La Roundele, Berwick-upon-Tweed: a lost southern broch?

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ABSTRACT

A late 13th-century survey of Berwick-upon-Tweed includes an entry entitled 'la Roundele'. It has not previously been interpreted satisfactorily but this paper shows it to have been a large circular site, in a secondary use by the time of the survey, at the head of the town's early beachside marketplace. It is argued that the site's shape, size and ability to survive in the changing townscape means that it originated in a substantial earlier structure – such as a broch or similar complex Atlantic roundhouse. The proposition accords with what is known of the early history of the Tweed estuary and southern brochs in general. Archaeological evidence for the structure may survive beneath later buildings.
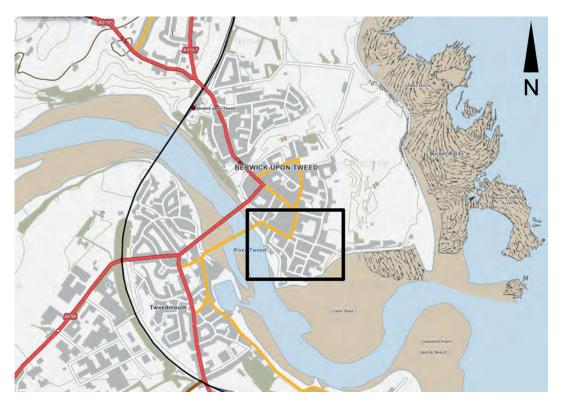
INTRODUCTION

A survey of Berwick-upon-Tweed, probably carried out in 1297, includes a feature named 'la Roundele'. It has never been satisfactorily understood, although its importance is noted in the medieval research agenda of the *Berwick-upon-Tweed Extensive Urban Survey,* which asks 'is there any evidence elsewhere for the building known as La Rondelle [sic]? (Marlow et al 2009: 47). The research outlined here suggests that, although further evidence may not be forthcoming, the 1297 survey itself provides more information about the site than previously recognised. Mapping of the survey and close reading of the relevant entry leads to the conclusion that it may have been the footprint or remains of a large broch, similar in scale to Edin's Hall broch some 20km away. (Throughout this paper 'broch' is used for convenience as a 'concise and more widely known' term than 'complex Atlantic roundhouse' (Romankiewicz 2016: 5)).

The lower Tweed valley in late prehistory has been understood as 'key to the social networks established in the region' (Crellin et al 2016: 15). Its estuary provided the only truly sheltered harbour on this stretch of the east

ILLUS 1(a)   Location of Berwick-upon-Tweed.
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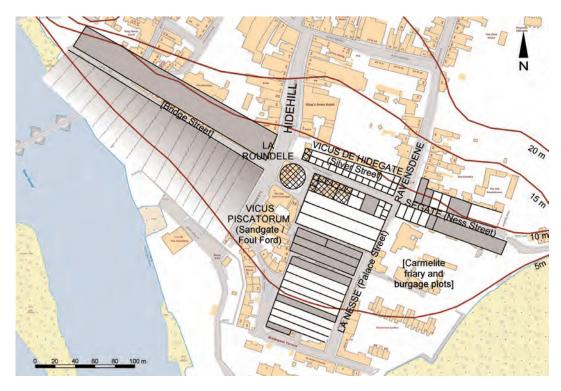
Illus 1(b)   Location of 1297 survey. (Catherine Kent, from base map. © Crown copyright and database rights 2019 Ordnance Survey 100025252)

coast, the shallow sloping beaches on each bank being linked by a low-tide ford (Linsley 2005; Marlow et al 2009). The south bank is assumed to have been used by the Roman military as an embarkation point for troops and supplies travelling north and may appear in the Ravenna Cosmography as *Oleaclauis* (for *Horrea Classis*, 'storehouses of the Fleet'), (Martin 1992: 14; Gates & Hewitt 2007; Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2013: 49). The Anglian name 'Berwick' implies that the estuary was home to one of the extensive group of specialised *wics* that serviced Lindisfarne (Coates 1999; O'Brien & Adams 2016). Northern sagas suggest use as a harbour during the 9th and 10th centuries (Giles 1849: 195; Wright 1866: 313–14). Berwick's nationality was contested as England and Scotland struggled over the remains of Northumbria (Rollason 2003) but with the gradual confirmation of the Tweed as the Anglo-Scottish border in the late 10th

and early 11th centuries, the settlement on the north bank quickly became Scotland's wealthiest port, eulogised as Alexander III's 'second Alexandria, whose riches were the sea and the water its walls' (Stevenson 1839: 185; Marlow et al 2009: 30).

THE SURVEY

This did not prevent the town continuing to suffer from cross-border warfare. One of the best-documented occasions was when, on 31 March 1296, Edward I and his troops crossed the lightly defended borough dyke and sacked the town in pursuit of his claim to English overlordship of Scotland. By the end of the day, it is said, six or seven thousand townspeople and soldiers were dead and much of the town's infrastructure had been destroyed, defended to the end by the merchants whose livelihood it

Illus 1(c)   Schematic mapping of 1297 survey. Grey: 'waste' site. Hatched: property of Jedburgh Abbey. (Catherine Kent, from base map. © Crown copyright and database rights 2019 Ordnance Survey 100025252)

represented (Riley 1865; Scott 1888; Rothwell 1957).

Berwick's wealth and strategic border position made the town essential to Edward I and he was soon planning its redevelopment as an interim seat of Scottish government. In January 1297 he called 25 civic leaders from all over England to discuss:

> the site and state of the town of Berwick upon Tweed and the port of that place, and to assess and arrent the houses and plots of the town, and to give and deliver the same to merchants, artificers and other suitable persons (Tout 1917: 116, quoting CPR 1292–1301).

This was the first of several such conferences. The survey mentioning la Roundele was drawn up either in 1296, to inform them, or in 1297 as a result of them; following Stevenson (1870: 152) the latter date is assumed here. Only one membrane of the original survey roll survives and even this is currently unavailable, possibly misfiled after calendaring by Joseph Bain (1884: 866; The National Archives, Kew, pers comm). Fortunately the text had already been transcribed and published by Stevenson. Although this means we are reliant on Stevenson's scholarship and his typesetter's accuracy there is no obvious reason to question either, and the fact that the document was examined separately by two well-respected scholars gives us as much assurance about the record of its contents as is possible in the circumstances.

TEXT

The surviving section of the survey is concerned with property in the 'low town', the area of relatively flat land facing the tide line and backed by the steep river terrace, the focus of Berwick's sea- and river-borne trade (Illus 1(b)) (Scott 1888; Ellison 1976; Fraser 1981; Cowe 1998). The text consists of 44 entries, some covering more than one plot, containing information such as names

of previous and new owners, details of buildings and plot dimensions. The information in each entry depends in part on whether a functioning burgage plot (*burgus*) or a waste site (*vacua placea*) is being described; dimensions are given only for the latter. Entries are listed under street headings and capitalised in the transcription.

The text has a few obvious errors and omissions. Two street headings are missing (*Vicus Piscatorum ex parte oriental* and *Briggate*), the orientation of properties in *Segate* is not defined and *La Nesse* is referenced at both ends of *Hidegate*. These may result from hasty recording, the surveyors' lack of local knowledge or copying errors, but need not impugn the reliability of the text as a record of what the surveyors saw.

Street names were generally as recorded elsewhere although *Segate* seems to have been equivalent to modern Ness Street rather than Sandgate (*contra* Marlow et al 2009: 16–17). The modern Sandgate and Foul Ford were part of a large marketplace, *Vicus Piscatorum*. The modern Bridge Street was not listed under its contemporary name *Briggate* but described only as two large waste plots off *Vicus Piscatorum*; as the site of the merchants' houses, quays and warehouses it had been defended to the last and its buildings obliterated (Scott 1888; Riley 1865; Rothwell 1957).

MAPPING

The survey was mapped using ArcGIS, adapting a methodology developed for a survey of Berwick dated 1562 (BRO/B6/1; Kent 2016). The plots with dimensions were first drawn as rectangles and positioned using the 1562 plots as a guide, with undimensioned plots interpolated, resulting in the layout shown in Illus 1(c). Some assumptions had to be made but these exhibited internal consistency. For example, in 1297 *Vicus de Hidegate* and *Segate* had few waste plots and thus few dimensions. However, the length of the north side of *Hidegate* in 1562 divided by the total of 14 or 15 undimensioned cellar/solar units in 1297 suggested an average frontage of *c* 7m for each unit, an unexceptional size for this type of urban building (Pearson 2009). Using the same unit width, the total street frontage on the

other side of the street also matched the length recorded in 1562. Overall, the mapping exercise suggested that street lines and frontages recorded in the 1297 survey were similar to those of 1562.

This indicates that the 1297 survey is generally accurate. The information it provides, however, remains frustratingly limited and this is particularly the case for the entry entitled la Roundele.

LA ROUNDELE IN 1297

DESCRIPTION

The entry reads:

> *LA ROUNDELE: In primis, placea rotunda dicta la Roundele, quondam abbatis de Gedeworthe, quae continet in se decem solaria et novem solaria, arrentatus per annum pro viginti m[arca].*

> (LA ROUNDELE: First, a rounded site called la Roundele, which belonged to the Abbot of Jedburgh, containing ten solars and nine solars, assessed at twenty marks a year.)

The author's translation differs at two important points from previously published versions. The first is in the understanding of the phrase *placea rotunda*. The *Extensive Urban Survey* translates this variously as 'a circular site (or structure)', a 'secure holding facility', a 'building' and 'a circular warehouse' (Marlow et al 2009: 16, 32, 47, 86). In what follows, 'site' rather than 'structure' is assumed, since buildings elsewhere in the survey are described by their function: *solario* (living space), *cellario* (undercroft), *shopa* (shop, workshop), *columbario* (dovecote) or *capellam* (chapel). A functioning burgage plot is *burgus*. Every other occurrence of *placea* is qualified by *vacua* (waste). On this basis, it seems most reasonable to understand the combination *placea rotunda* as a 'round site' rather than a 'round building'.
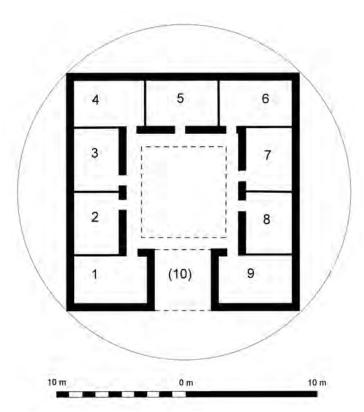
The second phrase at issue is *decem solaria et novem solaria*. The *Extensive Urban Survey* translates this as 'ten storehouses and nine upper rooms' (Marlow et al 2009: 16). This seems unlikely since *solaria* is normally taken to mean 'upper (or floored) rooms' (although the term has been recorded in the form *solario inferiori*

to mean 'cellar' or 'lower storeroom' (Latham 1975)). An unattributed translation of the phrase in *The People of Medieval Scotland* website (Beam et al 2012) has 'ten solars and a new solar', although *novem* normally means 'nine' rather than 'new' and elsewhere the survey uses *solario* rather than *solaria* for a single solar.

Several details distinguish la Roundele from other entries in the survey and provide glimpses of its physical and social character.

- The entry begins *in primis*, indicating the first property in a street, although it is the only entry under the heading la Roundele, giving it the status of a street even though it was only a single *placea*. This suggests that it was a detached site.

- It is the only site with its own name (*placea … dicta la Roundele*); presumably it was well-known in the town.

- The emphasis given to the site's circular shape by the repetition of the words *rotunda … Roundele* implies that in this respect it was atypical in the town.

- It is the only entry to use *contient in se* (containing within itself) when describing buildings on the plot. Elsewhere the term used is *cum* (with), for example *burgus … cum tribus shopis et uno solario* (a burgage … with three (work)shops and a living space). This may imply an atypical relationship between the site and the structure or structures built on it.

ILLUS 2   Possible arrangement of ten and nine *solaria* over two floors on a 25m diameter site. Rooms are at least 5m × 3.5m internally, smaller than the street-front *solaria* described in the survey but similar to some medieval lodging ranges; all 22 lodgings at Bishop's Waltham Palace (Hampshire, 1438–42) measured 5m × 4m and two at Haddon Hall (Derbyshire, 1470–90) were 3m × 2.5m (Kerr 2016). (© Catherine Kent)

- It is also the only entry with the combination *solaria et ... solaria* rather than the normal linking of *solaria* with *cellaria* or *shopa*. The pairing is unusual since solars are normally assumed to be upper rooms, but the combination could be understood as a two-storey courtyard block with floored living accommodation at each level, as suggested diagrammatically in Illus 2. Such a building could, for example, have been designed to accommodate visiting merchants or the Jedburgh Abbey servants they were dealing with (Stevenson 1988: 512), possibly in conjunction with a hall and service rooms in the Abbey's properties nearby (hatched in Illus 1(c)).

- Finally, la Roundele's rental value of 20 marks (*c* £13.33) is by far the highest in the document. The next most costly property, a burgage with five *celarii et solarii* belonging to Robert of Dunbar, was worth only 8 marks (*c* £5.33). The Abbey's nearby properties were valued at half a mark (*c* 33p) each and many others in the area at much less.

The survey thus suggests that, within the part of Berwick it describes, la Roundele was an exceptional site in terms of townscape and status.

LOCATION, SIZE

Unfortunately, the survey does not give any information on la Roundele's dimensions or its exact location. Both Stevenson (1988: 101) and the *Extensive Urban Survey* (Marlow et al 2009: 16) suggest that it was the detached plot at the head of modern Sandgate, now the site of a bank (NGR: NT 999 527) (Illus 3a). Neither gives a reason for this choice, but there seems no reason to disagree. This was a significant spot, where the major north–south route leading down the steep slope of Hide Hill on its way to the Tweed fording point met the flatter land of the riverside marketplace. A structure here would have been prominent from the estuary (and possibly visible from the sea).

The year 1297 may be one of the last occasions when the site was known as la Roundele. In the early 14th century, Berwick was walled, cutting off *Vicus Piscatorum* from the riverside. Market plenishment soon followed, creating the streets

Illus 3(a) La Roundele's site from the north. (© Catherine Kent)

ILLUS 3(b) La Roundele's site from the north *c* 1870. (Photograph from Jim Walker's collection in the custody of the Guild of Freemen of Berwick, reproduced by kind permission)

now known as Sandgate and Foul Ford. By 1490 (the date of the earliest title deed recited in the 1562 survey), the site had been squared up and divided into two burgages, although it remained detached and each burgage paid half a mark 'to the late Chanterie of Jhesus in Trinitie church', indicating its previous monastic ownership (BRO/B6/1: 191–2 of transcript). The 1855 *Ordnance Survey Town Plan* and a near-contemporary photograph show the site built up with a huddle of houses and inns gathered round a small courtyard (Illus 3(b)). By 1890, the western half had been redeveloped as a bank. The eastern half was demolished in the mid-20th century to create a small car park.

Locating la Roundele suggests its earlier dimensions. In 1562 the site was virtually identical to its current form, 26yd (24.5m) wide and 26–29yd (24–27m) deep. The original rounded plot cannot have been much deeper than this, since it was detached from the burgage plots in *Vicus de Hidegate* and *Vicus Piscatorum*. This implies a diameter of approximately 25m. Illus 2 indicates that a site this size could just contain a block of 'ten solars and nine solars'; if it were much less, the solars would have been unrealistically small.

The points made above suggest that in 1297 la Roundele was a detached site of high status and value, *c* 25m diameter, at the head of Berwick's beach-side marketplace and built up with a block of solars that allowed its rounded shape to remain apparent (or at least memorable). Its existence as a material entity is apparent even though the evidence survives in a textual rather than physical form.
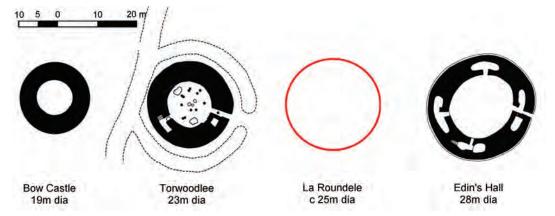
A BROCH?

POSSIBLE ORIGINS

Discussion of la Roundele's origins will inevitably be speculative, but this is not unexpected in an archaeological context. The circular shape is likely to predate Jedburgh Abbey's *solaria*s, which would almost certainly have been built using an orthogonal geometry. By the 13th century, Berwick's streets were already densely developed, with no evidence for other rounded sites, and to the author's knowledge, there is no record of any 12th- or 13th-century circular building types which could be described as consisting entirely of solars. It seems most likely, therefore, that la Roundele represented the

footprint of an earlier structure, massive enough to perpetuate its shape within the developing town plan. What could have produced such a long-lasting site? Several possibilities might be considered.

Enclosures of various periods echo la Roundele's size and shape. Bede describes St Cuthbert's settlement on the Inner Farne Islands, 'almost round in plan, measuring about four or five *perticarum* from wall to wall' (*c* 20–25m, assuming a 16.5ft or 5m perch) but its walls were only 'of unworked stone and of turf which he had removed from the excavation of his dwelling' (Morris 1989: 106; Blair 2013). A few centuries previously, some northern Roman signal stations had circular enclosures only slightly smaller; Muir O'Fauld, for example, was on a mound 15.8m diameter within a ditch 3.4m wide (Canmore ID 25990), but such walls were also normally of turf, albeit with a stone facing. In any case, such a station might be expected to have been sited on, rather than below, the river terrace. A working hollow *c* 22m diameter was recorded at the Iron Age Needle's Eye enclosure, just north of Berwick, but it incorporated few or no stones (Proctor 2012: 38). Pinfolds for stray animals, often found near cattle or sheep markets, could conceivably be as large as this but their dry stone walls are easily dismantled (Winchester 2016). None of these enclosures appear solid enough to endure in secondary use in an urban context.

A substantial stone or stone-based building thus seems a more likely predecessor for la Roundele. Circular *donjons* of almost comparable size were being built in Scotland during the 13th century, the largest survivor being the Valence or Moray Tower of Bothwell Castle, with an external diameter of nearly 20m (Rutherford & Malcolm 2011). Other surviving examples are considerably smaller, with diameters of 16.2m (Kildrummy) and 12.2m (Dirleton). However, none of their sites correspond with la Roundele. All were part of a larger defensible enclosure, set in a commanding position, often above steep river banks and enhanced by deep ditches on the landward side (MacGibbon & Ross 1977: 93, 108, 116). La Roundele, by contrast, is at the foot of the river terrace and there is no evidence for related defensible structures.

The link with Jedburgh Abbey may suggest an ecclesiastical origin. Circular stone churches were being built from the 12th century but they were even smaller than the towers cited above (indeed all the towers mentioned here are smaller than the size suggested for la Roundele, reflecting the difficulty of roofing such spans; Romankiewicz 2011). In addition, there is no record of a church or chapel on the site and a consecrated site is unlikely to have been used residentially so soon after construction. Given its location in *Vicus Piscatorum* it is likely that la Roundele was donated to or purchased by

Illus 4   Comparison of la Roundele with the three Tweed brochs. (© Catherine Kent; Torwoodlee based on Armit 2003; Edin's Hall based on detail from Dunwell 1999: 314)

Jedburgh Abbey for its economic rather than spiritual value (Stevenson 1988).

Venturing further back in time, even if antiquarian reports are accurate, the largest freestanding circular Roman building recorded in Britain – the 'temple' at Millington, East Yorkshire – only had a diameter of *c* 14m with walls 1.5m thick (Pastscape: NMR SE 85 SW). The 'elliptical building' in Roman Chester might be considered relevant, particularly in view of the 12 rooms arranged around its central courtyard and its possible connection with the Roman navy (Fulford 2005). But besides being considerably larger than la Roundele (52m×31m) and only very loosely 'rotund', it seems to have been functionally and structurally integrated with its rectangular *insula* and set within an important legionary fortress.
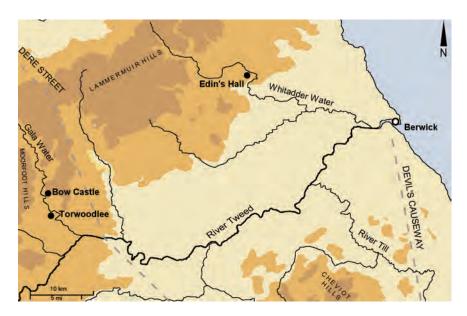
The closest correlation in size, shape and solidity between la Roundele and previous building types appears to be with brochs. For comparison, sketch plans of the Late Iron Age 'southern brochs' in the Tweed catchment area are shown in Illus 4 (Macinnes 1984; Mackie 2007; Harding 2009; Romankiewicz 2011). Their 20–28m diameter footprints make them comparable with la Roundele and their

substantial construction provides the potential to survive in some form, even in a rapidly changing townscape. The author therefore suggests that la Roundele is most likely to have originated in a broch.

THE WIDER CONTEXT

Archaeological evidence may never be forthcoming. However, the Scottish Archaeological Research Framework anticipates that new southern brochs will be found (ScARF 2012: 56) and it is possible to assess the likelihood of a broch having been built in this position by examining the contemporary physical and social landscape.

Several brochs are already known to survive in the Tweed catchment. Bow Castle and Torwoodlee are within a few kilometres of each other above the Gala Water (a tributary of the Tweed), while Edin's Hall stands alone above the Whiteadder Water which joins the Tweed just above Berwick (Illus 5). A broch in Berwick would raise the total to four, comparable to clusters of six in the upper Forth valley and four in the Firth of Tay valley (Armit 2003: 120, figure 46). Like the other known Tweed brochs,

ILLUS 5   Location of brochs in the Tweed catchment. (© Catherine Kent)

it would have been north of the river, possibly implying that the Tweed had some importance as a boundary, at least during the short-lived period of broch-building.

Northern brochs, assumed to have been roughly equivalent to farmhouses, were often built on coastal or riverine sites with easy access to good agricultural land and building stone (Parker Pearson et al 1996). The Tweed estuary provided all these advantages but was also a focal point for long-distance routes. Waddington et al have suggested that the lines of enclosures on both banks of the lower Tweed valley created a 'defended river corridor from the coast to the heart of Iron Age power at Yeavering Bell' and that 'waterborne transport from the North Sea provided one, if not the principal, means of travel in the region' (2012: 242). In this coast-with-hinterland polity, the Tweed estuary would have played a significant role as the gateway to the river system. Just north of Berwick, the Needle's Eye enclosure at North Road produced and distributed salt and also functioned as an important regional gathering place for cattle; pottery from the site indicated southern trade links with the Cheviots (Proctor 2012; 2016). The Roman road known as the Devil's Causeway linked the southern shore of the estuary with the major army supply depot at Corbridge (Breeze & Dobson 2000; Gates & Hewitt 2007).

The conjunction of these routes makes the estuary, with its gently sloping banks and low-tide ford, eminently suitable as a trading place. It seems to have been used in this way by the Roman military, since the Devil's Causeway appears to end just above the river, and it is assumed that local produce was gathered here for shipping north (Martin 1992: 14; Gates & Hewitt 2007). Such economic activity would have suited the builders of southern brochs who have been portrayed as 'an entrepreneurial class', funding their buildings from the proceeds of trade and building to impress their peers rather than their dependants (Smith 1990: 77; Romankiewicz 2016; Green forthcoming). The owners of Torwoodlee and Bow of Bowland apparently benefitted from the sale of grain to the Roman army at Newstead (Mackie 2007) and

the 'copper lords of Berwickshire' (Armit 2003: 125) built Edin's Hall on produce from the local mines, probably in the form of ingots (Dunwell 1999).
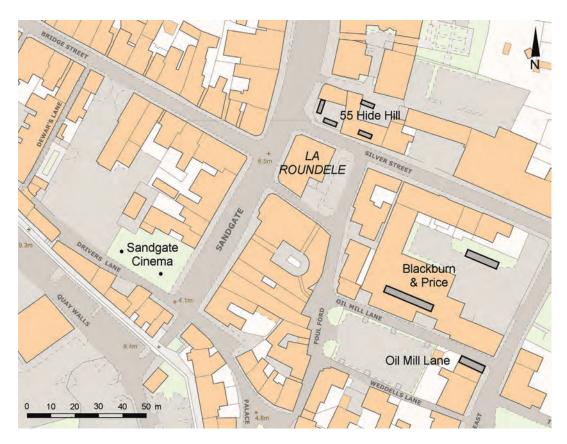
It has been suggested for some time that some brochs functioned as 'the focus of a prestige goods economy, effectively monopolising the acquisition and redistribution of Roman goods' (Macinnes 1984), and Dockrill (2002) proposes that they could have been centres for receipt and redistribution of cereals. These functions could presumably have included the redistribution of other surplus production and of non-Roman goods. A broch on Berwick's estuary could have had a role as a secure warehouse, and possibly an advertisement, for goods awaiting the arrival of Roman or other traders. It could even be suggested that the lack of evidence for trade with the Roman army at Edin's Hall is because the copper ingots produced there were sent down the Whiteadder to be traded from a broch on the estuary foreshore.

Finally, it has been proposed that the broch form was understandable across Iron Age Scotland and could have been used in the south as a consciously northern, non-Roman statement of 'political credentials in the face of Roman political dominion' (Armit 2003: 132; Romankiewicz 2016: 12). A broch directly opposite the Roman embarkation point on the south bank would be an ideal place to express the independent status and economic power of its builder.

FUTURE RESEARCH

An archaeological resource known only from a brief reference in a lost medieval document poses obvious difficulties of interpretation. It is, however, possible that archaeology may one day be able to throw further light on la Roundele.

Locations of archaeological interventions near the site are shown in Illus 6. At 55 Hide Hill (Archaeological Services, University of Durham 2006), 13th × 15th-century pottery was found at a depth of 2.5m in the rubble of a medieval tower demolished in the 1550s. Medieval deposits at Blackburn & Price continued below 2.1m

Illus 6 Location of archaeological investigations near la Roundele's site. (Catherine Kent, from base map © Crown copyright and database rights 2019 Ordnance Survey 100025252)

(Oxford Archaeology North 2007) and in Oil Mill Lane 11th×12th-century pottery was found at a depth of 2.5m (Hunter 1982). Boreholes at the Sandgate Cinema site found 13th×16th-century deposits at *c* 3–4m below ground level (Wardell Armstrong Archaeology 2015).

The levels recorded on these sites imply that any remains of la Roundele are now likely to be at least 2m below current ground level. The large-scale Ordnance Survey *Town Plan of Berwick*, surveyed in 1852, indicates that the cellars of the buildings seen in Illus 3b were *c* 2.5m (8ft) below street level, that is, probably within medieval levels and possibly even reusing la Roundele as a building platform. Street levels adjacent to the site have not altered significantly since then and it follows that the cellar floors of the current building on the site could also be within medieval levels (unfortunately, the cellars are currently in use by a bank and are thus inaccessible at present).

CONCLUSION

This paper has travelled a long way from its starting point in a single paragraph in a lost 13th-century document. The final destination certainly took the author by surprise. It is evident that in 1297 a large circular site with the nickname la Roundele existed in Berwick-upon-Tweed, in an important position within a townscape that had been developing since at least the early 11th century. It is argued here that it is most likely to have originated in a broch, even though in the absence of archaeological evidence, this must remain speculative.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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