

IV.

THE ROMAN FORT AT WHITEMOSS, RENFREWSHIRE.

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Students of the Antonine Wall have long been puzzled by the apparent weakness of the left flank. The Rampart and Ditch end on the Clyde, 220 yards south-west of the fort of Old Kilpatrick, and no fortifications have previously been recorded on either bank of the river below this point. Yet the Clyde does not constitute an adequate defence in itself. Small boats can cross it with the greatest ease and security at least as far as Gourrock, and, although it is reasonable to assume that a Roman flotilla patrolled the estuary, the interception of raiding-parties could not safely be entrusted to the fleet alone. When it is recalled that the right flank, resting on the Forth, is protected for a further 20 miles by the coastal forts of Carriden,¹ Cramond,² and Inveresk,³ and that the left flank of the Hadrianic frontier is guarded by a chain of fortifications extending along the north-west Cumberland coast for 30 or 40 miles beyond the western terminus of the Wall,⁴ the absence of Roman posts on the Clyde below Old Kilpatrick "becomes so striking that we cannot put it down to negligence."⁵ Moreover, there is one stretch of the Clyde which was much less of an obstacle in Roman times than it is to-day. Until dredging operations were initiated at the end of the eighteenth century, the four-mile reach between Old Kilpatrick and Dumbarton was too shallow for navigation by any but the smallest craft, and could even be forded at low tide at Dumbuck (fig. 1, B) where a great shoal split the river into two channels.⁶ Clearly, no fortification of the isthmus would be complete which did not make specific provisions for this highly vulnerable sector.

Horsley was well aware of the difficulty, and sought to overcome it by

¹ *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. xxxvii. p. 166.

² R.C.A.M., *Midlothian*, No. 45.

³ *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. xxxviii. pp. 81-2.

⁴ *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Archaeological Society*, 2nd series, vol. xxix. p. 138.

⁵ Collingwood and Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, 2nd ed., p. 142.

⁶ Cf. Marwick, *The River Clyde and the Harbour of Glasgow*.



Air photograph of Roman fort at Whitemoss.

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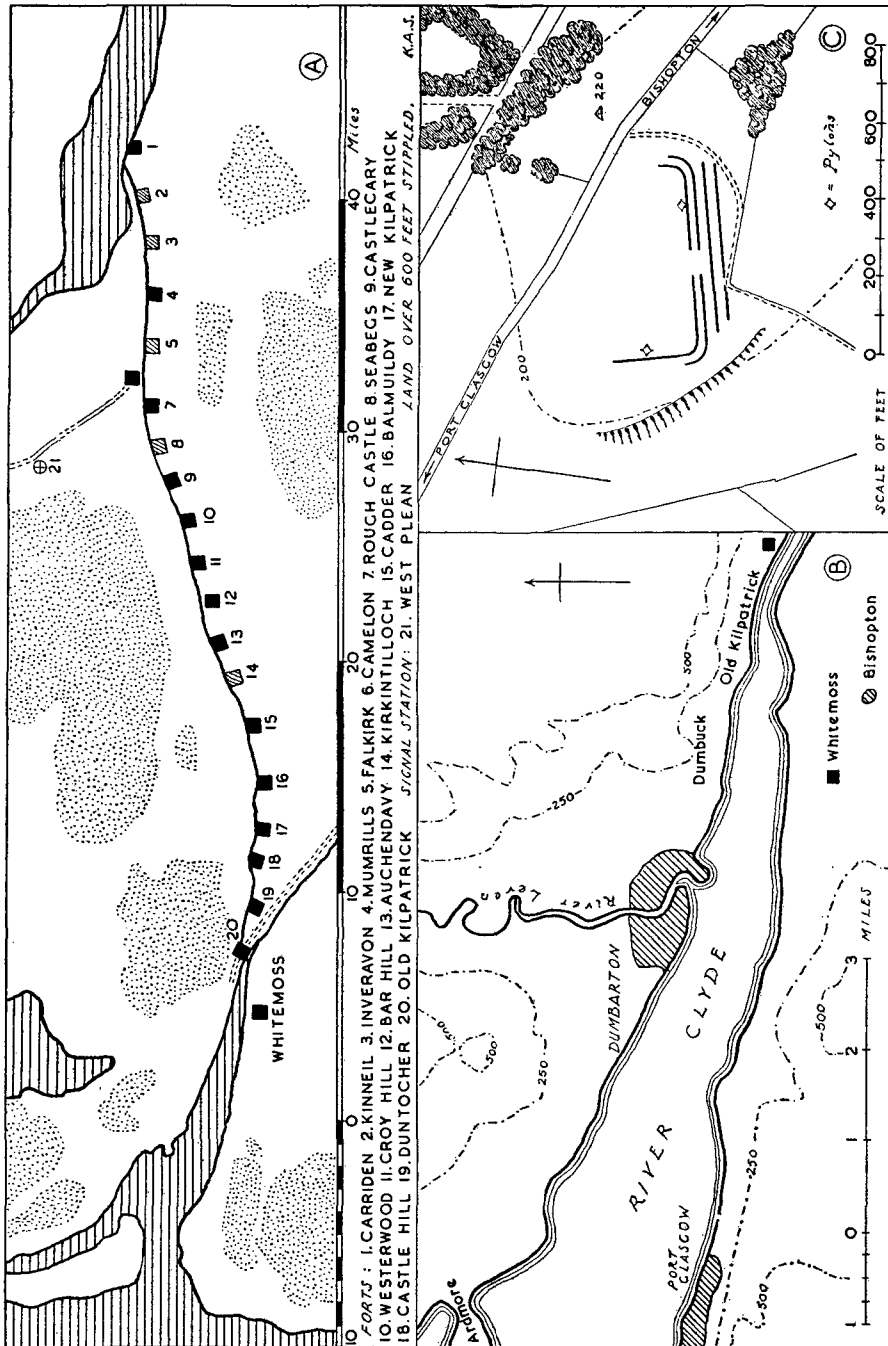


Fig. 1. Sketch Plans showing Site of Roman Fort at Whitemoss.

suggesting that the Roman road, which he traced westwards from Old Kilpatrick along the north bank of the river to within half a mile of Dunglass, had been deliberately designed to reduce the risk of the barrier being out-flanked.¹ Had this been the intention, however, the road would surely have lain on the south rather than on the north bank, where the Kilpatrick Hills, rising steeply from the narrow coastal plain, block the outlook. As Sir George Macdonald pointed out, the only reasonable explanation of this road is that it led to a harbour at Dumbarton, while excavation at Old Kilpatrick has shown that it went out of use some time before the Antonine frontier was abandoned.² Macdonald cautiously avoids any discussion of the weakness of the left flank in his *Roman Wall in Scotland*, but an ingenious solution of the problem was subsequently proposed by Collingwood. Briefly, his argument is that the use of turf instead of stone in the construction of the Antonine Wall, the absence of any distinction between the fighting and patrolling garrisons, and the lack of protection on the left flank, proclaim that it was designed to be little more than a token frontier. The justification for this, he suggested, is that the main opposition to Roman rule was broken by large-scale deportations of the Lowland tribes overrun during the Antonine advance. Consequently there were so few potential enemies left within striking distance that an elaborate scheme of frontier works was unnecessary.³ This thesis is, however, open to objection on several grounds. Professor Richmond has challenged the contention that the Antonine Wall is structurally weaker than Hadrian's Wall, and has pointed out that the evidence we possess for the strength of Roman garrisons in the Lowlands during the Antonine period does not accord with the theory that the district was heavily depopulated.⁴ Moreover, the reoccupation of Ardoch as an outpost fort, covering the main approach to the eastern end of the *limes*, implies that the danger from tribes dwelling beyond the frontier was not as negligible as Collingwood maintained; while, as far as the Clyde defences are concerned, the *argumentum ex silentio* is prejudiced from the outset by the existence of Dumbuck ford.

With this problem in mind, I examined, in the autumn of 1949, a strip of air photographs taken along the south bank of the Clyde in August 1947 in the course of the 1/10,000 Air Survey of Britain.⁵ Although these photographs have proved extremely successful in the detection of visible remains, particularly in the Cheviots, it is only occasionally that they reveal crop-marks since they are mostly taken at unfavourable times of year. In the present instance, however, optimum conditions obtained, and a few minutes'

¹ *Britannia Romana*, p. 159.

² *Roman Wall in Scotland*, 2nd edition, p. 188.

³ *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. xxvi, pp. 80-6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 190-4.

⁵ For an appreciation of this Survey from the archæological standpoint, cf. *Antiquity*, vol. xxi, pp. 50-3.

search was rewarded by the discovery of crop-markings of a series of ditches, unmistakably belonging to a Roman fort, in a field of ripened oats on the farm of Whitemoss, a mile west-north-west of Bishopton.¹

The fort is situated at a height of just over 200 feet above sea-level, on the north-west end of a flattish-topped, isolated hill of Lower Carboniferous lava which lies half a mile south of the present high-water mark (fig. 1, B). The hilltop, which is crossed by the old road from Bishopton to Port Glasgow, has long been under cultivation: no remains can now be seen on the surface, nor have any Roman objects been recorded from the site. On both the first and second editions of the 6-inch O.S. map the Whitemoss farm is called Castlehill, but the latter name is not older than the nineteenth century, and appears to have been derived from another hill formerly included on the same estate.

Unfortunately, only the south side of the fort, the south-east and south-west angles, and part of the west side are visible on the photograph (Pl. VIII and fig. 1, C). The south side shows four ditches, the inner pair of which are interrupted by a central entrance, while the outer pair appear to run unbroken across the entrance and may therefore belong to an earlier or later system. Allowing a width of 20 feet for the rampart, the internal measurements are approximately 440 feet from east to west by a minimum of 210 feet from north to south, so that the area within the defences is at least two acres.

The key to the function of the fort is the magnificent vista that it commands across the Clyde (fig. 1, A and B). To the north it immediately overlooks the site of Dumbuck ford. Eastwards, not only Old Kilpatrick but also the neighbouring forts of Duntocher and Castlehill are in view, while westwards the whole of the north bank of the river is under observation as far as the Ardmore peninsula. The garrison is thus in a position not only to control the vital passage of Dumbuck ford, but also to detect hostile forces operating in the Vale of Leven, and to repel them should they attempt to cross the river between the ford and Ardmore. Only excavation can determine whether the remains so far revealed are of Agricola or Antonine date, but Antonine occupation of the site has been established by the recent discovery of two fragments of Antonine Samian lying on the surface of the field. One was picked up by Dr St Joseph at the base of one of the two pylons which have been erected just inside the innermost ditch, while the other was found by the writer at the edge of the rocky scarp bordering the west side of the fort. And in this connection it is significant that the distance between Whitemoss and Old Kilpatrick, $2\frac{1}{4}$ miles, is approximately equal to the average interval between the Antonine Wall forts.²

¹ Sortie CPE./SCOT./UK 276, prints 5253-4; 6-inch O.S. map, Renfrewshire, III S.E.; Nat. Grid. Ref. 26/418721.

² *Roman Wall in Scotland*, p. 343.

Although the discovery of Whitemoss fort closes the main gap in the Antonine frontier-line, two requirements are still needed to complete the defensive system at the western end of the *limes*. Whitemoss itself has little view westwards along the south bank of the Clyde, and it is reasonable to assume that communication with the mouth of the estuary was maintained by a chain of watch-towers, remains of which are still to seek. Secondly, strategical considerations demand at least one outpost fort in the Vale of Leven comparable to those which guarded the main approach to the eastern end of the frontier.

I am indebted to the Department of Health for Scotland for access to the Air Survey material, to Mr J. L. Graham for re-photographing the original print of the fort, and to the Air Ministry for permission to reproduce this copy. Also to Mr David Baird of Whitemoss farm, and Mr W. McKie of Freeland, for information on local topography.