

## VI.—SECOND REPORT ON ROMAN BUILDINGS AT OLD DURHAM.

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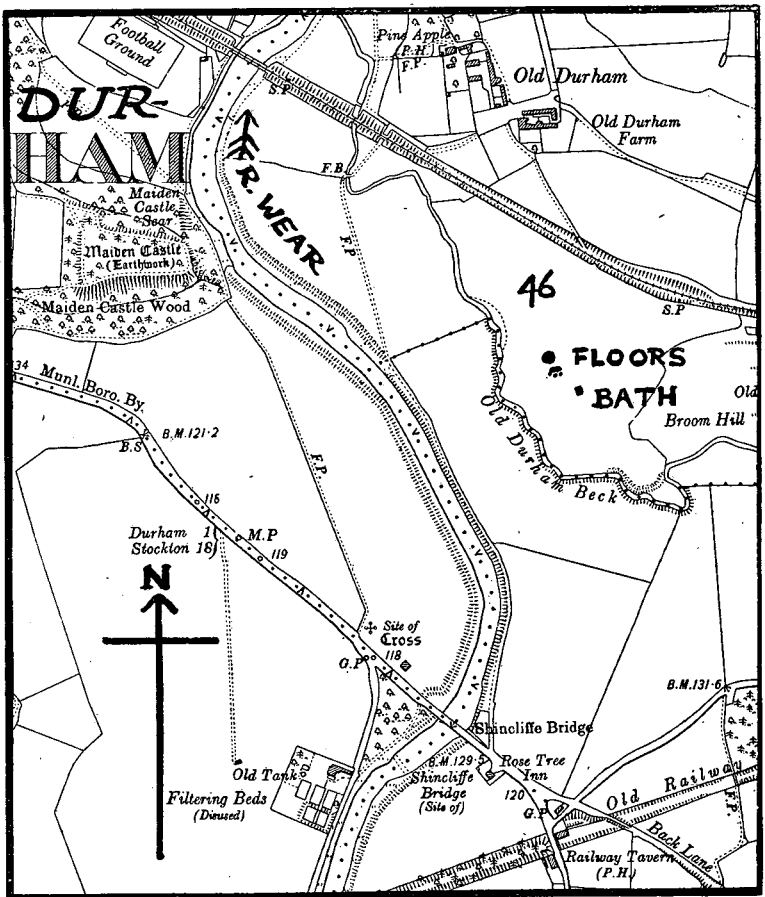
(Read on 24th November, 1948.)

Details of the bath-house of the Roman period, discovered at Old Durham in 1940 and excavated in 1941-3, have already been published.<sup>1</sup> Further structures, associated with the same agricultural settlement, were discovered in March, 1948, while a mechanical leveller was stripping about eighteen inches of topsoil off the field<sup>2</sup> just west of the Roman bath-house, in order to clear the ground for an extension of the gravel quarry. Mr. E. A. Coyne kindly reported this chance discovery of stone foundations to the Rev. T. Romans, and in co-operation with him an excavation of the new site was undertaken by the present writers in the fortnight beginning March 6th.

The site lay forty yards north-west of the cold bath of the bath-house, and proved to be the foundations of an almost circular building varying from 33 ft. 6 in. to 35 ft. 6 in. in diameter. Part of a second building, also roughly circular and obviously of much the same dimensions, was found at a distance of 15 feet farther south-east, but only a small segment of it could be recovered, as the main part had already been destroyed by the quarry. In the course of the spring all that remained of both buildings was quarried away.

<sup>1</sup> Richmond, Romans and Wright, *AA<sup>4</sup>* xxii (1944), 1ff.

<sup>2</sup> O.S. 25-inch map Durham xxvii, 6 (ed. 1919), field no. 46; O.S. one-inch map (Popular edn.) 11, square F.10; one-inch (New Popular edn.) 85, grid ref. 289416.



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FIG 1. OLD DURHAM SITE.

From 6" O.S., xxvii N.W. (1923).

*The north-west circular building.*

The wall varied in width from 2 ft. to 2 ft. 4 in. and was composed of mixed material, described below. In general only the foundation course remained, but on the west side two blocks of an upper course lay near their original position from which they had been dislodged by the mechanical leveller. Material which must have come from this course was found on the spoil-heap accumulated by the leveller.

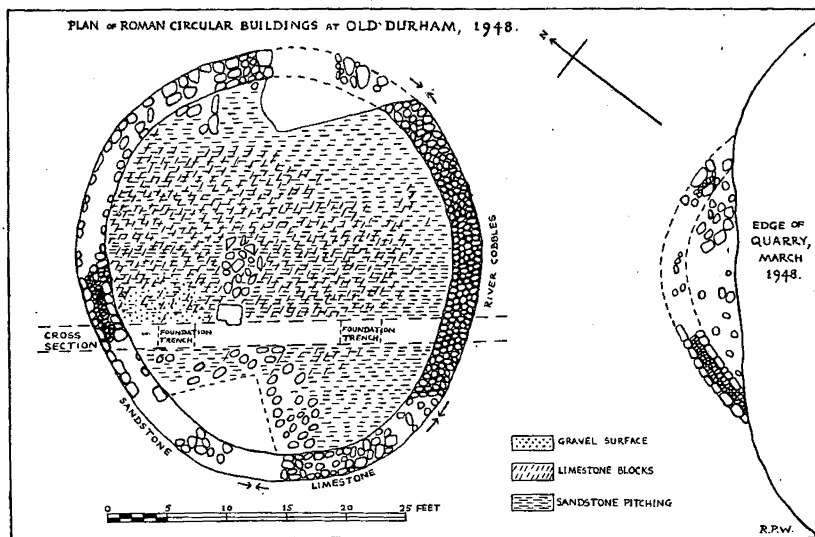


FIG. 2. GROUND-PLAN OF CIRCULAR BUILDINGS AT OLD DURHAM.

This pile of soil contained further blocks of sandstone, measuring 12 by 12 by 5 inches, and one example even 17 by 9 by 7 inches, and also specimens of the yellow limestone used on the site. Allowing for the depth of earth carried away by the leveller, it is likely that only this single course, about 6 inches in depth, lay above the foundation, apart from the eight to nine inches of topsoil which would lie within reach of the plough.

The material used for the surviving facing-stones of the

wall was sandstone, varying in size from the blocks described above down to smaller stones about 6 by 6 by 4 inches. The rubble used for the core and in the foundation was partly broken sandstone, partly a much weathered yellow limestone, and thirdly on the east side some water-worn cobbles. There was no trace of mortar in the walling. The area inside the wall was pitched with re-used building-stones set at an angle, or in places with cobbles. Smaller blocks of grey limestone had been used to fill the crevices, and on the western part of the pitching there remained a thin layer of gravel which had been spread to give a smooth

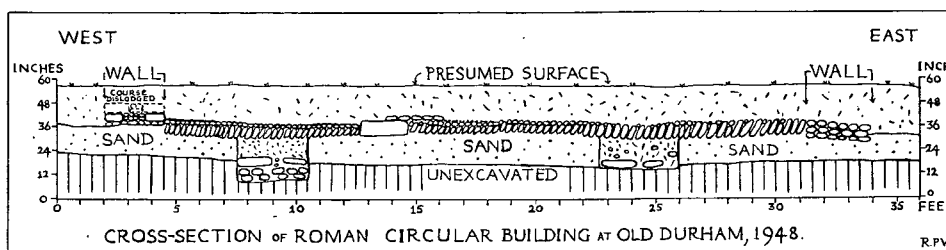


FIG. 3. CROSS-SECTION OF CIRCULAR BUILDING AT OLD DURHAM.

top surface. It is probable that the whole pavement had once had this thin layer of gravel. The whole building had thus been constructed with very varied material, much of it clearly re-used, as if drawn from previous structures near the site.

One full cross-section was cut through the building from south-east to north-west and showed traces of earlier work. The stone floor was on the average 9 in. thick and lay on undisturbed sand. But at two points the pitching had sunk slightly where it overlay a pair of earlier trenches which were 12 feet apart and ran nearly at right angles across the section. The east trench was 3 ft. 9 in. wide and had vertical sides cut 1 ft. 3 in. into the subsoil sand; it contained large sandstone slabs at the bottom and some mortar near the top. The west trench was 3 ft. wide, 1 ft. 8 in. deep

and had cobbles at the bottom, the sandstone slabs, and then a filling of earth and gravel. Unfortunately there was not time to follow out the course of the two trenches, but they seem clearly to have held foundations of earlier walls.

On the north side of the cross-section and sealed beneath the pitching lay a small area of sandstone slabs and beyond them a circular patch of slaked lime, 3 ft. 6 in. in diameter, standing 6 inches high on the east side, but scooped away elsewhere. It seems to have been a lime slurry, used by builders for providing lime for plastering, and can be matched by two examples from the Roman villa<sup>3</sup> at Park Street, Herts., where one such deposit was 12 inches deep and 2 ft. 9 in. in diameter. The Old Durham slurry yielded a stratified group of seven fragments of pottery and one roofing-tile, which are discussed below (items 1-4 and 10).

The south-east circular building had a well-laid circuit-wall, 2 ft. 4 in. wide, with a single course surviving. Large dressed sandstones formed the two faces of the wall with rubble packed in between. Again, there was no trace of mortar.

The pavement inside was formed by slabs of sandstone laid flat, unlike the pitching of the other building.

### *The finds*

The pottery falls into two groups. The first consists of seven fragments from four vessels; it was found sealed below the floor of the north-west circular building and was associated with the lime slurry. The pieces that make up this stratified group were broken and thrown away before the construction of the building. The second group consists of twelve fragments from five vessels; all the pieces were found in the topsoil, some above the north-west pavement, and some at the side of the south-east one. None of the pieces in the second group was significantly associated with any structure.

<sup>3</sup> *Arch. Jour.* cii (1947), 48.

The remains of only three of the nine vessels were capable of being drawn.

The stratified pieces were as follows:

1. Three conjoined fragments from a narrow-mouthed jar with a deeply scored wavy line on the shoulder, and two lightly burnished horizontal lines on the neck; sandy buff fabric with light grey surface, smoothed but not burnished (fig. 4, no. 1).

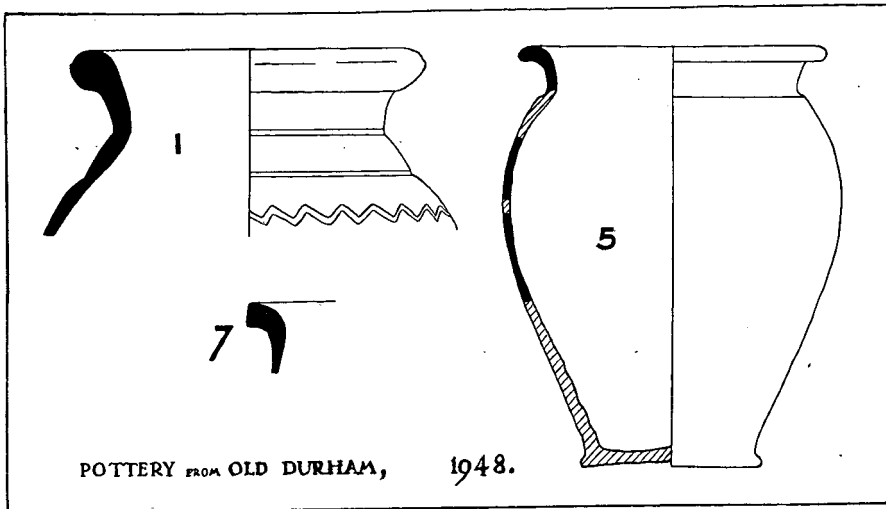


FIG. 4. POTTERY FOUND IN 1948 AT OLD DURHAM.

There are no exact parallels to this vessel; the nearest<sup>4</sup> is: Corbridge, 1947, no. 6, late second-century.

As vessels of approximately similar form are found in deposits ranging in date from the pre-Roman Iron Age to the fourth century, a late second-century date for the present piece, while probable, is not completely certain.

2. Fragment from between the footstand and the zone

<sup>4</sup> AA<sup>4</sup> xxviii (1950), 152.

of decoration of a Samian-ware bowl of Dragendorff's form 30. It has a deep-red glossy glaze which indicates Central Gaulish manufacture. The period of maximum importation of Central Gaulish pottery into Britain was from A.D. 120 to 200. So small a piece cannot be dated more closely.

3. Two small conjoined fragments which once formed part of a thin-walled spherical vessel such as a flagon. Light brown, smooth and sandy fabric. The fragments are certainly Roman, but cannot be dated more closely.

4. Fragment from the side of a wheel-made jar; the fabric is grey and similar to, but somewhat finer than, that of no. 1 above, with which the piece will not join. There is lightly burnished acute-angled cross-hatching on the outer surface. The fragment probably comes from a jar made between A.D. 120 and 200.

The group is small, and consists of small fragments, none of which can be closely dated with complete confidence. But, taken as a whole, it appears to be of second-century date, and to belong to the later rather than to the earlier half of that century.

The unstratified pieces were as follows:

5. Four fragments, one from the rim, and the other three—of which two join—from the wall of a wheel-made jar;<sup>5</sup> soft, smooth, light grey fabric with a darker grey surface.

This type of vessel is characteristic of the period from about A.D. 100 to 130. It is the commonest single type at the short-lived Turf-Wall milecastle, no. 50, and is met only rarely as an imported survival on Antonine sites.

In the drawing the vessel is restored after the Chesterholm example, and the surviving fragments are shown in section as solid black (fig. 4, no. 5).

6. Two fragments of a thin-walled jar; it is similar in fabric to no. 5, but somewhat sandy.

7. Two fragments—one from the rim—of a vessel, about

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Chesterholm (*AA*<sup>4</sup> xv (1938), 222), no. 22, A.D. 80-125; Corbridge, 1938 (*AA*<sup>4</sup> xv (1938), 243), fig. 9, no. 16, A.D. 80-125; Haltwhistle Burn (*AA*<sup>3</sup> v (1909), 213), nos. 14 and 20, Hadrianic; Throp (*CW*<sup>2</sup> xiii (1913), 363), no. 12, Hadrianic.

eight inches in diameter, with an outbent square-ended rim. The fabric is very hard, and is heavily charged with fine grey crystalline grit; it is whitish buff on the surface and pink in fracture.

This vessel is almost certainly medieval (fig. 4, no. 7).

8. Two conjoined fragments in similar fabric to no. 7, with which they do not join; the clay is slightly less gritty, and is grey in fracture. These fragments probably come from a medieval vessel.

9. Two fragments from the base of a cooking pot. The fabric is very hard, and is brick-red on the inner surface, but brown on the outer surface and in fracture; there are traces of an opaque orange glaze on the outer surface. This vessel is medieval.

The only other objects were:

10. Fragment of a Roman roofing-tile,  $3\frac{1}{2}$  by 2 by  $\frac{4}{5}$  in., found with the stratified pottery.

11. Thin fragment of bronze,  $\frac{3}{4}$  by  $\frac{7}{8}$  by  $\frac{1}{16}$  in., apparently part of a small disc; found on the surface of the circular building.

12. Strip of lead, 3 in. long,  $\frac{3}{10}$  in. wide,  $\frac{1}{10}$  in. thick; found on the surface of the circular building.

13. Two flint flakes, with no secondary flaking.

14. One large sandstone, 4 in. thick, forming a rough quadrilateral of 10, 14, 15 and 14 in.; with a socket, measuring  $2\frac{1}{2}$  by 3 in., cut through the middle. There was no clue to its purpose. Found in debris which had fallen down the quarry from the south-east pavement.

#### *The date and purpose of the buildings.*

All the stratified pieces of pottery are certainly Romano-British, and probably of mid to late second-century date. The north-west circular floor cannot therefore have been built before the middle of the second century at earliest, though there is nothing to show that it was necessarily built so soon. The negative evidence, the absence of post-Roman pottery from the sealed deposit on a site which has produced



post-Roman pottery, so far as it goes, confirms the inference made on other grounds that the structure is Roman. The presence of at least one unstratified early second-century vessel, unless it is to be explained as a (most unlikely) imported survival, suggests activity at or near the site as early as the time of Hadrian. It may be recalled that pottery of Antonine date was found in 1943 in the primary silt of the boundary-ditch beside the bath-building. The newly-found sherd, no. 1 above, however, cannot be used to date the foundations which were found in the cross-section, still less the lime-slurry which lay over them.

It is reasonable to suppose that the circular shape of these two buildings provides some indication of their function. There would, indeed, be space enough within for an animal to work a rotary mill, but despite careful search there was no sign of the appropriate wear on the pavement, or of any special feature at its centre. The problem of roofing a span of thirty-three feet could only be solved by some central support, and of this there was no evidence. It would thus seem that the buildings were not roofed. In fact, the side walling need not have been carried much higher than three or four feet. Comparable round building,<sup>6</sup> associated with a villa, were found at Ditchley (Oxon.), and belonged to two periods. The wall of the earlier ring was 2ft. 3 in. wide, and enclosed an area thirty feet in diameter. The later wall was two feet wide, enclosing a circle 25 feet in diameter. In both cases the floor was of hard, rammed clay laid on a cobbled foundation. They appeared to be open threshing-floors with a low surround, like those still used in the Balkans. A further circular structure in the villa at Ditchley was observed on the air-photograph, but not excavated. The most reasonable interpretation of the function of the circular buildings at Old Durham seems to be that they were open threshing-floors, and their discovery emphasizes still further the civilian character of the site.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Oxoniensia* i (1936), 45; *VCH Oxon.* 1, 311.

<sup>7</sup> *AA<sup>4</sup>* xxii (1944), 16.

A contrast, rather than a comparison, is provided by the circular building at the Roman villa at Langton,<sup>8</sup> near Malton. This was much smaller, having an internal diameter of 15 ft. 9 in. Its floor was not paved, but made of trampled sand. At its centre lay a small patch of paving forming a worn socket and on this basis the suggestion was made that the building had housed a mill worked by hand. The threshing-floor at Langton, on the other hand, was rectangular and slightly larger in area than the structures at Old Durham.

The writers wish to make grateful acknowledgment to Mr. E. A. Coyne for again permitting the excavation beside the quarry of the Durham City Sand and Gravel Company Ltd., and to the many volunteers who provided the labour for the work and made possible the examination of the site in the limited time available. Acknowledgment is also made to the Durham University Excavation Committee for defraying the cost of the blocks and plates used to illustrate this article.

<sup>8</sup> P. Corder and J. L. Kirk, *A Roman villa at Langton, near Malton, E. Yorkshire*, 40.



FIG. 1. NORTHERN PORTION OF PAVEMENT AT OLD DURHAM.



FIG. 2. LIME SLURRY AT OLD DURHAM.



