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The Roman Fort at Haltonchesters

An analytical field survey by K. Blood and M. C. B. Bowden

A survey¹ of the Roman fort at Haltonchesters (*ONNUM*) and its immediate environs was undertaken by the Newcastle office of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England in July and August 1989, in order to take advantage of an unusually dry summer when parching of the grassland revealed a number of buried features. By October these parchmarks had disappeared. The results of the survey have been deposited in the National Archaeological Record (reference no. NY 96 NE 2).

The fort (at NY9974 6845), which has received surprisingly little attention for a generation, straddles the line of Hadrian's Wall, here buried beneath the mid eighteenth-century Military Road, now the B6318. The field N of the road, under pasture at the time of survey, has been ploughed at least since the early nineteenth century (Craster 1914, 470), and it was here that the parchmarks were particularly informative. The large field to the S of the road is under permanent pasture; a carriage drive, bordered on the E side by a line of trees, extends S from a recently reconstructed formal gateway beside the public road through the fort to Halton Castle. These elements combine to give the pasture the appearance of a miniature park. Well-preserved broad ridge-and-furrow occupies almost the whole of this field, though its survival within the fort is limited.

From the fort there are extensive views to the N where the ground rises gently, and southwards down to the Tyne valley and beyond. Immediately to the W the ground falls away to the Fence Burn, and the course of Hadrian's Wall, including the junction of Dere Street with the Wall at Portgate, can be seen for about 2 km. Only to the E is visibility restricted by Down Hill about 800 m away.

The archaeological history of the site has

been summarized by Birley (1961, 170–2) and Daniels (1978, 84–9). In brief, this was one of the forts constructed, no later than c. A.D. 126, when the decision was taken to move the frontier garrison from the Stanegate (the existence of which, E of Corbridge, is still only a matter of supposition) up onto the line of the Wall itself. A dedication panel from the W gate (RIB 1427), recording its erection under Hadrian and the governor Aulus Platorius Nepos, confirms this dating. Before the fort was built the curtain had already been constructed, at least in part, and the Ditch dug on its N side (Simpson and Richmond 1937). Both of these were levelled and the fort was laid out, facing N, with its N third projecting beyond the Wall. Three of its major gates (those on the N, E and W) were to the N of the curtain in order to provide maximum mobility. On the S side, in addition to the S gateway itself, there were minor gates at each end of the *Via Quintana*, continuing the line of the Military Way. The pattern of occupation, after the early third century, is uncertain; although the fort was garrisoned in the late fourth century, there may have been earlier periods of abandonment.

The first antiquary to record the fort was John Horsley who noted that it was not rectangular but was much broader to the S of the Wall (Horsley 1732, 105, 142). This curious shape, in effect a broad reversed L, was found by excavation (Simpson and Richmond 1935, 133) to have been created by the addition of a later westward extension, subsequently identified as Severan by Jarrett (1959, 178–83). Excavations were undertaken by Simpson and Richmond in 1935–6 (1937, 151–71) in those areas most likely to be affected by a proposed realignment of the modern road which was never carried out: the major E and W gates to

the N of the road, the W portal of the N gate, and the NE quadrant of the fort. A bathhouse, as yet unlocated (see below), had been examined in 1827 (Hodgson 1840, 316–20).

The most recent excavations, by Jarrett in 1956–9 (Jarrett 1959), and by Gillam in 1960–1, have not been fully published. In advance of any reconsideration of the archives from those excavations, this paper concentrates on the information that can be gained from analysis of the surface remains. The excavated evidence, published and unpublished, will not be dealt with in detail, except where it can help to explain the visible remains or, indeed, their absence.

THE DEFENCES

At no point around the perimeter of the Hadrianic fort or of the Severan extension does any upstanding walling of certain Roman date survive above ground. Nevertheless the course of the fort wall can be assessed quite accurately from the surviving earthworks, the parchmarks, from air photography and from the results of the excavations.

From the main Roman W gate (A on plan) the northward course of the fort wall was visible at the time of survey for about 23 m as a light parchmark in grassland, above an outward-facing scarp, about 0·7 m high. The curve of the NW corner of the wall also appeared as parching, this time at the base of the ploughed-down scarp of the fort platform, which is here 1·1 m high. All that remains of the N defences is a barely discernible scarp spread by the plough; no parchmarks could be traced on the ground here in July 1989, and it may be that destruction has been particularly severe in this sector, although the line is discernible on air photographs (CUCAP DN 79–80).

The E rampart is occupied in its entirety by later features. The NE angle is cut, and the line of the rampart then overlain, by a scarp defining the edge of modern cultivation as far S as the road. From that point, almost to the SE corner of the fort, the course of the E rampart is marked by a ragged bank (B on plan), 3 m to

4 m wide; this stands 0·7 m high externally and 0·5 m high internally, and, whether contemporary or not, defines the W edge of the broad ridge-and-furrow. This cultivation and the bank are presumably earlier than the eighteenth-century Military Road. Immediately S of the point where this bank turns SW, a short stretch of poor, lightly-built walling (C) is exposed. Only one course high and 1·2 m long, it is in the expected position of the fort wall itself, and could conceivably be a surviving fragment of it.

The S wall of the fort has been severely mutilated. Its exact position E of the private road to Halton Castle can only be inferred; all that remains is an outward-facing scarp, 0·8 m high, much affected by robbing. To the W of the road its line is marked for most of its length by a robber trench, now a terrace in an S-facing scarp; this alignment can be verified, as the position of the wall is known within the two excavation trenches of 1957 (D and E on plan) across the S defences (Jarrett 1959, 183–4). These were backfilled but their edges can readily be traced. Excavation has shown (Jarrett 1959, 178–83) that the W wall of the Hadrianic fort was demolished to the S of Hadrian's Wall when the fort was extended to the W. No trace of this therefore exists on the ground.

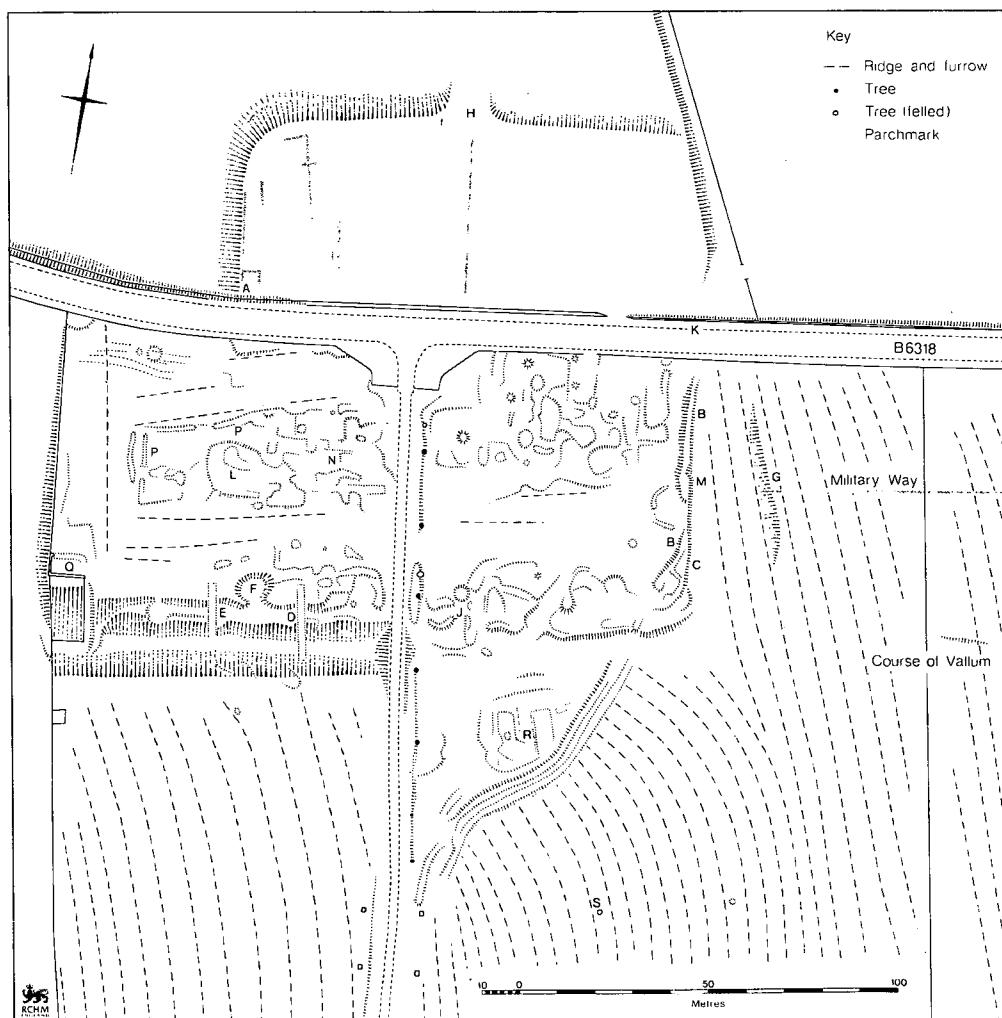
The W rampart of the Severan extension was found by excavation (Haverfield 1898, 177) to be 4·3 m W of the modern dry-stone wall that divides the parkland containing the fort from the adjoining field. Haverfield does not specify the position along the present field wall where he trenched, and, as this wall is not parallel to the presumed line of the Severan rampart, the precise position of these Roman defences cannot be determined; there is no trace of them on the ground. The field to the W slopes down to the Fence Burn; regular ploughing of it has created a negative lynchett, up to 0·9 m high, on the W side of the field wall.

The sites of the SE and SW angle-towers of the Hadrianic fort (the latter F on plan) are

marked by hollows and spoil suggesting major robbing. The NE example is cut by the scarp of the later boundary and may have been destroyed entirely. At the NW angle a vague spreading of the parchmark observed in 1989 may represent the site. The NW tower of the Severan extension was examined in 1935 (Simpson and Richmond 1935, 132–4; 1937, 152–3), but its exact position is not known. The Severan SW tower is overlain by a modern dry-stone wall and there is no trace of it on the

surface. No interval towers are anywhere visible.

With regard to the ditches of the fort, excavations in 1956 across the Hadrianic W defences (Jarrett 1959, 183) demonstrated that there were two ditches here. This double ditch system contrasts with the single ditch of markedly different character now visible on the S and E, and also with that excavated in 1897 on the W side of the Severan extension (Haverfield 1898, 177). This single ditch, the



dominant feature of the site, is about 14 m wide and 1·6 m deep. It survives outside the S rampart of both the Hadrianic fort and the Severan extension to the W of the road to Halton Castle, although its outer lip is affected on this SW side by the incursion of ridge-and-furrow. The ditch continues eastwards to the SE corner of the fort as a much shallower, wider depression, approximately 0·7 m deep, which appears to have been occupied, along its axis, by poorly developed ridge-and-furrow. The E side of the ditch is less well preserved; the only feature surviving here is a scarp standing no more than 0·4 m high (G). Its N end is approximately in the expected position of the counterscarp of the ditch in its final form, but it has been mutilated and apparently pulled out of alignment by the ridge-and-furrow. There are no surface traces of a ditch in the field N of the public road. To the W, at the W extremity of the Severan extension, the excavation trench of 1897 (Haverfield 1898, 177) revealed a berm and ditch "... together 60 feet (18·3 m) wide. . . .", which accords with the dimensions on the S side of the fort. It seems likely therefore that the original Hadrianic double ditch system was replaced in the Severan period or later by a more massive single ditch, though the evidence for the earlier phase is as yet limited.

THE GATES

The position of the N gate (H on plan) is marked by a break in the low scarp along the line of the N defences. This was partly excavated by Simpson and Richmond (1937, 162–4) whose site-plan suggests that a parchmark, discernible during the survey of 1989, had developed over the W wall of the guardchamber of the gate. At the site of the S gate (J on plan) is a series of irregular depressions and spoil heaps. There is no evidence from antiquarian sources or from ground inspection that the gateway has been excavated, and it seems likely that the present condition is a result of large-scale robbing.

The N, W and the E walls of the N guard-

chamber to the excavated main W gate (A) (Simpson and Richmond 1937, 157–60) were visible as parchmarks at the time of survey; the remainder of the gate lies under the present road. There is now nothing to see on the surface of the main E gate (K), also partially excavated (Simpson and Richmond 1937, 154–7), but the N and W walls of the N guardchamber are visible on air photographs (CUCAP RC8-HB 226–7). The S guardchamber lies under the present road.

The minor Hadrianic W gate (L) was located by excavation in 1960–61, but at the site there is only a series of amorphous rises and depressions. The minor E gate (M) is overlain by the later bank (B) along the line of the rampart. Its position can be assessed accurately by reference to its counterpart in the W, and by extending the line of the Military Way approaching from the E. Presumably there was an entrance through the W wall of the Severan extension to accommodate the Military Way (visible on air photographs) but there is no trace of either the gate or the road on that side.

It is unclear why the fort was extended westwards to create the broad reversed L-shape first noted by Horsley. Whatever the reason, the line of the Severan W defences, set on a slight crest, gives only a marginally better view to the W than the Hadrianic line. It is possible that the *vicus* to the S was already well established and of sufficient importance that a southward extension of the fort into it, which would have enabled the builders to retain the customary rectangular form, was not considered. Probably of more importance would have been the fact that by extending westwards and utilizing Hadrian's Wall as the N side, less demolition and building would have been required than that needed to enclose an area of similar size S of the fort.

THE INTERIOR OF THE FORT

No Roman masonry is visible inside the defences. To the N of the modern road, in the W part of the *praetentura*, buried walls are discernible both on the ground (see plan) and on

air photographs (CUCAP DN 79–80) as parchmarks (see below for the discussion of the bath-house and other remains here). One parchmark can be readily identified as the line of the *via praetoria* running S from the N gate. Outside the fort parchmarks on air photographs (CUCAP DN 79–80) show this road running beyond the N gate for a distance of 30 m before forking to the NW and to the NE, and then rapidly fading. To the S of the modern road, the fort interior is characterized by a confusion of irregular hollows, up to 0·9 m deep, together with numerous spoil-heaps and the scars of backfilled excavation trenches. To the E of the private road there are no surface traces of formal methodical excavation and no antiquarian evidence for any having taken place. Some of the disturbance may be due to nineteenth-century coal-mining, evidence for which was found during the excavation of the E gate (Simpson and Richmond 1937, 154–5). In the main, however, the hollows and mounds appear to result from the deliberate quarrying of the buildings in the central range, presumably the headquarters and the commanding officer's house, which would have had the best quality masonry. That this area was consciously chosen, in a well-informed decision, is suggested by the lack of such quarrying immediately S of the *via quintana* where the minor buildings would have been built of poorer materials. A similar picture is also apparent W of the private road, but this area is dominated by the backfilled trenches of the unpublished excavations of 1960–61. Those trenches still visible on the surface have been surveyed onto the 1:500 plan (see N) which seem to correlate well with a version of the excavation plan held by C. M. Daniels of the Department of Archaeology in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

Scant traces of broad ridge-and-furrow, running E to W, survive on both sides of the private road in those parts of the interior relatively untouched by later disturbance; what appears to be a contemporary plough headland extends from N to S at its W end. In the W sector there are two distinct areas of cultivation separated by disturbed ground. Alongside the

S furrow of the N area, and roughly parallel to it, is a turf-covered stony bank, 0·7 m high (P on plan), which may be contemporary with the ridging; this feature possibly turned S at its W end but because there has been so much disturbance here the picture remains confused.

Incorporated into the dry-stone wall immediately inside the Severan W defences are the remains of a rectangular building (Q) pre-dating the field wall. It measures 8·4 m from E to W by 4·6 m transversely within a neatly constructed wall, 0·6 m thick. The W side, which has been incorporated into the dry-stone wall, is 1·5 m high externally, whereas the remainder is reduced to mere grass-grown footings. A former garden, measuring 13·2 m by 8·6 m, abuts it to the S; to the N are the N and E sides of a vague platform, 0·3 m high, which may also be associated. These structures and the cultivation remains are undated but the building may well be the "small half-ruined hut" recorded by Bruce (1851, 159) within the area of the fort, "a fitting emblem of the surrounding desolation".

Deep ruts in the NW corner of the field may date from the time of the excavations in 1959–61. In the extreme NW corner of the field there is a mound, 0·4 m high; its origin is unknown.

THE VICUS

Consideration of this aspect of the Roman landscape has usually been restricted to quoting a remark by Horsley and to the interpretation of two tombstones set up to civilians (Salway 1967, 76–7; RIB 1435–6), although the relationship of those commemorated to the military personnel is uncertain. Horsley (1732, 142) noted the remains of outbuildings S and SE of the fort. It is highly likely that he saw no more than what is now visible of the civil settlement: the footings of two buildings (R on plan) in the only part of the field outside the defences which is devoid of ridge-and-furrow. The E building is 4·5 m wide from E to W and is at least 12 m long; its stone sleeper-wall has been reduced to a turf-covered bank, 0·9 m wide and 0·1 m high. The other example,

which stood alongside, immediately to the W, is poorly defined; the course of its walls seem to survive as robber trenches about 4·5 m apart but its length is indeterminate. The two identifiable buildings are overlain by the headland defining the NW edge of the ridge-and-furrow. The W edge of this headland was later used as the course of a field boundary which now consists of a bank up to 0·5 m high, formed of material scraped up from either side. This boundary is probably a continuation of the bank (B) on top of the E defences.

To the SSE of these buildings, but almost certainly within the area of the *vicus*, the highest surviving course of a stone-lined well (S on plan) is exposed for a depth of 0·15 m in the top of one of the ridges of the later field system. The well is circular and 1·6 m in diameter.

THE BATHS

Topographical constraints on the supply of water dictate that the provision of this essential facility must always have proved a problem at Haltonchesters. Antiquarian records and the interim report of more recent excavations suggest that several solutions were attempted. Hodgson (1840, 179, 316–20) describes a well preserved bath-house found in 1827 “in a recess in the north-east compartment of the station”, illustrating his excellent account with a detailed plan prepared by John Dobson. No one, however, recorded the precise location of the building, and it has since been argued that parchmarks in the north-west quadrant of the fort developed over its surviving buried walls (Daniels 1978, 86–7). The detail on the air photographs (CUCAP DN 79–80) is inadequate to demonstrate this. The suggested position of the baths, in the NW, could nevertheless be supported (despite the confusion over compass-points) by slender negative evidence from the excavations in the NE sector in 1936: these revealed absolutely no trace of a bath-house, only the footings of barracks and stables (Simpson and Richmond 1937, 164–7). On the other hand, it is possible that those who ex-

posed the baths in 1827 removed them completely leaving only the two earlier phases recorded in 1936. Neither position is wholly convincing and without further excavation no conclusions are possible. Despite the later statement by Bruce (1851, 160, 163), there are no means of knowing for certain that the baths were indeed cleared away; Hodgson is not specific on this point. Further to complicate matters, there is the problem set by Hodgson's odd usage of the term “recess” to describe the position of the remains. It is possible that he saw it lying in the *external* north-western angle of this unusual fort, the chronological complexity of which was not then understood.

All this is chasing shadows. The date of the baths recorded in 1827 is unknown but they may have belonged to a late phase in the site's history. The excavations of 1958 indicated that a predecessor, Severan in date, overlay one of the ditches of the Hadrianic fort within the area of the SW extension (Jarrett 1959, 184, 187). There must, however, have been an even earlier, Hadrianic, bath-house the position of which can only be inferred. One of the principal factors governing this was of course the water-supply which, at least in one phase, entailed the construction of an aqueduct. Lingard, writing in 1807 of a journey along the Wall from E to W (Bosanquet 1929, 145), found to the W of the fort “... a species of aqueduct of large stones in which was hollowed a conduit 12 inches broad and 8 deep which discharged the water from a wet piece of ground ... through the wall ...”. Bruce (1851, 161) and Horsley (1732, 142) refer to the same structure, leading from a spring on the higher ground to the NW near Dere Street, but gave few indications as to its exact destination. Bruce evidently believed that it served the baths found in 1827, but there is another possibility which, in the context of Hadrian's Wall, calls for no special pleading. This is that Lingard's description, though imprecise, may suggest that the aqueduct he saw served a bath-house close to the Fence Burn,² less than 200 m W of the fort, and to which the Military Way would have provided ready access. The suggestion must remain a hypothesis for the

present; there is nothing to be seen here, in what would have been the typical Hadrianic position for a bath-house, one that would require much less complex levelling for its water-supply than that for baths on the higher ground in the fort itself. The hillside here, to the W of the fort, has been cultivated for many years, causing substantial soil-creep and the build-up of a well-marked lynchet on the lip of the burn. This would have been sufficient to conceal any remains of a bath-house, as also proved to be the case at Chesters and Carrawburgh.

THE VALLUM

Although nothing of it is visible on the ground, air photographs (CUCAP RC8-HB 226-7) show the ditch of the Vallum as a cropmark to the W of the fort ascending the hill from Fence Burn and fading some 20 m from the SW angle of the Severan extension. A projection of this alignment south-eastwards takes the ditch to this SW angle, tying in with Horsley's observation (1732, 142) that the Vallum "seems to have fallen in with the south rampart of this fort". Exploratory trenching in 1897 (Haverfield 1898, 177) W of the fort nevertheless failed to locate the filled-in ditch. The position of the Vallum ditch on the E side of the fort is clearly visible as a depression in the line of a modern wall 65 m ESE of the SE angle. Otherwise there is now no trace of it on the surface to the S of the fort, but trenching by F. G. Simpson in 1909-10 (Simpson 1976, 159-60) E of the carriage-drive to Halton Castle demonstrated that the ditch veered to the S to avoid the defences of the Hadrianic fort. Nothing can be seen of the excavation trenches in the ridge-and-furrow; the measurements provided by Simpson do not enable the course to be plotted within the accuracy of the 1:500 plan, but the layout of his trenches seems to have been determined by the position of the existing furrows.

THE MILITARY WAY

This can be seen as a parchmark some 300 m W of the fort heading for the postulated entrance to the Severan extension; to the E it was surveyed as a parchmark (cf. CUCAP RC8-HB 226-7) making for the *porta quintana dextra* and terminating some 20 m from it.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Much further work is evidently required at Haltonchesters if we are to understand the history and role of this fort. As a priority, the archives of the excavations of 1956-61 need to be considered and published before any more excavation is undertaken. Geophysical survey would confirm the line of the Vallum (cf. Goult et al. 1990); it might also indicate the extent of the *vicus* and, perhaps, the degree of preservation in the northern half of the fort. Remote sensing, whether by ground radar or more familiar techniques, might also be able to test the hypothesis as to the location of the Hadrianic baths, and assess whether the baths found in 1827 were in fact destroyed.

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NOTES

¹The earthworks were planned using equipment and methods now standardized within the Royal Commission. The survey control was established using a Wild-Leitz T1000 electronic theodolite with a DI1000 electronic distance measurer, the measurements being captured automatically by a GRE3 data-logger and subsequently down-loaded onto computer disk. The points were then plotted by computer on a polyester sheet at a scale of 1:500. Using this framework the archaeological detail was measured and drawn in the field on a plane-table with a Wild RK1 self-reducing optical alidade. Hachures are employed to indicate scarps, allowing the depiction of interpretations and relationships which cannot be achieved by the use of contours.

² The significance of the Fence Burn is discussed by Rivet and Smith (1979, 431-3) who suggest that the fort may have been named after the stream. The ready availability of water may also have been a deciding factor in the siting of the fort.

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