

ART. VIII.—*Roman sites on the Cumberland coast,*
1962. By R. L. BELLHOUSE, B.Sc.

Read at Carlisle, September 7th, 1962.

SIX years have gone by since the last important discovery, namely the "double" tower 12b on Silloth golf-course (CW2 lvii 22 ff.). Although towers of the coastal signalling system had been proved as far south along the coast as Dubmill Point (tower 16b, CW2 liv 42 ff.), the problem of assessing the extent of post-Roman erosion at the Point and beyond, along the greater part of the curve of Allonby Bay, made it impossible to mark out the coast in units of 540 yds. with any certainty. Indeed, the search for traces of towers and mile-fortlets, at the measured positions they should occupy in any hypothetical extension of the scheme from the last known site, had been quite fruitless. But luck intervened on 6 April 1962. I had been to Bank End farm, and as I drove north along the coast road I saw stones in a newly ploughed field, on the seaward slope of the low hill called Brownrigg; inspection disclosed the familiar surface features indicating the presence of the remains of tower foundations and, as confirmatory evidence, one piece of a cooking-pot in grey ware. I recalled the words of the Mawbray sand-pit worker as he viewed our excavation at tower 15a: "We dug up walls like these at Cross-canonby road-end just before the war." Having plotted the position of the new discovery on the map and found that it made a pair with the lost tower, I felt certain that there were now excellent chances of establishing the "Cardurnock sequence" in a new sector of the coast.

The units to north and south should be mile-fortlets 21 and 22: on 9 April I climbed the low cliff at the north end of Maryport golf-course and found clear surface

indications of the ditch of M/f 22, made strikingly obvious by another strange chance. Cattle newly turned out had left deep hoofmarks in the softer ground over the ditch and these, filled by a recent heavy shower, showed its extent by shimmering reflections of the sky in the most convincing way. One look was enough — at such moments of discovery there are no doubts. A few days later I went to the site of M/f 21, but found no surface features; I did find two more towers, namely 20b and 22a. Tower 20b is on the north shoulder of Swarthy Hill, its position given away by the boulder-field at the foot of the scarp on which it stands; whenever the field is ploughed and stones are brought to the surface, they are rolled over the edge of the cliff. Tower 22a was visible as a rectangular stony mound in the fairway of the golf-course.

These new discoveries are exciting for several reasons; not only has the complete "Cardurnock sequence" been established for the first time south of Moricambe, but here also, for the first time, comes the opportunity to examine a mile-fortlet not occupying the special situations of those at Cardurnock and Skinburness, which watch the entrance to Moricambe. Would we find occupation lasting up to A.D. 140 and then evidence of dismantling? Then, a point of particular interest in prosecuting the search for more sites arises from the fact that some of the new ones lie right at the edge of the boulder-clay cliffs which overlook the foreshore, whereas those previously found have been either on Raised Beach or on ancient sand-dunes. Despite the lack of information about post-Roman erosion of the coast south of Dubmill Point, the provisional measuring off and numbering of mile-fortlets is now seen to require little adjustment, and the schedule printed in *Research on Hadrian's Wall*, 129 f., may be retained as a convenient working basis (without, of course, resolving the erosion problem).

A short programme of excavation was arranged for

the week beginning 2 September, tower 20b receiving attention first. Probing quickly located its remains but, as turf and soil were removed and the typical foundations were exposed, it was a great disappointment to find that ploughing had chamfered them off and that little more than half survived. The south and west sides were almost intact, the north and east progressively disturbed and at their junction all the cobbles had gone, leaving just enough trace of the foundation trench to enable us to measure the lengths of those two sides. Unfortunately, no part of the floor of the tower remained, and one solitary sherd of rather hard-fired cooking-pot, rescued from a spoil-heap, was the only evidence of occupation. The foundations were like those of other coastal towers but not nearly so deep, and the method of construction was at once apparent: a trench had been dug in the red sandy boulder-clay and in it had been laid one course of large cobbles, over which grey clay and smaller cobbles made a level surface. Width varied from 4 ft 9 in. to 5 ft., and depth at just over 1 ft. is just about one-third that of tower foundations laid in sand. On the south side two courses of irregular sandstone slabs remained *in situ* over the full width of the clay and cobble — as in tower 16b — presumably with one or two insets in the masonry above reducing the wall to 3 ft. The tower was nearly square, 21 ft. x 22 ft., and the west side was set back 20 ft. from the edge of the cliff.

The site of our next objective, tower 21b, was still concealed under a fine crop of oats; the lateness of the season and frequent showers had prevented the combine harvester from making more than five circuits of the field — another eight would have let us into it. For that reason we made an unscheduled examination of the site of mile-fortlet 21, digging a few small holes. The rather loamy, indeterminate subsoil changed within a few feet to apparently undisturbed boulder-clay, and then to soil and gravel, as we moved over the ground from north to south;

the significance of this evidence was not then apparent, but in the light of what we found at M/f 22 we can now recognise that it indicates the ditch-fill, rampart and occupation-levels of a mile-fortlet.

The examination of mile-fortlet 22 began on 4 September, with the aim of proving ditch and rampart and finding Roman pottery. The remains lie mostly in field O.S. no. 13, with part of the south rampart and ditch in no. 14. Our base-line was soon laid out and pegs driven into the ground to mark 10 ft. squares, so that a regular grid of trial pits could be opened and then expanded into a substantive trench across the defences and an area-excavation inside the fortlet. By mid-afternoon we had proved ditch and rampart; next day we found roughly flagged floors with rims of typical Hadrianic cooking-pots upon them. 6 September was spent in defining the lips of the ditch, the width of the berm, and the heel and toe of the rampart. We could not dig down to ditch bottom because of water, but the slope of the sides was determined and the depth worked out at just over 5 ft. The ditch fill was surprisingly clean and, in places, difficult to distinguish from the natural clay, particularly near the outer lip, where there had been much disturbance; the subsoil is a tough red sandy boulder-clay, and normally "mixed" earth and virgin clay can be readily distinguished. A thickness of clay covered the berm between ditch lip and the face of the rampart and rested on greyish loam. If the Romans, on their return to Hadrian's frontier system in A.D. 158, dismantled towers on the coast, then I think that in these features here we have clear evidence of the deliberate filling in of the ditch, not very long after it had been made; and in any future search for mile-fortlets we must take into account the possibility that they too were dismantled. The rampart proved to be 31 ft. wide and still standing 2 ft. 6 in. high near its centre; its limits were clearly defined and its turf construction was well evident.

At a distance of 3 ft. 6 in. from the front there appeared a sort of footpath of flat stones on top of the turf-work.

7 September was spent within the fortlet, examining more closely the flagged floors revealed in five trial-pits. Many of the flat stones used in the floors were of water-worn red sandstone, clearly taken from the seashore, quite carefully laid and with some of the wider gaps between them filled with gravel. The floors had no occupation debris on them, the pottery coming from the gaps between the stones except in the last pit, close by the south hedge, where at a depth of 15 in. many Hadrianic sherds appeared in a mixture of soil and red clay. Loose flat stones below, with pick and axe marks on them, and ash and charcoal on a puddled clay surface may represent the remains of an oven, or at least of a hearth. Since we had only one day's digging left, we decided not to attempt any area-excavation but to cover all in carefully and await a more opportune time. We did, however, lift up the large flagstone in square G-9 which was just below plough depth, expecting it to have been disturbed by the plough although we could see no share-scores on it; underneath was more gravel and more sandstone, so we put it back. Trials at the edges of the pavements in other pits showed them to be lying on about 3 in. of greyish-brown loam resting on the original ground level, here as at Kirkbride a well developed podsol.

Further work will have to be done before we can say for certain that the impression of disturbance in the interior of the fortlet is due to deliberate dismantling by the Romans. Modern disturbance can be ruled out, since all features are covered by a varying thickness of uniform brownish loam, passing upwards abruptly into a darker loam containing abundant coal and modern potsherds. A similar layer was noted over the site of M/f 21, and it may be that bumps and hollows persisting since Roman times had been levelled up with kitchen midden after the enclosure of this land in the first half of the 19th century.

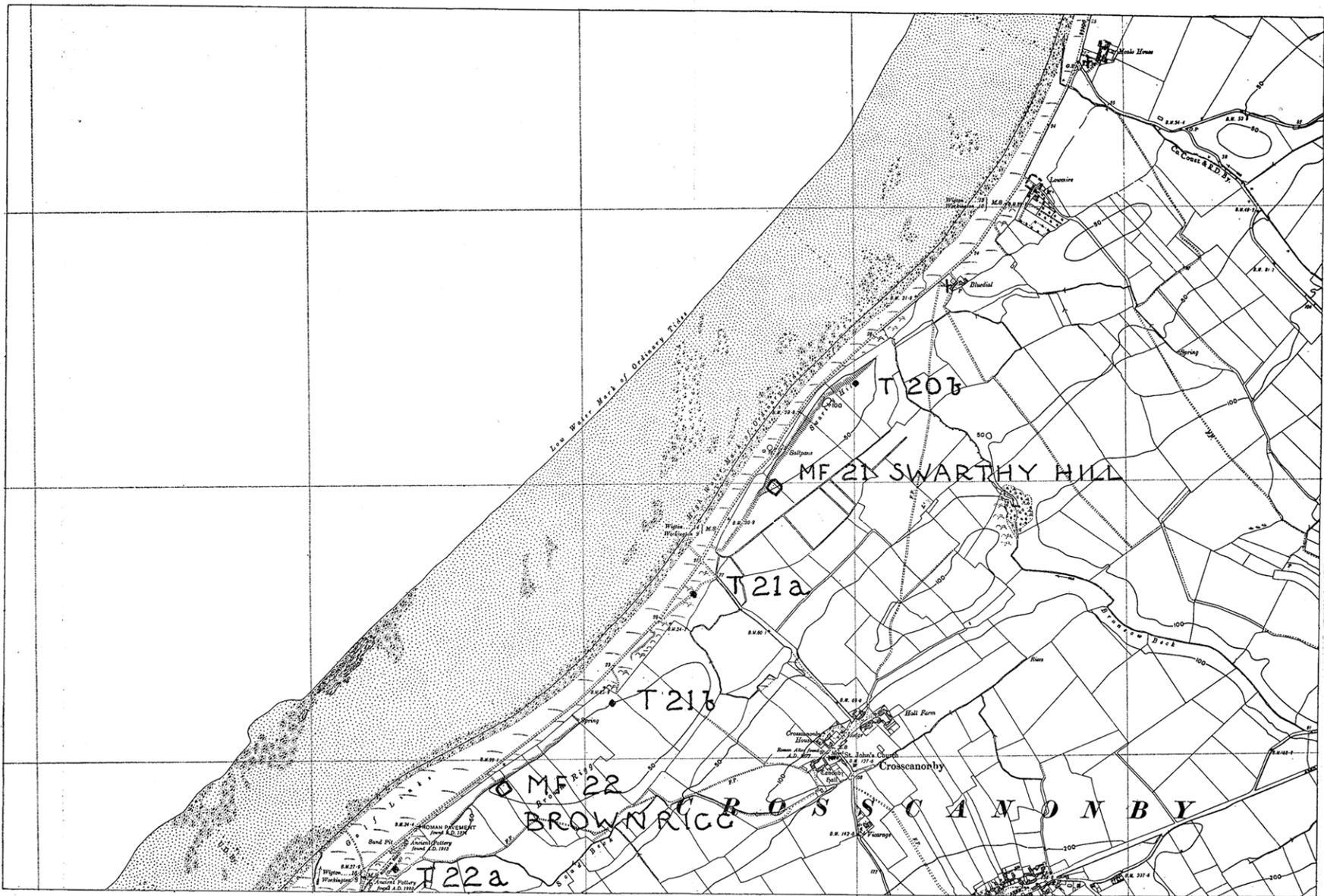


FIG. 1.—The newly located sites. Reduced, by permission, from the 6-in. O.S. map to 3 in. to the mile.

7 September saw the end of our short campaign on the coast, and left us with the feeling that, now we had seen for ourselves the manifest remains of a mile-fortlet, it should be much easier in the future to extend the chain down the coast towards St Bees Head by leapfrogging from fortlet to fortlet. Success in this, largely a matter of field-work in the first instance, would have to be followed by excavation, and the real problem would be the sheer number of sites awaiting attention: of the seven mile-fortlets so far identified only one, M/f 5 (Castlesteads, Cardurnock) has been excavated fully.

Professor Eric Birley has provided the following report on the pottery (fig. 2):

The yield of pottery was encouraging if one takes into account the small area opened up; six vessels were represented by rims that could be drawn by Mr Dodds, and there were fragments from the sides of another two or three cooking-pots. None of the vessels would be out of place in a purely Hadrianic deposit, and there was nothing that one would wish to date any later than A.D. 140. It seems to follow, on this sample of the pottery from M/f 22, that it was never reoccupied in the second half of the 2nd century or later, as was the case at M/f 5 (cf. CW2 xlvii 108 ff.). Notes follow on the pieces illustrated:

1. Rim of an amphora of the globular type in which olive oil was imported from the south of Spain (cf. M. H. Callender in AA4 xxvii, 1949, 60 ff. and fig. 5, 96 for the type of vessel); there is no significant dating to be got from the rim.
2. Many pieces, several conjoining, of a chocolate-brown rough-cast beaker, Mr Gillam's type 72 (AA4 xxxv), which seems not to have lasted much beyond A.D. 130, though it occurs not infrequently on Hadrianic as well as on earlier sites.
3. Rim of a black fumed cooking-pot.
4. Battered fragment of a light buff mortarium, similar in general to Gillam type 242; the fabric rather than the rim (the correct restoration of which is uncertain) implies a Hadrianic date at latest.
5. Rim of another black fumed cooking-pot. This and no. 3 are Hadrianic at earliest, but need be no later.

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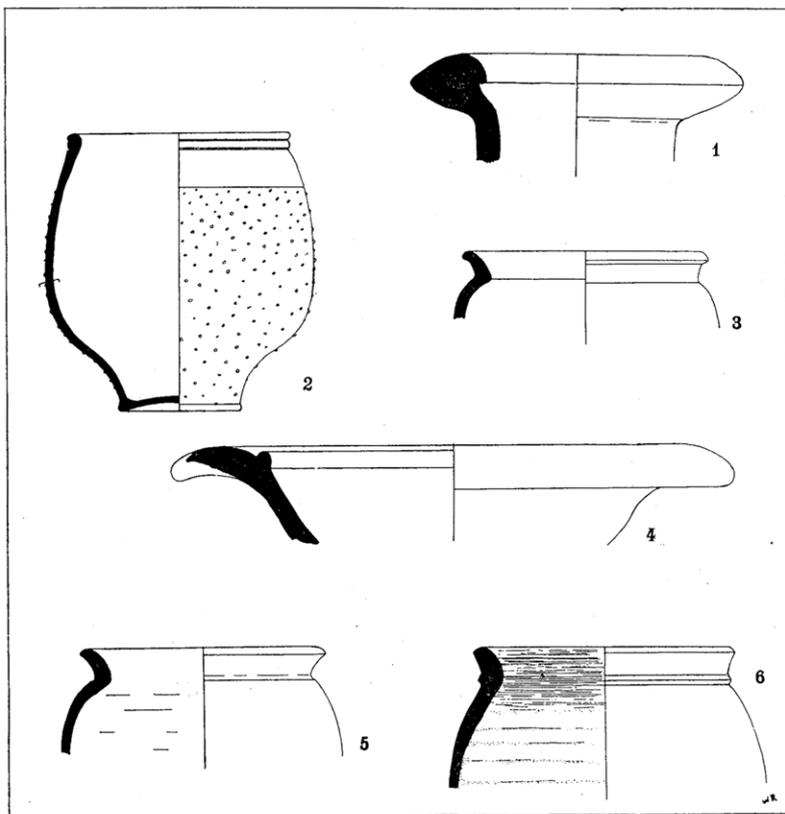


FIG. 2.—The pottery. (4)

6. Many pieces conjoining to give the upper half of a wheel-made jar in softish dark grey fabric, slightly lighter in fracture; for the slight collar at the neck cf. the Hadrianic piece from Benwell, AA4 iv 178 and fig. 10, 6.

Acknowledgements.

In concluding this short report on the new discoveries I must thank Mr Jackson of Crosscanonby for permission to dig in his field on Swarthy Hill, and Mr Stephenson of Crosby for permission to excavate the mile-fortlet in field 13. As usual numerous enthusiastic friends gave up their valuable spare time and provided the labour force; in particular I must thank Mr and Mrs Anthony Whitehead for joining me in yet another adventure and contributing so much to its success.