

ART. VII.—*Recent excavations at Birdoswald.* By
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I. A. RICHMOND, F.B.A.

Read at Carlisle, April 7th, 1951.

DURING 1949 and 1950 the Ancient Monuments Department of the Ministry of Works has been engaged in preserving the walls and gateways of the Roman fort at Birdoswald on Hadrian's Wall, and in

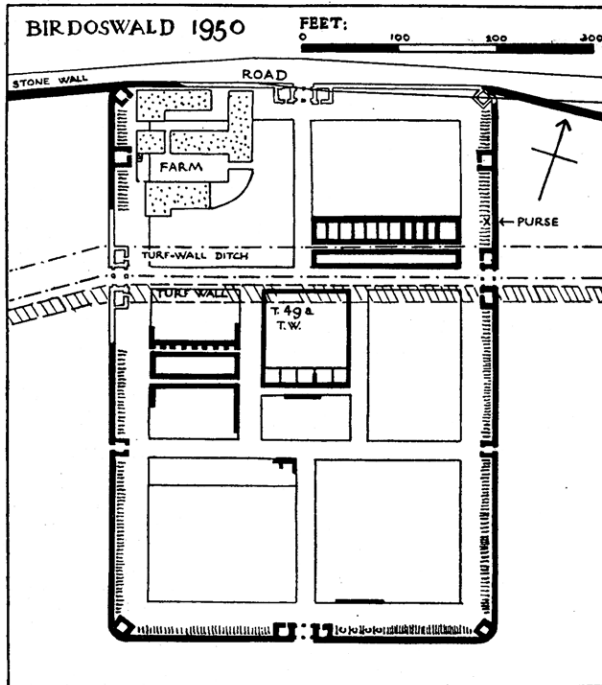


FIG. 1.—Birdoswald fort, general plan
(after I. A. Richmond)

the process three structures have been uncovered: an interval tower on the inner side of the east wall of the fort, 81 1/2 ft. north of the main east gateway (*porta principalis dextra*), the corresponding tower on the west wall, and the north-west angle-tower (see fig. 1). In March and April 1950 the interior of each of the interval towers and the north guard-chamber of the main east gateway—which had lain uncovered since 1852, but had never been completely excavated—were investigated by the Durham University Excavation Committee, the work being supervised by Miss Brenda Swinbank and the present writer. We hope to present a full report, with illustrations of the structures and of the associated pottery (on which the dating largely depends), for publication in a later volume of *Transactions*; but the results obtained were of sufficient interest and importance to require at least a preliminary account of them without further delay: it need hardly be added that some of the conclusions set forth in the following paragraphs must be regarded as provisional. Examination of the north-west angle-tower was reserved for a later season.

§ 1. THE MAIN EAST GATEWAY. (Figs. 2-4).

This gateway was excavated by H. Glasford Potter in September 1852, and his report, with plan and two lithographed views, was published in AA1 iv, 1855, 141-149; fig. 2 reproduces his general view of the gateway from the east, and fig. 3 is reduced from his plan of the structure as far as it was uncovered by him. The gateway's relationship to the Turf Wall and its ditch was established by the Cumberland Excavation Committee in 1897, and described by Haverfield in CW1 xv, 1899, 180 f.; the best modern study of the visible remains is given by Professor Richmond in the 10th edition of Bruce's *Handbook to the Roman Wall*, 1947, 170-171. The following account, based on fresh excavations in the north guard-chamber and to north of it, adds important

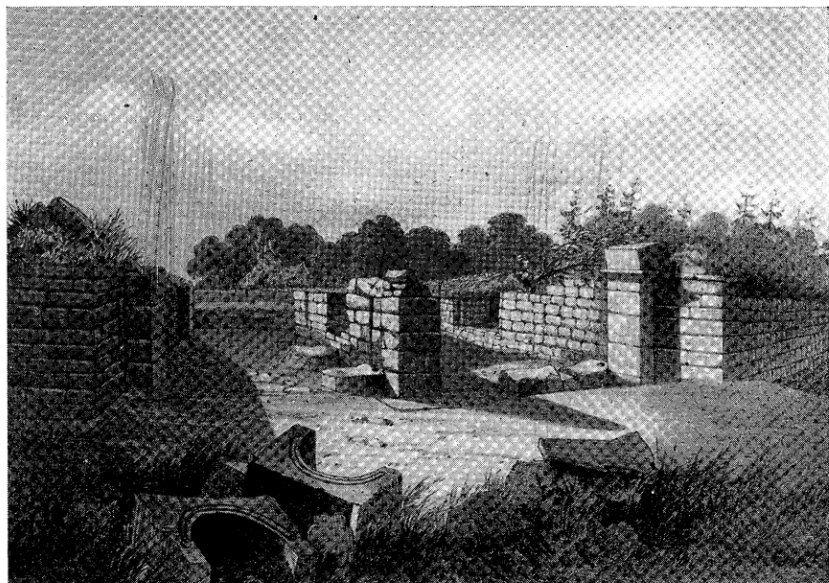


FIG. 2.—Birdoswald: main east gate as excavated in 1852.

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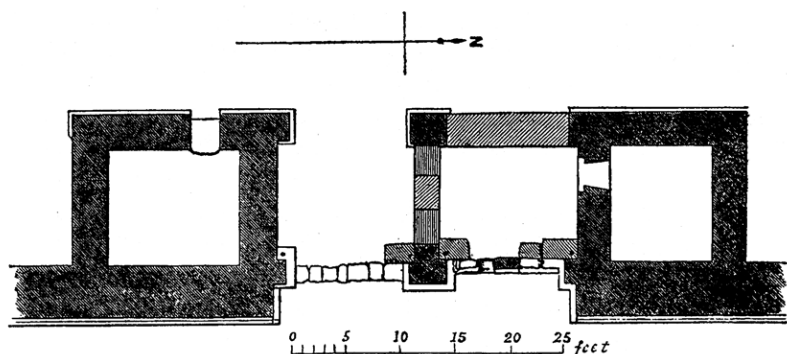


FIG. 3. — Birdoswald: main east gate, as planned by H. Glasford Potter, 1852.

details of the history of the structure but does not attempt to provide a definitive report on the gateway as a whole, which must await the further study which it is hoped to complete in time for its inclusion in our full report.

The north portal and the north guard-chamber of the *porta principalis dextra* were built squarely over the filled-in ditch of the Turf-Wall. Broad masonry foundations rest on the undisturbed subsoil at the bottom and on the north side of the ditch and are carried up, decreasing in width by a series of 3 in. offsets, to ground level, where they form a firm square base for the walls

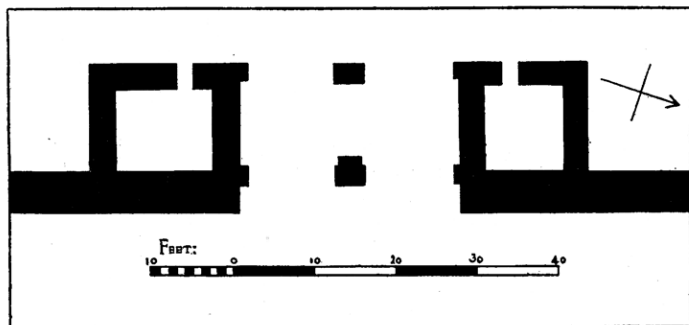


FIG. 4.—Birdoswald: main east gate, original state.

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of the guard-chamber. This measures internally 11 ft. from east to west and 9 ft. from north to south; its north, west and south walls are uniformly 3 ft. thick, while its east wall (like the fort-wall into which it is bonded) is 5 ft. thick. The original doorway, 2 ft. 6 in. wide, was in the west wall, a little to the south of centre, thus corresponding with the existing doorway in the south guard-chamber; after the guard-chamber had been built, and the threshold of this doorway placed in position, a layer of white lime, 6 in. thick, was laid as a floor to the chamber.

At a later date, probably in the third century, the function of the room was completely changed by the construction of a kiln, built on the principle of a hypocaust, which occupied the whole of its eastern two-thirds; the stoke-hole occupied the western third, access being gained by the original doorway. The kiln was supported on the stoke-hole side by two masonry buttresses, held together by clay; a group of pottery assignable to the late second century was found sealed in this clay. The kiln had been used for the manufacture of thick, unstamped tiles, 8 in. square. The inner face of the north wall of the room was reddened by fire only up to the horizontal joint between the second and third courses from the top of the portion now surviving, thus showing that the masonry above that point was added after the kiln had ceased to be used, and that the chamber itself had been in ruins at the time when the kiln was in use. The collapse of the structure, while it may have been hastened by enemy action in A.D. 197, was due no doubt to the west wall, lying at right-angles to the axis of the ditch of the Turf Wall, being weakened by a doorway: several cracks due to settlement are visible in its outer face.

When the kiln fell into disuse it was buried by the fall of its own clay superstructure, which sealed late third-century pottery. A new floor of rough flagging was then

laid, 3 ft. above the original floor level; one of the flags proved to have a moulding on the under-side, and also to have been re-used once before as a door sill. Early fourth-century pottery was found in the spaces between the flags. The new floor was precisely on a level with the threshold of a new doorway, again 2 ft. 6 in. wide, in the south wall and near its west end (fig. 1), opening into the north portal of the gateway; this is the doorway excavated by Glasford Potter and left exposed since his day. There is very little doubt that it was early in the fourth century that the ruined guard-chamber was completely re-built, and the ashlar facing of its west wall carried right across the position of the original doorway. The final phase in the occupation of the building was marked by a further new floor, of yellow lime, on which lay a heap of coal dust and small coal.

§ 2. THE EASTERN INTERVAL-TOWER

(Fig. 5).

This tower measures internally 13 ft. 6 in. from north to south and 10 ft. from east to west, its axis thus being parallel to the fort-wall; its north, west and south walls are uniformly 3 ft. thick, and its east wall 5 ft. thick in continuation of the fort-wall, into which it is bonded. It has a doorway 3 ft. wide in the west wall, towards

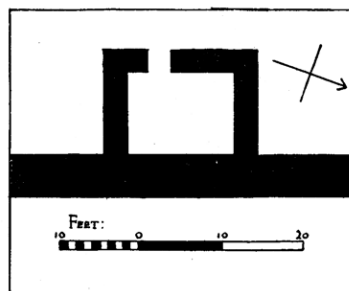
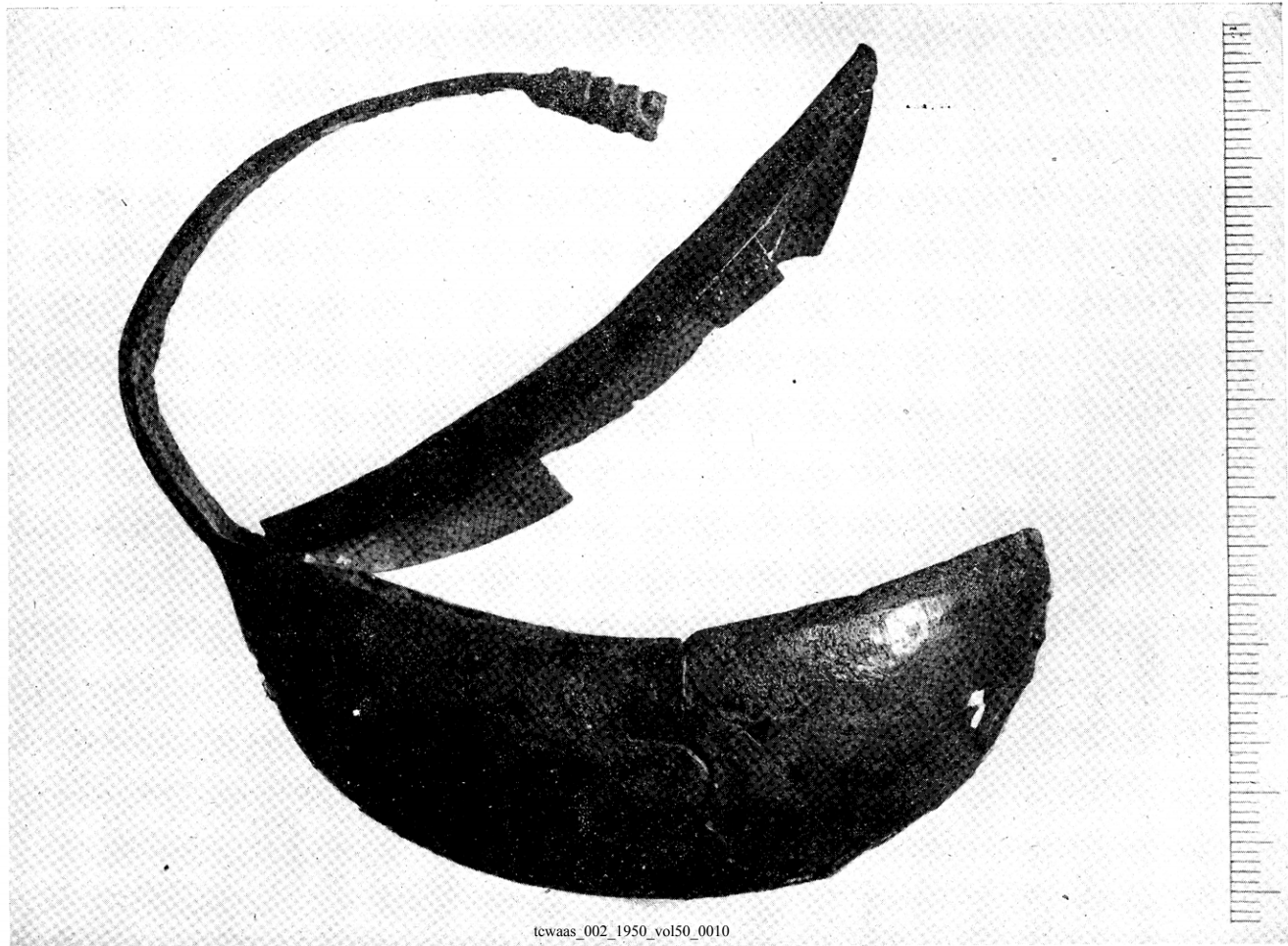


FIG. 5

its southern end. Here, too, a kiln had been inserted in the northern third of the room, with a stoke-hole in the southern two-thirds, entered from the original doorway. The tower, like the guard-chamber, had been taken back into normal use at a later time, a flagged floor being laid over the kiln, while the doorway remained in the original position. In its latest phase, however, the tower appears to have been converted into a *ballista*-platform, by an increase in thickness of the east wall from 5 ft. to 11 ft.; it may be presumed that its west and side walls were by then in ruins. No stratified pottery was found to date the four main phases—initial building, construction of the kiln, the new floor and the *ballista*-platform—but, by analogy with the approximately dated phases in the north guard-chamber of the main east gateway, and with the four periods established in 1929 for the fort as a whole (CW2 xxx 169-205), we may take them to be respectively Hadrianic, Severan, Constantian and Theodosian.

§ 3. THE WESTERN INTERVAL-TOWER.

This tower is similar in plan and horizontal dimensions to that already described, but it is far less well preserved. The fort-wall, including the west wall of the tower, has been robbed down to its footings. Inside the tower only two occupation levels survived, namely the original clay floor (on which the greater part of a globular amphora was found, in the south-west corner) and a later flagged floor at a slightly higher level: this was enough to show that here the room had continued to serve its original purpose, and had not been converted to industrial use.



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APPENDIX: A ROMAN WRIST-PURSE FROM
BIRDOSWALD (Fig. 6).

By Professor I. A. RICHMOND, F.B.A.

On 25 May 1949 the staff of the Ministry of Works was engaged in consolidating the east wall of the fort, a short distance north of the main east gateway, and was removing the top of the Roman rampart-backing behind it when, buried by the backing, a fine bronze wrist-purse was found: the find-spot is marked on the sketch-plan of the fort, fig. 1 above. The purse contained coins, but its condition was so frail that it could not be opened nor could the coins be examined until the British Museum laboratory had taken measures to preserve it. It was then found that there were 28 *denarii* inside the purse, ranging in date from 125 B.C. to A.D. 119, the latter coin being in very fresh condition. On 27 June 1950 an inquest was held at Gilsland, and the coins were found to have been accidentally lost, not deliberately hidden, and therefore not to be treasure trove. The owner, Lord Henley, has munificently presented the purse and the coins to Tullie House Museum, Carlisle, where they will keep company with a not dissimilar hoard of Roman silver coins found at Birdoswald in 1930 (CW2 xxxi 130); it is hoped to include a full report on the purse and its contents, with a note on Roman wrist-purses generally, in the next volume of *Transactions*; meanwhile a photograph of the new discovery is given as fig. 6, to round off Mr Gillam's report on the recent excavations to which the Ministry's work of consolidation has led.