A History of Watercrook Roman Fort

Kendal MUSEUM
Where History and Nature Meet

Celebrating 150 Years of The Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society (CWAAS)

Kendal Museum was approached in August 2014 to be involved in the CWAAS 150th Anniversary Exhibition. The touring exhibition consists of panels written by twelve Museums about 'treasures' from their collections that relate to the CWAAS, and three panels written by the CWWAS on the society's history. The treasures chosen for Kendal Museum were the Watercrook Fort Roman material and the Prehistoric collections from the Central Fells.

Students from the Kendal College's Diploma in Museum and Gallery Skills were invited to work on Kendal Museum's part in the exhibition with the 2014/15 students writing and designing the banner, and the 2015/16 students producing the display to accompany the exhibition. The students were supervised by Kendal Museum Archaeology Curator, Morag Clement.

Watercrook Roman Fort

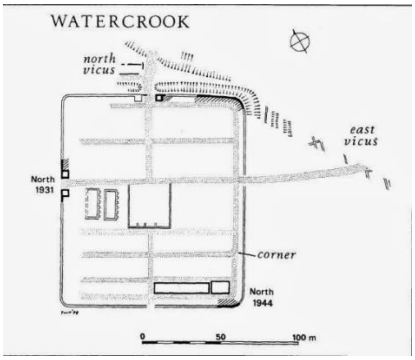
Watercrook Roman Fort is located two miles to the south of Kendal. T.W. Potter has constructed the following sequence of events based on archaeological findings from the 1974-75 excavations:

Phase 1: Initially built as a turf rampart, 90-95 AD, during the reign of Domitian.
Phase 2: Construction of a stone wall in good quality ashlar (finely worked masonry) 135-45 AD, this was during the reigns of Hadrian and Antonius Pius.
Phase 3: Reduction in the size of the fort. Rebuilding of the north-east gate and part of the south-east wall 150-170 AD. This was during the reigns of Antonius Pius and Marcus Aurelius.
Phase 4: Enlargement of the fort and rebuilding of the south-west wall, 270 AD.

The fort also boasted an extensive vicus site that developed around the roads; a vicus was a civilian settlement that developed around a Roman military structure. The site of the vicus was excavated in the 1974 and 1975 excavations which uncovered two areas of a vicus. To the north east an extra-mural settlement dating from 69 to 117 AD, which may have continued into the later 3rd Century, the eastern area was abandoned by 220 AD. There was also an area from the north side dated from the late 2nd Century to the 3rd Century AD.

1931-32 Excavations by Colonel O.H. North

The first archaeological excavation to take place at Watercrook was led by Colonel O.H. North for two seasons, the second in conjunction with Mr. E.J.W. Hildyard. He cleared the north west gate and traced parts of the wall including the north corner of the fort. The gate consisted of two square side chambers, built of good quality masonry blocks and separated by a roadway. During these excavations a number of fascinating artefacts were found and a selection can be seen on display here and in the adjacent History and Archaeology Gallery.



2. Roman whetstone Watercrook KMA1979.109

A sharpening stone used to grind and hone the edges of steel tools and implements. This is a flat whetstone for working flat edges; it would have been used to sharpen a number of tools, most likely knives. But it also could have been used for razors, scythes and tools such as chisels and plane blades. This item would have been very important for daily life in a vicus settlement.

3. Three lead weights Watercrook KMA1979.107

These small weights may have been used by traders for measuring small amounts of produce, possibly foodstuffs, for sale in the extra mural vicus settlement.

4. Samian ware sherd Watercrook KMA 1979.101

This is a fine example of decorations on a Samian ware vessel. It is part of a bowl used for dining on special occasions and is extensively decorated with rondels in an unusual ‘fleur-de-lis’ style inlay on the lower frieze. There are also details of dolphins and the vessel is stamped with PATERNI-M. This particular fragment is dated from 120-30 AD.

5. Iron Knife Watercrook KMA1979.109

A knife such as this would have been a fairly common utensil in Roman times and would have been used for cutting food and other domestic tasks. For an illustration of this knife from the 1934 CWAAS Transactions please see Figure 5 in the accompanying information board.

1974-75 Excavations by Timothy Potter

Timothy William Potter BA PhD FSA (1944-2000) was a highly respected archaeologist of ancient Italy and Roman Britain with a special interest in Roman landscape archaeology. Educated at March Grammar School in March, Cambridgeshire, he started on his career path at an early age, conducting an excavation with his brother on a small Roman site at Grandford, Cambridgeshire, at the age of 14. His standard of recording was so accurate even at such a young age that he was able to publish a paper on the excavation many years later, in 1982.

He began his academic career as a Senior Scholar at Trinity College, Cambridge, studying Archaeology and Anthropology. Following his graduation in 1966 he went to study for his PhD in Classical Studies at the British School at Rome. During his time there he pioneered field survey work in the Ager Faliscus, South Etruria, setting an example for the landscape studies which have become a standard and essential element in modern archaeology. He maintained a lifelong association with the British School at Rome, serving as the Chair of its Faculty of Archaeology, History and Letters from 1991 to 1996. His lasting contribution to the study of Italy's Roman period is borne out by his many publications on the history, culture and language of the country. Timothy Potter began his university career as a Visiting Professor at the University of California in 1969-70. During the next three years he was a Fellow of the Macnamara Foundation, working on the Italian Iron Age, and then spent time as a Knott Fellow at the University of Newcastle. Here he completed the publication of his excavations at Narce in Italy, which detailed the 1500 year story of how the settlement developed from a collection of Bronze Age huts to a wealthy town at the time of the Roman conquest. A humorous tale from this excavation which tells us something of his character is contained in an obituary by Catherine Johns and Graeme Barker:

"At the Narce excavations he liked to saunter out from his caravan 3 or 4 hours after his team had started digging (at dawn), in silk dressing gown, cigarette in one hand and a bottle of iced beer in the other, to check on progress, before repairing into the nearby village for a friendly barman's version of his full English breakfast."

In 1973 he began his first permanent post at Lancaster University where he set up the Department of Archaeology and was the University's first lecturer on the subject. While he was there, he had the specific duty of directing the excavations at Watercrook Roman Fort near Kendal in 1974 and 1975, which were funded by the Department of the Environment and Lancaster University. During his time at Lancaster he took on an active programme of fieldwork and excavation in North West England and produced a number of publications in this area.

In 1978 he took up a post as Assistant Keeper at the British Museum in the Department of Prehistoric and Romano-British Antiquities. He served as Assistant Keeper until 1995 and then he was Keeper until his death in 2000 at the age of 55. He was an active member of the CWAAS, and his book *Romans in North-West England: Excavations at the Roman Forts of Ravenglass, Watercrook and Bowness on Solway* was published by the Society.

1. Roman vessel Watercrook KMA1980.194
This vessel has been reconstructed with plaster from three fragments of a rouletted cup. Unfortunately there is little information on this object, but it was probably used as a drinking vessel.

In his book, *Romans in North-West England,* Potter notes that 'pottery was not especially abundant' at Watercrook; nonetheless, when taken together with the coins found, the pottery finds enable a clear idea of the chronology of the fort to be established. You will find more examples of Roman pottery in the 'Roman Dining' display on this floor in the middle of the room, many of which were excavated at Watercrook.

2. Samian ware sherd Watercrook BBT W75 82/67
This Samian ware sherd depicts two gladiators in combat. Romans were not actually the originators of gladiatorial combat, but it was during the Roman period that the gladiatorial games developed and reached the heights of organisation. At first, gladiatorial combat was only a matter of a few prisoners of war, or slaves facing each other in contests staged at the funerals of distinguished Romans. But very rapidly these spectacles developed into much more organised events and gladiatorial schools were set up. Each gladiatorial school known as a *ludus* was run by a *Lannister*. This was a private entrepreneur who acquired suitable men by purchase or recruitment, then trained them and hired them out to interested parties.

The gladiators consisted of slaves, condemned criminals and volunteers, who lived in barracks and were subject to a strict diet and training regime. However, they did benefit from careful medical attention. Training was entrusted to *doctores a*nd *magistri;* most of whom would have been former gladiators. Recruits began their training on a post and moved onto fighting with blunt weapons against one another. Careful records were kept of a gladiator's achievements in the arena, which ensured that the status and value of a gladiator was dependent on his success in the arena. The arena that these gladiators would have fought in was known as an amphitheatre. The nearest known amphitheatre to Watercrook was the large arena at the legionary fortress and town of Deva Victrix (Chester) capable of accommodating between 8000 and 10,000 spectators.

The gladiator on the left is a *murmillo*. This category of gladiator fought with his torso bare, but he wore a *manica* on his right arm and very thick wrappings covered the tops of his feet. A very short greave was worn over the top of this; five such greaves were discovered at Pompeii. He also would have carried a *scutum,* a tall oblong shield that was similar to the shield of a Roman legionary.

For head protection he would have worn a brimmed helmet with an angular crest, topped with a plume of feathers. His offensive weapon was of military origin, as he used a *gladius,* a weapon used primarily for thrusting. The *murmillo* weighed 16-18 kilograms, so was one of the heavyweight gladiators. His most frequent adversary was the *thraex* (as depicted on the Samian ware) and secondly the *hoplomachus*.

The *murmillo* is locked in combat with a *thraex*. These were a lighter gladiator and were apparently modelled on Thracian warriors, who originated from a tribe located in Thrace (modern day Bulgaria). These gladiators were armed with a rectangular, almost square-shaped small shield, a departure from the light oval shield of the real Thracian warrior. However, they boasted distinctive head protection with a helmet that had a griffin's head on the crest, which was typical of a Thracian warrior's helmet.

The *thraex* also had an unusual curved sword. This curved sword was called a *sica* and is what Thracian warriors would have used. A variant with a bent blade also often occurred and this is what can be seen on the Samian ware sherd. Because the *thraex* were relatively lightly equipped, they had extensive leg protection, which included quilted leg wrappings and two high greaves. Epigraphic evidence, like the one below mainly records *thraex* as pitted against the *murmillo,* but some sources and evidence suggest they may have also fought the *hoplomachus* on occasion.

The most famous gladiator to fight in this category was Spartacus. He was a Thracian himself, possibly of nomadic stock originating from the Maedi tribe. He may have fought as a Thracian mercenary in the auxiliary for the Roman Republic, before deserting and being captured as a slave.

However, he is most famously known as the gladiator, who along with the Gauls - Crixus, Oneamaus, Castus and Gannicus escaped from the *ludus* in Capua and led a major slave uprising against the Roman Republic during the Third Servile War. It soon became apparent that he was an accomplished military leader, but he was eventually decisively defeated by Marcus Licinius Crassus at the Siler River. As a result he has become a symbol for the oppressed and provided inspiration for many.

3. Ring, Iron and Onyx Watercrook KMA1980.204

This finger ring is made of iron with an onyx intaglio (hollowed-out carving in stone) depicting Achilles. He is holding a spear in his right hand and a plumed helmet in the left, with a shield on the floor in front of him. His left leg is flexed and his right leg bears his weight. Research suggests that this type of ring was popular among ordinary legionary soldiers, and they were worn as signets and charms depicting religious or mythological motifs. This type of finger ring depicting heroes of Greek mythology appealed to the Roman military mind. Occasionally they would be connected with the owner's family or business. British examples have depicted cupids, animals, gods and personifications.

Similar finds of intaglios depicting Achilles have been found in the North West including Standish and Heronbridge. Many of the intaglios have been excavated at Roman forts. In 1979, 88 were found in the Fortress Baths at the Roman fort of Isca, near Caerleon. Most of them were found in the filling of a large drain, which suggests their popularity among ordinary Roman soldiers. The finely detailed rings were produced by highly skilled craftsmen capable of producing minutely detailed work without the aid of magnification, and they provide an important insight into the beliefs and superstitions of the wearers.

4. Melon bead Watercrook W74 ADQ

Melon beads are often found in site excavations of Roman military occupation, including those at Corbridge and Vindolanda. Turquoise beads are particularly common in Roman military sites. This fragment was found within the Watercook fort rather than the vicus (the civilian settlement adjacent to the fort). Higher ranking officers and their families would have resided within the fort. The exact function for these beads is somewhat elusive. The smaller beads were probably used in a similar manner to other beads as a form of personal adornment. Perhaps signifying rank or status, and used rather like a dog tag. The larger melon beads may have been impractical to wear, particularly around the neck. An alternative function is that they were used as decoration for horse harnesses. The heavy abrasion especially at the perforations of many of these beads may support this proposition.

Melon beads were produced in a range of sizes and tend to have a convex profile with vertical or slightly diagonal grooves scored into the outside surface. Coloured using frit, a mixture of silica and fluxes which are fused at high temperatures to make a glass. They were produced in a wide range of blue shades ranging from turquoise to bright blue and less commonly in other colours.

5. Fragment of a face jar Watercrook W74 AHB 833

The crude stylistic shaping of the orange fabric suggests it is a sherd of a face jar, with the incised lines depicting hair. There are also markings that can be interpreted as part of a nose and mouth. Face pots were probably introduced into Britain by the Roman army in the 1st Century AD. Generally they consisted of crude features attached onto a storage jar or cooking pot on the shoulder or neck. The faces may have served as protection for the contents of the pots, i.e. cremations or harvested goods. In Britain many face pots have been found on military sites. Later, medieval Bellamine jars evolved from face pots. It was believed that these jars could ward off evil spirits by filling them with urine and nail clippings and hiding them under the floorboards.

Prehistoric tools

1. Polished axe head	Central Fells	KMA1993.222
2. Flint flake and note	Hartsop	KMA1993.224
3. Hammerstone	Central Fells	KMA2012.10.40
4. Macehead	Central Fells	KMA2012.10.90
5. Polished axe head	Central Fells	unnumbered
6. Polished axe head	Central Fells	KMA2012.10.64