

An old road to Knott Head from Thornthwaite

BY DEREK DENMAN

In 1998 a group of members of the Lorton & Derwent Fells Local History Society made excavations, with the consent of the landowner, on an old disused road which ascends the fell-side between Thornthwaite and Knott Head.^{1,2} The group had been established to study and seek Roman roads in Lorton Vale, based on the common understanding that the Whinlatter Pass was once on the route of a Roman road; for example as proposed and surveyed by Allan in *The Roman route across the northern Lake District; Brougham to Moresby*.³ Having been unable to find clear physical evidence of such a road at the western end of the pass, the group turned its attention to the eastern end, and the relationship of the ascent with the closest piece of proven Roman road; the old causeway by Braithwaite railway station reported by Bellhouse in these Transactions in 1954 and 1960.^{4,5} The group found a long disused, unreported old road to Knott Head, consistent with the conjectural route proposed by Bellhouse. This paper reports and discusses the findings.

Location and context of the road.

Figure 1 provides a composite map of the area based on the first edition six inches to one mile ordnance survey of 1863. This map has been annotated with features and boundaries relevant to the road and the excavations made. Where it is shown as a full line, from GR22272467 to GR22132458, the road is a clear and distinct terrace-way, climbing the fell side to the south of the valley cut by Masmill Beck. The map shows the current route of the Whinlatter Road, turnpiked under an act of 1761, which runs between Braithwaite and Lorton, plus the Hallgarth Road, running alongside and mostly to the south of Masmill Beck from the turnpike to Hallgarth, as it was specified to be built in the enclosure act of 1814.^{6,7} Immediately to the south of the Hallgarth road is a wall enclosing the commons allotments, which contain the old road. The map is annotated with the extent of the 'ancient enclosures' at 1814, where ancient in enclosure terms means at least 30 years before the Act, or 1784 in this case. To the North is the old Ladstocks Enclosure. The more recent enclosure on the fell-side to the South East appears to be later, the older fence being at the break of slope.

The old road is shown in no known maps or descriptions except possibly one. In James Clarke's survey of the Lakes of 1787, the map of this area, not drawn to a measured survey, shows a road from the turnpike to Lonin-foot, or Lanefoot, between ancient enclosures.⁸ Though there was 'a road from this station to Thornthwaite in at Lonin-foot, yet it is so steep you cannot ride down it'.⁹ Therefore it appears that a lane from the Whinlatter road went to Lanefoot before the commons enclosure but was replaced by the Hallgarth road, though no mention of the old road is made in the award.

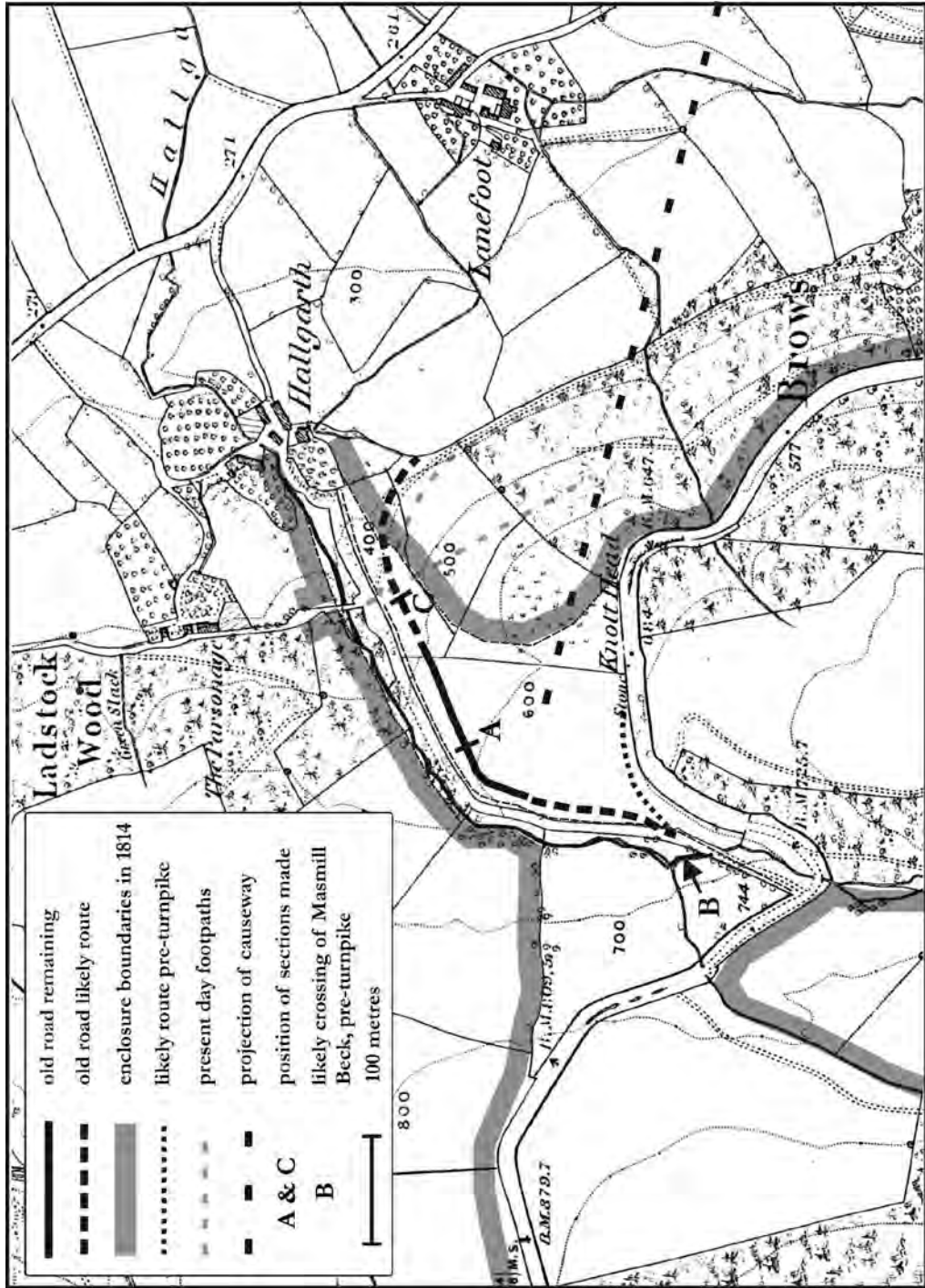


Figure 1. The general area of Knott Head, Thornthwaite, based on the first series Ordnance Survey of 1863.

Description of the road and excavations.

The land containing the road was used as common grazing before enclosure, and remains unimproved grazing today; with bracken, gorse and a scattered planting of larch adorning its higher parts. The cover of the road, from silting and vegetation, suggests that it has been out of use for many decades, but not many centuries. In most of the part shown by a full line, the road surface has a consistent width of 4m and is constructed as a curving terrace. The route of the road appears to have been chosen to avoid the steeper slope of the fell further to the south; keeping its slope within 25%. The terrace-way was sectioned at point A, GR22152461, and evidence of a properly constructed road was found, as illustrated in figure 2. The slate bedrock had been cut away as necessary to maintain the steady line and slope of the road. The terrace had been built out, retained by a curb of large stones, and finished at a width of 4m.

The part of the road shown as dashed and becoming gradually more conjectural above the terrace is less steeply graded and on transversely level ground, with little material covering the bedrock. On the southern side of Masmill Beck at point B, GR22082444, a number of large flat glacial boulders were found, placed to form a dry, solid approach to the beck. This crossing was consistent with both an extrapolation of the line of the old road, and also of a second old fell road, shown dotted, that merged with the current turnpike at Knott Head. This suggested that, before the turnpike was built, both the Whinlatter road and the Thornthwaite branch to Lanefoot might have crossed the beck at point B. The land across the beck at point B, an enclosure allotment, has been extensively disturbed by forestry.

A section made at point C, GR22332469, where the surface suggested a possible agger, showed no sign of purposeful construction. No hard base, indications of metalling or lateral ditches could be found. However, this general area contains numerous uninvestigated linear features in the ground, consistent with its earlier use as the access point to Thornthwaite common for many centuries.

Interpretation

It is likely that the most recent use of the old road was to connect Thornthwaite with the Whinlatter road both before and after that road was turnpiked in the 1760s. As evidenced by Clarke in 1787, the road then started at Lonin-foot or Lanefoot, rather than Hallgarth. It was replaced by the Hallgarth road after 1814. Prior to the construction of the turnpike, the Whinlatter road, which is attested in seventeenth century manorial records as a highway, may well have met the Thornthwaite road at a crossing point B on Masmill Beck.¹⁰

The major interest in the old road is as a possible part of a Roman road from Keswick to Papcastle over the Whinlatter Pass. Although that road is

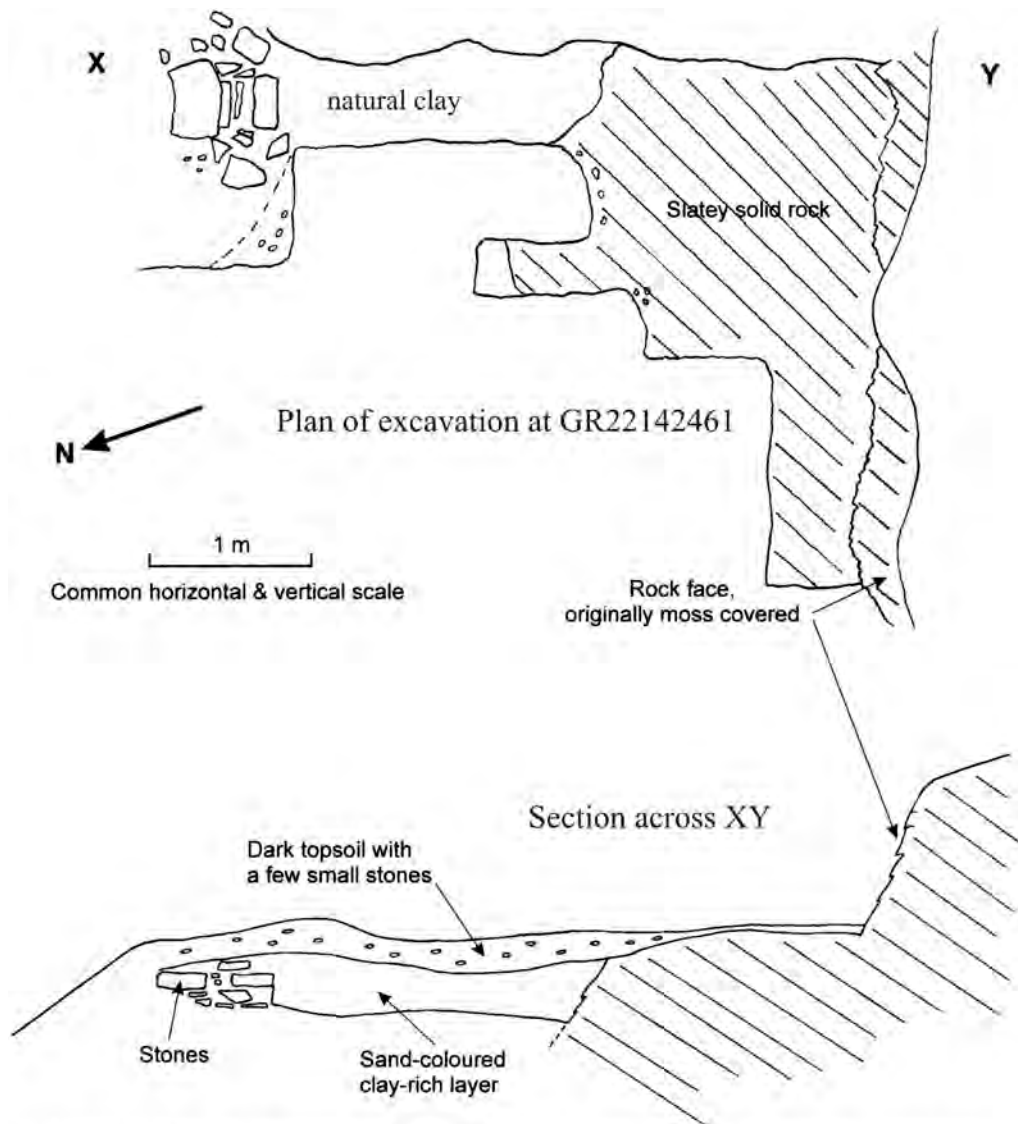


Figure 2. Plan and section of excavations of old road at point A, looking downslope.

commonly accepted to have existed, as part of a route from Maryport to Brougham and the Stanegate, examination of the literature shows the physical evidence to be lacking or unproven. The necessary Roman fort at Keswick has neither been found nor located, and the only proven piece of Roman road between Keswick and the fort Derwentio at Papcastle is the causeway passing between Derwentwater and Bassenthwaite Lake, found near Braithwaite station, west of the Derwent and Newlands Beck crossings.¹¹ The existence of this road,

of another from Caermote, near Bothel, passing along the east side of Bassenthwaite Lake, and their conjunction near Keswick, is rooted in the conjecture of Horsley, 1732, and developed in the other works cited in this paper.¹²

The importance of a Roman attribution to the origin of the old road, would lie in its confirmation that a Roman road did cross the fells via the Whinlatter Pass. The road does not have a design and construction that is diagnostically Roman, but it is consistent with Roman practice for a minor road in that type of terrain. The route is also fully consistent with the conjectural line of ascent proposed by Bellhouse, based on the alignment of the causeway with the viewpoint at Knott Head.¹³ Furthermore, it has been shown to be an old road, neither a turnpike nor an enclosure road nor associated with any known serious mining or quarrying. It appears too well surveyed, designed and made for a medieval or early modern purpose. While it is of course impossible to eliminate the effect of a thousand years of history on this piece of land, it is credible that this section of road could have Roman origins. It provides, taken with the causeway, the best evidence so far that a Roman road crossed the Whinlatter Pass.

¹ The members of the group were: the late Ken Deas, Ruth Deas, Derek Denman, Anne Flower, Robert Flower, Michael Grieve, Adrian Head, Joan Head, Daphne Holbrook, Alan Norris. The group had the advice and involvement of Alan Richardson in this area.

² The land containing the road remains is privately owned and not accessible under the right to roam legislation

³ Allan, Martin. *The Roman route across the northern Lake District: Brougham to Moresby*. CNWRS, Lancaster. 1994

⁴ Bellhouse, Richard. *The Roman road from Old Penrith to Keswick and beyond*. Transactions CWAAS 1954 pp. 17-27

⁵ Bellhouse Richard. *Roman roads in Cumberland. A note on some discoveries in 1959* Transactions CWAAS 1960 p.25

⁶ Williams, L. A. *Road Transport in Cumbria in the nineteenth century*. Allen & Unwin, London 1975, Appendix A.

⁷ CRO/C/QRE/1/10

⁸ Clarke, James. *A survey of the lakes of Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire*. Clarke, London 1787, plate 7.

⁹ Clarke, James 1787, p.92

¹⁰ CRO/W/D/Lec.85 Derwentfells court leet, 31st March 1687. 'Turmen of Braythwait & Cowlde complaineth of the Township of Lorton for a peece of high way not sufficient...?'

¹¹ Bellhouse 1960 p.25

¹² Horsley, John. *Britannia Romana: or the Roman antiquities of Britain*. Osborn & Longman. London 1732, pp.482-3

¹³ Bellhouse 1954, figure facing page 20.

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