

# H O L M E H I L L

## ITS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

There are no historical documents that throw light on the early history of Dunblane when Holmehill may have been a significant site. Any assessment of the hill has therefore to be archaeological, but even here we are largely in unknown territory. In their book *Historic Dunblane* Patricia Dennison and Russell Coleman could go no further than stating that Holmehill was of "unknown potential" archaeologically. That is because the hill has never been systematically excavated or archaeologically surveyed. In our present state of knowledge all we can do is point to reasons why the hill may be significant while recognising that these are as yet unproven.

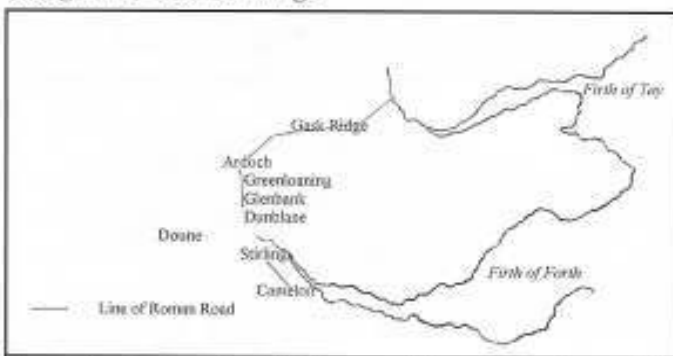
Of considerable interest is the possibility of Roman remains on Holmehill. Everybody in Dunblane is aware that the Argyll estate is built over two Roman camps, but few people know that the Roman presence in what is now the parish of Dunblane was of much more importance. Thus there is no doubt that the Roman road north from the Forth, their only supply route except by sea, ran through Dunblane. The Ordnance Survey map of Roman Britain shows the road running from Camelon to the King's Knot in Stirling where all trace of it disappears. It resumes in the parish of Dunblane about a mile south of Glenbank farm approximately where the Little Chef is located on the Perth road. From there it runs through Greenloaning to Ardoch then north to the river Tay. It follows that the missing part of the road must have run through Dunblane either via the Roman fort at Doune or in a straight line from Stirling.



to monitor, isolate and destroy any hostile force from the Highlands, coming south to raid Fife. It is obvious that Glenbank is not the terminus of the line, which must have continued to the Forth, if not further. As a result, there will have been other signal stations and fortlets in what is now the parish of Dunblane. Given its strategic position, with extensive views to the north and south, and the importance of the road with its barrier of signal stations and forts, it is unlikely that the Romans ignored Holmehill.

Then there is the more familiar possibility that St Blane established a monastery on Holmehill. The evidence for this theory rests on the derivation of the place name, Dunblane that is 'Blane's fort'. A number of historians have hypothesised that Blane's monastery was located on Holmehill with the site for lay worship being where the Cathedral now stands. Such a division between a site for the religious, that is a monastery, and that for the lay people, was common in Celtic religious settlements.

Some fifty years ago Marjorie Anderson questioned this generally accepted interpretation of the founding of Dunblane. She pointed out that there was an alternative spelling of Dunblane, that is 'Dulblaan', which was used in the Pictish Chronicle. Since the word 'dul' means a meadow 'Dulblaan' translated as 'Blane's meadow'. She argued that this might be



A map showing the path of the Roman road between Camelon and the River Tay and the defensive barrier between the Forth and the Tay

But the Roman road north of the Forth was not only a supply route it is likely that it was also a military barrier. Starting at the Tay a line of signal stations and forts runs along side the Roman road. This line is especially evident along the Gask Ridge and close to Ardoch. To date its southern most points are the signal station at Greenloaning and the fortlet at Glenbank farm. David Woolliscroft's view is that this line of forts and signal stations was probably a barrier designed to split the

used followed by the name of a saint in the period when Dunblane was established. Marjorie Anderson's interpretation confirms the association of the town with St. Blane but does not of itself imply the existence of a monastery



An aerial photograph taken of Holmehill in 1995, the arrow indicates the feature which interested archaeologists (by kind permission of the Royal Commission for Ancient and Historical Monuments Scotland).

While the derivations of the place name Dunblane are of interest undue attention to them leads to the neglect of other crucial evidence. In his book *Kingship and Unity: Scotland 1000-1306* Geoffrey Barrow asserted that seven of the ten Scottish bishoprics, which existed in 1155, including Dunblane, were already much older foundations. He deduced that they were ancient foundations because of the complex intermingling of their respective lands, "and a profusion of detached portions (of land) often remote from the mother church." He argued that no 12<sup>th</sup> century king would have created bishoprics with such geographically illogical land holdings so that the origin of these bishoprics must have been based on "ancient churches of a Celtic monastic type". Given in addition Dunblane's clear association with St. Blane, who lived in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, Dunblane emerges as one of the most important early settlements in Scotland. As such no development should take place on a site like Holmehill in the centre of the town without being preceded by very thorough excavation.

There is one final interesting finding. In 1995 a piece of archaeological evidence emerged as a result of aerial photographs of Holmehill. These revealed traces of an earthwork on the edge of a knoll 165 yards north west of the site of Holmehill House. It is fairly enigmatic being described as a "possible banked circular feature" and is only visible as "a shadow."

In conclusion I consider that Holmehill may be of considerable archaeological significance. Should any development be considered on the hill, it is essential that a very thorough series of excavations be carried out including the parts of the hill covered by trees. An aerial survey would not suffice. The surface of the ground on top of the hill has been greatly disturbed by the erection and occupation of Holmehill House and if there were structures on the hill, even a Roman signal station, they will have been made of wood. The excavations would therefore need to be of the very highest quality both in the area covered and in the search for any surviving evidence. Further

action would depend on the outcome of these findings. To behave otherwise would be cultural and environmental vandalism.

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