

EXCAVATIONS AT NORIC, PLEASANCE, FALKIRK, 2022

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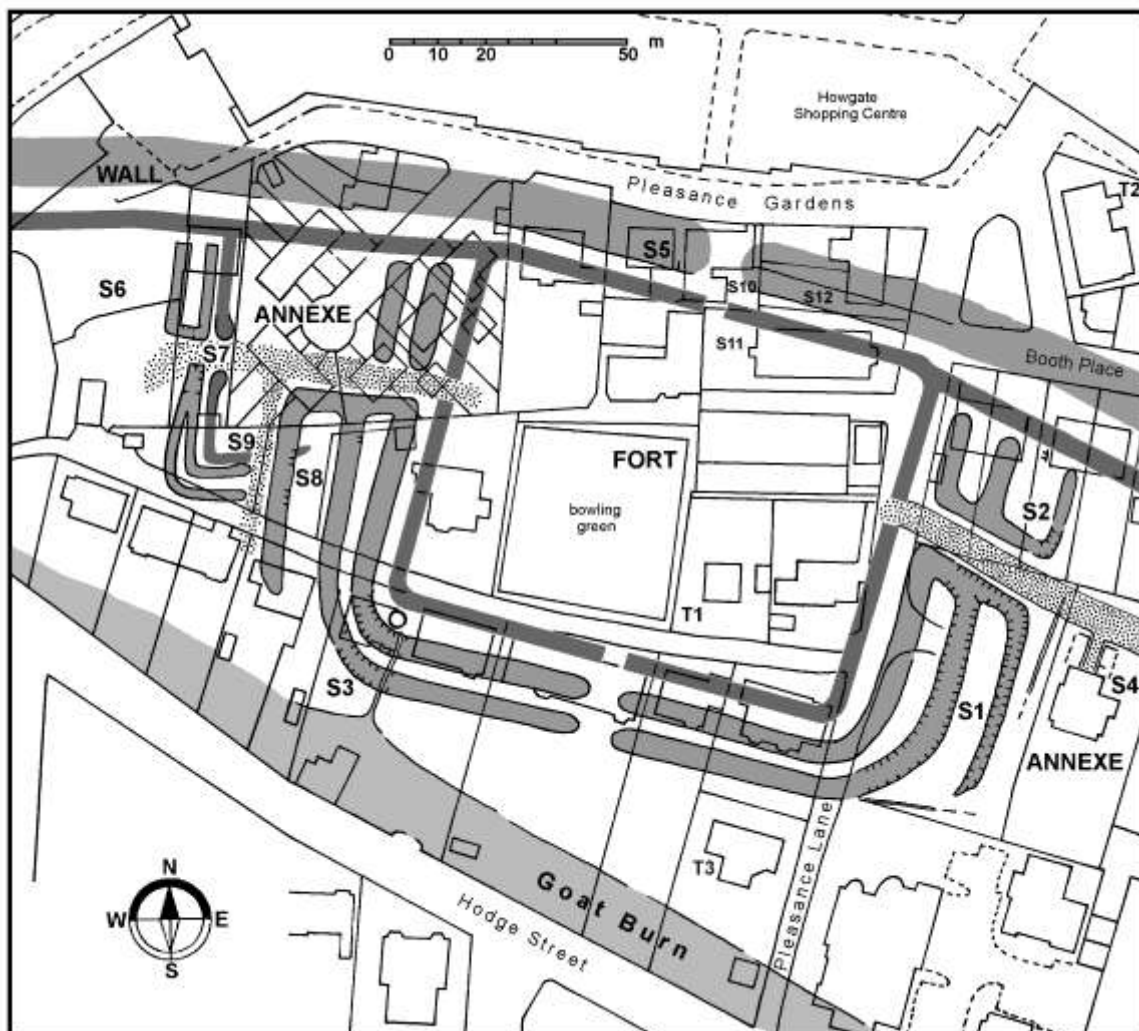
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Illus 1: Map showing the outlines of the Roman fort at Falkirk and various archaeological investigations. S10 – Church of Christ; S11 – Girl Guide hall; S12 – Noric.

Introduction

The Roman fort at Falkirk was only discovered in 1991 but since then the layout of its defensive ditches has been carefully mapped using a series of archaeological trenches placed in the gardens of the suburb. As a result, the line of the Antonine Wall in this vicinity had to be amended and was moved further north than indicated on Ordnance Survey maps. The resulting line showed the Ditch of the Roman frontier passing through the property called “Noric” immediately to the north of the Girl Guide hall in the Pleasance. In 2021 excavation by the Great British Dig team in the grounds of the Girl Guide Hall called that into question. It was therefore opportune that the owner of Noric asked the author to assess the archaeology there in advance of a planning application for an extension on the west side of the dwelling in compliance with the Special Planning Guidance for the World Heritage Site.

Excavation

Two trenches were excavated by hand on 24 April 2022 placed 7.4m to the west of Noric (NS 8869 7979). This was immediately to the west of the proposed extension but the intention was to avoid service trenches associated with the house – in which they failed as a sewer was encountered. It was also thought that it had the benefit of providing unimpeded access to the south lip of the postulated Ditch which further east impinged upon the tall boundary wall – and in this it succeeded.

The two trenches were in line and, given the potential depth of Ditch deposits, were 1.4m wide. The southern trench, Trench A, was dug first in the hope that it would encounter the natural deposits on the berm at a relatively shallow level. The topsoil was rather stony due to the presence of a west/east garden path. Below the good quality topsoil was a 0.3m deep layer of orange-brown sandy clay loam (layer 3 in the section). This contained fragments of 18th and 19th century pottery and appears to represent a leached cultivation soil. It was cut along the centre of trench A by a robbed out north/south wall (F10). The robbing trench, and presumably the wall foundation, was 0.8m wide and 0.25m deep from the top of layer 3. Along its eastern edge some of the stones and patches of lime mortar were still in situ. The remaining stones had rough faces to the outside but were evidently considered too small to be worth recovering. Along the west side of the robbed out wall, right on the edge of Trench A, was a metallised gravel surface (F11) lying on layer 3.

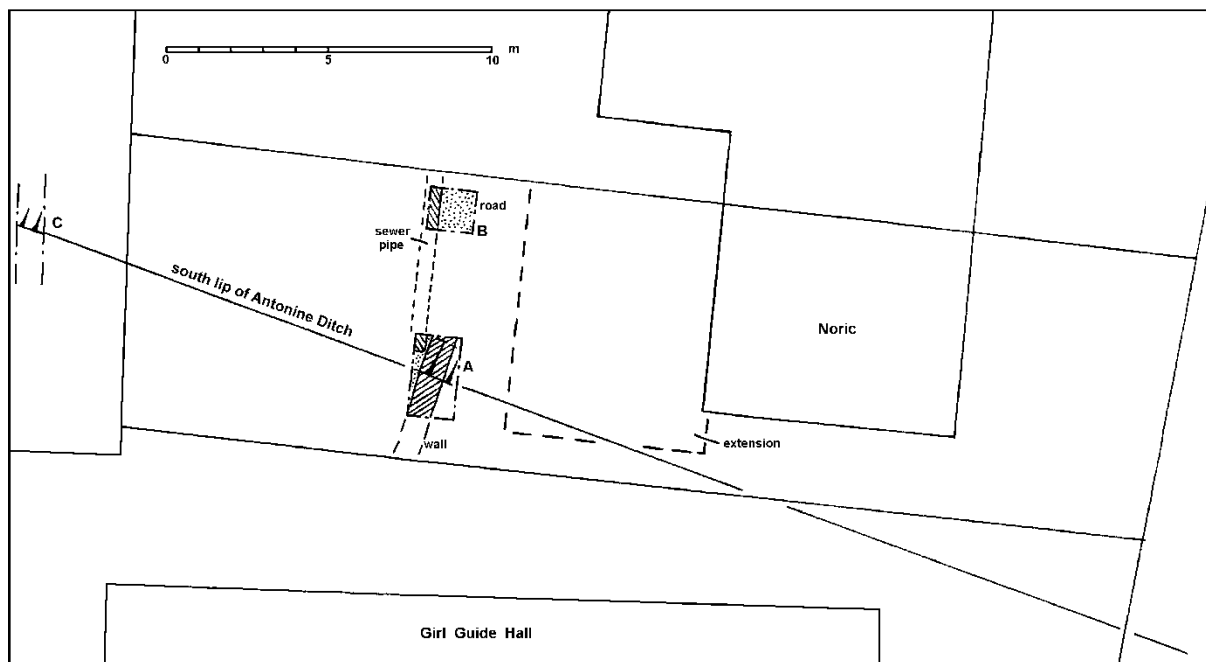
The cultivation soil, layer 3, lay directly upon the natural pale orange loamy clay and sand. Cut into the natural, below F10, ditch deposits were encountered sloping down to the north (layers 4 and 5 in section 1). The upper deposit was a brown-orange sandy clay loam (layer 4) which gave way to more silty material (layer 5). The ditch (F15) was on the alignment depicted on illus 1.



Illus 2: Trench A looking south with the robber trench (F10) on the right.

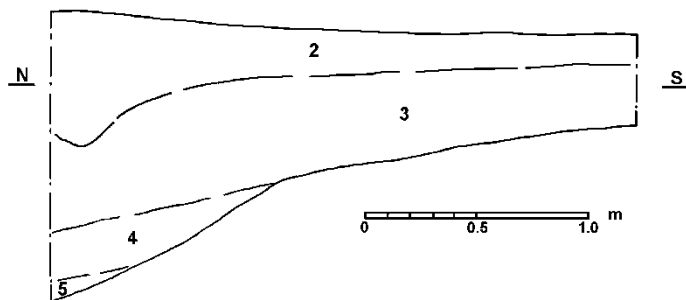


Illus 3: Trench A looking east with ditch (F15) on the left.



Illus 4: Plan showing the location of Trenches A-B. Trench C was dug in 2019.

A deep “pit” (F12) was found at the north-west corner of Trench A. It cut all of the other features and its fill contained pieces of broken sewer pipe. At a depth of 1.1m a flat stone was encountered in the pit and was left in situ. F12 was in line with a sewer pipe trench which ran along the west side of Trench B. That pipe consisted of collared ceramic glazed sections and lay at a depth of 1.2m. It ran north/south and presumably turned to the west in the corner of Trench A.



Illus 5: Section 1 across ditch (F15).

The stratified layers in Trench B provided a remarkable contrast to those in A. They were laid horizontally, were more compacted, and there were more of them. The upper levels, B2-B7, were all 19th century – as shown by the discovery of a fragment of a tobacco pipe bowl in the top of layer B8. Starting from the top there was a good quality topsoil (B2 - 0.45m thick); then a hard layer of dark soil bound by a bituminous material (B3 - 0.1m thick); a layer of broken sandstone (B4 - 0.15m thick); two layers of gravel road metalling with compacted upper surfaces (B5 - 0.15m thick); a layer of yellow and orange sand (B6 - 0.9m thick); and a thin layer of black ashy material (B7 - 0.07m thick).



Illus 6: The surface of the upper road metalling in Trench B. The broken sandstone layer and the bituminous layer can be seen in section above it, with the sewer pipe trench at the top of the photograph.

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Right up against the northern edge of trench B the layer of road metalling stopped at what appeared to be the robber trench for a west/east wall (F17).

Below all of these modern layers was a brown clay loam (B8). At the northern side of trench B the upper fill contain a number of cobble-sized stones but these soon gave way to stone free material which became damper and more silty with increased depth. Excavation in 2022 stopped at a depth of 1.8m below the modern ground level which was sufficient to show that it represents the fill of a very large ditch. At a depth of 1.3m a body sherd of a 14th century jar was found. This had a pale brown core with buff external faces, the external one ribbed and covered with soot.

Discussion

The large ditch, F15, was evidently the great ditch fronting the Antonine Wall. It was well in excess of 7m wide at this point showing that it retained its running form even fronting the fort, whereas at other forts it diminishes in size and is joined by a second ditch – as at the forts of Castlecary, Mumrills or Duntocher. It lay on the line laid out in previous work by the author (Bailey 2021) and not on that suggested by the Great British Dig (hopefully forthcoming). The nature of the fills observed in trench A show that initially it filled in slowly with some siltation. However, material was also thrown in from the south which was probably derived from the clay and turf Rampart. Latterly the great depth of B8 and its homogeneous nature suggests that it was finally levelled in a major operation in the early 19th century using material derived from elsewhere. This incorporated the 14th century body sherd as well as tobacco pipe fragments.

South Pleasance Avenue provided an early route into Falkirk from the west and as the core of the town settlement moved northwards the avenue joined the road from the south known simply as the Pleasance. At the junction of these roads a small community grew up and was already in existence when the first detailed maps were drawn in the late eighteenth century. The nature of this group of buildings is uncertain but it may have had its roots in the use of the surrounding areas as infield agriculture for the town and then as more intensive horticultural land associated with the town houses of the minor aristocracy (from which the name Pleasance is derived) which evolved into nurseries and allotments. The location lay on the major road into the town from the south, not far from the south gate on the town walls. Morphologically the oldest part of what became Pleasance Square would be that part forming the centre of the square. This occupied the north-east corner of the old Roman fort – the highest ground in the immediate locality.

In 1813 the Falkirk Charity School was founded with the aim of providing education for children who came from “good” families but were fatherless or whose parents had become oppressed by poverty. An old two-storey building was purchased for the school on the north-west corner of Pleasance Square. It was sustained by public subscription and legacies. Despite modifications to the building it did not meet the standards for a school demanded by the government and so in 1858 it was demolished and completely rebuilt. It is the new building which is shown on the first edition Ordnance Survey map of that year. It continued until 1872 when the trustees conveyed it free of charge to the new Falkirk School Board. Being too small it was replaced seven years later by Comely Park School (Bailey 2017, 86-87).



Illus: Extract from the 1858 Ordnance Survey map (National Library of Scotland).

The two layers of road metalling found in trench B correspond with the lane on the north side of Pleasance Square leading to the school. It seems reasonable to see the later surface as being part of the improvements of 1858. The south wall of the school (F17) lay on the very northern edge of Trench B. From the school the lane turned a right angle to the south and its extreme eastern edge (F11) was seen along the west side of trench A. It was bounded on the east by wall F10. This was the western wall of the central group of buildings. The shallow foundation suggests an early date. Unfortunately, the stone was almost completely robbed out and those remaining were unrepresentative. The use of an orange lime mortar hints at a 17th or 18th century date – before that clay bonding was more prevalent except in houses of higher social standing.

The Charity School building sold in 1879 for £242 and was clearly still in use. It appears on the 1917 Ordnance Survey map but was demolished in the mid-1920s. At that time much of the stone would have been recycled and the broken sandstone layer lying on the old road surface probably came from this salvage operation. It was sealed by a thin layer of mixed material which incorporated a large amount of bitumen and was very compact, indicating that the area was used as hardstanding. In the 1930s the area was completely remodelled and the area of the square arranged in three west/east plots fronting onto the Pleasance. On the southern of these plots the Girl Guide Hall was constructed - the date above the door being 1936. The northern plots were terraced up, obscuring the original contours which sloped down to the north from immediately to the north of the Guide hall.

Bibliography

- Bailey, G.B. 2017 'The making of Falkirk, 1830-1860,' [Calatria](#) 34, 1-92.
Bailey, G.B. 2021 The Antonine Wall in Falkirk District.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the owner of the property, Ben d'Orleans, for requesting the excavation and his hospitality on the day. The occasion was made possible by the help of a band of enthusiastic volunteers consisting of Richard Gillanders, Nicola Hamilton, Ian Hawkins, Alasdair Kane, Ian McAdam, Donald McLeish, Kenny McLeish.