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A Watching Brief at the Roman Fort of Benwell–*Condercum* 1990

Neil Holbrook

DURING the laying of a gas main along West Road, Newcastle, in September and October 1990 a 1 m wide and 1.2 m deep trench was dug across the site of the Hadrian's Wall fort at Benwell. The trench ran along the southern side of West Road, and terminated a little to the west of Condercum House where feeder pipes ran northwards across the width of the road and southwards along Denhill Park (fig. 1). Unfortunately no advance notification of the works had been given to the relevant archaeological bodies and Tyne and Wear Museums Service only became aware of the scheme by chance after considerable lengths of the trench had been excavated and backfilled. Once the archaeological implications of the pipe-laying had been brought to their notice

British Gas readily agreed to salvage recording of the still open lengths of trench. English Heritage undertook to meet the costs of this work. In the event recording concentrated on the trench along Denhill Park: the trench across West Road could only be examined in the most cursory fashion as it had been covered with steel plates to allow the passage of traffic. Recording of this section therefore consisted of crawling along the trench with a torch; the deafening sounds from overhead made protracted examination unappealing.

The Roman fort of Benwell–*Condercum* straddled the line of Hadrian's Wall and although the relevant areas have not been examined it is near-certain that the Wall met the southern guardchambers of the *portae prin-*

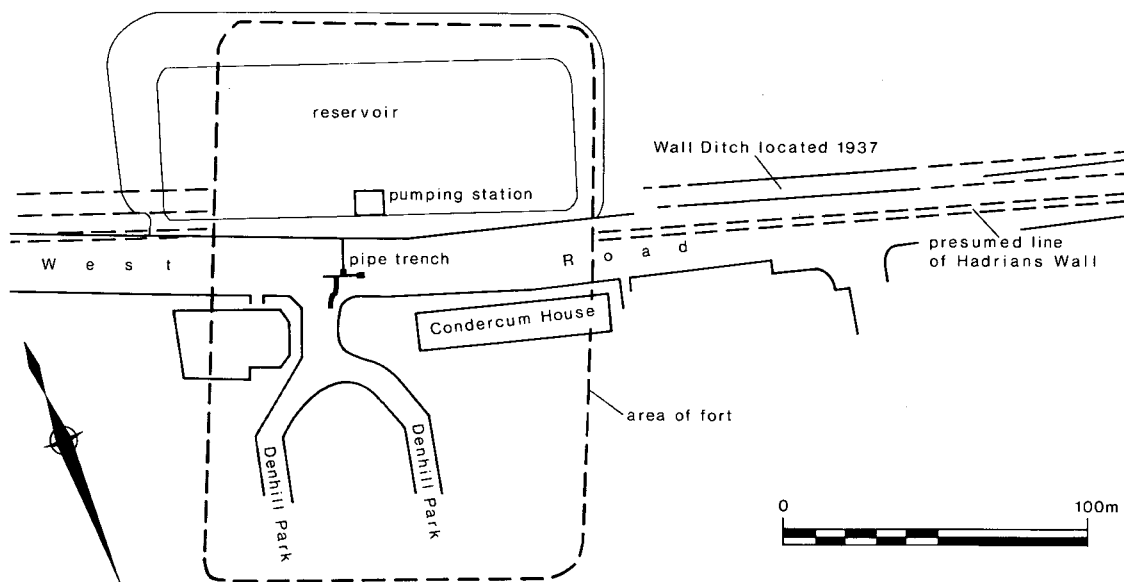


Fig. 1. Location of the gas pipe trench in relation to the Roman fort at Benwell (1:2500).

cipales. It has so far proved impossible to determine the line of the *via principalis* precisely, although extrapolating from the position of the Wall Ditch a little to the east of the fort Simpson and Richmond¹ calculated that its southern edge lay about 5 m north of West Road. The pipe-trench therefore cut through the central range of the fort, and the area available for examination lay within the double-granary partially explored in 1937² (fig. 2). The granary was shown to be 18.3 m wide with a central party wall; the southern end of the building possessed a flagged floor set on a solid mass of clay and pitched rubble. The excavators believed this to be a basement upon which the ventilating system would have once stood.

In the east section formed by the pipe-trench (fig. 3) the flagged floor (2) set on 0.35 m of clay bonded rubble was observed (4). It had been cut by a robber trench for the central party wall (which lay within the width of the pipe-trench and hence does not appear on the section). The party wall had been comprehensively robbed and only the clay and rubble foundation survived. This foundation was continuous with a similar one for a lateral cross-wall (6) which had like-wise been robbed of all

its courses although the robber trench (7) suggests an original width of about 1.2 m. This wall therefore divided the eastern side of the granary into two; the southern bay was 15 m long within its walls and the northern bay at least 17 m. To the north of the cross wall foundations of eleven sleeper walls (14, 17–23) were observed (a twelfth can be inferred in the area between B and C which was obscured by service pipes). The foundations were composed of angular rubble or crudely worked blocks set in stiff yellow clay; their width varied from 0.3–0.6 m and they lay at intervals of 0.5–1.6 m, with 1 m the norm. No facing stones survived intact, except in the case of the northernmost wall which retained two partially collapsed courses.

The section clearly demonstrated that three sleeper walls to the north of the cross wall had been demolished at some stage in the Roman period as their foundations were overlain by a layer of charcoal-rich loam (8). This same deposit was cut by the robber trench of the cross wall (apparent from the unillustrated west section) and we may presume that it originally abutted the north face of that wall. The burnt loam was overlain by 0.2 m of loose

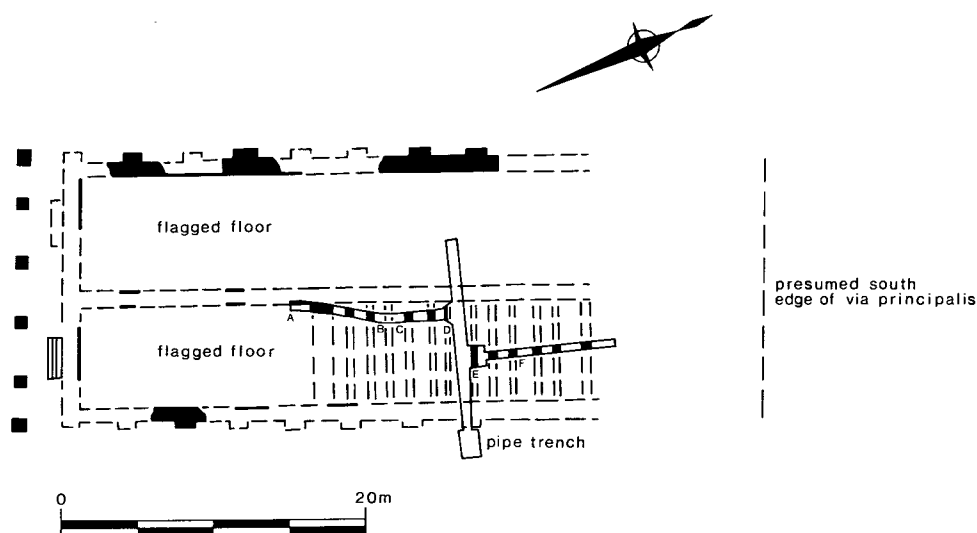


Fig. 2. Restored plan of the granary at Benwell (1:500).

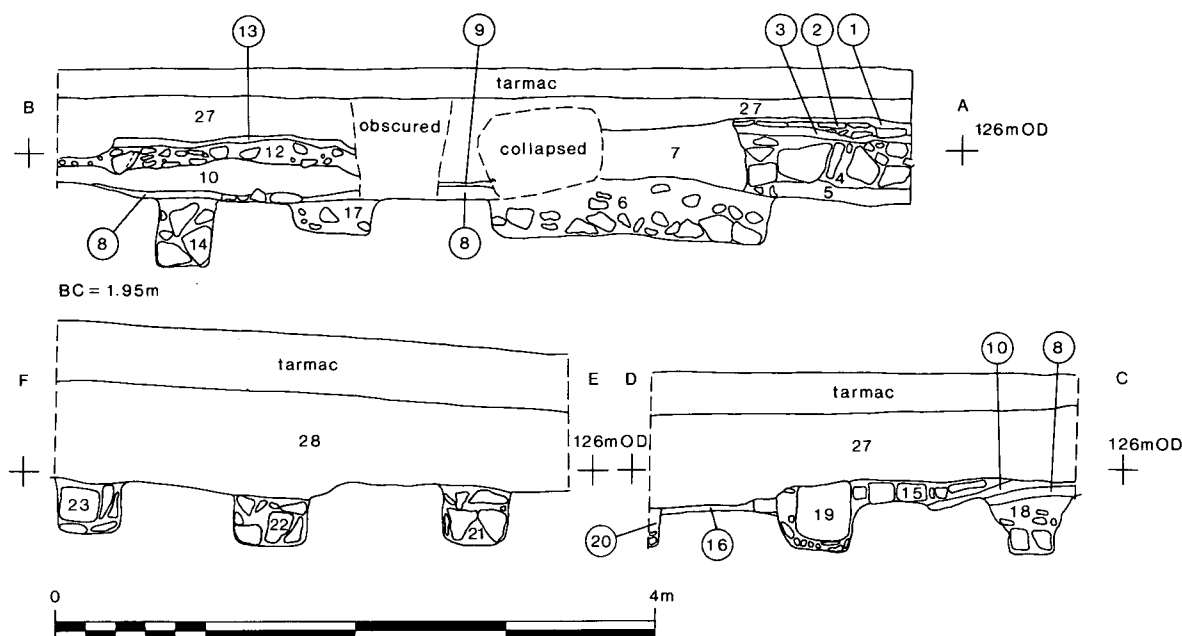


Fig. 3. East section of pipe-trench (1:50).

mixed loam and gravel (9, 10) which was in turn sealed by a metallised surface of sandstone fragments 0.15 m thick (12). This surface was overlain in one area by a thin layer of bright yellow sticky clay (13) but elsewhere it was covered by a mass of black coal-rich material (27), presumably the colliery waste encountered in previous excavations.³ The area beneath West Road had been so severely truncated that only foundations cut into natural survived, except for the northernmost sleeper wall. The mass of brown clay-loam (28) sealing these features may be infill of a hollow way.

The watching brief has therefore furnished some new details concerning the form of the granary. The building can now be shown to have an original length in excess of 34.75 m (the estimated length to the southern edge of the *via principalis* is 46 m). The eastern half of the building was divided into two bays by a lateral cross wall. The floor of the northern bay was supported on transverse sleeper walls, while the southern end was floored with sandstone flags set on clay bonded pitched rubble.

As the latter lay 0.5 m above the top of the foundations for the sleeper walls it seems probable that it was a solid floor rather than a basement for a ventilating system. At some stage in the Roman period the northern end of the granary was demolished to its foundations and the area lightly metallised over. The disposition of transverse sleeper walls in the northern bay recalls in some respects the arrangement at Haltonchesters where north-south (longitudinal) sleeper walls were found in the northern half of the granary and apparently contemporary east-west (transverse) ones in the southern portion.⁴ Indeed it has been pointed out that the granaries at Haltonchesters and Rudchester display sufficient similarity with Benwell to suggest that they are the work of the same unit, namely the detachment of the British Fleet recorded on a building inscription (*RIB* 1340) found fallen in the portico at the southern end of the building in 1937.⁵ The principal point of similarity was the observation that the Haltonchesters granary was founded on a massive raft of broken limestone, clay and flagging which

underlay both the external walls and interior of the building. This was presumably considered to resemble the clay bonded rubble recorded by Simpson and Richmond at Benwell. As this material is now considered to be a floor make-up rather than an overall foundation the similarity may not be as close as was once thought. The excavations of Brewis at Rudchester were not sufficiently extensive to determine the nature of the granary foundations or the internal disposition of the sleeper walls.⁶

The excavators of 1937 were somewhat premature in their claim that "archaeologically the last possible effort has now been made in the exploration of Condercum" as was also noted during the last piece of salvage recording in 1959.⁷ To the south of West Road archaeological deposits are likely to survive in a reasonable state, although the stone walls have evidently been robbed to their foundations throughout. The watching brief has demonstrated the useful information that can be gained from a very small piece of work, and should any of the buildings overlying the fort and its environs come up for renewal it is essential that the opportunity be taken for full archaeological investigation.

APPENDIX

A Letter From Henry McLauchlan to J. C. Bruce, Concerning excavations at *Condercum*

From the most recent investigation at *Condercum* we can turn to an excavation carried out in April 1858 by J. C. Bruce. This is a noteworthy example of early "rescue archaeology" as the purpose of the work was to recover details of the northern part of the fort before it was covered by Benwell reservoir. It is clear from Bruce's account⁸ that it was considered important to locate the north wall of the fort and thus check the reliability of Shafto's 1751/2 plan.⁹ As an illustration of the forethought which went into the excavation it seems worthwhile to place on record a letter from Henry McLauchlan to Bruce which Paul Bidwell has kindly brought to my attention.

Letter from Henry McLauchlan, 18 Chester Place, Kensington Cross, London, to J. C. Bruce.

December 26 1855

My dear Sir,

I lose no time in sending you another sketch of Condercum, with the supposed lines. The east and west fronts are readily distinguished, as they cross the road; and half the distance between them will give the dotted line (N-S) which I have marked on the sketch. A line cut from the road in a northerly direction, would ascertain the north front I should expect, a few yards on one side or the other would be of no consequence. Please to present my kind remembrance to Mr. Clayton, and my best wishes for the result of the excavation.

I am

My dear Sir

Yours truly

Henry McLauchlan

Tyne and Wear Archives Papers of Ald. Bramble 1074/48(2).

NOTES

¹F. G. Simpson and I. A. Richmond, "The Roman fort on Hadrian's Wall at Benwell", *AA*⁴ 19 (1941), 5, Fig. 1.

²*Ibid.*, 17-21.

³*Ibid.*, 33.

⁴J. P. Gillam, "Haltonchesters", *Univ Durham Gazette* (1960), 6; plan J. C. Bruce *Handbook To The Roman Wall* (13th edn, ed. C. M. Daniels 1978), 86.

⁵Simpson & Richmond, *ibid.*, 19-21; Gillam *ibid.*; D. J. Breeze & B. Dobson *Hadrian's Wall*, 3rd edn (1987), 76.

⁶P. Brewis, "Roman Rudchester", *AA*⁴ 1 (1925), 99-101.

⁷Simpson & Richmond, *ibid.*, 2; D. Charlesworth "A Roman well at Benwell", *AA*⁴ 38 (1960), 233-5.

⁸*AA*² 3 (1859), 47.

⁹J. Brand, *History of Newcastle*, 1789, vol. 1, 606.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The recording would not have been possible

without the permission of British Gas and I am indebted to Ian Varley for readily granting this. I am also grateful to Barbara Harbottle, City of Newcastle Archaeological Department, for her assistance in the on-site negotiations, and Francis Burton of the same department for his kind offer to survey-in the location of the pipe-trench. Paul Bidwell coordinated the

work for Tyne and Wear Museums Service and commented on a draft of this note. I was assisted in the recording by Leon Jazdziejewski, and the illustrations were drawn by Roger Oram. English Heritage, through the good offices of their Inspector David Sherlock, paid for the cost of the watching brief and grant-aided the publication of this report.

