

Excavations at Bowness-on-Solway, Cumberland, by T.W. Potter

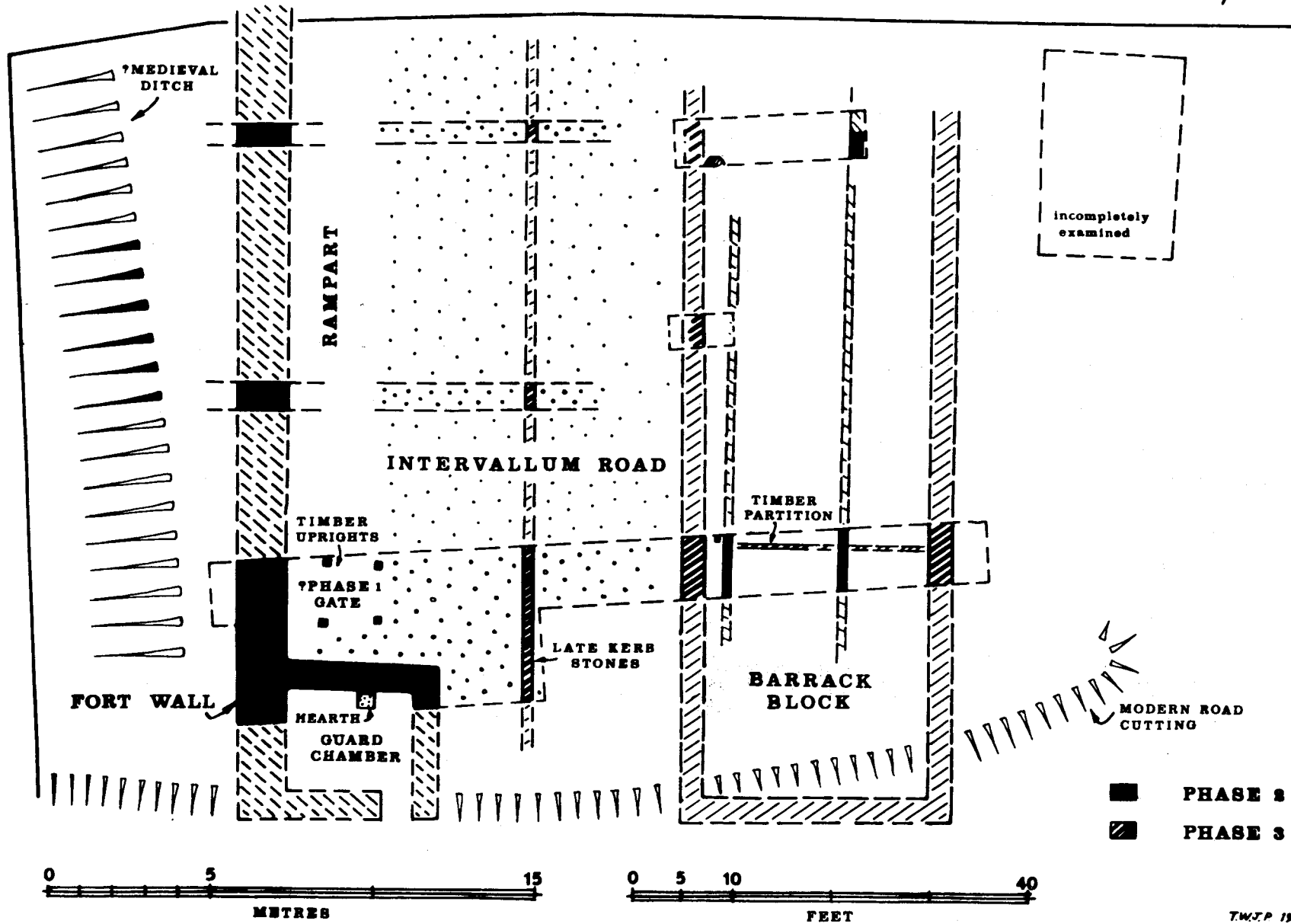
A rescue excavation for the Department of the Environment took place in December 1973 at the Hadrian's Wall fort of Bowness-on-Solway. The excavation was carried out by a team from the University of Lancaster in advance of house building on the western side of the fort. Bowness, Roman Maia, was the most westerly of the seventeen forts distributed along Hadrian's Wall. At nearly seven acres in size, it was also the second largest. Much of the fort lies beneath the small fishing village of Bowness, which is built upon a low knoll, immediately beside the Solway Firth. This may explain the paucity of archaeological investigation for, with the exception of small-scale trial trenching in 1930, 1955 and 1967, the site remains largely unexplored, in spite of its obvious importance as the fort which guarded the western end of Hadrian's Wall.

The present excavations (fig.11) did much to elucidate the structural history of the western part of the fort. The earliest phase was represented by a rectangular timber gate tower, 1.90 x 2.00 m., part of the Porta Praetoria, and a turf and clay rampart. There were also traces of Timber buildings, probably barrack blocks. Associated with these features were Hadrianic potsherds and a denarius of Hadrian, an issue of 119-121, in very good condition. These structures presumably relate to the construction in the early 1920's of the Turf Wall section of the Hadrianic frontier, which ran from Bowness to the River Irthing.

Subsequently, these timber features were rebuilt in stone. The footings of the fort wall, a massive construction 1.40 m. in width, were uncovered, together with a stone-built guard chamber of the West Gate, placed a little to the south of its timber predecessor. Parallel with the fort wall lay the carefully-metalled intervallum road, which ran round the perimeter of the fort. The road was 3 m. in width and was flanked on the east side by a long narrow building, 3.45 m. in width, possibly a store house. The pottery and coins did not provide a close date for the structures of this phase, but there was nothing which contradicted a late Hadrianic date, when the Turf Wall section of the frontier was probably rebuilt in stone.

In a third building phase, the narrow building was replaced by a stone-built barrack block, 6.9 m. in width. This building, like most of the structures at Bowness had been extensively disturbed by medieval stone-robbers, but clear evidence survived for the timber partitions which divided each contubernium, a unit providing quarters for eight men. The pottery suggests a date in the early 3rd century for this barrack block, but the dating evidence was insufficient to show whether this building activity might relate to the preparations for the Severan campaigns, so clearly attested at frontier sites like South-Shields and Corbridge. About the same time a hearth was inserted

BOWNESS on SOLWAY MILL FIELD 1973



into the guard-chamber of the West Gate, and the intervallum road was narrowed, perhaps to accommodate the enlargement of some buildings within the fort.

The pottery attests occupation into the later 4th century and it is probable that the fort was still garrisoned after Magnus Maximus had led many of the British army units to the Continent in his revolt against Gratian in A.D. 383. Some structural evidence for this late phase was found, comprising traces of timber structures built up against the east wall of the barrack block. This is reminiscent of other late 4th century timber structures found at Rudchester, Halton Chesters and Risingham, and may be accounted for by the shift of the civilian population to within the fort, for which there is some ceramic evidence at Bowness.

Soon after, however, the fort was abandoned, and it remained deserted until the 12th century. The growth of this medieval settlement is attested by documentary sources, the earliest reference being in 1225, and is corroborated by archaeological evidence. Timber structures were built upon the intervallum road and the Roman fort ditch was recut, forming a defended settlement which may have had some military significance during the Anglo-Scottish wars of the 13th century. Pottery and coins date this phase of medieval activity to the 12th and 13th centuries, and thereafter occupation appears to have been more or less continuous down to the present day.

The Bowness excavations are of particular interest in the light of the attempted reassessment of the Hadrianic Frontier at the recent Hadrian's Wall Conference in Newcastle. No longer can it be asserted that widespread destruction took place throughout the northern Frontier zone during the major crises of, for example, A.D. 197, A.D. 296 and A.D. 367. While individual forts, particularly in the central sector of the frontier may have suffered at the hands of the insurgents, many forts, including Bowness, apparently survived intact. It is clear that the fortunes of many more individual forts must be studied before any valid general history of the frontier can be described.

A full report on the excavation will shortly be submitted to the Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society.