New Roman Road Discovery

Only a few years ago a significant find was made by amateur archeologist and enthusiast Bill Huston who appears to have discovered a new Roman road within the former parish boundary. This chapter summarises his findings and highlights the need to carry out further research in understanding the historical importance of this ancient highway.

BY BILL HUSTON

THE ROMANS ROADS IN SOUTH LANARKSHIRE
The Romans came and went from Scotland. The first incursion into Scotland by the Roman army was in about 80 AD. In 82 AD the Roman army invaded south-west Scotland by marching overland from England as well as a seaborne force landing on the Ayrshire coast. To hold onto the territory conquered, they built forts, including a chain of forts that crossed the country.

One Roman fort was 31 km east of the mouth of the River Irvine, near the Lanarkshire/Ayrshire border (Loudon Hill). A second fort was 33 km further to the east, on the bank of the River Clyde, east of Lanark (Castledykes, near Carstairs). The next fort was 26 km further east, on the Lyne Water, 2 km from where it flows into the River Tweed, west of Peebles. The next fort was 34 km further east on the bank of the River Tweed, east of Melrose (Trimontium, just outside of Newstead).

The Roman army built two major roads north from England. The western route paralleled the M74 motorway, went to Castledykes fort and onward towards Glasgow. The eastern route was beneath and parallel with the present day A68 to Trimontium and onward towards Edinburgh.

The Roman army also built a road to connect their east-west chain of forts. The route of that road has been explored and documented by a variety of people, beginning with General William Roy in the mid-1700s. Little has been found of the route from the mouth of the Irvine to Loudon Hill. General Roy identified the route from the Avon Water east of Loudon Hill to the Cander Water near Blackwood. The route from the Cander Water across the River Nethan and across the north shoulder of Black Hill has not accumulated much supporting evidence since the time of General Roy. From the 1950s until the 1970s several searchers found evidence of the route from south of Kirkfieldbank, across the Clyde, through Lanark and up to Castledykes Fort. Eastward from Castledykes the Roman road is parallel to the A721 and then largely beneath the A72 to the Lyne Fort. From the Lyne Fort to Trimontium the Roman road has not been explored much but is presumed to be mostly covered by the A72.
During several occupations of Scotland, the Romans did not find the land sufficiently useful to stay very long. It was less agriculturally productive than today and they seemingly found no minerals that they didn't have in plenty in milder climates. It seems that the Roman army invaded Scotland largely because the emperor in Rome needed to expand the size of his empire in order to enhance his imperial reputation.

Within five to ten years of their 82 AD conquest, it seems that the Roman army withdrew most of their garrison troops, abandoning all of the forts with the possible exception of Trimontium, which was apparently in an area of friendly natives. The army may have sent mobile patrols through southern Scotland but the troops were based in England or at Trimontium. In the 120s AD the Romans expended a monumental effort to build Hadrian's Wall across the north of England.

About 20 years later, with a new emperor in Rome, the Roman army again invaded Scotland in 142 AD. This time they established their frontier across the Clyde to Forth Isthmus and built the Antonine Wall, from west of Glasgow to east of Falkirk. They seem to have recommissioned many of their 60 year old Scottish forts. They no doubt set out to repair the 60 year old road network as well. It seems that some sections of past roads were rebuilt on a different alignment. And, since the centre of activity was now the construction and garrisoning of the Antonine Wall, it appears that the changed traffic needs motivated them to build some new routes during the 140s AD.

With the above background, the author of this chapter researched, during the 2005 to 2007 period, a road seemingly built by the Roman army to provide a shorter route from the existing road from Loudon Hill and the Ayrshire coast to the central portion of the Antonine Wall. This recent search found evidence of a 13km road from the long known Roman road south of present day Stonehouse, across the River Clyde to a Roman road junction east-northeast of Carluke.

The new route began west of the Cander Water, perhaps because flooding during their 50 year absence destroyed the crossing (bridge or ford) built during the first Roman occupation.

Several types of evidence have been found during the recent research. At a number of points along the route there are apparent hillside cuts to allow a constant gradient descent to a stream. These suggest that the road was designed for heavily laden carts and wagons. Also there are straight field boundary hedges for substantial stretches. In addition, two burns have sharp changes of flow direction that could have resulted from stone culverts constructed so that the burn flowed beneath the road.

When stone quarrying was possible locally, the Romans built important roads with a layer of heavy stones covered with a layer of gravel, and cambered so that rainwater would flow away. So the recent searching used a thin steel rod to probe the soil for such bottoming stones. The probing was extended beyond the sides of the route to confirm that stones occurring naturally were far less in density. This soil probing method was appropriate to the route explored because, unlike many Roman routes, a modern road did not overlay much of the route.

The recently discovered route seems to branch off from the Loudon hill to Castledykes Roman road first identified by General Roy south of Stonehouse, at a spot 1.2km east-northeast of Dykehead Road. The site of this Roman fork in the road was perhaps chosen to avoid the ravine that opens out just to the north-west. The newly discovered road initially heads off in a north-northeasterly direction. The apparent fork in the long known Roman road is extremely difficult to identify today because of the abandoned route from Couplaw Farm to Tanhill Farm that crosses the same area at a slightly different angle. That spot does not look today like it would have looked in Roman times. The poor drainage now evident was most likely caused by the hedges and stone walls built in recent centuries to enclose the various fields.
About 500m north-northeast of the suspected fork in the Roman road there is a cluster of evidence near the small burn south-east of the Castlehill ruined farmstead. South of the burn there is a cleft in the hillside that may have been a cut so that a road could descend to the stream on a constant gradient. There is an abrupt shift in the flow direction of the burn that may have resulted from a culvert constructed beneath the ancient road. Across the burn, probing the soil revealed apparent bottoming stones beneath the field.

After the route has seemingly shifted to the east-northeast, there is another cluster of evidence on the slope down to the Cander Water north of Spittal House. Just north of the hedge line, apparent bottoming stones were detected by probing the soil at two locations. Ignoring the nineteenth century railway embankment, the gradient of the slope down to the Cander is constant, suitable for descending heavy carts and wagons. To the east of the Cander, the ascending slope appears to have once been a constant gradient, but it is hard to be sure since that area has been mined in recent centuries.

Evidence was also found at the top of the next hill, beside the M74. Probing the soil in the narrow field between the B7078 and the M74 showed apparent bottoming stones at two places just north of the old hedge line. Only 45m to the north there is an ancient ditch and mound, more than half of which was destroyed by the building of the M74 motorway. One wonders whether those earthworks may have defended a Roman watchtower. With visibility to the west, south and east, it would have been a good lookout site. Beyond Stonehouse Parish, evidence of the Roman route has been found near Draffan, on the hillside west of the Clyde, on the hillside east of the Clyde and southwest of Carluke, pointing to a junction with a long known Roman road east-northeast of Carluke.

Interpreting the results of archaeology is speculation. Each individual piece of evidence may seem like conjecture or the randomness of nature. However, they gain credibility when many pieces of evidence line up into a plausible route over many kilometres. The apparent design of the road and the route taken allows speculation on the motive for building it. Could it have been built for the transport of bulk goods via heavy carts and wagons from the Ayrshire coast to the central portion of the Antonine Wall? To sustain a large army, it seems that the Romans would have needed to transport substantial quantities of goods like grain and iron from England. Possibly landing such supplies in Ayrshire, as opposed to landing at the west end of the Antonine Wall, which exposed slow heavily laden sailing barges to hostile native raiders emerging from the sea lochs along the Firth of Clyde, was the slower, but safer, route.

Walking along a route that has been accepted as Roman helps to train one’s eye to see the landscape as a Roman army officer who specialized in the layout and construction of military roads would have seen it. The author of this chapter used the long known Roman road south of Stonehouse to study the art and science of searching for a Roman road, along with studying current and old books and maps.

Between major terrain obstacles, Roman roads were built straight, which makes it easier to trace their route today. When possible, the Romans put their military roads on high well drained land, so that the road crossed fewer streams that required the construction of a crossing (ford, culvert or bridge). High ground also allowed effective watchtowers to be built to guard the road.

When the natural slope down to a stream or river was too steep, the Romans cut into the hillside or went sidelong down the hillside to reduce the descending gradient, as do modern road engineers. Roman army supply wagons and carts are not likely to have had any wheel brakes so it was more important to the Romans than today that the descending slopes have a constant gradient. Hillsides undisturbed by human activity are unlikely to have a constant descending gradient. So finding a constant gradient slope suggests a man made road.
A useful way to identify a Roman route is to see if there are foundation stones. A T-shaped probing tool was fabricated for the author by a shop that makes custom stainless steel equipment for restaurant kitchens. It is a stainless steel rod 8mm thick and 1m long, with one end sharpened into the shape of a broken pencil or a bullet and the other end welded to a tubular stainless steel handle. When research of old maps and books shows no evidence of a road and no evidence is seen of building, mining or quarrying disturbances during recent centuries when walking the field, probing the soil for Roman bottoming stones can be productive. When there are bottoming stones beneath a suspected route and far fewer stones on each side, it could be a Roman road, particularly if there is similar evidence at other sites along the route. If there are no bottoming stones, it does not preclude it being a Roman route, since some Roman routes did not merit the labour investment of stone foundations or quarry stone was not readily available.

Probing for bottoming stones with such a tool is effective when the soil is sodden. But even then, it takes careful effort to push the rod into the soil until it hits solid stone. Large stones tend to make the tool ring when the point hits the rock firmly. The Romans put compacted gravel above the bottoming stones to form the road surface, so it is common for force to be necessary to push the probe rod past the small stones in the gravel until it hits a large stone. The judicious use of force also involves not bending the thin steel rod.

There is one archaeological method that was intentionally not used. No excavation was done, because it is destructive. Once an area has been dug up, no one can ever learn anything more about that site. As an amateur, there are a myriad of things I would not notice that professional archaeologists could learn from, much of it microscopic evidence that to me just looks like soil.

The final and most important part of any archaeological project is to document it and distribute that documentation so that researchers in the future have access to the information. Discovering things and not documenting them means the discoveries are lost. The European’s sailed to the Americas before Columbus, but he was the first one who made a map, wrote about his discoveries and distributed those written records.

Therefore, the 13km connection route that is believed to be Roman was documented in a brief report and a detailed report, both with maps. The brief report was published in the 2007 edition of Discovery and Excavation in Scotland. The detailed report is lodged within the archives of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland in Edinburgh. The RCAHMS on-line database has some of the information and references the rest of it. Hopefully, perhaps long after the author is gone, the information will be of use to someone. The reward is in having made a contribution to available knowledge.