

ART. IV.—*Roman sites on the Cumberland coast, 1956.*

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THE work planned for the week beginning 19 August 1956 was originally intended to be part of a seaside camping holiday near Beckfoot. Its objectives were strictly limited: first the detailed examination of the north-east corner of tower 15a, to find its doorway if possible; second sufficient trenching of the measured position of fortlet 16; and finally confirmation of tower 12b on Silloth golf-course (see key plan, fig. 1). My choice of sites for investigation was partly determined by offers of help from friends in Manchester, to whom I wanted to offer a short course in fieldwork, excavation and stratigraphy. In the event, the whole week was so rewarding that its results call for a detailed report, here presented.

The party from Manchester comprised Mr and Mrs A. Whitehead, Mr Toomey and Miss Gowland; I owe them my special thanks for their cheerful enthusiasm whatever the weather. Miss Minter and Mr Brian Blake completed the team.

Tower 15a.

This tower was first examined in 1954 (CW2 liv 36 f., plan and section at p. 38), by trenching planned so economically that we were able in 1956 to mark out a new square over its north-east corner — where we had reason to think that its doorway would be — without re-opening our earlier trenches. The wall of the tower was soon uncovered, overlaid as elsewhere by the demolition layer (E in the section, fig. 2); a line of squared stones across it gave us the left jamb of the doorway which, on further excavation, proved to contain a false sill. We exposed the outer face of the wall down to its clay and cobble foundations, and were able to identify the original

sill by the rounded edge of the second footing-course at the second inset. The right jamb of the doorway was missing, but its distance from the left jamb could be inferred as 3 ft. from the wear on the sill and the difference

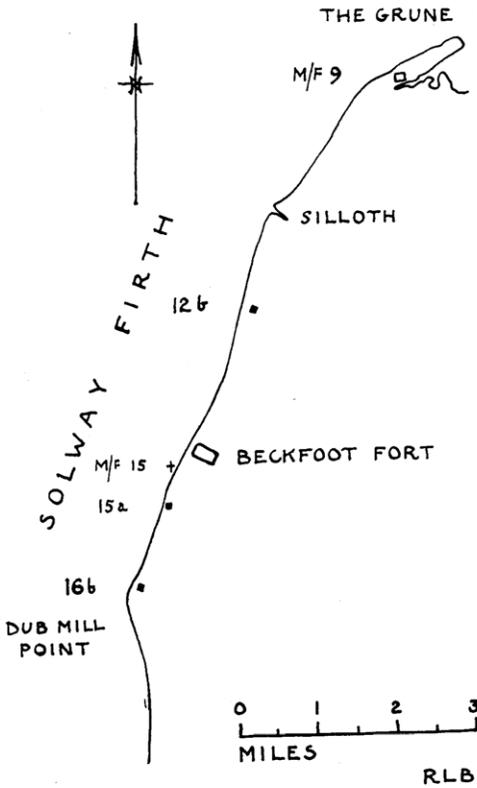


FIG. 1.—Key plan—Cumberland Coast 1956.

between normal wall and false threshold, as can be seen in Pl. I fig. 1. The new step had been made by laying two courses of second-hand facers across the doorway, where they bulged a little beyond the true line of the wall;

against the accumulated debris inside the tower no facers were used but only large cobbles, bedded in a small quantity of yellow clay; the centre of the new step was made of broken hearthstones. No trodden surface survived, but the top of the new threshold was only a little below the highest black layer within the tower.

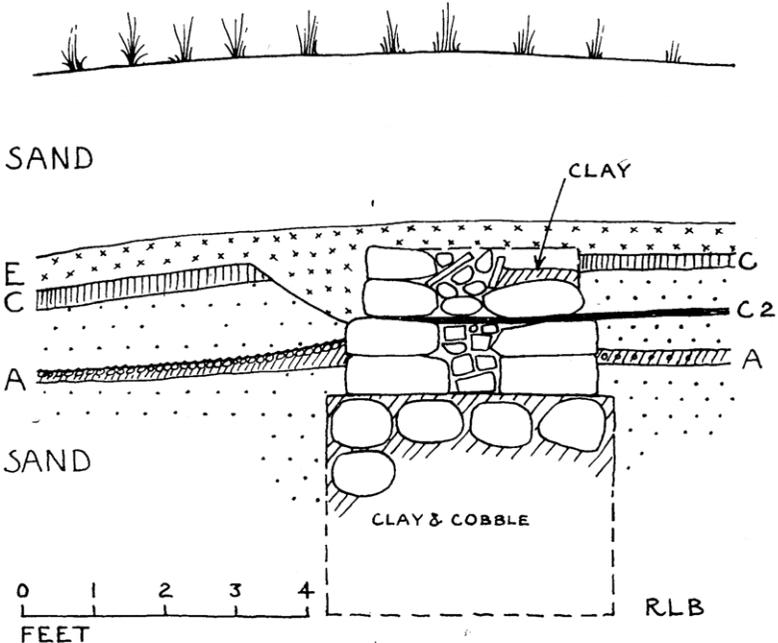


FIG. 2.—Town 15a. Section showing the levels in relation to the original and raised thresholds; interior of tower to right.

- A = Builders' débris, with gravel.
 C = Occupation level on wind-blown sand.
 C₂ = Trodden surface of original threshold extending inside the tower.
 E = Demolition level.

Removal of the false step revealed the original trodden surface of the first threshold (Pl. I fig. 2) at the level indicated by the rounded edge of the first masonry inset. The inside edge was not worn, being protected by a layer of overlying gravel which continued inside as the floor of

the tower. Pottery on the old sill and within the later blocking was of one type, the normal Hadrianic latticed cooking-pot.

The raising of the threshold seems to have been needed because of the accumulation of about 9 in. of blown sand inside the tower as well as outside it; this must have begun soon after its construction, but the false step cannot have been made until shortly before its demolition. The evidence is shown in the section, fig. 2. The builders' level (A) has been lightly gravelled in front of the doorway, forming a path whose upper surface showed little evidence of wear; on this rested about 12 in. of blown sand, the top 3 in. of which merged into a black occupation-level containing potsherds; the demolition layer (E) rested directly upon this, without trace either of turf (denoting a period of abandonment) or of fresh sand. These levels, when studied in relation to the original and false thresholds, have a fascinating story to tell. When the time came for making the new step, the lowest courses of the left jamb's inner and outer corners were chipped away, in order to allow the keying in of fresh stones; since the two lowest courses were covered by accumulated sand and occupation-debris, this had first to be dug away: and the delve was clearly defined—but before fresh sand or occupation-debris could begin to fill it, the order must have been given to demolish the tower, for it was in fact filled by layer E. This seems conclusive proof of demolition by the Romans immediately after the short period of occupation attested by the pottery finds.

Milefortlet 15.

Evidence for the existence of this fortlet may be seen in the cliff-section. To the north of its measured position lies the cremation-site (CW2 liv 51 f. and figs. 6-7); at the measured position itself there is a line of "fossil" turf in the cliff, overlaid by mixed sand and gravel which must represent ditch-upcast. Slight traces of turf-work

and a faint streak of grey clay strengthen the case, but carefully sited trial pits inland from the cliff-section revealed no sign of the fortlet. The Roman ground-level was easily identified, below 5 to 6 ft. of loose sand, and it seemed to thin out eastwards, while cobbles and broken pieces of stone in the upper part of the Roman level became more numerous to the west; from this I infer that the fortlet has been lost by erosion.

Tower 12b.

The credit for identifying its site is due to Mr John A. Inglis who, at my invitation, prospected the whole of the coast between Silloth and Allonby in July 1955. He reported that, on reaching "the first hill inside the golf-course fence (not the one near the coast where a trigonometrical station is marked on the map, but the one at the same northing between it and the path at the back of Blitterlees), I found a square grassy area in the centre of the heathery top of the hill. Probing at once revealed stone and indicated a wall stretching right and left; I dug into the ground and reached the stonework of a wall. I made only a small hole, but I feel satisfied that this is the site of tower 12b."

When our party assembled to test this site, I hoped for no more than a glimpse of the diagnostic levels and a few pieces of Roman pottery, sufficient evidence to confirm tower 12b in its measured position. This evidence was soon forthcoming, as our first trench crossed the path leading to the tower's entrance; but others of the party had meanwhile found a wall running roughly east to west, only 2 ft. 2 in. wide and quite different from the good Hadrianic work which we had been examining at tower 15a. It was of re-used sandstone set in yellow clay; and when two cross walls were identified only 8 ft. 6 in. apart, exciting possibilities occurred to me, for the tough clay layer sealing the site was exactly like that over tower 16b, and here we might hope to find its explanation.



PL. I, FIG. 1.—Tower entrance of two courses of later filling revealed after removal of layer E. The rounded edge of the original cill can be seen.



PL. I, FIG. 2.—Later fitting of doorway removed showing trodden surface. Note the sharp edge of the "faces" inside the tower.

We did indeed find the stump of a normal Hadrianic tower (Pl. II fig. 1), measuring 11 ft. 6 in. internally and with four courses of good masonry surviving, its doorway as anticipated in the north-east corner; standing upon it was the stump of a smaller structure. The contrast in build was striking, as Mr Blake's photograph shows. The floor of the Hadrianic tower showed more evidence of occupation than we had found at towers 15a and 13a, with as many as five hearths distinguishable against the north wall, just inside the door; the heat from the fire had burnt away and rounded the facing-stones of the north wall, as has been observed in turrets on the Wall. The pottery was all of one type, the dark latticed cooking-pot common to all the sites so far examined: pieces found just inside the doorway when put together formed an almost complete cooking-pot (see Appendix, p. 25 f. below), while other sherds came from two cooking-pots which had been cut down and used as bowls (cf. CW2 liv 49).

It is not certain what happened between the abandonment of the original tower and the construction of the second. There seems to have been a period when blown sand accumulated inside, covering the occupation-debris; part of the east wall seems to have fallen outwards, suggesting decay after a lengthy period of disuse—and in any case, before the rebuild the remains of the first tower were dismantled down to ground-level and the inside facing-stones of its fallen wall were taken up, leaving a spread of core material: compare Robinson's observations at Pasture House, CW1 v 129. The new foundations, consisting of small shore-cobbles set in clay, were roughly set out, to make a building 8 ft. 6 in. internally; it was a very poor affair, judging by the three courses of re-used stone set in clay which survive, its angles badly off square. Its builders seem to have ignored, or even to have known nothing of, the solid structure below, laying their foundation on sand or masonry in a most slipshod fashion.

There was no trace of floor or occupation, and not one solitary potsherd, above the sealed Hadrianic floor. The later building was immersed in a matrix of clay and rubble, as had been found at tower 16b (CW2 liv 44); another illustration of the value of recording observations not yet explicable (CW2 liv 33), was the discovery here of a clay spread to north of the tower, separated from the Hadrianic ground-level by 4 in. of blown sand.

It seems safe to infer that tower 16b also, like 12b, was later rebuilt in stone set in clay, though neither tower has yielded traces of later re-use—not even one scrap of pottery. One further point may be worth emphasis: these two towers are equidistant to north and south of Beckfoot fort (fig. 1), at 6 x 540 yards; the two sites were perhaps found to be adequate for signalling purposes in this coastal sector, when a signalling-system was re-established.

Conclusions.

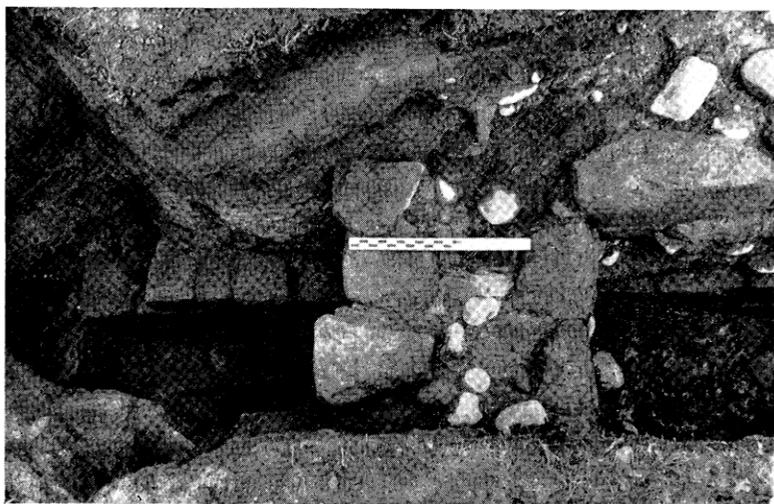
In the two towers examined in 1956 the doorway was in the east wall, at the north-east corner (compare the commonest doorway position in turrets on the Wall). In tower 15a the fortuitous raising of the step-level provides direct evidence for the dismantling coming immediately after a short period of occupation; and the alignment of this tower's walls strongly supports the conclusion that milefortlet 15 has been lost by erosion of the cliffs.

Towers 12b and 16b seem to have been occupied longer than the others so far examined, to judge by the thickness of occupation-debris inside; and at a later period both these towers were put into commission again as isolated signalling-posts: as on Hadrian's Wall, the original close spacing of such posts was not found worth maintaining, and on this sector of the Cumberland coast signalling could easily be dealt with by far fewer towers.



PL. II, FIG. 1.—Tower 126. North wall of Hadrianic tower and remains of later tower.

The doorway is just appearing at the right hand end of the scale.
Note the fire-rotted stones of the wall at the centre of the photograph.



PL. II, FIG. 2.—N.W. Corner showing later wall above.

APPENDIX: *A note on contemporaneous repairs to Roman pottery.*

It is an interesting fact that on all the Roman coastal sites so far examined, namely the milefortlet at Cardurnock and the four towers between Silloth and Dubmill Point, pieces of pot have been found showing repairs with lead rivets. Until a complete rivet, detached from the pot it had once mended, came to light at the newly discovered tower site on Silloth golf links (Tower 12b, above), we could only infer the general principles of the method, but not the technique. Such widespread repairs are interesting: while one may expect a valuable article, or a personal and prized drinking-cup, to be worth the trouble of repairing, it is noteworthy that these coastal sites have so often yielded common cooking-pots that have been repaired, indicating a shortage even of everyday pottery as far as their occupants were concerned.

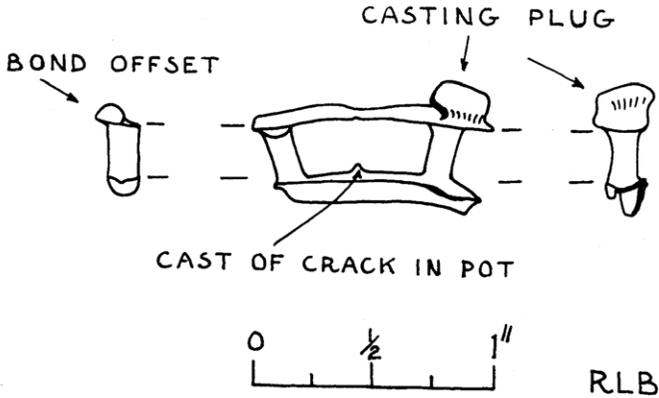


FIG. 1—The lead “rivet” found at Tower 12b.

The features of the rivet (fig. 1) made it clear that we are wrong in talking about the *rivetting* of Roman pottery; it has in fact been a *casting*, and there must have been a simple and satisfactory technique. The lead bond shows the following features, all indicating casting in a mould:

- (a) The mould-plug, a lump of excess metal remaining in the pouring-hole.
- (b) The ridge across the inner bar, where the molten lead has entered the crack in the pot.
- (c) The offset of the outer bar, due to faulty placing of the outer mould.
- (d) Faults in the metal, due to bubbles of air or steam.

I resolved to experiment with the casting of lead bonds, using the simplest possible apparatus. The holes in the pottery were obviously drilled, and I made and used a simple bow-drill with a steel bit ground to a diamond point and a whorl fashioned from a piece of amphora. The actual drilling of the pot offered no problem, except that hard gritty fabrics quickly dulled the steel bit, although I had made it glass-hard. For moulds I used moist clay, two of them being required (fig. 2). After drilling holes on either side of the break to be repaired, the inner mould is made by pressing a lump of clay against the inside of the pot, covering the two holes; on removal of the clay, the marks

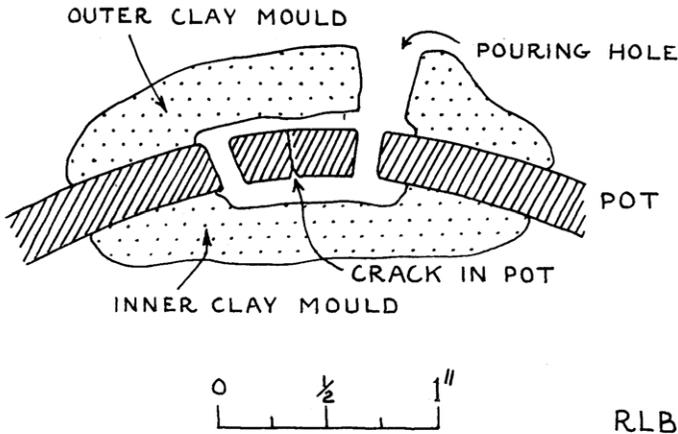


FIG. 2.—Section of a drilled pot, with moulds in position ready for pouring in the lead.

made by the holes on its surface enable a groove to be made joining them, thus completing the first mould. The outer mould is made in the same manner, but at one end of the groove on it a hole is pierced right through the clay, to form a pouring-hole. The inner mould can be placed accurately in position, because its groove can be seen through the holes in the pot, but the placing of the outer mould involves some guesswork: one of the holes may be seen through the pouring-hole, but the other can only be glimpsed under the raised edge of the mould, just before final positioning. This difficulty explains very nicely the offsetting of the outer bond in our example.

The pouring of the molten lead and the removal of the clay moulds completed the operation; the resulting bond showed all the expected features, thus making the experiment entirely satisfactory.