

VI.

THE ROMAN FORT AT EASTER HAPPREW, PEEBLESSHIRE.

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INTRODUCTION.

On 11th August 1955, the Royal Air Force took a series of air-photographs of the Roman fort at Lyne and its environs, at the request of the Ancient Monuments Commission. Over Lyne itself (fig. 1, A) the photographs proved disappointing, adding virtually nothing to the recent discoveries which have been made in this area by Dr J. K. St Joseph's air-camera,¹ and by Mr R. W. Feachem's study of the National Survey prints. Greatly to our surprise, however, the same photographs revealed, dimly yet unmistakably, the outline of a second Roman fort, whose existence was hitherto unsuspected, only half a mile from Lyne on the farm of Easter Haprew² (fig. 1, B). The fact that the two forts are within such a comparatively short distance of one another immediately aroused the suspicion that they were of different dates. But it was not at all clear how the newcomer could be fitted in to the accepted pattern of the Roman occupation of Scotland, since excavation at Lyne had produced both 1st- and 2nd-century pottery, and it had consequently been assumed that the same site had served both the Flavian and Antonine garrisons.³ Obviously, if an answer to the problem was to be found, it must be sought by the spade: and accordingly the Commissioners authorised the writer and two of his colleagues, Messrs J. G. Dunbar and A. MacLaren, to undertake a small excavation in June 1956, as part of the preparatory field-work for the forthcoming *Inventory* of Peeblesshire. The present report is the outcome of that excavation, and is published with the Commissioners' concurrence in advance of the abbreviated description to be given in the *Inventory*. Permission to carry out the excavation was readily granted by the Countess of Dysart, the owner of the land, and by the tenants, Messrs Thomas Hepburn & Sons, who also kindly made storage accommodation available for tools and other items of equipment. Only two men were employed, but we were again fortunate in having the voluntary services of Mr John McClory, Assistant Burgh Surveyor of Kelso, for part of the time, and, aided by an almost

¹ *Journal of Roman Studies*, xli (1951), 57; *ibid.*, xlv (1955), 85.

² O.S. 6-inch map Peeblesshire XII S.E.; Nat. Grid ref. NT[36]/194401. The air-photographs in question are F21 82/RAF/1270, 0049-50.

³ Macdonald, *Proc. Class. Assoc.*, xxix, 16; *P.S.A.S.*, lxxv (1940-1), 40.

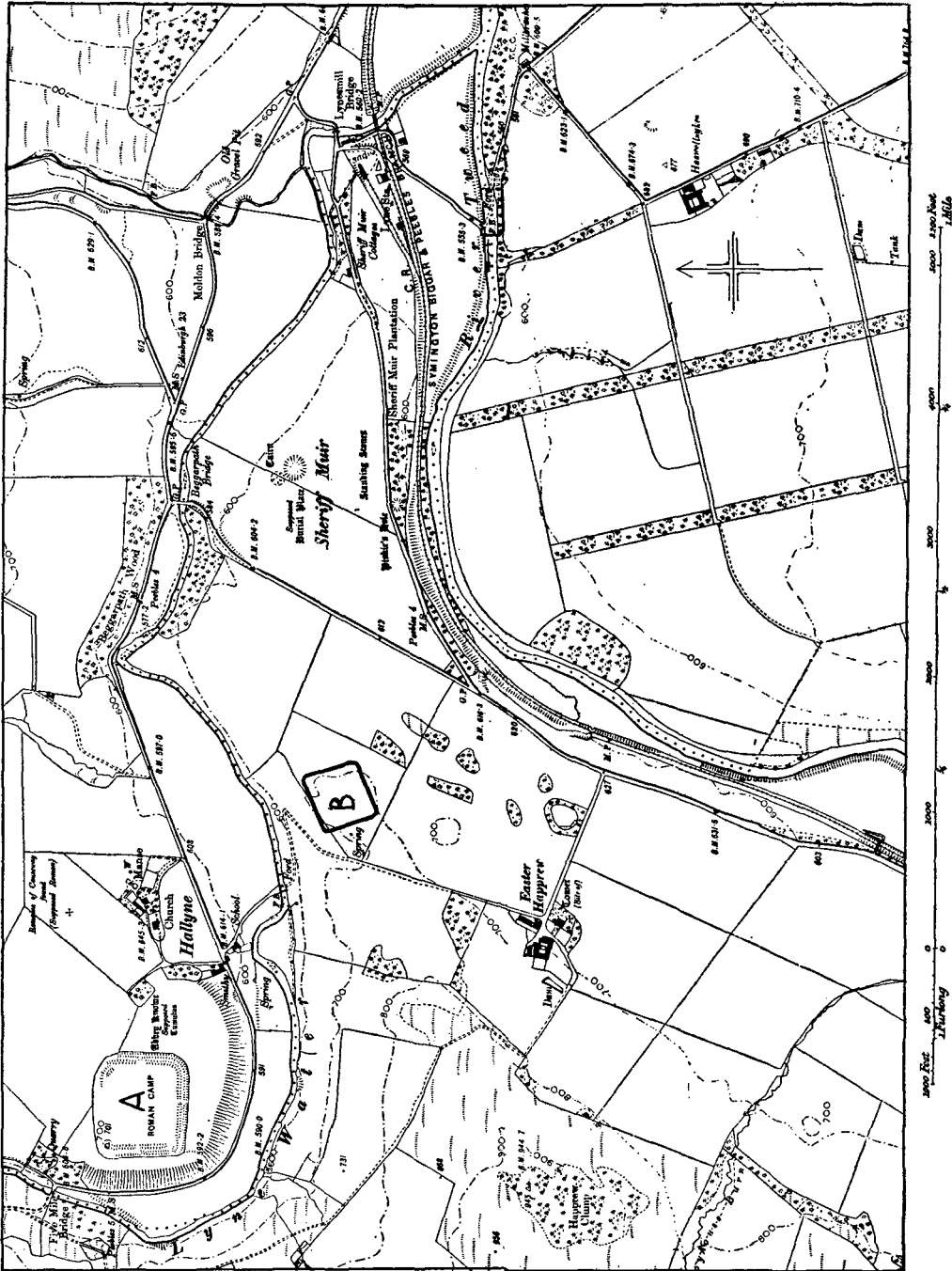


Fig. 1. The site of Easter Happrew Roman fort. (Based upon the Ordnance Map, with the sanction of the Controller, H.M. Stationery Office.)

unbroken spell of fine weather, we were able to secure our limited objectives in the space of ten days.

The new fort stands at an elevation of 700 ft. O.D. on the high, right bank of the Lyne Water, a quarter of a mile NNE. of Easter Happrew. It is thus on the opposite side of the river from Lyne fort, although it may well be that the ford behind Hallyne school, which is in a direct line between the two sites, existed in Roman times. From the strategical point of view, Happrew is unquestionably the better placed of the two forts. For whereas Lyne merely commands the narrow passage of the Lyne Water, Happrew, by virtue of its more easterly position, dominates the meeting-ground of no less than four natural routes—the Tweed valley to the S. and E., the Lyne Water valley to the W., and the gap between the Meldons to the N. Tactically, too, the site is well chosen, the level plateau of glacial gravel on which the fort stands being bounded by deep scarps on the N. and S. sides, and, on the E., by a long slope, broken by a series of natural terraces and terminating in the flat expanse of Sheriff Muir.¹ The only weak side is thus on the W. where a level stretch of ground connects the plateau to the lower slopes of Torbank Hill and Penveny.

Since Roman times the western half of the N. rampart of the fort has been completely destroyed by erosion of the bank on which it stands, and the rest of the circuit has been levelled by cultivation.² Owing, however, to the exceptionally dry conditions which prevailed in the summer of 1955, several buried features of the fort—notably the external ditch and the *intervallum* road behind the E. rampart—were revealed by differences in the colour and growth of the overlying pasture. And a short distance to the NE. of the fort the photographs also showed portions of three buildings in remarkable detail (fig. 2, Nos. 1–3), the walls appearing as dark lines of green grass which stood out clearly against the lighter background of parched grass covering the rest of the surface.

THE EXCAVATION.

The Fort.

The object of the excavation was twofold: firstly, to recover the plan of the fort's defences, and secondly, to determine the main outlines of the occupational history of the site. As at Oakwood,³ the first of these aims

¹ This roughly triangular piece of ground, some 50 acres in extent, is a conspicuous feature of the landscape, and owing to its central position it has played a prominent part in the history of Peeblesshire. The site of a number of prehistoric monuments, of which only two standing stones now remain (*Stat. Acc.*, III, 326–7), it was the scene of at least one skirmish during the Border Wars, and at a later date served as the parade-ground for the Tweeddale militia. The convenience of the moor for the latter purpose made it again, during the 1914–18 war, the *rendezvous* of the local volunteers for company drill (cf. Buchan, *History of Peeblesshire*, III, 511–12).

² Some slight traces of the E. and S. ramparts can, in fact, be seen when the field is in pasture, but they are so faint that their artificial nature would never have been recognised without the guidance of the air-photographs.

³ *P.S.A.S.*, LXXXVI (1951–2), 86.

was quickly realised by probing and trenching the ditch system, while in pursuit of the second aim a section (fig. 4, A-B) was cut across the defences of the fort, midway between the E. gate and the NE. corner, and subsequently extended eastwards to intersect two of the three external buildings disclosed by the air-photographs.

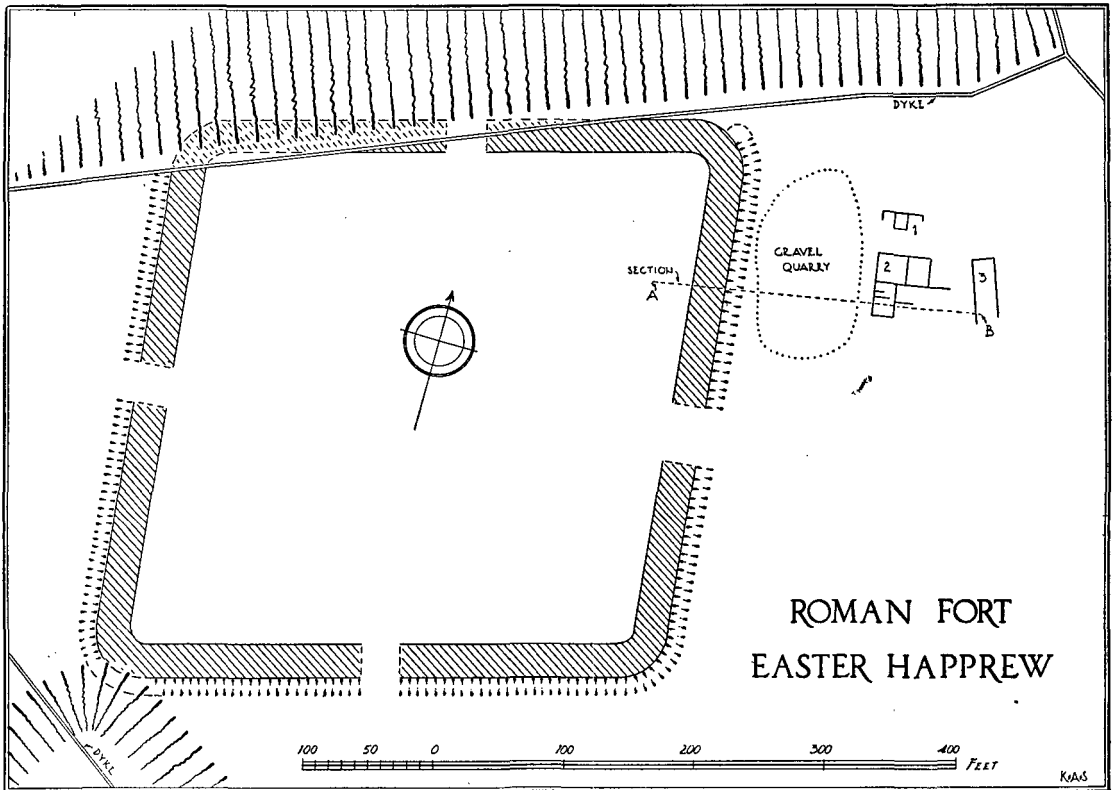


Fig. 2.

The results of this work showed that the fort is rhomboidal on plan and measures 380 ft. each way within the rampart.¹ The size of the enclosure, a little under $3\frac{1}{2}$ acres, is closely matched at Oakwood, Slack and Gellygaer, and is appropriate to an infantry regiment 500 strong (*cohors quingenaria*). Interruptions in the ditch system disclosed the approximate positions of three of the gates, and it can be assumed that there was originally a fourth gate, now almost entirely destroyed by landslips, in the centre of the N. side. No attempt was made, however, to recover the plans of the gates,

¹ The deviation from the normal rectangular plan is not dictated by the lie of the ground, and must be attributed to faulty surveying.

and the widths of the openings in the rampart shown in fig. 2 may not be absolutely accurate. Nevertheless, it seems evident from the position of the E. gate, and from the situation of the commandant's house (*infra*, p. 97) that the fort faced S.

The main section (fig. 4) revealed that the defences comprise a turf rampart, 25 ft. 6 ins. thick at the base, and a single V-shaped, flat-bottomed ditch, 12 ft. wide and 5 ft. deep. There is no berm, but in order to minimise the danger that the rampart might collapse into the ditch, the front 10 ft. of turfwork has been set on a stone foundation, which in turn is laid on an artificial step or terrace, cut in the subsoil. The foundation (Pl. V, 1) is composed of a single layer of stones, specially broken for the purpose, whose jagged surfaces would hold the base of the rampart in position and prevent it from sliding forward into the ditch. Immediately behind the rampart there was an open space, 7 ft. wide, covered with a thin layer of ash from an adjacent oven. Then followed the *intervallum* road which measured 21 ft. in width and consisted of a bottoming of boulders, some as much as 18 ins. in diameter, with a top surface of gravel. The most striking feature of the section was the entire absence of any sign of repair or reconstruction, and it seemed evident, therefore, that the fort had only experienced a single occupation of a comparatively short duration. In order to prove this conclusion beyond doubt, however, it was necessary to establish that the internal buildings likewise exhibit only a single structural period; and accordingly a trench was dug in a south-westerly direction from the W. end of the main section. The results of this trench, and of a branch dug northwards from it, can best be appreciated by reference to fig. 3. What, in fact, they revealed was a portion of the site of a timber building whose framework had been carried on sills sunk into the ground in vertical-sided trenches varying from 9 ins. to 16 ins. in width and from 6 ins. to 10 ins. in depth (Pl. V, 2). It was no part of our policy to attempt to recover the complete ground-plan of this building, but the complex of small rooms so far disclosed can hardly have belonged to any other structure than the commandant's house (*prætorium*), and this in turn implies that the E. and W. gates of the fort were the *portæ principales*, and that the fort faced S. More important for our purpose is the clear demonstration that, in common with the defences, the commandant's house exhibits no sign of rebuilding, all the sleeper-trenches being consistent with a single structural period. Of the fate of this building it is not possible to speak with certainty. A few small pieces of burnt daub were found in the immediate vicinity of the trenches, but are not sufficient proof, in themselves, that the building was burnt down; and the dirty gravel filling of the trenches gave no indication of whether the wooden sills had been removed, or had been left to decay in the ground, when the site was abandoned.

The Gravel Pit.

Between the E. defences of the fort and the three external buildings marked on the plan (fig. 2), there is a roughly oval, shallow depression in the ground measuring about 140 ft. in length from N. to S. by some 80 ft.

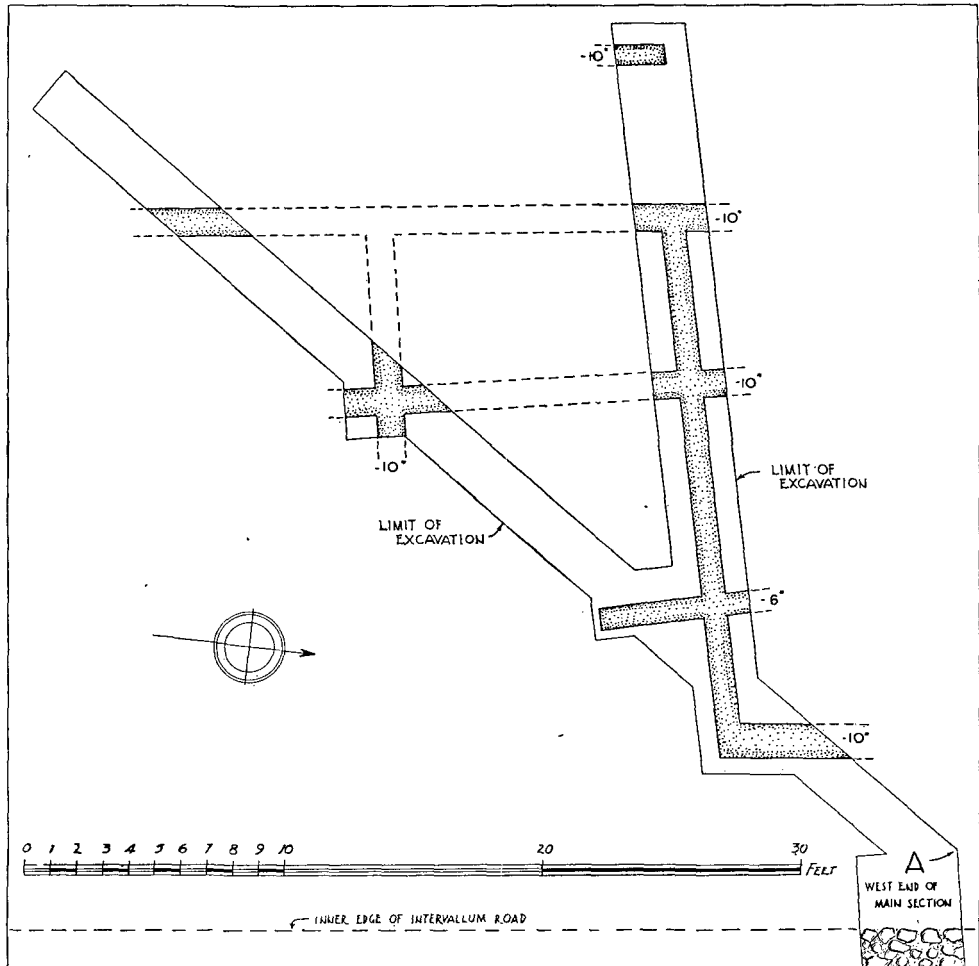
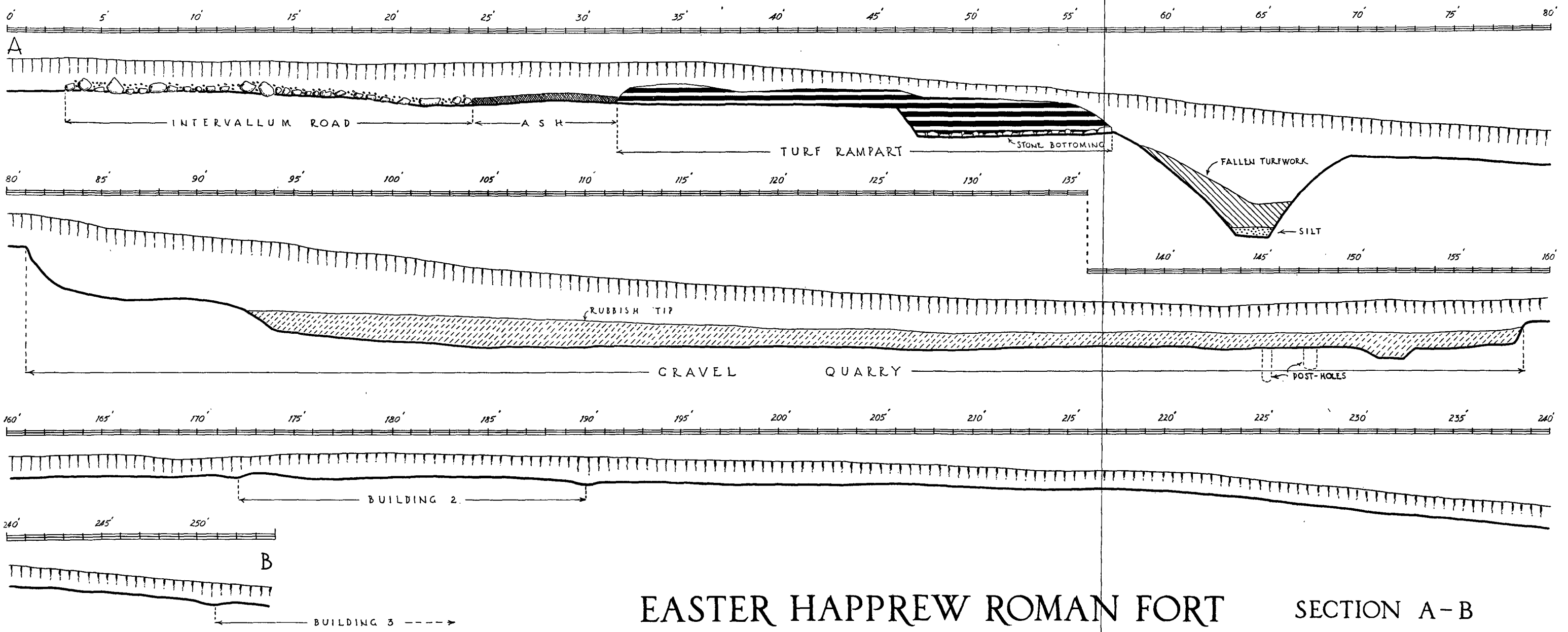


Fig. 3. Easter Haprew. Foundation-trenches of internal timber building.

in maximum width. From superficial appearances it was not possible to tell whether this depression was a natural, or an artificial, feature; but the section (fig. 4) disclosed that it is, in fact, artificial, and that it is due to the existence at this point of a Roman gravel pit from which the large quantities of gravel required for making roads and other hard surfaces (*e.g.* parade-grounds) in and around the fort were doubtless derived. Dug into the floor



EASTER HAPPREW ROMAN FORT SECTION A-B

Fig. 4.

of the pit, 12 ft. from its E. end, there were two post-holes, 2 ft. apart, with which were associated large quantities of charcoal and burnt daub. And also on the floor of the pit, some 5 ft. W. of the post-holes, there was a *sestertius* of Vespasian minted at Lyons in A.D. 71 and showing a fair amount of wear.¹ Subsequently the pit had been used as a rubbish-dump from which were recovered a number of small pieces of waste lead, a fragment of a bronze plate, a few sherds and a number of nails.

External Buildings.

Within the fort the subsoil is between 18 ins. and 2 ft. below the present surface of the ground, and the sleeper-trenches of the internal buildings are consequently too deep to have any effect on the growth of the overlying vegetation, even in times of severe drought. But immediately to the E. of the gravel pit the layer of humus is appreciably thinner, and here portions of three timber buildings were revealed by their sleeper-trenches on the air-photographs. As the section (fig. 4) shows, however, these trenches proved to have been ploughed down practically to vanishing point even in places where they show quite distinctly on the photographs, and it could therefore be safely assumed that where the trenches do not appear on the photographs they have, in fact, been entirely erased. Further work on these buildings would therefore be a waste of time since their plans cannot be completed, and their floors, which might have provided some clues as to their purpose, have not survived. That the buildings are Roman can scarcely be doubted in view of their proximity to the fort and the fact that they were constructed in precisely the same manner as the commandant's house. The three-roomed building (fig. 2, 1) and the long (?)shed (fig. 2, 3) may simply have held stores and equipment during the construction or evacuation of the fort, but the remaining building (fig. 2, 2) has been a larger and more elaborate structure. Although the evidence does not amount to proof, it is tempting to suggest that it may have been a *mansio*, or rest-house for official travellers, similar to those which stood outside the Flavian forts at Newstead² and Birrens.³

CONCLUSIONS.

The amount of datable material produced by the excavations is not large, but what there is is uniformly of the 1st century A.D. No Samian ware was found, and of the coarse pottery only two vessels merit illustration (fig. 5):

1. A jar in soft pink ware from the ash deposit behind the rampart.

¹ Cohen 407. I am indebted to Miss Anne Robertson for this identification.

² Curle, *Newstead*.

³ *Journal of Roman Studies*, xli (1951), 57.

2. A mortarium in light buff ware with a soft surface from the area of the commandant's house. The fine white and blue-grey quartz grit extends over the upper surface of the rim.

Both these vessels are well-known Flavian types, and the remainder of the sherds—scraps of soft pink or red wares, and three pieces of hard, unburnished grey wares—evince characteristically Flavian fabrics. A 1st-century date must also be assigned to a small glass jar, the upper part

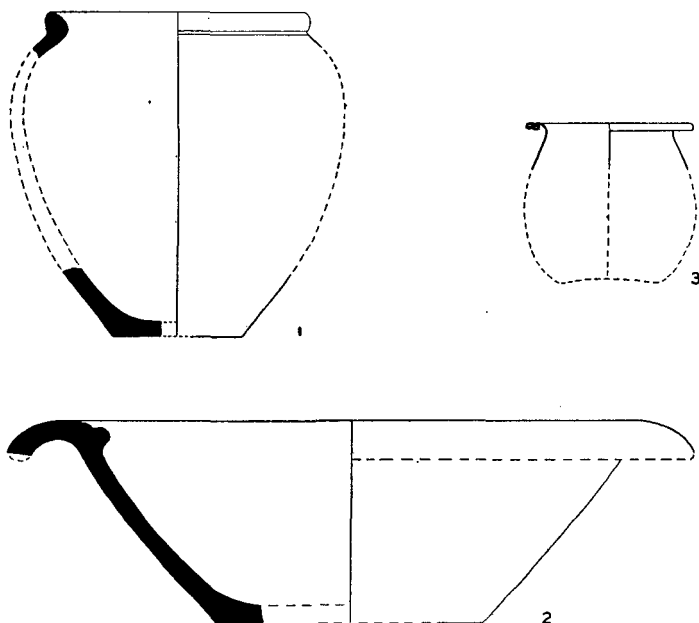


Fig. 5. Coarse pottery and glass from Easter Haprew.

of which was found, in fragments, immediately behind the rampart, and which is illustrated in fig. 5, 3. The jar is made of transparent glass, light blue in colour, and has very thin plain sides with an out-turned tubular rim. No exact parallels for this vessel have been traced, but it has an obvious affinity with the slightly more globular jars, also with tubular rims, found at the Claudian fort of Hofheim.¹ Lastly, although the *sestertius* of Vespasian discovered in the gravel pit is in a fairly worn condition, the amount of wear exhibited is not sufficient to raise any suspicion that it was lost in Antonine, rather than in Flavian, times—these being the only probable alternatives.

Having established that the fort displays only a single structural phase,

¹ Ritterling, *Hofheim*, p. 376, Abb. 93, 1 and 3; Taf. 38, 19. I am indebted to Mr W. Bulmer for this reference.

and one which is to be assigned to the Flavian period, the question then arises whether this phase is Agricolan or late Domitianic. For a considerable body of evidence has now been accumulated to show that none of Agricola's Scottish forts remained unchanged for long after A.D. 86. The reduction in the number of legions in Britain from four to three, by the transfer of *Legio II Adiutrix* to Pannonia, led very shortly to a reorganisation of the northern defences, in the course of which at least one of Agricola's auxiliary forts was abandoned (Fendoch), while others were modified (*e.g.* Oakwood), or completely rebuilt either on the same sites or on new sites near at hand (*e.g.* Newstead, Glenloch). Unfortunately, in the absence of Samian ware, the few relics from Happrew cannot be dated sufficiently closely to enable us to say, on the archaeological evidence alone, whether the fort was built by Agricola or by his successor. General considerations, however, leave scarcely any room for doubt in the matter. For just as the square plan of the fort, and the simple nature of its defences, are characteristic of certain Agricolan *castella*, so, too, the Happrew site, standing at the centre of a network of natural routes and commanding a wide view in all directions, is precisely the kind of position on which a Roman commander might be expected to plant a garrison during the initial stages of the conquest of the district. On the other hand, the construction of the important lateral road from Newstead to Clydesdale *via* the Lyne Water valley¹ (an undertaking which is not likely to have been completed before the end of Agricola's governorship) would bring about an entirely different situation. The Happrew fort would then be inconveniently placed, since local topography dictated that the road should follow the opposite (N.) bank of the Lyne Water until about the inflow of the Wester Happrew Burn. It would seem, therefore, that the 1st-century pottery found at Lyne is best explained on the assumption that the road was laid down during the late Domitianic reorganisation of the northern frontier defences, and that it was at this time that the fort at Happrew was abandoned and a new one erected at Lyne in its place. This hypothesis, however, can only be confirmed by the discovery of a late Domitianic fort at Lyne, so that the re-examination of that site, already desirable on other grounds, is given added urgency by the excavations at Easter Happrew.

¹ For the course of this road in Selkirkshire and Peeblesshire cf. *P.S.A.S.*, LXXXVII (1952-3), 63.



1. Easter Happrew. Stone foundation of front of E. rampart.



2. Easter Happrew. Foundation-trenches of internal timber building.