

THE ROMAN FORT AT WATERCROOK (KENDAL)

by

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Until relatively recent years it was customary to assume that most, if not all, Roman military establishments in north-west England came into being during the governorship of Gnaeus Julius Agricola (A.D.77-83). Such thinking was heavily influenced by what appeared to be the strong intimation of the historian, Cornelius Tacitus, that little of note had happened in the region prior to Agricola's governorship and that, after him, Rome's interests in Britain were cynically jettisoned.

A quarter of a century of research has shown this to have been a distorted caricature of reality: not only do we now recognise the vital parts played in the conquest of the northwest by predecessors of Agricola, such as Vettius Bolanus (69-71) and Petillius Cerialis (71-4), but also that what happened in northern Britain beyond the mid-80s was far from being a 'sellout'. The evacuation of Caledonia in c.87 was no doubt regretted by many, but it was necessary nonetheless. It is now clear that it was accompanied by positive action - the creation of the Tyne/Solway limes based upon the Stanegate-road, the development of infrastructural sites, such as Holt, Heronbridge, Wilderspool and Walton-le-Dale, and the completion of a military network of occupation, with forts established in areas which seem previously to have received only cursory military attention. One such site was the fort at Watercrock, just to the south of Kendal. It seems likely that this development should be linked with others observed to the south, at Lancaster: it was evident from excavations conducted in the grounds of the Old Vicarage (1972 and 1975) and in the Northern Vicarage Field (1970) that the early Flavian fort had been extended to the north (and probably to the south, also) late in the first century; it is possible that this was accompanied by a re-orientation of the fort through 90 degrees, moving the main gate from the east rampart of the fort (Church Street) to the north, presumably heading for a developing port and for a bridge taking a road across the Lune in the direction of Watercrock.

At Watercrock, the 'platform' left by the fort's physical remains is still visible in meadowland in a deep bow created by the river Kent, which thus 'protects' the fort on three of its four sides. This configuration is best described by the RomanoCeltic, MEDIBOGDO, a site-name given in the Ravenna Cosmography, and generally applied - in error, it seems - to Hardknott. Although excavations at Watercrock have left little doubt that this site was not established before the late 80s/early 90s, there are hints of earlier activity in the area. Some, for example, believe that on the prominent hill, known as The Helm, there may have been a British hill-fort (Castlesteads; RCHM [Westmorland], 1936, pp.181-2); there is, however, no clue to its date-of-use. A little further afield, Roman coins and pottery have of occasion been reported from the Hincaster-area, suggesting the possibility of a Roman site in the vicinity which was earlier than Watercrock. The area, therefore, still invites further research in order to clarify such issues; in particular, in the territory of which tribe was the Watercrock-fort sited? Was it in that of the Brigantes, or could it, following a suggestion of N.J. Higham, have been in the territory of the elusive Setantii?

It now seems clear that, in his second campaign of A.D.78, Agricola largely by-passed the Lake District and pressed northwards from Lancaster along the Lune valley, by way of Burrow-in-Lonsdale and Low Borrow Bridge, and then followed the Eden valley up to Carlisle, which had been established in A.D.72 by Petillius Cerialis, and where Agricola's presence is recorded on a recently-discovered writing-tablet from that site. The remainder of Agricola's term as governor was

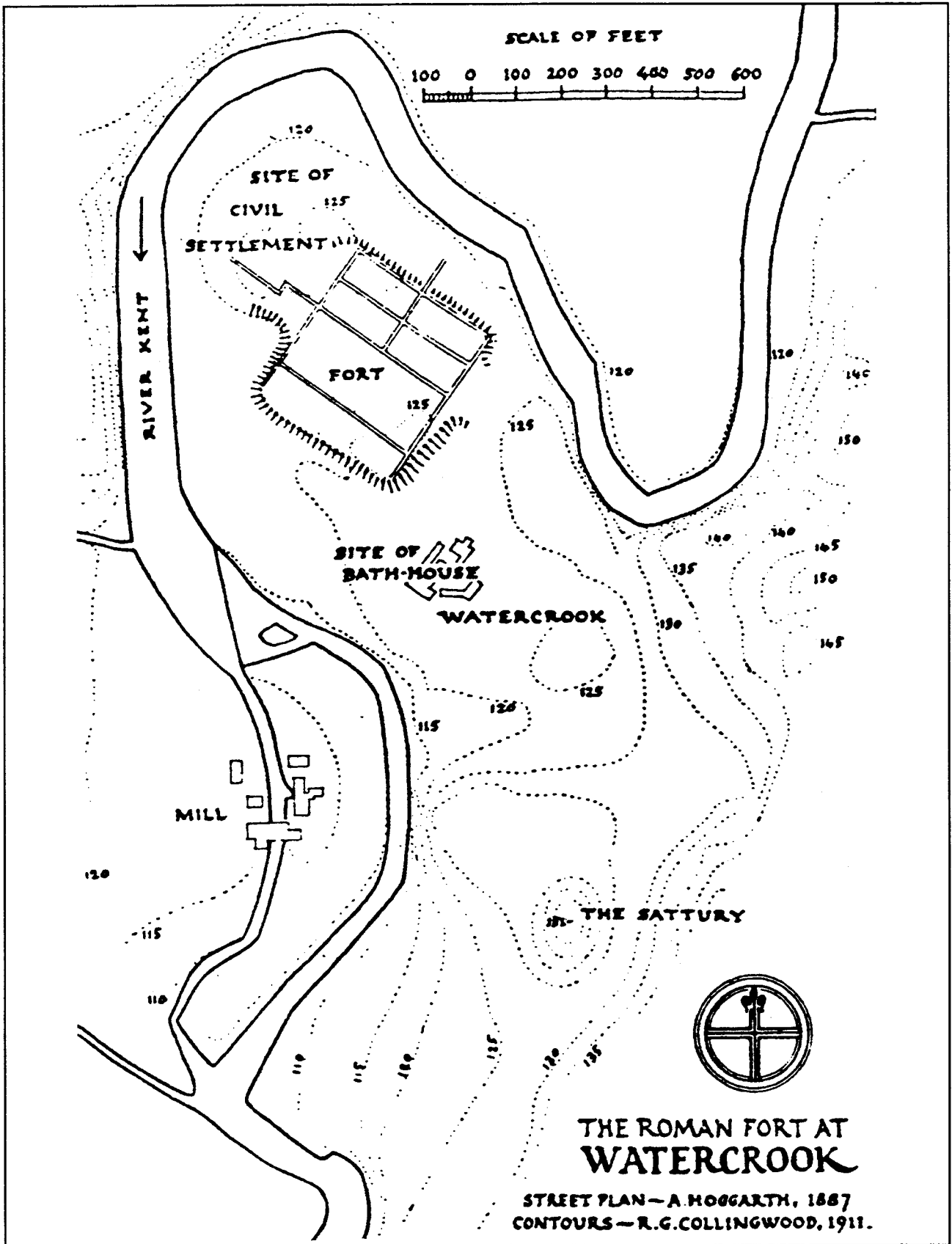


Fig. 1: Plan of Watercreek, based upon observations made in 1887 (A. Hoggarth and R.G. Collingwood). Reproduced by courtesy of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society.

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evidently spent north of the Tyne/Solway gap, culminating in his important victory in 83 at Mons Graupius.

Four years later, however, the decision was taken to withdraw Roman troops to the line of the Tyne and Solway; the reason for this had less to do with the state of Britain than with the need to transfer a complete legion (II Adiutrix) to the Danube to meet the mounting pressure of tribes, such as the Dacians, who lived on the north side of that river. It was at this point, with the establishment of the new Stanegate-limes, that Roman arms were introduced into the Lake District as part of a policy to strengthen the hinterland of the new frontier. A study of the pottery and coins from the excavations of 1974-75 has indicated that this was the point of Watercrock's establishment, as part of a process which also saw new forts at Ambleside (Waterhead), Hardknott and Ravenglass.

Although Watercrock was included in the works of the great antiquarians, the first serious study was undertaken when, in 1887, severe drought-conditions led to the revelation by parching of some of the fort's streets and buildings; these were measured and drawn by Arthur Hoggarth, a local architect, and more has been added as a result of further droughts in 1949 and 1975.

Some excavation took place under Lt.Col. Oliver North in the 1930s and 1940s on the site of the north-west gateway and the south angle respectively; the major campaign of work, however, was precipitated in 1974 and 1975 by the decision of the River Authority to widen the river Kent in an attempt to relieve the flooding-threat to Kendal. This work was undertaken by Lancaster University's Department of Classics and Archaeology under the direction of the late Dr. Timothy Potter. This involved the stripping of long areas to the east of the fort, which took in the north-east gate, the east angle and defences of the fort, and an area of civilian settlement relating to the road leading out of the south-east gateway.

Much of what was exposed was of poor quality - partly because it appears to have been built that way, and partly because of the subsequent robbing of most of the decent building-stone. The stone-built fort-wall was shown to have been preceded by a rampart of clay and turves, although there was no sign of the expected post-holes which will have marked the timber gateway of this first phase. The external defences were shown to have been complex at the fort's east angle, consisting of three V-shaped ditches, with a double palisade of timber between the first and second ditches, and a bank of stone rubble between the second and third. It is not common to find such complexity in fort-defences before the Antonine period (mid-second century A.D). The suggested chronology of the fort is based almost entirely on the results of the excavations of the 1970s, although nothing which was found in the 1930s and 1940s conflicts with it.

It appears, then, that the fort was established as a turf-and-timber structure in c.A.D.90, and rebuilt in stone probably in the middle years of Hadrian's reign (c.A.D.130). It was then abandoned during the Antonine re-occupation of southern Scotland (c.A.D.142-165), rebuilt by Marcus Aurelius and held probably until the 270s. A fresh coin of A.D.320, found at the very top of the in-filled inner ditch suggests that formal military occupation had ceased by that time. Despite the occasional discovery of coins and pottery of the later-fourth century, there is no indication that the fort was ever formally re-occupied. This does not, however, preclude the presence of civilian squatters utilising the buildings; indeed, the discovery of industrial waste in one of the ditches suggests that this may have happened.

There is evidence of a certain amount of civilian activity of a more formal kind outside the fort, associated with the north-east and north-west exit-roads. To the south, occasional drought conditions have revealed the presence of a substantial building, probably the bath-house. A substantial area of civilian settlement, however, flanking the south-eastern exit-road, was excavated in 1974. This showed initial timber buildings and a number of subsequent phases of stone-construction; these appeared to belong to buildings of the 'strip' type, with their gable-ends

facing on to the street-frontage, and offering shop-accommodation in front and domestic quarters beyond. There was no clue to the origins or activities of the inhabitants, although we can readily imagine that here, as elsewhere, the civilian settlement housed a population of mixed origins, and included the womenfolk and children of serving soldiers, retired veterans, as well as manufacturers and traders from near and far. The variety of personal manufactured items recovered during the excavation itself bears witness to the vitality and economic vibrancy of a settlement which depended upon the prosperous 'market' constituted by a military unit of 500 men. Such a town would have been lively, noisy - and, because of the probable presence of agriculturally-related trades, such as butchery, food-production, brewing and leather-making, smelly too.

Fieldwork over the wider area has suggested the intensive farming of the Kent valley, pointing to

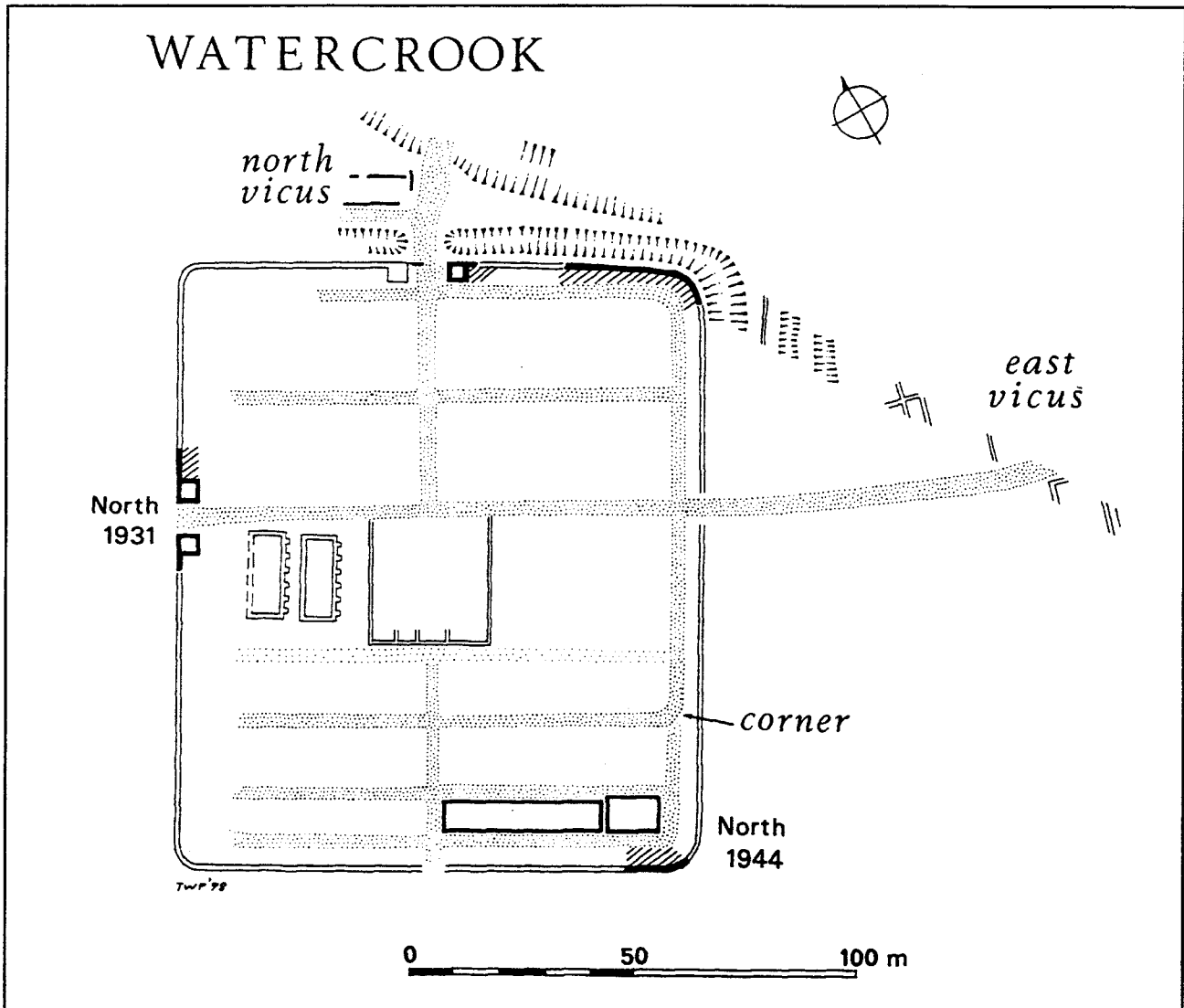


Fig.2: Plan of the Roman Fort at Watercreek, based on the evidence of excavation and aerial and ground surveys in drought conditions (T.W. Potter). Reproduced by courtesy of the late Dr. Timothy Potter and of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society.

extensive forestry clearance during the late pre-Roman and Roman periods. On the analogy of such sites as Vindolanda, we may be certain that the military garrison (whose name and nature are not known in this case) provided a major stimulant to economic activity well beyond the immediate neighbourhood of the fort itself. In all, therefore, the evidence from Watercreek demonstrates the

strong social and economic interdependence of soldiers, civilians in the town and farmers from further afield, and at the same time shows that the peace which the Romans brought was far from being the 'desolation' predicted by Agricola's Caledonian opponent, Calgacus.

As we have seen, the secure evidence for occupation and prosperity at Watercrock takes us to the later years of the third century A.D. It is thought that in the later-third and fourth centuries weather-conditions in Roman Britain may have deteriorated; this could have meant environmental disaster for a riverside site, such as Watercrock, with frequent flooding of the area. The post-Roman alluvial deposits found around the north side of the fort appear to offer support for this. There is certainly no sign on present evidence for a village and local militia, such as are now postulated at a number of Roman military sites, having survived at Watercrock through late-Roman times. This in its turn may help to explain why medieval Kendal was later to emerge in a different setting: the fourth century led Watercrock into a real 'dark age' which, for this Roman site at least, offered no realistic prospect of survival and continuity.

Further Reading

i) General Descriptions

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ii) Excavations

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O.H. North and E.J.W. Hildyard, Excavations at the Roman Fort at Watercrock, 1944, *Trans CWAAS² XLV* (1945), 148-162.

T.W. Potter, Excavations at Watercrock, *Trans CWAAS² LXXVI* (1976), 6-66.

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iii) Watercrock in its setting

N.J. Higham, *The Northern Counties to A.D.1000*, London 1986

D.C.A. Shotton, *Romans and Britons in North-west England*, Lancaster 1997.

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