

Excavations at the Roman fortlet on the Antonine Wall at Watling Lodge, 1972-4

by David J Breeze

SUMMARY

Excavations between 1972 and 1974 at the fortlet at Watling Lodge discovered in 1894 located the single ditch surrounding the site and established that the fortlet measured about 15.5 m N-S by about 18.5 m E-W internally. The ditch had silted naturally and no evidence was found to suggest that the defences had been slighted when the fortlet was abandoned. Finds were too few to establish the date of abandonment of the site.

INTRODUCTION

The fortlet at Watling Lodge on the Antonine Wall lies half-way between the forts of Falkirk and Rough Castle astride the road branching off the Military Way and leading through the Wall to Camelon and forts further north (NGR NS 862797). It was discovered in 1894 when the garden of the house Watling Lodge was being laid out. Mungo Buchanan visited the site and a note on it was included in the report on the excavations at Camelon published 6 years later (Christison 1901, 337). The essential part of the report reads: 'Mr Buchanan observed that the whole area consisted of a mass of tumbled stones, with scattered heaps of broken brown and grayish or whitish pottery. The east side was bounded by a stone bottoming, exactly like the paving under the Vallum, which ran directly south from the Vallum for about 100 feet, and then westward, where it was soon broken up; there could hardly be a doubt that it ended on the west, as it begun on the east, forming a rectangle, of which the Vallum was the north side, and that Mr Buchanan had added another Wall-Fort, or Castellum, to those already known.' This note was elaborated by Sir George Macdonald in *The Roman Wall in Scotland* (1934, 343-7): 'the stone foundation of the rampart seemed to stop short on either side of the opening, and that similarly the ends of the Ditch on either side of the roadway appeared to taper gradually and naturally to the level . . . A little distance to the east of the outlet of the road, the workmen laid bare 100 feet of stonework, about 15 feet broad, very like the base of the Rampart. At first it ran due south at right angles to the Limes. Subsequently it bent westwards, continuing in that direction, still perfect, for 40 feet. Thereafter it proved to be much broken up and disturbed. In the course of operations great quantities of very coarse pottery, of a light grey colour, were found among the debris, but Mr Buchanan saw no samian.' Macdonald also included a sketch plan and photograph of the site (fig 51 and pl 53, 1). No plan appeared in the Camelon report and Mungo Buchanan apparently drew the sketch at Macdonald's request for inclusion in *The Roman Wall in Scotland* (1934, 345, n 1).

The fortlet is one of only three that are known to lie between pairs of forts on the Antonine Wall; a fourth fortlet is known to have preceded the fort at Duntocher (Robertson

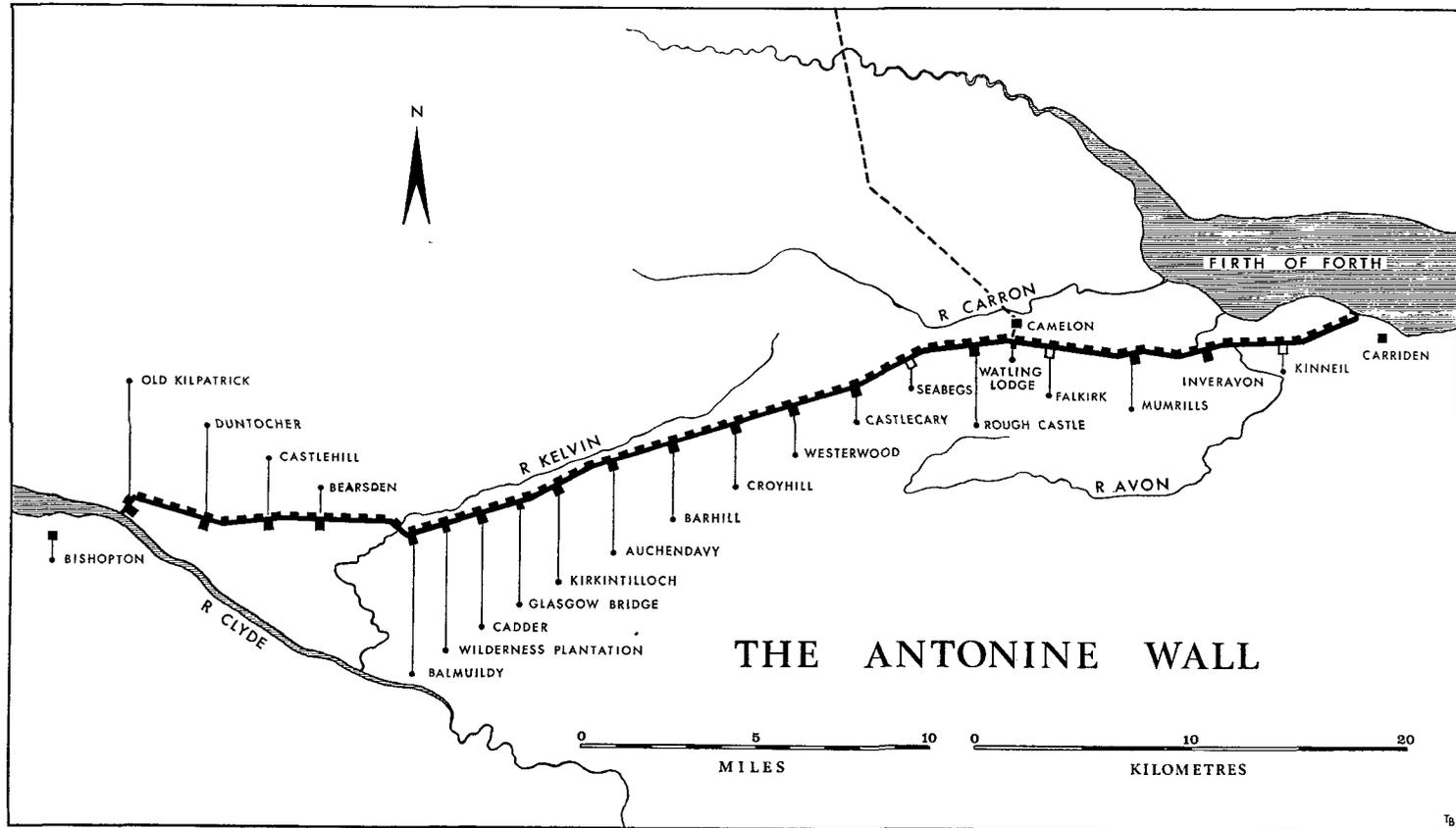


FIG 1

1957, 16-33) and it has been suggested that a fifth may lie immediately E of the fort at Rough Castle (RCAMS 1963, 100). The other two 'interval fortlets' are at Glasgow Bridge between Kirkintilloch and Cadder (St Joseph 1955, 86) and at Wilderness Plantation between Cadder and Balmuildy (Wilkes 1973, 51-65). It is not clear whether these fortlets are part of a complete series along the Wall, one falling between each pair of forts or whether they are only found at certain points. One purpose of the fortlet at Watling Lodge was undoubtedly to guard the road passing through the Wall, but it has been suggested that all three interval fortlets were specially placed to break up unusually long distances between certain forts (Robertson 1957, 29). The following table demonstrates that the known fortlets fall into three of the six longest gaps between forts on the Wall and, if that is indeed their function, it might be expected that others will be found. The distances are converted from those in Macdonald (1934, 342) with the more recent work at Kinneil taken into account (Steer 1961, 323-4).

4,418 m Balmuildy - Bearsden	
4,410 m Falkirk - Rough Castle	Watling Lodge fortlet
3,871 m Kirkintilloch - Cadder	Glasgow Bridge fortlet
3,772 m Duntocher - Old Kilpatrick	
3,726 m Cadder - Balmuildy	Wilderness Plantation fortlet
3,596 m Inveravon - Mumrills	

In two areas, between Inveravon and Mumrills (Steer 1961, 322-3) and between Balmuildy and Bearsden (Robertson 1973, 30), attempts have been made to find the putative fortlets but without success, possibly because, as Steer remarks (1961, 323), the search was made in the wrong place. The lack of success does not invalidate the basic argument that the three known interval fortlets - and others which may yet be found - were isolated phenomena designed to protect certain weak points on the line of the Wall or, as at Watling Lodge, to undertake specific functions. However, Mr J P Gillam has recently suggested that these sites were part of a series of fortlets along the whole length of the Antonine Wall with, in the first plan for the Wall, six forts at six to eight mile intervals and fortlets at every mile or so in between and that later some of these fortlets were replaced by forts (Breeze and Dobson 1974, 324-5). The discovery of a 'primary' fortlet at Wilderness Plantation between the 'secondary' fort at Cadder and the 'primary' fort at Balmuildy and some seven miles to the W the replacement of a 'primary' fortlet by a fort on the same site at Duntocher lends powerful support to Gillam's hypothesis, but more fortlets need to be found before the theory can carry absolute conviction.

The fortlet at Watling Lodge lies 2,377 m from the presumed site of the fort at Falkirk and 2,033 m from that at Rough Castle on a rise with clear views in all directions. At the fortlet the line of the Antonine Wall changes direction slightly. Trenching by Mr I MacIvor on the line of the rampart E of Watling Lodge in October 1961 in advance of a housing development and prior to Crown acquisition of the land established the line of the rampart hereabouts and this, together with the confirmation of the position of the rampart W of the fortlet in the present excavations, confirm's Roy's observations (1793, pl 29) that the change of direction takes place immediately E of the fortlet (Roy, however, makes no mention of the fortlet). Trenching E of the fortlet in 1961 and in 1973 failed to reveal any trace of the Military Way which Roy clearly shows here running about 20 m behind the rampart (Roy 1793, pl XXIX).

EXCAVATION

In 1971 the Department of the Environment learnt of a proposal to construct houses in the field to the W and S of the fortlet. An excavation in advance of the development took place for a

fortnight in June 1972. Four areas were excavated along the W defences of the fortlet, numbered 1-4 from N to S. Trenches 2-4 were each 1.5 m wide and were 15.5 m, 11.5 m and 16 m long respectively.

Trench 2 was excavated first, being cut at right angles to the modern fence. No trace of the rampart of the fortlet was found, just a single ditch cut into the yellow clay subsoil. The trench was extended 8 m beyond the outer lip of the ditch to search for a possible second ditch. This was not discovered and it may be presumed that the fortlet was surrounded by one ditch. This ditch, V-shaped but with a slightly steeper slope on the outside, was 2.8 m wide and now 1 m deep, to the bottom of a U-shaped channel 500 mm wide and 120 mm deep. At the bottom of the ditch

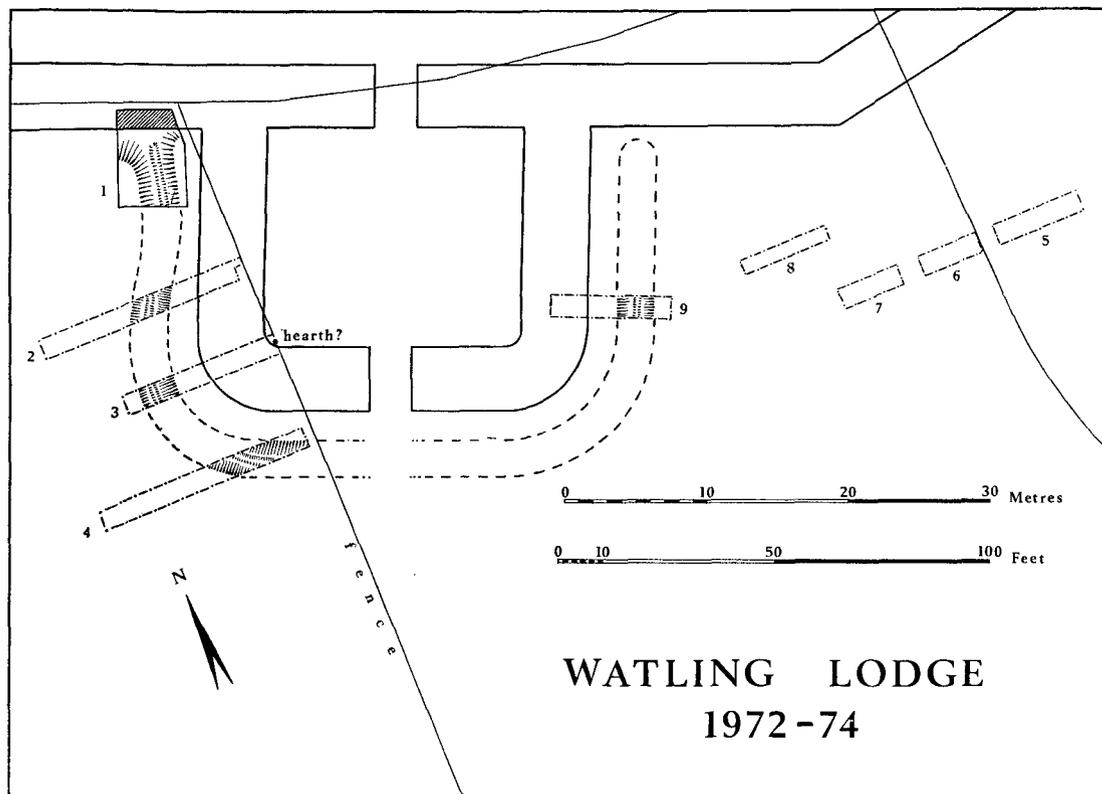


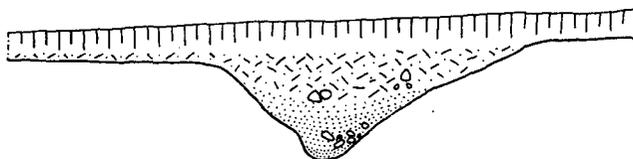
FIG 2

and filling the channel was a layer of fine brown silt 120 mm thick. This was covered by grey silt about twice as thick. Over this lay brown soil which merged with the lower top-soil. The ditch had clearly silted naturally and there was no suggestion that it had been recut.

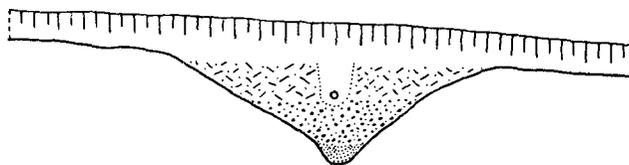
Trench 3, 4.5 m S of trench 2, also revealed the single ditch, here 2.7 m wide and 860 mm deep with the same channel 560 mm wide and 220 mm deep. A layer of thick grey silt 80 mm thick lay at the bottom of the ditch. This was covered with a deposit of light-grey silt 360 mm thick, in turn overlaid by brown soil which merged with the lower top-soil. Again the ditch had not been recut. At the extreme E end of this trench, partly under the section, were three flat conjoining stones, the only fully visible one approximately 260 mm across. The stones rested on a bedding of dark brown soil about 30 mm thick, which in turn overlay the clay subsoil. The stones exhibited

slight traces of burning. On them lay the base and parts of the rim and body sherds of an Antonine cooking pot (no. 3). The stones presumably formed part of a larger area of flagging, probably associated with a hearth. The most usual position for a hearth in a fortlet is against the back of the rampart. No trace of the fortlet rampart was found in any of the trenches so it may be presumed to have been either ploughed out or destroyed in the construction of the garden of Watling Lodge. The putative hearth provides the best evidence for the position of the rampart.

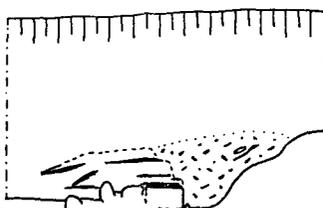
Trench 3 N Section



Trench 9 N Section



Trench 1 E Section



DJE

FIG 3

Trench 4, 5.5 m S of trench 3, lay across the SW corner of the fortlet ditch (pl 8a). The ditch measured about 2.9 m wide and was of similar profile to the other sections. It also exhibited a similar silting pattern and had not been recut.

Area 1 was the final trench to be excavated and it was cut to lie at right angles to the Roman features (pl 8b). It measured 7 m by 5 m with the E corner cut off by the fence. Within the area was found the remains of the Antonine Wall rampart and the N end of the W ditch of the fortlet. The ditch was 2.75 m wide, of the normal profile and depth and with the same silting pattern as the other three sections. Owing to the steep fall in the ground surface from S to N here the ditch did not come to a normal butt end but it ran out on the surface, on the step cut into the slope to

provide a level bed for the Antonine Wall rampart. The channel in the bottom of the ditch terminated 750 mm S of the rampart. The stone base of the Antonine Wall rampart was preserved intact within the trench though due to the presence of an electricity cable it was not possible to uncover all the base. The kerbs were of the usual dressed sandstone blocks and the core of undressed rough boulders. At the E end of the trench a small section of turf work was preserved standing 300 mm high and measuring 1.1 m E-W by 700 mm N-S. Traces of the dark humus-formed streaks in the turf-work were still visible. In the SE corner at the bottom the two best preserved turves measured 300 and 320 mm across. The bottom turf was apparently laid grass down on the kerb. The next dark band was 70 mm above this and the third 120 mm above that. Immediately S of the kerb was a shelf 300 mm wide and then the ground sloped upwards at a 45° angle for another 650 mm before it was cut away by a pipe-trench. The resulting small trench immediately behind the rampart was choked with fallen rampart material which, just beside the E section, contained a small patch of burnt soil.

Although no trace of the rampart of the fortlet itself was found, its position is indicated by the putative hearth. Assuming that this lay immediately inside the rampart, the fortlet will have measured 15.5 m from N to S internally and, accepting Buchanan's figure of 4.6 m for the width of the rampart, about 24.7 m across the ramparts. This measurement is much less than the 'about 100 feet' (30 m) recorded in 1894. However, the account of the discovery which Macdonald included in *The Roman Wall in Scotland* is slightly ambiguous and could be taken to read that the 100 ft of stonework included both the E and S rampart making the E rampart 60 ft (18.3 m) long. This is close to the correct distance. In order to check this hypothesis a search was made for the E defences in the vegetable garden of Watling Lodge with the kind permission of Mr W McRae. Trenches 5-8 were cut in June 1973 in the area of the Buchanan E rampart, but to no avail. However, the work did demonstrate that the plan in *The Roman Wall in Scotland* (fig 51) is totally untrustworthy.

Trench 9, 7.5 m long and 1.5 m wide, was excavated in November 1974 after the end of the growing season. No trace of the rampart was found, but the E ditch of the fortlet was located. This was V-shaped with a slightly steeper slope on the outside and was 2.8 m wide and 920 mm deep measured from the interior – the ground dropped gradually from W to E so that the depth measured from the exterior was only 770 mm. At the bottom was a U-shaped channel 390 mm wide and 160 mm deep. The silting pattern was similar to the other sections with the light-grey silt in the channel overlaid by dirty grey silt 350 mm thick which in turn was covered by light-brown soil 300 mm thick. Again there was no evidence of recutting. The discovery of the E ditch allows the width of the fortlet to be determined approximately. Buchanan's rampart of 4.6 m would allow a berm of about 2 m to the W and SW of the fortlet. If this continued round the whole site at the same width the fortlet will have measured about 18.5 m E-W by about 15.5 m N-S internally.

DISCUSSION

Four fortlets are known on the Antonine Wall and three of them have now been examined. Their comparative sizes are given below, the sites listed from E-W (all measurements are in metres).

	<i>N-S internal</i>	<i>E-W internal</i>	<i>Area m²</i>	<i>Width of rampart</i>	<i>Width of berm</i>	<i>Width of ditch</i>	<i>Depth of ditch</i>	<i>Width of outer ditch</i>
Watling Lodge	c 15.5	c 18.5	286	4.6?	2.0?	2.8	1.0	None
Glasgow Bridge – enclosure	measures 30 m within a single ditch –							None
Wilderness Plantation	c 19.5	17.4	349	3.0	5.5	4.0	2.1	3.6
Duntocher	17.4	18.0	314	3.6	4.5	2.0	1.5	None

The three excavated fortlets are similar in size, all internal lengths varying between 18.0 m and 19.5 m and widths between *c* 15.5 m and 17.4 m – there is little point with enclosures of this size in comparing the internal areas since an extra metre or so on the width results in a disproportionate increase in area. The fortlet at Glasgow Bridge fits into the same pattern as the other three sites, though in internal area is probably smaller than Wilderness Plantation and Duntocher. All four fortlets correspond in size to the milecastles on Hadrian's Wall which measure usually about 18.3 by 15.2 m on the stone wall or 21.3 by 18.3 m on the turf wall.

The three excavated fortlets on the Antonine Wall are all different in shape. In Hadrian's Wall terminology, Watling Lodge is a 'short axis' interval fortlet, that is the distance between the gates is shorter than that across the fortlet, Wilderness Plantation is a 'long axis' fortlet and Duntocher is almost square. On Hadrian's Wall such differences are usually taken to imply building by different legions, and the same may be true on the Antonine Wall but this is entirely uncertain. The ramparts of the fortlet at Wilderness are bonded with the Antonine Wall rampart (Wilkes 1973, 53), which in this sector was constructed by legion II (*RIB* 2186 and 2193). This ought to mean that the legion was also responsible for the construction of the fortlet. However, the fortlet at Duntocher, different in shape and in the number of ditches, may also have been constructed by legion II since it is possible that men from this unit undertook the task of building the primary forts and some of the primary fortlets along the line of the Wall (this suggestion is based on the fact that while the three legionary groups attested epigraphically on the Wall varied in size, II Augusta being at full strength but VI Victrix and XX Valeria Victrix only represented by detachments, all three legions were apparently at work on the rampart and ditch at equal strength; part of legion II may therefore have given the task of building primary forts and some primary fortlets, it certainly built Balmuildy (*RIB* 2191 and 2192): cf Breeze and Dobson forthcoming). It is not known which legion was responsible for the construction of the length of rampart in the vicinity of Watling Lodge, though if on excavation Glasgow Bridge is found to be of one build with the Antonine Wall rampart it may be presumed that it was the work of XX Valeria Victrix who built the rampart thereabouts (*RIB* 2184).

In certain characteristics the fortlet at Watling Lodge is rather different from both Wilderness Plantation and Duntocher. If Buchanan was correct, and now his observations can be seen to carry little conviction, the rampart was 4.6 m wide compared to 3.6 m at Duntocher and 3 m at Wilderness Plantation. The berm on the other hand is narrower, 2 m compared to 4.5 and 5.5 respectively. However, Buchanan may not have bothered to measure the width of the rampart base he saw being torn up – he certainly cannot have measured its length – and only gained an impression that it was the same width as the Antonine Wall rampart, though it may be noted that in 1961 Mr MacIvor found that the rampart was 4.6 m wide E of the fortlet. A slightly narrower rampart would increase the width of the berm and bring both closer to the measurements recorded at the other two sites. The ditch at Watling Lodge is somewhat slighter than those at Duntocher and Wilderness Plantation. In part this may be due to post-Roman agricultural activity – the fortlet lies on top of a rise and ploughing over the centuries will have resulted in the removal of an amount of soil from the site to the lower surrounding ground.

Little can be said concerning the life of the fortlet. The pottery is second century, so far as it can be dated, but this is no more than expected. Macdonald (1934, 345) considered that the absence of samian indicated 'that the occupants were common soldiers and petty officers, frequently relieved and living in simple fashion when in temporary quarters'. One sherd of samian, found in 1972, does not materially alter the balance of the pottery evidence but such evidence is difficult to interpret. On Hadrian's Wall it has been argued both that finds from the milecastles and turrets show that the soldiers stationed there had a lower standard of living than those in the forts

(Birley 1961, 271) and that they did not (Dockerill 1969, 394). The small size of the Antonine Wall fortlets suggests that the senior officer may even have been below centurion in rank and therefore unlikely to possess much samian. It is most probable that the soldiers themselves were seconded for duty here from a neighbouring fort, as seems to have happened in the Antonine Wall hinterland (Breeze 1974, 144–53). The men stationed at Watling Lodge may have been drawn from Rough Castle. This fort apparently was the base of *cohors VI Nerviorum* which left two inscriptions there (*RIB* 2144 and 2145). However, the fort was too small to have held the whole unit; there is room within its ramparts for two or at the most three centuries. Three or four centuries must therefore have been outposted and one possible outpost for a small group of men (probably no more than 32, that is less than half a century) would have been Watling Lodge. Macdonald's phraseology in describing the living standards of the soldiers at Watling Lodge implies that they lived in shacks or even tents. The excavation of the fortlet at Duntocher demonstrated that the building, presumably a barrack-block, within the fortlet although of timber was no different in essence than such buildings within the Antonine Wall forts (Robertson 1957, 16–33). It certainly was not a shack and neither was it temporary. The quarters were temporary only in that the soldiers would probably not be stationed there permanently. It would be expected that such small detachments would be regularly relieved, as Macdonald suggested, but the evidence from the Dura papyri demonstrates that soldiers were often sent on outpost duty for three years and more (*P Dura* 100 and 101; Breeze 1974, 146). In summary it may be said that the men stationed at Watling Lodge were probably ordinary auxiliary soldiers – there is no evidence for a separate force on the Antonine Wall – possibly drawn from the neighbouring fort of Rough Castle and commanded by an officer of or below centurion level, most probably a *duplicarius* or *sesquuplicarius*. They may have stayed there for up to three years and more and their main duties would be to guard the road through the Antonine Wall and engage in the normal frontier defence work undertaken by all soldiers on the Wall.

No clear evidence was found in the areas excavated to suggest how the life of the fortlet ended – the burnt soil just outside the NW corner of the fortlet is probably associated with the abandonment of the site, but it could date to later years. The filling of the ditch appeared to result entirely from the work of natural agencies – it had not been purposely filled. In no section did the ditch show signs of recutting. Such traces might have been expected if the site had been abandoned and reoccupied, as happened to most forts on the Antonine Wall in the second century. However, if the gap between the two occupations was short, as has recently been suggested (Hartley 1972, 38–39), and if the fortlet was reoccupied in the second Antonine period, which is uncertain, it is possible that the rebuilders simply cleaned the silt out of the ditch which had been left open when the site had been abandoned a few months before. Quite clearly, whenever the Romans abandoned the fortlet they did not make any attempt to fill the ditch. Further evidence concerning the occupation of the site will only come from the excavation of the interior of the fortlet. This area is unencumbered by modern buildings and serves as a vegetable garden. In spite of possible damage by agricultural and gardening activities, on excavation it could well produce traces of internal buildings.

MEDIEVAL OCCUPATION

Just to the N of the Roman fortlet lay, until its destruction in 1894, a mound known as Maiden Castle. Macdonald (1934, 345) notes that 'according to Mr Buchanan's description, the latter was a large mound, obviously artificial, which rose high above the ordinary Outer Mound of the Limes, projecting a considerable way beyond it and presenting to the north a front that was

approximately semicircular. It was constructed of earth, not turf. Its exact dimensions are no longer ascertainable.' After a recent visit, officials of the Ordnance Survey have suggested to me that the summit may have measured about 22 m by 12 m. To render it suitable to receive the foundations of the house, it was reduced in height by about 2 m. The mound lay immediately N of the Antonine Wall ditch and just to the W of the gap through the outer mound for the road. It could therefore owe its size to the dumping of the soil which would normally have lain in the gap to one side of the passage; a similar situation exists besides the N gate at Rough Castle though here the mound is much smaller. However, the amount of earth which would be thus displaced seems insufficient to account for the large amount described by Buchanan. The mound could therefore have been a medieval motte. A similar structure lies about 2 miles to the W at Seabegs while the better known Peel at Kirkintilloch also lies on the line of the Wall. The three sherds of medieval pottery found during the excavations may have derived from this putative motte, though they could equally well have been deposited during the spreading of manure.

POTTERY

All the pottery is unstratified.

Roman

Samian ware

- 1 Fragment of the rim of a form 37. Central Gaulish. Ditch trench 1.

Coarse pottery

- 2 Two conjoining fragments of the base of a vessel with a chamfer in black-burnished ware category 1. Hadrianic-Antonine. Ditch trench 1.
- 3 48 fragments of a cooking pot in black-burnished ware category 1. Part of the surface of the vessel has turned orange as a result of exposure to fire. Hadrianic-Antonine. Hearth trench 3. (Fig 4)
- 4 Fragment from the body of a cooking-pot in a grey fabric. Ditch trench 1.
- 5 Fragment of the base of a mortarium in a buff coloured fabric with mixed grit. Surface find.

Medieval pottery by E J Talbot

- 6 Although suggestive of a handle fragment this sherd has faceting more indicative of part of a leg of a tripod pitcher. I would not accept this as a jug handle sherd but there is the

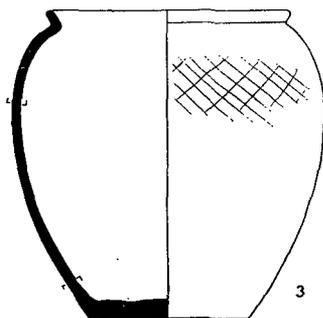


FIG 4 Roman pot (1 : 4)

possibility that it may be from the handle of a pipkin. The reconstruction of a tripod leg is more in keeping with the evidence of the sherd despite the fact that tripod pitchers are not common in Scotland – but see Cruden 1956, 78, fig 32, no. 34 (from Deer). Light grey fabric, orange slip beneath abraded brownish green glaze.

- 7 Abraded fragment of a strap handle (probably upper portion) in a laminated light grey fabric with an overall and abraded light brownish green glaze.
- 8 Sherd from a jug rim (diameter cannot be determined), glaze and fabric as 7; rim and handle could be from the same vessel. Rim profile see Laing and Talbot 1974, 49, no. 8, 43–50.

The three sherds are suggestive of a late medieval date.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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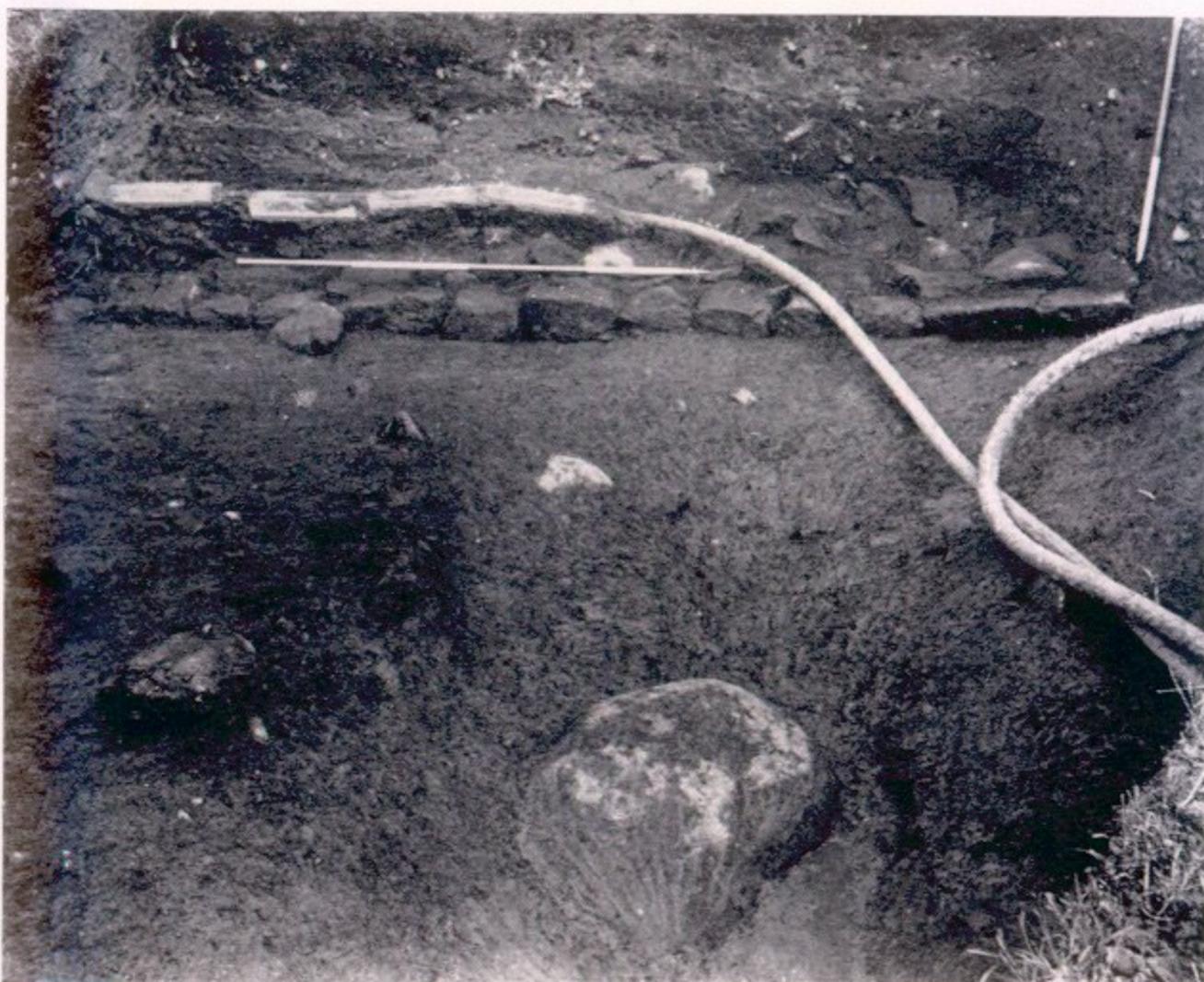
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a Trench 4, SW corner looking E



b Trench 1, looking N