

Vinovia

‘A buried Roman city in the county of Durham’?

In the 1870s, excavations at Binchester prompted the Reverend Robert Hooppell to declare that he had discovered a buried Roman city. Now known to be a Roman fort, was the Reverend’s enthusiasm for the structures genuine or just a cynical ploy for publicity? **David Mason** updates us on the results of an ongoing excavation campaign at the site.

BELOW Preparations are under way for a sixth season of excavations in the modern campaign. Here, the remains of a bath-house are visible in the foreground emerging from a trench cut just beyond the Roman fort rampart. With walls still standing 2.3m high, the bath-house is remarkably well preserved by the standards of Roman Britain.



RIGHT Founded in around AD 75-80, Binchester was part of a cordon of forts on the main road north in the east of England, now known as Dere Street. A network of forts was retained to the south of Hadrian's Wall, after both its construction and its refurbishment in the aftermath of the abandonment of the Antonine Wall.

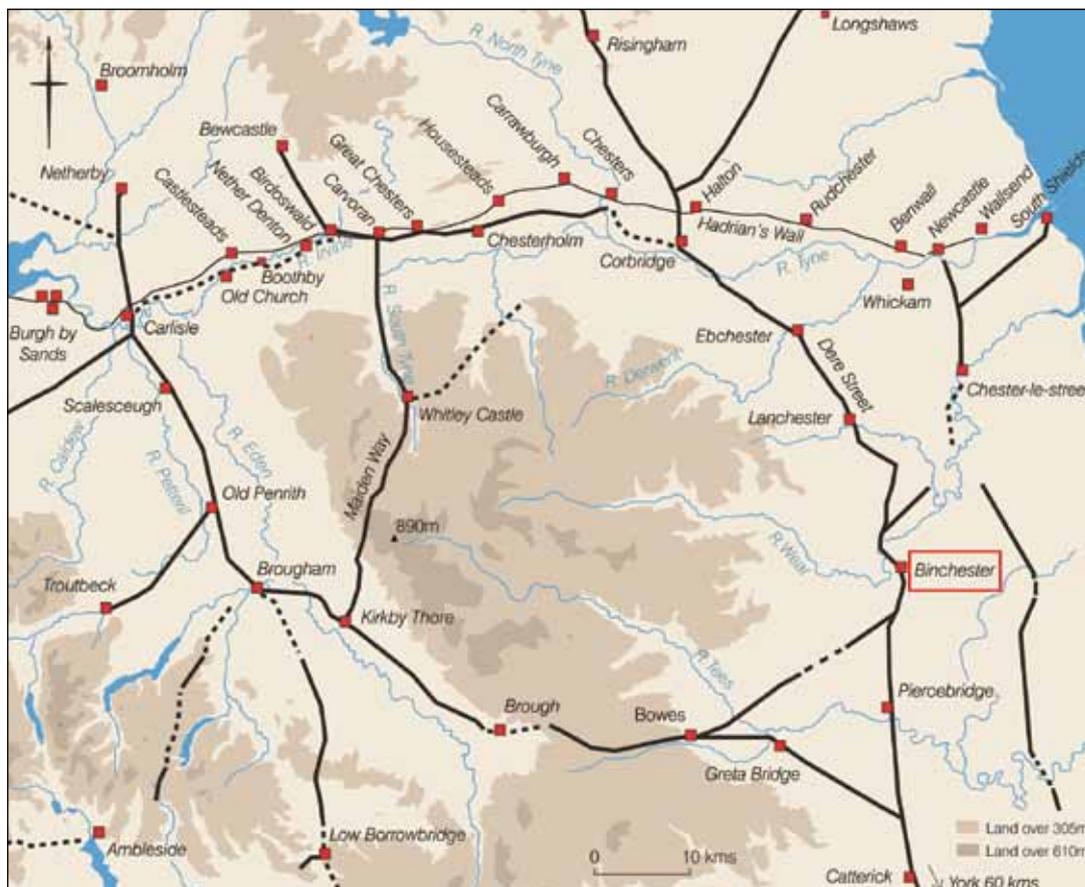


IMAGE: Philip Simton © English Heritage

BELOW This fragment of a monumental building inscription was reused as paving. It implies a date of AD 158 for the building work it commemorates, possibly indicating that the fort was being refurbished prior to the Antonine evacuation of Scotland.



Vinovia or Vinovium, to give Binchester its Roman name, was a key link in the fort chain strung along the major road now known as Dere Street.

It guarded the point where the road crossed the River Wear, to the north of modern Bishop Auckland. We last visited the site in CA 263, during the second year of a seven-season campaign. The fort held nearly 4 hectares within its ramparts, making it far larger than average, perhaps because it housed an elite cavalry garrison – principally the Spanish *ala Vettonum*. A *Time Team* project in 2007 revealed that the first fort here – founded in AD 75-80 – was larger still, at around 7.5 hectares, and perhaps occupied by a mixed garrison of crack legionary infantry and auxiliary cavalry.

Roman Binchester was home to more than just soldiers, however. A thriving civilian settlement or *vicus* grew up beyond the fort walls. Excavations here in the late 1870s, conducted by the Reverend Robert Hooppell, exposed a series of well-preserved masonry buildings jostling for street frontage along Dere Street. Carried away by the impressive character of these structures,

and others within the fort, Hooppell styled the site a 'buried Roman city' in the title of his book describing the diggings. Clearly Binchester could never have held that administrative status, but were Hooppell's discoveries really so impressive, or was he shamelessly exaggerating in order to aggrandise his work?

Soldiers and civilians

The current campaign is targeting two large areas of the site to secure an impression of life both within and without the defences. One lies in the eastern corner of the fort, allowing the defences, the *intervallum* road, and part of an adjacent barrack to be investigated. The second trench was opened in the area of *vicus* lying south-east of the fort, and opposite the buildings that so inspired Hooppell.

Making sense of the features and later stratigraphy within the east corner of the fort has proven to be a painstaking process. Centuries of ploughing had spread stone from the latest Roman structures across the site, making it difficult to discern whether any actual surfaces were present, or if it was all random rubble. ➤



The former possibility was accorded particular importance because traces of ephemeral ‘sub-Roman’ activity were discovered on the *praetorium* site in the 1980s. Our caution seemed to be repaid by the discovery of vast quantities of animal bone in associated deposits. Pits and depressions filled with soil and containing much animal bone were also encountered (see CA 263).

As excavation progressed this year, it became clear that not all of these ‘pits’ are what they seem. Some are severe depressions caused by subsidence that appears to be a geological rather than archaeological phenomenon. Even so, there does seem a strong possibility that the late- and sub-Roman activity encountered on the *praetorium* site is also represented here, albeit in a much disturbed form.

Although it was clear from the first season that the remains of a long, narrow, barrack-like building also lay within the excavation area, it is really only during the recently completed fifth season that the details of its latest phases have become clear. Aligned with its long axis north-east/south-west, the building is 12m wide and divided internally into soldiers’ living quarters

known as *contubernia*. About 4.20m-4.40m in width, each *contubernium* has an inner and outer room, separated by a masonry spine wall and divided by transverse timber partitions. This mimics the cavalry barracks explored at Wallsend fort on Hadrian’s Wall, where cavalry soldiers lived in the room behind their mounts.

At Binchester, the outer rooms open onto the *intervallum* road behind the fort rampart, and clearly provided stabling for the horses, containing a slot or drain to soak away urine. An area paved with large slabs provided a path to the troopers’ room at the rear, which contained a hearth. Further drains ran from this side of the building across the *intervallum* road, carrying the waste to a culvert running along its outer edge. In a later phase, the barrack was reduced in width to around 7.5m. Neither phase is closely dated yet, but both are likely to fall within the 4th century, leaving the earlier phases yet to be investigated.

At the east corner of the fort, the inner face of the rampart – generally thought to be early 3rd century in date – has been uncovered, revealing finely dressed masonry. Part of the angle-tower has also been investigated, although its walls have been heavily robbed. Immediately north of the tower, a small latrine building was attached to the fort wall. This essential facility contained two stone troughs that probably held water and cleaning materials, presumably the infamous sponges or bundles of grass on sticks that served as the Roman equivalent of toilet paper.

ABOVE The two areas currently under investigation at Binchester. The trench to the left was dug over the civilian settlement or *vicus* that grew up along Dere Street immediately outside the defences. The trench to the right encompasses the east corner of the fort rampart and a large, rectangular cavalry barrack. The plan (**INSET**), is on the same orientation as the photograph and shows how the trenches (marked in red) relate to the fort defences.



RIGHT A multi-seat latrine (**TOP**) was found positioned against the fort rampart just beyond the eastern corner tower. A trough, presumably for cleaning the sponges or bundles of grass on sticks used as toilet paper in the Roman period, remained in place on the stone flooring. An arched culvert (**BOTTOM**) carried the waste through the fort rampart to a chamber beyond.

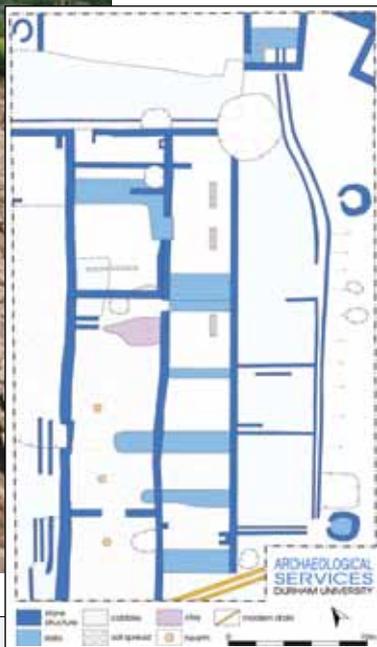
The raised 'loo' seating on which the latrine's patrons perched eventually collapsed into the drain below. Excavation produced fragments of stone slabs, complete with piercings to receive the sponges. The toilet-block drain debouched through the fort wall via a superbly constructed arched culvert. This dovetails with an investigation just outside the fort wall by Kenneth Steer in 1937, which revealed that the drain emptied into a circular chamber 2m in diameter, nestling between the rampart and the fort ditch. Hooppell's excavations unearthed an identical arrangement at the northern corner of the fort, although here the chamber was square in plan. To maximise flushing power, the latrine drain was plumbed into the drainage culvert carrying waste down the neighbouring *intervallum* road.

Changing rooms

The trench opened beyond the south-east fort defences has revealed a 40m length of the latest surface of Dere Street, buried only 20cm below the modern surface. Lying closest to the fort and immediately adjacent to a side-street is a small, rectangular 'strip building' measuring about 5m by 13m. Adjacent to this building and separated by a narrow gap stands a similarly sized neighbouring structure. Stone-robbing has denuded much of its walls, but even so it was plain that these were of inferior construction to a neighbouring building, and it seems quite possible they were built at a later date. This pair of buildings is much smaller than those on the opposite side of the side-street, where the majority were around 10m wide and upwards of 35m long, begging the question why.

An interesting feature of the frontages of the buildings exposed by Hooppell – as revealed in a sketch from his report – is a line of regularly spaced blocks of stone with a square recess in the top, in some cases placed on top of upturned sections of recycled column drums. Similar blocks have now been found on the opposite side of the street, and it is clear that they functioned as pads for timber posts supporting the sloping roof of a veranda. Thus shoppers frequenting *Vinovia's* commercial high street were afforded the luxury of sheltering from the blistering sunshine regularly experienced in this part of the world, or more likely the pouring rain.

BELOW The cavalry barracks built in the eastern corner of Binchester. The rooms occupied by the horses are visible to the right, and the soldiers' quarters to the left. Areas of burning indicate the presence of hearths. The barrack block occupies most of the left half of the trench plan (**INSET**), with the latrine and angle-tower top right. The open circles shown on the upper and right margins of the plan are ovens that were cut into the rampart.



Work in 2013 concentrated on a building at the south end of the trench – the very building whose presence restricted the length of the adjacent strip buildings. Continuing beyond the trench confines, it was vastly superior to its neighbours in terms of both construction and appointment. Hooppell carried out a minor excavation at a spot immediately east of the current trench edge in the 1870s, and uncovered a circular chamber that was equipped with a hypocaust. It seems very likely therefore that the structure we have discovered was the regimental bath-building. The other possibility is that it was a bath-building attached to a *mansio* – a lodging-house used by officials travelling on state business, but also providing

BELOW Excavations under way in the fort.

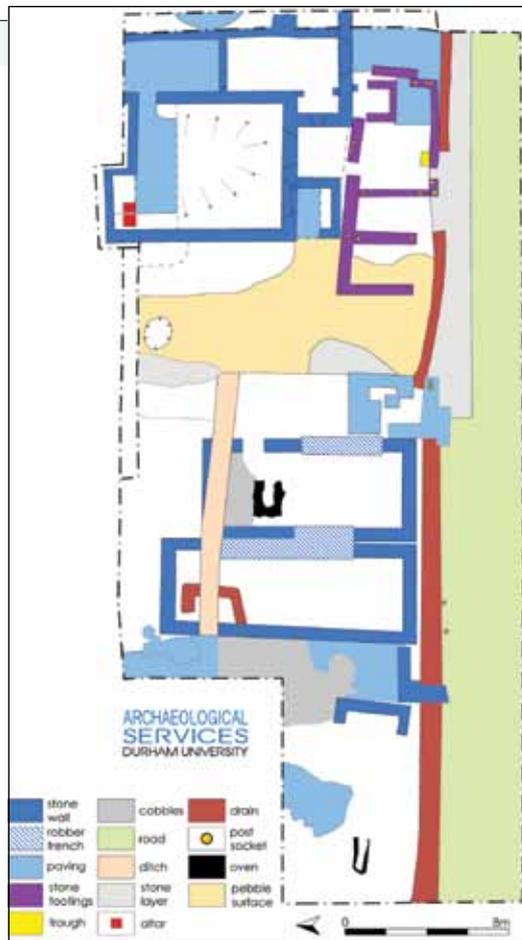


accommodation for paying guests.

Two rooms of the primary phase bath-house lie wholly or largely within our trench: one is a long, corridor-like chamber, and the other is a large square room with a raised stone bench along its walls. The latter may well have served as the *apodyterium* or changing-room from which access to the bathing suite was gained via the corridor. Bath complexes were built to last, and so tend to have a complicated structural history. Our example is no exception. There was originally a doorway in the north wall of the square room, but this was later blocked up, as were two splayed window embrasures in its west wall. Similarly, the western of a pair of doorways opening onto the corridor from the changing-room had received the same treatment.

There are traces of at least one other blocked doorway in the south wall of the corridor. One final feature of note is a small semi-circular niche in the north wall of the corridor, about 1.2m above floor level. A similar but less well-preserved example existed in the south wall directly opposite. Their function is uncertain, but they could have housed small sculptures or more mundane items such as lamps.

At some stage an additional chamber was added to the west side of the bath-house. The north wall of this extension was carefully positioned to avoid blocking light to the two window



ABOVE The features discovered in the trench opened over the fort *vicus*. Dere Street is visible to the right in pale green; the two short, adjacent strip buildings are visible in blue in the middle; while the remains of the probable bath-house project into the trench top left. Did the bath-house extend beyond the trench edge to the north of the strip buildings? If so, it explains why they are relatively short.

embrasures, implying they were yet to be blocked. This wall also incorporated a much narrower splayed window embrasure that illuminated the interior of a small alcove. The haunches of the arch at the front of this alcove still survive.

The most impressive aspect of this building is its level of preservation, the result of a remarkable combination of factors. Over the course of several centuries the floor levels within the bath-house appear to have remained more or less static, while successive reconstructions of neighbouring buildings and numerous resurfacings of Dere Street resulted in the ground surface outside rising by a metre or more. Whether the building continued to function as a bathing suite following the blocking of its windows is open to question. Perhaps only the lower portion of the opening was blocked, or alternatively new ones could have been inserted higher up the wall. Equally, this part of the building may have been converted into cellarge.

At a late stage in the building's history – not yet precisely datable but almost certainly after AD 350 – the bath-house became redundant and, even though its superstructure was apparently still standing, was used thereafter as a giant refuse receptacle. Tip lines in the fill show dumping occurred sequentially rather than in one episode, but still over a comparatively short period. The consequence of these factors is that the fabric of the building survives to a height in excess of 2.3m above floor level, with large expanses of wall-plaster still *in situ*. Such a high degree of preservation is astonishing for Roman Britain.

The infilling of the bath-house almost to ground level with rubbish was not the final episode in the building's life. Overlying the refuse deposits in the *apodyterium* was a layer of rubble that appeared to be discarded material from demolished wall core. Later still, a substantial (though crudely built) rectangular structure covering roughly 6m by 4m was erected in front of the demolished bath-building, and encroaching on the edge of Dere Street. Its footings were formed of large stone slabs that in many cases had



LEFT The well-preserved remains of the Binchester bath-house. The doorway to the possible *apodyterium* is visible bottom right, with the bench beyond.

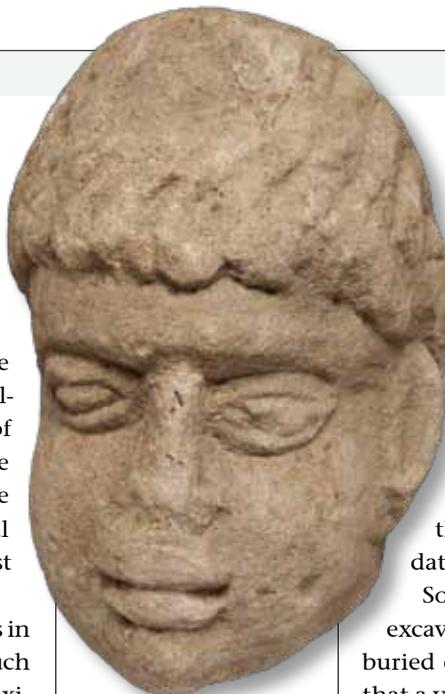
small holes drilled into them, presumably to form sockets for tenons associated with a timber superstructure. Buildings with identical footings have been found at several forts on Hadrian's Wall, notably Haltonchesters. There they were dated to the last third of the 4th century, and evocatively dubbed 'park-railing'-type footings. Although the purpose of this building is unclear, it had flooring made of large stone slabs. The deposits overlying the final paving included large quantities of animal bone, just like those associated with the latest activity elsewhere on the site.

An object recovered from the refuse deposits in the putative *apodyterium*, and the subject of much media interest last summer, was the approximately half life-size sculpted head of a Romano-Celtic deity (CA 282). The identity of the god in question is unknown, as there is no accompanying inscription. Indeed, the head was only ever just that: it was not made to be part of a statue.

Written in stone

As a postscript to this season's work, two altars were recovered from a recess in the *apodyterium*. One of these, standing on the latest floor surface, is neatly carved, though plain on all four sides. Possibly it had a painted dedication of which nothing has survived. The other altar, which had been placed on the bench at the foot of the wall, carries a fine carving of a bull on one side and an inscription on the front panel: *Fortune/Reduci/Eltaominus/Emeritus/Ex arc(h)itect(us)/Alae Vetto(num)/V(otum) s(olvit) l(aetus) l(ibens) m(erito)* = 'To Fortuna Redux, Eltaominus, veteran, former architect, [serving with] the *ala Vettonum*, gladly, willingly and deservedly fulfilled his vow'. The dedication is of particular importance because, although there is plenty of evidence for architects serving with the legions, there is very little attesting their presence in auxiliary regiments.

Finally, mention should be made of a fragmentary building-dedication slab found in 2011; it had been re-used in late surfacing beside Dere Street. Dr Roger Tomlin has restored the text: *'Sacer/...[cui pr]aest/[...praef(ectus) e]quitum'* = '...commanded by prefect of cavalry'. Apparently a formal building inscription, the names of the unit and its commander would usually be preceded by a reference to the provincial governor. As 'SACER' cannot be reconciled with the name of any known governor, however, it seems that a consular date was inserted,



ABOVE This half-size head, presumably representing a Romano-Celtic deity, was found deposited in the ruins of the putative bath-house *apodyterium*. It does not have any means to attach it to a body, indicating it was only ever intended to be displayed as a head.

RIGHT This altar, found on a bench in the bath-house changing room, has an inscription naming a military architect on one side (**RIGHT**) and a bull on the other (**FAR RIGHT**).



Tertullo et Sacerdote co(n)s(ulibus). This is the year AD 158, which would fit well with the construction of a new fort at Binchester as part of the preparations for the army to return south from the Antonine Wall in Scotland. This involved both the redeployment of units and refurbishment of Hadrian's Wall. As Nick Hodgson has recently discussed, a stone indicating repair to the curtain of Hadrian's Wall can also be dated to AD 158 (RIB 1389).

So, while neither the modern nor Victorian excavations can truly claim to have found a buried city at Binchester, they both highlight that a vibrant community of soldiers and civilians lived either side of *Vinovia's* walls. After all, perhaps this really was the closest to urban amenities that a weary traveller on Dere Street could hope for on the long stretch of highway north of Catterick and south of Corbridge. 

FURTHER INFORMATION

Information about Binchester Roman Fort, how to get there, and the opening times, as well as the best time to visit the excavations, can be found on Durham County Council's website: www.durham.gov.uk/archaeology

A daily blog is maintained throughout each season by Dr David Petts, Lecturer in Archaeology and one of the Project Managers from Durham University: www.durham.ac.uk/archaeology

The final report on the 1970s/'80s excavations is *The Beautiful Rooms are Empty* by Iain Ferris. It is available from Durham County Council's Archaeology Section (£35.00 + £8.00 p&p); telephone them on 030 00 267 013 or email archaeology@durham.gov.uk

A more popular synthesis of the report is also available: Iain Ferris, *Vinovia: the buried Roman city of Binchester in Northern England* (£15.00 + £3.00 p&p).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This excavation project is a partnership between the County Council's Archaeology Service, the Archaeology Departments of Durham and Stanford Universities, along with the Archaeological & Architectural Society of Durham & Northumberland. Management of the site work is undertaken by staff of Durham University's Archaeological Services, led by Peter Carne. The project has been made possible by the Church Commissioners who own the land, and by English Heritage who granted Scheduled Ancient Monument Consent for the investigations. As well as providing training for undergraduates, the project incorporates a 'community archaeology' element (funded by DCC Archaeology, aided by grants from English Heritage in 2010 and 2011), which enables local people to get directly involved in the investigation of their past.