Binchester Roman Fort Excavation Project: Results of 2011 Season

The third season of the new excavation campaign at Binchester commenced at the beginning of June and continued until the middle of August. This year saw major progress in both areas under excavation especially that in the civil settlement (vicus) south-east of the fort. In both areas further evidence of very late Roman/immediate post-Roman activity has been recovered. This is understood more clearly by first giving a summary of what was found in the 1970s/80s excavations on the site of the commanding officer’s house in the centre of the fort. Here a sequence of occupation was revealed that continued down to the end of the fourth century. But the story did not end there.

Use of the building continued well into the fifth century though in a manner very different from that for which it was originally designed. Several furnaces were inserted into one of the rooms in the west wing of this formerly palatial building and from the associated debris appear to have been used for iron-smithing. Elsewhere, facing-stones from demolished walls were laid down to form a number of working-areas with associated drains. Articulated cattle bones displaying signs of butchery suggest this part of the building had been used as a slaughterhouse or abattoir. A large dump of similar material produced a mass of finds including tens of thousands of pieces of animal bone, many with marks of butchery, and a number of pole-axed cattle skulls. An area nearby seems to have been used for bone-working. The dump produced a considerable number of iron knives and knife blades as well as bone/antler tool handles and pins. Pieces of jet/shale waste and sawn shale attest the manufacture of artefacts in this material. Radiocarbon dates suggest this phase most probably began in the very opening years of the fifth century and, as the sequence of
deposits and structures imply continued for at least several decades. The author of the final report – Iain Ferris - considered that this activity was centrally organised and managed and should not be regarded merely as glorified squatter occupation. His opinion has now been validated by the results of the new campaign of excavation.

As described in previous accounts in this magazine the trench now being excavated in the east corner of the fort has within it the remains of a long, narrow rectangular building. This can reasonably be assumed to be either a barrack or stable, or possibly – given that Binchester seems to have been a cavalry garrison for much if not all of its existence – a building combining both functions of the type found in some cavalry forts. The building is rather narrow for such a purpose at c. 7 metres but the fact the intervallum road to the south-east is much wider than that to the north-east suggests that it may originally have been wider. Indeed, traces of what may have been the original southern outer wall of the building are beginning to emerge in the intervallum area and this would give it a width of c 11 metres, much closer to the usual dimension.

Beyond the intervallum elements of the defences are gradually being revealed including the angle tower at the east corner, parts of a neighbouring interval tower to the north-east and a particularly fine example of a bread-oven set into the back of the south-eastern rampart.

The latest use of the putative barrack building saw the construction of several discrete areas of paving within its interior associated with which were a number of stone and clay lined pits. Other examples of such pits were found this year to either side of the building, one almost 5 metres in diameter. Most appear to have their linings repaired or replaced several times and some were associated with gullies.

The paving ran up to the outer walls of the building but the partition walls appear to have largely disappeared by this time. Whether the superstructure of the building was still upstanding at this stage or whether the walls were merely being used as convenient borders for the paving is as yet unclear. The discovery of a couple of possible post-settings cut into the top of the surviving masonry suggests the latter might have been the case. This interpretation might also be indicated by the nature of the activity associated with these features. The deposits over and beside the paving as well as the fill of the pits themselves contained numerous fragments of animal bone, including many cattle jaw-bones and a number of skulls just like the similar features found on the
praetorium site. The processing of animal bone to enable the manufacture of everyday objects was clearly taking place here, too, and possibly also the soaking and preparation of animal hides for the production of leather goods. A much smaller pit cut into the clay rampart of the fort seems to have functioned as a water storage feature and a narrow gulley led directly from this to a large sunken area within the building.

As excavation has progressed more of the north wall of the building has been exposed and, unsurprisingly, several phases of masonry are discernible in its fabric. The lower (and obviously earlier) portion of the wall is characterised by regular courses of neatly dressed facing-stones while the upper course is formed of much larger and roughly finished blocks, some laid transversely. In one section there is a layer of soil separating the two types of masonry suggesting a period of abandonment after the building had been demolished followed by a subsequent rebuilding.

In the trench outside the fort to the south-east a 40 metre long stretch of the latest surface of Dere Street has been revealed, lying only 20 centimetres below the surface of the field, along with the outlines of several buildings fronting onto its north-east side. Lying closest to the fort and immediately adjacent to a side-street surfaced with very large paving slabs was a small, rectangular ‘strip-building’ measuring 5 by 13 metres with walls of neatly dressed masonry. A doorway about 2 metres wide occupied the southern part of the wall facing out onto the street while the northern half was closed with masonry set on an enormous stone slab. Its interior awaits exploration. Adjacent to this building and separated by a gap of less than 0.40 metres there stood a second building with similar dimensions. Stone-robbing had removed large sections of its walls but even so it was plain that these were of inferior construction to those of the neighbouring building. Quite possibly it was built at a later date than its neighbour. Indeed, the style of masonry bears more than passing resemblance to the latest walling of the barrack described above. A furnace or kiln was constructed inside this building at a late stage in its history.
The buildings just described are much smaller than those on the opposite side of the street examined in the late nineteenth century during excavations conducted by the Reverend Robert Eli Hooppell, the majority of which were around 10 metres wide and upwards of 35 metres long. A possible explanation for this is provided by the character of the third building recently uncovered. Unlike the two strip-buildings just described this continues beyond the confines of the trench both to the east and to the south. It was also of superior quality both in terms of construction and appointments. Two rooms lay within the trench with a porch-like structure attached to the frontage apparently of later date. Wall-plaster survives *in situ* within the latter while a patch of concrete still adheres to the face of one of the walls in the larger room. Immediately east of the trench a depression in the field surface denotes the spot where the 1870s excavators uncovered a circular hypocausted chamber. This is almost certainly part of the regimental bath-building and the rooms just described seem likely to belong to the same building. Assuming this followed the usual row-type plan and extended northwards this would explain why the two neighbouring buildings were so small because there was only a narrow strip of ground between the baths and Dere Street.

Among the more notable finds recovered in 2011 were two inscriptions, both from Trench 2 in the vicus. Although only fragmentary the larger and more impressive of the two bears four partial lines of text from the bottom right hand corner of a dedication slab. Little sense can be made of the top line as so little survives and the break in the stone cuts the letters in half horizontally. However the second line clearly contains the word *sacellum* – a shrine – the next *cui præest* – dedicated by – and the final line *Jquitum*. The latter is thought most likely to be *equitum* preceded by *praefectus*, in other words the commander of the cavalry unit occupying the fort. While temples and shrines were normally situated on the periphery of the built-up area close to cemeteries religious dedications such as this do occur in bath-buildings; usually, and understandably, to deities concerned with healing, good health and well-being such as Aesculapius, Hygeia and Salus. The second inscription occurs on a small portable altar. It is so faint as to be undecipherable at present but further analysis and specialised photography may well reveal the text in due course.
The latest floor levels in the two rooms of the bath-building lying within the trench had been removed as they too were the setting for two more of the bone/hide processing pits. The northern of the pair was the largest encountered so far occupying the whole of the room’s interior and measuring almost 6 metres across. These were the only pits of this type to be encountered in this trench and interestingly, like those inside the fort, the stone lining ran up to but not over the walls of the room. As elsewhere animal bone fragments – including numerous cattle jaw bones and the occasional skull - occurred freely throughout the associated deposits. The fact that these pits were absent from the two neighbouring buildings may indicate these were still in use at this period. Pieces of raw jet/shale as well as fragments of objects in this material were retrieved from their surroundings indicating manufacture was taking place and again paralleling the situation on the praetorium site.

Possibly relevant to the later history of the Binchester vicus are the two parallel and closely spaced ditches detected by GSB Prospection’s geophysical survey of 2007 as part of a Time Team programme. These appear to originate from the east corner of the fort to run roughly parallel with Dere Street before beginning to turn sharply to the south-west just before the modern field boundary. Could they belong to a system of defences erected to protect this part of the vicus in the late Roman period?

Although the precise function of the pits and their associated platforms won’t be known until chemical analysis of samples from their fills has been completed it seems fairly certain that they represent the same sort of activity as that found previously on the praetorium site. Similarly, while more reliable dating will depend on the results of the radiocarbon dating of several dozen samples one early result supports the impression gained from the stratigraphic and structural sequence that this activity also dates to the very end of the fourth century and/or more probably the first half of the fifth century. With such occupation now found on two widely spaced sites within the fort and also in part of the vicus it looks as though a significant area of the Roman site continued to be occupied well into the fifth century. Furthermore the scale of this industrial activity suggests its practitioners were supplying a market well beyond the boundaries of Vinovium itself or, alternatively, that the population of Binchester in this period was greater than previously imagined.

Initial assessment of the ceramic assemblage recovered so far indicates that regular pottery supplies were still reaching both fort and vicus at least as late as the 380s. Similarly, freshly minted coins were arriving at the site into the 390s (more than 1,000 have already been recovered in the new work). It seems quite clear that occupation of the civil settlement, or at least that part of it lying south-east of the fort, continued down to the end of the fourth century. This contrasts with the situation at a number of other forts in the North, especially along or close to Hadrian’s Wall, where the vicus seems to go out of use around AD 300.
Iain Ferris, author of the report on the 1970s/80s excavations, considered that the activities of this period – which included the systematic removal of the metal fittings from the bathhouse – spoke of a community that was still well-organised and dwelling in a place that had retained its importance. The results of the new campaign of work have already confirmed and reinforced that interpretation. The implication is of continuity of occupation on a considerable scale. Despite successive troop withdrawals beginning in the 380s and culminating with the forces taken to the continent by successive usurpers in the opening years of the fifth century it is possible that a residue of the garrison remained at Binchester along presumably with a proportion of the vicus population. We may have a situation like that postulated by John Casey, Tony Wilmott and others at certain of the forts along Hadrian’s Wall where a much reduced garrison evolved into an autonomous unit which continued to control the surrounding area (perhaps formerly the fort’s territorium), providing protection for its population who in return continued to supply it with foodstuffs and other materials. It is only a small step from this situation to the emergence of petty kingdoms ruled over by a chieftain or clan-leader supported by his personal retinue of warriors.

The work of the 1970s/80s also produced evidence for later occupation at the site. Inserted into the debris filling the western furnace-chamber of the baths was an adult female burial. The body had been laid on its back in a crouched position and was accompanied by grave-goods. These included a string of twenty-six beads, a very coarse handmade bowl, and a reversed S-shaped copper-alloy brooch with birds’ head terminals of a type broadly dated to the late fifth and early sixth centuries AD. The latter in conjunction with radiocarbon dating suggests the burial occurred around AD 550.
This discovery prompted the radiocarbon dating of approximately fifty burials, none with grave goods, found during excavations carried out in 1971 ahead of the extension of what was then the Binchester Hall Hotel along with a few others found during later utility works in the vicinity. These were all thought to be post-medieval in date but the radiocarbon dating showed they spanned the period from around AD 600 to 1000. Along with examples of other burials found during evaluation excavations in more recent years they indicate the presence of an extensive Anglo-Saxon cemetery, and by implication a settlement, within the confines of the former Roman fort. It is possible that the early female burial here was of someone of high status or reputation whose grave became the focus for the location of a later cemetery.

At some time around AD 675 the church at Escomb, 2 km upriver, was built incorporating in its fabric masonry robbed from the ruined Roman buildings at Binchester along with a small collection of inscriptions. Documentary evidence from both Symeon of Durham and the Boldon Book (1183) suggests Binchester had become an estate centre by the twelfth century. Its demise as a settlement may have been prompted by the establishment during that same century of a residence at neighbouring Bishop Auckland by the Prince Bishops of Durham which in due course led to the area around it becoming the principal settlement focus in the area.

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