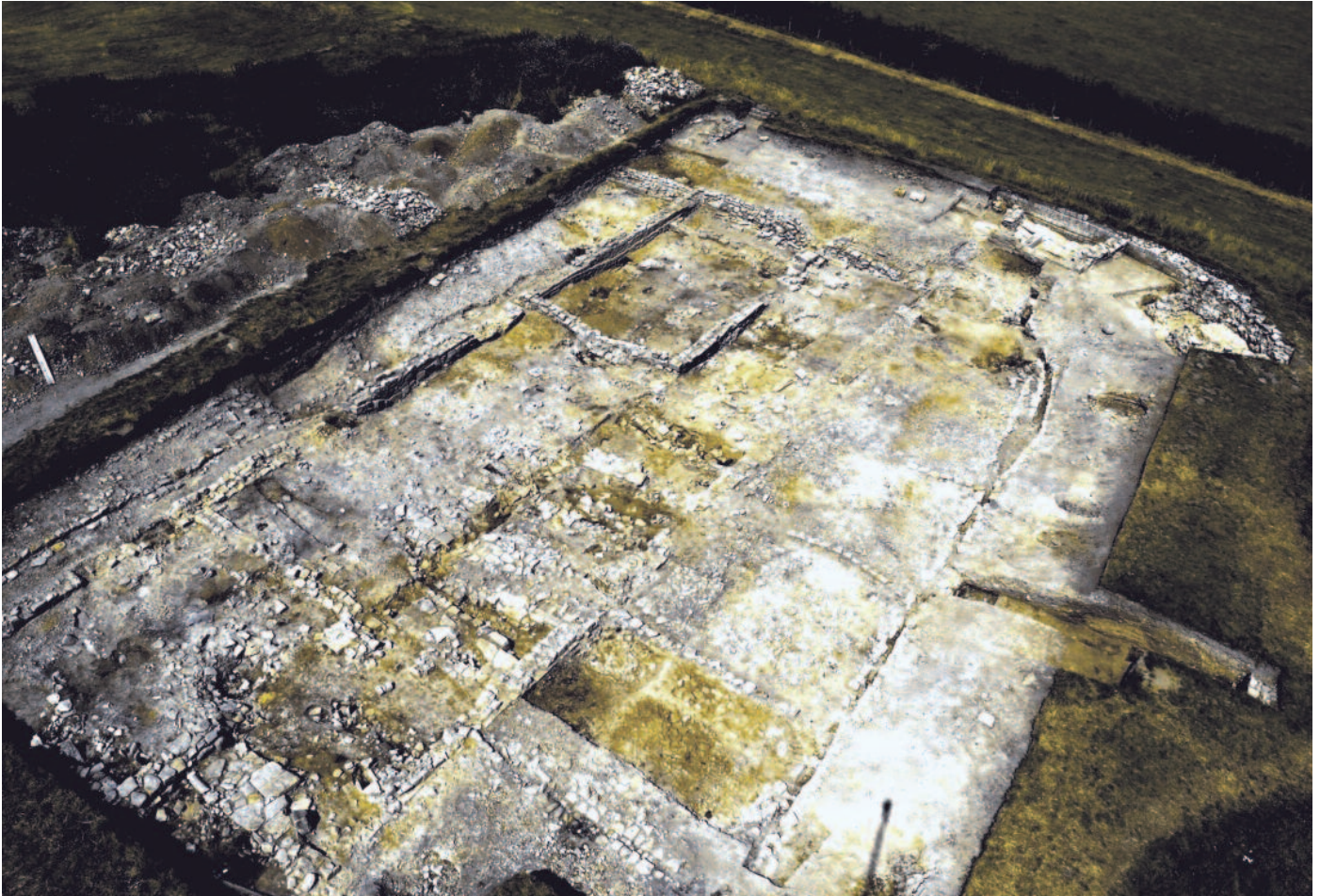


New Excavations at Binchester: Results of the 2014 Season



1. Aerial view of Trench 1 looking east showing, from right to left, defences, intervallum road and cavalry barrack.

The fort

Work continued this year on the cavalry barrack in the east corner of the fort (1 & 2). Numerous post-holes were uncovered belonging to successive timber partition walls within the stone barrack along with further examples of the slots or troughs that served to drain or collect the horses' urine. The gable wall of the building next to the intervallum had clearly been rebuilt on at least one occasion. Towards the end of the season a drainage channel was found below the floor of the adjacent officer's accommodation running at an angle to the general alignment of the building and passing beneath its north wall (6). Two infant burials were found a little further to the west one either side of the north wall.

At the east corner of the defences the excavation area was extended to encompass the entirety of the angle-tower including the fort wall (3). The side and back walls were found to have been severely affected by stone-robbing with the inner and outer facing-stones having been removed from all but the lowest course. Another extension to the area of excavation was made on the south-east side to define the precise position of the fort wall on this side. The space between the back of the fort wall and the intervallum road is wider here than on the north-east side. This is because the defences on this side belong in origin to the larger primary fort whereas the latter are exclusively Antonine. The interior face only of the fort wall was exposed and was found to be of different construction and rather cruder in form



2. Aerial view of Trench 1 looking west.



3. Aerial view of Trench 1 showing east corner of fort showing fort wall, angle-tower and adjacent latrine building.



4. Trench 1 showing free-standing enclosed oven structure at rear of north-east fort wall.



5. Trench 1 rear face of fort wall on south-east defences.

than the neatly dressed masonry of its counterpart on the north-east side (5). This could be explained by it being a later repair. Then again, it could be a wall added to the front of the rampart belonging to the primary fort before its abandonment in the Hadrianic period and then incorporated in the later wall.

The vicus

In the trench outside the fort excavation revealed a third 'strip-building' immediately south of the two uncovered in previous seasons (7). This one is slightly smaller overall than its neighbours and is even cruder in construction. The wall footings consisted of large blocks or boulders which seem likely to have acted as the base for a timber-framed superstructure. This late structure partly overlies the wall of an earlier building. Excavation of a late pit adjacent to this wall revealed its southern face to be constructed of neatly-dressed blocks in a style very reminiscent of the north-east fort wall (8). This could conceivably have been the perimeter wall of an open-air exercise yard



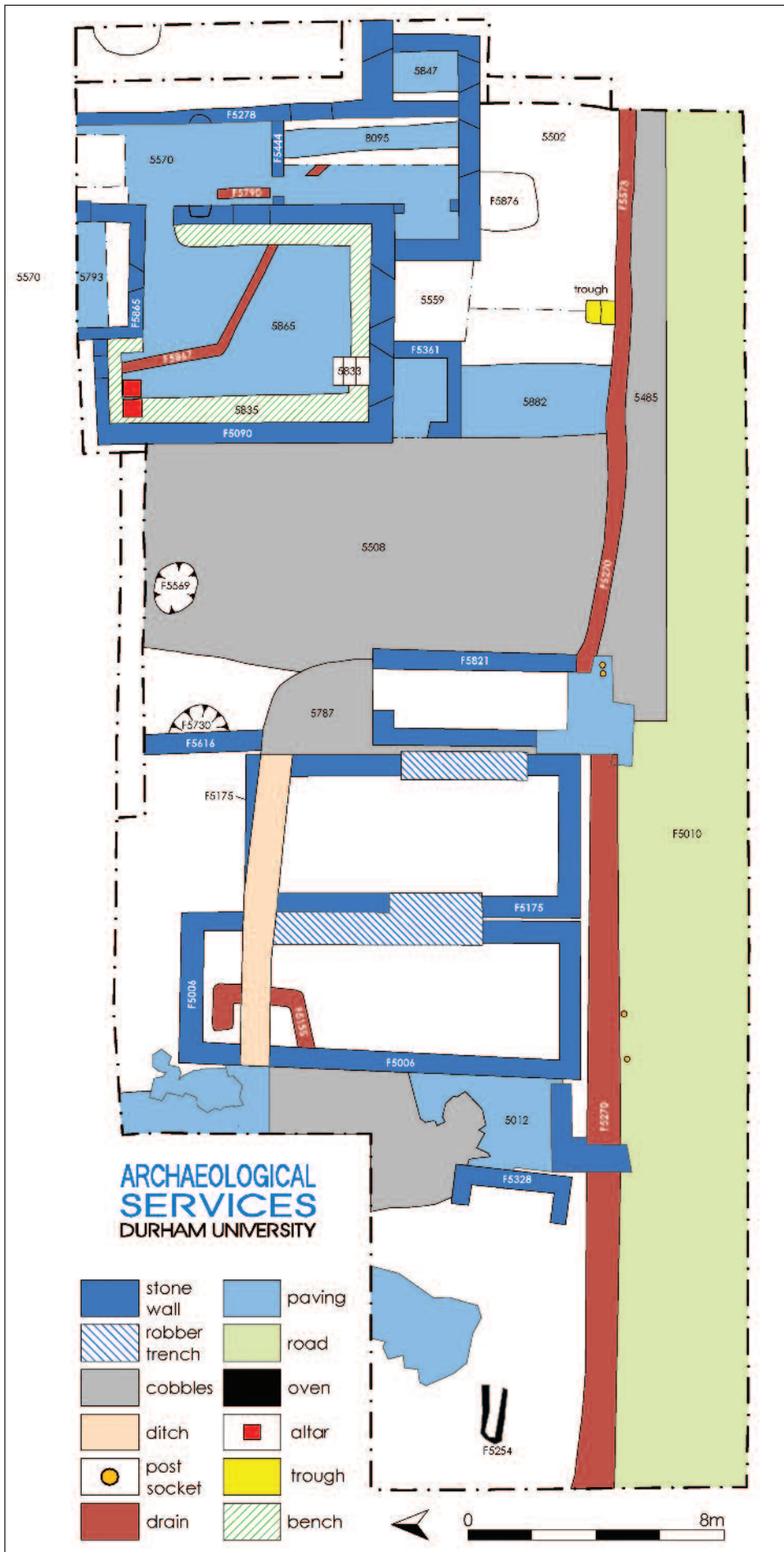
6. Trench 1, drain passing beneath north wall of barrack.

(palaestra) attached to the baths lying immediately to the south.

Progress with excavation of the part of the bath-building encompassed by the current work was accelerated this year by the fact that volunteers were able to participate throughout the entire two months this season instead of just the



7. Aerial view of Trench 2 showing third strip-building revealed this year.



Trench 2 at end of 2013 season.



8. Trench 2 Aerial view of bath-building.



9. Trench 2 south face of earlier wall beneath late strip-building (back wall of palaestra colonnade?).



10. Bath-building, south wall of apodyterium.



11. Bath-building, west wall of apodyterium showing blocked-up window embrasure to left and cut-down window embrasure with inserted steps to right.



12. Bath-building, west wall of room south of corridor showing window embrasure with painted plaster in situ.

second month as in previous years. As work has progressed this building's marvellous state of preservation has become ever more apparent. Only a small portion of this structure lies within the current excavation (9). Two chambers belonging to the original building have been revealed; a large room measuring 10 m by 6 m internally and most probably the changing-room or apodyterium and, running along the south side of this a narrow corridor-like room. Another chamber to the south has been partially exposed and this was probably the first of three such chambers forming the conventional linear layout of frigidarium, tepidarium and caldarium with the principal furnace/s beyond the last of these along with the water reservoir (*castellum aquae*). Hooppell excavated a circular room originally equipped with a hypocaust just a few metres east of the boundary of the new excavation and directly in line with the corridor. Rooms of this shape functioned as dry heat sweating chambers (*laconica*) contrasting with the steamy

atmosphere of the main bathing suite. Hooppell also found elements of further rooms to the north and east of the *laconicum*.

As described in last year's magazine the most striking aspect of this building is its remarkable state of preservation: walls still standing 2.1 m or more above Roman floor level and including features such as doorways, window embrasures and the haunches of arches and vaulting-ribs along with extensive in-situ areas of painted wall-plaster.

Access into the apodyterium, and thus the building in general, appears originally to have been via a doorway in its north wall from the area which, as just mentioned, may have been an exercise yard enclosed by a colonnade (*palaestra*). The original doorway into the corridor was positioned centrally in the south wall of the apodyterium (10). The west wall of the room, facing out towards Dere Street, was pierced by



13. Bath-building, close-up of painted plaster shown in image 12.



14. Bath-building, east wall of apodyterium showing blocked-up doorway and wall of intruding secondary chamber.

two large and splayed window embrasures. These measured 1.70 m wide internally and 1.30 m externally and were spaced 0.90 m apart. The lower edge of the sloping window sills lay 1.30 m above the floor (11). The fact that these large windows faced out onto the main street would not have encouraged voyeurs or embarrassed the bathers because the windows would have been glazed with small panes of opaque glass set in an iron frame.

The original west wall of the corridor had been removed during a later phase but would probably have incorporated a window like those in the apodyterium. A doorway near the west end gave access to the first of what is assumed to have been a suite of chambers lying to the south. Its west and east walls were continuation of those of the apodyterium and the chamber can be assumed to have been of similar dimensions. Only a small portion of this room has been excavated at the time of writing but it is clear that its painted wall-plaster is very well-preserved and also that its west wall incorporated at least one window

embrasure like those already described (12 & 13).

There are a number of modifications which judging from their structural interrelationship could have belonged to a single and major scheme of refurbishment. Most of the east wall of the changing-room was demolished to enable the construction of a new chamber which projected into the apodyterium by c. 1 m and forming a 2 m wide alcove in the north-east corner. The surviving stretch of the east wall of the apodyterium included a narrow doorway (14). This had been blocked-up and plastered over in a later phase of alteration. Whether this was part of the original design or inserted when the alterations currently being described were effected cannot be determined. The new chamber measured 3 m wide internally. Its walls were lined with a thick render of waterproof concrete and its floor was formed of the same material incorporating a narrow step or bench against the south wall (15 & 16). This had clearly functioned as a plunge-bath though whether hot (alveus) or cold (piscina) is unknown at present. Both haunches of a



15. Bath-building, part of secondary chamber intruding into apodyterium at early stage of excavation.



16. Chamber shown in image 15 with section excavated down to floor level.

vaulting-rib spanning the room from north to south survive about 1 m in from its west wall. An unusual feature of this chamber is the fact that its south wall stopped at a height of c 1.5 m above the floor level of the neighbouring corridor and just below the springing-point of the vaulting-rib. The top of the wall was capped at this point by a smooth slab of stone. This opening may have been to provide some indirect illumination of the chamber's interior by light coming in from the neighbouring corridor and/or provide some indirect heating of the corridor if the chamber contained a hot bath. Further illumination of the chamber interior, again indirectly, was achieved by a narrow splayed window or opening incorporated in its west wall at a similar level.

The apodyterium itself also underwent a major change at this time with the insertion of a plunge-bath (probably cold) occupying the entire western third of the room. Unlike the plunge-bath just described the bulk of this one was set into the floor of the room. The bath had a 0.30 m thick

lining of concrete which rose about 0.60 m above floor level forming a revetment at the front. Much of the latter had been removed when the bath eventually became redundant and was filled in but there were sufficient vestiges at the point where it had joined the north and south walls of the room to indicate its former presence (10 & 17). The insertion of the plunge-bath necessitated the blocking-up of the doorway into the corridor and the opening of a new one further to the east, immediately adjacent to the corner of the new chamber constructed at this time.

The corridor was also modified. Its west wall was removed and a 2 m wide and 6 m long extension constructed. The new outer wall of the corridor featured a splayed window embrasure 2.10 m wide internally and 1.50 m wide externally. The lower edge of its sill was 1.30 m above the floor of the corridor. Opening off the extended corridor on its north side was a small recess with a semi-circular vaulted ceiling and a small splayed window opening in the centre of its back wall



17. South wall of apodyterium showing blocked-up doorway with stub of retaining wall at front of inserted plunge-bath.



18. Labrum chamber in north part of extension at west end of corridor; note surviving haunches of arch at front.



19. Small plunge-bath in south part of extension at west end of corridor.

about 1.5 m above floor level (18). The haunches of the arch at the front still survive. Its floor consisted of two massive slabs of stone neatly fitting up against the quarter-round concrete mouldings at the base of its walls. It may have housed a free-standing pedestal wash-basin or labrum though no trace of such remained.

A similar recess now opened off the south side of the corridor, this one containing a 0.95 m deep plunge-bath sunk partially below floor level with a low and narrow step/bench on the floor against the corridor (19). Measuring approximately 2 x 1 m, and thus usable by only one or two people at a time, this was lined with waterproof concrete with a quarter-round moulding around the edges of the floor. The base was formed of two large stone slabs which may originally have been covered with a lead sheet. In the centre of the north side at floor level was a drain-hole which allowed the waste water to flow into a drainage culvert running below the corridor floor (20). This

passed beneath the original blocked-up doorway in the north wall of the corridor, continued across the apodyterium where it was joined by an outflow from the large plunge-bath inserted in this room, and then changed course to exit beneath the doorway in the east wall. A roughly cut vertical channel in the south-west corner of the bath suggests the crude robbing-out of some fitting. The upper end of this feature lay at the same height as the top of the upper step at the front of the bath suggesting that it was connected with the water level in the bath. Most likely it contained a lead pipe either supplying water to the bath or functioning as an overflow. The west wall of this chamber featured a small window 0.90 m wide internally and with a maximum height of 1.10 m which had been blocked-up at a later stage (21).

The next discernible major changes saw the partial demolition and filling in of the plunge-bath in the apodyterium and the construction of a low



20. Drain-hole in floor of plunge-bath shown in image 19.



22. Silver ring with cornelian gemstone carved with anchor and fishes Christian symbol.



21. West wall of plunge-bath showing blocked-up window and damage resulting from the robbing-out in antiquity of a lead water pipe (?).

bench around the perimeter of the room apart from that section formed by the wall of the new plunge-bath chamber inserted in the previous round of modifications. This bench was 0.42 m high and 0.65 m wide formed of three courses of masonry. On top of this originally there would have been wooden or stone seating. The means of entry into the apodyterium was also changed on this occasion. By this time – possibly around 300 AD – a significant difference had developed between the external ground level and the internal floor level of the bath-building. Whereas the latter had remained more or less the same throughout the building’s evolution the level of the area around the building had, because of the succession of demolitions and rebuildings of neighbouring structures and the numerous re-surfacings of Dere Street, had gradually risen to the point where it was 1.2 m higher than the floor level inside the baths. Whichever of the doorways in the east and north walls still in use was now blocked up. A new entrance was formed out of the northernmost window opening in the west wall (11). The sill was cut away and a short, narrow flights of steps constructed leading down into the apodyterium. A small porch-like structure with a

narrow doorway in its north wall was erected against the exterior to shelter the new entrance from the elements and to prevent water ingress during periods of heavy rain.

Both the changing-room and the adjacent corridor were provided with a new floor of stone slabs at this time. The earlier drainage system in this area was abandoned and instead a shallow open drain was formed in the corridor paving at the foot of its north wall. This later passed out of use when a cross-wall was built across the corridor. A doorway in this wall is notable for its monolithic stone jambs.

At what point in its structural history the windows were blocked up is unclear. This may have happened in a piecemeal fashion as various rooms in the complex were altered or it may have happened in a single programme of work. There is also the possibility, in view of the rising external ground level, that in some cases (though clearly not all) new windows were inserted at a higher level. It is even possible that in its final phase the bath-building, or parts of it, ceased to function as such and was put to other uses; storage for example.

At some time in the fourth century, very possibly around 350 AD, the building was abandoned and its rooms subsequently used as receptacles for vast amounts of domestic refuse. The absence of any demolition deposits on the flooring suggests either the superstructure remained standing or those who carried out the dismantling were unusually tidy. It was the difference in level between the interior and exterior coupled with the insertion of such a vast quantity of refuse that resulted in the building's excellent state of preservation. How long it took for the interior to become completely filled to ground level is difficult to say but a gestimate of 10-20 years seems reasonable. At a late stage in the accumulation of the filling a layer of building debris was deposited in the former apodyterium. This consisted of mortar and small rubble as might be derived from an event such as the demolition of a wall in which the facing-stones had been removed for re-use elsewhere while the material from the core was discarded. Refuse dumping then continued until the rooms – and presumably the entire bath-building – were full to

ground level. Thus whereas at Pompeii and Herculaneum the agency of preservation was volcanic ash and pumice, at Binchester it was rubbish!

As described in previous accounts, an entirely new structure was erected subsequently in the narrow space between the former frontage of the baths and the edge of Dere Street. In fact, it partly overlay Dere Street and its construction necessitated the building of a new length of roadside culvert. This new structure measured 6 m by 4.25 m overall and butted up against the west wall of the bath-building. The footings of its walls are unlike those of any other building found on the site so far consisting of large and very roughly hewn blocks of stone but with a very flat and smooth upper surface into which had been drilled small holes no more than 100 mm in diameter. The latter are thought to have functioned as locating sockets for timber posts forming the main components of the superstructure. Buildings with similar footings – designated for obvious reasons as 'park-railing type' foundations – have been found in late contexts at a number of Roman forts most notably Haltonchesters. Internally there was a single room containing a stone trough. This building was later extended northwards by a further 5m and two more rooms added. The footings of the extension consisted of large boulders along with re-used examples of the veranda post socket stones which given that these were set with the socket facing upwards presumably had posts set in them again.

This wasn't however the final event in the history of this part of the site. The late building just described was eventually demolished along with any still upstanding elements of the baths superstructure and the area covered over with paving. This varied considerably in quality but this event does at least indicate the continuation of some form of ordered community.

A notable individual find this season was a silver ring decorated with a cornelian gemstone (22). The latter is carved with an image of two fishes hanging from an anchor, a recognised Christian symbol. Professor Martin Henig considers it to be of 3rd century date and so it is likely evidence for the presence of a Christian and perhaps at an

early date. The only other example from Britain comes from York and is not as well-preserved.

Postscript

Some, perhaps many, readers will be aware of the unsettling situation that emerged during the summer of 2014 when it was announced that the Church Commissioners – who own most of the land at and around Binchester – were putting it up for sale. Worse still, the way in which the land had been divided into lots meant that the area containing the Roman settlement could potentially be split between two new owners.

Because the site is a Scheduled Monument there was no danger of damage by development but this could have resulted in significant complications concerning public access to the displayed part of the site owned by Durham County Council as well as the undertaking of further research and the staging of events. For Durham County Council to have secured the site for the future would have involved considerable expenditure at a time of severe financial constraints. Fortunately the situation was resolved satisfactorily by the purchase of the site by the Auckland Castle Trust and the two parties have embarked on discussions as to the future development and improvement of the site and its facilities.

Dr David Mason,
Principal Archaeologist,
Durham County Council



An interesting pot-sherd from Binchester

An interesting fragment of pottery was found recently at Binchester but it did not come from the excavations. It was spotted on the top of a molehill beside one of the raised walkways at the site by a member of the re-enactment group Roma Antiqua.

It's a fragment from the rim of a thin-walled cooking pot in a buff fabric probably of second century date and the interesting aspect is that it bears part of an incised graffito in neat cursive letters made before the vessel was fired in the kiln.

It was sent to Dr Roger Tomlin at Wolfson College, Oxford, who provided the following interpretation. At least two people are mentioned as the personal name *Eprius* is preceded by *et* (and). *Eprius* is a Latin name but it is quite rare and has not been found anywhere else in Britain.