

# THE MARYPORT ROMAN SETTLEMENT PROJECT

EXCAVATIONS IN THE ROMAN EXTRAMURAL SETTLEMENT,  
2013-14

John Zant

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Front cover: *Artist's impression of the Roman fort and settlement at Maryport in the third century AD*  
Rear Cover: *The Settlement Project excavations in 2013, looking towards the Solway Firth; third-century strip building fronting the main road north-east of the Roman fort; fragment of a small second-century altar*

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I M P R I N T S

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## Abbreviations

GPR	Ground-penetrating radar
HWT	Hadrian's Wall Trust
NISP	Number of Individual Specimens
RIB	Roman Inscriptions of Britain
SMT	Senhouse Museum Trust

## Foreword

Maryport is a unique site in Roman Britain. The estate has passed down within the same family since the Middle Ages and the collection of altars, inscriptions, and sculpture recovered from the site remains in the ownership of the present head of the family, Joe Scott Plummer. The estate came into the hands of the Senhouses in the sixteenth century; by 1587 they had started collecting the inscriptions found on their land, and in 1599, the Senhouse of the day, John, entertained William Camden and Sir Robert Cotton during their visit to the north of England. These two antiquarians were followed by others over the succeeding centuries, who saw, and recorded, the expanding collection at Netherhall. The discovery of 17 Roman altars in a series of pits in 1870 was one of the most exciting discoveries of the nineteenth century. Ten years later, a local man, Joseph Robinson, carried out the first formal excavations in the extramural settlement, uncovering the road through the settlement, a house, a temple, a circular building, and burials.

There matters stood until 1966, when the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, to mark its centenary, undertook an excavation in the fort. At this time Brian Ashmore brought the collection into the stables outside the family seat of Netherhall and 20 years later founded the Senhouse Museum Trust to care for the collection. In 1990, the former Naval Reserve Training Battery on Sea Brows was opened as a museum to hold and display the Netherhall Collection.

The last 20 years have seen four excavations at Maryport. In 2002 and 2005, Paul Flynn, on behalf of the Maryport and District Archaeological Society, examined the area of the play park to the south-west of the fort, discovering Roman remains which pre-dated the visible fort. In 2010, CFA Archaeology Ltd undertook an evaluation of an enclosure of Roman date to the south of the fort, discovering a cremation cemetery, and subsequently returned to examine an enclosure nearby. In 2011, Professor Ian Haynes and Tony Wilmott began a campaign of excavations on behalf of the Senhouse Museum Trust to examine the find spot of the cache of altars discovered in 1870, continuing over several seasons to re-excavate the temple and the adjacent circular building, and the area around them. The final excavation is the subject of this report, that of a house and its plot within the extramural settlement. These excavations have investigated very different areas of the settlement at Maryport, a house, a religious complex, cemeteries, and a rural settlement, most dating to the second and third centuries AD.

The excavation undertaken by Oxford Archaeology North is of major importance in helping us to understand life in the military community at Maryport. The house which was the subject of the excavation lies well within the extramural settlement and there seems to be no reason not to believe that it was typical of many houses in the community. Interestingly, the pottery associated with the first house, which was of timber, dates to the late Hadrianic period, the 130s. Yet the fort was established in the mid-120s, perhaps as early as 123. Where, then, did the people who built the house live before its construction? It is, of course, an assumption that they were already at Maryport, but it seems highly likely that the inhabitants were the dependants of the soldiers living in the fort, perhaps their wives and families, and had arrived with the soldiers when the fort was established (and, yes, Roman soldiers were allowed to marry, but only according to local custom not in accordance with Roman law). This is a question of wide significance and one that we can now ask for the first time as a result of the excavation.

The first house on the site was aligned on the road through the settlement, thereby demonstrating that this road, leading north-east from the fort, was also Hadrianic. This is most interesting. There appears to have been no road along Hadrian's Wall in its first phase, and we might have expected that the road along the coast would also date to later in the second century, but in fact it is earlier, confounding our assumptions.

It is not surprising that the timber houses were rebuilt in stone when the timbers required replacing, for this was a common phenomenon. The artefacts from this later house demonstrate its occupation into the third century, but about 270 this ceased, an occurrence that has been recorded at other extramural settlements along the northern frontier. The reason for the abandonment of these settlements outside the forts of the north of Britain is not known, but the evidence from Maryport usefully adds to this, and this evidence also comes from across the Roman Empire, with a similar phenomenon recorded outside

the forts situated along the River Danube. Did this significant change in settlement patterns relate to the serious warfare which took place in the middle decades of the third century, or perhaps reflect different ways of paying soldiers, in kind rather than money? Perhaps more excavation will answer this question. In the meantime, the excavation by Oxford Archaeology North has made a valuable contribution to our understanding of the life of civilians on the north-west frontier of the Roman Empire and added to the international importance of the Roman fort and its civilian community at Maryport

*David J Breeze*  
Edinburgh

## Summary

In August and September 2013, and again in April and May 2014, Oxford Archaeology North (OA North), on behalf of the former Hadrian's Wall Trust (HWT), undertook a research and community-training excavation within the extramural settlement associated with the Roman fort at Maryport, Cumbria (NY 040 374). The project sought to engage, and train, a wide cross-section of the community in a broad range of fieldwork and post-excavation techniques, and to address a series of academic research questions pertaining to the Maryport site, and to Roman extramural settlements in general. Based on the evidence of an extensive programme of geophysical survey undertaken on the site in 2000-4, a block of four putative Roman building plots was selected for investigation, north-west of the main axial road leading north-east from the fort (which appears to have formed the principal focus of settlement on this side of the fort).

Following an initial phase of prospection at the beginning of the 2013 season, which included a ground-penetrating radar (GPR) survey and the excavation of four test-pits (Trenches 1-4), what was thought to be a single building plot was selected for more detailed investigation. Open-area excavation within this putative plot quickly established that in fact it comprised a complete building plot, considerably narrower than was suggested by the geophysical survey data, and substantive parts of two others, to the north-east and south-west, with a probable external area, including what may have been a minor road, between the central and south-western plots. The primary aim of the project was to enhance understanding of this part of the settlement through the excavation of as much as possible of a single building plot (including the 'backplot' area to the rear of the street frontage); consequently, the fully exposed central plot was chosen for more extensive excavation. The south-western and north-eastern plots were not excavated, other than to establish the presence of stone/stone-footed buildings within them. The 2014 season was focused almost exclusively on the central plot, with the area investigated within the backplot being substantially enlarged. However, a small area immediately to the south was also excavated, to investigate stratigraphic links between the structures in the central plot and what appeared to be an external area adjacent to them.

The earliest evidence for a human presence at the site comprised a few prehistoric stone artefacts, intensive occupation clearly beginning in the Roman period. The main road leading north-east from the fort was identified, with the three building plots extending westwards from it. Following its initial construction, the road was resurfaced only once, in the third century AD. The stratigraphically earliest feature recorded was a small, north-east/south-west-aligned ditch, approximately 10 m north-west of, and aligned broadly parallel to, the road, possibly part of a field system of late pre-Roman or (perhaps more likely) early Roman date. The ceramic evidence from the site provides a strong indication that the investigated area as a whole saw little activity before the late Hadrianic period (*c* AD 130+), when a rectilinear timber building, probably a strip building, was constructed on the frontage of the targeted building plot. Since this structure clearly referenced the position and alignment of the axial road, this proves that this road was in existence by the late Hadrianic period and was not, like the Military Way associated with Hadrian's Wall, a later feature. The limited dating evidence associated with the building suggests that it may have remained in use to around the middle of the second century, probably sometime within the period 140-60, but it appears to have been immediately replaced with another, very similar, timber structure. This indicates that no break in occupation occurred at the time Hadrian's Wall was abandoned in favour of the Antonine Wall across the Forth-Clyde isthmus.

In the backplot area behind the street frontage, only a single pit could be associated, stratigraphically, with the earliest building, though at least one other feature, also a pit, is likely, on ceramic evidence, to have been broadly contemporary. Very limited excavation in the area immediately south of the central plot revealed remains possibly forming part of a second timber structure that may also have been broadly contemporary.

The new structure was almost certainly another wooden strip building, which appears to have occupied a similar footprint to its predecessor. By this time, and possibly earlier, the north-eastern and south-western boundaries of the plot, to the rear of the buildings, were defined by shallow ditches, and it is possible that the north-western boundary was similarly defined. The area to the south-west of the central plot contained part of a sandstone and cobble surface during this period. Following the demolition of this building in the late second- or early third century AD, the frontage of the central plot was covered by an extensive accumulation of dark soils containing large amounts of pottery and other rubbish. This suggests that the

plot was abandoned for a time, but during the first half of the third century, perhaps c 220-30, a stone- or (perhaps more likely) stone-footed strip building was erected. This was seemingly of similar size and form to the earlier structures, and may have been provided with an upper floor and a reed-thatched roof, though the latter was later destroyed by fire and possibly replaced with stone slates. In the backplot was a palimpsest of Roman features, many of which yielded third-century pottery, suggesting that they were broadly contemporary with this building. A substantial, V-shaped ditch may, for a time, have formed the north-western boundary of the plot, and there was also a group of six rectangular, vertical-sided pits, possibly wells or water cisterns. These appear to have been broadly contemporary, though it is not clear if all were in use at precisely the same time or, indeed, if they served the same purpose.

A notable feature of the Roman occupation sequence was the continuity evident in the positioning of the plot boundaries, which were repeatedly reinstated on or close to the original line following episodes of demolition and rebuilding, even after the probable occupation hiatus of the late second/early third century. A further important result of the investigations was to demonstrate that the superimposed remains of two wholly timber strip buildings lay beneath the stratigraphically latest, stone-footed, building, but only the latter was recorded by the earlier geophysical surveys. It seems highly likely that a similar situation pertains in the many other building plots within the settlement, and, indeed, at other extramural settlements elsewhere.

The frontages of the other two plots also contained probable stone-footed strip buildings. The area between the central and south-western plots was seemingly external, the principal feature being a paved sandstone surface, perhaps part of a minor road extending north-west, broadly perpendicular to the axial road. The buildings in the central and north-eastern plots were built virtually side by side, separated only by a very narrow gap. In Trench 4, to the north-east of the open-area excavation, a small part of a clay-and-cobble-founded timber building was exposed. This is thought to have been broadly contemporary with the stone/stone-footed structures to the south, though it has not been closely dated.

Dating evidence strongly suggests that the stone-footed building, and probably also those in the adjacent plots, had been demolished by the end of the third century, probably by 270, which is consistent with the chronology for the end of extramural settlements elsewhere in the North. In the central plot, the footings were extensively robbed of their stone, and this also appears to have been the case in the neighbouring buildings. Subsequent Roman activity was limited to the cutting of a substantial ditch along the boundary between the central and north-eastern building plots, and of a second, roughly perpendicular ditch, in the western part of the backplot, together with the digging of two shallow pits close to the street frontage. Some of this activity was associated with small quantities of late third- to early fourth-century pottery, and a few sherds of this period were also recovered from the uppermost fills of a few of the third-century features in the central backplot. Generally, however, late Roman pottery was extremely scarce, which, together with the complete absence of late third/fourth-century coins from the site, strongly suggests that activity declined very sharply during the later Roman period, probably in the last quarter of the third century. No evidence of medieval activity was identified, whilst modern deposits were restricted largely to agricultural soils and possible slight indications of antiquarian investigations.

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Figure 1: Site location