

ART. IX.—*The Roman Fort at Beckfoot.* By R. G. COLLINGWOOD.

*Read at the site, July 2nd, 1935.*

UNTIL Mr. I. A. Richmond made his sensational discovery at Brampton Old Church the Roman fort at Beckfoot was, of all the standard *castella* in our district, the last to be discovered by antiquaries. Its walls, though long visible above ground, escaped the notice of Camden, Horsley, and all other antiquaries down to the late 18th century, when Hutchinson published a note on it in his *History of Cumberland* (1794). "At New Mawbray," he wrote, "was a Roman camp, or fort; but the vallum has been defaced, and corn now grows upon the site of it; though some of the old inhabitants remember part of the wall standing" (ii, 346).

The demolition of the Roman walls, that is to say, took place in connexion with the improvement in agriculture and the rise in population which marked the 18th century.\* Here, as so often elsewhere, these changes meant the clearing-away of ancient ruins and the disappearance of visible relics of antiquity. All over England, and especially in the north, it is broadly speaking true that in the year 1700 ruined walls were everywhere visible at Roman sites, and that by 1800 they had been demolished; and Hutchinson's words make it clear that Beckfoot was no exception to that rule. So complete was the demolition, that for some 80 years afterwards no antiquary visited the site, and its very place was forgotten; it was not until the 'seventies that Chancellor Ferguson came

\* Actually in 1767, when a field 30 acres in extent called Newtown Castle, hitherto divided into 43 lots, was enclosed and divided into 8 fields called the Castlefields. See Robinson in *Trans.*, o.s., v, 138.

here more than once, and identified the spot where the fort had been. He found it completely overblown with sand; he saw no stones on the ground and none in the neighbouring dykes, and no pottery in the rabbit-holes; but he saw that a plot of some two acres in "a field called Castles" appeared dry and parched, as if it had once been built upon, and rightly inferred that the fort mentioned by Hutchinson had stood here.

About the same time, the site began to be studied by a man to whom all students of Roman remains in west Cumberland owe a great debt: Mr. Joseph Robinson of Maryport. Robinson was an able field archaeologist and a zealous and efficient excavator; and it was in 1879 that he, independently of Chancellor Ferguson, recognized the site of the Roman fort by a slight rise in the ground. He at once set about excavating it, and almost all that we know about the fort is due to his diggings here in 1879 and 1880.\*

In spite of the poverty of surface indications, Robinson's second trench struck the clay and cobble foundations of the fort's western or seaward wall, which he traced in over thirty trenches for its whole length, finding in some places three courses of the freestone wall *in situ*. His first trench had revealed a worn cobble pavement just within the fort, below which lay a bed of black soil containing slates, pottery, and worked stones bearing the marks of fire. This he interpreted, no doubt correctly, as evidence that the fort had been destroyed and rebuilt during the Roman period.

He traced the entire circuit of the walls, finding them to enclose a somewhat irregular quadrilateral, 405 feet long from E. to W. and tapering from 283 feet broad on the west to 267 feet on the east, being thus  $2\frac{3}{4}$  acres in

\* Ferguson: these *Trans.*, o.s., iv, 318. Robinson: *ibid.*, v, 136 *seqq.* Robinson's work was so good, and the volumes of our Old Series are so rarely available to readers, that I am here offering our members a summary of his report, with comments of my own, and a copy of his plan.

extent. He found the walls to be 6 feet thick, and rounded in the ordinary way at the corners, with the usual angle towers, measuring 8 by 7 feet internally; and in the north, east and south sides he found gateways with guard-chambers. In the west wall he found no gate; and this is strange, since the general plan of the fort, with its north and south gates nearer to the west end than to the east, shows that the fort faced, as it naturally would, seaward and that its main gate should be in that side. But subsequent work by Mr. Harold Duff revealed a block of masonry which must have been the *spina* of the west gate; and it is possible that this seaward gate was blocked up at some late period and that Robinson took this blocking masonry for the original wall.

The plan gives some grounds, in fact, for suspecting that the east gate was the only one which Robinson interpreted correctly, though even here he missed the *spina*. The south gate must have been badly knocked about, and it is odd that the road, as planned, did not lead straight up to it. At the north gate, it looks as if he had mistaken a later structure, built up against the west wall of the west guard-chamber, for that guard-chamber itself, and of the east guard-chamber had only found tumbled ruins.

Inside the fort he found the usual road running parallel to the ramparts and 15 feet away from them; we can infer that these 15 feet were occupied by an earthen bank. Between the road and the wall he found, beside the angle-towers and guard-chambers, two other structures. One, on the west side, was a solid block of masonry 11 by 7 feet, close inside the wall. He suggested that this may have been the base of a lighthouse; for my own part I imagine it to have been a *ballistarium*, added to the fort at some time after its original construction according to a well-known practice, and serving to mount heavy catapults commanding the foreshore with their

fire. The other structure was a raised water-channel at the south-east corner, associated with stone troughs.

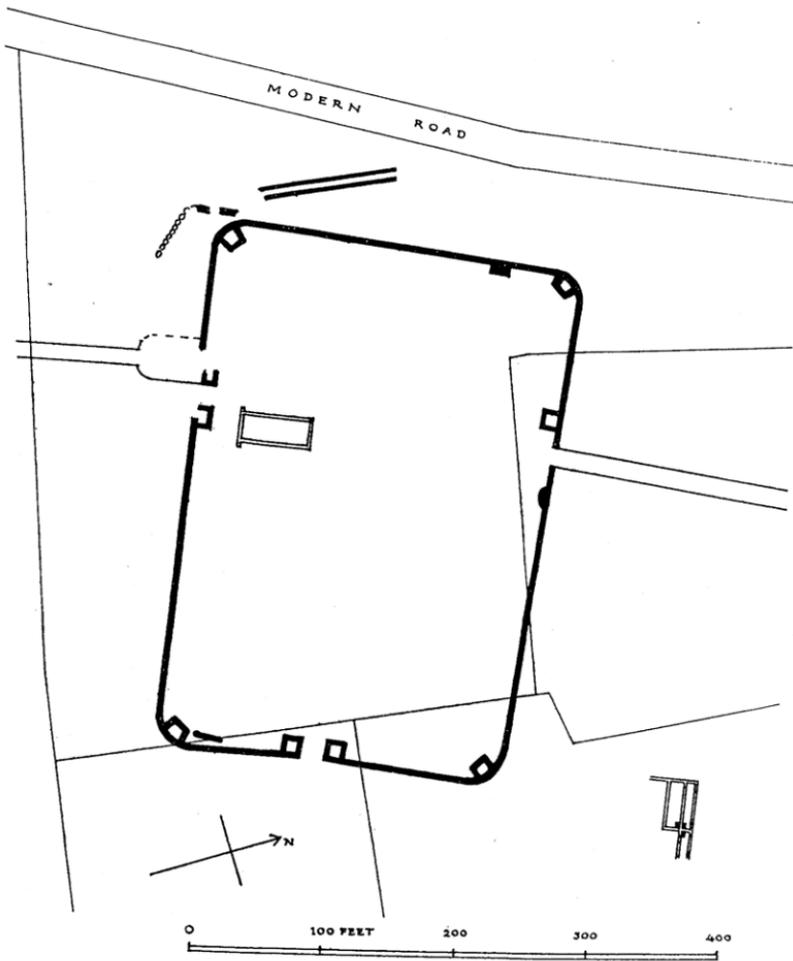


FIG. 1.—THE ROMAN FORT AT BECKFOOT.  
After the survey by John B. Harvey, 1879-1880.

From his description of it, I suppose it to have been the end of an aqueduct leading water into the fort at that corner.

The internal buildings of the fort he left almost entirely untouched. The only one which he explored was a long narrow building lying immediately east of the southern half of the *via principalis*, near the south gate. There is nothing in his plan to show whether it was a granary or, more probably, the façade of the commandant's house. He notes that the robbing of stone, which was still going on in his own time, was very extensive and systematic (building-stone is scarce in the neighbourhood) and in many cases he found nothing left of the walls except their clay and cobble foundations, everywhere laid on sand, which is the natural subsoil.

Robinson also found various structures outside the walls. North-east of the fort he identified one corner, at least 60 feet long by 30 feet wide, of a large building which, at a guess, might have been the bath-house. At varying distances on the west, south and east sides he found what he describes as a rough freestone foundation or pavement; I do not know whether this may have been part of a parade-ground as at Hardknot, Maryport, Ambleside and Slack. One or two other isolated pieces of building, near the south-west corner, I pass over as too fragmentary to interpret. One is a pair of parallel walls not mentioned in the text; another a diagonal line of large cobble-stones, reminding me of the retaining-wall or revetment which protected the end of the artificial shingle-bank outside the south rampart at Ambleside (*Trans.*, N.S., xv, 8). These external structures look as if the fort had never had a ditch; for which indeed the sandy soil would be ill-adapted. Finally, he discovered a road, 15 feet wide and very solidly built, passing right through the fort from N. to S. and extending a long way in either direction.

Among the objects which he found and exhibited to this Society were

“ An altar, 17 by 7 inches, uninscribed, a figure of Diana as

Luna Lucifera, thought at first to be Mithras, but since determined by Mr. Roach Smith, F.S.A., the eminent antiquary; a mutilated figure of Victory, three querns, a large slab, two large blocks of mortar, a large wedge [voussoir] showing the diamond tooling (the only one found), two coins, one of Trajan, much worn, and one of Constantius, two copper beads, several fragments of copper, iron, etc., a round stone, eleven inches in diameter, with a hole near the edge, apparently intended for a weight; a deal of pottery was found, including Samian, Castor, Upchurch, and Salopian ware."

The sculptures were found immediately outside the rampart, at the SW. corner.

These facts, admirably recorded in his paper and plan, tell us exactly what Beckfoot fort was. It is a standard fort of second-century type, designed for an auxiliary cohort 500 strong; facing seaward as if towards the enemy, oblong in shape and divided into 3 equal parts by its two cross-streets the *via principalis* and *via quintana*. This type of fort established itself, in Britain at any rate, during Trajan's reign, and was taken over as the standard pattern by the builders of the Hadrianic frontier. And a significant detail is the manner in which the coastal road here, exactly like the Military Way of Hadrian's Wall, passes through the fort itself. Even the 20-foot gateways are planned on the Trajanic-Hadrianic model, which on the Wall, as we know, was soon afterwards modified by blocking up part of them. Thus in every essential respect the fort belongs to the Wall system and must, one would suppose, have been built as part and parcel of that system. We are by now familiar with the idea that the Wall system extended down the Cumberland coast at least as far as Moresby, if not to St. Bees Head; the Wall itself being omitted, but the forts and signal-towers continuing uninterrupted. The plan of Beckfoot fort, as revealed by Robinson's excavations, entirely confirms that idea.

This brings me to the tactical and strategic character

of the fort. Tactically, it occupies a good position. On the north and east it is protected by streams, which in ancient times may have flowed through broad marshy depressions. Close by is the anchorage of St. Catherine's Hole. Strategically, it is in touch with Maryport, in sight 8 miles away to the south, and with Bowness, about the same distance to north; linked certainly with Bowness and probably with Maryport too by a chain of signal-stations along the coastal road, which was not then, as it is now, broken by the sea at Moricambe Bay. There is no evidence of any road running inland.

Concerning the history of the fort I can say very little. Robinson found, as he says, a deal of pottery, and his description suggests an occupation from the second century to some time in the fourth. A few fragments now preserved at Netherhall date from the Hadrian-Antonine period. Mr. Duff found a sherd with a stamp of the Flavian-Trajanic potter Dagomarus; as an isolated survival, this is not inconsistent with a Hadrianic foundation. A large jar from Beckfoot, now at Tullie House, is described in Mr. Thomas May's catalogue of Tullie House pottery as belonging to the first century, but since that catalogue was written plenty of evidence has come to light showing that jars of this type lasted into the 2nd and even the 3rd centuries, and I should place this particular specimen late in the series.\* The only recorded coins are a worn Trajan, a doubtful Carausius, and a Constantius junior. All this is consistent with an occupation beginning in Hadrian's time and lasting well into the 4th century. During this long stretch of time the fort was undoubtedly, as Robinson argued, destroyed and rebuilt once at least, but we cannot say when. We can

\* *Trans.*, N.S., xvii, p. 173. It is a jar with a cordon round the base of the neck. Such jars are briefly discussed in my *Archaeology of Roman Britain*, p. 233, no. 71. The earlier specimens stand closest to the Belgic pedestal-urn tradition, from which this example is somewhat remote.

only guess that the most probable occasion was the disaster that happened in the late 2nd century.

There is only one inscription. It is cut along the broadly bevelled edge of a stone which has been used in modern times as a gatepost; the holes in which the hooks for hanging the gate were inserted can be seen in the accompanying sketch; but originally it lay in a recumbent position, the lettering running along the face of a plinth. It is at Netherhall, and is no. 25 in Mr. J. B. Bailey's catalogue of the stones there (*Trans.*, N.S., xv, p. 143 and plate I),\* where the alternative suggestion is made that it belonged to an epistyle; but I cannot see how in that case the rest of the inscription was accommodated.



FIG. 2.—INSCRIBED STONE FROM BECKFOOT,  
60 inches long.

It says that the building of which this stone was a part was "erected by . . . prefect of the Second Cohort of Pannonians." No part of the fort or of its component buildings would be thus claimed as the individual work of a single officer; I think therefore that the work in question was some extra building, conceivably a shrine, put up at his own expense by the officer commanding the garrison at some date which, to judge by the lettering, probably fell not very late in the second century, perhaps under Hadrian or Antoninus Pius.

Finally, although Robinson's work of half a century ago has given us a very good general idea of this fort, and although the additional knowledge accumulated from

\* Other references: CIL. vii 417 (incorrect); *Lapidarium*, 903; Ferguson, *Trans.*, o.s., iv, 318; v, 136; Haverfield, *Eph. Epigr.* vii, 978.

time to time by Mr. Harold Duff\* has added not inconsiderably to this original store of information, especially with regard to the existence of a *vicus* north of the fort and a cemetery to the south of it, we have here a site peculiarly suitable for excavation at some future time, when the energies of our Society have exhausted, if they ever do exhaust, the problems of the Wall and our Roman experts look round for new worlds to conquer.

\* *Trans.*, n.s., xxi, pp. 270-1: a note on pottery, including Castor ware and a cooking-pot found by Mr. Duff in the sand-dunes north of the fort. The character of the finds points to an occupied site there which would naturally be part of the *vicus*. The suggestion of a date in the first century B.C. for some part of this pottery should be disregarded. Also xxiii, 244.