems to have been attempted to build a causeway through the morass. As soon, however, as the road rises from the Well Strands, entering the Linsheeles section, it is built up as a hard road and quite an impressive bridge was built to take the road over the Crane sike. Upright stones were erected down the centre of the burn, forming a wall, and horizontal slabs were straddled between this wall and either bank, making a strong and wide bridge surface of twenty slabs of stone.

About the coal itself there is no mystery. In this area the Scremerston Coal Group overlies the Fell Sandstones. A neighbouring outcrop of the Scremerston group was actively mined at Elsdon until c. 1967. *Until recently*, wrote Dr. Robson in 1965,⁶ *there were shepherds living ... in Coquetdale who could recall the days when coal was carried in sacks on the backs of ponies along the "Swire" from a pit high above Harbottle lake.* The commissioners who made a survey⁷ for the Crown in 1604 knew of these deposits and wrote: *For the Cole mynes; ther is not anie in use at this tyme, the inhabitants having suche store of turf and peate as they will not bestowe their labor in getting of Coles, but if the Cuntrie weare inhabited by industrious people and men*



Fig. 2. Pits at East Wilkwood 1816 (8 chains to the inch).

of trade, the mynes would bee of great value. Something must have happened after 1604, for by 1816, when Thomas Bell surveyed East Wilkwood for Thomas Selby⁸ (fig. 2), he recorded thirty-four pits lying between Pit Houses and East Wilkwood. Of these he marks 31 as old (disused?) pits, two just as pits, and one only as *working pit*. Pit Houses would accommodate one or more miners.

An explanation of the whole complex of stones may be found in the Enclosure Award⁹ for Harbottle Common, given in 1817. Figure 3 is a plan based on the survey by Thomas Bell attached to the Award. If the plan is superimposed over the distribution of boulder-stones shown on figure 1 it will be observed that one of Bell's lines indicating a division of the common falls on every stone except that inscribed B. The boundary stones record on the ground the allotments made by the Award. A re-iterated stipulation in making an allotment runs: *all future Owners and Occupiers*

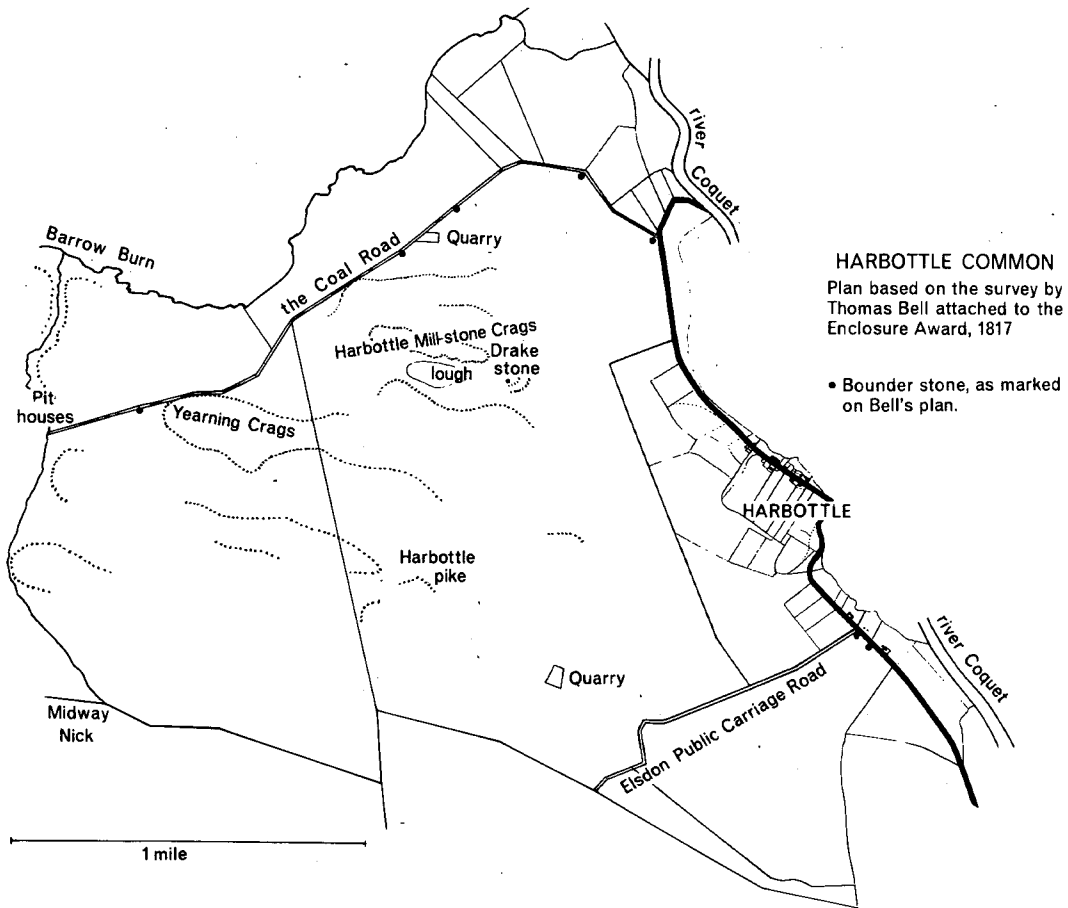


Fig. 3.

... shall ... forever after maintain bounder stones on the East and North thereof The greatest share of the common went to Thomas Clennell and many of the stones, some TC, some blank, mark his allotments. Those inscribed N mark land allotted to Hugh, Duke of Northumberland, who received a Sixteenth for his right and interest in the soil as lord of the barony or manor of Ridsdale.

The commissioners allocated two surface-quarries to provide stone for the use of commoners. The C/Q stones near the Sealburn mark the Elsdon Road Common Quarry and two uninscribed stones on the Swire mark the Coal Road Common Quarry.

The commissioners award strips of land for roads which they pronounce shall "belong" to a township named. Elsewhere they make it clear that the township to whom the road belonged was to have the duty of maintaining it. Thus the "Public Carriage Road to Elsdon", that is the track from Lightpipe Ha' over the hill towards

Yardhope, belonged to the Peels; and the main road through Harbottle was to belong to Harbottle and was to be maintained by the township from the footbridge over the Coquet at Low Alwinton to a boundary stone where the road passes into the township of Holystone. This explains why Harbottle has no part in the Coal Road, because it already has burden enough in maintaining the main road from Rocky's Ha' to Angryhaugh. It also explains the stone marked Har/Hal near Rocky's Ha', that marked Har at Lightpipe Ha' and the one possibly marked Har, formerly at the junction of the Coal Road and the main road. This last stone I had long sought in vain. Then in September 1963 I found it built into the nearby wall of Harbottle West Wood. In the dim light I photographed it, observed that though it should read Har it looked more like Hal, and fitted it back into the wall. When I returned a fortnight later to photograph it in a better light, it had disappeared.

For the Coal Road the commissioners provide:

We do also set and appoint a public Highway Forty feet in breadth ... and which we call by the name of the "Coal Public Carriage road" near Angryhaugh and leading from thence westwards and southwestwards to the ancient Grounds of Eastwilkwood at or near the pit Houses and we do hereby determine ... that part of the said Highway ... beginning at Alwinton public Carriage Road leading Southwards and westwards to a stone placed at the second Angle of the said road ... shall and doth belong to the Township of Alwinton...

So successive road-lengths are allotted to Biddlestone, Barrow, the Peels and Lin-shees townships.

The stone inscribed B at Well Strands under Yearning Crag has no apparent part in the scheme. The suggestion is made that it was quarried and dressed where it now lies¹⁰ and was intended to represent either Barrow or Biddlestone. Having been made, it was found to be ambiguous and the decision taken to cut the two inscriptions Bar and Bid respectively. So B was rejected.

The coal road runs down to the main road near Angryhaugh, near to the ford crossing the Coquet to Low Alwinton. It is reasonable to associate the location of a lime-kiln at Low Alwinton with the availability of coal at East Wilkwood. If the disused quarry at the head of Parsonsides was the source of stone, the kiln stands at a low point midway between pit and quarry.

The mines have fallen in and are grassed over; *the industrious people and the men of trade* have had their century and gone their ways; now the sheep and the military alone have a use for the abandoned valley of the Barrow burn; but the stones remain, some fallen and some sadly chipped, and tell that for a time there were a few who had ambitions for the planned economic development of these hills.¹¹

NOTES

¹ This note is extracted from a longer paper delivered to the Society in 1967. For access to documents and facilities to reproduce ZAN Bell 59/17 I thank the Northumberland County Archivist.

² Thomas Fenwick, baptized 1766, assumed the name of Clennell in 1796 on succeeding to the Harbottle estate.

³ In lamentable error some authorities have sought to attach to the former Harbottle common the name "Kidland Forest".

⁴ "The Swire" is the former road from Harbottle to Rochester. Swire originally meant a neck, hence a *col* in the hills, and hence again a pass crossing a *col*.

⁵ Born at Linsheeles 1884.

⁶ Dr. D. A. Robson, *A Guide to the Geology of Northumberland and the Borders*, N & D N.H.S., 1965, pp. 38-9.

⁷ R. P. Sanderson, *Survey of the Border Lands 1604*, Alnwick 1891.

⁸ NRO: ZAN Bell 59/17. Fig. 2 reproduces only part of the plan of the estate.

⁹ NRO: QRA 32.

¹⁰ The use of Yearning Crag as a quarry is further evidenced by an abandoned block of stone roughed out to form a trough but never finished. Its fellow, finished, may be seen alongside a house in Harbottle village.

¹¹ For an account of an earlier development in the adjacent parish of Holystone see J. C. Hodgson, "Holystone", *AA*³, IV (1908), 129-30, *Rhymes of Northern Bards*, ed. J. Bell, 195-6, and J. Philipson, "The Bard, the Butt, and the Holystone North Wood", *Roebuck*, 10 (1975), 12-14.

