

SURVEY AND CONSERVATION WORK AT CASTLESHAW ROMAN FORTS, 1984-5

D Start

The forts at Castleshaw lie on the Roman military road from Chester to York, a day's march (16 miles) to the east of the fort at Manchester and controlling the western approach to the trans-Pennine pass. The first fort on the site was built around AD 80, as part of Agricola's campaign to subjugate the Brigantian peoples, in advance of his move into Scotland. It appears to have been a standard auxiliary fort, covering about 1.2 ha, enclosed by a clay rampart and ditch (a double ditch in some places) and with internal buildings of timber. It seems only to have been occupied for a short period of time (perhaps 5-10 years) before the garrison was withdrawn and the fort demolished and evacuated.

The road presumably continued in use however, for around AD 100 a small fortlet was built within the ramparts of the earlier fort, re-using the SE gateway and part of the SE rampart. This fortlet, one of the smallest known in the country, only housed about 80 men and presumably served as a police post on the military road. The final evacuation of the site is not well dated but is generally assumed to have occurred around AD 125, when most of the garrisons in the area were transferred to the northern frontier.

The site was first noted in modern times in 1751 when it was discovered by the Manchester antiquarian, Thomas Percival (Percival 1751). The fields surrounding the fort were then under plough, and there were local reports of pottery, coins and inscribed stones being found. No systematic investigations were carried out however until 1897, when Buckley and Wrigley dug a series of exploratory trenches on the site (Andrew 1898). The position of their trenches was not recorded.

The first organised excavations were carried out in 1907 and 1908 by Bruton, Andrew and Lees (Bruton 1908; Bruton 1911), who purchased the site and hired a gang of local labourers to dig it. In the first season they excavated the gateways and corners of the forts and established the outline and form of the defences. During the second season

they concentrated on the fortlet, and located a small hypocaust, an oven base and a series of pits and post-holes. Bruton's report, whilst admirable for its period, was mainly concerned with artifacts, and his plan (Fig 1) gave only a limited record of the areas excavated and the features located.

The fortlet was completely excavated and the spoil piled in large heaps around it. As the site was never re-instated, these spoil heaps have now become a most confusing aspect of the site, wholly masking the outline of the fortlet. It is the presence of these heaps, and the many unfilled excavation trenches (now grassy hollows) that instigated the GMAU'S present programme of conservation work.

Following the excavations of 1907-8, no further archaeological work was carried out on the site until the late 1950's, when CEP Rosser began a series of excavations in the western part of the

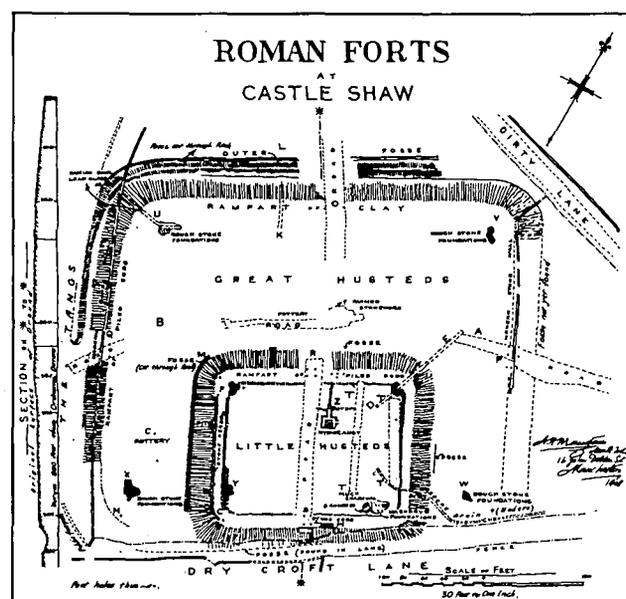


Fig 1 Castleshaw : Bruton's 1908 plan

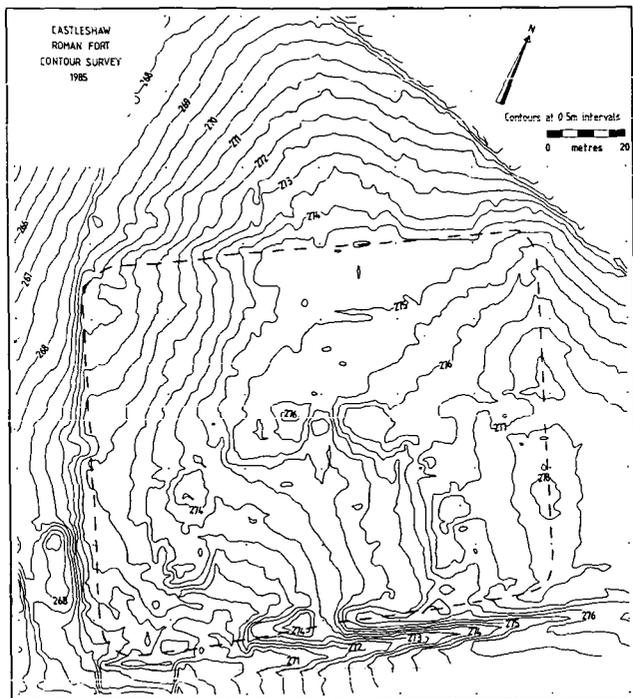


Fig 2 Castleshaw : contour survey of fort

fort. This work was taken over in 1960 by F H Thompson and completed in 1964, and did much to elucidate our understanding of the internal layout of the early fort (Rosser 1958; Petch 1963; Thompson 1967).

The Castleshaw Project commenced in September 1984. It is jointly sponsored by GMAU and Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council Community Programme Agency, and its brief is the conservation and presentation of the monument in a form comprehensible to both the informed and the casual visitor. The first phase of the programme deals with the conservation and re-instatement of the fortlet, and involves:

- i The removal of the spoil heaps surrounding the fortlet.
- ii The erection of an earthen marker bank and false ditch, superimposed on the line of the original rampart and ditch.
- iii The conservation of the interior of the fortlet: installing drainage where necessary and marking out or conserving features located by excavation.

Before such conservation tasks can be carried out, a great deal of preparatory survey and archaeological excavation is necessary. The work of the first year of the project may thus be considered under three main headings: survey, excavation and conservation.

SURVEY

The site of the fort was extensively ploughed in the 18th and 19th centuries but the ramparts are still visible in places as broad low banks. Their survival is notable on the NE side and at the western corner, where traces of the double ditch are also discernible. The SE rampart is bounded by a holloway known as Dry Croft Lane (a corruption of

Day Croft, the adjacent field) which lies within the fort ditch. The ramparts and ditch of the fortlet are completely obscured by the spoil heaps of the 1907-8 excavations, which now form the major visual feature in the interior of the fort.

The line of the defences of both forts has been fairly well established by past excavations and many of the internal features may be inferred from the more recent excavations. However, no systematic survey of the site has ever been carried out, and it was felt that such a survey was essential prior to the start of the excavation and conservation programme, even though much of the data would relate to recent disturbance rather than to the underlying archaeology.

A grid of 20m squares was laid out over the 2.5 ha field, and a contour survey conducted at 2m stations. The results of the survey may be seen in Fig 2. This is a manually-plotted contour map with contours at 0.5m vertical intervals, and clearly shows the surviving portions of the fort defences as expected, the only discernible internal feature is the ring of spoil heaps surrounding the fortlet. The data was also plotted using the UMRCC Graphics Unit's isometric display program (Fig 3).

The site is extensively disturbed, with many excavation trenches still visible on the ground. The position of most of these trenches has never been recorded and a survey of all visible ground disturbance was therefore made and, where possible, the original excavator of each trench identified by reference to the literature. A plan of this visible disturbance was combined with the recorded excavation plans of Rosser and Thompson to give an overall view of known disturbance on the site (Fig 4). This plan does not however include the major class of unrecorded, non-visible disturbance constantly being encountered during the process of excavation.

Prior to beginning excavation within the fortlet, a resistivity survey was conducted over the area enclosed by the spoil heaps. As this area was ex-

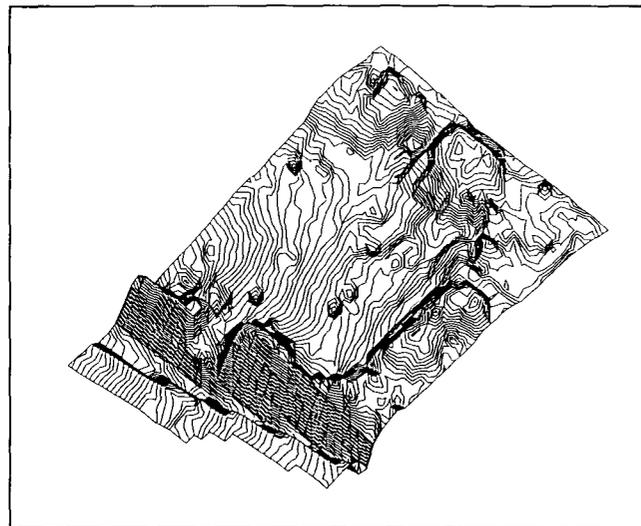


Fig 3 Castleshaw : isometric contour plot

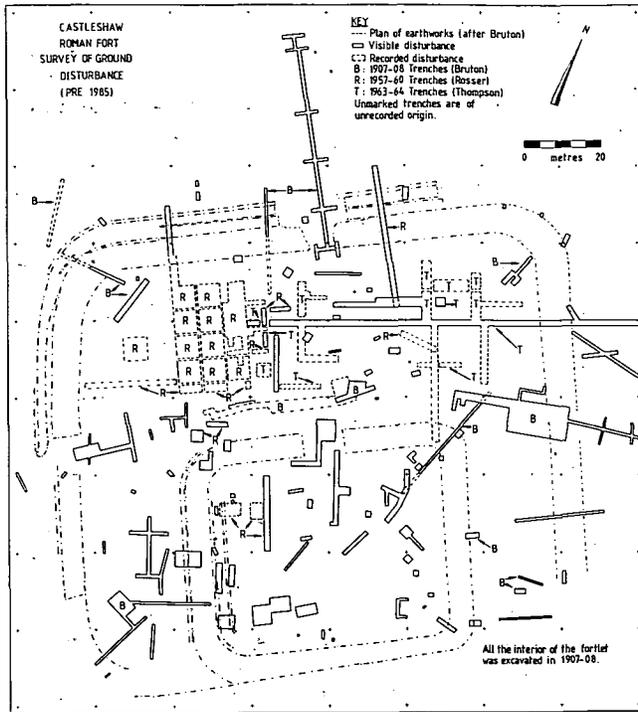


Fig 4 Castleshaw : ground disturbance plan

cavated down to bedrock in 1908 and now has minimal topsoil cover, it was not expected to reveal any previously unknown features. The survey (Fig 5) did however successfully locate the position of several of the features reported by Bruton. As with the contour survey, the data was input to the UMRCC computer and was plotted in a variety of ways in order to aid interpretation (Fig 6). A resistivity survey of the entire fort and the surrounding area will be conducted in the winter of 1985-6.

EXCAVATION

The excavation strategy within the fortlet has largely been governed by the various conservation tasks to be carried out. The programme entails:

- i Locating and examining the rampart and ditch around the fortlet.
- ii Examining the form and construction of the corners and gateways of the fortlet.

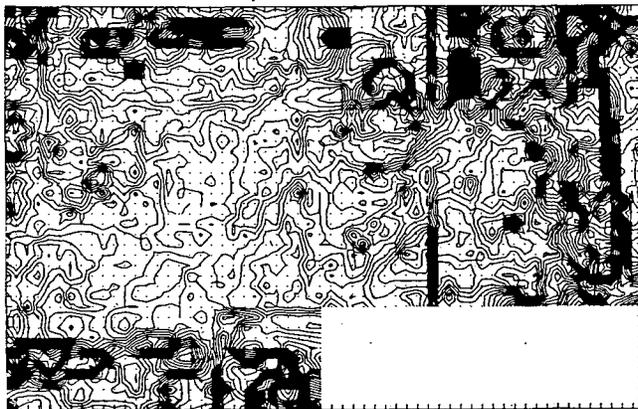


Fig 5 Castleshaw : resistivity survey

- iii Investigating the relationship of the fortlet defences to the rampart of the fort.
- iv Stripping the interior of the fortlet and recording surviving features.

Rampart and Ditch

The presumed line of the defences are being tested by a series of exploratory trenches to locate the rampart base and ditch (Fig 7, trenches 1-8). It is not intended that the rampart be wholly exposed, or that the ditch be completely emptied except within these trenches.

With the exception of trench 6, all the trenches located remains of the clay base of the rampart, which was generally 6-7m wide. Survival was best on the SE side, where the rampart base remained to a height of some 600mm. On the SW side, notably in trench 6, the rampart base had been completely removed by previous excavators. Trenches 1-3 and 6-8 located the position of the ditch, which was largely beneath the spoil heaps of the 1907-8 excavations and was clearly marked in the sections by a dip in the pre-1907 turfline. Trenches 4 and 5 differed from the others in that they included the

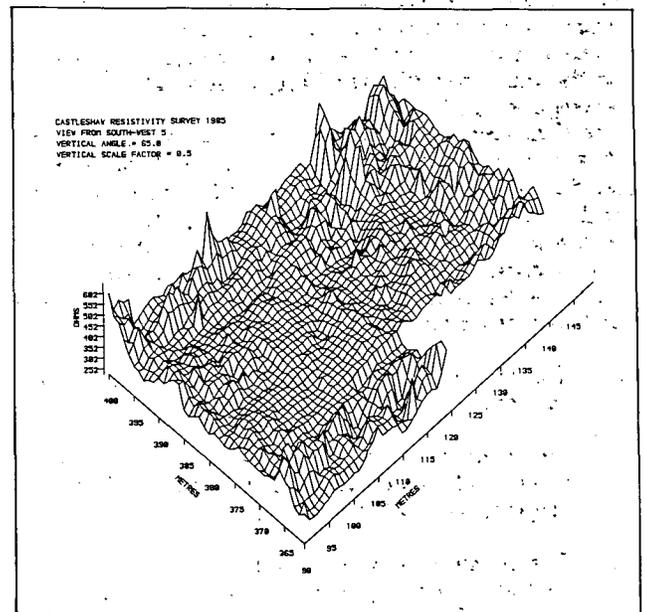


Fig 6 Castleshaw : isometric plot

holloway known as Dry Croft Lane, which runs along the SE side of the fortlet. This trackway appeared to lie within the ditch and, in the case of trench 4, surprisingly little ditch fill (less than 450mm) had accumulated in the bottom. It is not clear whether or not the lane assumed its present form because the ditch fill was removed during the 1907-8 excavations: a fact not recorded by Bruton, but nevertheless probable as the fill contained only post-medieval material. The ditch was cut into the natural shale, and on excavation appeared sharply defined with no visible signs of erosion. The shape of the ditch in trench 4 was of a very different form to that noted at other points around the fortlet, but this was doubtless because the defences of this SE side overlay and probably re-

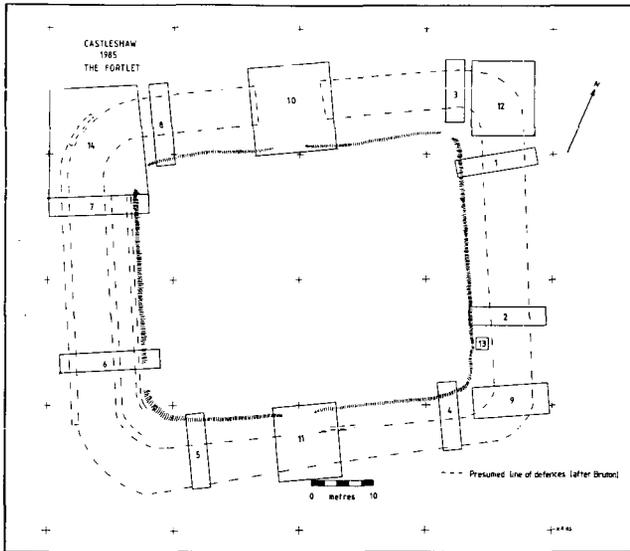


Fig 7 Castleshaw : plan of fortlet excavations

used features belonging to the earlier fort.

The profile revealed by trench 5, on the same side but close to the southern corner, in no way resembled that in trench 4. No convincing remnant of the ditch has yet been identified and the deposits contained large quantities of modern pottery in a sand and gravel matrix. The original ditch profile may have been lost to recent disturbance, or may yet prove to be at a much deeper level.

At present, the conditions of Scheduled Monument Consent only permit excavation to the top of Roman levels and re-excavation of previously excavated areas. Trenches 2-8 have therefore been excavated to the upper surface of the rampart base and ditch fill, and await further consent for the rampart to be sectioned and the ditch fill removed.

Trench 1 was intentionally sited over an old excavation trench, thus allowing excavation and recording of a complete profile. The section (Fig 8) revealed several points worthy of note. The ditch was of asymmetrical or 'Punic' form, with a total depth of c1.4m below the estimated Roman ground surface. At its base was a feature (46)

possibly representing an 'ankle break'; but interpretation was complicated by the existence of a major re-cut (45), visible in both sections of trench 1, which excluded the ankle break. Thus while the secondary ditch was certainly of Punic form, the primary ditch was of unknown profile: it may have been either 'V'-shaped or Punic. As yet, there is no dating evidence for the re-cut and it remains to be seen whether it will appear in the other ditch sections to be excavated.

The rampart base survived to a height of approximately 450mm in this area and consisted of layers of clay sandwiching thin black 'seams' of charcoal and humus. These were the remains of turves laid within the clay rampart in order to stabilise the structure. The width of the rampart base was c6.5m and there was probably a narrow berm (c500mm) wide separating it from the ditch. Modern disturbances, possibly archaeological in origin, were represented by layers 8 and 3/6. The foundation of the rampart (not shown on the section) appeared to be a rough platform of large and small cobbles, laid directly onto the bedrock. However, as mentioned above, the site of this trench had been previously disturbed and the precise form of the foundation is not clear. Indeed, the stone layer may be a feature of the early fort, lying coincidentally beneath the rampart. Better evidence for the foundations will be obtained from the other relatively undisturbed trenches, when these are fully excavated.

Corners and Gateways

The corners of the fortlet will each be examined, although only the northern corner (trench 12) has so far been fully excavated. This area contains Bruton's first trench (Fig 1, D-E; Fig 3) which cut through the rampart at its northern corner and extended across the ditch and into the fort. Although he does not report the fact, where Bruton's trench crossed the ditch he enlarged it to form a pit, and emptied the ditch. The trench and pit were both re-excavated (yielding a fine Edwardian leather boot) and cut back to provide another section through the rampart base and the ditch. The clay and turf construction of the rampart was identical to that observed in trench 1 and it survived in some parts to a height of 350mm.

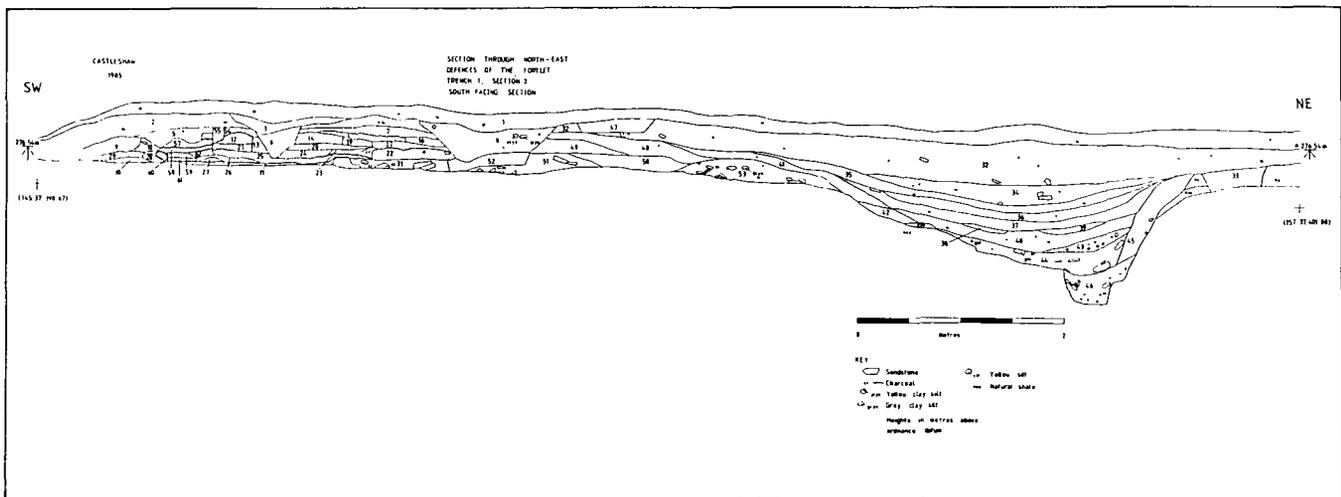


Fig 8 Castleshaw : section through fortlet defences, trench 1

The section also revealed features cut into the bedrock beneath the rampart, which may be gullies or beamslots relating to buildings of the early fort.

Whilst it is not intended to remove the surviving rampart to investigate these features, enough information may be gleaned from the various sections to enable some interpretation of them to be made.

The ditch sections in trench 12 showed the same Punic form and re-cut as trench 1, although there was only scant evidence for the existence of an ankle break. Thompson's southernmost trench was also located within trench 12 and provided another section of the ditch (Fig 9). Once again, the Punic ditch and re-cut were in evidence, although this time there was no sign of the putative ankle break.

Another point of interest observed at the corner was the survival of the drains serving the Via Praetoria of the early fort. This road, linking the NE gate to the Principia of the fort, was completely obliterated in the centre of the fort by the fortlet defences, but its northernmost drain just survived at the edge of the fortlet ditch. This drain also survived at the northern end of trench 3, where its fill contained large fragments of a 1st century mortarium. The southern drain was cut by the fortlet ditch, and only a short section survived, running up to the edge of the ditch. Little of the road metalling survived, the material probably being re-used for the construction works in the fortlet.

The gateways of the fortlet are currently under excavation and there is little as yet to report. It is not clear from Bruton's records whether the ditch had causeways at the gates (the normal practice) or whether some form of bridge was employed. Excavation so far has shown that at both gateways, the cobbled road linking the gates of the fortlet comes to an abrupt halt at the edge of the

ditch. This may suggest the use of bridges, or may merely be the result of previous investigation of the gateways.

The relationship of the fortlet to the fort

The fortlet clearly post-dates the fort, as is demonstrated by the fact that the fortlet ditch cuts the Via Praetoria of the fort. Their relationship can best be studied, however, at the point where the eastern and southern corners of the fortlet ditch cut the rampart of the fort. Bruton attempted to examine the relationship at the southern corner, but reports that his findings were inconclusive. It is intended that a new trench (Fig 7, trench 9) will be excavated at the eastern corner, in order to confirm the sequence, when the appropriate Scheduled Monument Consent is received.

The interior of the fortlet

The 1907-8 excavations appear from contemporary photographs to have stripped completely the interior of the fortlet. It is apparent from the present investigation that some 300-400mm of topsoil were originally removed from the whole area and not re-instated. The present topsoil is only some 20-30mm in depth.

Although excavation of the fortlet has so far concentrated on the location and excavation of the defences, some stripping and recording of the interior has also been carried out. The area immediately inside the NE rampart was excavated, and a cobbled road located and recorded. This road was noted by Bruton in 1908 (Fig 1) and forms part of the intervallum road of the fortlet. The oven, which was situated in the eastern corner of the fortlet (marked in Fig 1 as '8 courses') was re-excavated in the hope that it would be a feature worthy of conservation *in situ*. Sadly however, its slabbed base and 8 courses of masonry had been dismantled by previous excavators, leaving only the rubble-and-clay core intact.

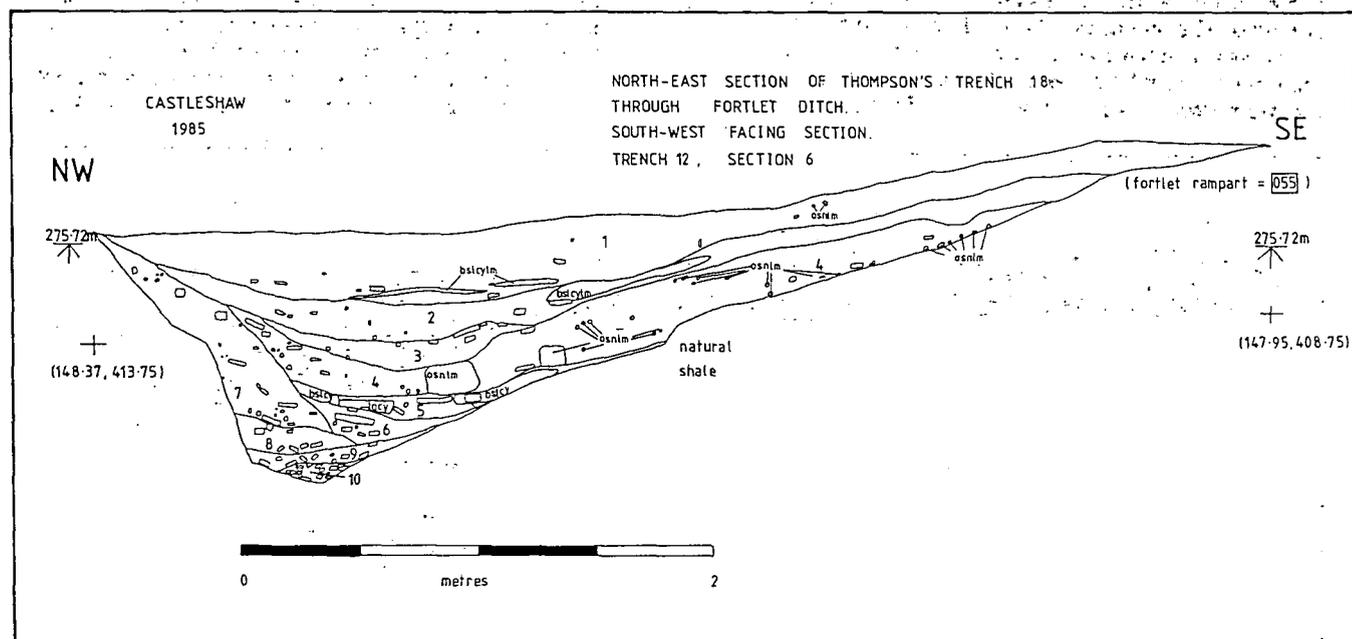


Fig 9. Castleshaw : section through fortlet defences, trench 12

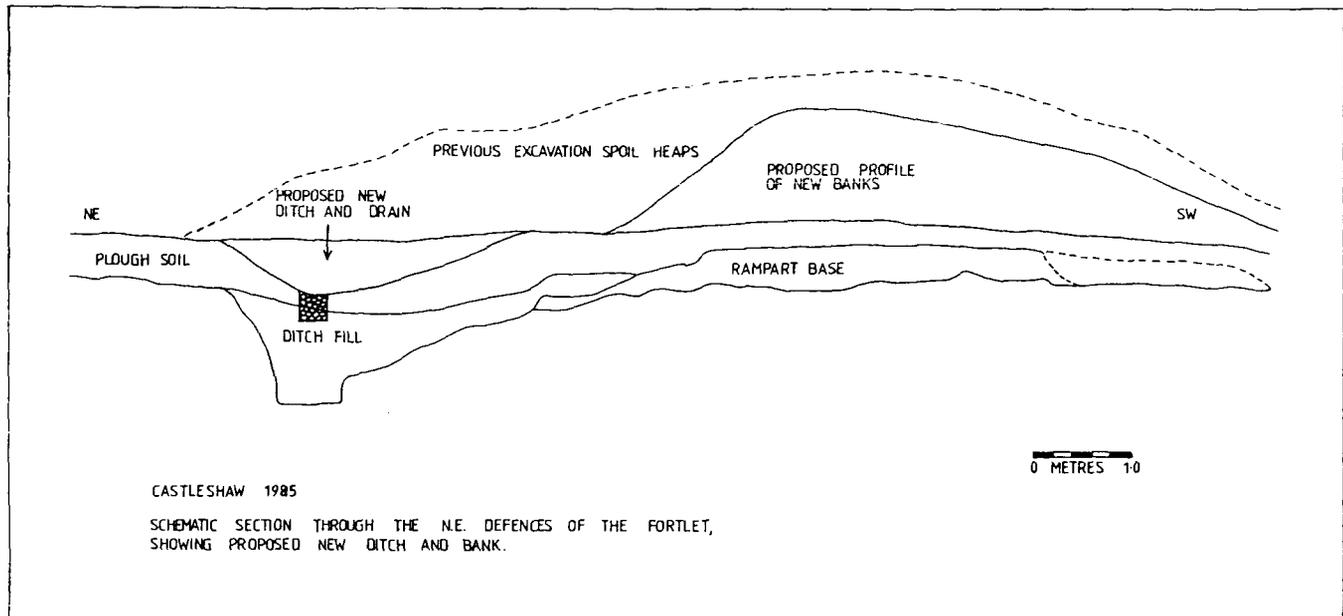


Fig 10 Castleshaw : proposed reconstruction of fortlet defences

The Finds

Excavation has been limited to the re-examination of previously excavated areas, or the removal of topsoil down to the surface of Roman levels. In the former case, the only finds were those overlooked or discarded by earlier excavators, and in the latter, the finds were unstratified. Nevertheless, a wide range of material has been recovered, including plain and decorated Samian ware, greywares, rusticated and other coarsewares, *amphorae*, *mortaria* and large quantities of fragmentary Roman tile. Metals do not generally fare well in the acid soil of the site, but some lead and iron objects have been recorded. A fluted blue glass bead, and fragments of another, have been recovered from the spoil heaps. The Roman material recorded so far is consistent with the accepted date of late 1st and early 2nd century AD for the fort and fortlet respectively. A few worked flints reflecting pre-Roman activity on the site, have also been found.

CONSERVATION

Most of the conservation work associated with the fortlet must await completion of the archaeological excavation. Pending this, trials have begun on the construction of the marker bank along the line of the rampart on the NE side. The spoil heaps have been moved or shaped to form a flat-topped bank, c7m wide at the base and with a maximum height of 900mm (Fig 10), directly overlying the original rampart. The broad flat top is an attempt to minimise the effects of erosion, since it is clear that at similar sites, visitors inevitably walk along the banks.

The false ditch with its associated drain cannot be installed until specific consent has been obtained. Consent has also been sought for the installation of a field drainage system in the interior of the fortlet. The previous excavations, which removed all topsoil from the area, have left a series of ponds and reedbeds. Replacement of the topsoil and the installation of drains will solve this problem, but clearly this work must wait until the whole of the interior has been re-excavated and fully recorded.

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