

IX.—THE TREASURE VAULT OF THE ROMAN FORT AT BENWELL (CONDERCUM).

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[Read on 27th November, 1929.]

In October 1929 Miss Dorothy Macarthy of Benwell Park, a member of this society, proposed that the North of England Excavation Committee should supervise the investigation of part of the Benwell fort in the garden at Benwell Park known as the headquarters building. Miss Macarthy kindly offered to supply the labour.

After the work done by Mr. J. A. Petch for the Excavation Committee in 1926-27 and published in *Arch. Aeliana*, 4th ser., vols. IV and V, it was possible to lay out the approximate position of the south side of the headquarters building, and the location of the east and west roadway through the fort on the south side of the headquarters building was attempted.

The first trenches uncovered the foundation of a building on the south side of the east and west roadway, and on the north side of the foundation a drain was found one foot wide at the bottom, rectangular in section, composed of large, roughly dressed stones. This culvert seems to have drained the south side of the east and west roadway. The subsoil of the ground to the north of the drain was densely packed with stones and gravel down to the bed rock, some 4 feet below the modern surface; no foundations were found and no doubt this area was a roadway. At a distance of 15 feet north from the north edge of the newly discovered drain the south edge of a clay and sandstone foundation 3 feet wide was located. This

discovery proved to be the south edge of the headquarters building. North of this foundation was found the great cavity of the strong room or treasure chamber, filled with a mass of lime and small broken stones.

It was soon seen that the whole of the area surrounding the site of the Chapel of the Standards and the treasure chamber cellar had been extensively plundered by stone robbers in the past. Of the strong room only portions of the east and south walls remained, and the west and north walls were found to have been entirely destroyed. The interior of the vault was filled with a confused unstratified loose conglomerate of lime small stones and soil with one or two animal bones, but no Roman period objects of any sort were found in this filling. The floor level of the cellar was found to be about 7 feet from the modern surface, and it was composed of clay some 6 inches thick resting on the bed rock. In the north-east corner was a rectangle of stones, containing burnt material, probably the remains of the lowest portion of the entrance steps into the strong room from the north side, as at Rudchester fort.¹ On the south side of this rectangle was a solitary block of dressed stone, 2 feet by 1 foot and 2 feet high. A shallow drain in the clay floor crossed from the centre of the north side to the south-west corner. This drain was covered with six thin stone slabs. The strong room (on the south side) had been sunk into the sandstone bed rock to a depth of some 3 feet. The fragments of the east and south walls remaining are coated on the inside with a layer of coarse cement, $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick, and the east wall interior still retains some of the surface distemper, a plain wash of bluish white.

The interior surface of the south wall has no traces of surface colouring but it is complicated on the interior side by the remains of an embrasure with rounded edges. The embrasure or window has a sloping sill 3 feet 5 inches above the floor level and 5 feet wide, with jambs widely

¹ *Arch. Ael.*, 4th ser., vol. I, p. 102. Plate XIII. 1925.

splayed internally at each side. The east jamb is only 6 inches from the south-east corner of the vault and it is probable that the south-west corner was also 6 inches from the west jamb. The south side of the south wall has been destroyed and only the foundation remains.

An embrasure or window allowing light and air to penetrate into such a cellar is unique on the line of the Wall, but a somewhat similar feature was found in the fort at South Shields,² where a better preserved chamber shows the lower portion of a widely splayed window originally protected on the outer side with iron bars. The fragment of the east wall is 9 feet 3 inches long from the south-east corner of the cellar interior.

Although the treasure chamber has been almost entirely destroyed by stone robbers, yet in a sense some treasure remained, for within the stone rectangle in the north-east corner of the vault were three Roman coins, two worn *sestertii* of the emperors Antoninus Pius (138-161) and Commodus (180-192), and one illegible *as*; a bronze lion's

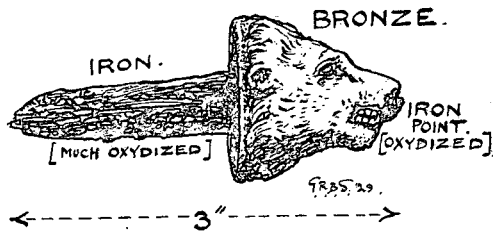


FIG. I.

head (fig. 1) with an iron tang, the whole 3 inches long, probably the pommel of a sword,³ and a mass of light flaky iron oxide containing the remains of a number of circular and rounded iron-coated buttons or studs.

The pottery fragments found at and in the clay floor level were submitted to Mr. E. B. Birley, a member of

² *Nat. His. Trans. of Northd. and Durham*, vol. VII, p. 164. Plate VII. 1880. *Arch. Ael.*, 2nd ser., vol. X, p. 233. 1885.

³ Two rather similar objects are in the Chesters museum, central case, nos. 898 and 947.

this society, for his opinion. He reports that the group consists of :

1. Plain samian, 3 pieces—
 2 pieces "form 31," date A.D. 120-150; and
 1 piece "form 27," date A.D. 120-150.
2. Decorated samian, 1 piece "form 37" from Lezoux showing a lion devouring a bear, *Déchelette* 778, in the style of Eppillus and Libertus, and a dog running right, perhaps *Déchelette* 914 (fig. 2). Date c. A.D. 150.

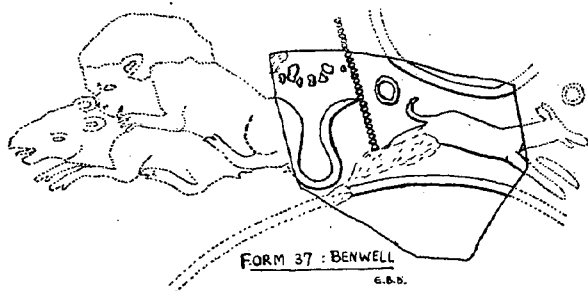


FIG. 2.

3. A jug-neck of buff ware, probably Hadrianic, A.D. 117-138.
4. A fragment of buff ware painted with reddish brown horizontal rings of a very unusual type, with the exception of Benwell⁴ so far unknown on the Wall, but similar to pottery found at Wroxeter by Mr. Donald Atkinson in deposits prior to A.D. 160.

The whole pottery group, therefore, falls into the period c. A.D. 120-160, and goes far to suggest that the strong room was made in the second century. The Ambleside vault also appears to have been constructed in the second century.

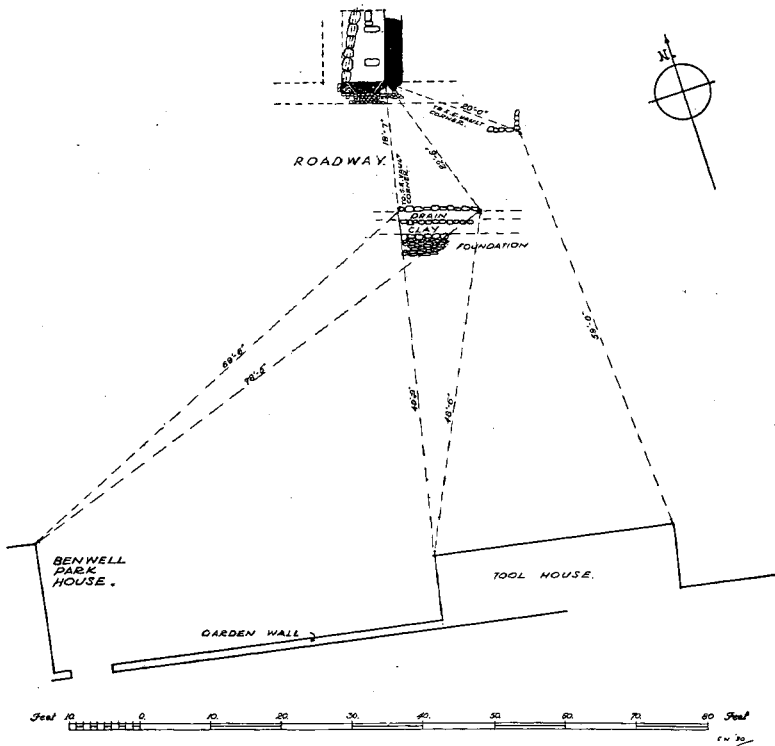
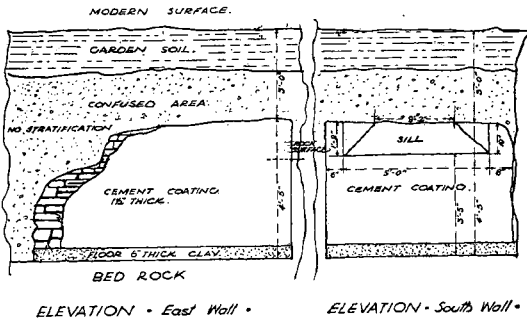
⁴ *Arch. Ael.*, 4th ser., IV, 174, fig. 11, no. 57. Plate XXXVII, no. 10.

It has been shown that many of these treasure chambers were a later addition to the headquarters building. The Benwell treasure vault does not appear to be an addition, but was probably part of the original plan.

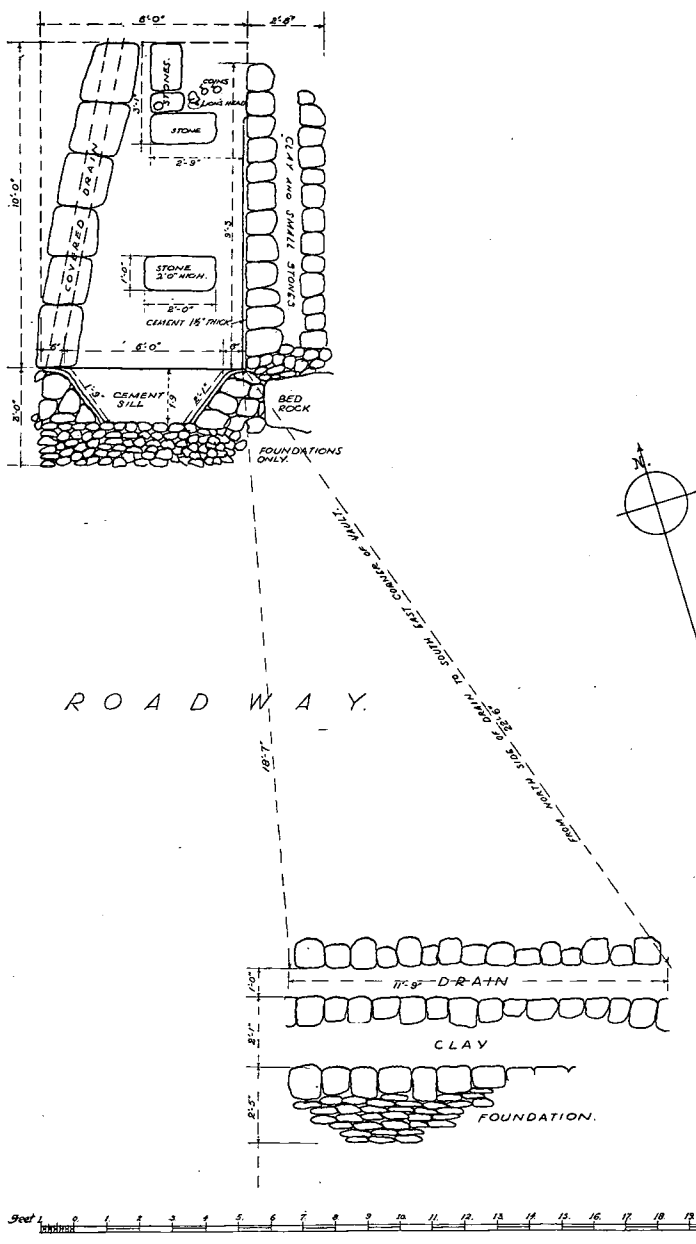
It seems possible that the strong room was used for the storing of records and documents as well as cash or other valuables, as the care taken to ensure dryness points to something of a perishable nature.

The animal bones were submitted to professor Meek of Armstrong College, Newcastle, by Miss Macarthy; they were :

1. Ox (modern).
2. Teeth of horse.
3. *Bos Taurus* (Roman).
4. Red deer horn fragments, usually cut or sawn across (Roman).



PLAN SHEWING POSITION OF VAULT IN GARDEN AND ELEVATION OF SOUTH AND EAST WALLS,



BENWELL FORT.

PLAN OF VAULT AND ROADWAY ON SOUTH.