

Excavations at Eskbank, Midlothian, 1972

by Valerie A Maxfield

SUMMARY

Rescue excavations were conducted in advance of housing development in an area known from aerial photographs to contain parts of two Roman marching camps and a pit alignment. Work was concentrated on the investigation of the relative chronology of the two superimposed camps and the entrance complex of one of them. A trench cut across the point of intersection of the defences of the two camps revealed that camp A pre-dated camp B (fig 1). No trace of the rampart bank of either camp remained. The ditch of camp A was approximately 3 m wide and just under 1 m in depth. Its entrance was 11 m wide and was fronted by a *titulum*, the irregularly shaped ditch of which was 10.60 m long and somewhat under 1 m in depth. The ditch of camp B was about 2.20 m wide and 1.20 m deep. No pottery or other material of Roman date was found during the excavation. An unsuccessful attempt was made to locate on the ground the pit alignment known from aerial photographs to cut obliquely across the field in which the camps were sited.

THE SITE (fig 1)

The area under excavation was sited immediately to the S of the River North Esk about 7 km inland from the river mouth and 3 km upstream from its confluence with the Esk (NGR NT 321668). The site was bounded to the N by the steep scarp which falls to the river, and sloped gently upwards to the S and W, there being a total rise of some 10 m in 260 m. The subsoil was of interfingered yellow clay and gravel which graded from fine sand through to medium sized boulders. This was everywhere overlain by at least a third of a metre of good agricultural soil.

The presence of Roman features in this area was first noted in the 1960s when Professor St Joseph identified and photographed from the air the ditches of a temporary camp (St Joseph 1965, 80). The whole of the N side, an estimated 414 m (1360 ft) was identified, 182 m (600 ft) of the W side and about 210 m (689 ft) on the east. This E side was interrupted at about the mid-point of the known stretch by an entrance fronted by a *titulum*. On the basis of this evidence Professor St Joseph suggested (St Joseph 1969, 108) that the Eskbank camp was a member of his series of 63 acre camps (25.5 ha) whose shorter sides average 1,350 ft (413 m) in length. These camps have a centrally placed gate in the short side; such a gate could have existed at Eskbank where the centre of the N side is obliterated by a wood and market garden. The 63 acre camps also have two gates in each of the longer sides: the known gate in the E side would be one of these, but no corresponding gate on the W side was apparent, the ditch being uninterrupted at the relevant point.

Subsequent reconnaissance in the same area revealed the crop marks produced by another camp. This was superimposed upon the previously known camp and at a slight angle to it (pl 7). No entrance gap was visible in the E side. While the NE corners of two camps are clearly visible, the field to the W has produced evidence for only one NW corner. Two ditches disappear into

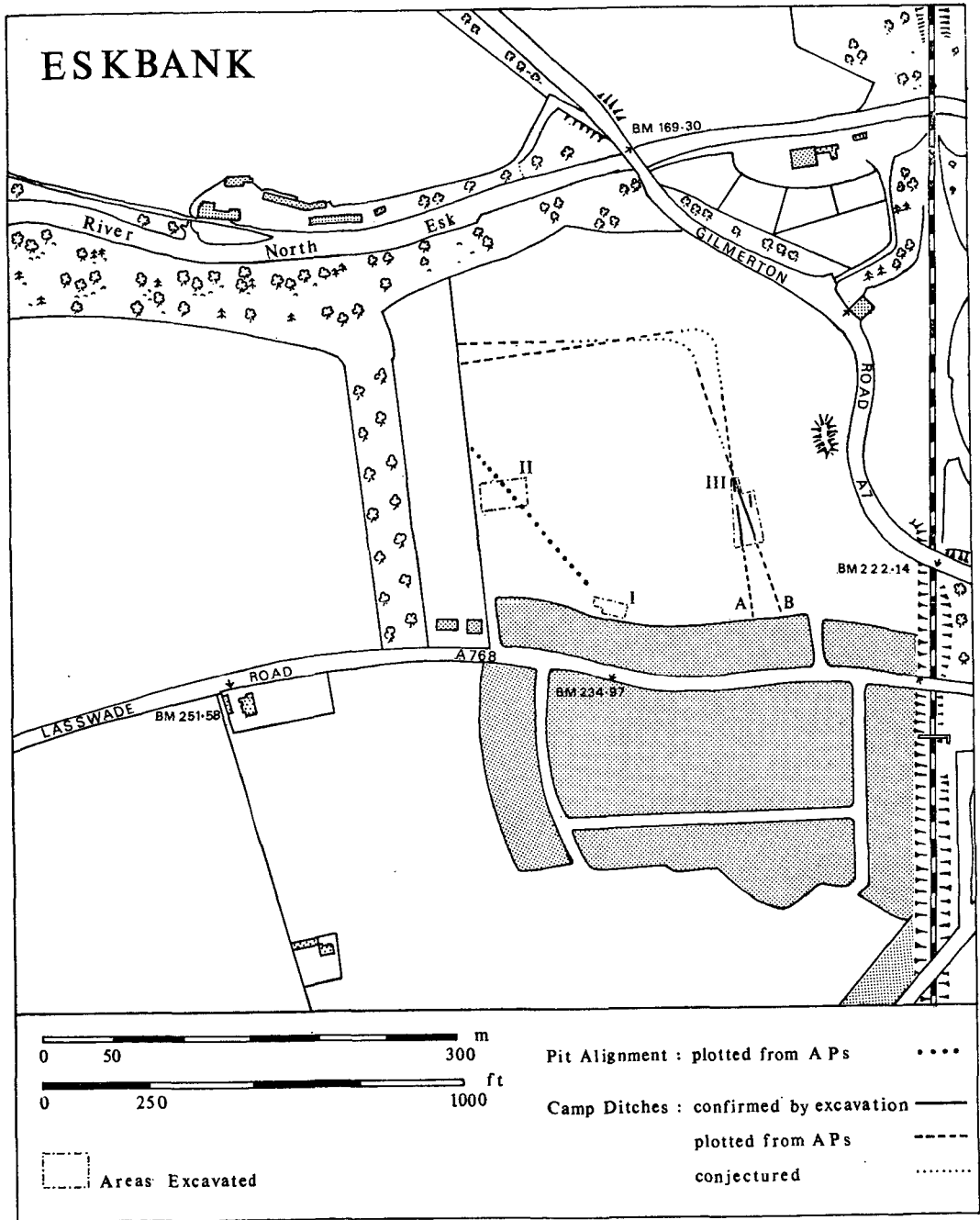


FIG 1 Plan of Eskbank showing site of temporary camps and pit alignment and position of excavation trenches

the E side of the market garden; only one reappears from the west. The question therefore arises as to whether the NW corner is to be attached to camp A, the camp with the gateway, as it naturally was when the existence of only one camp was known, or whether it belongs to camp B, that with the continuous E side. If the latter were the case the non-appearance of an entrance in the known length of W side would be more understandable. Professor St Joseph cut trial sections across the W ditch which proved to be 2.13 m wide and 1.20 m deep.

No trace of either camp is visible to the S of the Lasswade Road (A 768) where housing development will already have destroyed part of the S defences. The camps occupy a good position above a river which would have provided a ready water-supply, and on ground which, though it rises gently away from the river, is overall very level.

Cutting obliquely across the SW corner of the field in which the NE corners of both camps were sited was a pit alignment. It disappeared at its N end into the market garden, while the line of it to the S faded out just short of the boundary walls of the back gardens of the houses on the N side of the Lasswade Road.

In theory the whole of the field bounded to the N by the River North Esk, to the E by the Gilmerton Road (A7), to the S by the Lasswade Road (A768) and to the W by the market garden was available for excavation. In practice there was one major limiting factor in the condition laid down by the contractor that excavation should not be conducted in the areas where house foundations were to be laid and should keep one metre away from the proposed building lines for every metre in depth.

THE ROMAN CAMPS

The proposed development of the site affected the NE area of the camps but stopped short of the N defences. Excavation was therefore concentrated on the E side and was aimed at determining the precise alignment of both camps and their relative chronology, and at obtaining a plan of the entrance complex of camp A. An area was chosen to extend from the point of intersection of the two camps to some distance S of the entrance.

Method of excavation

A trial trench was cut by hand in a position estimated to be approximately at right angles to the line of the E defences a short distance to the S of the entrance. The ditch lines having been located, an area of approximately 800 sq m was stripped mechanically to reveal the entrance complex, the point of intersection and a long enough length of ditch to ascertain the exact alignment of both camps. The machine used, a Drot, cleared the area reasonably cleanly but did some damage on the softer sandy areas of the site where it sank too deep and churned up the top of the subsoil with its tracks. This resulted in stripping of these areas to a greater depth than was desirable, but by maintaining a baulk across the centre of the area the true depth and profile of the ditches could be recorded at this point. Sections were therefore sited immediately to the S of this baulk (fig 2). Some depth was however lost from the tops of the ditches at the entrance complex so that the dimensions given must be regarded as a minimum.

It was not possible to clear the whole of the ditch intersection because of the restriction on excavation in those areas where houses were to be erected; it did, however, prove possible to expose just enough to settle the important question of the relative chronology of the two camps. This was done by cutting a section just to the S of the central point of the intersection. The fill of the uppermost levels of the two ditches was too alike to be able to determine their relationship

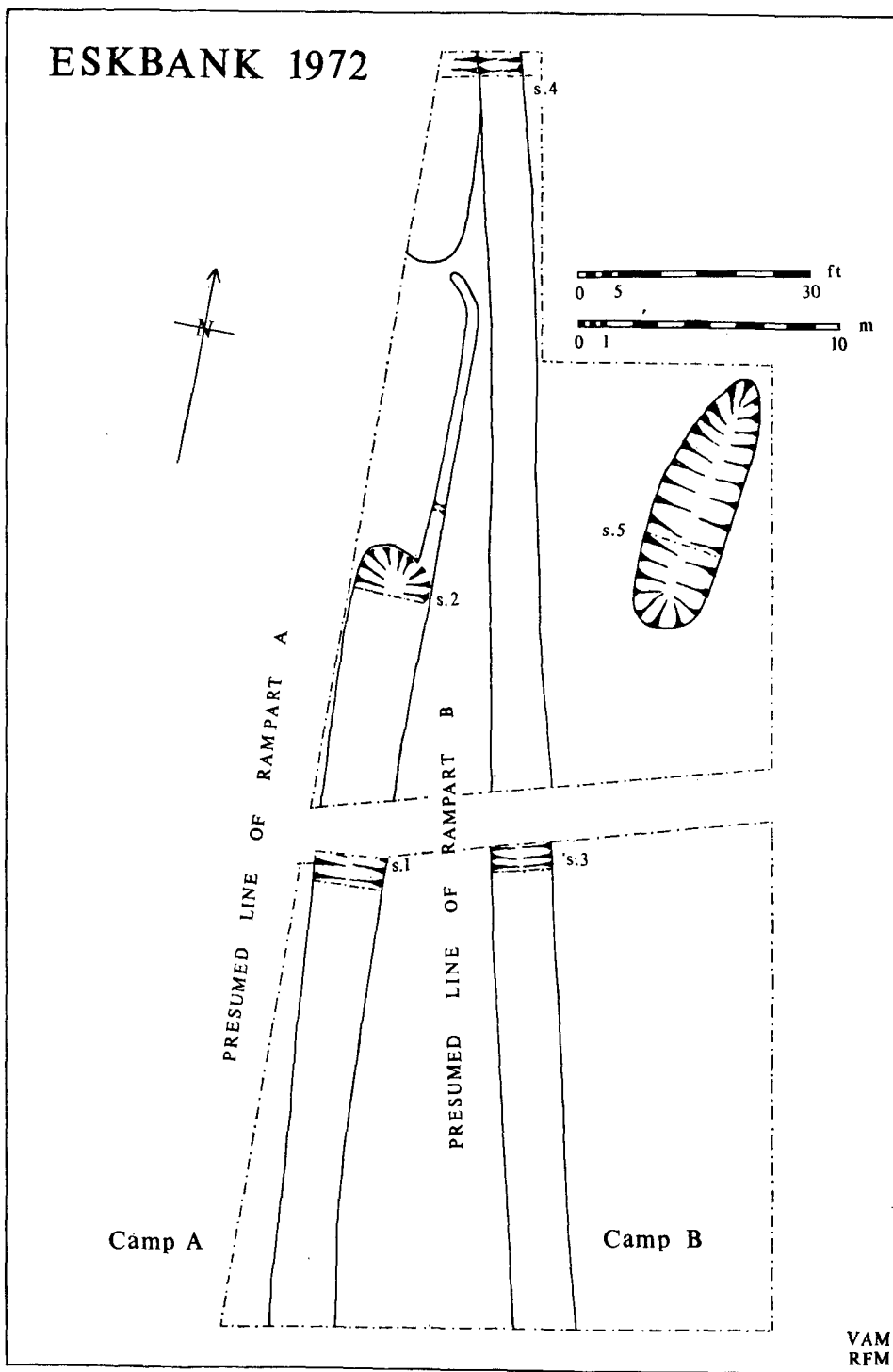


FIG 2 Eskbank Area III, showing entrance complex of camp A and intersection with ditch of camp B

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in plan, particularly in the very dry conditions which prevailed at the time. The fills at a lower level were sufficiently dissimilar to allow their relationship to be seen in section.

The entrance complex once stripped was cleaned by hand. The S ditch terminal was emptied as was also the *titulum* ditch, this latter being taken out by quadrants in order to obtain full longitudinal and transverse sections.

Camp A. The two sections which were cut across the ditch of this camp showed its profile to be irregular both in size and shape. The profile varied from a wide U, 3 m wide and 1.24 m deep as measured from the modern ground surface, 0.74 m from the top of the subsoil (fig 3-1) to a V-shape with slightly stepped sides 3.10 m wide and 0.92 m in depth from the top of subsoil (fig 3-2). In both cases the ditch fill was very clean at its lowest levels. Section 1 had been cut through yellow/orange sand and gravel. A fine lens of quick silt at the bottom of the ditch was covered with a clean mixture of sand and gravel to a depth of 0.56 m. This material came up to the lips of the ditch on either side but had subsided in the centre. The layer above was of a darker more mixed material, sand, gravel with stone and dark soil and this was overlain by 0.23 m of modern agricultural soil. The ditch at section 2 had been cut through fine yellow sand. The quick silt in the bottom was covered to a depth of 0.15 m with clean compact sand of a slightly darker colour than the undisturbed material around it. The material above became progressively more intermixed with soil, pebble and stone. Both of these sections suggest that at least the lower levels of the ditch had been deliberately backfilled, for the fill was too clean to be the product of gradual natural silting. The upper levels will then have become filled up by material accumulating in the depression left.

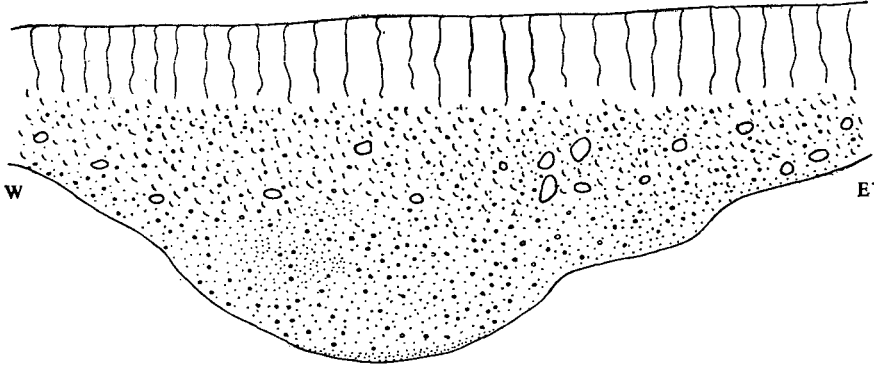
No trace remained of the rampart within the ditch (i.e. to the W); deliberate slighting in Roman times and repeated ploughing since would account for its complete elimination. The sand and gravel dug from this sector of ditch would not form a stable rampart and it may be assumed that the front at least would be revetted, perhaps with turf. An indication of this came from the ditch intersection (fig 4-4) where decayed turfy material was found towards the bottom of the fill of camp B. Turf has also been found in the fill of the ditch of the 63-acre camp at Ardoch (St Joseph 1970, 167).

A gap of 11 m had been left in the ditch for the entrance. This gap was fronted by a *titulum*, the ditch of which was sited 8 m to the E of the camp ditch and slightly to S of centre. The *titulum* ditch was irregular in shape being rounded off at its S end but thinning off almost to a point at the other. It was 10.60 m in length and attained a maximum width of 3.20 m. The sides sloped in at an angle of approximately 30 degrees, the ends rather more steeply at 40 degrees to a measured depth of 0.80 m. Its profile was boat-shaped (fig 4-5). The infill of the *titulum* ditch, like that of the camp ditch, suggests that it too was deliberately slighted. The fill was remarkably uniform in texture throughout the vertical section, with none of the colour and texture changes which might be expected had the deposition of the material been discontinuous. It was composed of the same sand and gravel mixture as the surrounding subsoil, though with rather more large cobbles towards the bottom. The fill was just slightly darker in colour than its surround. Very slight differences in colour, texture and compaction showed up reasonably well after a shower of rain but were otherwise not at all clear. The black material at the bottom of the ditch was a natural deposit of iron oxide.

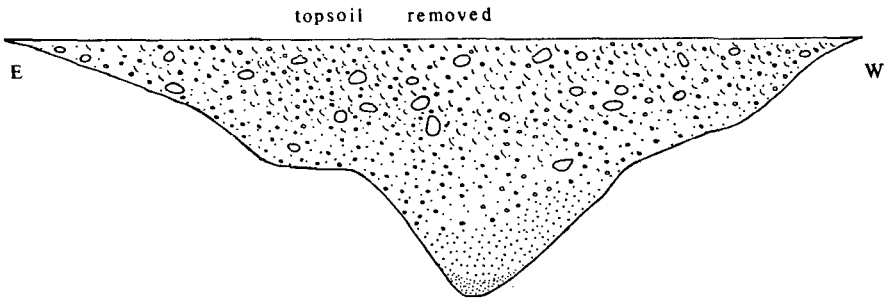
Running between the outer edges of the two ditch terminals on a slightly convex course was a flat bottomed V-shaped trench. It averaged 0.55 m in width at the top and 0.25 m at the bottom. The original depth could not be gauged with any certainty as this was the area of the site most badly disturbed by the mechanical stripping, but a section across the centre gave a depth of 0.46 m, while at the point of entry into the S ditch terminal it was 0.64 m. The latter

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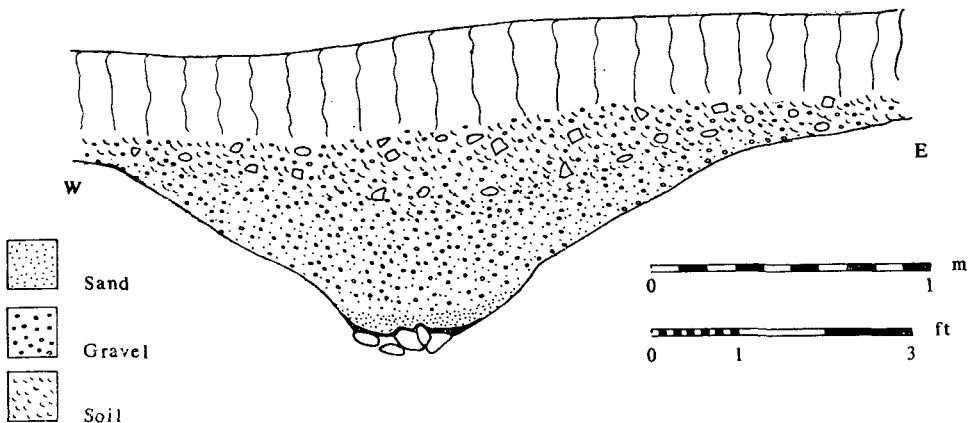
Section 1 ~ Camp A



Section 2 ~ Camp A



Section 3 ~ Camp B



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FIG 3 Ditch sections of camp A (Sections 1 and 2) and B (Section 3)

point was the less disturbed so gives a more accurate estimate of the original depth. The trench was cut into clean yellow sand. Its fill was homogeneous sand just slightly darker than its surround. It ran into the S ditch terminal but sloped up and came to an end half a metre short of the N terminal. The function of this trench is by no means certain but it is quite possible that it may have served to hold some temporary hurdling erected across the entrance to help keep prowlers and wild animals out of the camp at night.

A feature similar to this has been noted by Professor St Joseph and Mr David Wilson on a number of camps which they have excavated (information by letter). They have observed that a trench has been dug from ditch terminal to ditch terminal, as a result of which the entrance gap fails to show up on aerial photographs. Sometimes a drain has been laid at the bottom of the Roman ditch which is consistent with the suggestion that the elimination of the causeway was connected with drainage work carried out when the camp sites came under cultivation in early modern times. Such an explanation would not, however, seem to fit the present context. Firstly the trench across the entrance opens out into one terminal only (and this the uphill one). Secondly the area in question is extremely well drained. The subsoil, as mentioned above, is interfingered clay and gravel. Where clay is present so too are field drains in profusion, in sets approximately 6 m apart. In an area of 125 sq m on clay six field drains were encountered (fig 1, area I), in 1225 sq m on sand and gravel (fig 1, areas II + III) not one. Clearly the drainage problems of the site were apparent to the farmers who worked it, and the area of the camp entrance was notably dry; natural drainage was quite sufficient. Admittedly the trench at the camp entrance cannot be proved to be Roman; no datable finds (indeed no finds at all) came from it, though this is of little significance in view of the fact that the total area stripped throughout the excavation produced no Roman material. The feature is, however, easy to explain in Roman terms, rather more enigmatic if it be post-Roman.

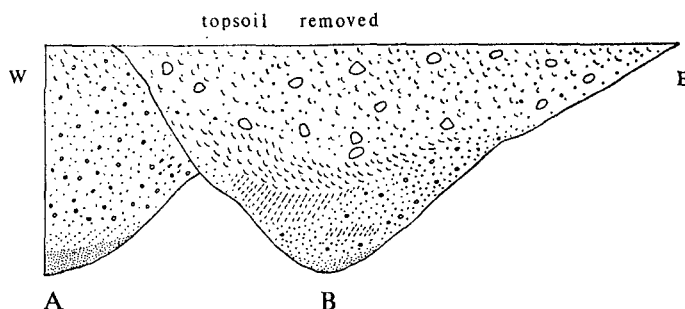
Camp B. Only one clear section was cut across the ditch of the second camp (fig 3-3). It was a wide U-shape in profile, cut through sand and coarse gravel down on to a layer of small boulders overlain by a deposit of iron oxide. At the bottom of the ditch was about 50 mm of fine brownish sand overlain by firmly compacted sand and gravel which filled the ditch up to its lips, leaving a hollow in the centre which contained a mixture of sand, gravel and stoney soil. The modern ploughsoil covered and levelled all. The ditch was 2.35 m wide at this point and 1.15 m deep from modern ground surface (0.65 m from subsoil). Further to the N at the point of intersection with camp A the ditch was slightly narrower (2.10 m wide) but of similar depth. Here the profile was more V-shaped (fig 4-4). The ditch fill again suggests deliberate back-filling. The dimensions of the ditch as shown in both of these sections correspond fairly closely with those recorded from his section on the W by Professor St Joseph. On the basis of this correspondence it would appear that the W ditch belongs to camp B and not, as has hitherto been supposed, to camp A whose ditch, in both the sections cut across it, was approximately four fifths of a metre wider. It is therefore the N side of camp B that can be calculated, not that of camp A.

The intersection of camps A and B (fig 4-4)

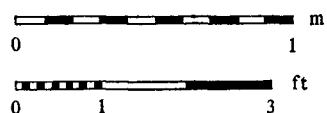
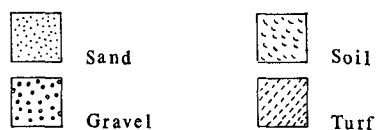
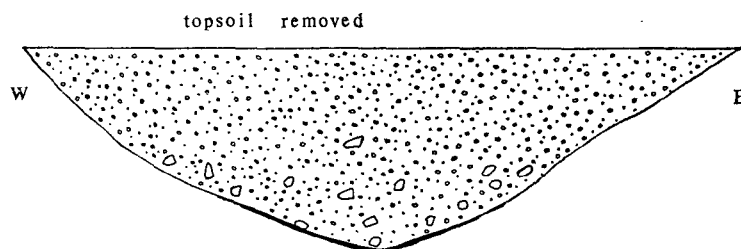
Excavation of the intersection was hampered by its proximity to the proposed building lines, but a narrow section sufficed to establish that camp A preceded camp B. The subsoil in this area was fine yellow sand. The fill of ditch A was of disturbed but compact sand at the bottom, then a lens of very pale sand overlain by darker orange-brown sand with an admixture of soil. Ditch B clearly cut through this fill; its sides must therefore have been very unstable and prone to collapse. The bottom of ditch B contained the same orange brown sand and soil which filled the upper level of ditch A; in the midst of this were two patches of a grey silty material, probably

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Section 4 ~ Intersection of Camps



Section 5 ~ Titulum Ditch

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decayed turf. These materials filled the ditch to almost half its depth. Above was a layer of dark brown-black humus which rested in the depression left in the layer below, and over this a fill of stoney soil. The lower material was comparatively clean and would appear to have been deposited (perhaps by collapse rather than deliberate infill) soon after the ditch was dug. Subsequently the ditch filled by natural processes.

The dating of the camps

No pottery or other material of Roman date was found in any context whatever on the site. Dating of the camps can therefore be done only on the basis of size and type. Valuable work on the classification of camps has been done by Professor St Joseph and it will be convenient here to summarise his main conclusions (St Joseph 1969, 113; 1973, 228). He has identified several

different series of marching camps, distinguished from one another by size or design; these series he attributes to two periods of campaigning, the Flavian and the Severan. The largest of the Flavian series is represented by the two camps of Dunning and Abernethy, 116 acres (47 ha) and *c* 115 acres (46½ ha) in size respectively and square in plan. The Stracathro type, whose characteristic feature is a distinctive gateway design – an external *clavicula* with an oblique ditch and rampart at an angle of approximately 45 degrees to the main line of the defences – includes tiny Dalswinton, 5 acres (2 ha) in size and 25-acre (10 ha) Dalginross as well as Stracathro itself which is of 39 acres (16 ha). The wide geographical distribution of these camps as well as their size range strongly suggests that they do not all belong to a single campaign. Another group of smallish camps is the 30-acre (12 ha) series (the appellation is approximate not exact) which have a gate with a *titulum* in each side. Finally in the group of types attributed to the Flavian period is the 110-acre (44½ ha) series, rectangular or sub-rectangular in shape and, where the gateway positions have been identified, having six gates, two in each of the long sides, one in each short side, guarded by *titula*. The smallest of the series attributed to the Severan period is that of the 63-acre camps (25½ ha) which are normally rectangular, average 2050 ft by 1350 ft (623 m by 413 m) and have six gates with *titula*, one in the middle of each short side, two in each of the long sides: St Joseph dates these to the first Severan campaign into Scotland. The very largest camps, those of 165 acres (66½ ha), appear only to the S of the Forth, while N of the Forth a 130-acre (52½ ha) series extends as far as Bervie Water, Howe of the Mearns. St Joseph has suggested that the two series may belong to a single campaign, the second Severan campaign into Scotland, the reduction in camp size being due to troops being left behind to guard the Forth-Clyde gap.

The basis of this dating is the relationship of the various camps to one another and to forts of known date, sequence and spacing of camps of similar type and the siting of camps in relation to known or assumed campaign routes and army sizes; rarely do these camps yield even a single sherd of Roman pottery.

Since neither of the camps at Eskbank is known in its entirety it is difficult to classify them. The one complete side known, the N side, which on the evidence already adduced I attribute to camp B, is an estimated 414 m (1360 ft) in length and has a hypothetical central gate. No gate is visible in either the W side or the E of which some 210 m (689 ft) are known. The argument which St Joseph put forward for calling the N side the short side of a 63-acre camp still holds good, though the camp now has a different E side. The absence of gates in the known stretches of the long sides does nothing to invalidate the argument; witness camp 4 at Ardoch (St Joseph 1970, fig 1) whose NW and SW gates are some 250 m from their respective corners.

Insufficient is known of Camp A to say anything very definite about it. The known length of the N side is roughly half that of camp B. It is possible that the NW corner lies under the market garden or belt of trees into which the N side disappeared, though equally it may lie, as yet undetected, in the field to the west. Since there is no certainty as to the length of any one side it would be futile to conjecture the overall size of the camp. Suffice it to say that on the evidence available it is a minimum of 10 acres in size.

If St Joseph's dating of camp types is correct, Eskbank B is Severan and Eskbank A predates it. There is however much still to be discovered about marching camps in Scotland. For example the 130-acre camp at Ardoch underlies the annexe to the fort; the annexe is not closely dated but must belong, at very latest, to the final period of occupation of the fort, that is in the Antonine period (Breeze 1974). This is clearly inconsistent with a Severan date for the camp. Campaigning in Scotland took place on many occasions during the Roman occupation. Agricola reached the Moray Firth. Antoninus Pius, as a prelude to the building of the Antonine Wall and presumably prior to its second period of occupation, will have penetrated well beyond the

Forth-Clyde line. So too, perhaps, did Ulpian Marcellus who fought in Britain the greatest war of Commodus' reign. Severus campaigned among the Caledonii and Maeatae, Constantius Chlorus won a victory over the Picti and Caledonii and Constans over the Picti and Scotti. In all of these campaigns marching camps must have been built by the armies both on their advance north and their retreat south. Six series of camps have so far been identified and dated to just two of these periods of campaigning, but others must exist, at present undetected. Camp A could belong to any of the Agricola or Antonine campaigns.

THE PIT ALIGNMENT

An unsuccessful attempt was made to locate the pit alignment. Two areas were opened up across the assumed line as estimated from aerial photography (pl 7 and fig 1). Area I lay across the assumed line just to the S of the point where the alignment fades out on the photographs. The area was stripped by hand and carefully cleaned; the only features which emerged were three separate sets of field drains. The subsoil at this point was clay. The excavation here was carried out in April and the weather, slightly damp, made for good working conditions on this type of subsoil. It can therefore be confidently stated that the line of pits did not run across the excavated area. Conditions were much less favourable when area II was opened up. The work was done in July during a hot dry spell and the subsoil proved to be gravel which varied in size from boulders to coarse sand, within a metre or so. A machine was used to strip off the topsoil to within a few millimetres of the gravel which was then cleaned by hand. Despite scrupulous cleaning and watering no sign of the pits appeared. The difficult conditions, however, make it impossible to say with any certainty that the pit alignment did not run across the trench, though certainly it was not seen to do so.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Excavations at Eskbank (Midlothian) were carried out on behalf of the Department of the Environment during April and July 1972. A total of 18 days was worked at the site in advance of housing development which was to obliterate the north-east corners of two Roman camps and a pit alignment. Thanks are due to the developers, John T Bell and Sons (Newcastle and Edinburgh), for permission to excavate, to the labourers provided by John Dennis and Co. (Dalkeith) and to the volunteers who helped out at weekends, notably Miss R J Harper and Mr P Waugh. The assistant director during the major part of the excavation was Mr Roger Miket, whose invaluable assistance it is my pleasure to acknowledge. Professor J K St Joseph very kindly provided information about the work which he has done at Eskbank. Dr David Breeze read an earlier draft of this report and made a number of useful suggestions which I have gratefully incorporated in the text. Since the excavations were conducted the building development has been completed. The site is now occupied by the Melville Park Estate.

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Eskbank temporary camps and pit alignment, looking north (photograph J K St Joseph, Cambridge University Collection: copyright reserved)