ART. V. – *The Roman Fort at Bewcastle: an Analytical Field Survey*
By IAIN SAINSBURY AND HUMPHREY WELFARE

THE site of one of the western outpost forts of Hadrian's Wall lies 10km in advance of the frontier at Bewcastle (NY 56557460), 25km north-east of Carlisle and 23km east-south-east of Langholm. The survey of the site, presented here (Fig. 1), was undertaken by the Newcastle office of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) at the request of English Heritage who were considering both the extent of the archaeologically sensitive area and its future management. Carried out using electronic distance-measuring equipment and an optical self-reducing alidade, the survey also provides a context for the publication of the excavation of the fort's internal bath-house (Gillam *et al.* forthcoming). However, the results of the various excavations on the site will not be treated in any detail here, except where they explain the presence, form or absence of earthworks. The survey documents are deposited in the National Archaeological Record (NAR), a section of RCHME (ref. NY 57 SE 15).

Strategically the site lies on the western edge of the Bewcastle Fells which, rising to 518m on Sighty Crag, divide Tynedale from the lowlands of the Solway. The twin valleys of the Lyne, of which the Kirk Beck is a tributary, provide a natural routeway north-westwards across country from the Tyne Gap, via Bewcastle, to middle Liddesdale and Eskdale and thus into the southern uplands of what is now Scotland. The value of the route (and thus that of Bewcastle also) was highlighted in the policing of the late medieval Border when the meeting-place of the Wardens of the Scottish and English Marches on days of Truce was at Kershopefoot in Liddesdale, only 12km north-west of the contemporary stronghold at Bewcastle. In the Roman period, Bewcastle had been chosen to guard this same cross-country route while access south-westwards out of Liddesdale and Eskdale was controlled by the next outpost to the west at Netherby, 17km away.

The fort occupies a knoll of glacial sand and gravel, at 152m OD, that forms the end of a small spur which projects southwards within the valley of the Kirk Beck. The knoll is easily approached from the north up a slight slope that offers no natural protection. On the west and the east, however, the spur is flanked by Hall Sike and Bride's Gill respectively and the slopes of the knoll become progressively steeper as they approach the Kirk Beck, flowing some 15m below the crest of the abrupt south scarp. This is the narrowest crossing-point of the poorly drained haughlands; the present bridge was preceded by a ford, approached from the north-west by a terraced track. The position chosen for the fort directly commands only the valley of the Kirk Beck itself, but the confluence with the broader lowlands drained by the White Lyne is little more than 1.5km to the west. Views to the north and south are more restricted than that to the east which extends to the watershed at Hazelgill Crag and Barron's Pike. To the west, downstream, the horizon is formed by the ridge at Roadhead, between the Black Lyne and the White Lyne. Communications between Bewcastle and Hadrian's Wall could only be achieved along the Maiden Way to Birdoswald, and by means of the signal stations at Barron's Pike and Robin Hood's Butt (Topping 1987).

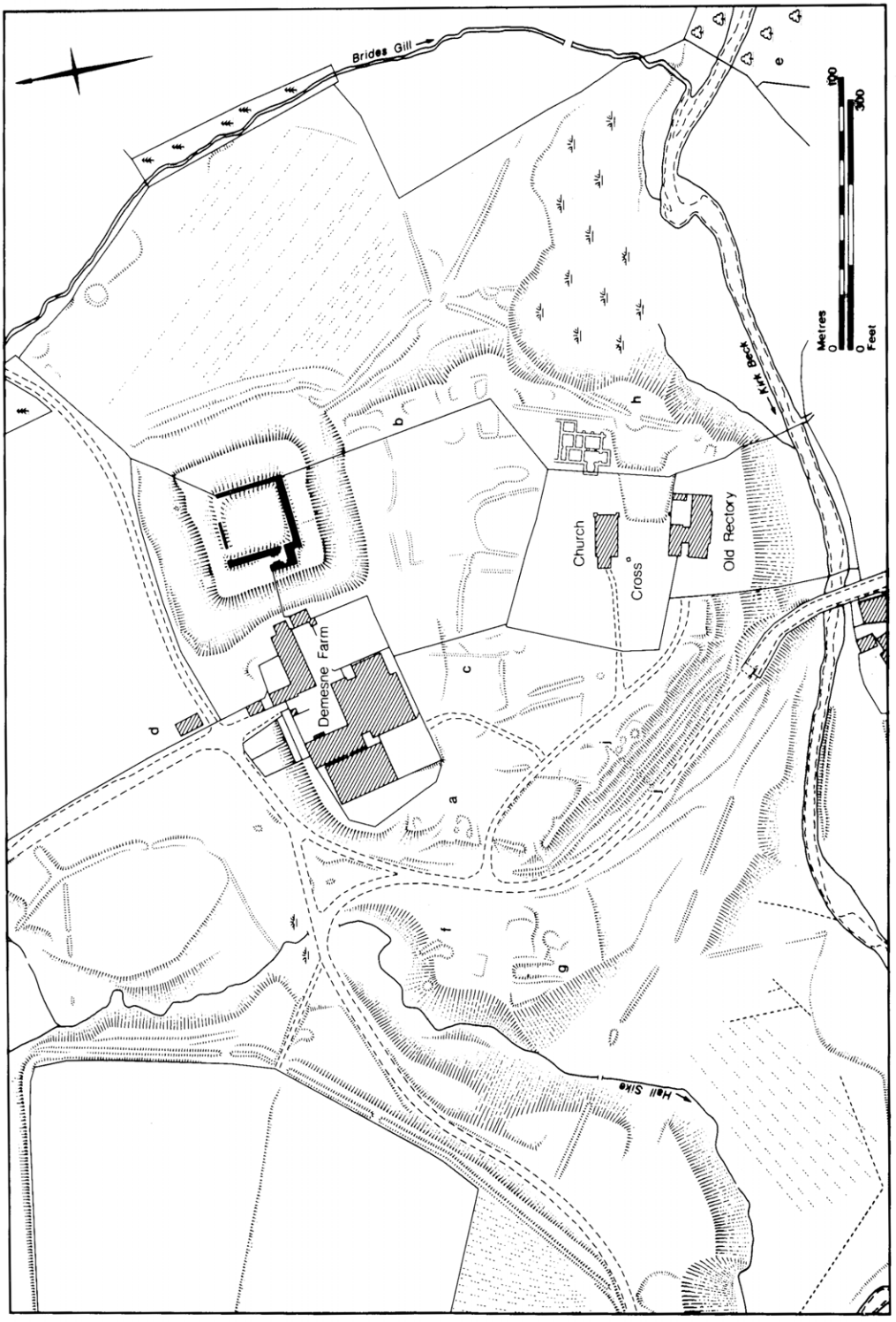

FIG. 1. The earthworks of Bewcastle Roman fort and of its immediate environs.

The archaeological history of the Roman phases of the site has been conveniently summarized by Daniels (1978, 321-6) and by Birley (1961, 231-3). Wholesale replanning and reconstruction, known only from limited excavation, make the structural history of the fort difficult to interpret and, as a consequence, various dating schemes have been put forward. These extend from a Hadrianic timber phase (with the usual stone bath-house), to the more general use of stone in the buildings of the late second to fourth centuries (Richmond *et al.* 1938; Gillam 1954, 267; *J. Roman Stud.* xlvii (1957), 204-5, 228-9; *Britannia* ix (1978), 421). Subsequent comment has included the suggestion that the outpost forts of Hadrian's Wall, of which Bewcastle was one, were abandoned as early as the second decade of the fourth century (Casey and Savage 1980, 79-80) but the pottery from Bewcastle suggests that occupation continued as late as about A.D. 370 (Gillam *et al.* forthcoming; cf. also Breeze and Dobson 1985, 16-17).

The Defences

The fort covered the whole of the summit of the knoll, an area of about 2.4ha (6 acres), and was laid out as an irregular hexagon – a highly unusual arrangement that was presumably chosen in order to maximize the natural defensive potential. Erosion by the Kirk Beck and by a spring on the south-east (Hodgson 1840, 296), together with the superimposition of later buildings, have destroyed or obscured much of the Roman defences which usually consisted of a wall backed by a rampart and with a single forward ditch; their general course is, however, clear. The north-east corner is overlain by the remains of the fourteenth century castle (King 1983, 82, 98; NAR NY 57 SE 4); most of the rest of the northern third of the interior is occupied by the Demesne Farm, formerly a public house, which also impinges upon the defences. The Old Rectory, built in 1837 (Maughan 1857, 3), overlies part of the south side and its terraced gardens have radically altered the topography there. Immediately to the north is St Cuthbert's Church which dates from about 1200; the eighth century Bewcastle Cross stands within the churchyard south-west of the nave.

The only area where the Roman perimeter is at all well preserved is on the south-west. Here the surviving rampart follows the crestline of the natural scarp and measures 6.5m in width on the surface. Excavation in 1937 (j-j on plan) revealed that the bottom of the single external ditch lies about 5.0m below the level of the present crest (Richmond *et al.* 1938, 214-17) but is overlain and obscured by a later boundary bank up to 3.6m wide and about 0.5m high. The internal scarp of the rampart survives to a height of 1.1m, whereas externally it is about 3.6m high. Elsewhere, in the north-north-west and the east, the defences are reduced to a single outward-facing scarp measuring up to 3.5m and 5.2m high respectively.

Of the gateways there is still little known. The apparent and approximate position of the simple double-portal gate in the west-north-west, excavated in 1937 (Richmond *et al.* 1938, 213-14), is still marked by a break and a hollow in the line of the rampart at (a). However, the published plans (Richmond *et al.* 1938, fig. 4) are not sufficiently accurate for detailed inferences to be drawn from them without further excavation. The exact orientation of the partly excavated headquarters building is, similarly, not known with enough precision to offer more than a rough alignment for the *via praetoria*; the location of the east gate, dependent upon this (probably somewhere close to (b) on plan),

is made yet more difficult to pinpoint by the irregular perimeter of the fort and the effect this will have had upon the plan of the interior, which is known to have been radically re-aligned. Maughan (1857, 4) believed he could trace the positions of both the east and west gates, but his description of the latter is so much at variance with the results of the later excavation as not to be trustworthy. He also claimed to have excavated part of the foundations of one of the guard-chambers of the south gate in 1840, but no further details were recorded (Maughan 1857, 4). If this is so, he must have examined the west chamber, which may have stood between the western gable of the Rectory and the gateway to its drive; the east guard-chamber is likely to have been seriously damaged or destroyed by the building of the Rectory three years earlier. The north gate has probably been destroyed by the west side of the moat around the castle or by the later farm buildings.

The Interior

Portions of the interior of the fort including a headquarters building, a commanding officer's house, the baths and some barracks, have been excavated by Richmond (Richmond *et al.* 1938, 202-13, 218), by Gillam (1949; 1954; Gillam *et al.* forthcoming) and by Austen (*Britannia* ix (1978), 421). At the end of the eighteenth century it was recorded that the "foundations of houses, and the course of the streets, all along the area, may still be traced" (*Gentleman's Magazine* lxii (1792), 1074). Apart from one east-west scarp, cut by a narrow groove (c), that may relate to the partial excavation of the headquarters building (Richmond *et al.* 1938, 205-12), the scarps and banks now visible in the interior do not appear to bear any coherent relationship to the few known Roman structures.

As at Risingham, and probably High Rochester also, the bath-house was built within the fort. Hadrianic in date, it was partly excavated in 1949, 1954 and 1956 (Gillam 1949; 1954; *J. Roman Stud.* 47 (1957), 228-9; Gillam *et al.* forthcoming) in the face of a proposal (never carried out) to extend the churchyard to the east. The baths must have received their water-supply from the north, possibly from Bride's Gill, although in the late eighteenth century it was recorded that "leaden pipes have also frequently been found in the fields, leading from a copious well of fine waters . . ." (*Gentleman's Magazine* lxii (1792), 1074). The original reports on the excavation of the baths did not include a location plan but there was just enough information in the surviving archive (cf. Gillam *et al.* forthcoming) to position the remains with reasonable accuracy; they are shown in outline in Fig. 1, to the east of the church.

A Civil Settlement, Temples and Cemeteries?

A narrow groove (c), still traceable for a distance of about 27m south of the Demesne Farm, seems to mark the pipe-trench cut through the fort in 1930 (Birley 1931, 137), despite the fact that the trenches dug in 1937 were in this area. Manuscript annotations on page 170 of James McIntyre's copy of CW2, xxii (1922), now in the Library of the Department of Archaeology, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, depict the line of this trench. A watching brief undertaken at the time recorded building-stones further along the trench, immediately north of the line of the fort wall and extending for a distance of about 20m – approximately along the short access road leading north from the

farmyard gate. A few more building-stones were encountered about 50m north of the gate in the area of (d). These vestigial remains, outside the defences of the Roman fort and of the medieval castle, are quite undated but could represent traces of a *vicus*, of which there are no other indications. The topography restricts the possible position of any *vicus* to the narrow shelf on the west between the fort and the descent to the Hall Sike, and to the much more accommodating northern approaches to the site where the ground is relatively level. The examination, in February 1990, of spoil upcast from new drains cut down the western slopes towards the Hall Sike, beginning about 30m west of the line of the fort ditch, revealed a scatter of Roman pottery and tile (including a coarse *tegulum*, reduced in the firing, a possible waster) at the upper ends of the drains where the ground evens out. It is uncertain whether, so close to the fort, this can be taken as any indication of the existence of archaeological structures on this terrace. No pottery of a later date was found.

One other area of interest is on the south-east. It is impossible to know how much weight to put on Hodgson's suggestion (1840, 296) that dressed stonework was sometimes washed down the Kirk Beck from a point immediately upstream of the fort. Nevertheless it is this area, close to the site of the former Byer Cottage (e; NY 56717445), that has been the most productive in terms of altars (Hodgson 1840, 296; Maughan 1857, 4, 7). The Maiden Way seems to have crossed the Kirk Beck somewhere on the extreme eastern edge of the plan to approach the east gate of the fort (Richmond *et al.* 1938, 199) and a cemetery and temples in this roadside position would conform to the usual pattern. If so, Hodgson's stonework might have come from such an area, disturbed by the frequent changes in the course of the river which are particularly marked at this point. Quite apart from the numerous dedications to Cocidius (RIB 985-9, 993) which have led to the identification of the fort with the cult-centre Fanum Cocidi of the Ravenna Cosmography (Birley 1961, 233; Rivet and Smith 1979, 363), there was at least one temple dedicated to Jupiter Dolichenus, known from an inscription found *ex situ* in the fort (RIB 992). A relief of a Mother Goddess was also discovered in the eighteenth century (Wright and Phillips 1975, 70, no. 183).

The Post-Roman Landscape

The later phases of landscape change are much less well represented or coherent than might be expected. This is little short of extraordinary, given our knowledge of later activity: the eighth century cross, with all the questions of post-Roman continuity that this poses (Biddle 1976, 111, 143-4); the medieval church; the grant of a weekly market and two annual fairs in 1279 (Cal. Charter Rolls, 7 Edw. I, 213); a reference to a hospital (albeit not precisely located within the parish) in 1294 (VCH. Cumberland ii, 204), and the fourteenth century castle itself (King 1983, 82, 98; NAR NY 57 SE 14). By the eighteenth century, following the demise of the castle, the area had become remote and was in decay. A visitor in 1754 described Bewcastle as "a parish . . . in which there is neither town nor village, but a few wretched huts only, which are widely scattered in a desolate country". He stayed, with some disgust, at a "hedge alehouse", presumably what is now the Demesne Farm (*Gentleman's Magazine,* November 1754, 505-6).

The standing fabric of the castle, still one of the dominant features of the landscape, is beyond the brief of this report. First mentioned in 1378 and garrisoned into the early

seventeenth century to guard against raids from Liddesdale, the castle consists of a square shell-keep which would have had internal buildings ranged round its central courtyard. The remains of a gatehouse and barbican project from the west wall and were approached (in the sixteenth century at least) by a drawbridge across the moat (King 1983, 82, 98; Curwen 1922); this may account for the narrowness of the moat on this side. The surviving earthworks are in relatively good condition, the moat on the south side being 2.2m deep, although its south-east angle has been cut through, apparently for a drain. The exact position of the castle seems to have been determined by that of the Roman fort, for the north and east sides of the platform on which the castle stands almost certainly coincide with the fort's north-east angle. Because the north and east sides of the moat were thus outside the artificial scarping of the knoll created by the ruins of the fort, the counterscarps here would have been relatively weak. This deficiency seems to have been remedied by an external bank, now 0.7m high, upcast upon the eastern lip; there are slight traces of a similar bank on the north-west and this probably continued around the whole of the north side. Apart from this, however, there are no earthworks that can be tentatively associated with the castle. Indeed, except for the remains of what seems to have been a rectangular building at the extreme east angle of the field between the church and the castle, the disjointed banks and scarps within the area of the fort appear to make little more sense in the medieval or post-medieval contexts, to which they almost certainly belong, than they do in a Roman one, despite Hutchinson's assertion to the contrary (1794, 78). Excavation has, as yet, revealed little on this aspect, apart from an allusion to stone-robbing of the baths in the fourteenth century (Gillam 1954, 265), some medieval pottery, and the discovery that the building of a kiln has destroyed the rear face of the fort wall at the west gate (Richmond *et al.* 1938, 229-31, 213).

Outside the fort itself there are a number of minor earthworks, of relatively recent date and of agricultural origin. Another kiln, for drying corn, which was mentioned by Bruce (1853, 322) and by Maughan (1857, 3), survives on the south crest of the steep slopes down to Hall Sike (f on plan). It is a subcircular depression, 0.6m deep, and on the east is an upcast bank, 0.4m in height, which flanks a shallow trench marking the position of the stoke-hole (cf. RCHME 1970, 44, 46, 52). The embanked area at (g), 22m to the south-west, was dug out to about its present depth of about 1.0m as a silage pit but was never used. Set into its west side is a large block of dressed stone, almost certainly of Roman date, measuring 0.8m by 0.6m by 0.35m; it was reportedly used as a cheese-press.

Beside Bride's Gill, 55m east of the castle moat, is a stack-stand which lies just beyond an area of relatively recent ridge-and-furrow. It consists of a slight circular platform, about 0.3m high, surrounded by the remains of a low internal bank which is now no more than 0.2m in height. It was evidently encircled by a ditch about 2.5m wide, although this is reduced to little more than a change in the vegetation (cf. RCHME 1970, 54-60). It is not impossible that this could have been one of the "barrow-like mounds" recorded "to the East of the camp" by Bruce (1851, 344) which are not otherwise identifiable. An alternative explanation – although no more than a possibility – is that the mounds could have been part of a Roman barrow cemetery (cf. Charlton and Mitcheson 1984). Finally, to the north-north-west of the fort there is a series of boundary banks which caught the attention of nineteenth century antiquaries, who interpreted

them as Roman forward defences (Bruce 1853, 321-2; Maughan 1857, 3). Although those to the east of Hall Sike are not immediately intelligible in their lay-out, the much later relative date of the banks was revealed during the excavations of 1937. On the south-west, the ditch of the fort was found to be overlain by one of these banks, constructed long after the ditch had silted up (Richmond *et al.* 1938, 214-15). Similar banks survive on the east, fragmented by erosion; that at (h) measures up to 4m wide and 0.6m high, on its north-west side it has a slight ditch, 2m in width and 0.3m deep.

Conclusions

Even with its lengthy occupation in both the Roman and medieval periods, Bewcastle rarely seems to have been in the forefront of Border affairs. Nevertheless, it is an example of a recurrent pattern: the continuing importance and re-use of a strategic strong-point, despite changing tactical needs. The location of the castle, at the economic centre of the manor, was no doubt influenced by the former existence of the Roman fort which, at the very least, provided a ready quarry at a defensible point where the beck could be easily crossed.

The survey has revealed that previously published plans were not sufficiently accurate for detailed inferences about the internal arrangement of the Roman fort to be extrapolated from them. Further excavation, securely located, would help to resolve this and would contribute to our limited understanding of the history of the fort. Bewcastle is the only one of the outpost forts of Hadrian's Wall from which there is insufficient evidence to point to the existence of a *vicus*. Field survey has not been able to demonstrate the presence of a civil settlement but excavation on the terrace immediately west of the fort and outside the presumed position of the north gate might pay dividends. It will be especially important to throw further light on the post-Roman and early medieval phases of the site which are under-represented archaeologically. The Bewcastle cross, one of the greatest achievements of northern art, should be provided with a context.

Acknowledgements

The work at Bewcastle was undertaken by staff of the Royal Commission and is published by courtesy of the Commissioners. Access to the site was kindly granted by the northoble family of the Demesne Farm. The survey was carried out by I. Sainsbury, P. Topping and K. Blood, and the drawing was prepared for publication by P. Sinton. Vivien Swan and Derek Welsby provided information on the excavation of the baths, prior to publication, and Lindsay Allason-Jones made helpful comments on the tile. Fig. 1 is Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England.

The publication of this paper has been assisted by a grant from the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England.

References

Biddle, M. (1976), "Towns" in D. M. Wilson (ed.), *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England*, (Methuen, London) 99-150.

Birley, E. (1931), "Three Notes on Roman Cumberland", CW2, xxxi, 137-47.

Birley, E. (1961), *Research on Hadrian's Wall* (Titus Wilson, Kendal).

Breeze, D. J. and Dobson, B. (1985), "Roman Military Deployment in North England", *Britannia* xvi 1-19.

Bruce, J. C. (1951), *The Roman Wall* (1st ed.) (London).
Bruce, J. C. (1953), *The Roman Wall* (2nd ed.) (London).
Casey, P. J. and Savage, M., (1980), "The coins from the excavations at High Rochester in 1852 and 1855", AA5, vii, 75-87.
Charlton, B. and Mitcheson, M. (1984), "The Roman cemetery at Petty Knowes, Rochester, Northumberland", AA5, xii, 1-31.
Curwen, J. F. (1922), "Bewcastle", CW2, xxii, 186-97.
Gillam, J. P. (1949), "Trial trenching at Bewcastle", CW2, xlix, 216-18.
Gillam, J. P. (1954), "The Roman bath-house at Bewcastle", CW2, liv, 265-7.
Gillam, J. P., Jobey, I. M. and Welsby, D. A. (forthcoming), "The Roman Bath-house at Bewcastle, Cumbria".
Hodgson, J., (1840), *History of Northumberland*, Pt ii, vol iii, (Newcastle upon Tyne).
Hutchinson, W., (1794), *The History of the County of Cumberland, I* (Carlisle).
King, D. J. C., (1983), *Castellarium Anglicanum* (Kraus International, New York).
Maughan, J. (1857), *A Memoir on the Roman Sation and Runic Cross at Bewcastle* (London).
RCHME (1970): Ramm, H. G., McDowell, R. W. and Mercer, E. (1970), *Shielings and Bastles* (HMSO, London).
RIB: Collingwood, R. G. and Wright, R. P. (1965), *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, I: Inscriptions on stone, (Oxford UP).
Richmond, I. A., Hodgson, K. S. and St Joseph K. (1938), "The Roman fort at Bewcastle", CW2, xxxviii, 195-237.
Rivet, A. L. F. and Smith, C. (1979), *The Place-names of Roman Britain* (Batsford, London).
Topping, P. (1987), "A 'new' signal station in Cumbria", *Britannia*, xvii, 298-300.
Wright, R. P. and Phillips, E. J. (1975), *Catalogue of the Roman Inscribed and Sculptured stones in Carlisle Museum, Tullie House* (Carlisle City Council).