

New Excavations at Binchester: Results of Season 5 (2013)



Trench 1. View across intervallum road with cavalry barrack in background. Note numerous parallel drains exiting from barrack and heading for main drain along outer edge of road

Background

As explained in previous interim statements, making sense of the features and later stratigraphy within the east corner of the fort has proved to be a lengthy and painstaking process owing to a number of factors. Centuries of ploughing had spread stone from the latest Roman structures around the site making it unclear whether this formed or contained within it actual surfaces or was merely rubble. This possibility was accorded particular importance given the late/sub-Roman surfaces found on the praetorium site and initially seemed to be supported by the vast amount of animal bone found in associated deposits. Pits and depressions filled with soil and also containing much animal bone were also encountered. In several cases a

cattle skull had been placed in the base of the pit. As excavation progressed this year it has become clear that some of these 'pits' were actually depressions caused by subsidence though others certainly were pits including one enormous example cut through the intervallum road at the corner of the fort. Some of this subsidence is so severe that they may have been caused by geological rather than archaeological phenomena bearing in mind the unstable nature of the subsoil. Some questions about this activity will probably only be answered by radiocarbon dating and chemical analysis in the post-excavation process but there does seem a strong possibility that the late-sub-Roman activity found on the praetorium site is also represented here albeit in a much disturbed form.

Although it was clear right from the first season that the remains of a long, narrow barrack-like building lay within the excavation area it is really only during the recently completed fifth season that the details of its latest phases have become clear. Aligned with its long axis north-east/south-west the building is 12 metres wide and divided internally into compartments or *contubernia* 4.20 – 4.40 metres in width. Each *contubernium* has an inner and outer room separated by a timber partition in an arrangement very similar to the cavalry barracks at Wallsend. The outer rooms, at Binchester facing out on to the intervallum road and clearly providing accommodation for the horses, feature rough surfacing with a slot or drain and an area paved with large slabs affording a path to the troopers' living room at the rear which contained a hearth. The outer 12 metres or so of the building, next to the north-east defences, contains the troop commander or decurion's living quarters. In a later phase the barrack was reduced to a width of around 7.5 metres. Neither phase is as yet closely dated but both are likely to belong within the 4th Century. Elements of earlier

phases are also beginning to appear while the undulating form of the outer wall of the building on the north-west side again testifies to significant subsidence.

At the east corner of the fort the inner face of the fort wall - generally thought to be of early 3rd Century date - has been exposed to reveal finely dressed masonry. Part of the angle-tower has also been uncovered though its masonry has been heavily robbed. Immediately north of the tower a small latrine building attached to the fort wall has been exposed. Approximately 3.5 by 4 metres in size, this features a floor paved with large stone slabs - which because it was laid over the tail of the rampart has subsided towards the intervallum road - on which were found two stone troughs which presumably functioned as containers for water and cleaning materials. The raised seating bench had been constructed along the side formed by the fort wall. In the space below a drain exited through the fort wall via a superbly constructed arched culvert. From an investigation just outside the fort wall by Kenneth Steer in 1937



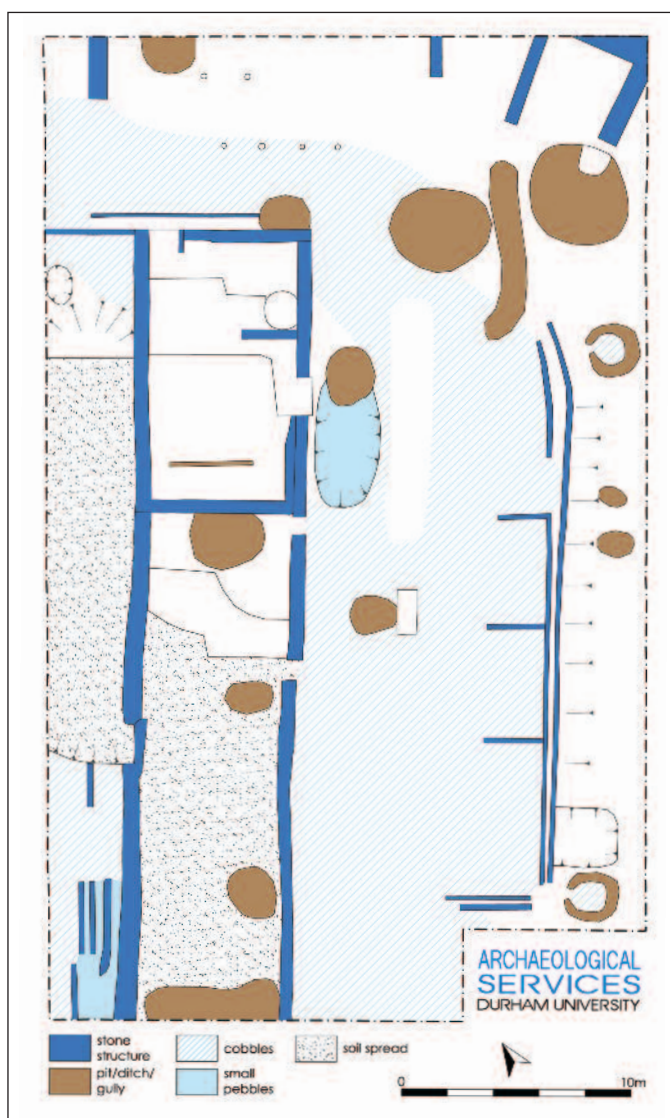
Trench 1. View across cavalry barrack with original front wall at right and later front wall of narrowed building at centre



East corner of fort showing interior of fort wall, latrine and angle-tower



Latrine building looking south



Binchester Plan Tr 1 at end of the 2012 season

we know that the drain emptied into a circular chamber 2 metres in diameter set in the area between it and the defensive ditch. Hooppell's excavations revealed an identical arrangement at the north corner of the fort though here the chamber was square. To try and ensure ample flushing of this facility its drain had been connected to the drainage culvert that ran along the edge of the neighbouring intervallum road. The latter has been exposed throughout the excavated area and on the south-east stretch is crossed at regular intervals by drains originating from the equine compartments at the front of the barrack.

In the trench outside the fort work this year concentrated on the portion of the building at the south end of the trench thought to be part either

of the regimental bath-building or just possibly a bath-building attached to a *mansio* [lodging-house used by officials travelling on state business but also taking paying guests]. Like many such structures it exhibits a complex structural history but the striking thing about it is the spectacular degree of preservation resulting from an unusual combination of circumstances. The building appears to have been partially terraced into a sloping ground on this side of Dere Street. Over the course of several centuries the floor levels inside the building remained more or less the same but successive reconstructions of neighbouring buildings and numerous re-surfacings of Dere Street resulted in the ground surface around it rising by a metre or more. This process is well illustrated by sketches in Hooppell's report of his work in this area. At a late stage in its history – not yet precisely dateable but almost certainly after 350 AD – the building became redundant and, with its superstructure still standing, was used thereafter as a giant refuse receptacle. Tip lines in the fill show this was deposited sequentially rather than all in one episode but still over a comparatively short period. The consequence of these factors is that the fabric of the building survives to a height in excess of 2.25 metres above floor level with large expanses of wall-plaster surviving in situ. An object recovered from this fill and the subject of much publicity last summer was the approximately half life-size sculpted head of a Romano-Celtic deity.

The identity of the god in question is unknown as there is no accompanying inscription. Indeed, the head was only ever just that; it was never part of a



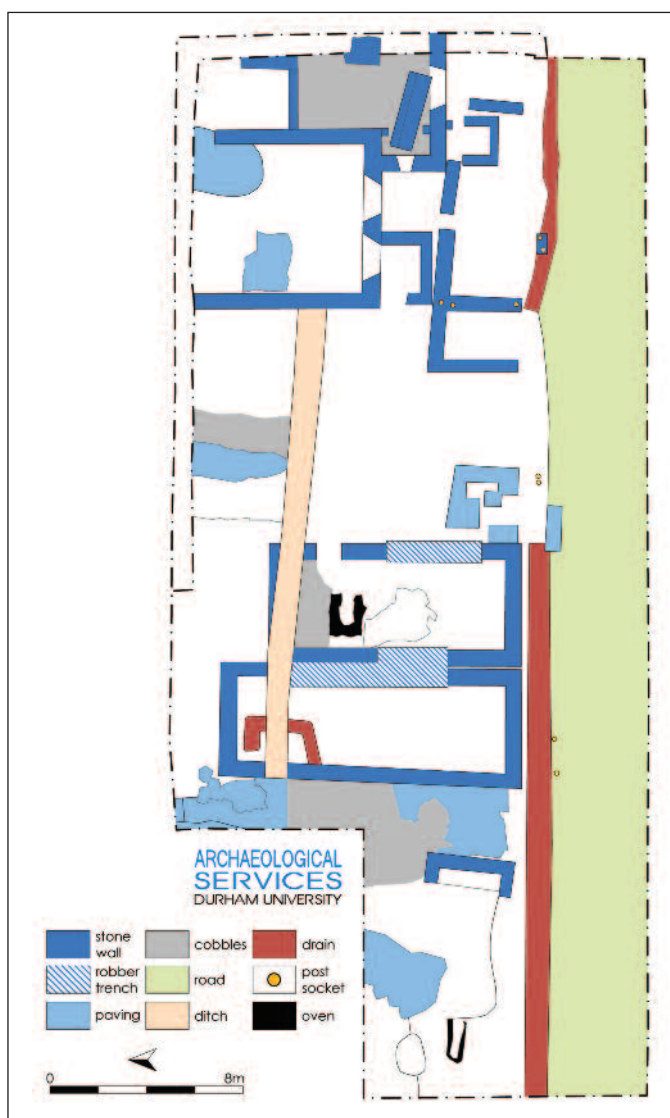
Severely robbed remains of angle-tower walls



Latrine building looking east



Arch in fort wall for latrine drain



Plan of Trench 2 (in vicus) at end of the 2012 season

statue. Possibly that was the original intention but something went wrong in the carving such as the stone fracturing while being carved.

Working out the structural development of this building is still in its early stages but the following provisional interpretation can be offered as an interim statement. Two rooms of the original building lie within the trench; a large room measuring 6 by at least 10 metres and to the south of this a long, narrow corridor-like chamber a little over 2 metres wide. The large room featured two splayed window embrasures in its west wall and a doorway in the north wall. This could well have been the apodyterium or changing-room. Two doorways in its south wall gave access to the 'corridor'. The eastern of these was immediately adjacent to a chamber

projecting into the large room but accessed from the 'corridor'. Comparison with the baths at Chesters suggests this could have housed a cold plunge-bath or *piscina* or just possibly a free-standing pedestal wash basin or *labrum*. At a height of about 2 metres above floor level the west wall of this chamber incorporates a splayed and bevelled window embrasure providing illumination to the interior of this otherwise totally enclosed room. The 'corridor' would have led ultimately to the circular chamber found by Hooppell and his findings indicate further chambers lie to both the east and the north. Doorways both blocked and still in use in the south wall of the 'corridor' indicate further chambers in this direction. If, as seems likely, the baths extended northwards this would explain the modest size of the strip-buildings just described as the space between the *balneum* and the road would have been quite restricted.

A subsequent addition to the west side of the building extended the 'corridor', or created a new chamber at this end of it, with a small recess opening off to the north. At the front of latter, which could have housed a small plunge bath or basin, the springing of an arch is still extant. The rear wall of the recess incorporated a very small splayed window embrasure with a larger one in the wall of the extension directly opposite the 'corridor'. All the exterior window embrasures mentioned so far were later blocked up presumably replaced by others at a higher level, a modification possibly implemented in response to the rise in the surrounding ground level.

Alternatively the building may have undergone a change of use. The insertion of a cross-wall in the 'corridor' and the blocking up of a number of doorways including that in the north wall of the apodyterium and the westernmost of the pair in the north wall of the 'corridor' may have been contemporary with this change. A doorway in the new cross-wall has monolithic stone jambs and the surviving doorway into the apodyterium was modified in similar fashion. Surviving nearly to lintel height, these doorways are paralleled by examples inserted into walls of the nearby circular chamber (*sudatorium*?) found by Hooppell. Masonry to support benching was now inserted along at least two walls in the *apodyterium* while the northern window embrasure in the west wall was converted into a doorway sheltered by a



Trench 2 Bath building. View west along corridor



Trench 2. Bath-building. Rubble infilling of doorway in late cross-wall in 'corridor'



Trench 2. Bath-building. North wall of 'corridor' showing blocked doorway and recess



Trench 2. Bath-building. Late structure of several phases constructed in front of baths and partly overlying Dere Street. Note large slabs with small holes drilled into them of 'park-railings' type. Also realigned roadside drain



Trench 2. Bath-building. West end of 'corridor' and small chambers in extension. Note surviving springing of arch



Trench 2. Bath-building. Blocked-up window embrasure in back wall of small chamber at west end of 'corridor'



Aerial plan view of Binchester showing location of trenches in relation to rest of the site. *Aerial-cam Ltd*

small porch added to the exterior. The final feature worthy of mention is a small semi-circular recess high up in the face of the north wall of the 'corridor' just short of the late doorway. A less well-preserved counterpart exists in the opposite wall. These could have housed items of sculpture appropriate to such a building or perhaps more mundanely lamps to illumine an increasingly dark interior.

Whether the building, or this part of it, was still functioning as a bath-building after these changes is open to question. The rooms described may have become cellarage. As a postscript to this season's work two altars were recovered from the (?) *apodyterium*; one plain on all four sides, though neatly carved, which probably had a painted dedication of which nothing has survived and the other bearing a fine carving of a bull on one side and an inscription on the front panel as follows: *Fortune/ Reduci/ Eltaominus/ emeritus/ ex arc(h)itect(us)/ Alae Vetto(num)/ v(otum) s(olvit) l(aetus) l(ibens) m(erito)*. 'To Fortuna Redux, Eltaominus, veteran, former architect, (serving with) the Ala Vettonum,



Uninscribed altar



Inscribed altar bearing dedication to 'Fortune the Home-bringer'

gladly, willingly and deservedly fulfilled his vow. The dedication is of particular importance because although there is plenty of evidence for architects serving with the legions there is very little attesting their presence in auxiliary regiments. The infilling of these rooms almost to ground level with rubbish was not the final episode in the life of this building. Overlying the refuse deposits in the apodyterium was a layer of rubble that gave the appearance of discarded material from the core of demolished walls. Later still a substantial if crudely built rectangular structure roughly 6 by 4 metres in size was erected in the narrow space between the bath-building and the road. Equipped with a flooring of large stone slabs this structure was subsequently extended northwards. Two layers of substantial paving laid over the rubbish deposits in the neighbouring chambers in the bath-building may be contemporary with one or more phases of this late structure perhaps indicating that it had been brought back in to use one last time before its final abandonment.

Finally, Roger Tomlin has revised his interpretation of the text of the fragmentary building slab found in 2011 re-used in late surfacing beside Dere Street in the *vicus*. He now restores this as '*Sacer / ... [cui pr]aest / [...praef(ectus) e]quitum.*' = '...commanded by prefect of cavalry'. It would appear to be a formal building inscription and usually the names of the unit and its commander would be preceded by a reference to the provincial governor. However as SACER cannot be reconciled with the name of any known governor it seems that a consular date was inserted, *Tertullo et Sacerdote co(n)s(ulibus)*. This is the year AD 158 which would fit well with the construction of a new fort at Binchester as a consequence of the refurbishment of Hadrian's Wall which is also now thought to have occurred in that year (RIB 1389).

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Inscribed altar



Carved head perhaps representing Romano-Celtic deity taken by Jeff Veitch for Archaeological Services Durham University.



Close-up of text of inscribed altar