

IX NOTE, 2006

A MILECASTLE EXPLODED

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The Rev. John Skinner, vicar of Camerton, Somerset, toured Hadrian's Wall in 1801, at the same time as the better-known William Hutton. Skinner's Wall writings and drawings were virtually inaccessible in the collections of the British Museum (Birley 1961, 19) until they were published by Kenneth Painter (1973), though they had been used as sources by archaeologists, notably by Bosanquet and Haverfield. Birley concluded from these contributions that Skinner had been 'an acute observer and a diplomatic and successful interrogator'. These qualities secured for Skinner information on a spectacular method of robbing stone from the Wall which does not appear previously to have been noted or located.

On September 22nd 1801, Skinner proceeded to trace the Roman Wall westwards from Thirlwall, and wrote the following account:

for the first mile the trench alone is distinct. Indeed beyond that little is to be seen of the original structure, though a wall has been built for some distance on the ancient foundations as a fence for the farmer's field. On making enquiry about three quarters of a mile beyond Thirlwall respecting some ruins I observed to the south of this wall, a man informed me that a few years since he remembered a building there called the chapel (I should rather suppose the castle). This was inclosed by walls of a prodigious thickness. On destroying them to build his farmhouse they discovered underground some wrought stones which he blew up with gunpowder in order to employ them in his works. (Painter 1973, 50–52)

As far as I am aware, this is the only account of any part of Hadrian's Wall being robbed with the aid of explosives (leaving aside, of course, large-scale quarrying activity (Charlton 2004)). The site called the Chapel (despite Skinner's

evident doubt, his informant was correct in the name) is well attested and located by other writers on the Wall. Horsley (1732, 152) describes it thus:

Just beyond *Tippal* water and this castle [Thirlwall] *Hadrian's Vallum* makes a little turn, whereby the walls begin to diverge, and *Hadrian's Vallum* becomes more obscure. Further west, at a house called the *Chapel*, which stands within a *castellum*, the walls are about five chains distant from each other (Horsley 1732, 152)

From this account, written almost seventy years before Skinner's visit, it is clear that the Chapel itself is a later house built within the walls of a milecastle (Horsley invariably calls milecastles '*castella*'). Henry MacLauchlan (1858, 51), during his 1855 survey of the Wall for the Duke of Northumberland, mentions again the Chapel and the milecastle within which it stood, which by 50 years after Skinner was reduced to 'faint traces':

about two and a half furlongs west of Wall-End are faint traces of a milecastle . . . The site of this castle was formerly known as the Chapel . . . this Chapel was taken down 55 years since to build Chapel House Farm, which is about 300 yards further to the westward.

By the time John Collingwood Bruce (1867, 221) visited the milecastle it was located by its proximity to the building which had been constructed from its remains:

before coming to Chapel House the site of a milecastle may, with care, be discerned (Bruce 1867, 221)

Today, following the accepted schedule of numbers and names (Birley 1961, 75), the site is designated MC 47 (Chapel House).

The use of the milecastles of Hadrian's Wall as enclosures for later houses or buildings is a frequently encountered practice. Some remain standing, others are attested archaeologically; medieval and post-medieval buildings within the enceintes of milecastles either exist or have been excavated at MC 14 (March Burn: Wilmott forthcoming), MC 17 (Welton: Wilmott, forthcoming), MC 35 (Sewingshields: Haigh and Savage 1984), MC 39 (Castle Nick: Frere 1986, 378), MC49 (Harrow's Scar: Wilmott 1997, 390; Richmond 1956), MC 50 SW (High House: Simpson 1913, 312), MC 52 (Bankshead: Simpson and Richmond 1935c), MC 53 (Banks Burn: Simpson and MacIntyre 1933a), MC 57 (Cambeckhill: Bruce 1978, Whitworth 2000, 66–7). Whitworth (2000, 66–7) has listed those milecastles within which such buildings are known to have previously existed from cartographic and literary sources (MC 16 (Harlow Hill), MC 31 (Carrawburgh), MC 41 (Shield-on-the-Wall) and MC 51 (Wall Bowers)), a list to which we may now add MC 47. It is clear that Chapel House farm was built using stone both from the old house and from the milecastle, though it is certain that the old house would itself have been built of Wall stone. The description of wrought stones solid enough to require explosive demolition would not readily seem to apply to the coursed rubble (*sensu* Hill 1981) of which the external walls of the milecastle were constructed, and it is logical to assume that it was one of the gates that was thus violently destroyed. Peter Hill (pers comm.) has suggested that the use of gunpowder might imply that the stones were solidly mortared, but remarks that a relatively small quantity of powder, judiciously placed, would have produced the required effect; we should not necessarily imagine a spectacular explosion.

The milecastle was partially excavated in 1935 (Simpson *et al* 1936, 270–73). Excavation on the north gateway showed only the eastern rearward projection to survive, with road metalling bordering on the 'cavity whence masonry had been robbed'. The examination of the east side of the south gate showed that it had been built in large masonry, the outer

jamb being built of very large blocks. It was, in fact 'the first Type II gateway to be found so substantially constructed'. It seems likely, therefore that it was the masonry of the north gate that was explosively dismantled, leaving the 'cavity' noted by the excavators.

A side note to this story is that Skinner's informant told him

Many stones with inscriptions were purchased at the time the building was demolished by a man who walked about the country in the manner I [Skinner] did (Painter 1973, 50–52)

If MacLauchlan's chronology is correct, this would have been *c.* 1800. It is not clear who this might have been, as none of the well-known collectors appear to have been operating at the turn of the century. Whatever the unknown gentleman may have removed has not reappeared, as an examination of the pages of *RIB* shows. It is probable that only small pieces, possibly centurial stones, were removed, as the only text recorded from MC47 is the large building inscription (RIB 1852), recording the reconstruction of the milecastle under Hadrian. This was found 'in or shortly before 1849', built into the wall of a stable at Chapel House.

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