

Excavation of cropmark features at Drum Farm, Bo'ness, West Lothian

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ABSTRACT

In February 1996 the Centre for Field Archaeology (CFA) was commissioned by Historic Scotland to evaluate three cropmarks near Drum Farm, Bo'ness. Before excavation, Feature 1 was thought to be a prehistoric enclosure, Feature 2 a prehistoric round house and Feature 3 a coal pit. On excavation, Feature 1 was found to be of probable Roman date. This was demonstrated by the recovery of two small sherds of Roman Samian ware from a primary ditch fill. The ditch from which the sherds were recovered contained three distinct fills and appeared to have been recut on more than one occasion. To the south of the ditch from which the Samian sherds were recovered, and within the enclosure, a section of probable ring groove slot was revealed.

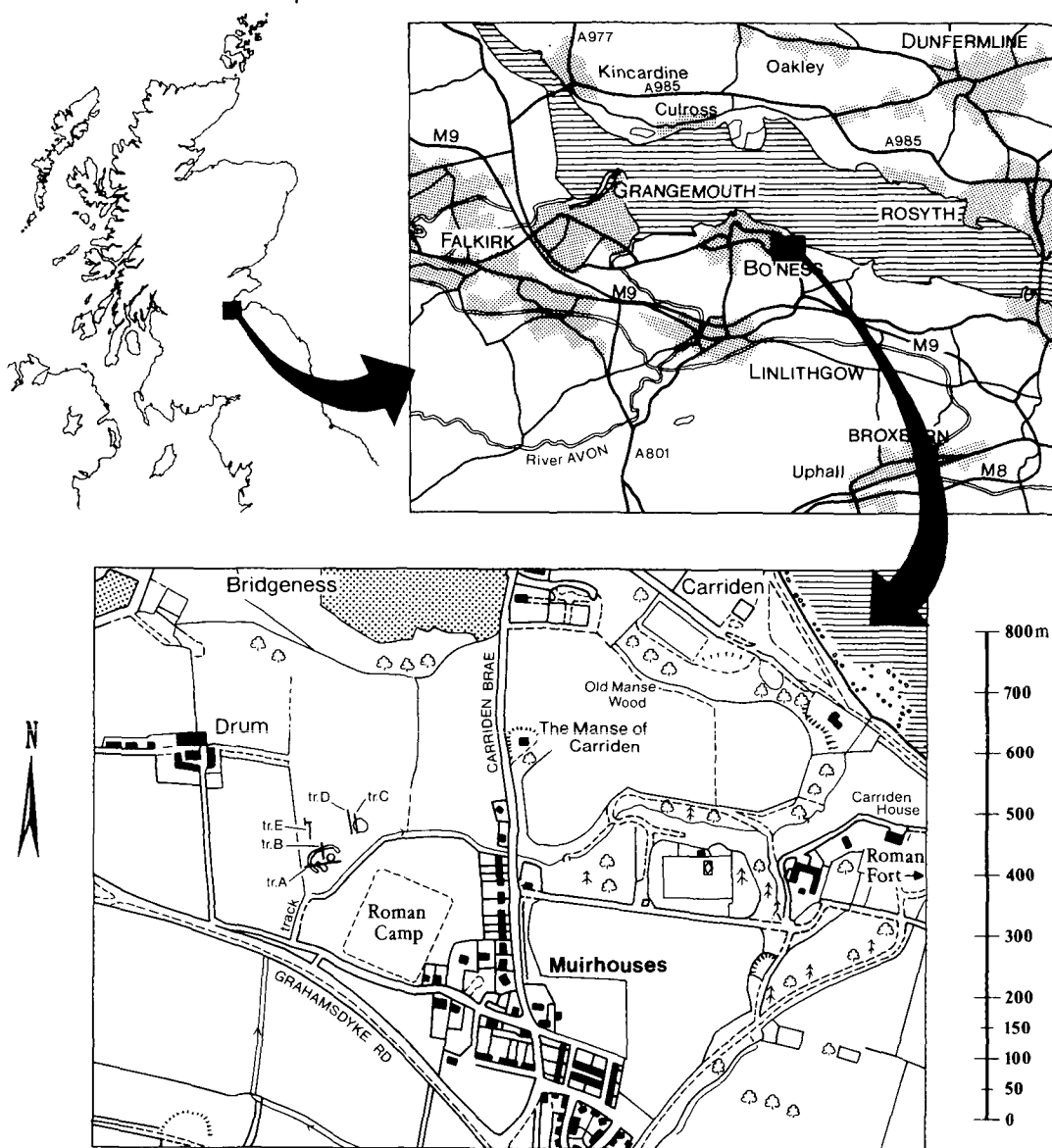
INTRODUCTION

The area under investigation lies 100 m north-east of Muirhouses Roman Temporary Camp (NGR: NT 017 816), West Lothian, in an area of low relief between two gently sloping ridges aligned east/west. Immediately to the south of the circular enclosure is the Carriden Burn which empties into the Firth of Forth 150 m to the east of Carriden Roman fort and *vicus* (NGR: NT 0256 8175) (illus 1 & 2).

From aerial photographs, three cropmark features were noted (illus 2 & 3). Feature 1 (NMRS NT 08 SW 89) is visible on aerial photographs as a large, dark, semicircular patch in the southern part of the field; within the enclosure, two other possible feature shadows can be seen. The second, Feature 2 (NMRS NT 08 SW 24), is noted as a possible circular enclosure 21–25 m in diameter. The third cropmark, Feature 3, is visible as a dark spot measuring approximately 5–8 m in diameter. It is less distinct than the other two and visible only on one oblique photograph (illus 3: WL/2340, 1981).

Excavation of trial trenches was commissioned by Historic Scotland to examine the possible archaeological nature of the cropmarks and to provide information for their future management, as appropriate, particularly in view of plans for the expansion of housing in the vicinity. In addition, due to the intensive mineral extraction which occurred in the area in the 18th and 19th centuries, the excavations also aimed to ascertain the pre-modern date of the cropmarks.

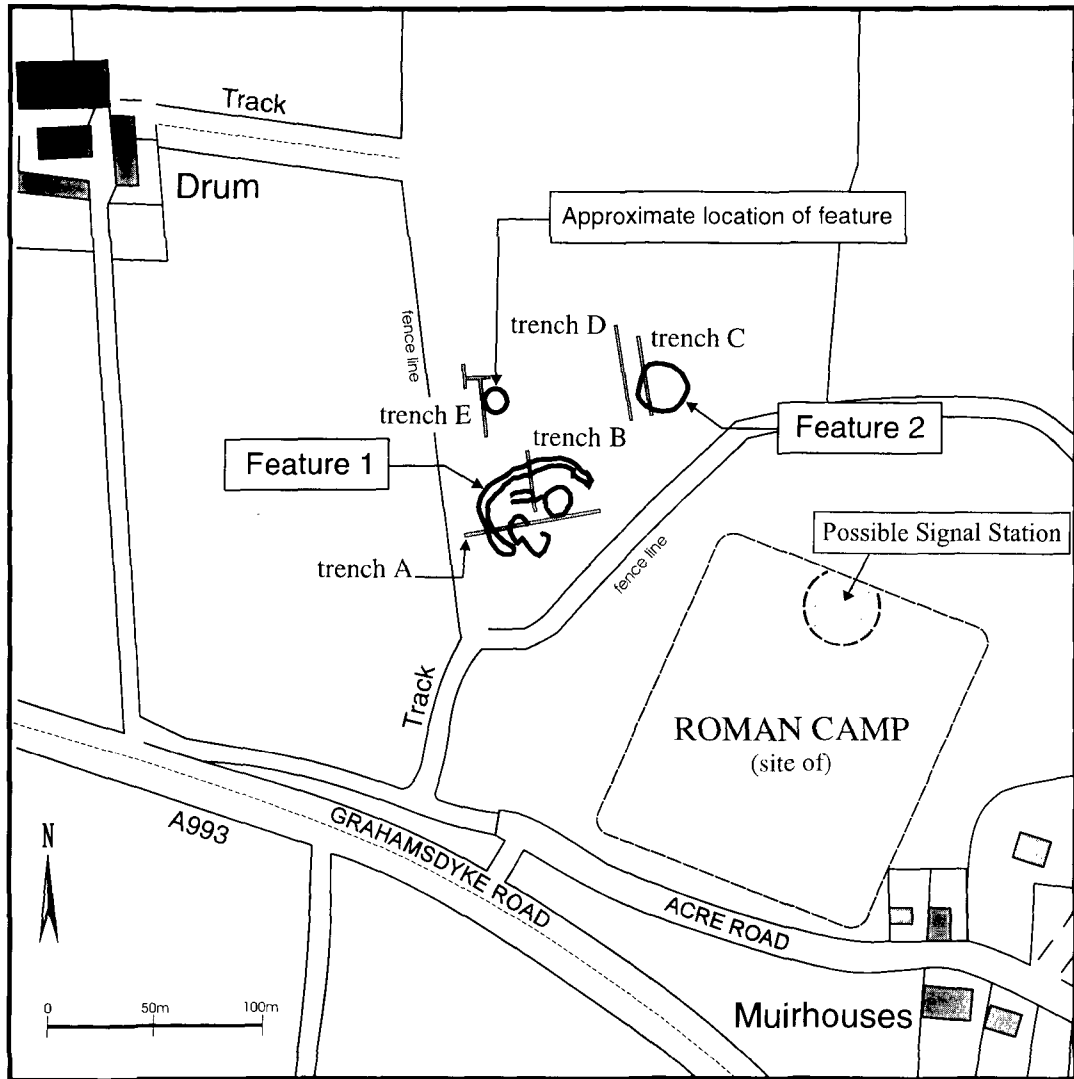
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ILLUS 1 Location map. (Based on the Ordnance Survey map © Crown copyright)

EXCAVATION

The areas of excavation were covered with a light brown silty topsoil 0.20–0.30 m in depth with occasional shale and coal fragments present. This overlay a beige, sandy clay subsoil with occasional more compact lenses of brown clay and sandy silts. One notable characteristic of the subsoil was the extreme variation in colour and texture, making it difficult initially to identify negative archaeological features with confidence.



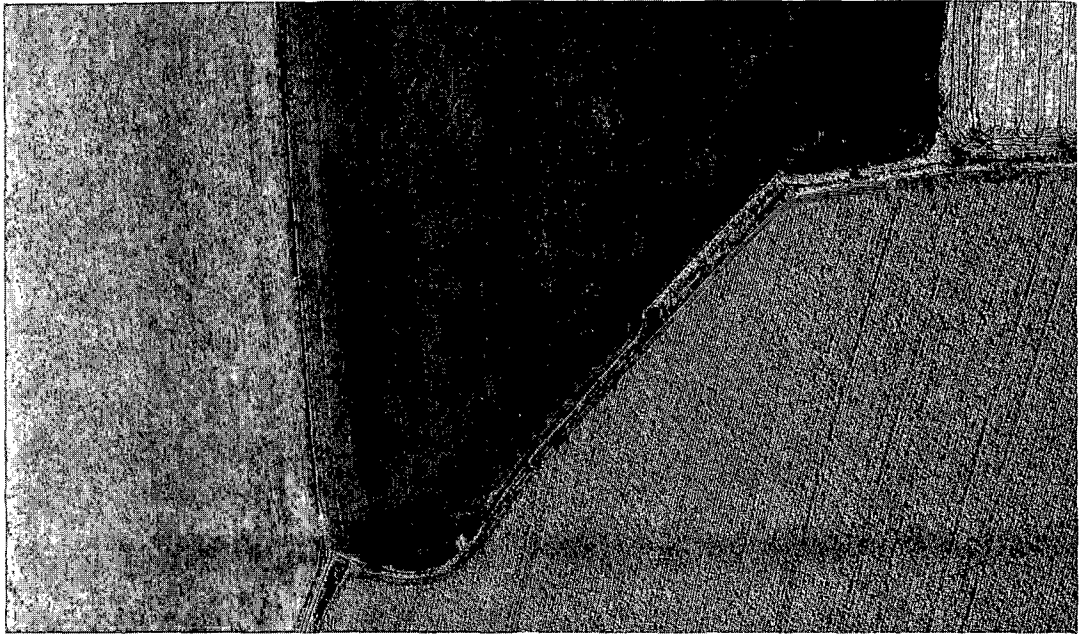
ILLUS 2 Location of the excavation trenches and the main cropmark features

Trench A

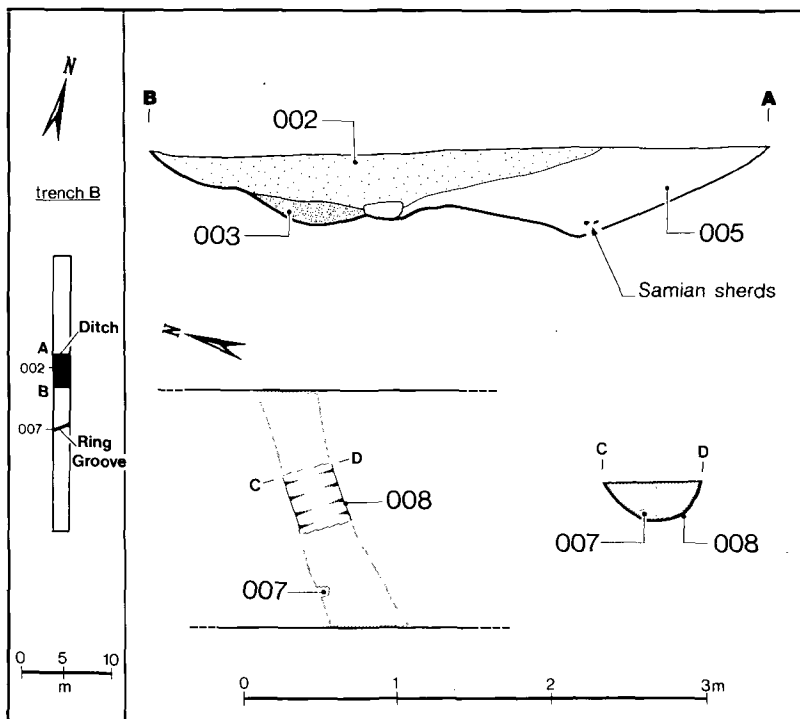
Trench A was positioned in order to locate Feature 1 and measured 65 m long by 1.6 m wide. Although the ditch was not identified within this trench, it was visible on the aerial photograph here as a cropmark trace. Therefore, it could be assumed to be present but not visible due to the very homogenized nature of the fill and subsoil as evidenced within Trench B.

Trench B

Trench B measured 29 m long by 1.6 m wide. Within Trench B, two features were noted and excavated. A small section of probable ring groove slot was recorded where it crossed the trench



ILLUS 3 Aerial photograph of the cropmark features at Drum Farm. (Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland © Crown copyright)



ILLUS 4 The context of the Samian sherds within the ditch fills in Trench B

diagonally at 17.5 m from the northern end (illus 4, context 008). This was 0.34 m wide by 0.14 m in depth with a U-shaped profile; no post-holes were identified in the base of the slot. The fill of this slot comprised a mid brown, fairly compact, silty fill with occasional small sub-angular stones.

Within Trench B, the other major feature revealed was the enclosing ditch noted from the aerial photographs. In section, the ditch measured 4.0 m wide by 0.54 m deep and contained three distinct fills (illus 4). The profile of the ditch was irregular with the deepest section at the north end. From within the lower primary fills of the ditch (illus 4, context 005), comprising a mottled, compacted and silty, brown clay-rich deposit, two sherds of Samian pottery were recovered. Contexts 002 and 003 are the fills of a recut which had been excavated after the initial cut had substantially silted up.

Trench C

Trench C was positioned over Feature 2 in order to ascertain the nature of the presumed ring ditch feature. Upon excavation, it was revealed to be an old shaft or pit which the present farmer, Mr Stewart, recalls having been filled in by his grandfather with a combination of coal and shale waste.

Trench D

Trench D was also placed in the area of Feature 2, but immediately outwith the cropmark, and produced similar results to Trench C.

Trench E

Trench E was placed in order to identify a possible coal pit (Feature 3), but no features of archaeological significance were revealed.

SAMIAN SHERDS

Two sherds of Samian pottery were recovered from the excavations within the primary fill of the enclosure ditch of the feature (illus 4, context 005). Both sherds were heavily abraded and only a small section of the distinctive Samian slip was present.

Their fabric was tentatively identified by Gordon Thomas (pers comm) as being of second-century AD date and from Central Gaul. However, the heavily and perhaps deliberately abraded nature of the sherds has precluded any more definite identification.

DISCUSSION

The recovery of two Samian sherds from the ditched feature at Drum Farm is of special interest, coming as it does from a site close to the eastern end of the Antonine Wall and the Roman fort at Carriden, with its associated *vicus* (see previous work by Richmond & Steer 1957; Dunwell 1995; Bailey 1997). These sherds are also unusual as they derive from a secure context, in contrast to the more usual stray finds.

Samian sherds have been recovered from a number of geographically disparate non-Roman sites, as far afield as Lewis and Caithness (Robertson 1970). The unusual colour and exceptionally

fine fabric of Samian ware probably made this attractive to native populations, a suggestion which is supported by the lack of second-century AD Roman coarse ware on native sites in comparison to discoveries of Samian sherds. The abrasion on the sherds may have been caused by secondary use, as several fragments of Samian ware recovered from brochs and souterrains appear to have been used as polishers and smoothers (A Henshall, pers comm in Robertson 1970).

The recovery of Samian sherds within the primary fills of a ditched enclosure at Drum Farm raises questions pertaining to the level of cultural and social interaction between native and Roman populations. It raises the possibility that the site at Drum Farm was one of a network of native settlements associated with the *vicus* at Carriden. A known parallel for this exists at Old Carlisle (Higham & Jones 1985, 60–3) where settlement features described as an extended *vicus* have been located. This has been traced for several kilometres around the fort area where native farms appear to have been linked with each other and with the Roman road network.

However, the evidence alone of two sherds of Roman pottery from a native site is extremely tenuous. The sherds could merely be a random find, representing the residual remains of Roman activity. Fuller excavation would be required in order to place the Samian sherds recovered into a more reliable social, cultural and geographical context.

ARCHIVE

A full archive report on the project (Rees 1996) has been deposited at the National Monuments Record of Scotland.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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