

ART. III. – *Roman Sites on the Cumberland Coast: Milefortlet 17, Dubmill Point.*

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**E**XCAVATION at Milefortlet 20, Low Mire, in August 1980 proved for the first time that coastal milefortlets were designed to have both front and back gates and thus were comparable with milecastles whose function, at least in the first period, was to control traffic through Hadrian's Wall.<sup>1</sup> At Low Mire, three periods of use were established for the front gate, but the area of the back gate was covered by a great depth of unstratified black humose sand and debris from a vanished cottage. The pattern of the post holes was the same for both gates but there was no closely associated rampart material of any of the three established periods, as was seen at the front gate, for the relationship between them to be made absolutely clear. All one can say is that the heels of the original posts appear to have rotted away *in situ* and the road through the rampart had not been resurfaced. For these reasons it was necessary to examine at least one other back gate elsewhere, in order to determine what type of rampart material was associated with first period posts and whether a different rampart material lay over the post holes and the road, and thus find evidence that the gate went out of use, and when the gap in the rampart was filled up. The choice lay between milefortlets 17, 21 and 26; I chose Milefortlet 26, Rise How Bank because something more than the simple pattern of trials of September 1969 was required to prove that the site was indeed a fortlet.<sup>2</sup> In the event it was the site of a stone tower making a pair with Risehow Tower examined and reported on by Joseph Robinson in 1880.<sup>3</sup> I next considered Milefortlet 17, Dubmill Point and approached Mr Dennis Williamson of Seacroft, Allonby, owner/occupier of the field in which the milefortlet lay, for permission to open the ground where the back gate would be found. I planned a small excavation for the summer of 1983. We were overtaken by events: after a week's work Mr Williamson received a letter from The Department of the Environment stating that the site was now a scheduled monument and that excavation required the formal approval of the Secretary of State following a change in the law. Mr Williamson had no option but to withdraw permission and I as a responsible archaeologist was in duty bound to record our work as accurately as possible before reinstating the site, and write a report.

### **The history of the site**

Milefortlets as such were unsuspected south of Moricambe until 1954, when my discovery of three stone towers in the Beckfoot sector of the coast, together with the tower identified and described by Robinson in 1880 on Wolsty Bank, and another by Richmond near Mawbray in 1937, made it clear that the "Cardurnock sequence" also applied to the coast south of Moricambe, at least as far south as Dubmill Point. In that year at Eric Birley's suggestion I marked up a map of the coast on the One-Inch scale putting in all the known sites and adding the missing towers and the expected milefortlets at their measured positions. This map was the basis for my fieldwork and for the schedule of coast sites prepared by Eric Birley for *Research on Hadrian's Wall*.<sup>4</sup> Within a year of

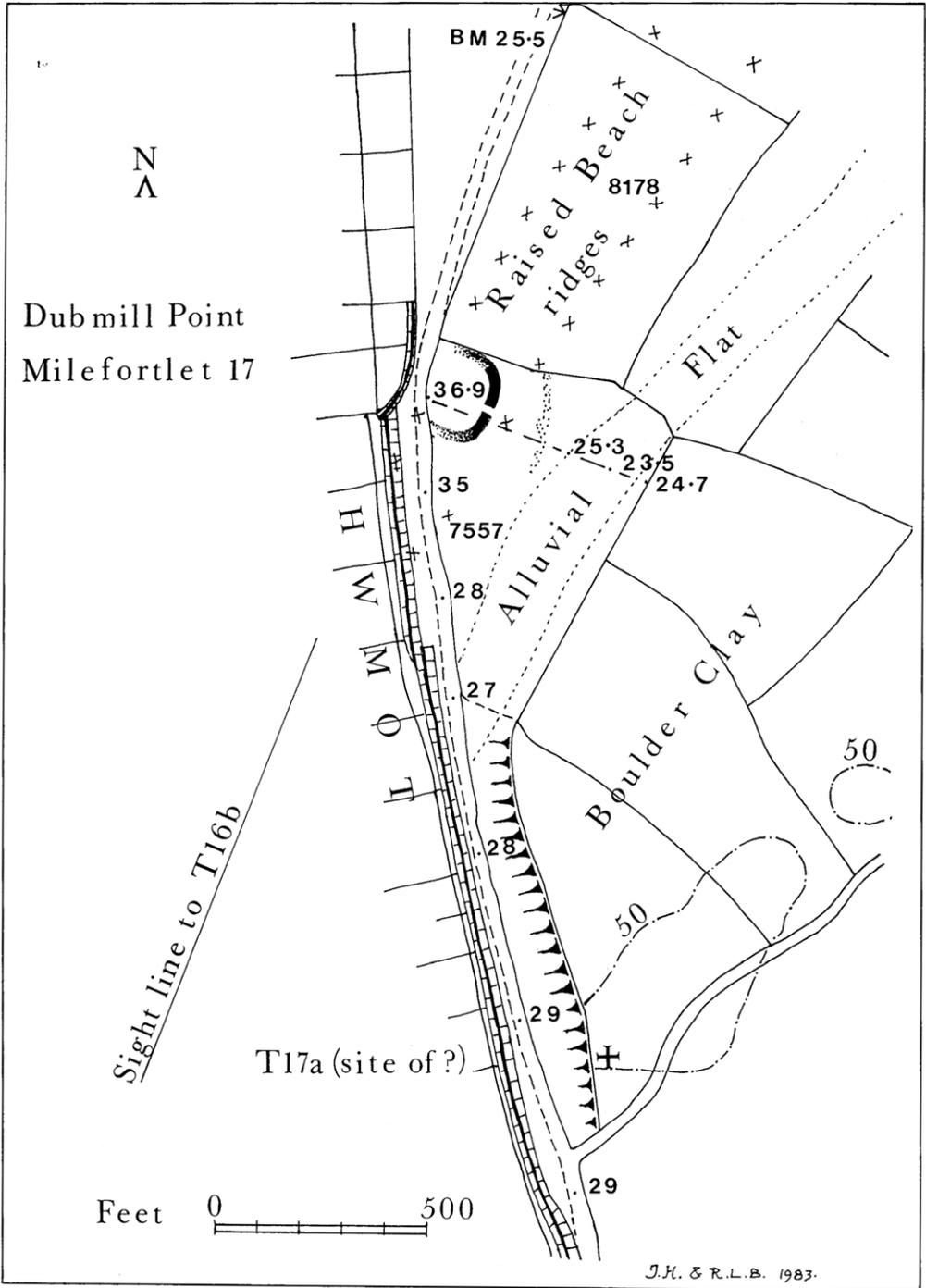


FIG. 1. - Location and orientation of Milefortlet 1, Dubmill Point. The Allonby - Silloth gas main crosses the fortlet towards the front. Based on the O.S. sheet and the survey by Mr James Huddart.

its publication more discoveries on the coast in 1962 made it necessary to revise the schedule. A happy chance led me to Tower 21b and Milefortlet 22 and a new sector of the system.

I sampled the turf of the rampart of Milefortlet 22 and saw what I would hope to find at the measured positions of other milefortlets. Milefortlet 17, Dubmill Point, appears in the schedule with the note "lost by erosion R L B" a comment based on probabilities in view of the alignment of the front wall of Tower 16b on a line passing to the south-west on the seaward side of the Point and the observation of the late Mr Harold Duff, that more than 50 yards width of ground had been lost from the Point within his own lifetime. I was researching the geology and depositional history of the Solway for my article on Moricambe and it occurred to me that if the system had turned just a little to the south at Tower 16b the missing milefortlet might yet be found at the Point on the gravels of the raised beach.<sup>5</sup> I identified laid turf like that of the rampart of Milefortlet 22 at the measured distance from Tower 16b in the north-west corner of the field just where the coast road swings a little to the south. Excavation was not urgent, indeed I had many other things to do in the following years. After the great drought of 1976 Professor G. D. B. Jones telephoned me with the news that he had seen from the air the outline of a milefortlet and asked me if it would be part of the system, I explained it was obviously number 17. In due course he very kindly sent me two photographs. I was very pleased to have this confirmation so unexpectedly "out of the blue."

### **Allonby Bay and the schedule of coast sites**

The schedule of sites was based on an interval of 540 yards between the towers and milefortlets, approximately a third of a Roman mile. This has served well for practical purposes. However, the reasonably accurate locating of Milefortlets 17 and 20 about 3 miles apart across Allonby Bay, makes it possible to scale the distance between them on the Six Inch sheets. The direct line is 2.8 miles (4928 yards) which should accommodate Milefortlets 18 and 19 and six towers, making 9 intervals, which works out at 547.5 yards for each interval. The same number of units spaced out following the line of the present coast road through Allonby a little to the landward side would have to be 570 yards apart to fit the distance of 5132 yards. One must opt for the shorter distance because circumstances argue against the possibility of the line having curved farther inland in order to accommodate a third milefortlet and two more towers and point to the much more acceptable explanation that there has been loss of land by marine erosion since Roman times. In my report on the new tower on Rise How I discussed the probable and evident changes in the coast line and the factors which may have caused them. To the north of Dubmill Point the land has grown out by as much as 230 yards opposite MF 16 and Towers 16a and 16b, and the sand and gravel which went to form this new land must have come from south of the point by wave action and longshore drift. Since the sea is no longer eroding the drumlins of boulder clay, the original source of the shingle, wave action is reworking the present day shingle and the remains of old raised beaches and it is reasonable to assume the shore of Allonby Bay to have been at one time as much as, say, 250 yards farther to the west. Thus it seems likely that two milefortlets and six towers have been lost in the sea. Support for the idea of the line of the system continuing to the south-west from MF 17 comes from my inability to find any traces of

Tower 17a on the ancient sea cliff (Fig. 1) even when at one of my visits the site was actually being ploughed as I watched.

### The physical features of the site

The fortlet lies within the north-west corner of field 7557 with its front ditch and part of the front rampart under the coast road. It is sited on the parallel ridges of Raised Beach, clearly seen in the adjoining field 8178, which have a north-east to south-west alignment, and have been anciently truncated by marine erosion. The section is concealed by coast defence works at the Point. It is certain that the gravels once extended much farther to the south-west where are now the waters of Allonby Bay. Inland across the fortlet from the roadside hedge, the ground falls away from 36.9 ft AOD to 25.3 ft where there is a narrow flat running between the gravel ridges and the rising ground of the slope of boulder clay towards Salta. Its lowest point is at 23.5 ft and is often flooded. At the eastern hedge the ground begins to rise from 24.7 ft towards the 50 ft contour. Because the coast deposits are concealed beneath the alluvium of the flat their nature and depositional succession cannot be studied. However, a soil profile pit dug at the lowest point showed the following horizons:-

Height	Depth	Horizon
23.5	0-25 cm	Grey-brown sandy clay loam, fine rusty and black mottling, coarse prismatic structure.
	25-40 cm	Grey silty clay loam, diffuse ochreous mottling, coarse prismatic structure.
22.2	40-120 cm	Abrupt change to grey loamy sand, faint ochreous staining, streaks of grey clay.
	at 120 cm	Non cohesive sand, grains slightly iron stained, occasional streaks of more cohesive sand.

The top of the base deposit of grey sand is at 22.2 ft. The overlying alluvium may have been partly derived from hill wash from the boulder clay slope deposited in a ponded area behind the raised beach, but if it continues to the west under the beach gravels it would predate them and represent marine alluvium related to one of the changes in sea/land level. The alluvial flat reaches the coast road at about 27 ft (nearest spot level) almost at the same level as the shelf below the ancient sea cliff (Fig. 1). The deposit of clay so close to the site of the milefortlet must be considered as a possible source of rampart material. It must be noted that first period ramparts of grey clay have been recorded at milefortlets 12, 15, 16, 20 and 22, and in the clay and cobble foundations of Towers 12a, 12b, 13a, 16a and 16b, all sited in the dune sands; puddled grey clay was used for bedding the cobbles. It is an interesting point that the foundations of 21a on Swarthy Hill contained grey clay although the tower was on a red clay subsoil, and when foundations were laid for Tower 21b, also on red clay, local red clay was used.

### The excavation

My plan of campaign was simply to locate the undug causeway between the ends of the fortlet ditch, find the gravel road leading to the back gate, and look for the first signs

of laid turf and post holes; further development then depending upon the successful achievement of this first step. However, the fortlet had an unsuspected wide berm of more than 20 feet, which might have been readily explained as a result of a reduction in size in a later period (cf Cardurnock MF), were it not for the absence of first period post holes of a back gate in a more normal position alongside the road. This was of shingle on a thick bottoming of cobbles and small boulders without evidence of repair or resurfacing. The original land surface within the area opened was identified by a thin black turf line on coarse, heavily iron-stained, slightly indurated sand, with typical sandy beach gravels below. On this soil surface were patches of small pebbles trodden flat, areas of grey clay, scattered cobbles and boulders and ploughed down rampart material. Three worn potsherds and some corroded iron nails were recovered from the lowest level. The grey clay lying on the pebbles may represent slumped remains of first period rampart, while the exposed toe of the rampart of pale yellow and grey sandy clay may represent second period rebuild, and dark peaty turf above a third period. At this stage the ground was reinstated. All that can be safely said at present is that the fortlet had an exceptionally wide berm at the rear and different rampart materials point to there having been three periods here as at MF 1 Biglands.<sup>6</sup> It seems safe to assume the grey and yellow clays were won from the alluvial flat which we investigated to the east of the fortlet.

One other feature was investigated. Jones in *Britannia* XIII refers to a ditch of a "primary phase" on the air photograph.<sup>7</sup> He wrote, page 295, "Significantly, there also appear traces of an additional, far smaller ditch, on the eastern side." It is true there is a vague curving diffuse line on one photograph, less clear on the second. He continued: "The whole of the eastern side (of the fortlet) was visible, and parts of the north and south sides up to the point where the small ditch is lost in the main ditch of the milefortlet." This is certainly not so to my eyes. Further: "From the air photographic evidence this suggests a development sequence in which the small ditches (*sic*) belong to a primary phase on the relatively elevated crest of Dubmill Point, the point subsequently taken over by the milefortlet." This "small ditch" (I can see but one on the photograph) was investigated in a long trench and I am satisfied there was no break in the continuity of the soil profile or any disturbance underground which indicated a ditch or would explain the vague marks on the photograph. We found no ditch; thus the idea of a pre-Hadrianic primary phase must be scouted. The soil profile was uniform in both sides of the trench:

0-13 cm	Sandy turf and matted grass roots.
13-26 cm	Grey-brown loamy sand with horizontal iron staining at transition to
26-31 cm	yellow-brown loose coarse sand.
31-41 cm	Sands and gravels of the raised beach.

I can appreciate the attraction of postulating a primary phase and talking about development stages in the coast "defences", but the Solway system seems to have been organized and built in one go and no datable evidence has been found so far of anything earlier than 120 A.D. under or near any of the coast sites I have worked on. See Appendix I.

### The finds

The yield of pottery from the 650 square feet of ground opened was very small: 5 sherds from the ditch end and 3 from the berm.

- 1 One piece of hard gritty white fabric, blue-grey inside and outside.
- 2 One small piece, thin hard blue-grey fabric.
- 3 Two pieces of Black-Burnished ware, both from the pared band of a cooking pot, one from just below the rim, the other from just above the base.
- 4 One piece from the base of a Black-Burnished ware dish, pared on the inside, zig-zag scoring on the underside.

From the berm.

- 5 Two wall sherds, not conjoining, of a flagon, pale red, slightly gritty fabric, traces of cream slip on outside.
- 6 Small rim sherd of a bowl 10 cm diameter, red fabric with dark grey gritty core and traces of cream slip.

### Iron objects

Part of a large nail with head, much corroded, square section, hollow. One smaller nail head, 3 washer like objects 8 mm diameter, 2 mm diameter hole, possibly roves. (For an explanation of hollow nails see CW2, liv, 53.)

### Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Mr Dennis Williamson, owner of the site of the Milefortlet, for his help and friendly interest in our researches, Mr Ian Dixon of Salta for reinstating the ground without charge, Mr Colin Baddeley and members of *The Friends of Barnsley Park and Wroxeter*, and many other friends, and Mr James Huddart for his survey and levelling of the site.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> R. L. Bellhouse, 'Roman sites on the Cumberland coast: Milefortlet 20 Low Mire', CW2, lxxxii, 7.
- <sup>2</sup> R. L. Bellhouse, 'Roman sites on the Cumberland coast 1968-1969: Part II. A new schedule of the coastal sites', CW2, lxx, 43.
- <sup>3</sup> R. L. Bellhouse, 'Roman sites on the Cumberland coast: The new tower on Rise How', CW2, lxxxiv, 41.
- <sup>4</sup> E. Birley, *Research on Hadrian's Wall* (Kendal, 1961).
- <sup>5</sup> R. L. Bellhouse, 'Moricambe in Roman times and Roman sites on the Cumberland coast', CW2, lxii, 56.
- <sup>6</sup> T. M. Potter, 'The Biglands Milefortlet and the Cumberland Coast Defences', *Britannia* VIII.
- <sup>7</sup> G. D. B. Jones, 'The Solway Frontier: Interim Report 1976-81', *Britannia* XIII.

### Appendix I

The idea that the coastal system developed in stages has been given expression in *The Carvetii* by Higham and Jones. (Alan Sutton 1985). Unfortunately, half-truths, inaccuracies and omissions reduce its value. The section headed *The Hadrianic Coastal Defences* (30 ff.) is an account of the

Solway Frontier, summarized in Fig. 16, which I find wholly unacceptable; even the introduction is flawed:

In the 1870s the antiquarian Ferguson recorded the presence of stone towers and a certain number of milefortlets, as they were termed, but it was not until 1928 that Collingwood published his realization that the disjointed remains in fact formed part of an alternating system of milefortlets and towers imitating the spacing of milecastles and turrets on Hadrian's Wall proper. With this basis it was possible for Bellhouse to carry out important work in infilling our knowledge of the towers and milefortlets, notably in the Silloth and Cardurnock areas.

Ferguson found no milefortlets, Collingwood invented *fortlets* and wrote in his summary (CW2 xxix 164): “. . . a permanent station of some sort, affording proper quarters for troops, as opposed to a mere watch-tower, would occur about every five miles, so that the men in a signal-station would never be more than 2½ or at most 3 miles from cook-house and bed.”

Nowhere is the important contribution made by Simpson, Richmond and Kate Hodgson at Cardurnock mentioned: they found and excavated the first milefortlet and proved the existence of two others in 1945. I have done no excavation in the Cardurnock area and none north of Silloth. I note that only one of the eleven references in the bibliography under my name has any connection with the coastal system; it is my study of Moricambe (CW2 lxii).

With such an introduction one is prepared for what follows, the timber tower (Fig. 14 p. 31) or clay and cobble base, palisades, ditches and stone tower, page 31:

The (timber) tower was soon replaced. A second palisade ran through the dismantled platform and this showed that in a second stage more emphasis was placed on manpower in the milefortlets. The third structural phase involved an isolated stone tower, long paralleled elsewhere, actually built over the forward ditch of the earlier defences.

The writers concede: “While the relative sequence of structures is clear, the absolute dating is not.” In fact the stone tower is unparalleled anywhere on the Cumbrian coast. It most certainly is *not* Tower 4b; it is late in the sequence and quite unlike any I have ever seen, too small, no clay and cobble foundations, walls too thin, no occupation debris inside and outside, no pottery, no trodden surfaces. The true Hadrianic tower is yet to be found. In my view the excavators were led astray by the cross on Richmond's plan (CW2, xlvii, 79, Fig. 1) which was a mere guess. If the true tower had been proved then all would have been clear. My opinion is that, if there is any sequence, it is all post-Hadrianic.

