

Stirton¹

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This brief contribution aims to correct details of the etymology for the West Riding place-name of Stirton (near Skipton-in-Craven) given by Smith in his standard reference work.² Given a precise and correct explanation, the name can be added to the otherwise sparse evidence available to us about the course of Roman roads in Yorkshire.

In his study on Roman Roads in Britain, Margary follows Villy in postulating a Roman road running from Skipton to Ingleton, suggesting that the course would be as follows:

Leaving Skipton, a straight road, Raikes Lane, climbs directly to the high ground upon a line which is the continuation of that by which the Skipton-Ilkley road ... climbs the opposite hill to Skipton Moor. Raikes Lane turns westward and descends again to the Settle main road at Thorlby, but this may not be the original course.³

Margary suggests two possible alignments onwards. No actual archaeological traces of this road are mentioned, nor have any such to my knowledge been found; the possible courses are deduced from long straight alignments of twentieth-century lanes and paths.

That there was indeed a Roman road along this alignment is confirmed by the name of the hamlet of Stirton north of Skipton. The probable further

¹ I am indebted to W. B. Lockwood, Reading & Goslar, F. Valentine Rowley, Skipton, and the editors of the *Journal of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society* for help in preparing this study.

² A. H. Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, 8 vols, English Place-Name Society, 30–37 (Cambridge, 1961–63), VI, 76 and VII, 252.

³ I. D. Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain*, 2 vols (London, 1957), II, 139; F. Villy, 'The Craven Way; or, the Roman Road from York to Carlisle via Settle', *The Bradford Antiquary*, 8 (1940), 251–62 (pp. 258–59 and 262). See also A. Raistrick, 'Roman remains and roads in West Yorkshire', *Journal of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society*, 31 (1933), 214–23.

course of the road from the top of the Skipton Raikes northwards thus becomes clearer: the road will indeed have turned westward and so passed through Stirton on its way to Thorlby. Stirton (*Strattun* 1120–47, *Strettun* c.1140) bears a name meaning ‘homestead on the Roman road’⁴; the first element deriving from Old English *str̥t*, which is ultimately a loan from Latin (*via*) *strata*. This derivation is undisputed, but the interpretation ‘Farmstead near the street’ given by Smith, who adds ‘The village is near the main road through Airedale from Skipton to Kendal’,⁵ ignores the fact that the present-day route of this road, avoiding Stirton, was only constructed in the early nineteenth century.⁶ Until this diversion, still known locally as the ‘turnpike’, was opened in 1824, the main road ran not near but through the village; only thereafter did the old course become a minor lane, still in existence today. Smith himself actually glosses the place-name element *str̥t* as ‘paved way, Roman road, street’,⁷ and Ekwall in his place-name dictionary writes quite explicitly about various Strettons (of whose name Stirton is merely a variant): ‘All the places are on Roman roads’.⁸

More cautiously, Faull writes:

It obviously cannot be assumed that every single ‘street’ name must refer to a Roman road ... However, the courses of many of the [Roman] roads in West Yorkshire are so uncertain that such names may provide valuable clues for future work.⁹

And as mentioned above, no actual archaeological traces of a Roman road through Stirton have so far been registered. However, the excavation of a Roman villa near neighbouring Gargrave has shown a ‘large number of rectangular plots on each side of what is certainly the road leading in the

⁴ E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 4th edn (Oxford, 1960), pp. 443 and 450.

⁵ Smith, *Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, VI, 76.

⁶ Cf. J. J. Brigg, *The King’s Highway in Craven* (Keighley, 1927), pp. 42–44.

⁷ Smith, *Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, VII, 252.

⁸ Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, p. 450. Margary, *Roman Roads*, II, 235, also stresses the significance of the word *Street*.

⁹ In *West Yorkshire. An Archaeological Survey to A.D. 1500*, edited by M. L. Faull and A. Moorhouse, vol. 1 (Wakefield, 1981), p. 156.

direction of STIRTON'.¹⁰ This road must have been a branch of the road from Skipton to Ingleton, postulated by Margary. And the name of Stirton is clearly a very strong sign that the village was indeed sited on the Roman road. There has even been speculation that an earthwork known as 'Cock Pit' near Stirton crossroads might be taken from aerial photographs to have been a Roman camp or villa.¹¹

Stirton is thus quite clearly so named because of its location on a Roman road, a fact as yet not recognized. The Roman road deduced by Margary from Skipton to Ingleton is in fact confirmed by the place-name Stirton. It continued in a straight line from Short Bank in Skipton, at the bottom of which the well-known Roman road from York to Ribchester bore off to the left,¹² across Eller Beck near the present Mill Bridge and approximately followed the pre-1824 course of the old road to Kendal through Stirton as far as Thorlby, whence it perhaps continued northward towards Ingleton with a branch across the River Aire to the Roman villa near Gargrave.

Although Stirton is a mere hamlet, omitted from all but the largest-scale maps, its name is important historical evidence. Careful philological analysis, often taken together with clues from archaeological studies, can still throw light on the antiquities of Britain.

¹⁰ H. M. Gill, *The History of Gargrave* (Sheffield, 1988), p. 25. The Roman villa at Kirk Sink near Gargrave was on the other side of the River Aire, and road access to the villa was previously only assumed from the south from a Roman fort at Elslack (W. Thompson Watkin, *Roman Lancashire* (Liverpool, 1883), p. 79), but the stepping stones and ford in the present-day village show that this need not be an argument against road access from the Stirton side of the river.

¹¹ J. Broadbent, *The History of Stirton-with-Thorlby* (Skipton-in-Craven, 1995), p. 30.

¹² Margary, *Roman Roads*, II, 105–06; P. Ross, 'Roman roads in Yorkshire. Ribchester to York. The road between Downham Park and Bramham Moor', *The Bradford Antiquary*, 6 (1921), 33–64 (p. 49). See also A. and S. E. Raistrick, *Skipton. A Study in Site Value* (Newtown, 1930), p. 5.