Illus 1 Innerpeffray Library, location plan.

Illus 2 Photo, the Innerpeffray cutting
A possible Roman road cutting at Innerpeffray Library, Perthshire

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with a contribution by Birgitta Hoffmann

Archaeologists have long been aware of a well preserved and obviously artificial cutting running through woodland, immediately S of Innerpeffray Library (Illus 1 and 2), on the E side of the River Earn (NGR NN902184). The library stands on an eroded drumlin atop an almost sheer river cliff and local lore has it that the cutting represents the Roman Gask road coming up the otherwise very steep bank from its crossing of the Earn. This has always seemed eminently plausible, especially in view of the scale of engineering involved. There are a number of other, albeit smaller, cuttings known on the Gask road. The top (E end) of the feature can be seen turning onto an alignment which heads towards the next known stretch of the road (NGR NN912184–917185), in and around Parkneuk Wood (Woolliscroft and Davies, 2002) and the line has been traced from the air over virtually the whole of the intervening 1.05km, flanked by Roman style quarry pits (e.g. Cambridge negs AWA87 and RE46). Its lower end is aligned on an old ford in the river (early O.S. maps show a ferry just upstream), from the opposite end of which air photography has detected what seems to be the road to the Roman fort of Strageath, which lies just 350m to the SW. Indeed, some scholars appear to have accepted the Roman identification without comment (e.g. Frere and Wilkes, 1989, fig 4). Nevertheless, there has been a competitor line for the Roman road route; for Roy (1793, PL XIX) shows the road passing to the W of Strageath (running approximately S–N) and crossing the Earn c. 400m upstream (W) of its confluence with the Pow Water (not immediately upstream as shown in Frere and Wilkes, 1989, fig 3). He then shows it turning to the E, crossing the Pow Water and running to the N of Innerpeffray towards Parkneuk. There had, however, been no modern evidence for such a course and modern scholars have tended to discount the existence of the line (e.g. Crawford 1949, 51 and Frere and Wilkes, 1989, 5). Recent air photography by ourselves (Gask Project Air Photo neg: Torro3CN8#11) has, however, now shown a road a few 15m wide and over 130m long. Much of it lies in dense thickets, but it did prove possible to conduct a levelling survey of a 15m x 42m sample in the time available, with spot heights taken in a grid pattern at 0.5m intervals. The results (Illus 3) show that the feature survives at depths of up to 3.5m and, at least at the modern surface, its bottom ascends the otherwise very steep slope at a fairly even gradient of 7.7° (1:5.7), which should have been gentle enough to allow the passage of wheeled traffic. The average depth of the surface feature over its entire length was c. 1.5m, although the original average is likely to have been rather greater (see below).

The survey

The cutting survives as a surface feature, 12–15m wide and over 130m long. Much of it lies in dense thickets, but it did prove possible to conduct a levelling survey of a 15m x 42m sample in the time available, with spot heights taken in a grid pattern at 0.5m intervals. The results (Illus 3) show that the feature survives at depths of up to 3.5m and, at least at the modern surface, its bottom ascends the otherwise very steep slope at a fairly even gradient of 7.7° (1:5.7), which should have been gentle enough to allow the passage of wheeled traffic. The average depth of the surface feature over its entire length was c. 1.5m, although the original average is likely to have been rather greater (see below).

The excavation

A 5.5m x 1m section (Illus 4) was excavated across the cutting bottom, near the SW end of the survey grid (Illus 1) and later extended to the NE. This revealed a well preserved metalled road surface (Illus 6, plus Illus 4 and 5, Context 11) averaging 2.8m wide and consisting of water worn stones (probably from the river) up to 0.3m across, set in a matrix of dirty pinky clay and gravel, up to 0.28m thick. This surface was badly worn and marked by a pair of clear wheel ruts with an average centre line separation of 1.57m. There were few signs of repair, although river gravel had been added to partly fill the ruts at some point. Instead, there were signs that an original surface had been worn away and that the road's final traffic was actually running on the substructure, for a band of significantly larger stones was revealed along the road's western edge, the part least affected by the ruts. This lay on top of the clay and gravel matrix and might represent part of an original paving layer. No signs of side drains were uncovered, as is common on the Gask road, but the clay and gravel road bed was fairly waterproof and its surviving
surface is slightly concave so that, given the cutting’s angle of slope, the road itself would rapidly channel rain water down to the river. The original surface may well have been flat, or more probably convex, but it would still have shed water fairly readily. A single fragment of Medieval green glazed pottery was found on the northern roadside and a small piece of 18th-century glazed pot was found in the southern wheel rut. No datable carbon was present in the road structure and no deposits likely to contain pollen or other organic data were uncovered.

On both sides of the road the clay and gravel matrix blended into a cleaner, stone free layer of waterproof and apparently puddled pink clay which extended up the cutting sides for at least the full extent of the excavation trench. This had been broken up to some degree by tree roots, especially in the area of the drawn section (Illus 4, Context 8), but it may originally have been designed as a revetment for the steep cutting sides. These were, after all, cut through pure and relatively loose glacial sand (Illus 4, Context 9) which would otherwise have been extremely vulnerable to
weathering and collapse. A 1m wide strip against the drawn section was excavated down to the natural sand, but no features were found underlying the road.

On its abandonment, the road surface and cutting sides were covered by a layer of sandy soil (Illus 4, Context 7) up to 0.24m thick. Through this a pit had been cut (Illus 6, Context 12) which also penetrated the road surface. This was 0.48m wide and at least 1.15m long, but extended beyond the confines of the trench. It was filled by a hard, compacted orange sand and contained no datable material.

The post-road topsoil was overlain by a deep overburden of fairly modern deposits, much of which seemed to have been deliberately dumped down the cutting side from the SE. The first (Illus 4, Context 6) was a 0.4m thick layer of clean orange sand which contained a modern nail, a barbed wire fragment and a deflated rubber tennis ball. This was overlain by two layers both c. 0.32m thick. The first (Illus 4, Context 2) was a rather less pure sand layer and the second, which seemed to be slightly later, appeared to be dumped topsoil (Illus 4, Context 5) containing fragments of plant pot and Victorian china. These were themselves overlain by a layer of sandy loam, up to 0.37m thick (Illus 4, Context 10) which appeared to have washed in from the opposite (NW) side of the cutting. Contexts 2 and 10 had then themselves been cut by pits. That cut into context 2 was 0.45m wide and 0.41m deep (Illus 4, Contexts 3 and 4) and contained no datable material. The pit through Context 10 penetrated c. 1m down, to below the level of the road surface, although it lay slightly to its NW (Illus 6, Context 13), and contained a mixture of turf and relatively modern plumbing debris, including pieces of enamelled iron pipe and an old high level lavatory cistern. Finally, the deposits had been covered by a thin woodland topsoil, just 0.16m thick and consisting mostly of leaf mould (Illus 4, Context 1). In all, the road surface lay between 0.65 and 1.06m below the modern surface, with an average depth of around 1m.

Discussion

The traditional assumption that the Innerpeffray cutting represents the Roman Gask road has been at least partly vindicated: for the feature is definitely a road. Whether it is Roman is less certain, however. Certainly no datable Roman material was uncovered, but then this is often the case with Roman roads, especially on small excavations. There are, however, a number of factors which might make a Roman origin seem likely. The first is the fact that the cutting falls in so readily with the known course of the Roman road through the area. The second is the sheer scale of the engineering involved, coupled to the dating evidence recovered. Given the depth of overburden above the road surface, the 3.5m maximum depth of the surface feature becomes
an original cutting of around 4.5m maximum depth and the 1.5m average depth might be increased to at least 2m and probably more. Given a 2.8m wide road bed and a 12m (or greater) wide cutting top, this would mean that a minimum average of 14.8m$^3$ of material has been removed for each 1m of road, a total of at least 1920m$^3$, or well over 2,000 tons. The resulting steep sided cutting was then revetted well enough that it has survived as a clear cut surface feature (despite being run through what is essentially a large natural sand pile) and a durable road surface was laid with a very even gradient. At the same time, the presence of Medieval pottery and the wear evidence for very prolonged use, would suggest that it was built before the 18th century, albeit there is pottery evidence for use up to at least that time. With the exception of bridge building, however, the Medieval period is not noted for sophisticated road engineering. Indeed, virtually the only properly engineered rural roads in Scotland before the 18th century were Roman.

One counter argument might be that the cutting’s 2.8m wide road bed is markedly narrower than any of the known Gask road stretches: which range from 5.79m to 7.92m in width (Woolliscroft and Davies 2002, 56). Interestingly, however, there are quite a number of parallels for similar cuttings that are known to be Roman and where a similar narrowing of the road has been recorded. What are probably the best known examples have been found in and around the Alpine passes in Switzerland, where cuttings are known through the Great St Bernard Pass and, on the Jura, at Effingen/ Unterbözberg (Illus 7), Langenbruck, Bivio and Stampa/Maloja (Drack and Fellmann 1988, 367, 373, 390, 419 and 550). These are often broadly similar in width: with the Great St Bernard cutting almost identical at 2.7m. Some are also noticeably steeper, with the Stampa/Maloja cutting reaching a slope of 30%. Yet all seem to have been used by wheeled traffic as, again, wheel ruts are often found, albeit with narrower axle gauges of between 1.07m and 1.3m. In all cases, the narrowing of the road is presumably a labour saving measure to allow heavy traffic to move up and down a more gentle gradient, albeit only in one direction at a time, without the need to excavate the full width of a two carriageway road. If so, the saving would have been considerable. For example, had the Innerpeffray cutting been dug to the full average width of the Gask road (c. 6.8m), an additional c. 1050m$^3$ of earth would have needed to be moved, a 54% increase in an already considerable workload and so the design represents a good compromise between economy of construction and user convenience. This cannot be regarded as conclusive, and it is to be hoped that the site will be investigated further, but the current evidence is probably enough to at least incline the balance of probability towards a Roman date. What is undeniable, however, is that the cutting represents a most impressive ancient monument and it is to be hoped that nothing will be done in the future to endanger its survival.
Archival evidence for the abandonment of the Innerpeffray road cutting
Birgitta Hoffmann

The Innerpeffray Library excavation was able to confirm the presence of a well engineered road cutting, but did not provide conclusive dating evidence. The best parallels are Roman, but the road’s importance in the Medieval period is suggested by the presence of Innerpeffray Library and chapel close by. The fact that the chapel formed part of Muthill parish (which is otherwise located on the opposite site of the Earn), suggests that easy access from the other side of the river was available at the time of its construction, which may provide a tentative terminus ante quem for the road. Could the cutting thus be part of a Medieval scheme? Medieval road building tends to receive less attention than Roman or early Modern parallels, perhaps because of the less impressive nature of the surviving remains. Advanced engineering tended to be restricted to bridge building, although the skills needed for more complex construction elsewhere were available when needed, as is shown by the Medieval works in the St. Gotthard pass (Meyers Konversationslexikon, 1887, vol 14, 286). The best quality roads of the period, especially in Britain, were usually associated with religious demands, be they pilgrims' ways, more local tracks to parish churches or roads used in the administration of monastic estates. Even then, however, they were normally little more than tracks, with few signs of the engineering skills and effort displayed in the Innerpeffray cutting (Hindle 1998).

In Scotland, evidence for Medieval road building (as opposed to maintenance) is scarce. James Macdonald (1893) was only able to cite the following examples of roads newly constructed before the 18th century: In 1250 John Comyn granted Melrose (Abbey) ‘free passage through the middle of his lands of Dalswinton to their lands at Nithsdale’ and continued ‘if the aforementioned road, through inundations or its being long used for wagons, gets out of repair, the monks and their dependants shall have full liberty to renew the same road by ditches and causeways, or in any other way they please’ (liber de Melros VI 1.1 no. 319 cited by Macdonald 1893, 43). For 1582, Macdonald (1893, 43) cited evidence from Ayr, which ordered ‘a bie street and passage to me amid from Langshot Moss to Threipland Dyke, of the breid of sex fallis’. There are further references to the existence of ‘king’s high roads’ (Macdonald 1893, 45), but it is unclear whether these were newly constructed, or used pre-existing tracks. These were not the whole story, as can be shown by the evidence from Atholl, where Wade’s Road was preceded by two engineered pre-18th-century roads. These were the Minigaig (perhaps already marked in Moll’s 1725 map) and the even earlier Comyn’s (Rathan nan Cuimeinach) or Wine road (Rad na-Pheny), which is described as paved and suitable for wagons in some sources. Both appear to have linked Blair Atholl and Ruthven/Kingussie. The older road cannot be ascribed
any historical date and its association with the Comyns apparently owes more to folklore than to historical proof. It is thus hardly surprising that, despite its location, there are occasional rumours of a Roman date (Keillar 2001). But the reoccurrence of the Comyns, who we have already seen supporting road building in the South, is suggestive, so a Medieval date for the Wine road cannot be ruled out.

The situation at Innerpeffray is very different, however. Major engineering was mostly the work of powerful landowners, such as monasteries and, particularly, the Cistercians whose skills are well attested. The church on the Gask came under the Bishop of Dunblane, and the largest monastic landowner in the area was Inchaaffray Abbey. Their holdings were mostly on the left-bank of the Earn and appear to have been partly associated with the Perth Road/Old Gallows Road, the road to Kinkell (a holding of the abbey) and the Roman Gask road. According to its charters (Lindsay, Dowden and Thomson 1908), Inchaaffray also held land around Strageath and was responsible for St.Patrick’s chapel from about 1220 onwards, suggesting the need for a fordable crossing of the Earn.

This combination of possessions aligned on roads that are known to have existed either earlier (Roman Road) or later (Road to Perth/Gallows Road and Kinkell road) might suggest involvement by the abbey in constructing the Innerpeffray cutting. The charters, however, make no mention of the road (despite the illusion created by the map attached thereto) or to road building and maintenance. Indeed they even leave it open as to whether the land occupied by the cutting belonged to the abbey or to secular lords, such as the de Innerpeffrays. In addition, the Augustinian Canons who ran Inchaaffray had little reputation elsewhere for engineering projects on any great scale. This is in marked contrast with orders like the Benedictines and, more especially, the Cistercians, whose nearest house (Coupar Angus) did have dealings with the de Innerpeffrays, although it did not have land holdings in our area (Charters of Coupar Angus Abbey I, 185–7 and 210–214: dated 1306–20). We thus have no evidence for the road being built during the Medieval period and given the distribution of their holdings (incl. land at Strageath, Raith, Arduine, Gask House, Thornhill and Womanhill (Witchknowe?)) it seems more than likely that the canons used a pre-existing Roman road to access most of their land on the Gask. This is admittedly a somewhat tenuous argument, based largely on an absence of evidence, but it might support the view that the cutting forms an integral part of a road built before the Middle Ages which really leaves only the Romans as the likely builders.

Rather more can be said about the cutting’s later history. The early modern period brought increased traffic to this part of Strathearn. In 1672 an Act of Parliament granted the Earl of Perth the right to establish a large cattle market at Crieff (Haldane 1952, 134). This was held in mid October and quickly became the chief cattle tryst of Scotland, with reports of 30,000 head changing hands during the fair, mostly to be exported south. While the majority of the cattle were probably brought in via the Sma’ Glen and the glens further west, cattle from Angus and Aberdeenshire tended to be driven from Perth via the ‘Old Gallows Road’. Described in 1715/6 as ‘the road to Stirling’ (Tabraham and Grove 1995, pl. 4), this leads out of Perth past Long Causeway, Burghmuir Road and Glendevon Farm, and continues today as a line of hedgerows, field tracks and short roads past the old farms of Gateside, Easter and Wester Cultmalundie, Westmuir, Clathymore, Clathy, Roundlaw, Arduine and Shearerston. It eventually crossed the Earn at Innerpeffray, with further branches leading to Crieff and Kinkell. As the name suggests, it appears to have run past the Gallows to the west of Perth, whilst the early 19th century ‘Notes of the Statue Labour Trustees’ already describe it as old and confirm its use as a drove road.

A second important road from Innerpeffray to Perth ran just to the south. This was ‘The ‘Roman Road’ or ‘Street Road’ and followed the course of the Roman Gask frontier road past the 1st-century watchtowers on the Gask Ridge, before turning north near Windygates to reach the Old Gallows Road somewhere between Tibbermore and West Lamberkine. To judge from 18th century maps, such as Moll’s of 1745 and Stobie’s of 1783, both roads were in use side by side, but the ‘Street Road’ appears to have degenerated into a track to the east of Gask House, suggesting that it may have been of mere local importance, a fact born out by statements in the (old) Statistical Account (vol I (1791), 481 and Vol. 18(1796), 486) for the parishes of Gask and Trinity Gask, that it saw little use, despite being still in a good state.

The 18th century saw large road building projects in Scotland, with associated improvements to the wider infrastructure. The first impact on the use of the Innerpeffray cutting must have been felt with the construction of Crieff bridge in 1741–2, as part of the road from Stirling to Inverness (Taylor 1996, 53). Designed to carry artillery, it was also able to take carriages over the Earn and thus provided a more comfortable route than the ford and steep incline at Innerpeffray, which may thus have seen a drop in use. The period after 1745 also saw the rapid decline of the Crieff cattle tryst, which was increasingly supplanted by Falkirk. Indeed, by the 1790s the cattle fair had become just a memory among the older residents of the town (OSA vol. 9 and V ol. 18(1796), 486) for the parishes of Gask and Trinity Gask, that it saw little use, despite being still in a good state.
A possible Roman road cutting at Innerpeffray Library, Perthshire

statement that the common road did not begin until he reached the village might imply that they were no longer a major crossing point. If so, this would fit well with Moll’s map, produced a decade earlier in 1745. This still marks the Old Gallows Road, but shows Kinkell, not Innerpeffray, as the Earn crossing point. Kinkell was originally a ferry crossing (OSA Vol. 17 (1796), 486), but in 1793 this was replaced by a toll free bridge (NSA Vol. X (1845), 382). This cut travel times and drovers’ costs still more and rapidly made its impact felt.

Further problems were to come which effected the rest of the Roman road on the Gask Ridge. The Perth and Kinross Council Archive holds the ‘General Notes of Perth District Statute Labour Trustees’ (hereinafter PDSLT), which detail a number of road building projects in the area in the first half of the 19th century. From these (e.g. PDSLT Notes of 10 May 1803) it appears that the Old Gallows Road and the ‘Street’ or ‘Roman Road’ were maintained on an equal footing by the landowners up to 1813. However, with the continued development of turnpikes in the area, which included the roads from Perth to Crieff (OSA Vol. 17 (1796), 649f) and to the south, the drove road became a problem. The committee notes of 4th May 1813 record that it was decided to close the ‘Old Gallows Road’ and a series of connecting branch roads, on application by the Lord of Kinnoull and Robert Smyth of Methven.

The reasoning was as follows:

‘the road called Gallows road is of little or no use, but is the cause of much evasion from the adjoining turnpike roads as people using the turnpike are easily enabled by means of said road to gain the Town [ie Perth] without passing any of the bars either on the Crieff or Dalreoch roads and in particular droves of cattle and sheep always take that road in crossing the country to Falkirk and the west, and it can be well established that numbers of people residing on the south of the Dalreoch road and on the north of the Crieff road, are in the habit after using in part both these roads to come into Perth by the Gallows road. It is equally true that the persons residing nearer the town and whose properties adjoining the road have good accesses and of equally short distance by the said turnpike roads ...’

In other words the Committee was attempting to stop travellers evading the turnpike tolls and, while their report for the following year notes that the road could not be shut up completely as it provided access to some properties (PDSLT 3 May 1814), they intended to take steps to limit its use to local traffic only. Innerpeffray was not specifically mentioned in any of these exchanges, but it is likely that it was affected by these restrictions, which seem to have taken effect quite quickly. The 1823 edition of Stobie’s map (copy held in Perth and Kinross Council Archives) shows the Old Gallows Road to have vanished completely between Ardunie and Cultmalundie, although the ‘Roman Road’ was shown as a continuous line between Innerpeffray and Windyedge (near Cultmalundie Wood). Five branch roads now linked this road with Kinkell Bridge, while the branch road to Crieff (the modern B8063) continued in operation. The “Plan of the Perth Statute Labour Roads” surveyed by W. Archer in 1828 (held in Perth and Kinross Council Archive), shows the Old Gallows Road as a dotted line (indicating that it was not surveyed) between Clathy and Hill of Ruthven, while the ‘Roman Road’ is marked as a statute labour road leading not to Innerpeffray but to Kinkell Bridge. The latter description is repeated in the 1836 notes, where the road was described as running “from the Parks of Dupplin to Kinkell Bridge” (PDSLT 3 May 1836). By then, however, the state of even this road was apparently abysmal:

‘Considerable anxiety has been expressed for the repair of the Roman Road leading from Kinkell Bridge towards Perth—those lengths which render the line almost impassable in bad weather lie in the Parishes of Gask and Tibbermore and are in extent 2 miles 178 rods. The expense of complete repair would including £70 for the cartage of materials be £340.’

Despite repairs made through donations in 1837 (PDSLT 3 May 1837) and a grant from the Trustees of £89 4/- 2 1/2d in 1838 (PDSLT 3 May 1838), by 1840 the road was again in a bad way, with the report reading as follows:

‘The Roman or Street Road is perhaps more difficult to preserve in proper repair than any other line in the district. It passes through woods for almost its whole extent, and the effects of the sun and wind are hardly perceptible. It is besides formed of metal of a very inferior quality, which is easily worn when in a wet or damp state. I have, however, opened two quarries of whinstone metal along the sides of the line, and the repair of last season, was generally effected by this material, and by the constant application of this stone, the surface will ultimately become hard and be less subject to be broken up. A perfect winter road cannot be promised here for two years to come.’ (PDSLT 14 Feb 1840)

By 1842 the Trustees were happy to report:

‘The Roman or Street Road has had much attention paid to it during the past three years and I am glad to find that it is now beginning to show the good effects of employing the best whinstone metal in its repair for although occasionally tracked in soft weather it never breaks in the manner in which it used to.’ (PDSLT 3 May 1842)

The excavation found that none of this whinstone had been employed on the Innerpeffray cutting, despite deep rutting and other serious signs of wear, which suggests that it was no longer being maintained by this
time. This adds further strength to the view that the ford lost much of its importance with the successful re-direction of traffic such as large cattle drives to the bridges at Crieff and Kinkell. It was, however, still marked on J.Knox’s map of 1850 and so may have retained some purely local significance. By 1844 even more traffic was removed from the surviving parts of the Old Gallows road with the traffic around Clathy (to the north of Muir o’ Fauld and Gask House) being directed to the road past Findo Gask Church and onto the Roman Road towards Kinkell Bridge (PDSLT 7 May 1844). This would have further reduced the possible traffic through the ford at Innerpeffray, which would now only have interested people trying to get just across the river from Strageath to Shearerston or Innerpeffray and, a few years later, in the 1860s, the first edition O.S. map showed the cutting as obstructed and included within a field.

If the surviving literary sources are of little help in determining the origins of the Innerpeffray cutting, they do help us to understand its use and decline as an active route and drove road following the construction of the 1742 road between Ardoch and Perth. Over the next 100 years the crossing was increasingly sidelined, not least by an effort to force more traffic onto turnpikes and thus raise revenues for their trusts. The building of the pontage- (bridge toll) free Kinkell bridge in 1793 and the continued upgrading of the track of the ‘Roman road’ between Kinkell Bridge and Perth, as well as the progressive closure of the old drove road between 1813 and 1854, turned the cutting (and associated sections of the ‘Roman’ and ‘Old Gallows’ roads) more and more into an obsolete dead end, leading to its eventual abandonment by the 1860s.

Acknowledgements

The writer is grateful to the landowner Mr C.R. Connell for allowing access to the site, to Innerpeffray Library for car parking and toilet facilities and to the Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust for funding the work. Dr B.Hoffmann provided the photograph of the Effingen/Unterbözberg cutting reproduced as Illus 7 and I would particularly thank the volunteers who worked on the site, often in heavy rain. Dr Hoffmann is grateful to the staff of the Perth and Kinross Council Archives for their unstinting assistance during the research for her section.

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Abstract
An investigation of a deep artificial cutting at Innerpeffray Library, Perthshire, found a well preserved and long used road bed. The feature lies on the line of the Roman Gask Frontier road and the feature may well be of Roman date, although this could not be proven. Archive research suggests that it may have remained in use until the mid 19th century.

Keywords
cutting
Perthshire
Roman road
Innerpeffray
River Earn

This paper is published with the aid of a grant from the Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust.