

Great Chesters (*Aesica*)

By J. P. Shipley

Introduction

The Roman Fort of Great Chesters (*Aesica*) lies within the modern parish of Greenhead, (Tynedale district), in the county of Northumberland, approximately 40 miles west of Newcastle upon Tyne, and 25 miles east of Carlisle. Situated in the central sector, it occupies the site of milecastle 43, and lies on a relatively flat area of raised ground (approximately 210m above sea level) commanding fine views south across Haltwhistle Common which runs away towards the town of Haltwhistle, and the South Tyne Valley. To the east of the fort the land drops away towards the area of Cawfields Quarry and the numerous streams which feed the Haltwhistle Burn, with the whin sill escarpment visible as it cuts its way across the landscape towards the fort of Housesteads. Views to the west are dominated by the rolling landscape which continues to the settlements of Greenhead and Thirlwall, and the River Irthing which crosses the Wall near Gilsland. To the north, undulating moors roll away towards the old Forest of Lowes, with the immediate ground dipping towards the Tippalt Burn.

The forts name is recorded as *Aesica* on the *Notitia Dignitatum*, and as *Esica* on the *Revenna Cosmography* and the Amiens Skillet. It is possible that the name can be identified in the post Roman period when it is reported, in the life of St Cuthbert, that the saint stopped mid way between Hexham and Carlise at a *mansio* and people gathered at *Ahse* to hear him preach.

History of Exploration

The site of Great Chesters was investigated by a number of antiquarians during the 19th century however the fort never received the same intrusive study as other sites such as Housesteads and Chesters.

The earliest reference to an individual visiting the fort appears to be from 1691 when Thomas Machell mentions “Chester by Woa-town”, and although Raphaell Holinshed mentions “Wall towne” and its position on the Wall earlier in 1577 he fails to mention Great Chesters by name. One can take Robert Smiths account (in the 1722 Gibson edition of *Britannia*) to be the earliest printed reference to the site when, in 1708, he notes “at a place called the Chesters, two miles east of Caer-Vorran, are the ruins of another square city”, while the fine preservation of the walls were noted by Alexander Gordon when he visited the fort with Sir John Clerk in 1724. This fine level of preservation was also noted by following antiquarians including William Stukeley and John Horsley who both make reference to structures standing within the fort, and the civilian settlement outside.

Intrusive investigation at Great Chesters seems to have commenced in the opening years of the 19th century, as when Lingard visited the Wall in 1807 he noted that the vaulted strong room in the *principia* had been exposed by the farmer (Daniels 1978, 182). It was not until the closing years of the century that the fort was host to its first planned excavations when, in 1894, the Northumberland Excavation Committee commenced its first season of work focusing on the south gate, west tower, south wall, and a section of a

barrack block in the south west corner. During this initial season a major hoard of jewellery from the latter part of the third century was discovered between floors of the west chamber of the south gate (see AA 1895 and Gibson 1903).

This work was followed up with a second season of work in 1895 when their attention turned to the *principia* (and a re-examination of the strong room), the south west angle, the south gate, and the east tower. In 1897 Northumberland Excavation Committee carried out a third and final season focusing on the west gate and bath house, however work on the bath house was never completed, and it was not until 1908 that the structure was fully excavated when Gibson and Simpson investigated the site (while working at nearby Cawfields Farm) discovering a hoard of late third century coins sealed by a destruction deposit (Gibson & Simpson 1909, 158-169).

In 1925 Simpson selected Great Chesters as the first site to be investigated by the newly formed Durham University Excavation Committee excavating sections of the north curtain wall and the northwest angle (Hull 1926, 197-203). This revealed a complete Broad Wall foundation to the north of the curtain, while it was also noted that the western ditches ran under the Narrow Wall (which also forms the north curtain) but did not continue north of this. This problem remained unsolved until the last major work to take place at the fort commenced in 1939 when Simpson returned with Richmond (Richmond 1939 162-165). During this season of work the remains of milecastle 43 were located attached to the Broad Wall, and were found to lie under the north curtain, thus for the first time it was suggested that the milecastle might relate to a different phase to the forts. This fact was proven in 1945 when a search was carried out at Chesters, Birdoswald, and Housesteads, and the same sequence was identified at all forts (Birley 1961, 191).

Work in the 1950's concentrated on the forts ditches and the Vallum causeway, however since these excavations work at Great Chesters has focused on consolidation and management issues. Problems regarding the condition of the site appear to have been noted during the mid 1970's, however it was not until the late 1980's that work started when a photographic survey was carried out detailing areas of significance. As a result of this survey the west gate (north and south chambers), the internal face of the west wall, and the east chamber of the south gate were the focus of consolidation work in 1988. This work involved the re-setting of loose masonry, pointing, and re-turfing some areas near the blocking of the west gate. At the same time the barrack block and bath house were filled in to reduce the remains to ground level, and therefore reduce damage caused by cattle.

Layout and History:

Lying wholly south of Hadrian's Wall the fort of Great Chesters measures 419 by 355 feet enclosing just over 3 acres, and faces east, with the Military Way entering by the *porta praetoria* and leaving by the *porta decumana*, while a road linking it to the Stanegate lies on the track of a modern farm road entering the fort through the south gate. West of the fort a series of at least four ditches can be observed, however these do not continue around the circuit of the fort with only two ditches apparent on the east, and a

single ditch to the south. To the north an extra ditch was added between the Wall ditch and the north wall of the fort making Great Chesters the most heavily protected fort on the Wall (Breeze 2006, 273-274). A bathhouse and the civilian settlement lie to the south of the fort, while two possible cemeteries can be observed further south near the Stanegate and the modern Military Road.

It is not clear when work commenced on the construction of Great Chesters, however a building inscription of Hadrian with the title *Pater Patriae*, a title he did not assume until AD128, suggests that the fort was not completed before this date. Further inscriptions indicate the granary was rebuilt by the Second Cohort of Asturians ("*Severus Alexanders Own*") in AD 225, while in the second century the fort appears to have been occupied by the Sixth Cohort of Nervians followed by the Sixth Cohort of Raetians (Daniels 1978, 179).

One of the most interesting features of the fort is the blocking of the western gate. Great Chesters is the only fort on the Wall to retain its blocking in situ, and although this is now obscured under a protective covering of turf, it was examined during the 1897 season of works. Study of this gate reveals a double Hadrianic gate extensively restored under Severus prior to the southern portal being blocked. The north portal was then blocked, with the final phase involving the construction of a new wall across both blocked portals (see Gibson 1903, Birley 1961, and Breeze 2006).

The bath-house was located to the south of the fort slightly to the east of the farm track that linked Great Chesters to the Stanegate. Excavated during the 1897 and 1908 the plan recovered a building containing (from east to west) a changing room with adjacent latrine, a cold room and a hot room (both with baths), a warm room, and large room, a second warm room, and a hot room (Breeze 2006, 274). During the excavations a hoard of 120 late third century coins were recovered from the hot room providing an approximate date of abandonment.

To the north of the fort the line of the aqueduct supplying the site can be traced for some 6 miles from its source at Saughty Rigg Washpool at the head of the Caw Burn (NY7450 6879) to the point at which it approaches the northern limit of the fort (although it fails to actually enter the site). Limited excavations have observed an unlined channel (cut into clay) 0.56m wide and 0.28 deep with the upcast forming a retaining bank on the south side 0.30m high and 1.60m wide. At only one point (Benks Bridge) would the channel have had to cross a bridge, however no remains of this structure (that would probably have been constructed of timber) survive (Mackay 1990).

The Vicus

The civilian settlement associated with Great Chesters has received very little attention during the excavations carried out at the fort. Surviving as a series of earthworks to the south of the fort's defences, the *vicus* can be observed spreading out south of the gentle slope towards the Military Road, and is certainly worthy of investigation. Detailed geophysical survey (such as those carried out at Birdoswald, Housesteads, and Maryport)

would certainly further our knowledge and understanding of this important component of the Roman landscape of Great Chesters.

Two clusters of tumuli have been identified a short distance to the south of the fort suggesting the location of the cemetery. The first is situated near the Stanegate, while the second lies by Markham Cottage on the Military Road, and although both clusters have yet to be excavated, a number of tombstones were recovered during excavations within the fort including one to a young child (Aurelia who lived 1 year and 4 months), and another to L. Novellius Lanuccus who, at the over end of the scale, died aged 70.

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