

XXIV.—*CHESTER-LE-STREET: On the Evidences of its Occupation by the Romans; with an Account of the Discoveries made, and an Attempt to determine the Site and Roman Name of the Station.*
By the Rev. WALKER FEATHERSTONHAUGH, M.A.

THE Roman Station at Chester-le-Street, though plainly pointed out by the Saxon name of Conceastre, and doubly distinguished by the modern name, is yet to antiquaries, as far as the actual site is concerned, an undetermined ground. Not here, as in the neighbouring station of Lanchester, and the noble stations on the Wall, “the camp” uprears its grassy mounds, conspicuous from afar; for the site of this once important station is now massed with houses, or levelled by churchyard, garden, and street, rendering the opportunities of investigation but rare. The speculations of antiquaries on this subject have been various. By some the site of the station has been fixed at Walridge, a mile west of Chester; and a passage from an old document, communicated to me by the Rev. James Raine, speaks of “Chester Flat, scilicet ipsam Cestram,” there existing still in the neighbourhood of Chester-le-Street a locality called Chester Flatts. But we may, I think, satisfy ourselves that the church and present town occupy the real site, from the substantial evidences which I venture to offer to the Society, and which are the result, partly of discoveries made within the last few years, placing in my possession a number of valuable relics, and partly of personal investigation conducted on the spot. These remains I have had the satisfaction of presenting to the Society, as in my opinion the most suitable guardians of objects of antiquity relating to the Wall and its supporting stations.

In order to gain a general idea of the position, let us ascend the tower of the church, step out upon its leads, and look around.

The first thing which strikes the eye as remarkable is, that the level site below is divided into two apparently equal portions by a street running north and south; of which portions, eastern and western, the former is bounded on the east by a line of ancient trees, and again, at a few yards' distance, by an avenue of equal age; the latter on the west by the high road, without doubt the "via strata," from which the "Chester" is named. Beyond this the ground rises gently to the west. The western portion is again divided by a street, running into the other at right angles from the road, and terminating at the churchyard wall. On the south the area is bounded by the raised road to the Deanery, having a very marked dip in the surface on the northern side, which dip is continued in a street, the extension of the southern boundary towards the west. Along this raised road, which was formerly a public path, and the adjacent street, the manorial boundary was yearly ridden, the procession turning northwards through the houses by a small street close to the high road, and parallel with it. The raised road, after running some distance to the east, turns at right angles, and forms the eastern boundary of the area, planted with an avenue running northwards, having on the west the dip before mentioned, also turned at right angles, and west of that the line of trees spoken of above, planted alongside of the garden and church yard wall. The raised road marks the "agger," the dip the "fosse," and the single line of trees the eastern rampart of the station.

On the north no particular marks are distinguishable, but about a hundred yards northward from the church the ground declines towards the "Con" burn, the Saxon name still in use, becoming more declivitous on the north-east, where the brook in its ancient course washed the foot of the hill before its junction with the river. The site was therefore most favourable for defence, and of the character apparently usually sought by the Romans for a permanent encampment.

The sloping ground to the north has within a few years been appropriated as a burial ground, and has furnished the greater part of the Roman remains in altars, coins, pottery, &c., which I have had the pleasure of depositing with the Society. This ground on excavation presents the fol-

lowing features. First come four feet of gravel, soil, and a remarkable quantity of squared and rough stones, below which are two feet of black artificial soil, resting upon the natural clay. In this bed of black soil the relics are usually found, it having apparently been the depository for all refuse and broken articles of domestic use, the superincumbent mass of stones being probably derived from the ruins of the station, turned over there when the site was cleared for the erection of a church. Many of the stones present unmistakeable marks of fire, and the decayed state of the inscriptions on the altars would lead to the belief that, after the destruction of the station, the site remained long unoccupied, before the district was found sufficiently safe for the foundation of the religious establishment.

In an open space to the west of the church, in the centre of the area, were discovered the foundations of a house, with the remains of its contrivances for warming; viz., three hypocaust pillars of rough freestone; a stone trench, two yards long by one foot broad; some slabs of tufa; part of a pipe tile, stamped with letters; and several small circular hearths, containing cinders. In the same place was found a large altar, uninscribed, or the inscription obliterated by exposure. Coins have been found in the garden of the deanery, and Roman stones, with diamond broaching, lie in its grounds. A sepulchral votive altar stands where it was found, in a field south of the church, but rechiselled and the inscription mutilated by the finder; and a gold coin of Galba was found some years ago in a field west of the town.

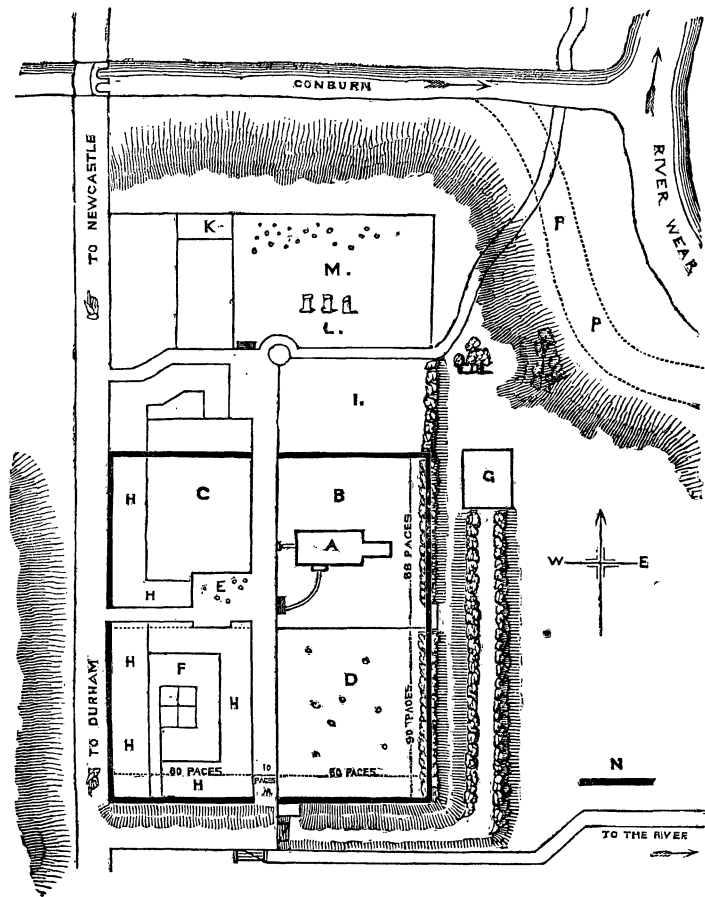
Having surveyed the site from above, let us descend to measure the ground, and we shall find reason to conclude that the camp was in form nearly a square, and that the principal streets through it, north and south, and east and west, are still represented by the streets now running in those directions.

On the south side, commencing with the point where the fosse turns, and where an angle of the rampart must have stood, eighty paces will carry us to a street. The street itself is ten paces, and eighty more to the west will bring us to a point where the dip in the street turns northward through the houses, the high road running above it on the agger to the west. Again, on the east side, commencing with the same corner, and

measuring northwards, the line of trees, continued in a straight line to a point where it turns with an angle to the west, gives us 178 paces. This distance is divided on the west side into two nearly equal portions by a street running eastward from the high road to the churchyard gate, the churchyard wall continuing the division through the eastern part. Thus we have an area about 180 paces from north to south, and 170 from east to west, bisected by the two streets running through it at right angles, and meeting in the centre. A reference to the plan, though the result of a hasty sketch, may assist us in arriving at the conclusion that here we have an approximation to the exact size and position of the camp. It has been nearly a square, containing about six acres, a little larger than Lanchester, with a gate opening onto the great road from Vinovium to Pons Ælii, which, as at Lanchester, ran under the western rampart. I venture further to assert, in support of Brand's opinion, that this station was, in all probability, the "Epeiacum" of the *Itinerary*.

That it was a most important station no doubt can be entertained, from the abundant remains discovered in the limited space investigated. Five altars are deposited with the Society, one four feet high, uninscribed, found west of the church; one about eighteen inches high, and highly ornamented, found built up in the wall of the house of R. S. Shield, esq., to whom I am indebted for it; and three less than a foot in height, found in the new burial ground lying confusedly together, "as if trundled out of a wheelbarrow," to use the words of the finder. The inscriptions on these have received the close attention of Dr. Bruce, to whom the north country is so deeply indebted for his laborious and profound investigations on the subject of the Wall and all connected with it, but it is to be feared their decayed state will preclude any satisfactory elucidation. On one, however, may be traced "DEABUS," and on the base of the same, letters which to my eye read "VADRE"; if this be the case, we have the name of the river associated with the local deities, whose favour the Romans were much in the habit of propitiating.

In coins, the discoveries are remarkable more for number than quality, or state of preservation. Of denarii have been found only Hadrian (or Commodus), Sabina, and Julia Mamaea. In "first brass," we have Hadrian, three, Sabina, and Antoninus Pius; in "second brass," Antoninus



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|---|--|
| A Church. | H H H Houses. |
| B Churchyard. | I Stable-yard. |
| C Garden, &c. | K School. |
| D Deanery Garden. Coins found here. | L Burial ground. Altars found here. |
| E Hypocaust discovered. Altar found. | M Pottery, coins, &c., found. |
| F Garden, &c. | |
| G Deanery. | The ramparts of the station are marked by a thick black line, such as is shown at N |



Pius and Gordianus; "third brass," of Carausius, Crispus, Tetricus, Victorinus, Constantius, Constantius II., Constans, Constantinus Magnus, Constantinus II., Gratianus, and Magnentius; and the "follis" of Maximianus and Magnentius. Specimens of the greater part of these are presented to the Society, the remainder, found in the garden of the Deanery, I have examined.

Several iron nails have been found, and a few bronze articles, including an enamelled-in-blue fibula; part of an enamelled lockplate; an ornamental article, the end of a key or stylus, probably; and others of use uncertain, but one of which bears a strong resemblance to a modern bell-pull.

In glass, the fragments, the handle and base, of only one vessel have been discovered, of a well known Roman pattern.

The remains of pottery, however, are numerous and varied, including Samian, both plain and embossed, some stamped with the makers' names, all known types, of which Dr. Bruce has figured several; also varieties of the darker coloured wares known to have been manufactured in this country; amphorae, large and small, some of the handles stamped, all, however, in fragments; vases, (one contained bones); mortars; lava quernes; pots of all kinds; and a remarkable human mask, which is figured in Dr. Bruce's noble work on the Wall. One fragment of Samian has a rivet hole in it; several are scratched with distinguishing marks; and two have been filed or ground into roundels about an inch in diameter. The site of these discoveries has hitherto furnished only mutilated specimens, and has probably been a rubbish heap and deposit for refuse outside the walls.

A very great quantity of indurated clay was found here, honeycombed with cells bearing the impression of reeds or straw; also a quantity of charred oats, horns of deer, bones and teeth of animals in quantities, pronounced by a learned comparative anatomist of Newcastle to be the remains of horses and black cattle. This last fact gives a striking character to the discoveries, as shewing that this was in all probability a cavalry as well as an infantry station, and our idea of its importance will increase accordingly. Moreover we know that Roman industry had smelted iron and lead in the neighbourhood, of which the remains were found at

Whitehill and at Walridge : indeed, all the evidence at present available, goes to prove that this must have been a most important station. Lying, as it does, on the great road from Vinovium to Pons Ælii, a distance of nearly nine-and-twenty Roman miles, we naturally look to Chester-le-Street as the intermediate point, dividing the space into two military journeys of about eighteen miles and eleven.

If so important, what was its name? Is there no reasonableness in Brand's proposition for attaching to this station the name of Epeiacum? This is usually given to Lanchester, but cannot, I think, agree with the distances marked in the fourth Iter of Richard of Cirencester, "from Vinovium to Epeiacum nineteen miles," but which cannot, if referred to Lanchester, be really much more than twelve.

Richard's authenticity is by some doubted; but at any rate we find the distances from Corstopitum to Vindomora, and thence to Vinovium, as given in his fifth Iter, agreeing exactly with those of the first Iter of Antoninus, unknown to him, which certainly is an argument in his favour. It is said that his fourth and fifth Iters here go over the same ground, but the improbability of this is great. It is much more probable, that, as the one, the fifth, describes the western line of road, from Vinovium to Corstopitum, so the other, the fourth, describes the eastern line, branching from Vinovium for the great Pons Ælii, or, as it was afterwards called, "Ad Murum."

We find the distance given, "Vinovium to Epeiacum, nineteen miles." The distance in English miles is, I believe, thirteen and a half; whereas Lanchester is but nine and a half at most. Chester-le-Street certainly gives the closest approximation to Richard's distance; it will give us eighteen Roman miles, whereas Lanchester can afford but twelve.

I trust I shall not be considered presumptuous in enforcing the claim of a hitherto unknown station to an appellation so much disputed by the learned; but I have some hope that the evidences I have now adduced may incline antiquaries to give a deserved importance to this as yet undescribed Roman town. Its position, on a great road, midway between two great towns; its size, of no mean degree; its luxuries and arts, as instanced in its relics of altars, bronzes, and pottery; and finally, its having been selected as the site of an extensive church establishment from the

earliest times, with the Roman feature apparent in both its Saxon and modern names; all these would lead us to the conclusion that, though swept from our eyes, the antiquary at least may call up the truthful image of a stirring military town, established here at an early period of the imperial rule, and, as we see from its coins, one of the last to be deserted in the empire's fall.

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The following are two of the Altars referred to on page 4.

