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Bearsden

A Roman Fort on the Antonine Wall

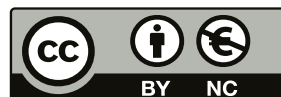
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Chapter 2

PREVIOUS ACCOUNTS

The existence of a fort on the Antonine Wall at Bearsden was recorded by Christopher Irvine, Historiographer Royal for Scotland, in the late 17th century (Keppie 2012: 42–3). Irvine's papers were acquired by Sir Robert Sibbald who published Irvine's list, which included: 'From thence [Castlehill] over the Mossfaldhill of Led Carmmock, by the New Kirk of Kilpatrick a Mile, at the Hay Hill a Fort' (Sibbald 1707: 28). Irvine's observation was followed by those of Gordon (1726), Horsley (1732), Maitland (1757) and Roy (1793). Roy, as usual, provided the best plan (illus 2.1) and noted for the first time that the fort was surrounded by two ditches: 'a double envelope' (Roy 1793: 159). Moreover, the measurements scaled off Roy's plan closely approximate to the size of the complex as determined in the excavations: Roy's 475 × 360 feet compared to 476 × 380 feet (illus 3.2.1). All these commentators failed to record the rampart between the fort and the annexe. The reason is no doubt recorded by Roy, who remarked that the fort was 'so much defaced by the plough, that excepting on the south side, it is with much difficulty that it [the double envelope] can be traced' (Roy 1793: 159). The antiquarians noted the Military Way running through the centre of the fort, Gordon (1726: 53) stating that perhaps here the 'Causeway is not to be seen in greater perfection, measuring 20 feet in Breadth'. Horsley (1732: 166) also commented on the military way 'being ... conspicuous and magnificent', and that 'the gates at which the military way enters then goes out, are nearly in the middle of the east and west ramparts'.

Roy (1793: 158–9) also recorded the topographical setting of the fort: 'the fort of New Kirkpatrick, stands lower than most we meet with on the Wall, having the rivulet which afterwards falls into the Allender in front. And as the rising grounds, on the right and left of this post, form a sort of gorge or pass, through which it seems to have been apprehended that the enemy

might penetrate from the north and north-west, therefore the fort hath not only been made to larger dimensions, but likewise to render it more respectable, it hath been surrounded with a double envelope ... The military way passes through it, and it is distant from Castle-hill only two thousand four hundred and fifty yards' (illus 2.2).

Stuart's plan retained the two ditches, but he recorded robbing of stones from the fort: 'Many hundred cart-loads of stones have been removed at different times from the line of the Military Way, and also from the foundations of the Station, and

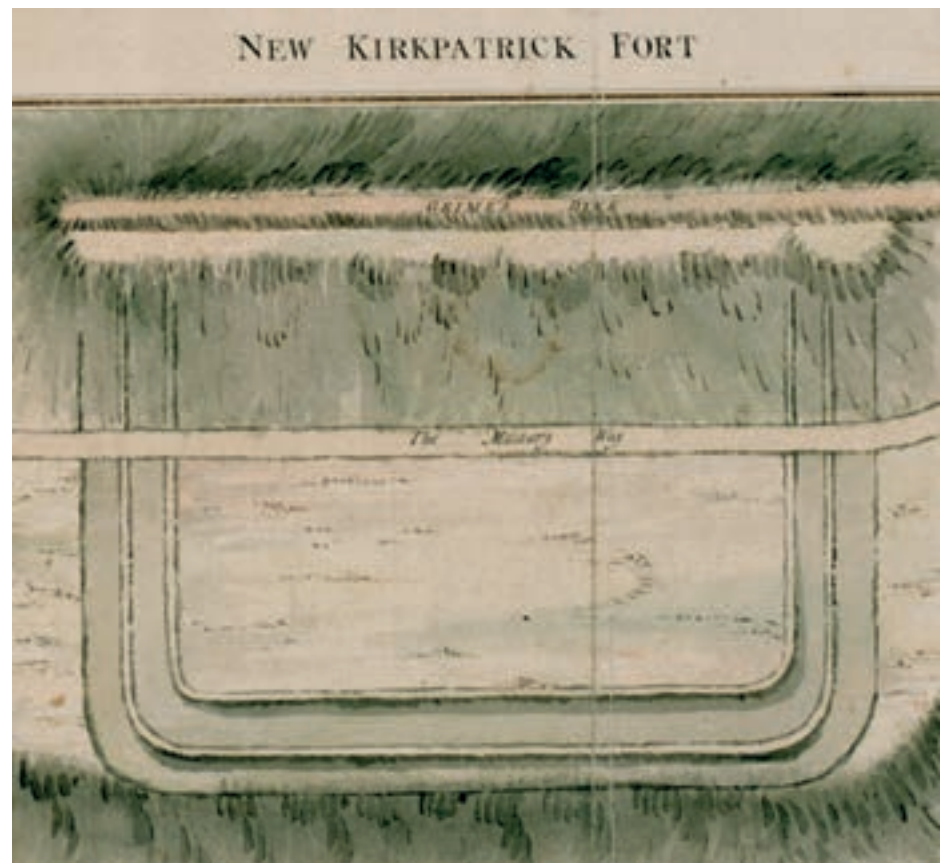


Illustration 2.1
Roy's plan of Bearsden, 1755.

BEARSDEN: A ROMAN FORT ON THE ANTONINE WALL



Illustration 2.2

Roy's map of the Bearsden area, 1755.

many hundreds more remain to be dug out whenever they may be required' (Stuart 1852: 313). In 1825 Reverend John Skinner had noted 'large squared stones . . . some of them chiselled in lines after the Roman manner' re-used in a building near the fort (Keppie 2003: 225). Stuart recorded the existence of a spring 'within the ramparts at East Kilpatrick, the water from which has been recently led into a drain, and now makes its crystal appearance towards the bottom of the field, at a considerable distance from its former outlet. When first discovered a few remains of masonry existed near it – confirming in some degree the opinion, that this tiny fountain had been a source of supply to the ancient garrison' (Stuart 1852: 313). In addition, Stuart stated that 'some fragments of Roman pottery have also been found at East Kilpatrick, which much resembled those discovered at Duntocher; they likewise contain the figures of centaurs, and what might also be called a copy of the Medicean Venus – all in low relief', presumably samian ware (Stuart 1852: 315).

The fort was still visible and free of encumbrances when the Ordnance Survey recorded it in 1862 (illus 2.3), though by this time the only trace of the defences was a broad hollow marking the line of the ditches south of Roman Road; north of the road two fence lines maintained the line of the west and east ramparts (Feachem 1974: 74–5). By the time the second edition

was published in 1896 two villas had been erected in the northern part of the fort (illus 2.4), while south of the road lay a further two; the only part of the fort not built over was the south-west corner, though the ditch to the south-west and south was still marked as visible. By the 1914 OS map, the fort was recorded as 'Roman Station (site of)', with no remains visible (Feachem 1974: 75; Macdonald 1934: 324–6).

Since that day little has been recorded of the fort and few finds have come to light. Macdonald (1934: 325) recorded events during the building of the villas on the site: the corner of one villa had been erected over 'a soft mass of black material' and required strengthening; the south rampart was grubbed up during the laying out of gardens; and also during gardening was discovered 'a number of pits from 30 to 36 inches in diameter and similar in depth. In the bottom there was usually or always some ashed or charred wood'. Fragments of amphora and a coin of Trajan were found in October 1912 in the garden of Maxholme, an intaglio cut in cornelian and the device of a female figure making an offering of fruit found in 1933 (Macdonald 1934: 326) and a coin of Constantine I in the grounds of 16 Roman Road (Robertson 1950: 139–40) complete the catalogue. Macdonald concluded his report with the ill-judged prophesy that 'it is unlikely that we shall ever learn more' (Macdonald 1911: 165; 1934: 326).

PREVIOUS ACCOUNTS



Illustration 2.3
The OS first edition map of Bearsden, 1862.



Illustration 2.4
The OS 1896 map of Bearsden.

BEARSDEN: A ROMAN FORT ON THE ANTONINE WALL



Illustration 2.5

The grounds of 35 Roman Road before excavation looking east.

Today, the site of the fort can still be recognised, particularly on Roman Road. A slight dip in the road marks the western ditches of the fort, while the ground falls away to the east of the annexe. To both north and south of the fort and annexe the grounds drops steeply away, to the north into the valley of the Manse Burn.

The modern name assigned to the fort has varied. Irvine called it Hay Hill (Sibbald 1707: 28). The parish of East Kilpatrick was created in 1649 and a church erected soon after

which was known to Roy as New Kirkpatrick, but by 1860 had become New Kilpatrick; the names were in contrast to the parish and church at Old Kilpatrick at the west end of the Wall. However, when a railway station was opened in 1863, it was given the name Bearsden after a small farmhouse (Feacham 1974: 74–5). With the popularity accorded to the excavations reported upon in this volume, this name was accorded the fort rather than the more cumbersome and otiose ‘New Kilpatrick’.