

ART. II.—*Excavation of a Romano-British farmstead at Eller Beck.* By R. A. C. LOWNDES, M.A.

*Read at Penrith, September 6th, 1963.*

**Summary.**

THIS site, "Site C" (Map Ref.: SD/642781), is one of six settlement sites, labelled A-F, in the neighbourhood of Eller Beck, on the Lancashire/Westmorland border (parishes of Casterton and Leck). These sites are surrounded by a system of "Celtic" fields; and there are at least four, perhaps five, tumuli in the near vicinity.

The excavation of site C has produced Romano-British pottery, suggesting an occupation possibly "in the period A.D. 250-350". No dateable evidence has been found for any occupation other than in the Roman period. There are two types of wall-construction; the earlier included at least one circular hut and curvilinear enclosures; there appears to have been later an enlargement of the site by rectangular cross-walls, in a different walling technique.

**Introduction.**

The general background, natural setting, and archaeological significance of this area have already been described and discussed by the author, in CW2 lxiii (1963) 77-95, where also there are plans showing the inter-relationship of the sites, fields, and tumuli.

The purpose of this article is to give the evidence for a Roman period dating for site C, and to show what has been found of its construction.

The general area in which this site lies, was first pointed out to the author by the land-owner, Lt-Col. R. H. Ogden, of Park House, Leck. Col. Ogden had noticed that when light snow lay and drifted on the

ground, one could pick out lines and markings that appeared artificial.

There does not appear to be any published reference to this site before the above-mentioned article in CW2 lxiii.

The primary purpose of excavation was to look for dating evidence. The decision to excavate was influenced by the hope that, with five other sites in the area, any inadequacies in technique would not result in irretrievable damage to an unique site. Site C was chosen as being the most coherent and likely to be the most prosperous, and hence to possess the most pottery of the group.

The site is being filled in, and will revert to permanent pasture.

The pottery finds are at present in the author's possession.

The excavation was directed by the author, who is most grateful for the help of volunteers, who included members of this Society, of the Sedgwick Society of Sedbergh School, and in particular to boys of Cressbrook School. Lt-Col. R. H. Ogden fenced the site, and refreshed the diggers. The excavation benefited much from Miss Fell's advice and visits; Mr Charles Thomas and Mr George Jobey readily gave help with pottery dating.

### **The Excavation.**

The excavation began on 24 June 1961, and ended on 10 October 1962. Digging took place on a total of 53 days, usually in afternoons. The numbers present at any one time varied from two or three to nine or ten.

A grid of 20 ft. x 20 ft. squares was put down over the site for reference and control. The aim was to uncover as wide an *area* as was practicable; it was soon evident that *trenches* told one very little.

The site is grass-covered, with a good deal of surface

rock; the general outlines of walls can be clearly seen, though detail is masked by tumble.

The turf/humus layer is rarely more than a few inches deep, and in the vicinity of walls is inextricably mixed with stone tumble. Away from walls (for instance in the centre of the larger of the two enclosures excavated) the humus lies above and is distinct from a pebbly layer, which presumably marks the old occupation surface. Only a couple or so inches below this pebbly layer (which near walls is extremely difficult to distinguish from the tumble) lies the "natural".

This consists of a hard, pale yellow-grey, sandy boulder-clay — sometimes locally known as "sannel". This "natural" layer is water-retentive, holding pools of water for a considerable time after rain.

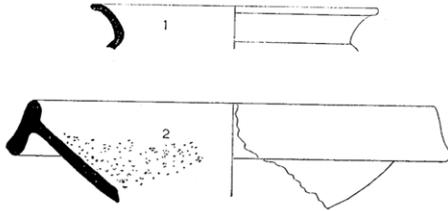


FIG. 1.

The humus layer contained a great deal of iron-pan, which had been deposited in tubular formation around plant-roots; some of these formations bore a disconcerting resemblance to iron-nails. One (only) genuine iron-nail was in fact discovered.

In general, there is little clear-cut "horizontal" stratification on this site; humus — tumble — old "floor" level merging confusedly into each other. Hence *sections* revealed very little; nor was it possible to place the pottery found in stratigraphical order — obviously, sherds could slip between tumbled stones, in worm-disturbed soils. Hence only one section (A-B, Fig. 2) has been reproduced.

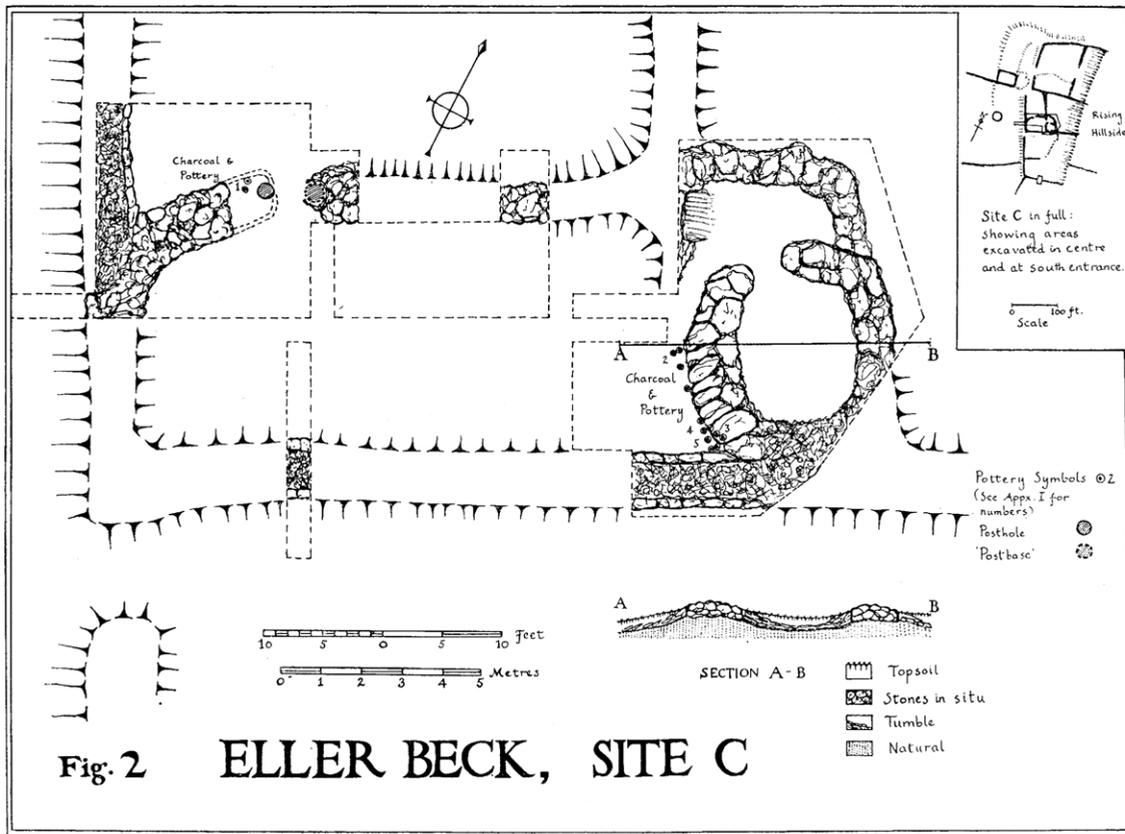


FIG. 2.

On the other hand, when approaching a wall through a mass of "tumble", it was usually reasonably easy to distinguish "vertically" between tumbled stone and walling-stone *in situ* — particularly if one approached the wall on a "broad front" — as opposed to a narrow trench. The closer one got to the wall, the looser and more soil-free was the tumble. Hence *plans* are relatively easy to ascertain.

### The Structures.

As mentioned earlier, two types of walling were encountered; two instances of junctions (see Fig. 2) between the two types were uncovered. From these junctions, it seemed clear that the curvilinear walls, about 4 ft. thick, composed of relatively large stones, intermixed with smaller cobbles, were in existence before the second type of *rectilinear* walls, some 6-9 in. thicker; these latter were formed by undressed stone facings, with a core of smaller rubble. It also seemed clear that this second type of walling incorporated the earlier curvilinear ones in some places — this seemed particularly clear at the *western* of the two junctions referred to.

There was only one structure of dimensions suitable for a hut — on the eastern side of the excavated area, with section A-B drawn across it (Fig. 2). There was a clear entrance here, 3 ft. wide, but no signs of post-holes, either at the entrance, or inside for roof-poles. However, with abundant stone lying about, it would have been fully feasible to rest roof pillars, or entrance posts, on stone-slab bases.

This "hut" contained no occupation debris, but immediately outside, up against the western exterior wall, there was an appreciable scatter of pottery scraps, charcoal, and fire-burnt stones — either hut-sweepings, or an outside cooking area — though there was no clear made hearth. The sherds from this area include those listed under headings 2, 3, 4 and 5 of Appendix A; and Fig. 1 (2).

To the north of the entrance of the "hut" there was a walled area, in a "slighter" type of walling, which probably represented a "forecourt" enclosure rather than a roofed annex to the hut.

West of the "hut", there was an enclosure measuring 15 yds. x 7 yds. which produced no signs of having been roofed.

In its N.W. corner there was an entrance, marked by one unmistakable *post-hole* — 12 in. in diameter and 9-10 in. deep, filled with soft brown earth and packing-stones set on edge. Three feet east of this, there was what appeared to be a post-base — stones at the end of a wall, set in a roughly circular arrangement though no "hole" had been dug.

Immediately west of the first post-hole mentioned, two more pieces of pottery were found, Fig. 1 (1) and Appendix A (1), together with more charcoal and fire-marked stones — again, this scatter lay just outside the entrance, up against the external wall.

This area lay, like the first one mentioned, in an angle between two walls (see Fig. 2) and hence might well represent an outdoor cooking-site, sheltered from wind, in a corner conveniently close to the hut entrance.

It would seem possible that the "post-bases", and the curved wall running S.W. from them, marked the remains of an earlier hut, that had been demolished when the site was enlarged by the rectilinear walls.

Underneath both types of wall, the "natural" appeared to rise up in a ridge running along underneath the walls — though in fact, of course, the natural must have been dug away inside the enclosed areas. This apparent "rise up" of the natural can be seen in section A-B (Fig. 2). It was in all cases accompanied by a change in the colour and texture of the natural, which in the higher "under wall" areas under the walls, was of a deeper yellow, almost orange, colour than elsewhere; and it was also

softer and sandier in texture. Presumably this is due to chemical action, caused by water-logging affecting the lower dug-out areas, and not the higher, better drained "ridges". This digging-out of the areas away from the walls must have been connected with the general levelling of the whole site out of the hill-side. This levelling is most noticeable on the ground, all the enclosures of site C being built upon a level platform some 40 yds. wide, 100 yds. long, dug out of a slope of  $10^{\circ}$ - $12^{\circ}$ .

As well as the main excavated area — shown in Fig. 2 — the gateway, 5 ft. wide, at the southern end of the whole site (Fig. 2) was excavated. This proved to be cobbled, the cobble layer being 3-4 in. deep. The gateway was edged with two large boulders, each about 2 ft. across and the same high — one each side of the entrance. No trace could be found of either a central or side post-holes for gate-posts — though here, as mentioned earlier, gate-posts could well have had their bases resting on a flat stone, and have been held in place by other stones, now tumbled. Alternatively, the entrance may have been blocked with a hurdle.

The nearest identified Romano-British homestead to the Eller Beck one is at Sealford (SD/583789) two miles west of Kirkby Lonsdale. This was briefly excavated — two trenches dug — in 1945;<sup>1</sup> and some pottery of 2nd/3rd centuries A.D. dates was found; however, no attempt was made to produce a plan. There is a plan of the surface markings in *RCHM Westmorland* (1936) 139.

Mr Brian Blake's excavations in Cumberland<sup>2</sup> produced evidence for sites of approximately the same date (3rd/4th centuries) as Eller Beck; though his sites show greater evidence of turf and timber construction than at Eller Beck — a difference doubtless due to the variation in local geology.

Closer parallels may perhaps be found in North Wales

<sup>1</sup> CW2 xlv (1945) 192. Cf. also CW1 vii 111-113 (investigation of 1883, with plan) and CW2 lviii 198.

<sup>2</sup> CW2 lix (1959) 1-13.

— the huts on Garn Boduan and Tre'r Ceiri;<sup>3</sup> one can remark that both the North Welsh huts and the Eller Beck one show floors levelled by digging;<sup>4</sup> generally an absence of interior post-holes, and a scarcity of post-holes at doorways or anywhere else; little evidence for interior hearths; and a similarity of walling techniques.

#### APPENDIX: *Pottery.*<sup>7</sup>

- (1) Fig. 1 no. 1. Two small, abraded rim fragments of cooking-pot in grey fabric; similar to Gillam<sup>5</sup> type 138; examples occur in destruction deposit Corbridge A.D. 197, suggested dates A.D. 180-250. Found in area west of post-holes.
- (2) Three fragments of wall of grey fumed cooking-pot with pronounced shoulder and beginning of high curving neck with rim broken off; possibly though not certainly similar to Gillam type 142, with suggested dates A.D. 190-280. Found outside western wall of hut.
- (3) Fig. 1 no. 2. Four sherds from hammer-head, cream mortarium, almost white in fracture, with black grits; one fragment burnt to light brown colour. Cf. Gillam type 280, suggested dates A.D. 270-350. Found among western walling-stones of hut.
- (4) Small rim fragment of comparatively large grey platter with plain rim, exact dimensions uncertain; fabric embodies a little white grit; part of decoration of intersecting arcs showing. Possibly though not certainly similar to Bewcastle<sup>6</sup> no. 30, period II A.D. 205-296. Found outside western wall of hut.
- (5) In addition there are four very small and abraded wall fragments of cooking-pot and a small base sherd, all in grey fabric. Found near fragments (2), (3) and (4).

<sup>3</sup> AJ cxvii (1960) 1-39.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

<sup>5</sup> AA4 xxxv (1957) 56.

<sup>6</sup> CW2 xxxviii (1938) 224.

<sup>7</sup> This Appendix, and the drawing of Fig. 1, are contributed by Mr G. Jobey, D.S.O., M.A., F.S.A., to whom I am most grateful.