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Excavations in the Praetorium of the Roman Fort and Vicus at
Chester-le-Street, 1960–63*Malcolm Todd*

ABSTRACT

Excavation in the north range of a large building near the centre of the Roman fort at Chester le Street (County Durham) is here reported. The structure is identified as a wing of the commandant's house (praetorium) and dated to the second to fourth centuries. Part of a small apsed Roman building in the vicus immediately south of the fort is also recorded.

INTRODUCTION

The site of Chester le Street on a flat platform 300 metres west of the river Wear and overlooking its small tributary the Cong Burn to the north, has long been known as the position of a Roman fort and vicus. Its ancient name was Concangis (or possibly Concangium; Rivet and Smith 1979, 314), which may enshrine the Celtic name of the Cong Burn. In the mid-eleventh century the site was referred to as Conceastre, indicating the survival of the Con- element. Chance finds of Roman material in the nineteenth century demonstrated the importance of the site (Featherstonhaugh 1855), but no organised study was undertaken for another century. In the 1920s and 1930s the then vicar Canon Jackson recorded what he could from building trenches and other intrusions, and collected finds of pottery, coins and other objects. A list of this material was seen by the writer in 1960. Modern excavation on the north range of the praetorium began in 1960 by J. C. Mann, R. N. Bailey and later by the writer (below, p. 41).

The pace of work quickened from the later 1960s with excavation and recording in the south-east of the fort and on the defences (Gillam and Tait 1968). This was followed by excavation in the western fort area (Rainbird 1971). In 1978–9 an important excavation added detail to the defensive sequence by positing a primary fort with turf defences and timber internal buildings (Evans, Jones and Turnbull 1991), though these conclusions have not been widely accepted. The most recent publication has recorded results west of Church Chare in 1990–91, including plans of barrack accommodation and significant evidence of date for the fort as a whole (Bishop *et al* 1993). Finally, a summary report on the history and archaeology of Chester le Street was prepared, but not published, in 1980 (Clack 1980).

The site examined in 1960–63 was largely free of modern structures. Insubstantial nineteenth-century brick buildings had occupied the site but these had earlier been demolished; their foundations were slight and had not penetrated the Roman levels. No evidence of occupation between the latest Roman deposits and the nineteenth century structures was observed. The account and plan of the building on Church Chare published here amplifies and amends the report by Rainbird (1971). Funding for the work on Church Chare was provided by the Haverfield Bequest of the University of Oxford. In 1962, an additional small excavation was carried out in the north-east corner of the Rectory grounds, at the invitation of the Rev. A. Spurr, south of the fort defences in advance of a phase of landscaping.

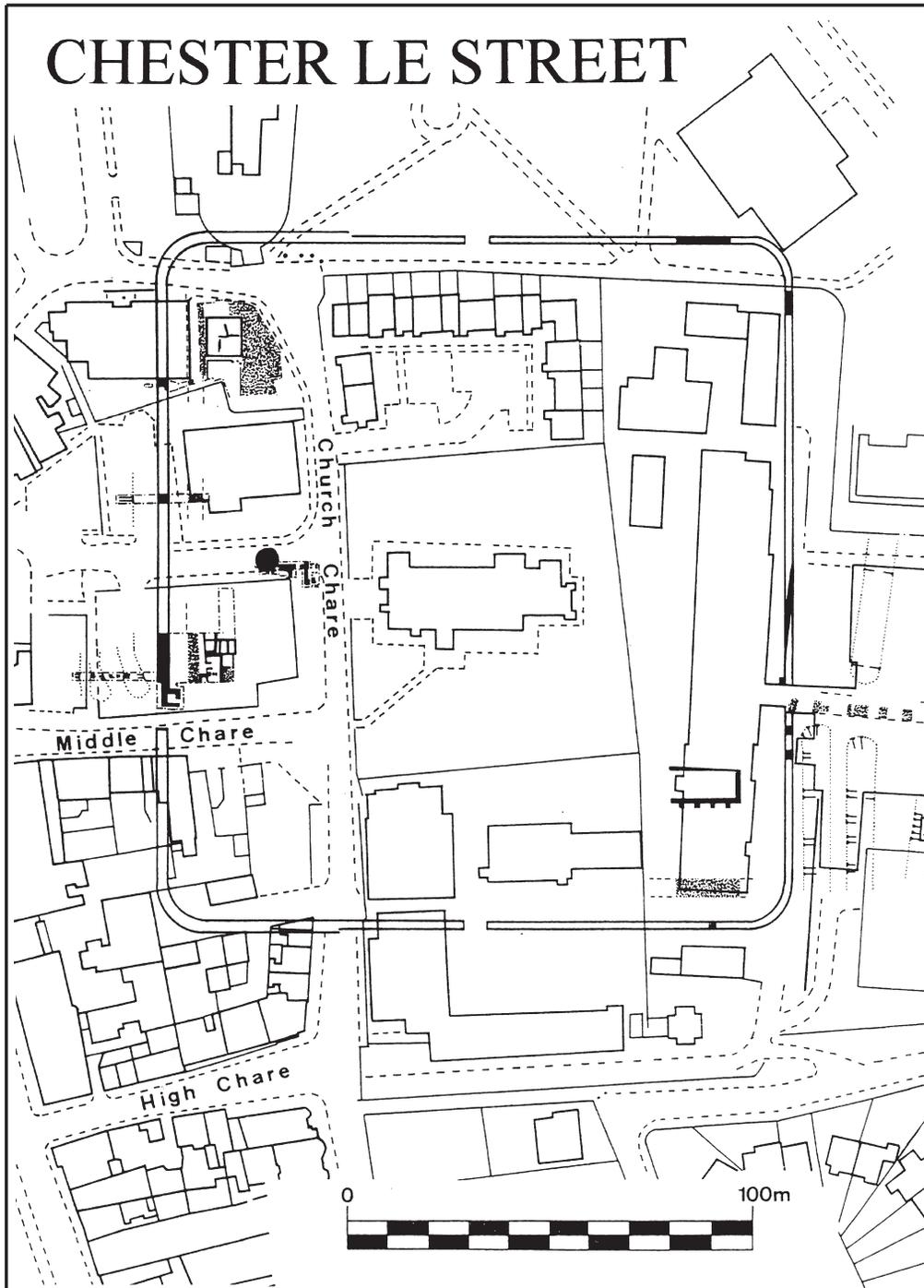


Fig. 1 General plan of the fort (after Bishop et al. 1993).

THE NORTH RANGE OF THE PRAETORIUM (FIGS. 2-3)

The north range of the Praetorium was partly examined in 1960-63 by J. C. Mann and the writer. Four rooms were identified, three of them containing stone-built hypocausts. To the south of the range lay an open courtyard, floored with gravel set in clay over a natural deposit of compacted clayey loam. In all a length of 16.2 metres of the range was examined. The structure was well built in sandstone blocks, with occasional river cobbles in the footings. The superstructure had been extensively robbed, possibly in connection with the building of the nearby mediaeval church in which neatly squared masonry of probable Roman origin is evident. The surviving walls measured between 45 and 60 centimetres in width and were bonded in a mixture of clay and gravel. Careful examination of the courtyard and of Room 4 revealed no trace of earlier timber structures. A single post-hole in a post-pit was identified in the north-west angle of the courtyard, but this appeared to date to the final phase of occupation.

The four rooms in the range were revealed as follows:

Room 1. Only partially accessible west of the Parish Centre. It contained a channelled hypocaust set in a clay and gravel floor. There was no indication that the hypocaust had been heated.

Room 2. This chamber measured 2.8 metres by 3.3 metres. It too contained a channelled

hypocaust set in a clay and gravel floor. As in Room 1, there was no sign that the hypocaust had been fired.

Room 3. This was the most impressive chamber in the range, measuring 6.2 metres by 5.0 metres overall and including a bay in its northern wall. A substantial hypocaust lay beneath its floor, of which stone elements survived (shaded on the plan, fig. 2). What remained of the floor was a surface of clay and gravel. Much of the southern wall was heavily robbed.

Room 4. This opened from Room 3 and consisted of a hall at least 6.4 metres by 4.2 metres without subdivisions. Its floor was of beaten clay and the north wall bore white plaster rendering. An opening in the south wall gave access to the courtyard. The only feature within the hall was a round pit, 45 cm. in diameter and 30 cm. deep.

After abandonment of the building there was no indication of subsequent use, except for the robbing of the south wall and in Room 4. A length of crude walling ran up to the north wall of Room 2; although certainly post-Roman, this could not be more closely dated. After the phase of stone-robbing the range steadily filled with debris and earth which contained small sherds of mediaeval pottery. If later buildings existed, they did not possess substantial footings. This part of the site, at least, had remained open, perhaps as a garden, down to the nineteenth century.

Identification of this building as the north range of the Roman praetorium seems assured.

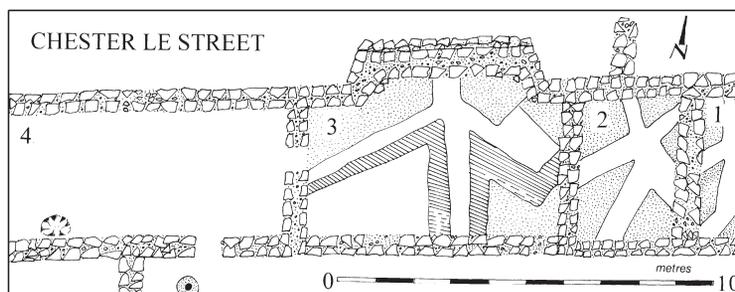


Fig. 2 Plan of the north range of the praetorium (1:200).

CHESTER LE STREET

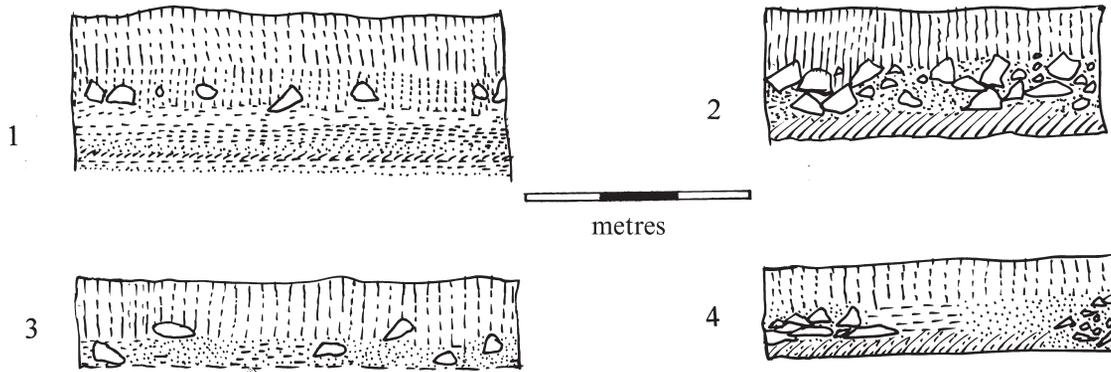


Fig. 3 Sections of the rooms in the north range of the praetorium (1:100).

Across Church Chare, itself probably overlying a major Roman street, lies the fine mediaeval church whose timber Saxon predecessor had housed the body of St Cuthbert for over a century after AD 875 (Cambridge 1989, 373, fig. 362). The stone church probably lies over the remains of the principia, or part of it, and may even incorporate part of the Roman structure in its lower fabric. The presence of substantial stone foundations may well have been an attraction for the mediaeval builders.

Dating

Relatively small quantities of pottery were recovered from stratified deposits in the building. No sherds could be assigned to the late first or early second centuries, with the sole exception of a rim sherd of samian form 18/31 or 31 of the early second century. This is significant as it lay in the foundation-trench of the north wall. The sherds of decorated samian, nos. 1 and 2 (below, p. 44) are Antonine, *c.* AD 160-90; both were found beneath the surface of the courtyard. A small fragment of form 37, unstratified in Room 2, is also probably Antonine. The other pottery *en masse* is in broad agreement with the dating indication by

samian. The material from deposits in the building is no earlier than the mid-second century. Several vessels are to be assigned to the late second and third centuries (nos. 4, 6, 7, 9, 10 and 12 – below, p. 44). Material of the later third and fourth centuries was sparsely represented, but this may only indicate that the principal rooms in this range were kept in clean order down to the late fourth century. Thereafter, no artefacts could be assigned to a period of use.

These dates accord well with those obtained from other areas in the fort. B. R. Hartley (in Gillam and Tait 1968, 91-96) argues for a mid-Antonine foundation date. Bishop et al (1993) propose the second half of the second century, perhaps as late as AD 175.

EXCAVATION IN THE RECTORY GARDEN, SOUTH OF THE FORT

In March 1963 an area of ground at the north-eastern corner of the Rectory garden was reported to be producing worked stone, mortar fragments and pottery. The gardener had recently worked over the area and had unearthed several facing blocks of sandstone,

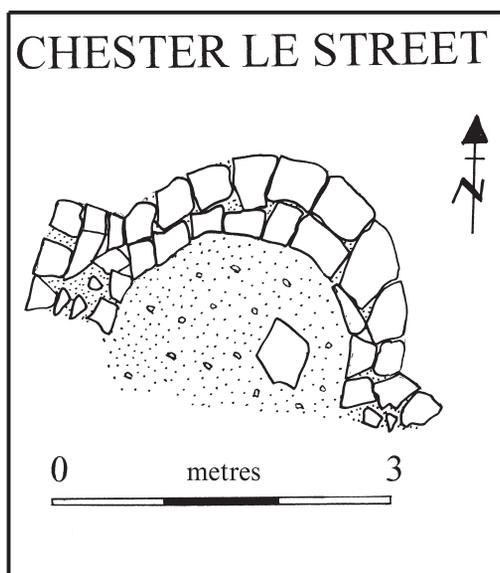


Fig. 4 Plan of apsed building in the Rectory garden (1:66.666).

indicating the presence of a substantial building. The writer was requested to examine the site in advance of any further intrusion below the topsoil. Only a small area measuring 5 metres by 4 metres was available for excavation, so that a key-hole approach was inevitable. The opportunity to examine this area was taken as detailed information on extra-mural settlement at Chester-le-Street was limited in 1963, though finds recorded by Canon Jackson in the 1920s and 1930s indicated that the vicus may have extended well to the south of the fort. Jackson's records and finds were seen by the writer in 1961 but their whereabouts are now unknown.

The removal of 35 cm. of humus revealed the footings of a stone structure aligned north-south (fig. 4). The north end of this building was apsidal, the chord of the apse measuring 2.4 metres across. Only short lengths of walling were uncovered adjoining the apse, the area to the south being unavailable for excavation. The floor of the structure was composed of compacted gravel 12 cm. deep. The walls and floor had been constructed directly on natural clay; no foundation trenches had been dug to

accommodate the wall-footings. No artefacts were found below the floor and only a few pottery sherds above it. These were of vessels current in the fourth century but cannot be more closely dated. The building had been robbed of its dressed stone and only the footing remained.

The complete plan of the building cannot be reconstructed. Its internal width may be estimated at 3.5 metres or slightly more. The structure does not seem to have been domestic but its purpose is far from clear. There are analogues in northern vici but these are not helpful. Late Roman burials have been recorded some 60 metres to the south of the building (Salway 1967, 153), so that the possibility that this was a tomb monument must be entertained, but no supporting evidence is to hand. Another possibility is that this structure was a small shrine situated close to the road leading from the south gate of the fort. This seems preferable to interpretation as a tomb monument though proof is equally unattainable at present. The footing of the building was left in place after excavation and carefully reburied so as to facilitate further work at some future date.

At the very least this building demonstrates beyond doubt that the vicus at Chester-le-Street extended south of the fort, a point which has been questioned in the past. Scattered finds made between the fort and the road leading to the river crossing make the matter more secure, without adding anything on the character of the occupation. It might have been expected that the terrace between the fort and the river Wear would have been taken up with extra-mural settlement but there is little sign of this. A small sondage 42 metres east of the apsed building reported on here revealed a gravel roadway leading east towards the river terrace. This measured 3.2 metres wide and was covered by an old land surface. A few scraps of fourth-century pottery, including the rim of a Crambeck mortarium, lay on the gravel surface. As yet, Chester-le-Street has not produced evidence for an extensive extra-mural vicus like those of Binchester and Lanchester. Nevertheless, Canon Jackson's records and

other chance discoveries suggest widespread use of the level ground to the south and east of the fort. A substantial structure south of the fort, but not precisely located, may have been a bath-house and could well be the same structure as the 'villa' found in 1856, which produced a building inscription of the Second Legion Augusta (RIB 1050). It is not an objection that this building lay too far from the river to have been a bath-house. An inscription set up in AD 216 (RIB 1049) records the provision of an aqueduct to the fort, so that a subsidiary channel to extra-mural baths would not be problematic. The drainage of water and waste from the fort was unusually elaborate, involving major culverts south and west of the defences in areas now heavily built over. Since the above was written a road 200 metres east of the fort and presumably leading to the east gate, and the corner of a stone building, have been identified (information from Paul Bidwell).

FINDS

Roman Pottery: Samian (not illustrated)

1. Fragment of F.37 in the style of Casurius of Central Gaul. His beaded border and leaf. Stanfield and Simpson, *Central Gaulish Potters*, pls. 133, 20 and 137, 56, c. AD 160-90.
2. Fragment of F.37 with the ovolo of Iullinus of Central Gaul. Stanfield and Simpson, fig. 36, 2, c. AD 160-90. Nos. 1 and 2 below courtyard surface.
3. Fragment of F.37. Central Gaul. Probably Antonine. Unstratified in Room 2.
4. Rim sherd of F.18/31 or early 31. Central Gaul. Early second century. Foundation trench of north wall.
5. Base sherd of an early F.31 with interior rouletting. Central Gaul. Antonine.
6. Rim sherd of F.33. Central Gaul. Abraded and residual in rubble layer.

Roman Pottery: Coarseware (fig. 5)

1. Rounded bowl in dark grey fabric. Second century form not commonly represented in

- northern Britain. Below gravel surface of courtyard.
2. Everted rim jar in hard dark grey fabric. Probably second century, but the form is long-lived. Below clay floor in Room 1.
3. Everted rim beaker or jar in dark grey-brown fabric. Unstratified on courtyard surface.
4. Jar with rounded rim in soft black fabric. Under clay floor of Room 1. Probably second to third century.
5. Jar with upright rim and rouletting on body. Hard, well levigated light grey fabric. A second century form. In fragments under courtyard surface.
6. Beaker with everted rim in grey/brown fabric. A long-lived form, but probably second to early third century. In foundation-trench of north wall.
7. Jar with rounded rim in dark grey fabric. Second or third century. Unstratified on courtyard surface.
8. Straight-sided jar with roll-rim in mid-grey fabric. Residual in make-up below floor in Room 1.
9. Rhenish ware beaker in fine light grey fabric with lustrous purple slip. Scratched graffito of a bird. Later second to third century. Below clay floor in Room 2.
10. Flat rimmed jar in hard dark grey fabric. These vessels are common in Lincolnshire and South Yorkshire in the second and third centuries. They are not to be confused with 'Dales Ware'. Below hypocaust in Room 4.
11. Bowl in dark grey ware with black burnish. Crude incisions on the side of the vessel. Third century. Foundation trench of wall bounding Room 2.
12. Wide-mouthed bowl in dark grey fabric with black burnishing. Common in second and third centuries. Occupation deposit in Room 1.
13. Upright beaker with small rim in hard dark grey fabric with light burnishing. Unstratified in courtyard.
14. Flanged bowl with flat rim in hard cream fabric with smooth surface. Early to mid fourth century. In clay floor of Room 2.

EXCAVATIONS IN THE ROMAN FORT AT CHESTER-LE-STREET, 1960-63

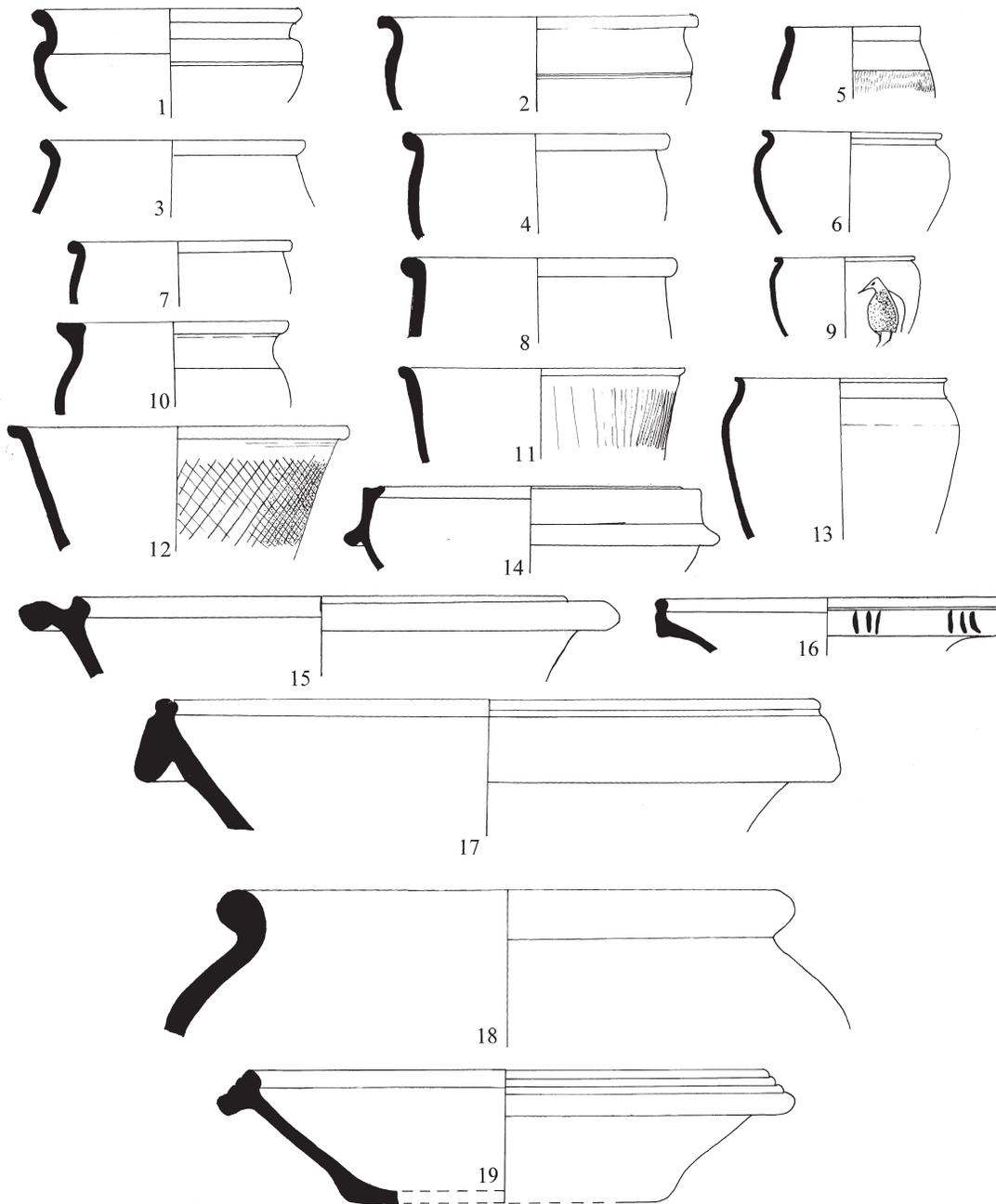


Fig. 5 Roman pottery, coarseware, nos. 1-19 (1:4).

15. Mortarium in hard, creamy white fabric. Probably a Hartshill-Mancetter product. Second century. Unstratified in Rectory grounds.
16. Carinated bowl in cream fabric with brown painted decoration. A Crambeck product. Late fourth century. In rubble layer in Room 2.
17. Mortarium in cream fabric with small black grits. Early third century. In floor of building in the Rectory grounds.
18. Storage jar in coarse dark grey fabric. Unstratified in Rectory grounds.
19. Hammerhead mortarium in cream fabric with small brown and black grits. A common form from the late third to the late fourth century. cf. Gillam 282 (Birdoswald). In rubble layer in Room 3.

Glass Vessels

The following note is based on comments by Dr Clasina Isings in 1964. Six small glass sherds were recovered from a single deposit in Room 2. Only two vessel forms could be distinguished with certainty, both of small beakers.

1. Rim sherd of a beaker in colourless glass with faint iridescence. Isings Form 96, a common fourth century type, though originating in the late third century.
2. Rim sherd of a small beaker in colourless glass. Below the steeply upcurving rim are two rows of oval facets. Probably Isings Form 96. Late third to fourth century. Neither vessel is illustrated.

Crucible

Three conjoined sherds of a crucible in hard-fired dark buff fabric. Metal residues on the interior surface suggest, but do not prove, the manufacture of copper alloy. Below rubble in the courtyard. Not illustrated.

Building Materials

The walls and other stone features in the building were of sandstone, presumably

derived from quarries on the banks of the Wear to the east of the fort. No imported stone was evident. The roofs were presumably of timber or thatch, for no tile fragments were found and none are evidently reused in later buildings in the fort area. River cobbles and clay were used in the footings of walls and gravel in the courtyard surface. Oddly, no trace of opus signinum was found in the hypocausts or anywhere else in the building.

Other Small Objects

Few small finds were recovered. The most significant are:

1. Small convex bronze stud, 0.8 cm. in diameter. In patch of burnt debris.
2. Cylindrical jet bead, 1.9 cm. long. Ash layer in Room 2 and possibly post-dating the collapse of the building.

Organic Remains

Small quantities of organic material were recovered from the courtyard area and from Room 4. Fragments of grass lay among building debris in the courtyard, not securely dated but probably post-Roman. Charcoal fragments found in Room 4 indicated the use of oak, elm, alder, willow and hazel, presumably for domestic purposes. All these species will have been accessible in the adjacent Wear valley.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

Professor Ian Richmond (as he then was) and Charles Daniels gave valuable advice on site, especially in respect of the earliest levels below the praetorium and the clear absence of timber structures. John Gillam commented on the pottery and Clasina Isings on the glass. The writer is also indebted to Paul Bidwell for his comments on a draft version of this report (*in litt.* April, 2005) and to Professor Richard Bailey for his editorial guidance.

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