

Echoes of the Past.

A VISIT TO THE ROMAN WALL.

BY COLONEL S. F. CLARK.

OUR country is full of relics of the past, each of them with its own peculiar interest, whether it be the work of Ancient Briton, of Saxon, or of Norman, but for richness of romance not one of them surpasses the Roman Wall near the Scottish border. Our pride of Empire is jolted as we look at this witness, on our own ground, of the former absorption of our England in another empire, and our imagination is stirred by the sight of the actual line where that dominion ended.

We are accustomed to find a country bounded by one of the works of Nature—a sea, a river, or a mountain range—but here is a man-made barrier in our own land, ordered by an Emperor to mark the chosen limit of his sway.

And his empire has crumbled like his wall, whose ruins remain to us as a reminder and a warning.

In the hope that this effort may send some of our corps to view this ancient rampart, I give an outline of its history and a short account of what I saw of it.

Julius Cæsar landed in Britain in 55 B.C., but it took the Romans about 135 years to subdue the country. When this had been done, about A.D. 80, Agricola fortified a line from the Forth to the Clyde, but he soon abandoned it and returned to Rome. Forty years afterwards the Britons in the north rose in revolt and destroyed the Ninth Legion at York, which brought the Emperor Hadrian on the scene in person, with the newly arrived Sixth Legion, and after restoring order he built a turf wall across England from the Solway to the coast of Northumberland, and declared that no further conquest should be made. After his death, however, Lollius Urbicus, a Roman general, pushed up again to Agricola's old line and built a wall of sods along it, which is still referred to as Agricola's wall. The two ramparts existed together for forty-five years, but in A.D. 185 the Romans were compelled to fall back to the Cheviot hills. They made no move for over twenty years, but about A.D. 208 the Emperor Severus took matters in hand and invaded Caledonia, but decided to make Hadrian's barrier his substantive frontier. It is apparent that this was a much stronger position than Agricola's, and Severus replaced the turf wall by one of stone, dug a deep ditch in front of it, and built forts, towers, and blockhouses at intervals. With a strong force of Roman soldiers behind it this wall was impervious to all attacks, and, until the Romans withdrew from England two hundred years later, it remained the "sure shield" of Rome's western flank. The successors of Severus made no

attempt to go beyond it, but they strengthened the wall and kept it amply garrisoned, so that the Scots were unable to gratify their national instinct to get into England, which exists even unto this day.

This article was begun in the summer of 1914, but it had to be put aside until a more convenient time. In June of that year a week-end duty took me to Carlisle, and I eagerly seized the chance of using the free Sunday in satisfying a long cherished desire to see the Roman Wall, so I went by train on the Saturday evening to the Orchard House Hotel at Gillsland.

Next morning I walked about two miles west to Birdoswald or Amboglanna, one of only three existing camps or large stations, each of which is thought to have held 12,000 men. Its outlines can be easily traced by the mounts which mark its boundaries, and a guard room still exists on each side of one of the gates, but what I really appreciated were the grooves worn on the sill stone of the opening by the wheels of chariots and other vehicles. They were as clear as if they had been made yesterday, while there was no mistaking the holes in the stone in which the pivots of the gate had swung.

Refreshed by Sunday's midday dinner at the hotel, I took an afternoon train to Haltwhistle, as the map showed a line of wall about three miles north of that place. After leaving the train I made for three crags which I was told were at the wall, but it was heavy going, over fields and fences on to moorland, with long wet grass and swampy patches, always up hill, while an unseasonably cold, searching wind blew strongly over the moor, driving before it drenching showers of rain which fell at intervals.

At last I reached the crags, and all my toil was forgotten as I saw before me a low, narrow mound winding its way both east and west, which I gazed at with the utmost interest. Was this the boundary of the empire of ancient Rome? Yes, at one spot in the mound the earth had been scraped away, laying bare a cut grey stone—undoubtedly it was the Roman Wall.

To the east was a long stretch of precipitous crags—itsself a first-rate defence—and as one saw how the wall ran along the top of tense steep rocks, one recognized why this area had been included in the fortified frontier. Against the weapons of 1,700 years ago the commander of this section of the rampart had an easy billet.

I should have liked to have gone east, but time pressed, so I walked in the opposite direction on the top of the wall, which was merely a continuous narrow ridge of earth about four feet high, with, apparently, a stone centre. A dressed stone at times peeped out of the face of the ridge, and at one place a blockhouse had been restored, but it was easy to see that the countryside had looked upon the wall as a heaven-sent quarry of prepared stones for the building of their farmhouses and of their field boundaries. It is surprising that any stones at all are left in place, but presently, amid a growth of small trees, ferns, and wild flowers, the ridge

became a wall again, and I counted nine courses of stone above ground, all in position as the builders had left them. I believe that this is as good a piece of the wall as can be seen anywhere: there is not much of it, and small trees have rooted themselves in it and damaged it, but there it is, without doubt, a wall. The stones were all of a grey colour, shaped very like bricks, but rather larger, and each one had been carefully squared and dressed, and well and truly laid. It was evident that the wall had been no jerry-built affair, but was erected with skill and craftsmanship.

This fragment doubtless owed its immunity from removal to its remoteness. It stood in a bleak and desolate spot on the moors, not a human being was in sight, and the cries of the curlews and peewits added to the wildness of the scene. I peered over the top of the wall and thought of the countless Roman soldiers who had done the same thing, and who had seen the Solway gleaming in the west as I saw it, and the moor stretching endlessly to the north and to the east. As the cold wind blew through me on that summer day, I could imagine what keeping watch there in mid-winter must have meant to the Roman sentry, and how he must have longed for the soft breezes of his own country, and must have cursed the fate that had brought him to this inhospitable spot.

Further to the west the ridge ended abruptly at a modern quarry, but in a field beyond was a fine piece of the ditch which Severus had dug in front of the wall. It ran down hill in a perfectly straight line to Thirlwall Castle, which is said to mark the spot at which the Scots broke through the abandoned defences after the withdrawal of the Romans. This castle was so unashamedly built of the stones of the wall, that it is not surprising that all signs of the barrier were lost at this point.

The village of Greenhead was not far off, and after a much needed visit to the inn there, I walked back to Gillsland and arrived in time for supper—tired but contented.

I have seen much in many lands, but in my store of mental pictures not the least treasured are the views that I can call up of the bleak north country moor on which I saw the line that marked the limit of the wonderful Empire of a great people.

