

## VI.—AN EXCAVATION AT THE GUNNER TOWER, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE, 1964

*Barbara Harbottle*

For eight days in April/May, 1964, I conducted an excavation at the Gunner Tower on behalf of the Newcastle City Estate and Property Committee. I am grateful to the Committee for providing labour and equipment, to Mr. P. W. Dixon for assistance with the excavation, to the acting City Archivist, Mr. M. Willis Fear, for help in finding the relevant documentary evidence, and to Mr. R. A. S. Cowper, Mr. J. P. Gillam and Mr. J. E. Parsons for reporting on the finds.

The remains of the Gunner Tower lie on the south side of Pink Lane (National Grid ref. NZ/246639), and occupy a recess formed by the offices of the Tyne Improvement Commission on two sides, and Gunner House on the third (see figs. 1 and 2). Before excavation began the base of the tower showed as a semi-circular bastion covered with turf at about street level, with the outer face of its wall standing nine courses, or 7 feet, high above the sunken yard of the Tyne Improvement Commission. This wall was relieved by three chamfered plinths, of which the top one (the uppermost course to survive) appeared to be modern.

The object of the excavation was to investigate the inside of the tower, and discover how much of the original fabric remained, so that the Estate and Property Committee could decide how to treat the building in the proposed new lay-out of Pink Lane. It was decided that it would be sufficient for this purpose if half the material filling the tower were removed, thus providing a longitudinal section across the building.

*History of the site*

The Gunner Tower,<sup>1</sup> built originally as one of the towers on the south-west section of the medieval town wall of Newcastle, lay between the Pink Tower to the north and the Stank Tower to the south (see fig. 1). The date of its erection is unknown, but—in the absence of contrary evidence—it would not be unreasonable to suggest that this piece of the town wall was probably built at the end of the thirteenth century. The wall between the Morden and Heber Towers was described as new in 1280,<sup>2</sup> and not only is this stretch not far to the north of the Pink Tower—Stank Tower sector, but the towers in both cases appear to have been similar.

The history of this tower, as distinct from the other towers on the town wall, passed unrecorded from the time of its construction until the early nineteenth century. Presumably it went through the same vicissitudes—neglect in time of peace, repairs only when invasion threatened,<sup>3</sup>—and it was portrayed in a state of dilapidation by Bewick.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the Gunner Tower was to stand for most of the nineteenth century, a period when the greater part of the medieval town wall of Newcastle was demolished, and it survived because a new use was found for it.<sup>5</sup>

In 1821 the tower was leased by the mayor and burgesses to the Company of Slaters and Tylers for twenty-one years at

<sup>1</sup> In one source it is suggested that the Gunner Tower should more properly be called the Gunnerton Tower because it "is said to have been built by the ancient family of Swinburn, who had a house behind it", (and who possessed land at Gunnerton in Northumberland). E. Mackenzie, *Newcastle upon Tyne*, Vol. I. (Newcastle, 1827), pp. 108-9.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Bourne, *History of Newcastle upon Tyne*, (Newcastle, 1736), p. 14. John Brand, *History and Antiquities of the Town and County of the Town of Newcastle upon Tyne*, Vol. I, (London, 1789), pp. 2 and 2-3n.

<sup>3</sup> Brand, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-5; Parker Brewis, *The West Walls of Newcastle upon Tyne*, (*A.A.* 4, XI), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *A.A.* 4, VI, p. 119. Thomas Bewick, 1753-1828.

<sup>5</sup> It was a common practice in Newcastle for the companies (guilds) of the town to lease gates or towers on the wall for use as meeting houses. Mackenzie (*op. cit.*, pp. 107-116) records that three gates and ten towers were used in this way at different times and for varying periods, chiefly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Gunner Tower appears to have been one of the latest taken over for this purpose.

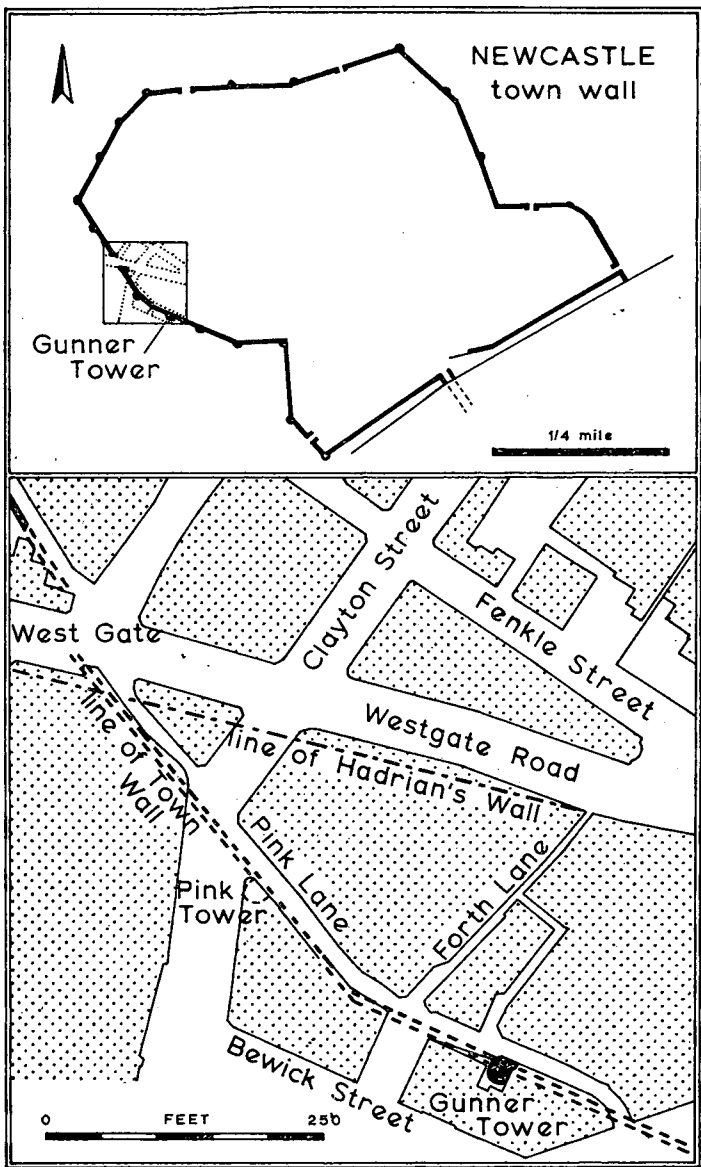


FIG. 1

an annual rent of 2s. 6d.<sup>6</sup> It was thereupon converted into a hall for the company—Mackenzie records that “the tower has been very neatly repaired, and the hall is light and spacious,”—and in the course of this restoration workmen found “a large quantity of shillings and sixpences of the coinage of Edward I.”<sup>7</sup>

The lease was renewed in 1842<sup>8</sup> but the company did not retain the tower for the whole of this second term. Although the lease was never officially assigned to him, the rent ledgers show that Richard Grainger, and later his trustees, paid the rent from 1853 to 1871, when the Corporation served them with a notice to quit. Collection of rent stopped forthwith, but no action was taken to enforce the notice to quit, and the Grainger trustees remained in possession of the tower.

In the summer of 1880 the Corporation made another attempt to regularize this increasingly irregular situation, and asked both the trustees and the subtenants to leave. By this time the premises were divided into three parts—James Bell, a cabinet maker, occupying the upper floor of the tower, and John Weatherley, a photographer, the “light erections” on or against the old town wall, while the ground floor of the tower was vacant. The first notice to quit addressed to the trustees, Rev. Henry Wright, James Sharp and Edward Liddell, and dated 31st July, appears to have become invalid when Liddell was found to be dead, and in the interval before another was served the trustees’ solicitors, Messrs. Clayton and Gibson, and the receiver to the Grainger estate, John Lamb, made an attempt to establish Grainger’s original title to the tenancy and to persuade the Corporation to renew

<sup>6</sup> Newcastle upon Tyne City Archives, 46/1/6.

<sup>7</sup> Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 109. I am grateful to Professor G. W. S. Barrow for pointing out that these coins could not have been shillings and sixpences, which were not issued at this time, and for suggesting that they were probably pennies, and halfpennies and/or farthings. It is indeed possible that they were not coins of Edward I, since to distinguish between coins issued by Edward I, Edward II and Edward III is sometimes difficult. See R. H. Dolley, “Coinage”, pp. 284-5, in *Medieval England*, Vol. I, ed. A. L. Poole, (Oxford, 1958). I am also indebted to Mr. R. Taylor, Keeper of Coins for the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne, for attempting to trace the hoard from the Gunner Tower.

<sup>8</sup> Newcastle upon Tyne City Archives, 46/1/35.

the lease. In this they were unsuccessful; in March, 1881, the trustees received yet another notice to quit, and in October the Corporation at last recovered the property.<sup>9</sup>

Their tribulations were, however, by no means over. In February, 1882, they leased the tower to James Cuttriss for use as a photographic studio, and for three years all was quiet. Then, early in 1885, the chapel in Bewick Street was pulled down to make way for the building of new offices for the Tyne Improvement Commission and Messrs. Angus & Co. on the south side of Pink Lane. The immediate effect of the demolition of the chapel was to expose the south front of the Gunner Tower to public view for the first time for many years, and the Newcastle Weekly Chronicle took the opportunity to publish a drawing of the tower.<sup>10</sup> For Cuttriss, however, this large-scale reconstruction between Pink Lane and Bewick Street was to have serious consequences.

The first of these was the partial stopping-up of Pink Lane on 12th March, 1885, on the grounds that the work in progress made the lane unsafe for pedestrians, and on the 17th Cuttriss was served with a notice to quit by 1st May. He was on a monthly tenancy and appears to have made no complaint about being required to leave the premises, but he was very upset by the Council order of the 12th. This, he declared, had entirely destroyed his business, and he threatened to proceed against the Corporation to recover damages. While everyone else, including his own employees, agreed that the hoardings to close Pink Lane had been placed to allow access to the kitchen door into the tower, and that clients did continue to come, if somewhat fewer in number, the Corporation nevertheless acknowledged that Cuttriss had been inconvenienced and should be compensated. No solution satisfactory to both parties had been reached when, on 30th March, W. G. Laws, the City Engineer, inspected the

<sup>9</sup> For the information contained in the last two paragraphs see Newcastle upon Tyne City Archives, Box 35/1.

<sup>10</sup> *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 28th March, 1885. The drawing was later reproduced in *P.S.A.N.* 2, II, opp. p. 22.

tower, decided it was dangerous owing to building by the Tyne Improvement Commission, and advised Cuttriss to leave, saying that the Commission would find him alternative accommodation until his lease expired.

The future of the tower was discussed at a council meeting on 1st April. The Mayor, who had visited the site the previous day, said that while "the foundations of the Tyne Commissioners' new offices were considerably lower than the foundations of the Gunner's Tower" it was not certain that this excavation had caused the damage, for work was also going on on the other side of the tower. As it was by now clear that the tower was likely to collapse, and as a suggestion to spend a large sum of money on its repair was vetoed by a chorus of "no! no!", the Council agreed that the City Engineer should be authorized to pull it down.<sup>11</sup>

Demolition began on Easter Saturday, 4th April, with the removal of the parapet wall down to the gutter. Cuttriss was determined to stay in the tower as long as possible, and did not start his removal until the 9th, completing it on the 14th. In a letter to the City Engineer, dated 13th April, Cuttriss' solicitor complained that the workmen engaged in the demolition had allowed a number of large stones to fall into his client's yard, and he asked that this should stop "as my Client is about to commence to build a Photographic Gallery in this Yard". What this rearguard action was supposed to achieve is not clear, and one cannot help wondering whether the workmen had decided to hasten the removal so they could finish the work.

With Cuttriss' departure, one matter only remained to be settled—his claim for damages. In April he demanded £100 and 15 guineas costs, but later reduced it to £75. In a conciliatory manner the City Engineer explained that the Corporation considered this sum exorbitant, but that they would pay him £25. After a pause Cuttriss accepted a cheque for this amount, but then went on to sue the Mayor and Corporation for the remaining £50, as compensation for having

<sup>11</sup> *Newcastle Council Reports*, 1884-85, p. 218.





Fig. 1. Junction of tower wall and town wall



Fig. 2. Foundations of town wall



to leave his premises and for loss attending the removal. Judgement was given for the plaintiff in the County Court on 18th August for the sum of £20, and £9 18s. costs.<sup>12</sup>

In this manner the history of the Gunner Tower came to an end, and in 1904, when the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle visited it on one of their excursions, the site must have looked very much as it did immediately before excavation began sixty years later. Members observed "the wall base in the Tyne Commissioners' yard left there to indicate the site of the adjacent Gunnar tower".<sup>13</sup>

*The excavation* (see figs. 2 and 3)

As has been said already, about half the material filling the tower was removed in the course of the excavation, and this resulted in a trench of highly unorthodox shape with only one straight side. The curved outer face of the tower wall bounded the trench on the south and west, and a stone and brick sill beneath iron railings lay on the north side along the edge of Pink Lane.

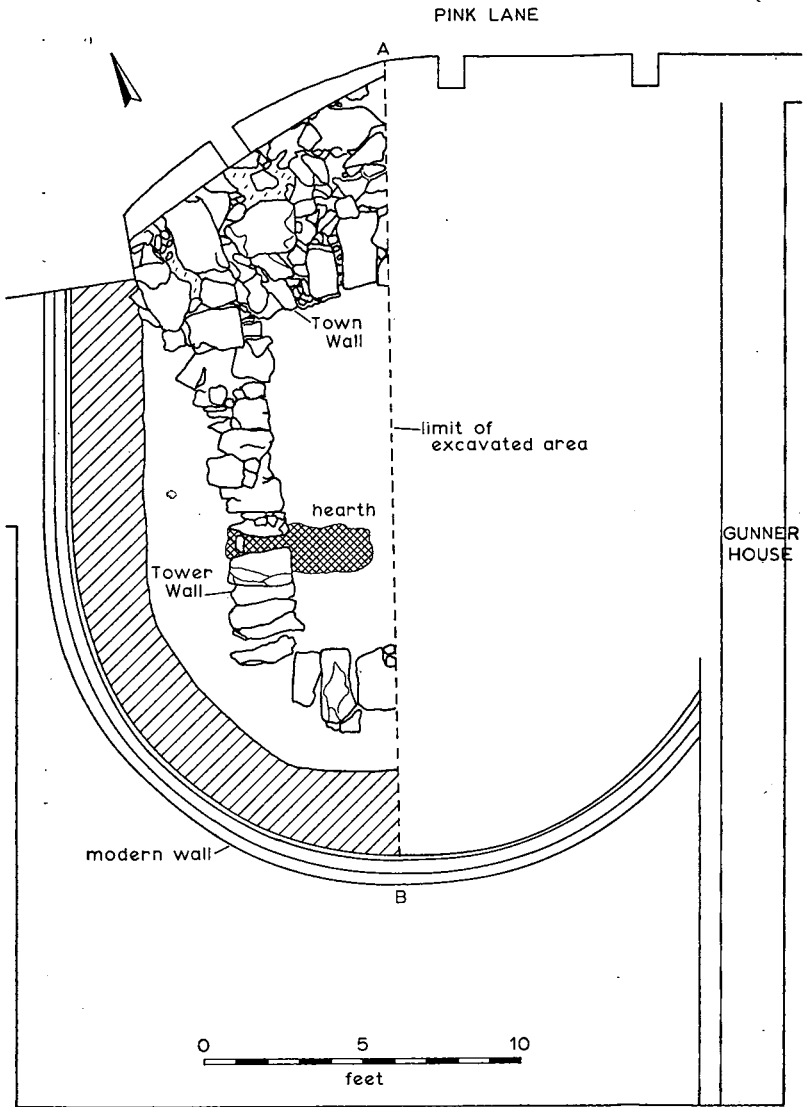
At the bottom of the trench the subsoil was found to be bright orange clay, in which there was a slight depression filled with black burnt material, largely wood. Presumably this was a hearth, but no artifacts were found in association with it. Between the walls described below, and overlying both hearth and subsoil was a band of grey clay streaked with orange (layer 2), and, while this too yielded nothing, a hollow at its north end contained further traces of burning (3), a pot holding the remains of a cremation, and other sherds, all of which were Roman, (see pp. 134-5 and fig. 4, nos. 1 and 2).

Above the Roman remains, and in the same central portion of the trench, there were three more clay levels—a patch of brown clay (4) over the cremation, an interrupted layer of grey clay (5), and finally a band of fairly clean yellow clay (6).

<sup>12</sup> For the evidence relevant to Cuttriss' occupation of the Gunner Tower see Newcastle upon Tyne City Archives, Box 34/1, file entitled "Cuttriss and the Corporation Papers—Gunnars Tower, Pink Lane, 1885".

<sup>13</sup> P.S.A.N. 3, I, p. 161.

# GUNNER TOWER



TYNE IMPROVEMENT COMMISSION BUILDING

RBH, PWD; 1964/66

FIG. 2

# GUNNER TOWER

## SECTION A-B

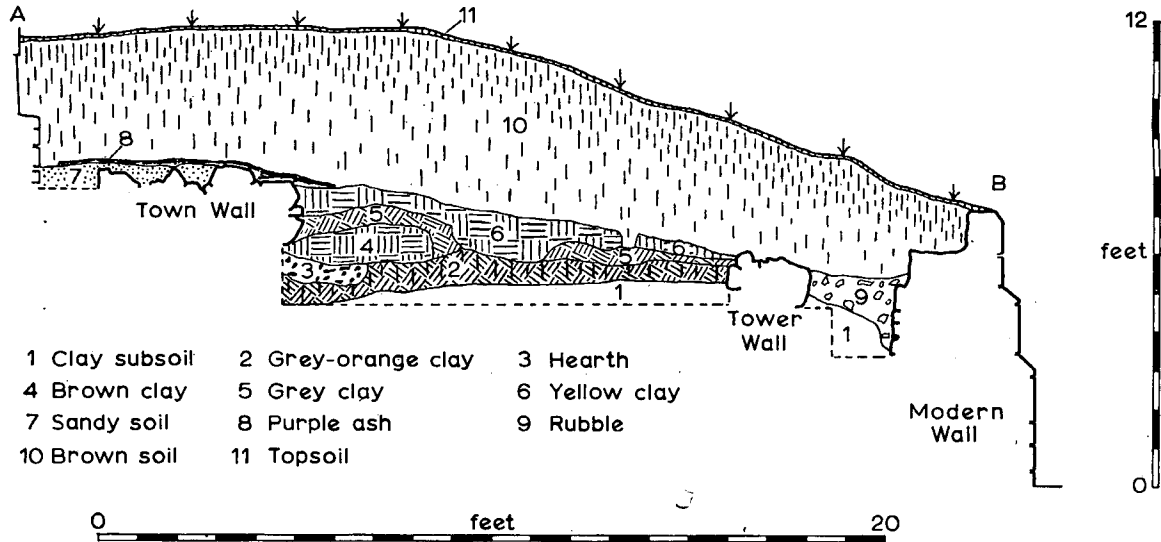


FIG. 3

RBH, PWD, 1964/66

Five tiny medieval sherds were recovered from these layers, (see p. 135-6, and fig. 4, nos. 3-7), and can be dated to the late thirteenth or possibly the early fourteenth century.

This stratification was contained on three sides by the fragmentary remains of stone foundations. These filled the whole of the north end of the trench (see plate XIII), and ran 10 feet southwards in a single row about 2 feet wide before turning east (see plate XIV, fig. 1). The bottom course of these footings consisted of large stones set on their sides at a slight angle, on top of which was a second course of stones laid flat and in places mortared together. A single block of ashlar survived at the corner (see plate XIV, fig. 2). It was impossible to decide whether the slant of the stones in the lowest course was deliberate, or if it had occurred accidentally after building, perhaps because the wall had been constructed on a slight downhill slope to the south.

While it was certain that layers 2 to 4 predated the wall, the relationship between 5 and 6 and the masonry was not so clear, since there was no obvious trace of a foundation trench. A slight looseness of soil, however, at the point of contact between layer 5 and the wall face did suggest that this layer had been cut through by the digging of a foundation trench, and the foundations laid up against the trench sides. The same might be true of layer 6, but in this case the clay was firmer against the stones, and it could be argued that its cleanness indicated this level had never been trampled on and had merely been dumped here as the base for a higher, but missing, floor.

The top of the surviving foundations roughly coincided with the top of the layers of clay, and it was at this point that the two ends of the trench were found to differ. Sandy soil (layer 7), which produced one piece of medieval pottery (see p. 136, no. 8), overlay the broad piece of wall at the north end, and this in turn was covered by a thin spread of purple ash (layer 8). To the south and west the narrow line of footings was separated from the curved outer wall of the tower by a shallow trench filled with rubble, fragments of

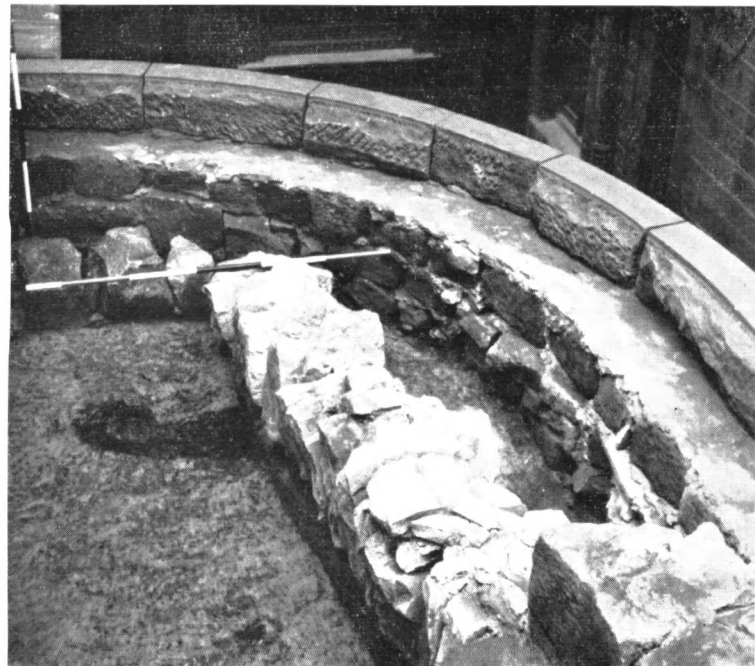


Fig. 1. The tower, showing the gap between the original foundations and the reconstructed wall



Fig. 2. Foundations of tower wall beneath one block of ashlar



brick and lumps of hard grey cement (9), which produced a few sherds of early modern pottery (see p. 136, no. 9). Above, and covering the whole trench, was a thick homogeneous level of brown soil (layer 10), which contained a large quantity of pottery ranging in date from the thirteenth to the twentieth century (see pp. 136-7, and fig. 4, groups 1-7, and nos. 10-13).

As will be seen from fig. 3, the outer wall of the tower was not excavated to its full depth, but enough was revealed to show that it was comparatively narrow, being less than 3 feet thick above the second chamfer. Excavation also showed that the inner face of this wall was built of coursed rubble and a few fragments of brick bonded with modern cement.

### *Discussion*

Excavation at the Gunner Tower produced only one problem of interpretation, the relationship of the foundations inside the building with the curved wall round its outer edge. Not only did the two differ markedly in construction and relative depth, but neither was wide enough, if considered alone, to have been the original wall of the tower. In a comparable building, the Heber Tower, the semi-circular wall was 7 to  $8\frac{1}{2}$  feet thick at ground level, and the basement room rectangular in plan and measuring  $15\frac{1}{2}$  feet long by 10 feet wide.<sup>14</sup>

There can be no doubt that the site of the excavation was indeed the site of the Gunner Tower, nor that the foundations discovered within it were of medieval construction, and presumably of the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. With these facts in mind one can explain the footings at the north end of the trench as the bottom course of the town wall, here forming the back wall of the tower, and the single row of foundations running south as the surviving remains of the inner face of the front wall. Assuming that similar conditions prevailed in the unexcavated portion, this

<sup>14</sup> A.A. 4, XI, plate XI.

would give an oblong space some 10 feet in length at foundation level.

Although the outer face of the curved wall, with the exception of its top course, looked genuine, the excavation provided no further evidence of its authenticity. Instead, it demonstrated that the inner face of this wall had been built with modern materials, that its foot on the outside was almost 5 feet below the bottom of the foundations within the tower, and that the two were separated by a trench 2 to 3 feet wide filled with discarded fragments of stone, brick and cement. In view of what is known of the fate of the tower in 1885, it seems probable that this semi-circular wall was rebuilt at that time in the place of the original outer wall of the tower and with some of the original stone, partly—no doubt—to mark the site and so satisfy antiquarian interests, and partly as a revetment above the sunken yard of the Tyne Improvement Commission.

#### THE FINDS<sup>15</sup>

An asterisk indicates that the find is illustrated.

#### ROMAN POTTERY

*J. P. Gillam*

- \*1. Many fragments making up the greater part of a jar or cooking-pot in light reddish-brown sandy fabric. Both in form and fabric this is typical of a series of vessels recorded from several sites on, or in the immediate hinterland of, the eastern third of Hadrian's Wall. They come from contexts ranging in date from the second quarter of the 2nd C. to the early years of the 4th. It is difficult to assign a precise date to the present piece, within that range of time, but it is quite certainly Romano-British.

This jar was found containing a cremation.

2. Five fragments of a beaker in fine white-bodied fabric with

<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Mr. John Tait and Mr. Paul Herson for drawing two of the finds.



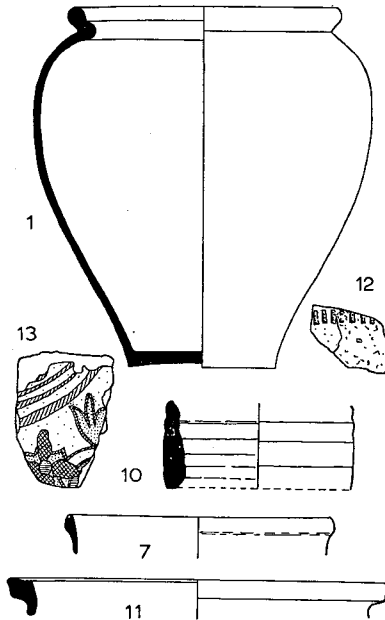


FIG. 4. (4)

very dark colour-coating, decorated with "rouletting"; this is probably of late 2nd- or 3rd-C. date.

Nos. 1 and 2 were found in layer 3.

The discovery of Roman pottery was unexpected, but not surprising, since the line of the Wall is assumed to be the south side of Westgate Road, only some 80 yards north of the Gunner Tower (see fig. 1). Cremations, although more common in the 2nd and 3rd C., have been found near the Wall in a 4th C. context.<sup>16</sup>

## MEDIEVAL AND LATER POTTERY

*J. E. Parsons*

3. Fragment of wall of jug, in hard, gritty, light grey fabric; covered with an even, olive green glaze on the outside. Late 13th-early 14th C. From layer 4.

<sup>16</sup> Unpublished material from Birdoswald, kindly communicated to me by Professor E. Birley.

4. Sherd from near neck of jug, in dark grey fabric fired to light grey on external surface, with visible rilling. Late 13th C. From layer 5.
5. Fragment of wall of jug, in dirty, off-white fabric with black grit; faint traces of external green glaze. 13th-14th C. From layer 5.
6. Fragment of wall of cooking pot, in gritty, pinkish-buff fabric. 13th C.? From layer 5.
- \*7. Part of rim of jug, in dark grey fabric with medium grit, fired to pinkish-buff on both surfaces. Diam. 5-6". Late 13th C. From layer 6.
8. Damaged fragment of rim of bowl (?), in dark grey fabric fired to buff on both surfaces; the underside of the rim is glazed green, but this may be accidental. Mid-late 13th C. From layer 7 on top of the surviving footings of the town wall.
9. Five sherds were found in the rubble of layer 9. Of these, two were rim fragments of slipware plates (17th C.), one was a fragment of a Delft plate or bowl (17th C.), and two were parts of the bases of two vessels (probably later than 17th C.).

A large quantity of pottery, in a wide range of dates and types, was found in layer 10. This has been divided into groups, and only those sherds which are illustrated have been given a number.

*Group 1:* sixteen sherds, 13th-15th C.

- \*10. Fragment of wall of mortar (?), in light grey fabric fired to dirty buff on both surfaces. Diam. of body of vessel 4".
- \*11. Part of rim of cooking pot or bowl, in light grey fabric fired to light buff on both surfaces. Diam. 8". 13th C. Evolved from 12th C. Northern cooking pot.
- \*12. Fragment of wall of jug, in hard, medium grey fabric, with purple glaze on exterior, which bears impressed decoration reminiscent of Cistercian ware. 15th C.

*Group 2:* three sherds in soft, light-coloured fabric. 16th C.? One is part of the rim of a jug, which has had a pinched spout, in off-white fabric with light green glaze on exterior and covering the edge of the rim.

*Group 3:* fourteen sherds in reddish-brown fabric (plant-pot ware), including two fragments of slipware. 17th C.

*Group 4:* seven fragments of Delft, of which two are parts of tiles. 17th C.

- \*13. Fragment of Delft polychrome tile.

*Group 5:* assorted sherds in stoneware, including Siegburg ware, part of a handle of Nottingham ware, and fragments of Dutch gin bottles. 17th-20th C.

*Group 6:* sherds from heavy, dark-glazed kitchen vessels;

one covered in purple glaze with an applied blob of pipeclay reflects the Staffordshire form of decoration. 18th C.

*Group 7:* modern material, 19th-20th C. This group may be subdivided into two—fragments of white earthenware plates, saucers etc., and fragments of mixing bowls, in red fabric, a cream or tortoiseshell-glazed interior, and sometimes a brown-glazed exterior.

## CLAY TOBACCO PIPES

*J. E. Parsons*

Several pieces of stems and bowls of pipes were found in layer 10, and range in date from late 17th to 19th, or even 20th, C. One stem bears the stamp of Michael Parke, and therefore dates from late 17th to early 18th C.

## CREMATED HUMAN REMAINS

*R. A. S. Cowper*

In cremations it is usual to find parts of the skull, teeth and lower extremities, for although the bones have been calcined and warped they will still be recognisable.

In this cremation parts of the parietal bones of the skull are present. The sutures show no signs of ossification. Therefore one surmises that the person was not above 21 years of age, and certainly not older than 22.

No teeth are present, which is unusual, as they are the last to perish in a cremation.

The bones present are those of the lower end of tibia and fibula. There is however an epiphysis of the tibia. The ossification of the epiphysis takes place at about 18 years of age.

### *Summary*

Bones—human.

Age—plus or minus 18 years.

Sex—unable to determine owing to lack of material.



