

ART. II. – *Roman Sites on the Cumberland Coast: Milefortlet 20 Low Mire.*
By R. L. BELLHOUSE, B.Sc.

Recent years have seen a small amount of highly significant new information on the coastal system of milefortlets and towers, and a great deal of speculation. All found a place in the Appendices to the Handbook prepared for the Tenth Pilgrimage of Hadrian's Wall. It is not my intention here to criticize details in those appendices beyond saying that I consider Professor Jones' ideas as regards what he calls the "schematic development" of the Solway defences (Fig. 19) to be wholly misconceived, and Dr Potter's suggestion that the coastal system "continued at least as far as Millom . . ." most unwise. I have dealt with these specific aspects and other more generally related matters in a forthcoming article in *Britannia XII*. The new facts are very interesting and may be summarized thus: there is evidence for a timber tower earlier than the stone tower 4b, for a palisade and some small parallel ditches in the Cardurnock Peninsula, and evidence of two distinct arrays of clay-filled palisade trenches near Silloth.¹ Milefortlet 1 Biglands had an original front entrance with a standard six post gate, rebuilt to the same plan during a second period of use, then narrowed to about 1.5 m without any rebuild of any gate in a third period.

All three periods seem to have been entirely within the second century.² My own contributions have added something to our sparse collection of facts relating to the period immediately before the building of the Wall, the discovery at last of the Trajanic fort at Kirkbride in 1976/77 and the working out of the alignments of the Roman road from Carlisle via Kirkbampton and Fingland Rigg to the new fort. The fort must be accepted as defining the western terminus of the Stanegate frontier; its location on relatively high ground watching over Moricambe, the sea inlet that divides the coast into two sectors, is very significant. For many years I have had my own views on aspects of the evolution of the coastal system of watch-towers and milefortlets and have derived some satisfaction from seeing some of them, in due course, accepted by the *cognoscenti*. In short, the system was early in Hadrian's reign (if not just before) not an afterthought *circa* A.D. 128; the fort at Maryport must have been in existence when the system was laid out north and south from the seaward corner turrets; Moricambe was not "dry ground until the sea broke in, in the thirteenth-century", it had always been there; the close watch system was not defensive in a military sense in the first instance, but served to protect the fertile and productive hinterland from cattle thieves from across the Solway. We now have evidence for an important element in any anti-raiding measure in the palisade and timber watch-tower, but the well-built stone towers seem to tell us that something more solid and permanent than a chain of free-standing towers and isolated milefortlets was to develop. Many years ago I suggested that the coastal system units would be found to be comparable with turrets and milecastles of the Turf Wall but without the linking curtain of turf. The orientation of the towers and fortlets as they were found and studied strongly suggested they were related to base-lines laid out in straight sections with changes of direction at selected units. Since no trace of any laid turf, as for a wall, has ever been found on a line linking the units, support for the case for the intention to build a turf barrier depended on finding sufficient surviving

walling on tower sites to show a plinth on front and back walls, and both front and back gates to milefortlets. If no connecting barrier was intended (apart from a simple palisade) towers would have had four walls of equal width, and fortlets would have needed but one gate, like similar isolated posts known elsewhere.

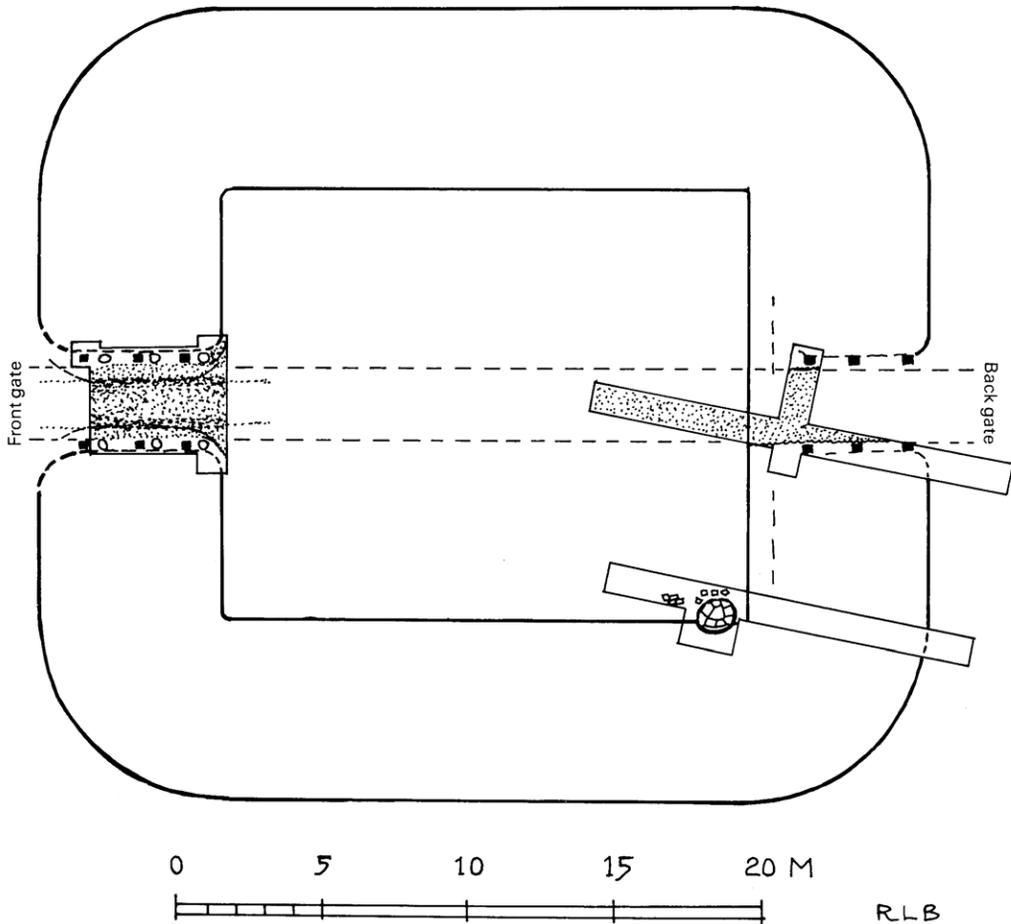


FIG. 1. — MILEFORTLET 20 LOW MIRE

Idealized plan of the rampart of the fortlet to show the relative positions of front and back gates. The positions of the first period gate timbers are shown as black squares; second period posts as circles.

Of the thirteen fortlets identified on the coast, leaving out numbers 5 and 9, for 5 is atypical and 9 may well be so, circumstances have combined to show either a front gate or a back gate, but not both at any one. The only details of a front gate so far come from Dr Potter's work at Biglands. Therefore, if a second gate could be proved at a number of fortlets where one has already been found, a reappraisal of the whole frontier would have to follow. I decided to plan some limited excavations in an attempt to resolve these uncertainties. I chose to return to milefortlet 20 Low Mire where a back entrance had been found in 1969³ by following the gravel of the axial road through the back rampart, and where the whole of the line of the front rampart was accessible for a large pit to be dug

where a front gate should be. I ruled out a return to fortlet 22 Brownrigg to seek a back gate because, since the excavation of 1968⁴, the ground over it had been raised and formed into a putting green. In any case it was certain from a study of my excavation record that there were both front and back gates. The causeway across the ditch opposite the back gate could very possibly be confirmed at some convenient time by augering and a resistivity survey with very little disturbance.

Mr Michael Slack of Mealo House Allonby gave me permission to excavate and very kindly agreed to open the ground with his digging machine. Work started 2 August 1980. We reopened the 1969 trench that proved the axial road behind the front rampart in order to find the centre of the metalling, then extended forward into the rampart area and opened a pit about 5 m square. As at Biglands there was no sign of any break in the front slope of the green mound of the rampart nor any slight hollow in its level surface. The pit could not have been better placed to reveal in due course practically all the details of the front gate. In effect after three day's work the first objective of the excavation had been achieved – proof of the existence of a front gate. Three levels of road were very clear and traces of the related post-holes for the gate timbers at each side were beginning to appear. Because the work was so well advanced I asked Mr Slack to reopen and extend the two trenches of the 1969 excavation at the back of the fortlet in which we had found the gravel of the back gate through the rampart, and remains of an oven set in the angle formed by the back and left ramparts. By the eighth day we had found four of the six post-holes of the back gate; the timbers had rotted away *in situ*, the packing stones surrounding a clearly defined space filled with dark coloured soil about 22 mm square. There were no signs of disturbance or reconstruction and the adjacent road had not been resurfaced. Dark sandy turf lay over all as if the gate had been blocked up. Both front and back gates were identical in plan, standard six post gates. The first signs of the post-holes of the front gate were darker brownish areas in the over-lying brownish third period turf which had reduced the width of the entrance to about 1.5 m. This third period turf had sunk slightly over the disturbed post-holes of the second period gate. It was clear also that the ground had been made up with clean sand over the first and second period post-holes before the latest turf was laid because the packing stones were not immediately visible. Our findings fitted Dr Potter's description of the front gate of milefortlet 1 very closely except that he had thin sandwiches of marsh turf for ramparts on hard packed gravel, we had three types of turf on sand and large cobbles in the post-holes. It is clear from this fortlet and from the remains of others in this sector of the coast that grey clay prepared from the terraced marine alluvium immediately inland was a standard building material, both for tower foundations and first period ramparts. From the fact that clay was also used in the first period post-holes, but not for the back gate, one may infer that the timbers supported something more than a gate, almost certainly a timber tower about 8.5 m high to match the stone watch-towers. A second gate was built to the same plan at the beginning of period two; this time the timbers were set in the same lines but 0.5 m behind the first post-holes and contained only cobbles. The second period road was of larger gravel than the first and in places lay on lenses of clean sand which must have come from the excavation of the new post-holes.

Third period work can be identified by the use of a much darker, almost peaty, turf. It lay over the earlier post-holes and the edges of the entrance roads and restricted the passageway to 1.5 m. The road itself at this time was made up with rather large cobbles and water-worn sandstone blocks from the shore. The back rampart had been repaired with the

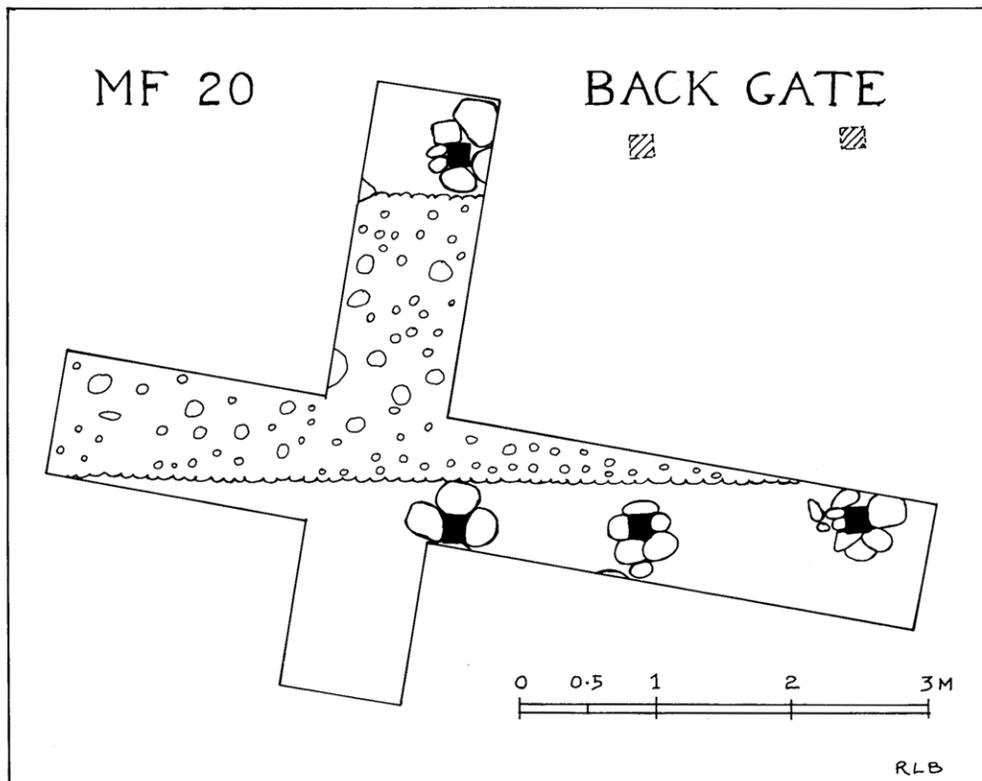


FIG. 2. — Detail of post-holes of back gate on each side of the single period road.

same dark turf and the oven base in the south-east angle had been set into this same material. The oven had been stripped for repair because the stones from the walls were heaped at one side: all was covered with pale-brown blown sand. This sealing layer indicates that the fortlet lay abandoned and open to the sky for a long time; no evidence of any later occupation was seen but one is reminded that fourth century sherds were recovered from the north-west corner in 1969; they were associated with a hearth resting on a thickness of blown sand. If the third period with the narrow entrance and reduced internal space was quite short and came towards the close of the second century, then there was clearly a long interval of more than 150 years until the assault on Britain by the combined forces of Picts, Scots and Saxons in 367. Small finds were few: three pieces of pot, two pieces of corroded iron. However, the structural evidence obtained and the three clear periods corresponding so closely with those established by Dr Potter at Biglands represent a very useful means of interpreting the sometimes very fragmentary remains of other milefortlets. The features of each period may be summarized thus:-

Period I *Circa* A.D. 120. Original rampart of grey clayey turf from the nearby terraced marine alluvium, puddled grey clay in the post-holes of the front gate.

Period II *Circa* A.D. 160. Rampart repaired with brown sandy turf similar to that of the modern soil of the surrounding fields. New post-holes for the front gate, no clay packing. Back gate not rebuilt.

Period III *Circa* A.D. 180. Rampart repaired with dark peaty turf, front entrance reduced to a width of 1.5 m, area within the rampart reduced. Path within front entrance made up with large stones and cobbles.

Occupation after each repair may have been quite short; certainly after establishment *circa* A.D. 120 the fortlets may well have gone out of use when the extra forts were added to the line, say by A.D. 124, and the occupation after the repair marking the beginning of period II equally short if it was a covering operation pending the repair and recommissioning of the forts.

Apart from indicating the types of turf readily available to the Roman army, this constructional sequence can be applied to other sites on the coast in comparable situations, but where the remains of fortlets are either scanty because of sea and wind erosion or the exposures are small because the site has only been tested by trial pitting or augering, these differences may be of the greatest significance. This applies especially to the remains of the two fortlets, numbers 15 and 16, where only traces of the back rampart survive in a narrow section. However, the streaks of clay and humose sandy turf visible in the sections can be made intelligible. It is possible to say that five other fortlets shared the fate of number 20; they are:

Fortlet 12 Blitterlees. The exposure of rampart examined in 1967 showed a grey clay base on sand with brown sandy turf above which it contained some lumps of grey clay. I interpret this as period I with a period II rebuild surviving to a height of some feet. Fourth century sherds were found in blown sand near the highest point.

Fortlet 15 Beckfoot Beach. Traces of grey clay were seen in the cliff section in 1954. Later observations revealed the gravel of a back gate with dark sandy turf above it. All remains of the fortlet have gone, but it is safe to assume that they indicated periods I and II.

Fortlet 16 Mawbray. A thin slice of the back rampart still survives in the abandoned gravel pit. It shows the grey clay rampart of period I with the gravel and two post-holes of the back gate. Dark sandy soil over the gravel may represent period II.

Fortlet 17 Dubmill Point. Augering at the measured position some years ago showed the rampart to be of dark sandy turf. In 1977 Professor G. D. B. Jones saw clear signs of the rampart and ditch from the air and sent me a photograph. A causeway is visible in the ditch where a back gate should be; the front gate may lie under the main road. Period I presumed from the presence of a back gate, period II very probable, period III very likely.

Fortlet 20 Low Mire. Three periods established as already reported.

Fortlet 22 Brownrigg. The fortlet lies on the low hills of red boulder clay and the source of the grey clay, the terraced marine alluvium, is some distance away. The basic period I "structural" clay changes colour from grey to pink somewhere between tower 20B, grey clay foundation, and tower 21B, pink clay foundation. Period I rampart was of greyish-brown turf with a core of red clay, probably from the excavation of the fortlet ditch; the rebuild of period II was in greyish-brown humose turf which also overlay the gravel of the back gate. At the front the narrow entrance and the rough paving of large stones is clearly period III, with the distinct roads of periods I and II below.

The results from this limited excavation enable me to state that milefortlets were planned and built with two similar gates, one at the front and another at the back, and that they clearly resemble Turf Wall milecastles. To complete the comparison all one need do is to draw a wall of turf in line with the front rampart on a plan of a milefortlet. If a turf curtain was planned from the first, and so far there is no evidence at all that its construction was

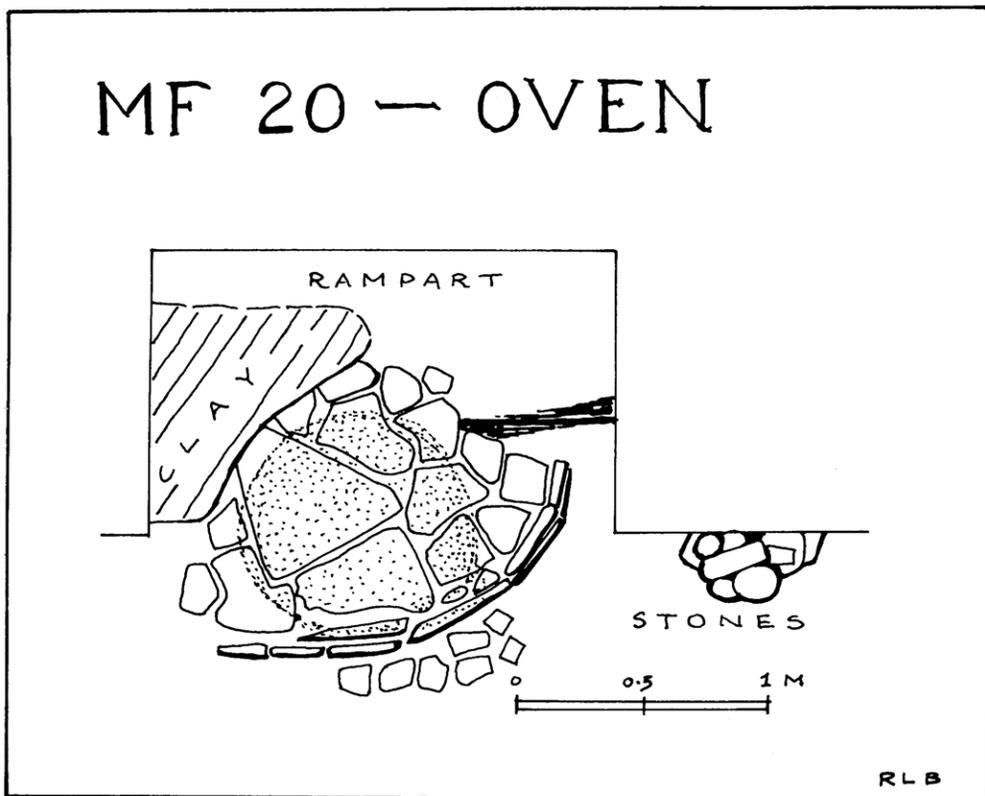


FIG. 3. — The stone-built base of the oven in the south-east corner of the fortlet. Third period.

ever begun on the coast, it would follow that the decision to move the Stanegate forts forward to the line of the Wall and build additional forts on the Solway, possibly after Hadrian's visit of inspection in A.D. 122, made the close watch and patrol system unnecessary and the planned barrier was never built. More excavations will be attempted, and here it is fortunate that in addition to fortlets 20 and 22, fortlets 17, 21, 23 and 26, are for the most part accessible in open fields so that small excavations can be planned to confirm two gates and more specifically to establish, if possible, that back gates were all period I with a period II blocking of turf. As regards the stone watch-towers it will be worth while looking again at tower 12B⁵ where substantial remains of Hadrianic work are concealed beneath the stump of a later rebuild. It would be almost more than one could hope for to find a plinth because the walling may not be to a sufficient height to show it, but the side walls might be thinner, like those of Turf Wall turrets. And, of course, there is the need to look out for any signs of a palisade or of any timber structure near any of the stone towers.

The idea that the logical end of the system would be a milefort number 40 on St Bees head must be abandoned. I think it is an illusion that the fort at Moresby seems to fit so neatly into the measured position of a tower, and the same could be said about Burrow Walls, when the most southerly unit so far found is the tower at Risehow that Joseph Robinson examined in 1880, to the south of Maryport. I am sure it ended with Risehow tower where the real sea cliffs begin and the geology changes and with it the soils and the

density of native settlement. One has only to look at Figure 5.1 in *Rome and the Brigantes*⁶ to see why the Romans found it necessary to protect the hinterland of the Solway from raiders from across the waters.

Notes and References

As the Handbook to the Tenth Pilgrimage of Hadrian's Wall is not readily available to most people I will give a brief outline of my reasons for criticizing Figure 19 which purports to show three stages in the "development" of the Solway defences. The first period diagram shows two fortlets linked together by parallel ditches in line with their front and back ramparts, a "Palisade I" behind the forward ditch, a patrol track running between the ditches from one milefortlet to the other, and two tower sites. One fortlet is labelled MF5, and the next unit (a tower) 4B. The scale on the diagram has no value for it shows the distance between MF5 and tower 4B to be 1 mile, when it should be about 540 yards, and the distance between MF5 and what I assume to be MF4 as about 3 miles when it should be 1 Roman mile. Professor Jones has assembled a number of observations tailored to fit a theory. It is clear he has accepted MF5 Cardurnock as the Period I type specimen and assumed its main features could be transferred to MF4, but MF5 is unique among the coastal milefortlets; it is three times their size, has one entrance and must be regarded as a small fort at the terminus of the Cardurnock sequence. It had a timber tower in the rampart at the south-west corner. Each of the two milefortlets is shown as having a gate towards the front in both left and right ramparts and two barracks aligned along the axis of the system. There is no evidence for this arrangement at any of the other milefortlets so far examined, but the existence of front and back gates is now established and their purpose in period I was to allow passage through a barrier. Perhaps the misconception arose through giving too much weight to the "paved causeway" mentioned by Camden and translated into the "patrol track" for the existence of which there is insufficient evidence at the time of writing. Even if it exists, it could be of almost any age. During a conversation some weeks before the Pilgrimage Professor Jones told me he found a cobbled area close by the left rampart of MF4 during his sectioning of the parallel ditches in 1977 and took this as indicating a "patrol track" leading to a side gate. This is unacceptable. I have found cobbled areas associated with other coastal units; at tower 12A one such lay above an accumulation of humose sand over the debris of a robbed wall; at milefortlet 22 another rested on the surface of the much reduced second or third period rampart. The possibility of these cobbled areas being post Roman cannot be ignored.

¹ G. D. B. Jones, "The Western extension of Hadrian's Wall: Bowness to Cardurnock", *Britannia VII*, 1976 236f.

² T. M. Potter, "The Biglands milefortlet and the Cumberland Coast Defences", *Britannia VIII*, 1977 149 f.

³ R. L. Bellhouse, "Roman sites on the Cumberland Coast", CW2, lxx, 23 f.

⁴ R. L. Bellhouse, "Roman sites on the Cumberland Coast", CW2, lxx, 10 f.

⁵ R. L. Bellhouse, "Roman sites on the Cumberland Coast", CW2, lvii, 22 f.

⁶ K. Branigan, (ed.), *Rome and the Brigantes. The impact of Rome on Northern England*, University of Sheffield 1980.

Acknowledgements

I wish most sincerely to thank Mr Michael Slack for permission to dig and for his great help and many kindnesses, and to record my appreciation of the efforts of many friends towards the success of the excavation under rather trying circumstances.

