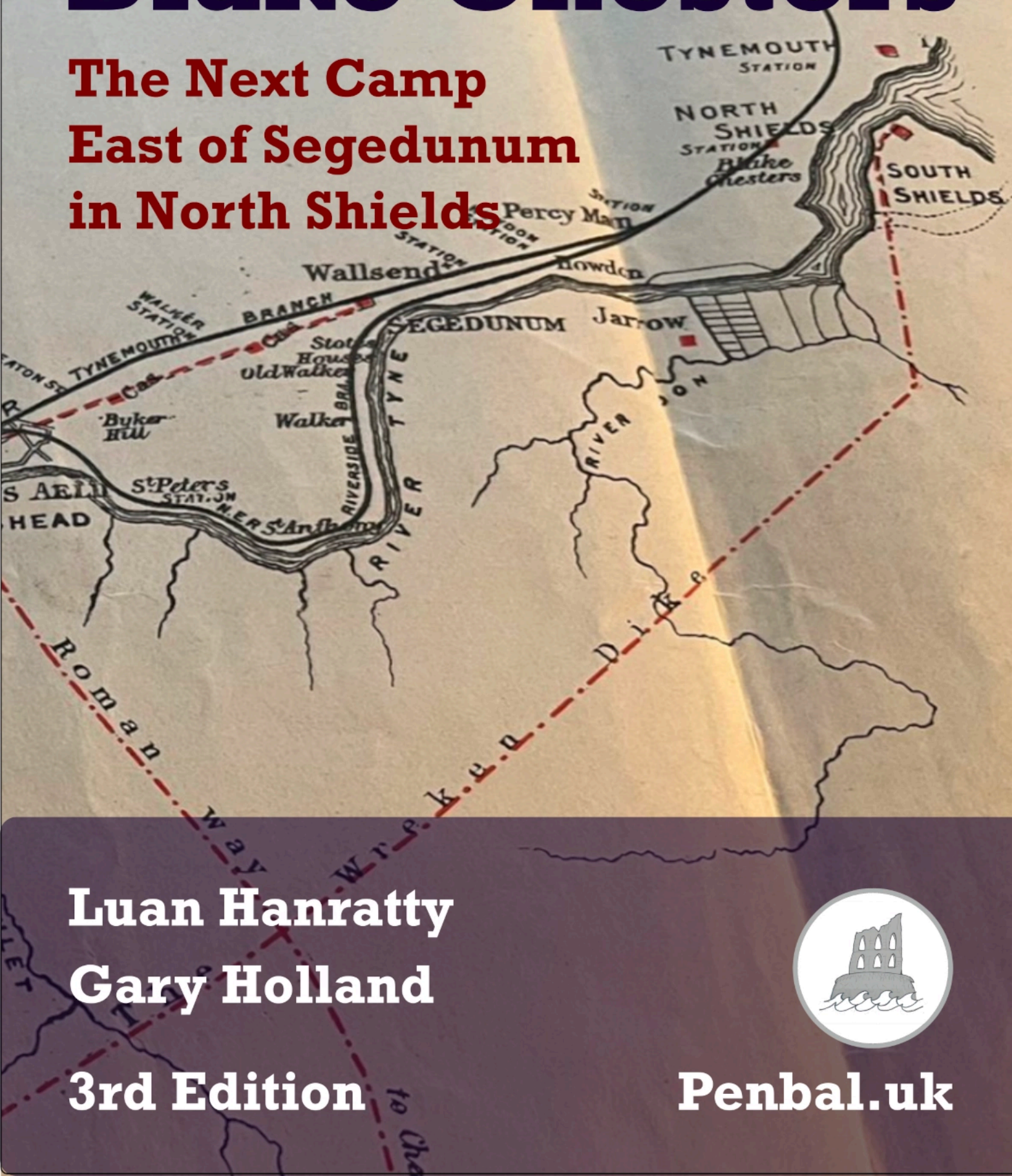


Finding Blake Chesters

The Next Camp
East of Segedunum
in North Shields



Luan Hanratty
Gary Holland

3rd Edition



Penbal.uk

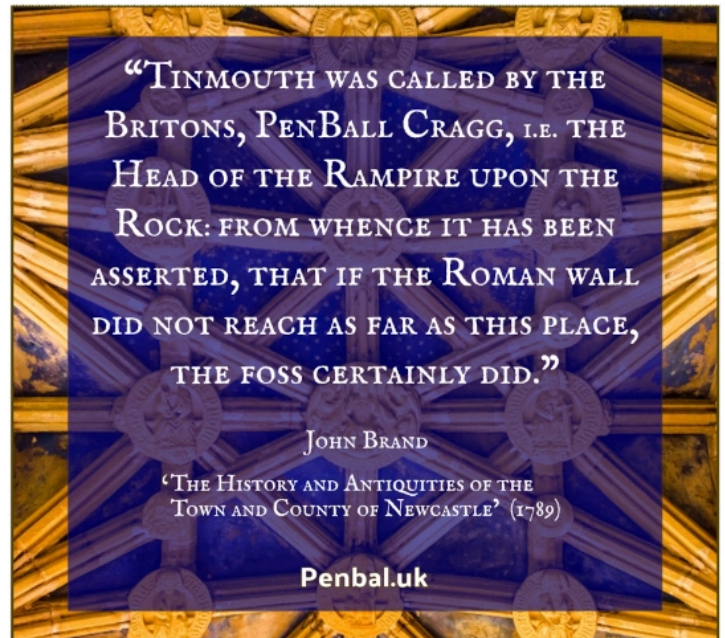
Background

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 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 would 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 following the building of the main wall. To this end the antiquary, John Brand, taking the lead from the earlier antiquary, Camden^[4], wrote:



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*.

"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)



HADRIAN'S WALL FORTS

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 Tynemouth. 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.



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



Coloured "chesters" around Hadrian's Wall 🙄

Blake (Black) Chesters (North Shields) ■

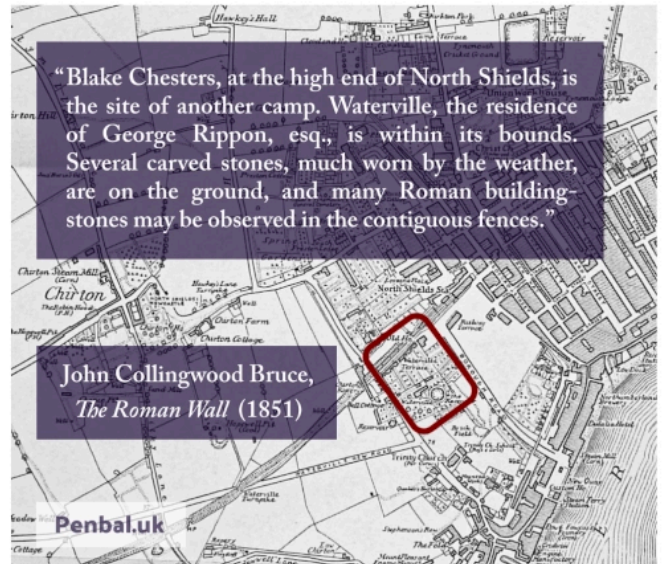
Green Chesters (hamlet now under Wallsend Police Station) ■

Rud (Red) Chester (Vindobala fort/Heddon-on-the-Wall) ■

Whit (White) Chester (settlement one mile NW of Rudchester) ■

Natural Points for Stations East of Wallsend

- 🚢 Point Pleasant: Dock
- 🔗 Flatworth: "Milecaste -1"
- 🔗 Ridges Farm: "Milecaste -2"
- 🏰 Blake Chesters: Fort
- 🔗 Adrian's Mound: "Milecaste -3"
- 🔥 Clifford's Fort: Beacon/Signal Station
- 🏛️ Penbal Crag: Beacon/Signal Station/Fort/Temple



Alexander Scott Park, North Shields, the site of the Waterville estate. Before North Shields existed, this would have lay in East Chirton.

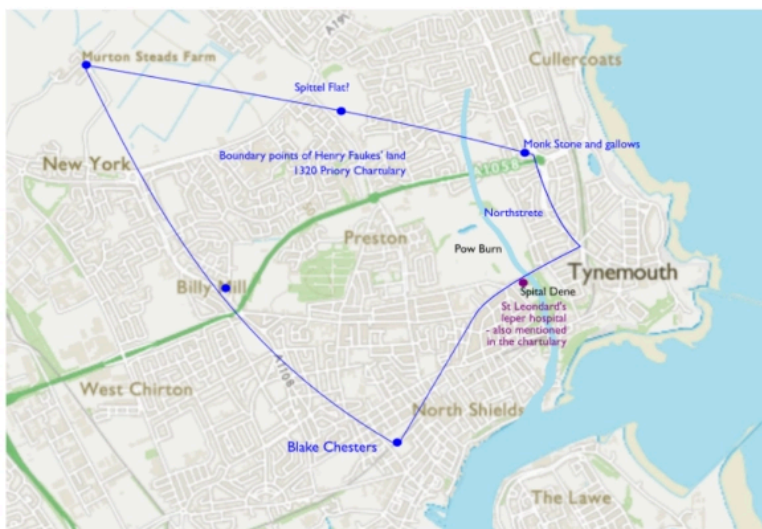
Sources for Blake Chesters

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 modern 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.

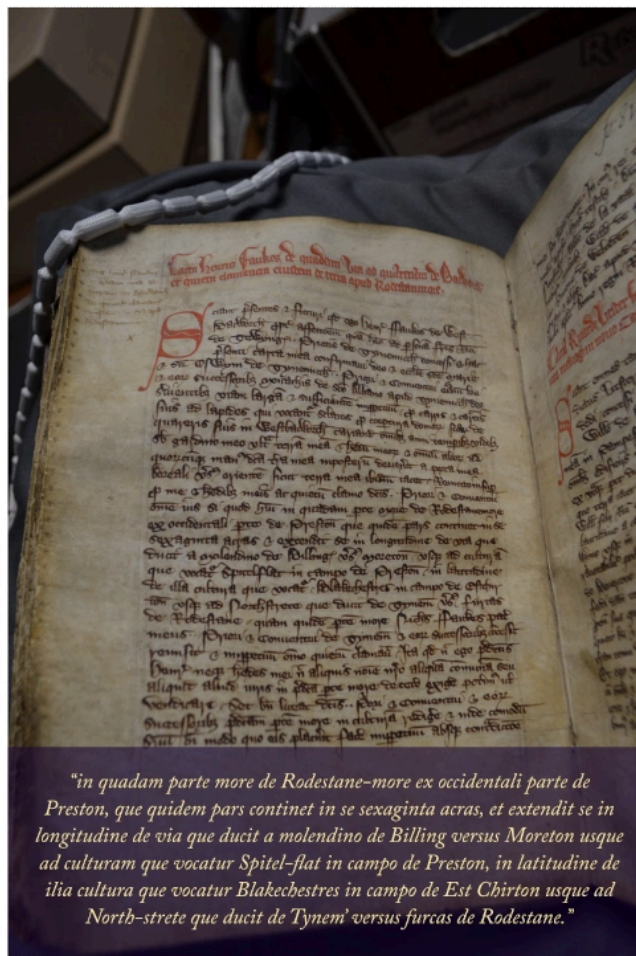
The Tynemouth Chartulary contained of all the Prior's lands, property, legal rights, liberties and privileges. In this particular 1320 document, the land of Henry Faukes of West Backworth is delineated in order for him to grant the monks of Tynemouth Priory right of way through his land to quarry slate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



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

“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)



“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.”

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 in-line 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.

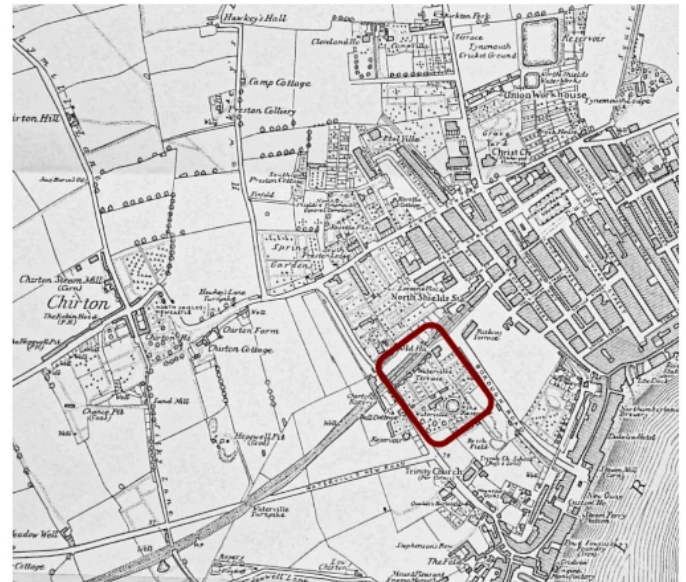
Waterville

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.

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'.



Wood's 1826 Map of North Shields & Tynemouth.



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."

"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 Caerboran, but from Blake Chesters. It was presented by Mr George Rippon"

While Collingwood Bruce wrote in 1851:

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

Written Out of History

There was a map published of Hadrian's Wall with 'Blake Chesters' labelled on it and this image was used for the front cover of this paper and shared with me courtesy of Allen Jones of Whitley Bay. The map folded out from the early editions of John Collingwood Bruce's masterwork, *Handbook to the Roman Wall* (1863) as well as in his earlier book, *The Roman Wall* (1851).

Blake Chesters was given prominence because Bruce saw the site himself and wrote about the strategic importance of it. However, in later editions from 1947 onwards, this Blake Chesters map entry was erased and a great deal of detail within the book along with much of Bruce's stylistic flourish became sanitised by successive editors. In regards to Blake Chesters, this occurred because the remains of the fort were gone by the 20th century. Nevertheless, this crude redaction and rewriting (errors notwithstanding), is viewed by the authors of this paper as deeply problematic and excessive.



Collingwood Bruce at his resting place in St Nicholas Cathedral. His feet lie on a copy of his book, *The Roman Wall*

Discord between Bruce & Craster

There's a certain level of discord between the accounts of the historians, HHE Craster and John Collingwood Bruce. More accurately, Bruce may be described as an antiquarian, in contrast to the more academic historian, Craster, who was granted full rein of the Duke of Northumberland's archives from which to write his volumes of the mammoth, *History of Northumberland*. It does seem by his accounts that Craster lacked an acute first-hand knowledge of the geography of what is now the North Tyneside area.

Bruce on the other hand, was from Newcastle and was a hands-on antiquary, venturing to the remote places he wrote about and sketching and cataloguing the artefacts he found, while employing reason and experience to speculate on the Roman occupation.

Both men were brilliant and venerated scholars. However, Craster wrote 50 years later than Bruce (1900s vs 1850s). He didn't see Blake Chesters as Bruce did — matter-of-factly before North Shields became built up.

Secondly, a knotty problem has arisen in Craster's understanding of the area. This lies in the fact there are two places called 'Rodestone' (*rode* or *rood* means 'cross' in Old English) that are both within the contiguous moor that has borne various names including Billy Mill Moor, Tynemouthshire Moor or Shire Moor.

More Discourse on Blake Chesters by JC Bruce

"THE RECENT DISCOVERIES AT SOUTH SHIELDS

Dr Bruce [John Collingwood Bruce] read a paper "on the recent Discoveries in the Roman camp on the Lawe, South Shields." In the course of his remarks, he said the great Wall of the Lower Isthmus had its eastern extremity on the north bank of the river Tyne, at the village which has taken its name from the circumstance—Wallsend. This place is about four miles from the junction of the river with the sea. The mouth of the Tyne, was not, however, undefended. On the opposite side of the estuary, standing upon a bold elevation, we have the camp at South Shields. These two camps, we might suppose, would have been sufficient to command the entrance to the Tyne. The

Romans thought otherwise. **At the western extremity of North Shields, at a place called Blake Chesters, about midway between Wallsend and Tynemouth Priory, were to be seen until lately the remains of a fortlet**, which is believed to have been Roman. Then on the south side of the river, and at about the same distance from the Lawe as Blake Chesters is from Tynemouth, we have the town of Jarrow, where undoubtedly the Romans had a station."

Newcastle Weekly Chronicle, 3.10.1884



The first Rodestone, near Tynemouth, is an Anglo-Saxon cross and ancient boundary marker of the northern limit of the Prior's land in Tynemouth. It was the place where felons were hanged outside of Church bounds and has been known since modern times as the Monk Stone. The antiquarian John Brand referred to it as the Rodestone in his *History of Newcastle*, vol II p 90 (1789).

That this is the Rodestone bordering Faukes' land in the 1320 Chartulary is somewhat churlishly dismissed without explanation by Craster in the footnotes on p413 of *History of Northumberland* as it presumably doesn't fit his erroneous belief in Blake Chesters being around the Billy Mill area*, or as he also confusingly stated, immediately north or west of Preston.

The second Rodestone is at Holystone in the Shiremoor area, west of Murton. Craster believes this is the Rodestone in the 1320 Chartulary.

NB: Northstrete ran north from Tynemouth, not from Billy Mill. It was the boundary between the Prior's land and Faukes' land, which the monks needed permission to cross for the quarrying of slate.

In assessing the evidence for the location of Blake Chesters, Craster should, in the authors' view, be given far less weight a) for an uncharacteristic lack of rigour in dismissing earlier antiquaries such as John Collingwood Bruce, but also John Brand*, and b) for his two fundamental errors elucidated above, viz. the Latin misinterpretation and the Rodestone conflation.

* Craster also cites on p316 a cist found at Billy Mill as evidence of Roman settlement, but this was found not to be Roman or even of medieval origin according to the 2001 archaeological assessment by RE Young.

* Brand was liable to error, also on this subject in his transcription of the 1320 document, but it seems Craster has used this to reject what else he states.

Surrounding Stones

According to a report in the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* on 26th Sept 1891, local journalist and historian, William Brockie, wrote in "The History of Shields" (1851):

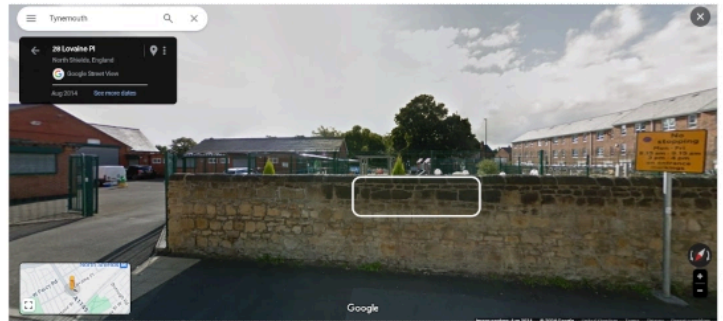
"The present turnpike road to Newcastle passes the west side of the camp. The foundation walls have been examined very recently and are only a few inches below the level of the road."

The authors have been unable to source this quote regarding this intriguing discovery of Roman stones that are presumably still below the tarmac on Coach Lane. However, thanks goes to Tyneside historian, Steve Ellwood, for sourcing these newspaper reports.

The "contiguous fences" Bruce talks of offer another clue to the place, as there are several walls in the streets around the site that are built with small, irregular and weathered sandstone blocks.

Point 4 on the map are the walls of the old Hylton Lodge, a John Dobson-designed manor house immediately north of Waterville (also a Dobson designed house), where the primary school is today. While points 5 and 6 were originally part of the gardens of the house.

Note how the stones in this picture of Point 4 form a distinct shape unlike typical bricks or wall stones. Could these be springer stones from a Roman arch to the camp?



Thank you to local Roman expert Peter Crasterfarian Angus for identifying these stones.

Walls of substantial age around the Blake Chesters site

Position

The Blake Chesters site is in strategic spot and on a high point locally. This vantage point is not easy to appreciate given the level of urban development around it, but when you stand in the park or on the pedestrian bridge on Coach Lane crossing the railway line below you can really get a sense for why the Romans chose this place. To this end, I ask any reader to stand on this bridge and remove all the buildings in your mind's eye to consider how ideal the place is. In short, it *feels* Roman, just as other forts, and forts speculated by Collingwood Bruce, also do, due to their *genius loci*.

Blake Chesters would have been within full view of:

- Wallsend
- Penbal Crag (another high point)
- Arbeia
- The supposed Roman forts at both Jarrow and where the Cleadon Mill is situated, the highest point within miles within view of both Pons Aelius and Sunderland (Dicti?) on the river Wear (Vedra?).
- As well as the supposed Roman fort on Penschaw Hill.

Line of sight was vital to the Romans' ability to communicate. They didn't like blind spots in their defensive line and the distance between the end of the Wall and the sea formed a massive blind spot. Line of sight communication was also far quicker and presented less of a risk than delivering written messages.

Thank you to local resident Adam Gray for help in sourcing these sections of wall.

At an Apex

Like the forts at Wallsend and Newcastle, Blake Chesters sits at a bend in the river called Panash Point with commanding views down two stretches: the Entrance Reach and the Shields Harbour Reach. It also sits on Coach Lane, which appears to be a very old route and toll gate to the river and the ferry landing, which appears to have been located there since time immemorial. There has been a ferry crossing for at least 800 years, since North Shields was founded. It's a key crossing point.

In a Straight Line

As well as this, Blake Chesters sits at the correct interval on a line from Newcastle to Tynemouth. Upon this line sits the easternmost section of Hadrian's Wall, the fort at Wallsend and 'Adrian's Mound'—halfway between Blake Chesters and Penbal Crag.

Milecastles 2 and 3, Segedunum fort and the Blake Chesters site sit perpendicular to this line which follows an east-north-easterly course. This line more or less follows the route of the railway. The excavation of this line and natural ridge through North Shields by the Victorians may have removed some Roman archaeology.

Water

The clue's in the name, *Waterville*. The Romans relied on streams beside their camps and Blake Chesters has an ample water supply. A reservoir is marked across the road in the 1856 Tynemouth Dock Map and the Spring Gardens district lies at the top of the road, also indicating a fresh water source.

Shape and Area

As stated before, the site and situation of Blake Chesters *feels* Roman. It is also flat and the correct shape and area for a Roman fort. Miraculously this patch of land was left free from building. Maybe the reason for this is that Alexander Scott, a local councillor and physician whom the park is named after, knew it was Roman. Perhaps he also knew George Rippon.

Leading Light

The modern day High Light and Low Light are two of the main features of Shields Harbour. When these white towers line up on entering the river, they provide a guide for ships to avoid the Black Middens, and before the Groyne was built, to steer clear of the Herd Sands on the south side. Navigation transits like this are common in the world's waterways and likely have their origin in the ancient world.

In Roman times, with Blake Chesters being on a high point locally, a beacon would have served an important purpose for ships a good distance away, being in-line with both a speculated signal station on the site of Clifford's Fort, and the middle of the old channel.

For further context on please read this detailed post:
A Roman Pharos at North Shields

<https://penbal.uk/a-roman-pharos-at-north-shields/>



Theory by Peter Crasterferian Angus

Roman signalling stations have been unearthed down the coast at Scarborough Castle and Whitby, which share similar geography (and history) with Penbal Crag. These belong to a relay of beacons along the Yorkshire coast. There were dozens of other Roman signalling stations on high points across Britain.

Below is an excellent artist's impression of the Scarborough station by Ivan Lapper, which resembles a pharos structure, not unlike the preserved pharos at Dover.



Adrian's Mound

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. 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.

Local Context

If we put these points 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.



Looking up at Blake Chesters from the west (Silkey's Lane). It sits at the crest of the bank down to the river.

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 outposts or Romano-British farmsteads. Were coins found in the fields surrounding these places? As well as this, the site of Green Chesters, now below Wallsend Police Station, 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 Gardiner 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. Although the location has yet to be confirmed and some of the statements made in this paper may be speculative, the authors believe the convergence of evidence towards the site of Waterville House is worthy of archaeological investigation.

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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 Boggenges 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 Tinmouth" — 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://twsitelines.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://twsitelines.info/SMR/5491>