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The Location of Blake Chesters

Next Camp East of Segedunum in North Shields

2nd Edition

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Background

It is widely agreed that Hadrian's Wall terminated at Segedunum in Wallsend. What is more uncertain is what constituted the frontier to the east of Segedunum where for several miles the River Tyne continues on to Tynemouth.

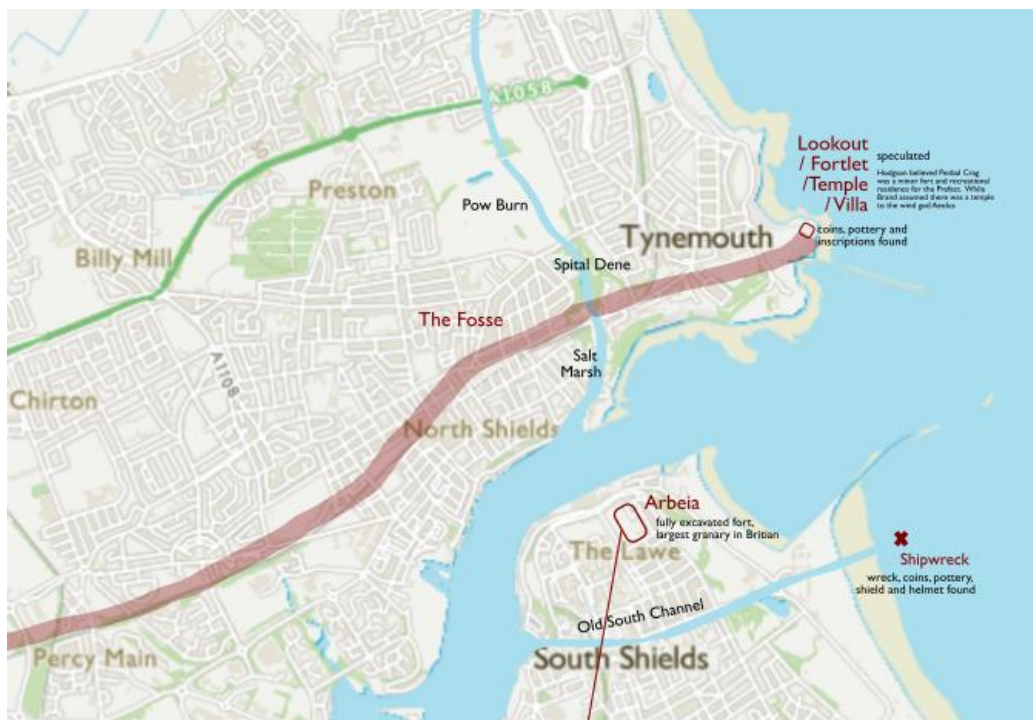
The Venerable Bede twice wrote of a wall 'from sea to sea' and other scholars such as Leland and Nennius reiterate this idea^{[1][2]}. Similarly, the Gough Map, one of the earliest maps of Britain, shows the wall drawn all the way to the coast at Tynemouth^[3]. It is worth noting that Bede was from Jarrow, just across the water from Wallsend. He stayed there all of his life and if anyone is likely to have known the true extent of the wall, it would have been him.

These sources may be inaccurate in asserting the existence of a stone wall, but what of a series of earth ramparts? Or simply camps themselves which were present on the frontier prior to any wall being built. To this end the antiquary, John Brand, taking the lead from the earlier antiquary Camden^[4], wrote:

"Tinmouth was called by the Britons, PenBall Cragg, i.e. the Head of the Rampire upon the Rock: from whence it has been asserted, that if the Roman wall did not reach as far as this place, the foss certainly did."

'The History and Antiquities of the Town and County of Newcastle' Vol 2 (1789)

The 'foss' (or 'fosse') is the rock dyke or ditch which runs north of the river and on which Tynemouth village is built. This sill and ditch was conflated with the vallum (see Hutton's 'Severus's Ditch'^[5]). The idea of an earthen rampart, natural or reinforced, extending east from Wallsend was articulated in more depth by John Hodgson in the inaugural journal of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle Upon Tyne:



The general route of the fosse or ridge – more or less along the course of Metro line today

"why therefore are we to conclude, that the security of the east coast was also not an object of the first importance to them, or that they would neglect it*? But that they did extend their communications beyond the station at Wallsend, is a fact of which, fortunately, more convincing proofs than mere conjecture evince the truth. **At Chirton, may yet be traced the form of a Roman station, known by the name of Blake Chesters**—a name sufficiently expressive of its origin. In the neighbouring fields too coins have been found at various times; and I am told by good authority, that several squares and oblongs, extending from West Chirton to Tynemouth, may yet be traced. Supported by these facts, the conjecture of a fort having existed at Tynemouth, amounts almost to certainty."

Archaeologia Aeliana Vol 1 p235 (1882)

While the historian Collingwood Bruce in his book 'The Roman Wall' (1851) wrote:

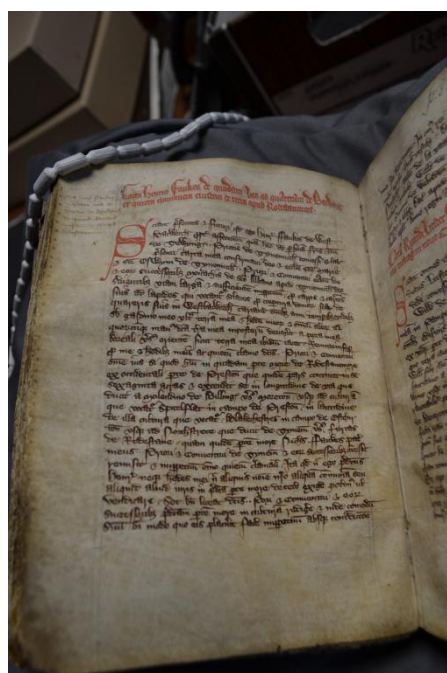
"The only trace of the northern division of the station that remains, consists of the road which has apparently led from Segedunum to the out-posts at **Blake-chesters** and Tyne-mouth. This causeway extends from the station to the north of the Shields railway; it is formed of a mass of rubble, about two feet deep, and is eleven yards wide. It cannot be ploughed, and nothing that requires any depth of earth will grow upon it."

Some speculation has surrounded the whereabouts of a Roman camp in North Shields. One common opinion is that the area at Camp Terrace may be the location although no conclusive evidence has been found. This paper describes another site which is noteworthy and requires serious consideration.

Sources for Blake Chesters

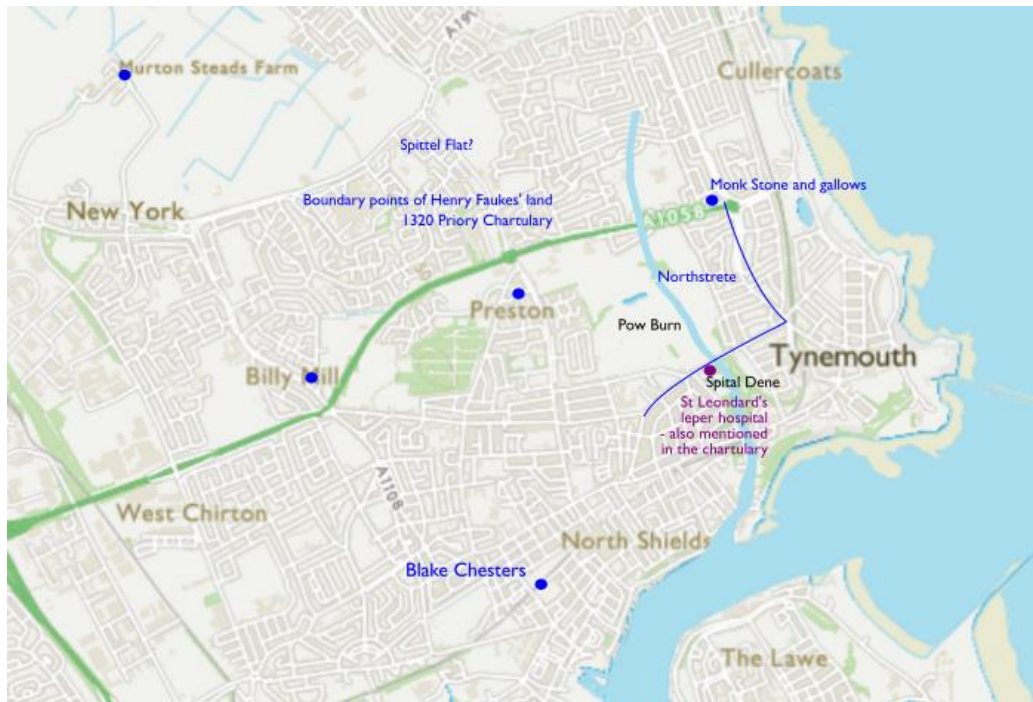
There are a few key sources for the existence of a Roman camp in North Shields, including the Bruce and Hodgson quotations above. The oldest source is the 1320 Tynemouth chartulary, which provides an enigmatic description of the area with what we believe is a firm and obvious location for the site. The other Victorian sources have been either debunked or seem to have been somewhat overlooked by researchers and are also worth examination.

The Chartulary Text



We are thankful to Christopher Hunwick, Archivist at Northumberland Estates, Alnwick Castle, for sourcing this vital manuscript and helping us greatly with our enquiry.

The Tynemouth chartulary contained of all the Prior's lands, property, legal rights, liberties and privileges. In this particular 1320 document, the land of Henry Faukes of West Backworth is delineated in order for him to grant the monks of Tynemouth Priory right of way through his land to quarry slate for roofing. Faukes' land is described using six boundary points, five of which are indicated on the following map.



Craster in *'History of Northumberland'* (1907) quotes the text:

"in quadam parte more de Rodestane-more ex occidentali parte de Preston, que quidem pars continet in se sexaginta acras, et extendit se in longitudine de via que ducit a molendino de Billing versus Moreton usque ad culturam que vocatur Spitel-flat in campo de Preston, in latitudine de ilia cultura que vocatur Blakechestres in campo de Est Chirton usque ad North-strete que ducit de Tynem' versus furcas de Rodestane."

"on a part of Rodestane Moor [Monkhouse Farm] on the west side of Preston, being sixty acres and extending in length from the road from Billing's Mill [Billy Mill] towards Moreton [Murton], to Spitelflat culture in a field of Preston, and in breadth from Blakechesters culture in a field of East Chirton to Northstreet [Broadway] which leads from Tynemouth towards the forks of Rodestane [Monk Stone]."

Tynemouth Chartulary, fol.80,b. (29th July 1320). Translation: Historical Manuscripts Commission (1948) (Referenced 'National Register of Archives' (NRA) Report 0836)

The chartulary description of the land is vague and open to some interpretation but the important point is that Blakechesters was **in a field of East Chirton**. The location of Spitel-flat in a field of Preston is unknown and further research is needed here. However, Craster goes on to state, what we believe is a major oversight in claiming:

"Black Chesters has been variously located. The deed quoted above demands a site immediately north or west of Preston colliery, the land there conveyed practically coinciding with Billy Mill farm. No traces of it can now be discovered, though they are said to have been distinguishable early in the nineteenth century."

In the view of the authors of this paper, East Chirton cannot possibly be conflated with an area immediately north or west of Preston. Preston sits one mile to the north of East Chirton. They were, and are, distinct and separate places.

As well as this, this phrase contrasting the length of the land with its breadth: " , and in breadth from Blakechesters to Northstrete" surely refers to the entire breadth of Faukes' land, which puts Blake Chesters precisely inline with both Billy Mill and Murton.

In light of this reasoning, we believe that it is because of this 'red herring' from Craster that previous research for Blake Chesters around the Preston area yielded nothing.

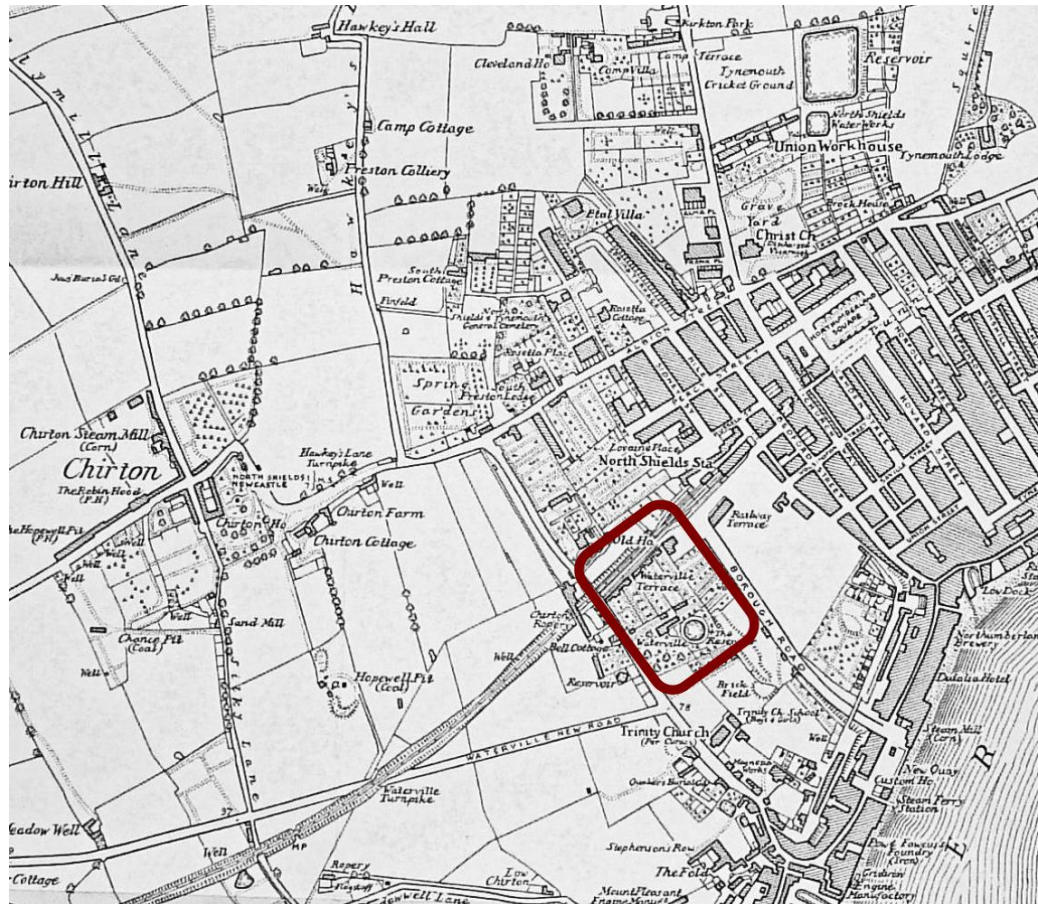
Waterville

Several sources point directly to Waterville House as the location of Blake Chesters. This semi-stately home, designed by renowned Chirton-born architect, John Dobson, and built in 1815, was owned by the gentleman and antiquary George Rippon Esq. (c.1791-1864). The Waterville estate was also the site of a reservoir and waterworks of which Rippon was the proprietor. The house was destroyed by German bombing on 30th September 1941.



Wood's 1826 Map of North Shields & Tynemouth

The house can also be found on an 1856 map of the area produced by the North Shields and Tynemouth Dock Company. The land in question spans both sides of the railway, which was built in 1847. On the north side is a structure named 'Old House'. In latter years the site included Hylton Lodge, of which the gate pillars are still present. This area today is the playing field of St Cuthbert's Primary School. To the south is Waterville House and reservoir, which is now Alexander Scott Park and Stanley Street West. The site of Waterville House itself is currently occupied by property including the North Shields Spiritualist Church. Further south of that today lies residential property which is named on the same map as 'Brick Field'.



North Shields and Tynemouth Dock Company Map 1856. Speculated site overlaid

'A Topographical Dictionary of England comprising the several counties, cities, boroughs, corporate and market towns, parishes, and townships', 7th Edition (1848) by Samuel Lewis, states:

"CHIRTON, a township, in the parish, borough, and union of Tynemouth, E. division of Castle ward, S. division of Northumberland, 1 mile (W.S.W.) from North Shields; containing 4,360 inhabitants. This township comprises 1,795 acres, abounding in coal; and the village, which forms the western suburb of North Shields, has greatly increased in extent and population, owing, chiefly, to the extension of the coal-works, from which tram-roads have been formed to the river Tyne. In the township are also iron-foundries on a large scale, for the manufacture of steam-engines, and various kinds of machinery. **Waterville House, situated here, occupies the site of the Roman station of Blake Chesters.**"

While Collingwood Bruce wrote in 1851:

“BLAKE-CHESTERS, at the high end of North Shields, is the site of another camp. Waterville, the residence of George Rippon, esq., is within its bounds. Several carved stones, much worn by the weather, are on the ground, and many Roman building-stones may be observed in the contiguous fences.”

As well as Roman coins found in neighbouring fields^[6], *Archaeologia Aeliana*, Vol 12 (1887) contains a “Catalogue of Roman Inscribed and Sculptured Stones” found in the region, with the following entries:

“196. Part of the shoulder of a large mailed Statue, from Blake-chesters, North Shields. Presented by George Rippon, Esq.”

“Appendix – No. 33.- The laureated head of Pan, of larger size than usual, thus numbered, is not from Caervoran, but from Blake Chesters. It was presented by Mr George Rippon”

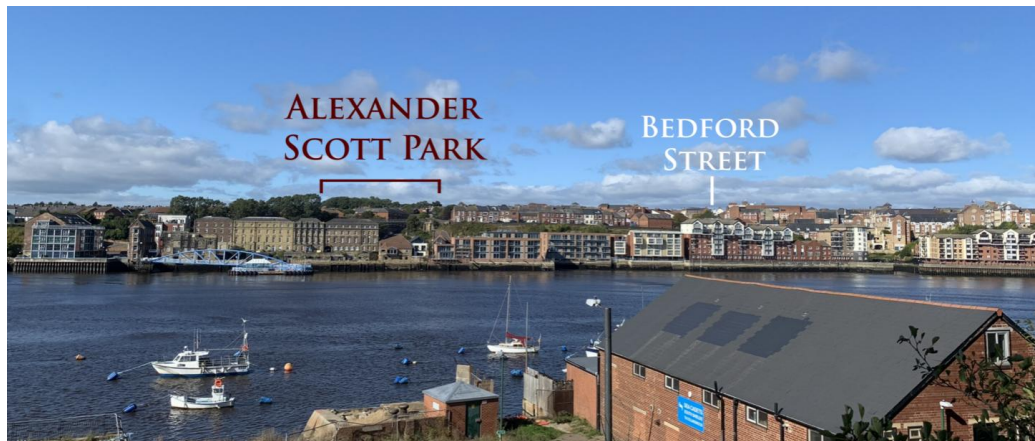
Disappointingly, these stones have been expertly examined by the learned E.J. Philips from the Society of Antiquaries in Newcastle and reliably found to be 18th century productions.^[7]

Points to Consider Regarding Waterville

- If we consider that Waterville House and the grounds of this property stood on the land now occupied by both Alexander Scott Park and St Cuthbert’s Primary School to the north side of the railway line, it should also be noted that this location has other significance. On the east side of Coach Lane, a toll gate/turnpike existed, which may ultimately have been ancient in origin^[8].
- Heading towards Tynemouth from the direction of Waterville is sited the large ballast embankment that culverts the south side of Northumberland Park and the north side of Tanners Bank, along which runs Tynemouth Road and the railway line. A few sources refer to the western side of this area prior to the embankment as Adrian’s Mound, since a 19th century excavation discovered what were speculated to be Roman remains, hence the name^[9]. In addition, it is the site of the milestone, marking the 8-mile point east of Newcastle. This may also be the site of an ancient toll gate.
- The topography of the land at Waterville should be appreciated since it sits on a hill overlooking Coach Lane down to the River Tyne. Roman camps built on a slope are not unknown—an excellent example being the site of Epiacum near Alston, Cumbria. However, the land in the vicinity of Alexander Scott Park is relatively flat, close to the Tyne with a good view of the river in addition to views of South Shields and towards Tynemouth.
- The Waterville site at North Shields sits at the apex of a bend in the Tyne looking down two reaches of the river, just as the two nearest and equally spaced Wall forts of Wallsend and Newcastle do. The supply fort of Arbeia would also have been in plain view across the water.

Local Context

If we put these sources together with a map of the Roman finds we know about in the immediate region, as well as the ones that have been speculated about, we can construct the following map pinpointing Blake Chesters.



Blake Chesters from the south side. The ferry landing may have an even more ancient provenance than we know.

Future Research

There are still some key questions need answering.

1. We need to research the record of Roman coins found at Waterville, in the neighbouring fields, and over the wider area. We then need to add these to the map to build up a fuller picture of the Roman presence in the area.
2. The site of the former Chirton House and the present site of Norham School, both to the west of Alexander Scott Park, need investigation as possible milecastles, similar to the supposed site and function of Adrian's Mound. Were coins found in the fields surrounding these places? As well as this, the site of Green Chesters in East Howdon requires investigation.
3. The authors need to examine the thesis, research and reasoning on which the previous investigations and dig were conducted to find Blake Chesters at Preston and around Camp Terrace in North Shields.
4. Spittelflat is mentioned in the 1320 Chartulary and a document from 1649. This needs to be researched.
5. Each of the sources for Adrian's Mound on the Tyne & Wear Archives site need to be investigated.
6. There is a curious reference to "recent discoveries" at both Alexander Scott Park and Camp Terrace in a school book titled 'A Tynemouth School Looks Around'. This was published in 1949 by the Tynemouth County Borough Education Committee and was written and compiled at Ralph Gardner School to mark the centenary of the borough. Frustratingly, it is assumed the reader is aware of these finds and they are not elaborated on or referenced. We would need to search newspapers from the late 1940s to uncover these finds.

These questions aside, the existence of a Roman camp in North Shields called Blake Chesters has multiple references. However, the location has yet to be confirmed. Some of the statements above may be speculative, but the authors believe the convergence of evidence towards the site of Waterville House is worthy of serious consideration and archaeological investigation.

Contact

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Footnotes

1. "Thus Severus drew a great ditch and strong rampart, fortified with several towers, from sea to sea" — Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, Book I, Ch. V, (731)
"["the departing Romans"] thinking that it might be some help to the allies ["Britons"], whom they were forced to abandon, constructed a strong stone wall from sea to sea, in a straight line between the towns that had been there built for fear of the enemy, where Severus also had formerly built a rampart." — Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, Book I, Ch. XII, (731)
2. "Nam circa hunc locum finis erat valli Severiani." i.e. "Around here ["Tynemouth"] is the end of the wall of Severus" — Leland, *Collectanea*, Vol. IV, III, p. 32, (1536)

“De secundo etiam Severo qui solita structura murum alterum, ad arcendos Pictos et Scottos, a Tinemuthe usque Boggenes praecepit.” — Nennius, *Monumenta Historia Britannica*, p. 50, (c.800)

3. The Gough Map (c.1366) is held by the Bodleian: <http://www.goughmap.org/map/>

4. “Yet some will needs maintain, that the Ditch, tho’ not the Wall, reach’d as far as Tinnmouth” — Camden, *Britannia* (1586)

5. Hutton, *The History of the Roman Wall*, Part 3, (1801)

6. “Two sculptured stones, for long thought to be Roman, were found at Blake Chesters and presented to the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle on separate occasions by Cuthbert and George Rippon. Both are now considered probably of 18th century date. Roman coins are also reported to have been found in the vicinity.” — Notes relating to the stonework found at Waterville, <https://twositelines.info/SMR/180>

7. *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani: Great Britain (Corpus of Sculpture of the Roman World: Great Britain)*, Volume 1, Fascicule. 1, *Corbridge, Hadrian’s Wall East of the North Tyne*, p. 131, app. f and g, by E.J. Phillips (1977)

8. A description of Waterville House as well as information on George Rippon is contained in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle Upon Tyne*, Series 3, Vol. I, (1903)

9. Sources for Adrian’s Mound, North Shields: <https://twositelines.info/SMR/5491>