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**Hadrian's Wall Milecastles 69 (Sourmilk Bridge) and 70
(Braelees), Cumbria: Interim Report on Archaeological
Evaluation, September 2000**

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Summary

Milecastles 69 and 70 are two of thirteen of these installations on Hadrian's Wall under regular or intermittent ploughing. Field evaluation was carried out on these milecastles in 1999-2000.

Neither milecastle has been located in the field, and two possible locations for 69 have been postulated. Geophysical survey on the two proposed sites of milecastle 69 and the measured site of milecastle 70 failed to locate the milecastles, probably because they had been totally robbed. Trenching on the measured location of 69 picked up part of the southern face of Hadrian's Wall.

Keywords

Excavation
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HADRIAN'S WALL MILECASTLES 69 (SOURMILK BRIDGE) AND 70 (BRAELEES), CUMBRIA

Interim Report on Archaeological Evaluation, September 2000

1. Project background

Thirteen of the milecastles on the World Heritage Site of Hadrian's Wall have been identified as being under potentially damaging land regimes, principally cultivation either in rotation, or annually for cereal crops. A programme of field evaluation to investigate the condition of the remains and their vulnerability to further cultivation was put forward in a Project Design (Austen and Wilmott 1999) in June 1999, and the first phase of the work, during which five of the milecastles were evaluated, took place during August 1999. A further phase of work which covered seven further evaluations took place in Autumn 2000.

The primary objective of the fieldwork was to provide data on the survival and vulnerability of these milecastles in order to inform discussions with land owners and managers over their future management. Archaeological information on the shape, size, internal layout and dating of the milecastles was also recovered.

Pending the production of a formal MAP2 assessment on the completion of the whole project, it has been decided to produce a series of short interim reports summarising the results of the work on each site. These will be circulated to archaeological curators, and also to the owners and managers of individual sites.

The geophysical work on the two proposed sites of Milecastle 69 was undertaken by permission of the site owners, Mr H Hodgson, Wormanby Farm, Burgh-by-Sands, and Mr Reay, Park Farm, Grinsdale. Mr Reay also allowed the evaluative excavation on his land. Geophysics at milecastle 70 was carried out by permission of Mr D Baxter of Edenbank Farm, Beaumont.

2. The Sites

Wall miles 69-71 (Fig 1) lie in one of the least explored and most poorly preserved stretches of the frontier, and have tended to be somewhat glossed over by antiquarian observers. The best description is provided by Horsley (1733, 155-6), who found the works obscure all the way from Newtown to Burgh-by-Sands (Wall miles 67-71):

“On the west side of the *Eden* the Walls are mostly obscure. At a part between *Grinsdale* on one side and *Newton* on the other, *Severus*' wall is very visible, and *Hadrian's* may be discovered about a furlong to the south of it. And a little to the

east of *Kirkanders* the vestiges are clear. Between *Wormanby* and *Brugh* the track of the walls is also visible, and they come within a chain of each other. But excepting the ditch at the west end of *Brugh*, *Hadrian's vallum* appears no more after this with plainness and certainty. And *Severus'* wall in the general is for several miles very obscure, and much leveled. The people hereabouts have no stone quarries for building, so that they spare no pains in digging for stones, wherever they have any prospect of finding them, upon which account the wall and stations have been sufficiently plundered. The ditches are the most visible part of the works, and are very discernible in going up to *Beaumont*.”

It is clear that even by Horsley's time most of the remains had been denuded by comprehensive stone robbing. MacLauchlan (1858, 80) described the course of the Wall running west from Grinsdale thus:

“The Wall crowned a height 350yds west of [Mr Sibson's] house and curved back to the southward so as to run within a furlong of the Mill, where it crossed the stream dividing Grinsdale from Kirkandrews. At this bend a greater quantity of foundation stones were seen than usual, and it was conjectured there might have been a milecastle at that spot”

Much of this, as MacLauchlan admits, derived from hearsay evidence provided by the elderly Mr Sibson; the Wall itself had completely disappeared by MacLauchlan's time. From Kirkandrews the line of the Wall runs northwards along the bluffs on the west edge of the river Eden, until traces of the ditch can be seen below Beaumont:

“continuing our course along the top of the cliff, we find traces of the foundations of the Wall and the commencement of its ditch may be observed at a small stream about 300yds before we reach Beaumont, and up the hill both Wall and ditch are plainly visible”.

Small evaluations have had varied success in the area. In 1996 (Burnham et al 1997, 415) an evaluation in Grinsdale village at NY337 558 failed to locate the Wall, though a linear feature appeared to be the Wall ditch. Milecastles 69 and 70 have not been located. MacLaughlan's mention of large quantities of stone at Sourmilk Bridge on the Doudle Beck in the eastern part the field north of Millbeck Farm was formerly used as the basis of scheduling for the site of milecastle 69 (Sourmilk Bridge), though the measured position of this milecastle as shown on the 1972 edition of the *Ordnance Survey Map of Hadrian's Wall* is on a high point immediately west of Grinsdale village; the very height which MacLauchlan locates 350yds west of Mr Sibson's house (Figs 1, 2).

The measured position of milecastle 70 is thought to lie near NY 351590 within OS parcel 1400, approximately 300m south of Beaumont Farm. The owner, Mr Baxter, thinks that he has encountered the milecastle when ploughing in this field on the south side of Monkhill Beck. There are no visible indications of the milecastle on the surface.

Milecastles 71 and 72 were located in 1960 by S H Bartle (1961), who considered the

chances of finding other installations between here and Carlisle:

“Little hope can be raised for the stretch along the bluffs along the Eden, but there seems good reason to hope that it will be possible to establish the position of Milecastle 69” (*ibid*, 40)

Further excavations took place at Milecastle 72 (Fauld Farm) in 1989 (Austen 1994), demonstrating both that this milecastle survived well and that Bartle’s conclusions concerning the orientation of the milecastle were not secure. Milecastle 71 was re-examined within the milecastles project in order to ascertain the impact of ploughing for pasture renewal (Wilmott 2001).

3. Original aims

The original aims for the work were:

Milecastle 69

M69.1 to locate the precise site between Grinsdale and the field west of Mill Beck

M69.2 to establish the accurate course of Hadrian’s Wall west of Grinsdale.

If remains are subject to plough damage:

M69.3 to locate the remains of the milecastle walls without disturbance to *in situ* surviving remains.

M69.4 to ascertain the depth below the present surface at which remains of the southern part of the milecastle survive

M69.5 to assess the impact on the site of past cultivation, and the implications of its continuance.

Milecastle 70

M70.1 to establish the precise site of Milecastle 70 south of Beaumont in OS 1400.

M70.2 to establish the accurate course of Hadrian’s Wall west of Grinsdale.

M70.3 to locate the remains of the milecastle walls without disturbance to *in situ* surviving remains.

M70.4 to ascertain the depth below the present surface at which remains of the milecastle survive

M70.5 to assess the impact on the site of past cultivation, and the implications of its continuance.

4. Site Methodology

Geophysical survey using magnetometry and resistivity was undertaken on the two

possible sites of milecastle 69, and the projected site of milecastle 70. This was intended to guide the location of evaluation trenches. As will be mentioned, the results were disappointing, and the only trenches to be excavated were opened on the projected site of milecastle 69 above Grinsdale. Two trenches 8m x 2m were cut on the Grinsdale site (Fig 2). Trench 1 tested whether the milecastle was represented by an apparent anomaly between linear features, and Trench 2 was sited to examine a linear anomaly on the hill-top.

5. Archaeological results

5.1 Milecastle 69 (*Sourmilk Bridge*)

As noted above, two possible locations for the milecastle were proposed; one based on MacLauchlan's observation of stonework at Doudle Beck, the other west of Grinsdale at NY 3655 5810, at the turn of the wall in the western end of OS parcel 6215. These two locations are nearly 500m apart.

Geophysics

In 1998 the Doudle Beck site was explored by the geophysics firm Stratascan using both resistivity and magnetometry techniques. (Mercer 1999). The survey was inconclusive, producing some evidence of the Wall ditch on the projected alignment, but no sign of the milecastle.

In August 2000 the site above Grinsdale was surveyed by Timescape Archaeological Surveys, and again both magnetometry and resistivity surveys were carried out (Robinson and Biggins 2000a). The site of the survey covers a small hill and the downward slope from the hilltop to the north. A modern track runs along the face of the slope, and north of the track there is a steep scarp, which forms the edge of the Eden flood-plain, and may once have been a river bank. The top of this scarp is marked by a definite geophysical anomaly, which was interpreted by the surveyors as possibly comprising the turf Wall. A further anomaly, which ran along the crest of the hill to the north of the track was tentatively interpreted as the Military Way. Though the responses in much of the area were masked by the presence of clear ridge-and-furrow, the present writer thought he could detect the shape of a milecastle lying between these two linear anomalies in the magnetometry plot.

Trenching

Trench 1

This trench, which measured 8m x 2m was cut across the slope to the south of the high ridge in order to investigate the western side of an apparent rectilinear anomaly which appeared on the geophysical survey. It was soon clear that whatever had caused this anomaly it was not an archaeological feature, as the topsoil (1500), which was 260mm

deep, directly overlay the pink, natural boulder clay (1502) throughout the trench.

Trench 2 (Fig 3)

This trench was cut across the high ridge from north to south, in order to establish the line of Hadrian's Wall. The topsoil (1500) was 270mm deep, and overlay a thick, homogeneous soil deposit (1501) comprising a mid orange-brown clay-sandy silt. This deposit was undifferentiated and well sorted, and appears to have been an old ploughsoil. It was 510mm deep at its maximum depth. This deposit contained, at 320mm depth, a spread of rubble (1503), including dressed stone, but generally comprising small, angular, grey sandstone pieces. Adjacent to this was a single course of faced sandstone flags which appear to be in situ (1504). These formed the south face of a flag foundation course of a wall, with a crack where the weight of the Wall had borne down on the offset below.

5.2 *Milecastle 70 (Brae Lees)*

Geophysics

Survey was undertaken by Timescape Archaeological Surveys in 2000. (Robinson and Biggins 2000b). Like the milecastle 69 surveys the results were disappointing, showing no evidence for the location of the milecastle, although there were some ephemeral linear features of low resistivity in the expected place. It is possible that the course of the Wall was clipped at the extreme north-east corner of the survey, and it is thus probable that the Wall lies on the eastern edge of the field, where survey was impeded by dense marginal vegetation. The apparent Wall line is consistent with the visible position of the ditch on the north side of Monkhill Beck below Beaumont.

5.3 *Interpretation*

Neither milecastle was located. It is probable that, as Horsley noted two centuries ago, the remains have been almost totally robbed. If they were in the same condition as milecastle 71 (Wilmott 2001) they would have been invisible to geophysical survey.

The trenching on the Grinsdale site seems to have revealed a surviving scrap of Hadrian's Wall in the location pointed out to MacLauchlan by Mr Sibson. The depth of soil cover on the hilltop is rather more difficult to explain. The existence of ridge-and-furrow to the south of the Wall may offer an explanation. If the Wall stood fairly high at the time that the land was under cultivation there would have been a tendency for soil to build up against it as a headland developed. If the Wall was subsequently totally robbed, it would no longer retain the headland which would tend to slump downhill over the robbed footings.

6. Conclusions

6.1 *Original aims*

For milecastle 70 it proved impossible to meet any of the original aims of the work. The location of the milecastle remains unknown. The same is true for milecastle 69, except for the fact of the location of Hadrian's Wall in the vicinity of the milecastle. Aims M69.4 and M69.5 can be addressed with relation to the Wall. The depth of soil over the remains has been established as very deep, and consequently plough damage is not taking place.

6.2 *Recommendations*

There is insufficient evidence to back any recommendation to change the agricultural regime of these areas. The failure of geophysics to locate the Wall and its structures, however, does not mean that they are totally destroyed. The option to re-survey this stretch of the Wall, and to do so over a wider area should be considered as remote sensing equipment becomes more sensitive.

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Enclosed figures and plans

- Figure 1 Location of sites in Wall Miles 69-71
- Figure 2 Location of trenches on the Grinsdale site
- Figure 3 Plan of Trench 2 at close of excavation