

## The Milecastles

The term ‘milecastle’ was introduced to the scholarly community in 1708 by Robert Smith, who noted that it was then current amongst the inhabitants of the Wall zone (Birley 1961, 89). It is applied to an installation type that is recognisable as an adaptation of the fortlet class and was spaced at intervals of approximately 1 Roman mile along the course of the Wall. Physically anchored into the frontier curtain, which served as a north rampart, the milecastles normally contain two gates and permit passage through the border wall. In contrast to the turrets, the milecastles were constructed of stone on the Stone Wall and of turf on the Turf Wall. They are small by the standards of freestanding fortlets, with an average internal area of 277m<sup>2</sup> on the Stone Wall. The largest attested internal area comes from the stone rebuild of milecastle 52, which enclosed 644m<sup>2</sup>. Integral to the building plan for the Wall from the very start, the original specifications would have seen the milecastles holding the bulk of the forces stationed on the Wall line. However, the ‘fort decision’ fundamentally altered this relationship and the full consequences of this for the milecastle sequence remain incompletely understood. Welfare has observed that “much of the debate about the changing function of Hadrian’s Wall centres around the role of the milecastle...” (Welfare 2000, 14), while Dobson dubbed them “one of the great mysteries of the Wall” (Dobson 1986, 9).

The milecastles were numbered from 1-80, east to west, by Collingwood in 1930, and Hill has recently put the case for a milecastle 0 (Hill 2001). West of milecastle 9 their locations are, with the exception of the stretch between milecastles 65 and 71, reasonably fixed. East of milecastle 9, under modern Newcastle and Wallsend, the picture is less clear. Much of our information is dependent on antiquarian observations, with Stukeley, Horsley, MacLauchlan and others all recording possible sites. However as Hill (2001, 3) observed: “the positions given by the three writers do not coincide”. Furthermore, the Westgate Road milecastle does not fit the presumed location of milecastles 4 or 5, although it is currently considered most likely to be the former. The distance between MacLauchlan’s milecastle 1 and the Westgate Road milecastle is 271m longer than 3 Roman miles, while the stretch west to milecastle 9 is 282m less than 5 Roman miles (Hill 2001, 11). Elsewhere on the curtain, varying the intervening distance between milecastles prevented them being built in streams or on split-levels. Woolliscroft (1989) has also demonstrated how they would complement a signalling system incorporating the Stanegate forts. Despite this limited flexibility, the overall system is remarkably rigid and the awkward relationship that a number of milecastles enjoyed with the local topography has been well documented.

The provision of gates through the frontier barrier has earned the milecastles the epithet of “fortified gateways” (Breeze & Dobson 2000, 33). As the regular spacing of the milecastles has resulted in gates that are not always in the most apposite locations, it has been suggested that “it was simpler to provide [the gates] on a massive scale than to commission an investigation on the ground of what may be required” (Dobson 1986, 12). While this aspect was unquestionably important, the 30m vertical drop to the north of milecastle 35 meant that a north gate was never provided there. The fundamental question of whether civilians were permitted to pass through the milecastle gates remains unresolved. Welfare (2000) has discussed the futility of having gateways through the Wall without an attendant provision to cross the ditch,

and concluded from field survey that earth causeways were originally retained at these points.

Four different stone gate types are recognisable in plan, although type II is a Narrow Wall adaptation of type IV. These were attributed to specific legions, but Hill (1991, 36) has pointed out that it is unlikely the legions named on the building inscriptions are the same as those that commenced work there, due to a dislocation during the construction phase. The north and south gates in the stone installations are mirror images, but what little is known of the turf milecastles indicates less uniformity. At milecastle 50 TW the north gate structure consisted of 10 posts, while the south had 6. It is generally assumed that both gates carried towers (Hill & Dobson 1992, 36), although the matter remains contentious (Breeze 2006, 67).

Two types of milecastle are discernable in plan and known as either long or short axis. The single known exception is the stone rebuild of milecastle 79, which was square. On the Stone Wall, all known short axis milecastles, and the long axis milecastle 18, have type I gates. All other long axis installations have type IV / II or III gates.

Simpson believed that the Broad and Narrow gauges found on the curtain were replicated in the milecastle perimeter walls (Simpson 1931, 310). Milecastle wall widths range from 2.9-2.1m on the Stone Wall and 2.5-2m on the rebuilt Turf Wall. It is likely that those milecastles with Broad perimeter walls were begun during the lifespan of the Broad curtain and Symonds (2005) has suggested that at least some were completed to this gauge. The majority of milecastles on the Stone Wall with Narrow side and south perimeters have a Broad north wall. This has been attributed to either the completion of milecastles designated for modular construction after the reduction to the Narrow Gauge (Stevens 1966, 53) or a policy to provide narrower perimeter walls from the start (Hooley & Breeze 1968). Wilmott's confirmation that the short axis milecastle 14 had Broad ramparts means that all three Stone Wall milecastle types are known to have been initially constructed to the Broad Gauge. The building schedule may have been influenced by a desire to complete those milecastles in areas where the topography facilitated unregulated north-south access across the Wall line (Symonds 2005, 72).

There is evidence for the primary internal arrangements of six of the milecastles: 9, 35, 37, 47, 48 and 50 TW, with some details also available for 39. With the exception of 50 TW, the known barrack blocks are of stone and it remains possible that they had timber predecessors. There are indications of wooden structures in some of the Stone Wall milecastles. A posthole was detected in the western half of milecastle 9 (Birley 1929, 156), while early timber buildings in milecastle 39 have been associated with construction work (Woodside & Crow 1999, 40). Nevertheless, the one certain example of a Hadrianic milecastle barrack block, from milecastle 50 TW, is sufficiently similar to the stone examples from milecastles 9, 35 and 37 to sustain the possibility that they accurately reflect the original internal layout. If so, then the discrepancy between the large double barrack blocks in milecastles 47 and 48, and those in milecastles 9, 35, 37 and 50TW is marked. The barrack-block in milecastle 9 covered 32m<sup>2</sup>, those in milecastle 48 172m<sup>2</sup>. It has been suggested that this equates to a divergence in garrison size from 8 to 32 (Breeze & Dobson 1972, 188-9). The remains of a stone staircase providing access to the rampart were found in milecastle

48. Stone ovens are widespread. Milecastles 9, 23, 25, 29 and 51 had perimeter ditches.

Alongside the building inscriptions, a collection of altars and tombstones have been found in or near thirteen milecastles. Religious dedications are the most common occurrence, with Cocidius the named deity on eight inscriptions at six sites (Breeze 2002, 60). Further finds from milecastles include: coins, brooches, glass, tiles, *mortaria*, cooking wares, samian, jars, bowls, amphora, gaming boards, gaming counters, beads, spindle whorls, scabbard chapes, a surgical implement (48), intaglios, lamps, millstones, hammers, a pickaxe, spearheads, nails, a weight (?), a wooden writing tablet (50 TW), a plumb-bob casing (79), whetstones, a millefiori and enamel disk (40), studs, pins, rings, arrowheads, a bolthead (35), knives, a dagger (35), harness pieces (40, 48), a shield boss, hobnails, and carved stone ‘Celtic Heads’ (35, 8?). Allason-Jones has commented on “some distinct similarities” to the material found in the turrets, while noting the absence of finger rings and intaglios from the latter. She also uses a concentration of finds with Wheel motifs to suggest that milecastle 35 was manned by a detachment from Housesteads (Allason-Jones 1988, 217-218).

### **Post-Antonine milecastle use**

The advance into Scotland was accompanied by the removal of the milecastle gates and the destruction of their pivot holes. One of the first steps in reinstating Hadrian’s Wall as a viable frontier line must have been to replace both elements. Welfare has argued that it is likely that “in the later second century the role of each milecastle was evaluated individually, according to its geographical and tactical position” (Welfare 2000, 18). At around this time the large milecastle double gates were removed and replaced by narrow posterns or, at milecastle 22, fully blocked. A number of milecastle ditch causeways were probably also eliminated during this period (Welfare 2000, 13). The Westgate Road milecastle and a number of milecastle gate towers elsewhere may have been demolished. Tower superstructure from milecastle 79 SW was found in a pit containing early third-century pottery (Richmond & Gillam 1952, 19-20), while fallen voussoirs from the north gate at milecastle 48 lay stratigraphically between the secondary pivots and the reducing wall (Gibson & Simpson 1911, 411-413).

There appears to have been a third-century expansion of internal buildings in at least some milecastles. In milecastle 9 the stone barrack was enlarged and a further building erected in the western half (Birley 1930, 157-158). Unfortunately there are no indications of the nature of this occupation, and it cannot be dated with any precision. There is a comparable increase in internal buildings at milecastle 35, with pottery suggesting that they survived into the early fourth century (Haigh & Savage 1984, 39-44). No coins from between AD 180 to 259 are known from the milecastles. The most recent analysis of the pottery, from milecastle 35, suggests occupation continuing throughout the third century, but notes that this may “overrepresent actual occupation” as the examples given as early-third-century could be late-second (Haigh & Savage 1984, 111).

Milecastles 9, 35, 37, 38, 39, 48, 50, 51, 54 and 79 have yielded fourth-century material. Associated structures are less widespread. The south gates at milecastles 51 and 52 were rebuilt in the late-third or early-fourth-century with monumental uprights, apparently intended to carry a flat lintel (Simpson & Richmond 1935b, 252-256). The only detailed evidence for internal arrangement comes from milecastle 35. At around the start of the fourth century this site appears to have been “cleared” and levelled, this latter “apparently also blocking access through the south gate”. As this was the only entrance, it may suggest that the rampart no longer stood, although the fourth-century buildings appear to respect its course. The buildings are described as “cruder than their predecessors” and part of the interior was devoted to metal-working. By the last third of the fourth century, the excavators concluded that “it may no longer have been recognisable as a milecastle” (Haigh & Savage 1984, 46-51).

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