

BEARSDEN
THE STORY OF A ROMAN FORT

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For Cerian, Ronan, Catrin and Cerys



The bath-house on public display on Roman Road, Bearsden, looking south-west

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Preface

Archaeological excavations took place at the Roman fort on the Antonine Wall at Bearsden during ten summers from 1973 to 1982, funded by the Department of the Environment, now Historic Environment Scotland. There are three major results of this work: the excavation report published by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in June 2016; the best finds from the excavation may be seen in the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow University, where the remainder are available for further research; the bath-house and latrine are now on display on Roman Road, Bearsden, as state-owned monuments.

The excavation report is a detailed account of the excavation running to about 200,000 words and nearly 440 pages. Although, I trust, readable by all, it is primarily a report written for archaeologists. My colleague Rebecca Jones of Historic Environment Scotland suggested to me that there was a place for a more ‘popular’ account. This is it. This account is not a replacement for the main excavation report. That report contains much more information than there is in these 25,000 words but it does provide the basis for this book. The excavation report is organised in the way favoured by archaeologists, that is, a description of the excavation, followed by specialist reports and culminating in a discussion section. This book follows an entirely different pattern.

The discoveries made during the excavation underpin this account, but here I also seek to introduce two new elements. The first is to explain the undertaking of an archaeological excavation, the subsequent post-excavation work and

the creation of the final report to non-archaeologists, thereby, hopefully, aiding understanding of archaeological endeavour. The second is to place the discoveries in a wider context and explore the life of the soldiers at Bearsden not just on the basis of the material recovered during the excavations but also using evidence from elsewhere in the Roman empire.

I have not provided references within the text. The excavation report remains the basic work of reference and includes a full bibliography. A section on further reading at the end of this book is arranged thematically.

All dates are AD/CE.

Edinburgh
September 2016

Chapter 1

Finding the fort

Early records

It is possible that the very earliest record of the fort at Bearsden lies in a list of Roman place-names prepared by a monk in Ravenna in the early 700s. Ravenna is now a rather sleepy town in northern Italy, but then it was the capital of a province of the Roman empire. We do not know why the list, today called the *Ravenna Cosmography*, was created, but it embraced the known world from Ireland to India and included Britain, lost to the Roman Empire about 300 years before. The British place-names include a list of those across the narrowest part of the island where the Antonine Wall lies. The first name in the list is *Velunia*, which an inscription confirms is Carriden at the eastern end of the Antonine Wall. Bearsden ought to be close to the end of the list but the problem is that there are only 10 names recorded and at least 16 forts along the Wall. If assume that only the larger forts were included, that is, forts over 1.3 ha (3.2 acres), then Bearsden may be *Litana*, but that remains a guess.

The first modern mention of a Roman fort at Bearsden on the Antonine Wall was over 300 years ago. In the late 1600s Christopher Irvine, Historiographer Royal for Scotland, visited the Wall several times and recorded the forts along its line. He stated that, 'by the New Kirk of Kilpatrick ... at the Hay Hill a Fort'. Irvine's visit to the Roman Empire's north-west frontier was followed by other historians in the eighteenth century. These included Alexander Gordon, John Horsley, William Maitland and, most importantly, William Roy.



Figure 1. The trig point on Castle Hill next to the Antonine Wall at Bar Hill is a reminder both of Roy's survey of the frontier and his creation of the Ordnance Survey

William Roy was a Scot, born at Carlisle, just 30 km south of the Antonine Wall, in 1726. In the aftermath of the Jacobite Uprising of 1745-6, he joined the team surveying Scotland. He clearly had an interest in the Romans for in 1755 he mapped the Antonine Wall and its forts. Over the next two decades he surveyed other Roman remains in Scotland and prepared a report on them. His other duties, however, prevented publication of *The Military Antiquities of the Romans in Britain* until 1793, three years after his death. Roy's other main achievement was to lobby for the formation of the Ordnance Survey, the body which still undertakes the mapping of the United Kingdom (Figure 1).

Roy produced a plan of the fort at New Kirkpatrick, that is Bearsden, which was remarkably accurate (Figure 2). He recorded that it was attached to the Antonine Wall on its northern side, that it was surrounded by two ditches, or, as he put it, 'a double envelope' and that the Military Way (our name for the Roman road which ran along the Antonine Wall) passed through the centre of the fort. His plan shows that the fort was built on sloping ground though with an area of higher ground in the centre of the southern half of the fort.

Roy also recorded the wider 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 in the Allander in front. And as the rising grounds, on the right and left of this post, for a sort of gorge or pass, through which it seems to have been apprehended that the enemy might penetrate from the north and north-

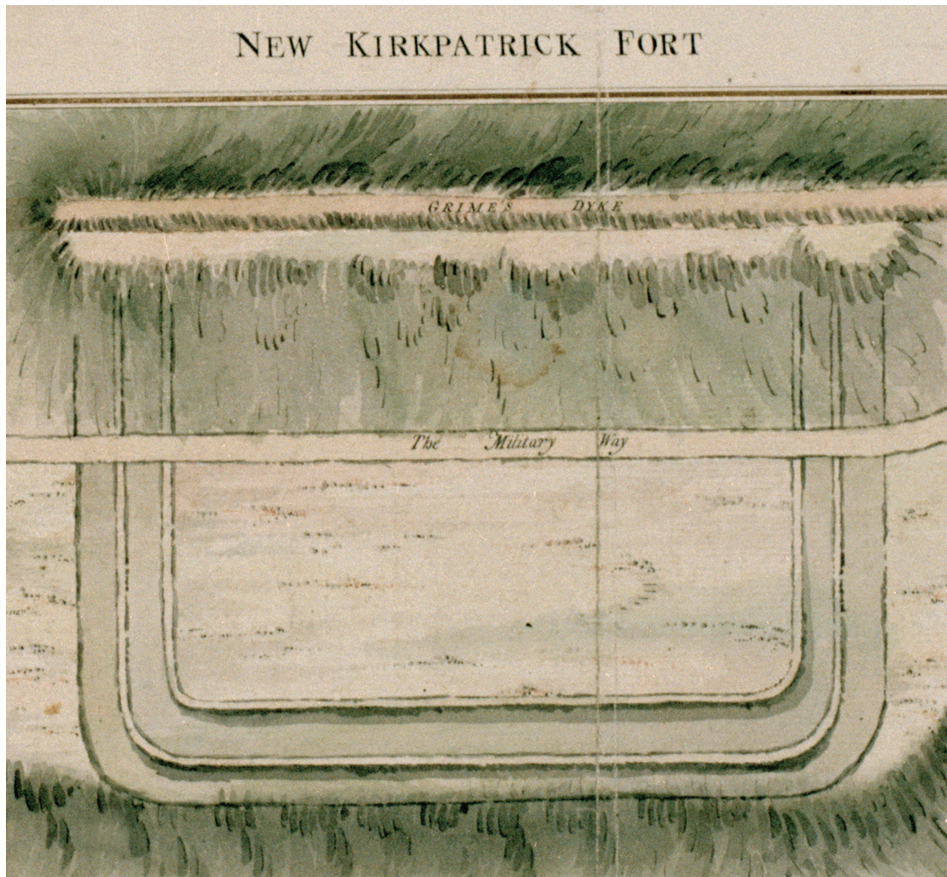


Figure 2. William Roy's plan of Bearsden, 1755
 © Society of Antiquaries of London

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.'

The observation of a military surveyor is most important. Roy noted that the fort was not placed on a high point, but had extra protection to the north from a stream, while his plan indicates that the land fell away to the south (Figure 25). But most importantly he recorded the passes to the west and east of Bearsden and suggested that the fort was larger than normal in order for the army to guard these passes. Finally, he noted the proximity to the fort at Castlehill to the west.