

The Fortress of Deva

By W. J. WILLIAMS, M.A.

IN 61 A.D. the revolt of Boudicca Queen of the Iceni had led to the massacre of 70,000 people in London alone, as well as many others in Colchester and Verulam. When Suetonius Paulinus had regained control of the province of Britain, he was recalled. The Emperor Nero appointed Turpilianus to succeed him and for some years the Britons were content to settle down under the rule of Rome. Two legions were stationed at Wroxeter on the Severn, one near Gloucester and another at Lincoln. In the west the Roman frontier was harassed by the raids from South Wales, while in the north the Brigantes gave more and more trouble south of the Trent in spite of the pact with their Queen, Cartimandua. In 68 the death of Nero started a civil war in which four claimants attained the Imperial throne in rapid succession. The last of the four—Vespasian—had left his son Titus to finish the Jewish War and on his arrival in Rome sent Petillius Cerealis to Gaul to suppress the revolt of Civilis.

Meanwhile in Britain a situation had arisen full of menace after the withdrawal of the XIVth Legion by Nero. Other troops also had left to take part in the civil war. At the conclusion of the revolt of Civilis, Cerealis was made Governor of Britain and given a new legion the II Adjutrix to replace the XIVth Gemina. At that time, 71 A.D., Agricola was legate of the XXth Legion at Wroxeter and was probably ordered to prepare for the coming campaign against the Brigantes by carrying on the Watling Street, northward to the Dee and constructing a camp,—a tête-de-pont—at Heron-bridge. In three years Cerealis overran the Brigantian territory as far as Carlisle after capturing the great earthwork at Stanwick before its completion.

The next governor, Frontinus was a man of distinction as an engineer, an architect and a writer on military subjects. He quickly overcame the Silures in South Wales and set about the task allotted to him by Vespasian—to consolidate the new gains in the west and north by building three new Legionary fortresses at Caerleon, York and Chester which would serve as winter quarters as before, but instead of a merely defensive role would entrap any enemy bold enough to attack them against the river in their rear. To effect this, each fortress was set back to front in advance of a river. At Chester which was the latest of the three, a very large amphitheatre was an additional feature at the south-east angle, to close the gap between the fortress and the river. The primary purpose of the amphitheatre, in a war, was to house the cattle of the legion. The tribes in Wales and northern England must have paid their yearly tribute in cattle. In peace time they were kept in the disused camp at Bovium less than two miles away in charge of the *pequarius*. When the amphitheatre was excavated in 1930, numerous meat bones were found on both sections of the arena floor uncovered. This suggests that after a disastrous

siege the amphitheatre was never restored to its peace-time uses. The abundance of these bones may have misled Ranulf Higden in his *Polycronicon* into describing the dens round the arena as *triclina concamerata* i.e. vaulted dining rooms. In his report on the Stanwick excavations, Sir Mortimer Wheeler has told how the Roman army solved the problem of logistics set them by the rarity of corn crops north of the Trent. As they advanced to the north, they drove cattle on the hoof with them, until they could live on the country by impounding the enemy's cattle. The corn supply of the fortress of Deva was somewhat precarious owing to the British climate at that period. As it came from south Britain probably by sea, it was liable to loss in the stormy Atlantic and Irish sea. The newly discovered granaries inside the west gate of the fortress were sited as the point nearest the river. It is also possible that the Romans had found out by experience that the cold and damp winter climate at Deva called for a diet richer in proteins than they were used to in the South. In digging at Heron-bridge I once came across a cooking pot in which a sheep's head had been stewed and the remains hastily buried in a ditch. As there were also several of the perforated discs used in spinning, probably women as well as men had shared the picnic feast.

In the post-Agricolan period we know of no attacks on the fortress, but possibly at the end of Trajan's reign the Brigantian revolt may have involved Deva as well as York. At Heron-bridge there is clear evidence of destruction at that time in the *mansio* and also in the military quarters. During the rest of the second century the XXth Legion wintered in Deva but each summer it was campaigning where needed and helping to build first the Wall of Hadrian and later the Antonine Wall in Scotland. Part of the Legion may have had permanent quarters at Corbridge, while the Forth-Clyde line was maintained. Very little is known about the defences against raids from Ireland in the Irish Sea, since sea encroachment has destroyed the ports which we know existed along the west coast of Britain. It is possible that the XXth Legion was responsible for manning forts similar to the Saxon shore forts at Meols in Wirral and in the Fylde area long before the same problem arose in the North Sea. The transfer of many thousands of cavalry from Transylvania in 238 A.D. to the Preston area near the *Portus Setantiorum* indicates how serious a view the central government took of the threat to Britain.

If the Devan disaster occurred toward the end of the 2nd century after Albinus had led his army to meet defeat in Gaul, it may well have been the work of Irish raiders who must have eagerly seized the opportunity to avenge their losses on hearing news of the departure of the Romans. If the disaster must be dated a century later, how does it come about that no inscribed stones of the 3rd century were recovered from the north wall? They should have been the most numerous of all, if the legion was still wintering in Deva; if the legion was quartered in coastal forts and the fortress served as a supply base and training depot for recruits, there should have been at least a few. The excavations at Bovium have revealed nothing to invalidate Haverfield's dating. All the buildings on that site were reduced to ruin both civil and military and, as in Deva, the stones were incorporated in a new wall to fill the gap

made in the rampart of the earth-work about 90 A.D. when the Legion expelled its metal workers from the fortress and laid out work-shops and furnaces beside the Watling Street. The wall was built of stones of large size with clay in lieu of mortar and must have contained tombstones, since one fragment was found built into Chester Castle in 1831.¹ This fragment bore the name of Julius Secundus, who dedicated the altar to the Matres Ollototae found in 1931² close to the wall site. The curious hollow on top of the rampart was the robber-trench of the men who in the XIIth century carried off the stones to build Chester Castle. They also left behind many fragments of green glazed ware to date their operations. The altar had obviously been rejected by the builders because of its irregular shape and had formed part of the Roman wall. Other stones had been rejected as too large. For several weeks, during the exploration of the site, the altar had served as a stepping stone to climb out of a trench and was spotted only on the last day. The parallelism between what happened at Deva and Bovium was most extraordinary. How great a contrast was the policy adopted in repairing the defences of the camp to the deliberate slighting of the same rampart in the first century! The refortification achieved its purpose, since numerous arrow heads of flint, slate and glass with their points broken, lay on the paved area inside the wall.

In view of the early excavation of the northern half of the amphitheatre it may be of interest to remark that my discovery of part of that structure in 1929 had been anticipated by the late Frank Williams who in 1886 in his *Synopsis* prefaced his summary of Roman relics in Deva with a quotation from Higden, which I believe to be a description of the ruined building as it appeared in the XIVth century, after it had been robbed by the Normans to build St. John's Church. It is printed in Gothic characters and runs—"In this citee beeth weies under erthe, with vawtes of stoonwerk wonderliche i-wroughte, thre chambres workes, greet stoones i-graved with olde men names there ynne." In his Latin verse Higden wrote "Concava testudo bina latet sub humo" Two hollow tortoise-shells lie beneath the soil. Professor Newstead used a more homely simile "One piedish inside another." It is clear that Frank Williams suspected there was an amphitheatre and may have consulted the Rev. George Preston about the Latin. At any rate in a lecture at that time the latter foretold that one day an amphitheatre would be found on the north or east side of the fortress. Actually it is to the south-east.

In 1920 the Dee-stands on the Roodee were enlarged and in doing so the tombstone of a Roman soldier was uncovered, much larger than the one in the Museum, found in 1874³ about 50 yards away. The new find was 8 feet high, had a relief of the Sepulchral Banquet above and a long inscription below. The foreman was ordered to break it up and the fragments were buried under the new stand. Later I received an inquiry from Sir Arthur Keith who was anxious to know if I could tell him why the burials on that side were inhumations and not cremations. I

¹R. P. Wright, *Catalogue of the Roman Inscribed and Sculptured Stones in the Grosvenor Museum, Chester*, No. 114.

²*ibid.*, p. 47, No. 209a, pl. XLIII.

³*ibid.*, No. 115, pl. xxx.

replied that in my opinion the reason was that there was a Mithraic cemetery along the river bank. Six other inhumations had previously been found there with coins of the first century. Some years later I was walking on the Wall near the end of Grey Friars when a man called me in to see a skeleton he had found in the garden with a denarius of Vespasian. This proves the cemetery to have extended more than 100 yards along the bank with a width at least 40 yards. Such a discovery is unique, since all efforts to locate one not only in Europe but also in Asia and Africa had failed. Cumont, the great authority on Oriental religion, asserted that the II Adjutrix Legion must have contained Mithraists when it came to Britain in 71 A.D. This Legion occupied the fortress while the XXth Legion was away in Scotland. In 86, the Legion, on Agricola's recall was sent by Domitian to the Danube to assist in the Dacian War, and may possibly have given the name of its first fortress to a small town in Transylvania on the river Maros, still called Deva today.

When the XXth Legion depleted in numbers returned to Britain, it was no doubt reconstituted with new drafts and set to work to rebuild the coastal forts, which it was to reoccupy from Lancaster to Caernarvon for many years. The buffer states established by Caracalla north of the Hadrian Wall after his punitive campaign into Caledonia, brought a long period of peace, until the usurpers Carausius and Allectus were overcome by Constantius I. If the north wall of the fortress was rebuilt at that time, the raiders from Ireland may have had no time to do more than loot and hurriedly destroy the north wall, before the advance of the Roman Army forced them to escape to their boats. Constantius, like Severus a century earlier, dealt sharply with both Picts and Scots so that little unrest occurred in the North for sixty years. The mosaic floors in Bridge Street may well date from the fourth century, but there is no evidence of reconstruction of barracks at Chester as at Caerleon in the late 3rd century. Some day a Mithraeum may be found near Pierpoint Lane where the gold ring with a bee intaglio was discovered, but more probably the images of Silvanus and a dadophor were brought in for shelter from outside the wall at the end of the third century. When at last in 367 all the enemies of Rome joined hands in a common cause, the Duke who commanded the field army was pinned down, the forts were overwhelmed and their commander, the Count of the Saxon Shore, Nectaridus was killed. Then it was the XXth Legion disappeared, though some believe it survived to follow Magnus Maximus in his march on Rome in 383.

Among the tombstones from the north wall is a stone to the memory of Gabinius Felix⁴ a soldier of the Legion II Augusta which was stationed at Caerleon. The stone had been broken in half and near its edge there were only traces of a word which Haverfield read as QVI followed on the next line by (VIX) SIT meaning "who lived". In 1925, when Mr. C. W. Baty was making contact drawings on behalf of Professor Collingwood, I suggested instead of QVI the letters DVP ligatured with L, a common abbreviation for duplicarius—a man who drew double pay. Mr. Baty now confirms his recollection of that suggestion. Instead of the Q or the

⁴ibid., No. 77, pl. xxi.

D Mr. Wright has proposed to read A and a close inspection shows traces of the upper part of a letter of unusual shape, A', like the A on the line below. The only possible conclusion seems to be that the rounded letter D, of which Haverfield and I saw traces, has vanished and a new mark or scratch has been made. Every few years the painters and decorators have moved the stones about with risk of damage. The relief of Hesione must have suffered in this way by being dragged about face downward. The fractured lettering on the Capienus stone now shows much less than it did in Haverfield's photograph.⁵ I suggested SIGNIF LXX. The fine slate tombstone which I found in 1933 near Netherleigh⁶ and handed over for repair after drying, was put in the public gallery and destroyed by hooligans.

Finally, there is the centurial stone of Ocratius which was dismissed in summary fashion by Haverfield who stated as probable a find spot between Newgate Street and the east wall.⁷ The *Synopsis* (F. Williams), p. 52, had given a variant story from Hemingway's *History of Chester*, I, 396, to the effect that it was found in a garden on the banks of the Dee, while Hanshall's *Cheshire*, p. 220, says it was found on the site of the Deanery. If the latter is the true account, it had probably been stolen and buried in a garden in the Groves. Later it was sold and exhibited in the wall of a garden in St. John Street. There it was recognised by Dean Cholmondeley, reclaimed and placed in the Chapter House. The stone is not earlier than the third century, since the *prae nomen* is absent. It is clearly an official document authorised by the legate. C. Roach Smith, in 1849, saw a similar, but uninscribed stone, "inserted into the Town wall opposite the Rope-walk"⁸—probably the well-known rope-walk formerly within and alongside the north wall (west).

What no one has remarked is that the middle letter of the three, described as the initials of the mason,⁹ is a doublet for M. V. The Llanio stone referred to by Mr. Wright is not a parallel, being the work of an individual soldier. Such a ligature is found on the two stones of a praefect of Leg. II Aug. at Caerleon in the early third century, but there the V is produced up above the line of capitals.¹⁰ Our Chester mason was a more scrupulous craftsman and cut the ligatured MV within the guide lines (Fig.1.). He was also intelligent enough to see the ambivalence of L M meaning 50,000. To avoid ambiguity he cut on the stone L--P i.e. *quingenta muri passus*. The *Cohors prima* was twice the size of the other nine cohorts and the centuries were also doubled. If therefore one century were taken from each cohort, and set to work to rebuild the north wall, the eleven centuries would each have to build 250 Roman feet, which exactly fits the length of our north wall.

⁵ibid., No. 68, pl. xx and cf Haverfield, *Catalogue, C.I.J., N.S.*, vii, p. 47 and pl. p. 114.

⁶ibid., No. 54a, fig. 2.

⁷Op. cit., No. 16, pl. p. 103; R. P. Wright, op. cit., No. 16, pl. viii.

⁸*Journal*, Brit. Arch. Assoc., v, 224.

⁹R. P. Wright, op. cit., No. 16, pl. viii and cf Haverfield, op. cit.

¹⁰C.I.L., vii, 100, 101.

The Editor has drawn attention to the accounts cited by Watkin which state that the Ocratius stone was found in a garden in Newgate Street, backing on to the walls and that there was formerly a rope-walk at the foot of the east wall, approaching the Phoenix Tower.¹¹ Haverfield accepted Thompson Watkin's identification of Roach Smith's stone with the Terentius stone deposited in the Museum in or before 1883¹² but gave no evidence to that effect. However, the conflicting accounts matter little, since the latest find of the TIMO..... stone in the core of the east wall (November, 1959) proves that wall to be contemporary with the north wall. The MATRIBUS altar¹³ and the Fesonic tombstone found nearby¹⁴ probably came from inside the wall when the gateway to the Abbey precincts, subsequently built up, was cut through it many centuries later.

¹¹R. P. Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 121, 124.

¹²*ibid.*, No. 18.

¹³*ibid.*, No. 8, pl. n.

¹⁴*ibid.*, No. 116, pl. xxx.