THE ANTONINE WALL

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The east-west link provided by the Forth/Clyde isthmus offers the shortest route from coast to coast across central Scotland, and as such formed an important strategic zone. The Romans recognised this initially in the first century under Agricola, and again in the second century when Q. Lollius Urbicus became governor of the province of 'Britannia' in A.D. 139. The Antonine Wall was completed by A.D. 142/143, this date being arrived at from a coin issued in A.D. 142/143, which has been interpreted as commemorating the successful completion to campaigns by the Roman Army, aimed at conquering and occupying southern Scotland.

For a period of 20 — 40 years the Antonine Wall formed the northern frontier of the Roman Empire. Like Hadrian's Wall, built some 20 years earlier, the building of the Antonine Wall proceeded from east to west, running for almost 60 Kilometres from Bridgeness on the Forth to Old Kilpatrick on the Clyde, clinging closely to the southern valley slopes. The Antonine Wall is considered by many to be the most important ancient monument in Scotland, and the 21 Kilometres of its length which lie in the Central Region include some of its best preserved sectors. (Fig. 1)

The wall comprises four main elements: (Fig. 2)

(a) The Rampart

Excavations have confirmed the literary evidence that the Wall was constructed, over the greater part of its length, from squared blocks of turf — "murus cespiticus" resting on a single course of stone-work which provided a stable and level base for the Rampart (Plate nine). This base consists of a core of large rounded boulders edged by two rows of dressed kerb stones. Over the first 14.5 Kilometres, the nature of the Rampart varies to include an earth or clay core revetted with clay or turf cheeks (facings). Over the whole length of the Wall there is considerable variation in the width of the base (between 4.3m and 4.88m). This variation, while possibly relating to military considerations, may be partly related to the activities of individual legions or work squads involved in the construction work. The
The original height of the Rampart would not have been less than 3m and this would probably be surmounted by a timber breastwork, giving an overall height of c. 5m.

Fig. 1. The Antonine Wall in Central Scotland
Plate 9. The Antonine Wall
Fig. 2. The Antonine Wall—cross section

(b) The Ditch

To the north of the Antonine Wall a V-shaped Ditch was dug out, again varying in size to a maximum of 12.2m wide and 3.7m deep. The berm i.e. the level stretch of ground between the Wall and the Ditch, is normally 6.1m wide. The upcast from the Ditch was deposited on the northern lip and, depending on the lie of the ground, was either spread out or heaped up to form a counter-scarp (also known as the Outer Mound).

(c) The Forts

As on Hadrian's Wall the garrison from the Antonine Frontier was housed in a series of Forts located to the south of the wall. It seems likely that there were originally 19 forts at intervals of 3.2 Kilometres. Of the 8 which lie in the Central Region the precise location of 2 is unknown and, of the others, only that at Rough Castle can still be clearly seen on the ground (N.S.843798).

(d) The Military Way

This, the main line of communication between the Wall Forts, ran parallel to the Wall, some 35 — 40m behind it (i.e. to the south). It was 4.9 — 5.5m wide with a foundation of large stones set in clay, overlain by a cambered surface of cobbles covered with fine gravel.

The Antonine Wall, its Ditch, its Forts and its Military Way have, in many sectors, been entirely erased by agricultural or industrial activity. Because most of the Rampart was constructed of earth/turf the remaining outlines have suffered considerably from the natural processes of erosion and deposition. The result is that over much of its length the Wall is no longer visible on the surface although its approximate course is marked on the Ordnance Survey 6 inch Maps. The maximum height of the existing remains is 1.8m. However, it is important to note that some of the best preserved sectors of the Rampart and Ditch lie in this Region, together with the best preserved of the Wall Forts. The following section indicates those places where the Wall can still be clearly seen.

1. **N.S.950798 - 948795** - (Access is from the minor road which runs east to Polmonthill Farm from the point where the B.904 crosses the River Avon.) From the River Avon to the west of Polmonthill
Farm lies a clearly visible stretch of Ditch. This is now part of Grangemouth Golf Course.

2. **N.S.901795 - 897796** - (Access is via the main park entrance from the A.9 (Laurieston Road), Falkirk.)

While the Rampart is no longer visible, the Ditch is still readily traceable for a distance of some 550 m in the grounds of Callendar Park, Falkirk. It measures up to 12.2 m wide and is still c 2.7 m deep.

3. **N.S.866798 - 862796** - (This stretch is signposted from the junction of the A.9 (Camelon Road) and Glenfuir Road, and can be reached by following the B.816 (Tamfourhill Road) towards High Bonnybridge.

The section from Lock 16 on the Forth and Clyde Canal to Watling Lodge runs for a distance of 320 m, with the Ditch in a remarkably fine state of preservation. It is 12.2 m wide, and scarp (the side of the Ditch next to the Rampart) and counter-scarp (the side of the Ditch opposite to the Rampart) measure up to 4.6 m and 3.4 m in height respectively. There are now no surface indications of the Rampart, but the northern lip of the Ditch is heightened by the upcast mound.

4. **N.S.857798 - 834798** - (Access is easiest from the west, following the B.816 from its junction with the A.803 at Bonnybridge, across the Canal to Bonnyside House.)

This is the finest surviving stretch of the entire Wall, running from Tentfield Plantation to Bonnyside House, a distance of around 2.4 Kilometres (Plate nine i). It is under the guardianship of the Department of the Environment, and open to the public. Both the Ditch and the Rampart are traceable with only minor interruptions over all of this sector. The Rampart stands to a height of 1.5 -1.8 m in places; the Ditch is uniformly 12.2 m wide and 3.3 m at its deepest. A short stretch of the Military Way can be seen 550 m to the east of Rough Castle Fort, c 200 m south-west of the Rampart, and again between Rowantree Burn and Woodside Cottage, where it is in the form of a low turf-covered mound 27 — 36 m south of the Rampart. From Woodside Cottage to Bonnyside House the road cannot be seen, but a number of quarry pits are
visible immediately behind the Rampart; these were the source of the gravel used as top-dressing for the Military Way.

A further feature of this sector is the existence of 4 turf platforms, projecting at regular intervals from the south face of the Rampart. Excavation has suggested that these were signalling platforms linking the Wall with the forward area of the Stirling Gap.

Rough Castle N.S.843798 -

Rough Castle is the best preserved of all the Antonine Wall Forts. It lies in a belt of moorland 1.6 Kilometres east of Bonnybridge, on a slope which rises sharply from the east bank of the Rowantree Burn. The site is under the guardianship of the Department of the Environment.

It is a very small Fort, about 65.5 square metres internally, enclosing a little over 0.4 ha. The northern defence of the Fort is formed by the Antonine Wall itself and its Ditch. Beyond the Ditch lies a unique series of defensive pits or lilia, 0.76 m deep. Some of these are still visible and were originally arranged in ten parallel rows.

On the other three sides, the Fort rampart was built of turf laid on a stone foundation 3.3 m thick and fronted by two ditches. The scarp of the rampart survives to a height of 2.5 m and is spread over 10 — 11 m. There were four gateways, the northern one being 6.2 m wide, centrally placed with a causeway across the Ditch. Initially, the Military Way appears to have run from east to west through the Fort as the via principalis, but subsequently a bypass was constructed on the southern side of the Fort. The former route can still be seen as a track 5.0 m wide running across the Fort. Inside the Fort the remains of three stone buildings were excavated, the headquarters building (principle), the granary, and the commandant's house, and a number of timber-framed buildings, probably barrack blocks have also been located. None of these internal structures are now traceable on the ground. To the east of the Fort lies an annexe of 0.6 ha, defended by an earthen rampart. The remains of a single ditch on the south and three on the east are now barely visible, while nothing is to be seen of the bath house which formerly stood in this annexe.

5. N.S.815793 - 811792 (Access is from the B.816, about halfway between Bonnybridge and Castlecary.)
Rampart, Ditch, and Outer Mound are all very clear for around 0.4 Kilometres in Seabegs Wood, the Rampart standing to a height of around 1.2 m in places. The Ditch is 12.2 m wide and the Military Way is also visible as a cambered mound 4.9 - 5.5 m wide and some 0.5 m high. This sector is in the guardianship of the Department of the Environment.

6. **N.S.799788 - 795787** - (This sector can be seen from the B.816 to the east of its junction with the A.80, Stirling/Glasgow Road.)

   From Woodend to Castlecary Primary School the Ditch is quite prominent and can be clearly followed.

**FURTHER READING**


