

ART. VII.—*The Roman site at Kirkbride, Cumberland.*

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THIS is a work of collaboration, sparked off by a screening of the printed sources, continued by field-work and excavation, and completed by a brief report on the resulting finds and their significance. Each of us is immediately responsible for the portion of the paper to which his name is attached, but we submit it as a joint contribution to the study of the Roman occupation of Cumberland.

I. *The case for a Roman site.* By ERIC BIRLEY.

The early antiquaries show no knowledge of anything Roman at Kirkbride, nor is it credited with Roman remains in the county histories; the first reference in print seems to be in Mannix & Whellan's *History & Directory of Cumberland* (1847) 475, where it is noted that the church is "built on the site, and probably with the materials from the old Roman fort or station which stood here", and that in the garden wall of the rectory "is a portable Roman altar". We may take it that the source of this information was either the rector, the Rev. Joseph Hallifax (1773-1855) — who had been curate there for many years until he succeeded to the living on 10 March 1847 — or his son and successor as rector, the Rev. Joseph Hallifax (1816-1868). It must certainly have been the latter who furnished the fuller account printed in Whellan's *Cumberland & Westmorland* (1860) 248, which deserves to be reproduced here all the more because it has been neglected so conspicuously by later writers:

“Beside the Roman altar just mentioned, and the ancient font constructed in the church, few remains of antiquity are visible in this parish. The church, as above stated, is supposed to occupy the site of a Roman fort or station, the upper and lower moats of which may still be traced on the western side of the sacred edifice. There are, however, no less than three ancient roads, at some depth from the present surface, one of sand, one of gravel, and one paved. This last is about three feet below the surface; and as far as can be traced they all run from south to north. The paved one goes up to the site of the present church, and was first discovered while removing some soil from the churchyard. Roman pottery, in the shape of urns, lamps, vases, and vessels of domestic use, have frequently been found in parts of the churchyard, and in the adjoining land. Some ancient British pottery has also been discovered, though less frequently than Roman, and many Saxon beads of glass, and other ornaments, which may be seen at the rectory.”

The altar is *Lap. Sep.* 530 = CIL VII 333, revised in JRS xvii 217: *deo Belatocairo Peisius m. solvit votum l. m.* — one of the many dedications to Belatucadrus by individuals who tell us nothing of their status — unless Peisius was *m(iles)* = a soldier; in 1868 it was purchased from the rector, shortly before his death on 4 December, by James Mawson (1813-1879) of Lowther, who paid 10/- for it.¹ Mawson also had in his collection, presumably acquired in the same way, two samian bases (apparently of the 2nd century form Dr. 31) with *graffiti* on their undersides, which Bruce published as *Lap. Sep.* 531 and 532, noting that “Graffiti are said to be more frequently met with at Kirkbride than elsewhere”; this seems to imply that Mawson, Bruce’s informant, was aware of other items in the Hallifax collection as well as those which he himself had obtained from it.

It was presumably from the account in Whellan that Chancellor Ferguson derived the idea put succinctly in his paper of 1876 (CW1 iii 77): “A Roman road led from Old Carlisle to Bowness, passing Kirkbride Church, which stands in a Roman Camp.” That, indeed, is the

¹ CW1 xv 151 (Rev. J. Whiteside).

only reference cited by W. G. Collingwood in his Cumberland inventory (CW2 xxiii 243), and it seems difficult to suppose that he had ever studied Whellan on the subject — otherwise he would hardly have committed himself in 1924 (CW2 xxv 350) to the statement that

“The church, indeed, stands on a rectangular platform with dykes round it, but there is no indication of the ramparts of a Roman fort nor of pottery such as would be inseparable from such a site.”

Yet pottery was already on record, as we have seen, and indeed another piece had been found during the restoration of the church in 1895, as the Rev. James Whiteside duly noted in his careful study (CW1 xv 147): “In the chancel wall I discovered a fragment of Roman pottery.” But Whiteside had also introduced an element of caution in his paper:

“The Romans had previously a camp on the eminence where the church is built, we see traces of the moat or fosse, the Roman roads went close by, and the stones of the church, being such as would be used in their wall, may possibly have come from Bowness, if they did not form the walls of the local fort.”

It was no doubt recollection of that suggestion which led W. G. Collingwood, or “the authorities on Roman matters” on whom he fathered the suggestion, to give up the idea of a Roman site at Kirkbride, and to suppose that the Roman walling-stones and the altar had been “brought round by boat from Bowness as material for the 12th century structure”.

Yet the materials in the Hallifax collection, as listed summarily by Whellan, and the specific pieces of pottery illustrated by Bruce or mentioned by Whiteside, are surely sufficient to justify us in re-opening the case — not to speak of the new and striking evidence adduced by Mr Bellhouse in his report on the Roman road from Drumburgh to Kirkbride (CW2 lii 41-45); compare also his observations in CW2 lv 338, where he has suggested the possibility of a further road-link with Beckfoot.

II. *Investigations on the spot.* By R. L. BELLHOUSE.

In January 1961 Professor Birley sent me the foregoing brief on the case for a Roman site at Kirkbride, and in a covering letter he asked me to consider the possibility of a fort or fortlet there, perhaps connected with the coastal system of towers and mile-fortlets, and whether any sort of a plan could be made to show visible remains of rampart or ditches. This was not the first time that a tempting carrot had been held before a not unwilling donkey; the resulting evidence seems conclusive, and yet the site shows not the slightest significant surface feature!

The village of Kirkbride stands on a low ridge of red boulder-clay running roughly north and south at the head of the sea inlet known as Moricambe Bay (cf. CW2 lxii 63 ff.); at the north end of the ridge, on the highest point, stands the ancient church of St Bride, the main centre of interest because of the second-hand Roman look of its stones. The site (fig. 1) is not a promising one

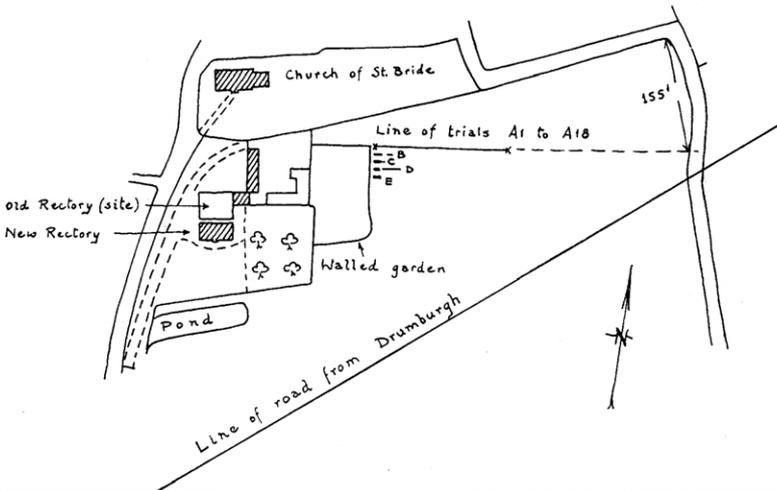


FIG 1.—The site.

because so much of the ground is inaccessible: on the north side of the church lie the farm buildings and yards of Bank House, and immediately to the south is the Rectory with its garden, orchard and outbuildings, so that scope for field-work there is severely limited. However, in February 1961 Mr Whitehead and I were able to dig two holes in the little lane between the churchyard and the rectory, and we found five pieces of Roman pottery — the first tangible and datable evidence to strengthen the case stated by Professor Birley.

This lucky find of Roman material, despite the absence of surface indications, provided welcome encouragement to continue our investigation of the area, which demanded close and urgent attention, the more so since the old rectory, built in 1790 (probably a rebuild or enlargement of an earlier house, since a joist in the cellar bore the date 1757), had been gutted by fire and a new rectory was about to be built a little to the south of it. I obtained permission to dig in the garden, and in the meantime I watched the digging of foundation trenches, so that any finds or structures could be recorded before being built over or otherwise destroyed. These trenches were disappointing and served only to confirm my view that the old rectory had been sited on a cut-and-fill terrace, for they showed a thickness of made gravelly ground, nowhere penetrating to the underlying red boulder-clay. But the garden on the east side seemed to be lower than the filled ground, so that it was an obvious place for further trials; and, in any case, we owed it to the new rector to complete our work and be out of his garden before he took up residence. No excavations could be arranged until July 1961, when we spent three days in the walled garden; hampered by fruit trees and paved walks, we yet managed to prove a varying thickness of disturbed ground resting on cobbling and hard-packed gravel spreads; green-glazed sherds hinted at the activities of medieval stone-robbers. As so often happens when a

limited excavation is attempted, the last pit showed the most promise when the time had come for filling in and tidying up: in the last hour on the last day we thought we had found the clay and cobble base of the rampart of a fort, interrupted as if for a gateway, on a distinct east-west ridge. Moreover, a trial pit had already been dug in a slight hollow on the south side of the ridge, where a ditch might be expected, but this pit only proved to contain six feet of mixed earth and modern flower-pot right down to the bottom. We could only cover up the cobbles and go away wondering.

In the extract from Whellan, three "roads" are described as running south to north, one of sand, one of gravel, and one paved: if we could interpret them confidently as rampart-base, turf-work and *intervallum*, there seemed to be a good chance of recovering the outline of a fort. Our last hole therefore assumed a greater significance the more we dwelt on this problem. Investigations in the garden were hardly a good example of planned and ordered digging, as our pits could only be dug where the spaces between fruit trees were not already occupied by pathways, but in the event we had found the expected Roman-type clay and cobble bases for stone walls and associated gravelled surfaces, all much disturbed by trenches for modern field drains, evidenced by the occurrence of 19th century pottery on the cobbles and of worn samian at the surface. We were clearly within an area of buildings and seemingly close to the southern rampart of a fort.

It was some time before we could return to the last hole, in June 1962. When we had uncovered the cobbling and extended the excavation, it was to find a wall footing only 27 in. wide, consisting of one course of cobbles set in grey clay and with no masonry surviving above it. A hard-packed thickness of gravel, at a higher level and clearly associated with the traces of the wall, was either a road outside a building or a floor within it. The

one conclusion we could draw was that we were still inside a fort, and that it was a larger fort than we had imagined.

Hitherto the places in which we could dig had been severely limited because we had assumed that the Roman levels would be mainly under the church and churchyard; but now, with remains proved as far away as the south-east corner of the rectory garden, there was an excellent case for extending our researches to the pasture on the east. Just over the garden wall therefore we laid out the base-line for a ten-foot grid, and began a systematic sampling and recording. The first 22 pits have now been dug: at first the finds were just like those in the garden, but as we moved across the field they became more and more exciting. For the first time we were finding clear Roman levels, lying directly on undisturbed subsoil and securely dated by recognisable types of coarse pottery and figured samian; indeed, as we got further away from the garden the finds were thicker in the ground. Our first surprise, that the site was proving so extensive, was followed quickly by a greater one, that the pottery indicated its occupation to have begun before the end of the 1st century. Thus an investigation begun simply in order to prove the existence of a Roman site — presumed to be of Hadrianic date because of its obvious link with the Wall-fort at Drumburgh — ends with the case proved, but at the same time it has introduced an entirely different set of problems.

For the record I append the following details of the trial pits sunk in the field O.S. no. 93; the plan given on p. 129 gives the layout of the excavation grid, in which pits measuring 2 ft. x 3 ft. were dug in the south-west corners of the squares, allowing for balks 2 ft. wide in the event of development of an area-excavation at some future date:

E 1: 6 in. greyish plough soil.

- 1 in. small pebbles, observed in all pits and explained as a cultivation feature (not specially mentioned hereafter).
- 6 in. soil with coal and modern pottery.
- 3 in. very fine grey sand (marsh silt).
- 24 in. mixed greyish-brown soil with some stone, merging with red boulder-clay.
- D 1: As in E 1. 3 ft. deep to the boulder-clay, on which lay a thin gravel spread with pieces of reddish-brown freestone.
- C 1: 6 in. plough soil.
8 in. mixed earth.
3 in. marsh silt.
15 in. mixed earth and gravel on the surface of the underlying boulder-clay.
- B 1: 6 in. plough soil.
24 in. mixed soil, gravelled surface on the boulder-clay.
- A 1: As in B 1.
- A 2: 6 in. plough soil.
12 in. mixed earth.
3 in. pebbles in soil.
6 in. stones in grey clay.
6 in. change to red boulder-clay.
- A 3: 6 in. plough soil.
18 in. mixed earth to boulder-clay at 24 in.
- A 4: 6 in. plough soil.
12 in. mixed earth.
9 in. hard packed gravel resting on boulder-clay.
- A 5: 6 in. plough soil.
15 in. mixed earth.
6 in. cobbles in soil.
6 in. gravel spread on boulder-clay.
- A 6: 6 in. plough soil.
18 in. mixed earth resting on grey boulder-clay containing patches of red clay.
- A 7: 6 in. plough soil.
18 in. mixed earth.
3 in. gravel on boulder-clay with four loose cobbles.
- A 8: As in A 7.
- A 9: As in A 7. Rim fragment of hard reddish ware.
- A 10: 6 in. plough soil.
18 in. mixed earth with cobbles and gravel below. As there seemed to be a sleeper-trench here, this pit was lengthened to display it as a strip of mixed red

- boulder-clay, 15 in. wide, with natural grey clay on either side. Red sherds at lowest level.
- A 11: 6 in. plough soil.
 15 in. mixed earth.
 2 in. pebbles in soil.
 2 in. occupation earth, black with charcoal; some samian.
 6 in. small gravel or grey boulder-clay.
- A 12: 6 in. plough soil.
 6 in. gravel and soil.
 3 in. small cobbles, resting on
 9 in. packed gravel. All disturbed by a modern drain.
- A 13: As A 12. Water prevented us from proving the lowest level, but probing indicated a thickness of 21 in. of gravel.
- A 14: 6 in. plough soil.
 24 in. mixed earth.
 9 in. blackish silt and charcoal.
- A 15: 6 in. plough soil.
 15 in. mixed earth.
 7 in. bright red clay, partly burnt to brick; rim of samian bowl, type Curle 11.
 9 in. large gravel and grey silt on grey boulder-clay.
 This pit was made 4 ft. square in order to display the burnt feature.
- A 16: 6 in. plough soil.
 18 in. mixed soil with small and large stones.
 3 in. a discontinuous mixed level with burnt clay and many pieces of samian.
 12 in. mixed soil and pebbles with a general reddish-grey colour.
 2 in. gravel, resting on
 2 in. iron-stained grey clay, merging into the red boulder-clay at a depth of 43 in.
- A 17: 6 in. plough soil.
 15 in. soil and pebbles.
 3-6 in. red clay in two lenticels.
 9 in. gravel and pasty silt on grey boulder-clay.
- A 18: 6 in. plough soil.
 18 in. soil and pebbles.
 13 in. burnt red clay.
 1 in. black muck, containing some sherds and bone fragments.
 2 in. gravel on grey boulder-clay.

For a proper understanding of the above notes a comment on the grey clay seems called for. This material was used by the Romans and many examples of their foundation-work in clay and cobble come to mind: it will suffice to mention the truly massive foundations of the coastal towers, and the remains of the early clay rampart at Drumburgh. At Kirkbride grey clay is entirely natural, its occurrence the result of well-understood soil-forming processes. The soils we see today are man-made, many of them dating from the enclosures of the 19th century; typically the profile shows two horizons, an upper uniform plough soil about 6 in. thick changing abruptly to the almost unweathered boulder-clay below. The red soils round Old Carlisle are of this type, and but for the "fossil" soils preserved under the floors of the *vicus* there we should not have been able to say what the soils of that area were in Roman times; we can in fact state with some confidence that the local soil was a thin and peaty podsol, and that the countryside was moorland and certainly not oak forest. The same may be said of Kirkbride, where the original soil has been preserved unchanged beneath the Roman levels. It too is a podsol, and the grey leached horizon which is characteristic remains as the layer of grey clay passing into the red boulder-clay below. The normal tough black peaty turf has gone, doubtless stripped off for rampart-building, exposing the grey clay to the elements; in places it was quickly gravelled over, elsewhere its surface was trodden and accumulated occupation debris before receiving its gravel sealing.

III. *The finds.* By ERIC BIRLEY.

Only one coin came from Mr Bellhouse's excavations, and it was in such terrible condition that we were afraid that nothing could be made of it; we submitted it, however, to Dr J. P. C. Kent, F.S.A., of the Department of Coin and Medals in the British Museum, and he was able to identify it as a double denarius of Tetricus I (270-274), with reverse COMES AVG, Victory standing left. The altar to Belatucadrus, by its style, may well belong to the earlier years of the 3rd century, and the two pieces of samian bearing *graffiti*, illustrated by Bruce, might be of the time of Hadrian or later; but the pottery from Mr Bellhouse's digging in 1961 and 1962, apart

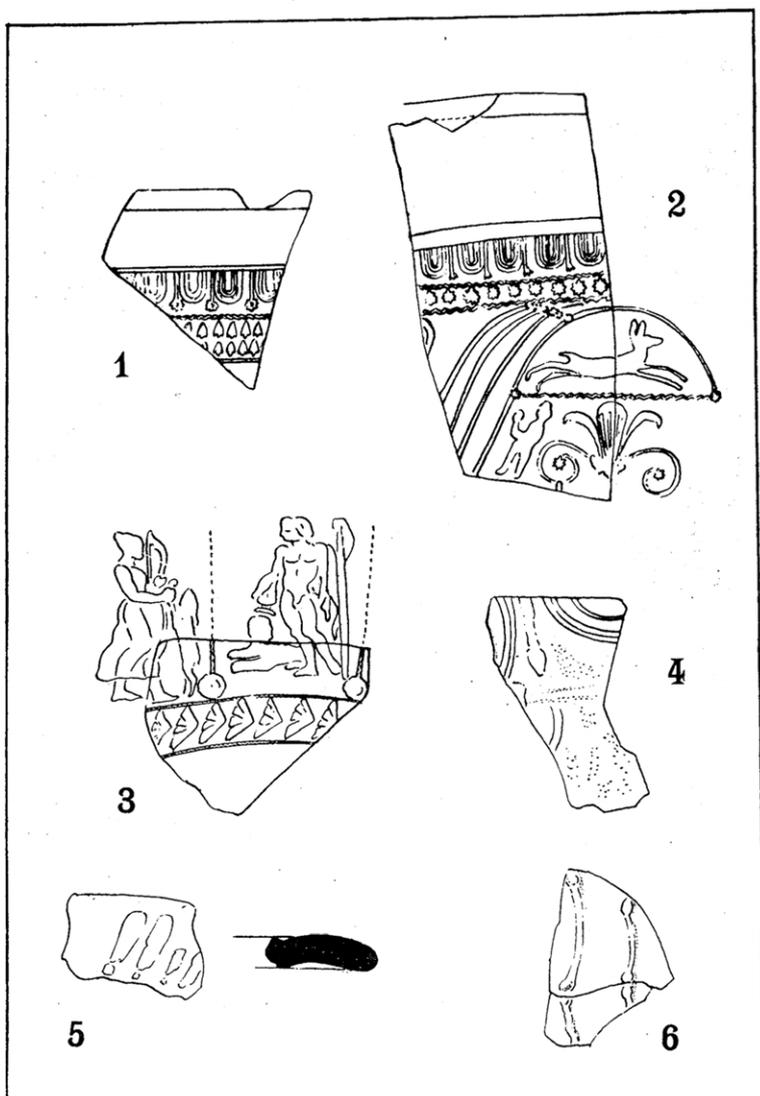


FIG. 2.—Figured samian and decorated wares. ($\frac{1}{2}$)

from modern sherds and some pieces of medieval pottery (showing the characteristic green glaze but without significant shape), was all of the period *c.* A.D. 80-120. I subjoin brief notes on the most significant pieces, drawn for us by Mr Wilfred Dodds:

(a) Figured samian and decorated wares: fig. 2.

1. Dr. 37: the ovolo with large rosette terminal to its tongue, wavy lines and "arrowheads" in series, are characteristic of the mid-Flavian period; this piece and no. 2 might well have been in use in the decade 80-90.

2. Dr. 37: in this case the tongue of the ovolo is trifid and bent slightly to the right; the main scheme of decoration has been a continuous winding scroll, its lower concavities containing upper and lower fields separated by horizontal wavy lines, while a single series of neat rosettes, bordered above and below by wavy lines, separates it from the ovolo.

3. Dr. 37: much abraded, but clearly representing a later stage of South Gaulish production, perhaps later than A.D. 100; the figure-types are *Diana and the hind* (many versions of which were used by different potters) and *Dionysus and his panther* (D. 302) in panels separated by coarse wavy lines terminating in crude rosettes, while the decoration is closed below by leaf-ornaments in series, bordered above and below by coarse wavy lines.

4. Dr. 37: too badly corroded for its decoration to be made out in detail, but it consisted of festoons in two separate zones, this decorative scheme suggesting a date early rather than late in the Flavian period, say *c.* 75-85.

5. Rim fragment of a shallow bowl in hard, reddish fabric with off-white painted decoration on the upper side of the rim. We have not noted an exact parallel, but Mr John Gillam, F.S.A., to whom we showed the piece, was prepared to accept it as pre-Hadrianic.

6. Wall-fragment from a dark grey rustic cooking-pot, showing rustication in irregular vertical lines; typologically likely to be Trajanic rather than Flavian, but hardly later than that.

(b) Significant rim-sections: fig. 3.

1. Reddish-buff fabric, from a carinated bowl with flat rim, faintly reeded; no exact parallel in Mr Gillam's type-series (AA4 xxxv, 1957).

2. Soft light red fabric, from a carinated bowl of more normal rim-section, with vestigial reeding.
3. Rustic cooking-pot in grey fabric, with relatively slight rustication.
4. Rim and upper wall of a carinated bowl in hard lead-grey fabric, with a lightly scored line half-way down the upper wall.
5. Rim fragment from a jar in hard fabric with a dark surface and brownish core; not one of the standard types and not directly datable, but compatible with a pre-Hadrianic date.
6. Conjoined fragments of a samian flanged bowl of Curle's type II, showing the leaf and stalk in barbotine which are characteristic of all but the latest (Hadrianic) examples of this form.

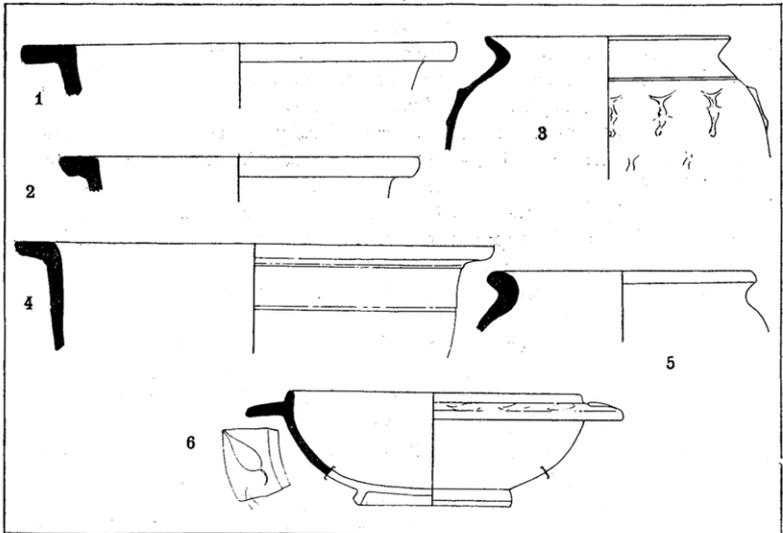


FIG. 3.—Significant rim-sections. (4)

Judging by the account in Whellan, the earlier finds came mainly from the churchyard, and the silence of Parson & White (1829) implies that they cannot have been found, as one of us was at first disposed to suspect, during the rebuilding of the rectory in 1790: otherwise they would not have had to wait until 1847 for their

first public mention. On the evidence so far available, one may be entitled to think that the Roman occupation at Kirkbride will prove to consist of two distinct phases: a relatively large Flavian fort, which might well have been founded as early as the governorship of Agricola in or soon after A.D. 80, and a smaller site, incorporated in the Hadrianic system (in view of its road-link with Drumburgh), and in occupation at least until the closing years of the 3rd century (in view of the coin of Tetricus). But we must await further excavation, which Mr Bellhouse hopes to undertake when circumstances permit, before the outlines of the Flavian fort or of its Hadrianic successor can be plotted on the map.²

² We see that Professor Richmond has anticipated us in deducing a pre-Hadrianic fort at Kirkbride (*History* xliv, 1959, 4 and footnote 19).