



The S.E. Corner of the Roman Fortress, Chester.

By EMERITUS-PROFESSOR R. NEWSTEAD, F.R.S.,
AND
PROFESSOR J. P. DROOP, M.A., F.S.A.

(Plates xvi—xx).

In the account given in this *Journal*¹⁸ of the excavations carried out in the year 1908, it was explained that the defences of the Roman fortress on the site of the Telephone Exchange¹⁹ had consisted of a clay rampart faced externally with a wall of masonry, and a single ditch.²⁰ That the fortress wall was traced to a total length of fifty-six feet ten inches, with its southern portion curving gradually towards the Newgate, evidently forming part of the sweeping curve of the S.E. corner of the fortress.

By kind permission of the Chester City Council the complete excavation of the corner of the legionary fortress was carried out in February, 1930, under the auspices of the Chester Excavations Committee. The discoveries made exceeded our hopes, as we were able to trace almost the whole of the remaining sweep of the corner together with the internal tower; and also make sections of the clay rampart and the ditch. These structural finds form the subject of this report.

The Site (Key plan, pl. xvi) was formerly covered by a group of old cottages which was demolished in connection with the Chester Corporation scheme for a new arterial road

¹⁸ R. Newstead. *Jour. Chester Arch. Soc.*, Vol. XVI, pp. 1-29; pls. i-xi, 1909.

¹⁹ This building occupies the northern portion of the site.

²⁰ No trace of a second ditch was discoverable.

leading from this part of the City in the direction of Manchester, the construction of which enabled us also to explore two sections of the Roman amphitheatre (see p. 5).

Though there is no record of the existence of any portion of the S.E. corner of the Roman fortress excepting that which has been referred to above, parts of its foundations had been laid bare in several places during recent years. Four modern drains rested in part upon the Roman foundations, and two brick manholes belonging to this system of drainage were actually built into the walls of the structure : one of them on the inner wall of the tower (pl. xviii, centre of background), the other rests on the foundations of the rampart wall at a point under the wheelbarrow, in pl. xviii. Moreover, an electric cable crossed the structure obliquely, its resting-place at one or two points being the core of the tower walls!

The rampart wall. The footings opposite the centre of the tower were composed of boulders set in mortar laid on the upper stratum of soft rock or " roach " ; over this (also in the central portion) was a course of large foundation slabs of sandstone²¹ which overhung the footings considerably, and presented a somewhat serrated edge. No trace of these blocks of masonry was discoverable on the inner face of the wall at this point or elsewhere. Over these projecting stones came the massive plinth in two courses, the upper or weathering course having a distinct groove on its upper surface immediately inside the chamfered edge, presumably to mark the line of the first course of ashlar. Of the latter only a few mutilated blocks remained (see pl. xviii), giving an average thickness of twelve inches. In the section preserved under the Telephone Exchange²² five courses of massive ashlar work were left standing, leaving no doubt as to the structure of the outer face of the fortress wall. In the few examples left in our newly found section of the wall, the ashlar blocks were all bonded into the rubble backing,

²¹ A similar structure below the weather-plinth of the wall of the east corner-tower was found at York. Cf. *Jour. Rom. Studies*, Vol. XVIII, pl. vi.

²² *Chester Arch. Jour.* Vol. XVI, pl. ii, fig. 2.

and one of them passed through to the inner face of the wall. The interior of the wall was formed by the rubble backing, and its face presented a very rough and extremely uneven surface, both inside and outside the tower. None of the blocks of sandstone used in its construction had been dressed. The mortar used was of a rather poor, sandy nature, so much so that some of the smaller fragments of the wall fell away on the removal of the clay backing, notably in the interior of the tower in the section shown on pl. xix, fig 2, where little or no attempt had been made to course the rubble, as was the case in the central section (pl. xx, fig. 1). The total thickness of the wall above the weather-plinth varied between four feet six inches and four feet.²³

The Internal Tower was of the usual form (pl. xvii); the inside dimensions being: width in front, twenty-three feet; at the back, twenty feet; and the depth, sixteen feet.

Both faces of the lateral walls were constructed of fairly good ashlar work (pls. xix, xx); that on the south side gave a maximum thickness of four feet one inch, the other four feet four inches. The back wall was also faced on the inside, but the courses of ashlar were generally somewhat thinner than elsewhere. The thickness of this wall could not be determined, as the footings of the existing City Walls are bedded upon the rubble core of the Roman work.

The infilling of the tower (pl. xx., fig. 1) was determined in part by a diagonal cut through the central area, and in part also by a cut alongside the inner face of the north wall (pl. xix). These cuts revealed a somewhat remarkable stratification of thin horizontal beds, strongly recurved towards the outer wall. These consisted of variously coloured earth, chiefly of the following:—(1) Red clay evidently taken from the surface of the local red sandstone; (2) a very stiff greyish loam; and (3) a loose, blackish earth heavily charged with humus. The first was generally devoid of plant remains. The second contained rootlets of plants and brushwood, the tissues of the latter were almost

²³ The maximum thickness of the wall in the section under the Telephone Exchange was four feet seven inches.

completely decayed, but the outlines of the branches were easily traced in the pale coloured matrix of the loam. Here and there in the lower strata were also some rather short, isolated slabs of oak, varying in width from four to six inches, but so reduced by pressure and decay that none was more than half an inch thick. These slabs or baulks of timber were laid horizontally and somewhat obliquely to the rampart wall. Judging by their regular parallel sides they seemed to have been roughly trimmed into shape. The blackish earth contained the remains of small seeds (*sp. non. det.*) and also the skeletal remains of plant rootlets.

This stratification in both cuts extended up to the face of the rampart wall, and in places completely overlapped the projecting masonry (text fig. 14), clearly demonstrating that the "clay" rampart cannot have been in place before the stones of the wall—the wall and rampart were evidently laid down at the same time and as part of the same job.

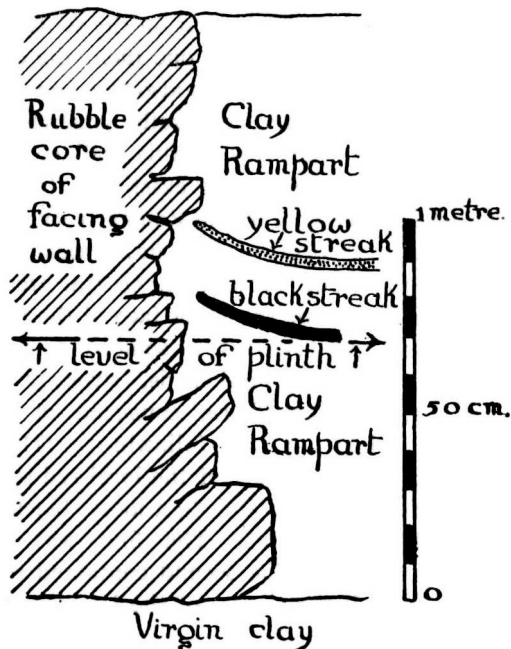


Fig. 14.

The clay rampart outside the tower (pl. xx, fig. 2) presented a stratification similar to that inside the tower; but it was much discoloured by soakage from the overhead drains. Here also the stratification was recurved towards the face of the wall. It consisted chiefly of the grey clay loam and blackish earth. Oak slabs also occurred in the former, one of which can be seen at A in pl. xx. The blackish strata were heavily charged with the remains of the European gorse (*Ulex*) and sparingly with bits of small branches of the common birch (*Betula alba*). One fragment of a flagon (see below, No. 6) was found in this section, which registers with fragments belonging to the same vessel found in the rampart inside the tower. The two deposits therefore synchronise.

The chronological evidence afforded by the pottery found in the clay ramparts both inside and outside the tower, though scanty, can be used as a safe index as to the date of the structure; and as a whole may be described as of late Flavian date. Details of these potsherds are given below.

SAMIAN (TERRA SIGILLATA).



Fig. 15. $\frac{1}{2}$ 1. Form 29 (text fig. 15). A small fragment showing part of rouletted rim, bead-row, and portion of scroll with a seven-rayed star. From the inner face of the back wall of the tower.

2. Form 18. Three fragments all apparently of South Gaulish origin. Two pieces came from the back wall of the tower, and one from the inner face of the north wall of the same structure.

3. Form 15/17. One small piece showing the quarter-round fillet. From the *outer* face of the south wall of the tower.

4. Form 27. One fragment from the inner face of the north wall of the tower.

COARSE WARE.

5. Rim of cooking pot (text fig. 16). Fine, hard, pale grey clay. Rim angular. This type is not uncommon in early stratified deposits in Chester.

6. Flagon. Clay overbaked, core partly grey and also partly red, exterior thinly coated with cream-buff slip. Three fragments from the inner face of the north wall of the tower, and one which registers with the former from the *outer* face of the south wall of the tower.

7. One small sherd of egg-shell ware (Holt fabric) from the outer face of the south wall of the tower with the fragment of the flagon No. 6.

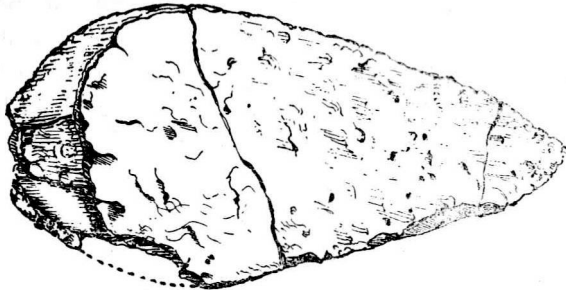


Fig. 17. $\frac{1}{2}$

A mason's trowel of iron (text fig. 17), was found at the lowest level close up to the inner face of the north wall of the tower. The tang is missing, but there are traces of two rivets which seems to indicate that the handle had been attached to the blade by these.

The cut outside the rampart wall was carried down to the bottom of the footings in one place only. (See section, pl. xvii). Elsewhere it was carried to the level of the blocks of sandstone projecting beyond the plinth. Here the excavated material was heavily charged with fragments of early English pottery, belonging chiefly to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. With these sherds was also part of a floor tile belonging to the same period as the

pottery; and a coin of Charles VI (France), 1380—1422 A.D. Objects of Roman origin associated with the above were three pieces of “pink” mortar, a fragment of a frilled incense cup, and Samian vessels of the following forms: 33 (one), 18/31 (six) including one with the potter’s stamp **OF•VITA**, on a small example with low cone and good glaze.

The ditch (pl. xvii). Traces of a narrow cobbled berm,²⁴ set in poor mortar, passed between the fortress wall and the inner lip of the ditch. Our section of the ditch proved on the whole disappointing, as both sides had been disturbed and the outline for the most part destroyed. The natural rock hereabouts dips downwards rather sharply to within a short distance of the bottom of the ditch. The infilling seems to have taken place chiefly in mediæval times; and at the lower level just above the floor was a thick stratum of fœtid, black soil heavily charged with humus. In this deposit there were many sherds of early English ware of a kind similar to that found along the face of the rampart wall. Associated with these sherds were the foot-ring of a Samian bowl (form 37) and the lower jaw of a human skull with the left articular condyle *cut* away, leaving deep cuts in the bone towards the angle on the inside. Whether this may be taken as an indication that the victim had met with a violent death is not clear. The cuts in the bone were certainly not of recent date.

The excavations on the north side of the Newgate have revealed the major portion of the south-east angle of the Roman fortress together with its internal tower. Northwards these discoveries can be connected up with the adjacent sections of the fortress now preserved in the Telephone Exchange and in Messrs. Dickson’s seed warehouse, respectively, so that approximately 150 feet run of the circuit of the original defences of the fortress of Deva can be linked together on the eastern side. Furthermore, the position of the newly discovered tower, together with

²⁴ A similar paving was found in one of the sections under the Telephone Exchange. Cf. *Jour. Chester Arch Soc.* Vol. XVI, p. 17.

the western curve of the fortress wall, fixes the line of the south wall as running from about the centre of the Newgate to a point in Bridge Street, opposite St. Michael's church, where traces of the south gate of the fortress (*Porta Prætoria*) have been found.

The evidence of the pottery found within both tower and rampart clearly indicates that these structures are contemporary and that they were erected during the early days of the Roman occupation, probably during the period of Agricola's campaigns, between 80 and 86 A.D. The foundations are clearly of Flavian origin, and as such are among the earliest examples of Roman masonry in Britain. One may go a step further and add that our discoveries, apart from their historical interest, are the finest examples of first century work in all Britain.

The chronological limits of the period of its use as a defensive fortification are not at all clear; but unless there was a marked reduction in the size of the fortress on the south side, as there seems to have been on the north,²⁵ then it may be taken as a fair inference that the structure lasted until the end of the Roman occupation of Britain sometime towards the closing years of the fourth century.

Certain it is that the remains exhibited an element of permanency throughout—there was no trace of structural alterations or rebuilding, and certainly none of a conflagration, or the like. The mutilations which we see to-day are evidently the work of the mediæval builders who quarried the massive blocks of sandstone and reused them, it may be, in the construction of their own buildings, or in the repair of the defensive walls of the city.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.

Sites 2, 5 and 6 were excavated under the auspices of the Chester Excavations Committee, during the years 1929-1931, at a total cost of £350. A debit balance of about £70 is still owing at Lloyds Bank on this account. On the other hand

²⁵ Cf. *Liverpool Annals*, Vol. XVIII, p. 7.

the cost of excavating sites 3 and 4 was kindly defrayed by the Chester City Council, to whom the Excavations Committee express their warmest thanks. In this connection the Committee also wish to express their thanks to the Town Clerk, J. H. Dickson, Esq.; the Chairman of the Improvement Committee, Alderman S. R. A. Wall, J.P., and the City Engineer, Charles Greenwood, Esq., A.M.Inst.C.E., for valued assistance rendered to the excavators during the course of their investigations. Furthermore, the Committee wish to record their indebtedness to the Prioress of the Ursuline Convent for permission to explore the first found section of the amphitheatre (site 1); the High Sheriff of Cheshire, E. Peter Jones, Esq., J.P., for his additional gift of timber which enabled us to explore the long section of the arena-wall, on site 5; to Mr. A. Briercliffe for the loan of metal rails and trolleys for the removal of the excavated material; and to Mr. J. W. Garnett for his gift of the model of the amphitheatre (restored) which is now placed on view in the Grosvenor Museum. The Committee are also indebted to Councillor P. H. Lawson, F.S.A., for his gift of a model of the amphitheatre in its relation to the Newgate Improvement Scheme.

The excavators wish to express their thanks to the Misses M. and E. Paige Cox for the interest and active part taken in the work by searching over a great mass of the excavated material.

Chester, October, 1931.

