

## THE ROMAN ROAD TO RAEBURNFOOT.

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In his recent paper on "A New Roman Mountain-Road in Dumfriesshire and Roxburghshire,"<sup>2</sup> Dr Richmond pointed out that the fort of Raeburnfoot was sited so as to watch not only the Rae Burn valley, but also "a gap by which there is an easy approach to Eskdale from the south-west," and he inferred from this that his newly discovered road, originating presumably at Trimontium, "once ran across the dale [*i.e.* Eskdale] to join the main north and south road somewhere near Lockerbie, at the foot of Dryfedale."<sup>3</sup> This inference has now been proved valid through the identification by Dr Richmond, in July 1948, of remains of a Roman road in the "gap" south-west of Raeburnfoot, at distances of from 1300 to 2300 yards from the fort, and the Royal Commission on the Ancient Monuments of Scotland has authorized the publication of the following notes regarding this new discovery. The terrain is described in terms of the 6-inch O.S. map of Dumfriesshire, 2nd edition, sheet XXVI S.W., and the six-figure references are to large square 35 of the National Grid as shown on the 1-inch O.S. map of Scotland, "popular" edition, sheet 85.

The traffic-tracks of post-Roman age, which were noted by Dr Richmond as following the Roman route between Mid Raeburn and Northhope Haugh, reappear west of the arable fields of Craighaugh (248984) on the right bank of the Esk; and if these are followed in a south-south-westerly direction across the Ryehill Burn and the wall that descends to the Holm Burn from Long Knowe, it will be found that, at a distance of about 160 yards beyond the wall (244977), there develops a fine stretch of terraced roadway which Dr Richmond considers to be undoubted Roman work. It is about 120 yards in length by up to 27 feet in breadth, and is aligned directly on the fort at Raeburnfoot. Above this stretch the line of the road is occupied by a small but deeply cut burn, not marked on the 6-inch map, which has

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<sup>2</sup> *P.S.A.S.*, vol. lxxx, pp. 103-17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

washed it out for a distance of about 250 yards; but above the source of this burn, and some drains which feed it, further Roman work appears in the form of a cutting, up to 5 feet in depth by 30 feet in width, and again aligned exactly on the fort (Pls. XLIII and XLIV, 1). At its upper end the cutting curves sharply to the south, apparently to skirt the eastern side of a small area of moss; its total length, including the short curved portion, is approximately 230 yards. In this section of the work recourse has evidently been had to the same technique, of removing the overlying peat to obtain a solid foundation, as was previously noted by Dr Richmond and discussed in his paper.<sup>1</sup>

No further remains of the road can be identified with certainty for 100 yards or more, although what seems to be an artificial bay on the eastern side of the small moss, with a scarp up to 5 feet in height, may well indicate its course. At the watershed, however, just east of the ruined house called Watcarrick Dinnings (240976), a transverse ridge has been cut through by a notch for a distance of some 50 yards; and although the easternmost 20 yards of this notch probably represent no more than a hollowed traffic-track, the westernmost portion must have been cut purposefully, and is doubtless Roman work (Pl. XLIV, 2). This part of the cutting is now about 11 feet in depth at its deepest point, its bottom being flat and about 10 feet in width; a slight change in the slope of its sides, however, 2 feet above the bottom, suggests that it has been deepened by traffic to this extent, and at a depth of 9 feet its bottom would have been fully 15 feet in width. It thus fits well with the hypothesis of a Roman road 18 to 20 feet wide somewhat contracted at the notch to save excavation, and subsequently deepened, with consequent narrowing of the bottom, by traffic of the hollow-track phase. From the western end of the notch a cambered road-mound up to 20 feet in width runs west for 46 yards, dips under a low turf-dyke, and is finally obliterated in the small paddock attached to Watcarrick Dinnings.

Beyond this point no certain remains of Roman work could be identified, but it seems impossible to doubt that the hollowed and terraced tracks, which descend to the Black Burn, skirt the base of Plea Knowe, cross Letterstone Heights at Fauld Brae, and coalesce with the modern road from Eskdalemuir to Lockerbie at the foot of Letterstone Shank (237961), are following the general line of a Roman route. The same may be said of the modern road itself from this point at least as far as Fenton Yet (192932), beyond which the ground was not examined; the tracks were found to accompany or underlie the modern road as far as this point, and the whole of this line is the logical continuation of the portion identified as Roman north-east of Watcarrick Dinnings.

In connection with the post-Roman tracks a word of caution is necessary.

<sup>1</sup> *P.S.A.S.*, vol. lxxx., p. 115.



1. Roman road-cutting above the source of the Holm Burn.



2. South side of Roman road-cutting above the Holm Burn,  
from the north.



1. Distant view of Raeburnfoot seen along cutting of Roman road (in foreground).



2. Roman road-cutting east of Watcarrick Dinnings,  
from the east.

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Those which take the form of a terrace may often reach a breadth of up to 20 feet, and their apparent scarping and grading may well suggest the effects of purposeful construction. However, evidence obtained by the trenching of a terraced track of this type in Roxburghshire shows that they can be formed, on a suitable subsoil, solely by the passage of traffic, and in consequence even a broad and apparently well-graded terrace should not be regarded as being of Roman origin unless positive structural remains are found below the surface. More suggestive, perhaps, but still not to be accepted on superficial evidence alone, is the highest-lying and oldest of the terraced tracks that flank the modern road as it approaches the left bank of the Twiglees Burn, some 40 yards north-east of the bridge. Here a modern quarry, which cuts off the south-western end of the track in question, shows it in section as having apparently been cut and scarped to a level on the surface of the underlying rock; while a similar appearance is shown by pieces of old track which diverge from the north-western side of the modern road at 219945 and 209937. At the latter point a small roadside quarry again shows the track in partial section. The resemblance of this levelling of the surface to the Roman technique described by Dr Richmond's paper suggests that these pieces of old track may deserve some further study.

It remains to review the evidence for a Roman road running up Eskdale from Netherby, and linking that fort with the route now under discussion in the manner suggested by Dr Richmond.<sup>1</sup> The literary record<sup>2</sup> is exceptionally positive and clear, and on that account alone can hardly be disregarded. Again, the hint given by the first of the passages referred to, that the road crossed the Wauchope Burn near Wauchope Bridge, is borne out by the lie of the ground—below the bridge the burn enters a ravine, with the result that the site of the bridge is the lowest convenient place for effecting a crossing, while a short distance above it the left bank becomes high and cliff-like. Moreover, the right bank, though fairly steep at the bridge, is there marked by hollow tracks which speak of traffic in the past. On the other hand, the actual trough in which the Esk runs above Langholm is generally unsuitable for the passage of a Roman road, being twisty and largely steep-sided, and in places passing through difficult gorge-like narrows. The ground on either bank is also a good deal cut up by transverse valleys, that of the Black Esk forming the most serious obstacle.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding these drawbacks, however, it would certainly be possible, by dint of detours and some bridging, to lay out a road from Broomholm

<sup>1</sup> *P.S.A.S.*, vol. lxxx., p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> *Statistical Account of Scotland*, xiii., p. 597; xiv., p. 422; *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, iv., pp. 404 (note), 420, 490. The two last references, however, add nothing to the evidence of the *Statistical Account of Scotland*, from which they have merely been copied.

<sup>3</sup> No trace of a Roman road has been found approaching the right bank of the Black Esk through the belt of high ground extending from Carterton Knowes to Baillie Hill.

to Raeburnfoot which conformed satisfactorily with Roman military requirements; and there is no reason to suppose that the eighteenth-century records may not well refer to a road which followed such a course—perhaps now on one bank and now on the other. Systematic search for such a road, based on a careful study of the local topography, might perhaps even now yield interesting results.