

THE DEFENCES OF ROMAN CHESTER:
DISCOVERIES MADE ON THE EAST WALL, 1983

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In 1982, the author published an account of the results of his research on the Roman masonry which survives in the fabric of the City Wall between the North-gate and King Charles' Tower (Strickland, 1982). It was possible to demonstrate that, contrary to earlier supposition, the external face of the visible Roman masonry did not consist of reused stones. That much reused stone of Roman origin was found in the Roman defensive circuit was not denied; but the presence of this masonry was ascribed merely to a continuous process of patching and repair, and not to a complete building, or rebuilding, of the wall in the late Roman period. That being the case, it was argued that the datable reused stones recovered from the Wall a hundred years ago could not be used to provide a *terminus post quem* of c. A.D. 300 for much of the well known Roman masonry visible in the external face of the North Wall. It was suggested, therefore, that this wall may have been built at some point in the period centring on A.D. 200, a period in which so much else in the fortress was either under construction in stone or being brought to completion. Nevertheless, it was stressed that more research was necessary before any firm conclusions could be drawn regarding both dating and structural details. However, during the Summer of 1983 the City Council's conservation programme included extensive consolidation work on a length of the City Wall on the East side, a short distance to the North of the Kaleyad Gate, and this led to some new research of a length of the Roman fortress wall which survives to a degree almost as impressive as the well known Roman masonry in the North Wall. With the assistance of Mrs. Gaenor Morris, the author examined the 19th century structure and rubble core of the City Wall, excavated a sounding within the wall down to the rear of the Roman masonry and, subsequently, cut a trench against the East, external, face of the wall, through the deposits which have accumulated in the berm area. The results achieved proved most interesting and are now published in this report.¹

¹ The reader is advised to read this report in conjunction with that published in this *Journal* in 1982.

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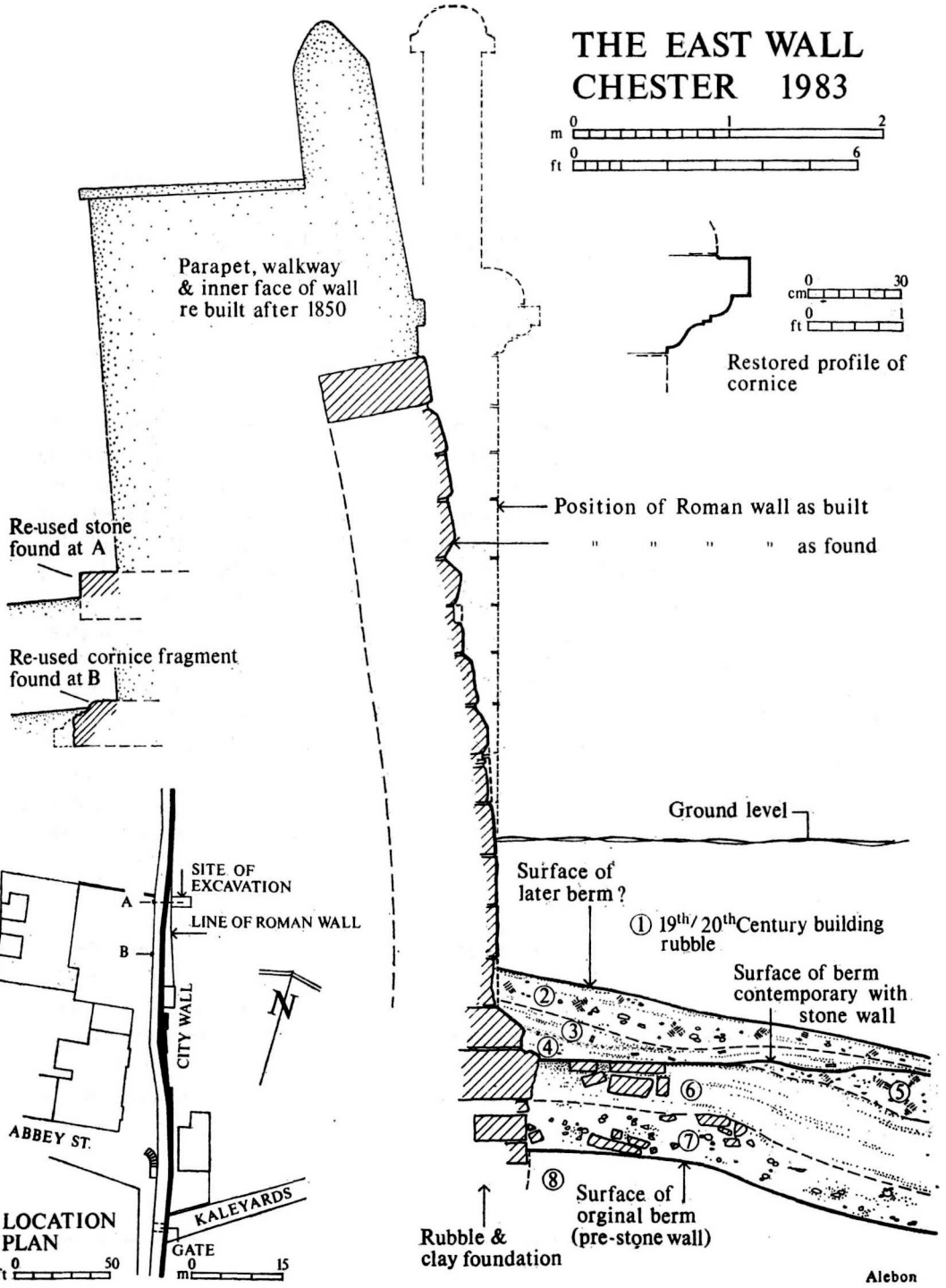
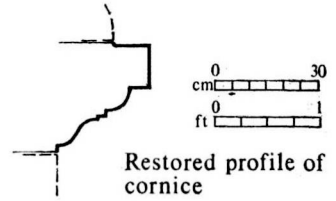
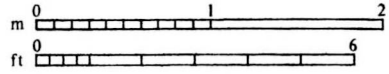


Fig. 1.

The Structure of the Wall (Fig. 1)(a) *The Masonry*

Approximately fifty metres to the North of the Kaleyad Gate, and visible above ground in the outer face of the City Wall, are ten courses of Roman masonry identical to that present in the North Wall and already described by the author (Strickland, 1982, 26-32). The trench subsequently excavated against the base of the wall revealed an additional three courses of the same masonry, set on the well known chamfered plinth and base course. Like the masonry in the North Wall, this also has slipped backwards but can be seen, at a glance, to have been vertical originally. On this occasion, examination of the rear face of the structure, where it lies buried within the top of the City Wall, confirmed that the facing blocks are only about 0.70m thick, somewhat narrower than was suggested in 1982 (Strickland, 1982, figs. 1 and 2, 26-27). Excavation to the rear of No. 6 St. John Street in 1973 had already shown that the wall facing blocks in that area were similar to those North of the Kaleyad Gate (e.g. Strickland, 1982, pl. 4). It must, therefore, be supposed that, in general, the wall was far too narrow to be anything more than a stone facing constructed at the front of the earlier rampart, which was simply adapted to accommodate it.

On the North Wall it was possible to demonstrate that the Roman decorative cornice and parapet structure were set on thirteen courses of masonry and it may, therefore, be assumed that the identical masonry in the East Wall (also thirteen courses excluding plinth and footings) lacks only the cornice and parapet. Fortunately, a fragment, recognisable as wall cornice, was found close by, reused in the inner face of the City Wall. This is identical to the cornice which remains *in situ* in the North Wall, near the Northgate, and its discovery makes possible the conclusion that the East Wall was of similar design.²

(b) *The Berm* (Numbers in the text refer to layers in Fig. 1)

The trench excavated against the external face of the wall produced some interesting information which lends support to certain tentative conclusions concerning the structural sequence in the berm area. In the interest of brevity the layers examined are described and interpreted below in note form, working from the earliest deposits upwards.

- (8) Natural orange clay. Earliest visible berm surface. The surface of this layer falls eastwards towards the assumed inner edge of the defensive ditch or ditches. It can be seen to have been in use before the existing Roman wall was

² The apparent absence of reused masonry in the earliest visible Roman curtain wall is stressed.

built because it was cut into for the insertion of the stone wall and because this berm is well below the level of the wall footings. It may have been the berm for more than one earlier phase of the defences.³

(7) Dark brown sandy loam containing scattered fragments of Roman building rubble and dressed masonry; very tightly compacted at the time of deposition.

(6) Clean light brown sand containing occasional fragments of Roman roofing tile and worn, redeposited, Roman building rubble and dressed masonry; tightly compacted at the time of deposition.

(5) Redeposited lumps of clay and 'chips' of sandstone; also tightly compacted at the time of deposition.

These three layers (7-5) appear to consist of material imported to raise the height of the berm to the appropriate level (i.e. top of base course of wall masonry) at the time the existing Roman wall was constructed. The clay layer may have been laid to prevent the raised berm material from being washed into a new ditch.

(4) Silty brown sand with a concentration of frost shattered fragments of Roman roofing tile near the base of the wall. A deposit which appears to have accumulated on the raised berm during the period of use of the latter.

(3) Dirty brown silty sand near the base of the wall. Probably derived from weathering of the wall masonry over a long period of time.

(2) Redeposited lumps of clay and sand, containing some Roman building rubble. This deposit may well have been derived from a later recutting of the defensive ditch or ditches; not necessarily in the Roman period. It may also be another berm.

Dating of the Structural Phases

It may safely be assumed that the earliest berm (8) visible in the section drawing belonged with the Roman defences which were in use prior to the construction of the Roman wall which remains *in situ today*. It seems probable that there was more than one phase in the use of this feature and that it is of the later 1st century (Flavian) in origin.

The compacted deposits (5), (6), (7), which were imported to raise the level of the berm, and possibly to backfill the earlier ditches, contained a fragment of samian ware which gives a *terminus post quem* for the raising of the level of the berm of A.D. 150. Therefore, it is possible that this alteration took place a good seventy five years after the construction of the original defences; time enough for the building and a considerable period of use of an earlier, and no longer visible,

³ Mr. D. F. Petch, formerly Curator of the Grosvenor Museum, has drawn the author's attention to the sequence of several defensive ditches which he has recorded at various points on the circuit.



Plate 1 — The East face of the City Wall approximately fifty metres North of the Kaleyad Gate. Although worn, damaged and subsequently repaired in modern times, the characteristic Roman masonry is clearly visible. (Two metre scale).



Plate 2 — Close up view of the lower courses of Roman masonry (at left) exposed in a trench fifty three metres North of the Kaleyad Gate. Note particularly the chamfered plinth base course, the earliest visible berm surface below, and the reused Roman masonry incorporated in the raised berm, contemporary with the chamfered plinth.



Plate 3 — Damaged cornice fragment, originally from the Roman wall and reused in the footings of the City Wall (Point B on Fig. 1). (Half metre scale).

stone curtain wall, built to replace the timber structures of the 1st century defences. This stone wall would have been built in the early 2nd century, possibly c. A.D. 120, at a time when the Twentieth Legion were rebuilding much else in stone. This being so, then the dressed masonry incorporated as rubble in the berm constructed after A.D. 150 may well have come from this earlier wall. Certainly, the wear on some of this rubble shows that, whatever the structure from which it had come, it had been exposed to the elements for some time prior to its redeposition in the new berm. Interestingly, this masonry is closely comparable to that in the stone interval towers (e.g. Abbey Green, 1975-77; McPeake *et al*, 1980) which in some cases, appear to have belonged with an earlier stone curtain wall than the one which is visible today. Further, it is perhaps worth pointing out that this masonry cannot have come from the surviving Roman wall, which is of a totally different character.

That the new berm was contemporary with the existing Roman wall is strongly suggested by its level, which coincides with the top of the base course for the wall; precisely the level at which one would expect it to have been constructed. This is confirmed by the unweathered condition of the wall masonry below, whereas above this level the upper surface of the base course, adjacent to the plinth, is worn from use and exposure to the weather. Further, the uppermost surfaces of the reused rubble, where they coincide with the surface of the new berm, are also worn from the same causes. On this interpretation, then, the existing wall, and hence also the earliest visible Roman masonry in the North Wall, must have been constructed after c. A.D. 150. Thus it remains possible to argue that the date of construction of this particular curtain wall was c. A.D. 200 as the writer has already suggested (Strickland, 1982, 34-35).⁴

Unfortunately, on this occasion it was not possible to explore the area immediately behind the Roman masonry in the East Wall to a depth sufficient to throw further light on the nature of the rear of the structure, or on the recurring problem of the true significance of the Roman architectural fragments and tombstones which are known to have come from different points on the North, East and West sides of the wall circuit, and which cannot have been placed there much earlier than c. A.D. 300 (e.g. Strickland, 1982, 32-33). However, some further thoughts on the matter may be of some use.

Re-examination of a photograph taken at the time of the recovery of the reused stones from the North Wall, near King Charles' Tower, in the 1880s, and published many years ago in this *Journal*, has revealed a point of considerable interest, namely, that the reused material appears to have been recovered from *behind* the Wall facing stones and not from amongst them. The facing stones seem to belong to a distinctly different structure and not to consist of reused material (Haverfield, 1900, pl. 2). Inevitably, the question arises: is the reused stone at the rear con-

⁴ However, it is important to bear in mind that this wall may have taken some years to complete and that varied styles of masonry may well have been used, even if the overall design was the same throughout.

temporary with the masonry at the front, or was it inserted behind a pre-existing wall? As said above, such reused masonry has been found on the North, East and West sides of the Roman defences, which suggests that, whenever it was put there, the full Roman circuit was still in use. This adds support to the conjecture that the reused stones were put there late in the Roman period.⁵ If indeed this was so, then a new, albeit tentative interpretation can now be offered.

It has become clear that the earlier rampart, in use from the later 1st century into the 3rd century, was partially taken down and, with some earth imported for the purpose, a new low, and much wider, bank was constructed c. A.D. 300.⁶ Such an alteration to the bank against which both the earlier curtain walls had been built would have necessitated a fundamental alteration to the interior structure of the curtain wall to enable it to stand freely above the now reduced rampart. A new interior wall face, where none had existed before, would then have become essential, and all kinds of available masonry, much of it stripped from redundant buildings and cemeteries, appear to have been used in its construction.⁷

SUMMARY

The following new interpretation of the sequence of events on the defences of Roman Chester is now suggested. It remains tentative.

1. c. A.D. 100. Turf rampart with wooden gates, towers and palisade still in use.
2. c. A.D. 100-c. A.D. 125. The wooden gates, towers and palisade were replaced in stone shortly before the run down in the occupation of the fortress c. A.D. 125, noted elsewhere (e.g. Strickland, 1981, 418-19).
3. c. A.D. 200. A new, superbly built, curtain wall replaced the early 2nd century one. The interval towers would have been partially dismantled and then rebuilt to accommodate it.
4. c. A.D. 300. The defences were systematically redesigned. Due to the reduction of the rampart the curtain wall was now made into a free standing structure by the insertion of reused masonry at the back.

⁵ By the later 12th century the City's defences had been extended on the West and South sides, thus making the West and South sides of the Roman circuit redundant by that date. However, the possibility remains that some of the reused Roman masonry was part of the Mercian refortification of Chester in the early 10th century.

⁶ This is suggested by the results of the author's current research on the discoveries made at Abbey Green, 1975-77.

⁷ It is worth bearing in mind that in the Roman period, just as in modern times, the defences would have been subjected to a continuous process of patching and repair, and that the reused stones may not all belong to a single event, after all.

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