

ART. VIII. – *The Roman Site on Grey Hill, Bewcastle, Cumbria*

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AS part of a programme of research on Roman signal towers connected with the outpost forts of Hadrian's Wall, a rectangular surface feature was investigated on Grey Hill, Cumbria, 1.5 km north of Bewcastle fort at NY569760. The work was carried out in the summer of 1987 by postgraduate students from Manchester University¹ under the direction of Mr D. J. Woolliscroft and with the kind permission of Mr J. Little.

The Site

Grey Hill is a commanding ridge forming the northern side of the Kirkbeck valley. The site is set at its western end about 260 m above sea level overlooking the Roman outpost fort of Bewcastle (see Fig. 1). The geology is a coarse light grey sandstone giving a natural subsoil of sand and sandstone fragments. The hill is under pasture and the soil, though well drained, is thin and highly exposed so that ploughing at any period is unlikely.

The site presented a low rectangular mound of about 6 m square which was obviously artificial.

The Excavations

Four trenches were opened in two phases of excavation comprising two trenches each. Trenches 1 and 2 were set at diagonally opposite (SW and NE) corners of the mound as a reconnaissance prior to quarter sectioning the tower that was originally expected. Both were initially 2 m × 2 m but Trench 1 was later extended to 2 m × 4 m with its long axis running roughly north-south. When it became obvious from the results of these trenches that a signal tower was not present, two more small trenches were opened. Trench 1A which added a further 3 square metres to the north-west corner of Trench 1 and Trench 3 (2 m × 4 m) which abutted the southern half of the east side of Trench 1 with its long axis running east-west. The total area excavated being 23 sq. m. The sequence over the whole site was similar and all four trenches can be dealt with together (see Figs. 3 and 4).

A thin layer of soil and turf (level 1), which yielded a tiny worked flint (Fig. 5, J.) overlay an area of large rocks packed with small stones and earth (see Figs. 2 and 3) which formed a reasonably flat surface (level 2). Within this mass of 'rubble' individual stones ranged in size from one kilogram to around 50 kilograms with a noticeable bias towards the heavier end. There were also flagstone-type stones of 30 sq.cm. to 40 sq.cm in area. This area of 'rubble' appeared to have an edge running along the south-eastern part of Trench 3 and a second edge parallel with the western side of Trench 1A. The surface features which first drew attention to the site were caused by linear piles of rock c. 75 cm wide and c. 20 cm high. These were especially noticeable in Trench 2 where

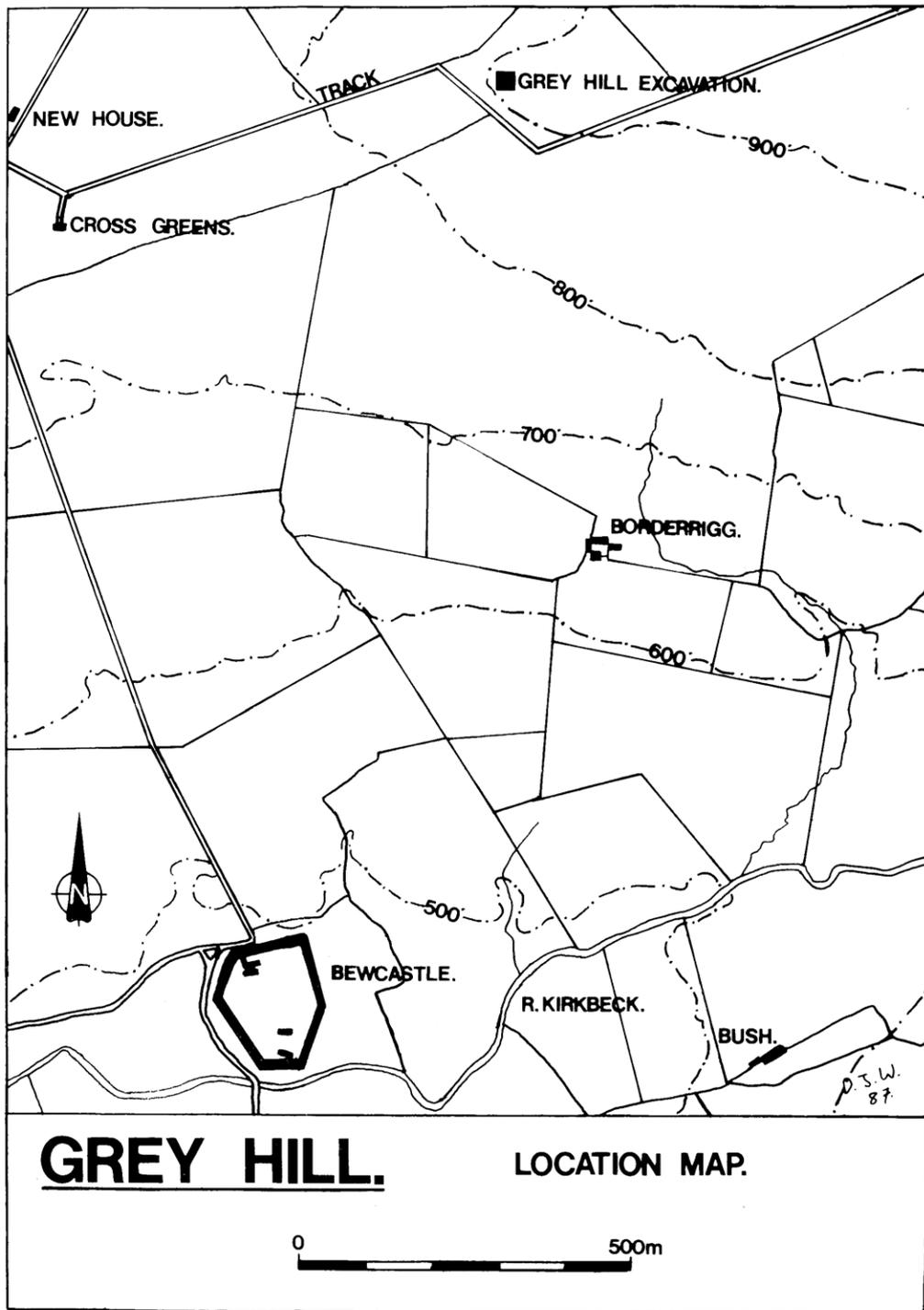


FIG. 1.

they were aligned east-west and in Trench 3 where they seemed to follow the curve of the 'rubble' edge.

Finds from level 2 were meagre comprising three iron nails and a fragment of incised whinstone (see Fig. 5, A) (whose nearest source is in the Carvoran area, 14 km south-east of the site). A small quantity of charred wood was found and other signs of burning were noted.

Level 2 was removed to reveal level 3 (see Figs. 2 and 4), which rested immediately upon the natural subsoil. Trench 2 and the north-eastern part of Trench 3 had been roughly paved with irregular, flat and very worn stones which ranged in size between 15 sq. cm and 40 sq. cm. The edge of the paved area of Trench 3 ran south-west from just west of the trench's north-east corner to a right-angle in the south-western part of the trench from which it headed north-west to disappear into the baulk just east of the trench's north-west corner. It then clipped the north-eastern part of Trench 1 apparently still on the same alignment. To the west of this 'platform', in Trenches 1 and 1A, two hearths were located, H1 being 1 m in diameter and H2 c. 50 cm in diameter. These features were formed by circles of packed stones within which the natural subsoil had been heated to a high temperature discolouring the soil red. They were full of grey ash, clinker and iron flecks and associated with H1 was a small quantity of coal and a further spread of ash and iron flecks. Just to the west of H1 lay a small post-hole, 19 cm in diameter which had been burnt *in situ*, scorching the ground about it red. The post survived as black ash and charcoal.

Sealing the stone 'platform' was a black layer of very heavy burning, 5 cm to 10 cm deep (level 3A), which in Trenches 1 and 1A contained large quantities of burnt daub.

The finds from levels 3 and 3A were extensive and these too were heavily burnt. Large numbers of iron nails (e.g. Fig. 5, C, D and E) were found. These were square in section, c. 5 cm to 8 cm long and all straight. They were, however, so heavily oxidized that it proved impossible to retrieve most of them as they survived only as soil stains, but those that could be excavated provided an average density of 3 nails per square metre. In Trench 3 the distribution of such nails was confined to the paved area only, but in the other trenches the distribution was uniform except for the most southern part of Trench 1 where nails were also absent.

Trench 1 contained four body sherds and one rim sherd (Fig. 5, K.) of a Stibbington Ware reeded mortarium of the first half of the fourth century² together with one whole (Fig. 5, B.) and one broken whet stone all of which were associated with Hearth 2, while the north-west corner of the trench yielded a worked flint (Fig. 5, I.). Trench 2 produced a piece of coal, a small iron ring, 3.2 cm in diameter (Fig. 5, H.), and two tiny tack like nails (Fig. 5, F and G.) that may have been shoe studs. On the floor of the 'platform' in Trench 3 a small hemispherical iron vessel (13 cm in diameter) was located covered by a thin slab of red sandstone (which is not native to the site). This contained more nails, but as the vessel was extremely thin walled the object had completely corroded and was unrecoverable.

The undisturbed natural subsoil of sand and sandstone fragments (level 4) lay immediately below level 3. This proved to be exceptionally flat considering the terrain. No features were found cutting into this level except the posthole already reported.

Three small and long abandoned quarries were noted within 25 m of the site to the

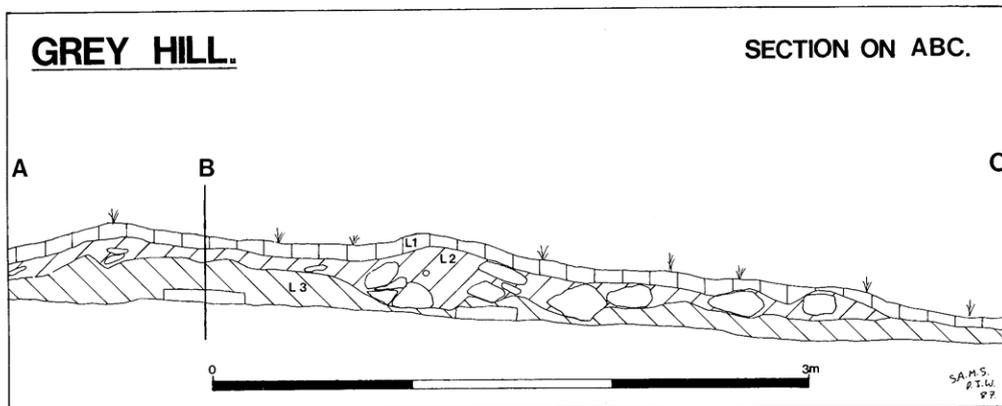


FIG. 2

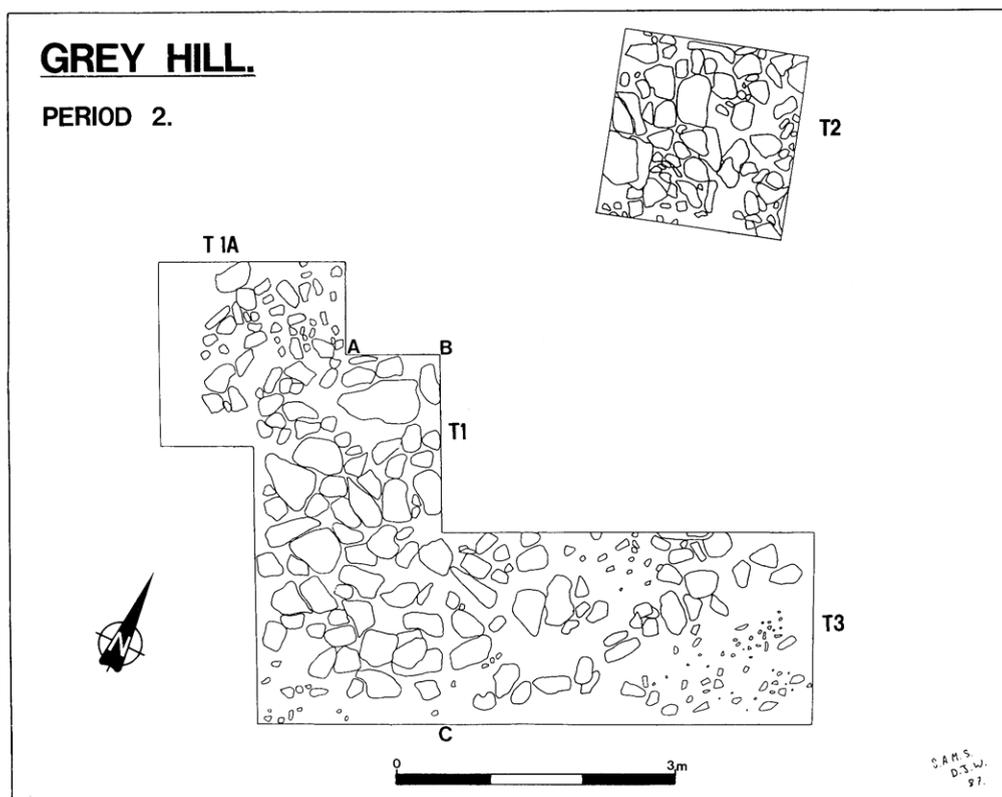


FIG. 3

more of the site is excavated it is not possible to determine the size of these buildings or to confirm whether the paved areas in Trenches 2 and 3 are part of the same structure.

The *terminus post quem* for the destruction of Period I is provided by the broken Stibbington reeded mortarium from Hearth 2 which dates to the first half of the fourth century A.D. and the ware on the paved floor suggests a reasonably lengthy occupation prior to the building's destruction.

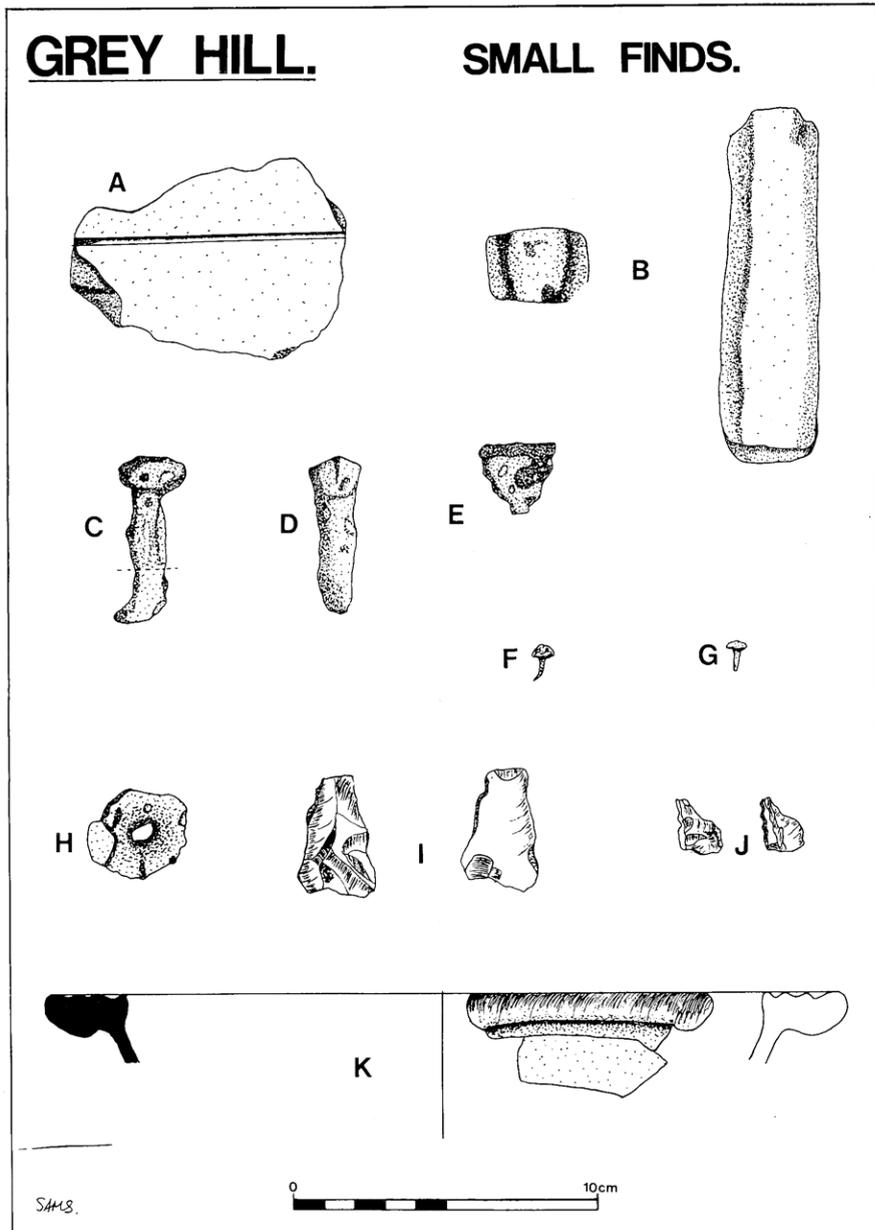


FIG. 5

There is no discernible abandonment horizon between Periods 1 and 2, and the Period 1 building was replaced by a rough stone platform of unknown extent and purpose (see Fig. 3). Although there are no dateable finds, the absence of an abandonment phase and the fact that the platform follows the southern edge of the Period 1 paved area suggest that the site was quickly re-occupied. The re-use of some of the Period 1 flagstones in this platform rule out the possibility that this layer is simply the tumbled remains of the Period 1 superstructure and may suggest a change in the use of the site rather than a re-building by the occupier of Period 1. There is no evidence for a superstructure associated with Period 2 although there were signs of light burning.

Conclusion

The site is an obvious lookout point commanding spectacular long range views over a c. 320° arc including all but its immediate east and this coupled with its proximity to the outpost fort of Bewcastle and its exposed position had initially led the excavators to expect a Roman military use. However, although the Period 1 building, is clearly Romanized, it does not (from the limited evidence available) appear to be of a military type and, as the nearby fort would presumably have had its own workshop facilities, the presence of industrial activity may be taken to imply some form of late Roman civilian use,³ probably connected with agriculture, and the building may have formed part of an extended vicus similar to that of Old Carlisle,⁴ but it should in any case be borne in mind that the distinction between military and civilian on the frontiers was becoming somewhat blurred by this late period. There are few, if any, parallels for such a building north of Hadrian's Wall at this date but the fact that it was built at all may suggest reasonably secure conditions.

It is obviously tempting to try to link the destruction of Period 1 with the destruction by fire of the fort of Bewcastle itself, in the first half of the fourth century, which, along with similar destruction levels at High Rochester and Risingham,⁵ is usually assumed to be connected with the troubles of 342/3 A.D.⁶ Further speculation must, however, be firmly resisted without additional evidence.

Notes and References

- ¹ The authors wish to thank Mr J. MacDonald and Mrs C. Nevell for their help in these excavations and the people of Bewcastle for their warm welcome.
- ² We thank Dr J. P. Wild for giving his opinion on this pottery.
- ³ Of two worked flints found during the excavations one was a turf find while the second was from the make up for the Period 1 paving and was thus re-deposited. Both are, therefore, unstratified.
- ⁴ N. J. Higham and G. D. B. Jones, *The Carvetii* (Gloucester, 1985), 60.
- ⁵ I. A. Richmond, K. S. Hodgson, J. K. St. Joseph, "The Roman Fort at Bewcastle", CW2, xxxviii, 195. I. A. Richmond, "Excavations At High Rochester And Risingham 1935", AA4, xiii, (1936), 170. However P. J. Casey and M. Savage (AA5, viii, (1980), 79) would seek to re-date the abandonment of the outpost forts to 314 A.D. on the basis of coin evidence from High Rochester.
- ⁶ The sources for these events are conveniently assembled in J. C. Mann, *The Northern Frontier in Britain From Hadrian to Honorius: Literary and Epigraphic Sources* (Newcastle), (no date given), nos. 190 (Cod Theod. xi, 16, 5), 191 (Cohen, *Med Imp*, viii, 313, no. 332), 192 (Firmicus. *De errore profanarum Religionum.*), 193 (Ammianus, xx, 1, 1), 198 (Ammianus, xxviii, 3, 8).

