

ART. IV. — *Excavations at the Roman Fort of Watercreek, 1975: a second interim report.* By T. W. POTTER.

*Read at Kendal, April 2nd, 1977.*

THE programme of rescue work initiated in 1974<sup>1</sup> was continued in 1975 with two separate campaigns of work. In January 1975, a series of machine-cut trenches were excavated around the loop of the River Kent, in order to test the extent of occupation debris on the west side of the fort platform. This was followed in July by four weeks of excavation which focused on the area of the north-east gate.<sup>2</sup> This concluded the examination of the parts of the site that were immediately threatened by the river-widening scheme, and a definitive report is now in preparation. However, several conclusions of importance have emerged as a result of the 1975 campaign and it has seemed useful to summarise the main results at this stage, in advance of the main publication.

The July excavations incorporated part of site 'C' of the 1974 season, and were extended to make an approximate rectangle of c. 35×40 m. (Fig. 1). This area included part of the north-east gate itself, together with a substantial section of the road, defences and in addition some extra-mural buildings. The primary defences of the late first-century fort proved to have been much more complex than had been previously supposed. Between the inner ditch and the massive second ditch were two other small defensive trenches. One was nearly 4 m. in width and is likely to have been a conventional protective ditch, but the second was less than 2 m. across and probably held a palisade. Both ditches were laid out parallel with the fort wall and ran as far as the 'clavicula' type palisade, found in 1974. This palisade proved to terminate close to the butt end of the innermost ditch and thus had a total length of 17 m. Traces of demolished timber uprights were located along its whole length and its main purpose was evidently to protect the western flank of the road. The eastern flank, as was noted in 1974, was apparently guarded by a turf outwork, thus creating an unusual horn-like protective arrangement. There is little doubt that the reason for this lies in the unusual width of the berm between the major ditches in this area; but it is still not apparent why so unconventional a pattern of ditches was adopted on this part of the site.

The main north-east road was uncovered over a length of 35 m. In places it was over 8 m. wide but between the butt ends of the inner ditch it was reduced to a width of 6 m. Just beyond was the north-east gate, part of which was examined in 1975. This disclosed a complex history, only the later phases of which were fully studied. The principal feature was the eastern guard chamber, which still stood to a height of nearly 0.60 m. The room measured 2.40×2.60 m. internally and was built not in dressed masonry but with cobbles and fragments of limestone, set in a poor quality mortar. Both the style of the construction and the overall dimensions differ so markedly from those of the north-west gate excavated in 1930<sup>3</sup> that it is immediately apparent that the two guard chambers cannot be of the same date. *A priori* it seems likely that the shoddy work of the

## WATERCROOK 1974-5 NORTH-EAST DEFENCES

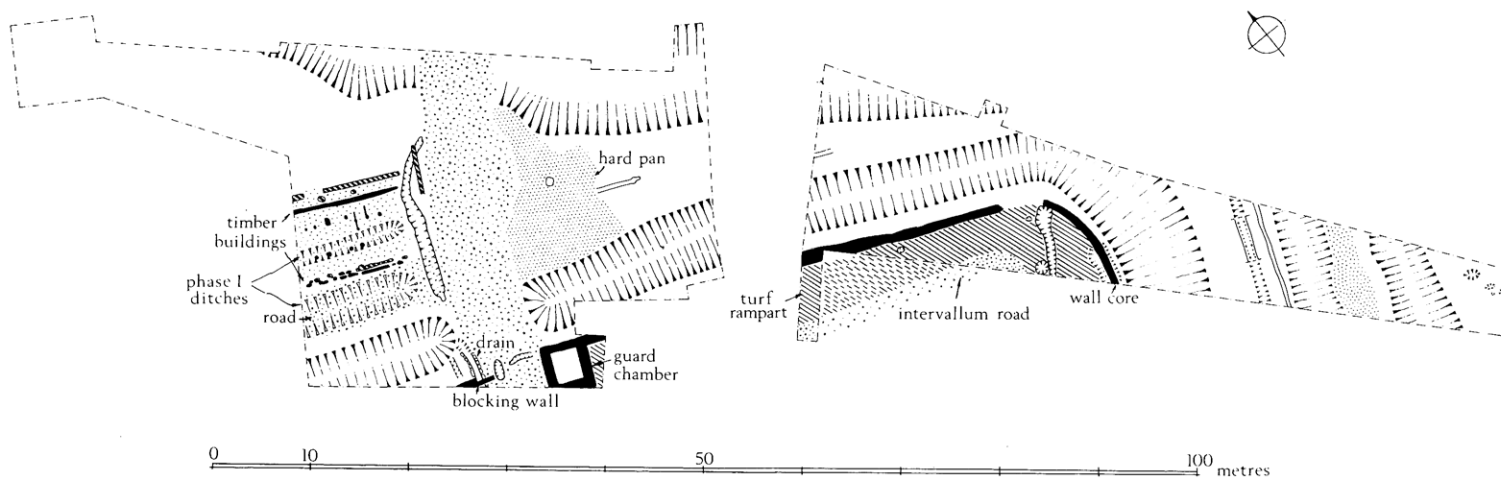


FIG. 1. - Watercreek, 1974-5.

guard chamber relates to the rebuilding of the fort wall, identified in 1974; and the pottery from the lower fill of the guard room sustains this conclusion. The occupation deposit associated with the earliest use of the chamber contained a number of vessels of the period c. A.D. 150-220, together with a large quantity of domestic refuse and other objects. Evidently, therefore, parts of the fort's defences were refurbished when the garrison returned to the site in the latter part of the second century, probably after the final abandonment of the Antonine frontier in the early 160s.<sup>4</sup>

The other elements of the gate were not well preserved, for both the central *spina* and the gate sill beam had been robbed out, and all that remained of this phase was a masonry culvert which drained into the innermost of the fort ditches. However, there were important traces of buildings immediately outside the gate. The two minor ditches described above were filled in and a rectangular timber-framed building that fronted onto the road was constructed. This structure was 6 m. wide and had trench-built walls and internal roof supports and partitions. It was provided with a cobbled service road which ran immediately beside the innermost fort ditch, and over one of the backfilled primary ditches. Dating evidence was sparse but points to an Antonine date for the construction of the building. Subsequently it was rebuilt, again in timber but on a marginally different site. Presumably we may attribute the building to *vicani*, initiating a process of ribbon development along the north-east road in the same manner as the extra-mural settlement along the south-east road;<sup>5</sup> in this area, however, the *vicus* seems to have been short-lived, certainly extending no further than A.D. 200. Perhaps this civilian encroachment upon the defences was deemed a threat to security.

Finds of the first half of the third century were in fact rare in the whole excavated area and it is likely that Watercreek, in common with many other forts in the North-West, was only thinly garrisoned at this time. The date of the final garrison on the site was however clearly demonstrated in the east guard chamber of the north-east gate. There was a distinct occupation layer with a spread of hearth sweepings and traces of a flagged floor, in which were four coins of the period A.D. 269-273. There was no layer above this deposit except for an accumulation of humus and ploughsoil and, when taken in conjunction with the near absence of fourth-century material from the site, it seems clear that the final evacuation must have taken place in the late third century. Moreover, the shallow depth of this last occupation layer implies that a garrison was only maintained for a brief period at Watercreek and it may well have been a unit of reduced size, since part of the north-east gate was blocked off at this time.

Whilst the evidence for a garrison in the 260s and 270s can be matched at many North-Western fort sites the apparent absence of fourth-century occupation is a curious feature. Most forts in the area have yielded evidence for a garrison during much or all of the century and it is apparent that at sites like Lancaster<sup>6</sup> there was a major reconstruction of the defences. The probable reason for the absence of the fourth-century unit at Watercreek did however emerge from work in January 1975. A series of machine-cut trenches were excavated around the loop of the River Kent as far as the southern reaches of the river. With the exception of a lime kiln of recent date, there was a complete absence both of structures and archaeological deposits in this sector of the site. Instead, every trench revealed a succession of beds of gravel and alluvium, laid down by the River Kent. Fortunately, there were some datable objects in these deposits which showed that the alluvium belonged entirely to the post-Roman period and indicated a phase in the history of the valley bottom when the river level was much higher than at present.

This is not the place to discuss these important conclusions in detail; instead, it will suffice to say that the flood deposits attested in these trenches are likely, by analogy with other sites, to have started to form during the late Roman period.<sup>7</sup> The low-lying ground beside the present river will understandably have been directly vulnerable and there may well have been occasions when the fort platform itself could have suffered an inundation. Thus we can postulate a strong environmental cause for the final evacuation of the site: that its flood plain location and its proximity to the River Kent eventually made an occupation of the site untenable. Eventually, when the nucleus of medieval Kendal was established, much higher ground was selected for the site.

### Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the first interim report in CW2 lxxvi (1976) pp. 6-66.

<sup>2</sup> Carried out by a team from the University of Lancaster for the Department of the Environment, and supervised by J. H. S. Witherington. Full acknowledgements will be held over to the final report but we would like to record our gratitude to the Officers of the Lancashire River Unit and the landowners, K-Shoes.

<sup>3</sup> CW2 xxxii (1932) 116f.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. B. R. Hartley, *Britannia* iii (1972), 36f.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the 1974 interim report, CW2 lxxvi (1976).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the forthcoming volume on *Roman Lancaster* (*in press*).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. T. W. Potter, "Valley bottoms and settlement", *World Archaeology* viii (1976), no. 2, 207-219.