

Within the corner formed by the River Kelvin, Balmore Road (A879), and Balmuilty Road—between Easter Balmuilty Farm and the sewage works—lies the site of Balmuilty fort on the Antonine Wall.

The fort sits on a small plateau and overlooks the River Kelvin and Blane Valley to the north. Nothing of the fort is visible on the ground today, but subtle traces of the Antonine Wall Ditch and Outer Mound are visible in the field east of the farm buildings on the north side of Balmuilty Road. The site is significant as the location of an Antonine Wall river crossing, as the location of one of the most significant Roman frontier inscriptions, and as one of only two Antonine Wall forts to be defended by stone ramparts.

HISTORY OF DISCOVERY AND EXCAVATION:

The fort at Balmuilty survived well from antiquity and was clearly recognised by the eighteenth-century antiquaries, who called it “Bemulie”. Alexander Gordon described “the great Ruins” of the site, including “four Rows of Ramparts, with as many Ditches between them”, and John Horsley provided a similar description. Both antiquaries note that several underground “vaults” had been located inside of the fort, and that a range of Roman finds were recovered. Among these was a partial building inscription with the name of Lollius Urbicus (RIB 2191), the Roman general and Governor of Britain, who is recorded in Antoninus Pius’s anonymous biography as being responsible for the construction of the Antonine Wall. Because of this inscription’s direct support for the statements of an ancient Roman historical text, Gordon described it as “the most invaluable Jewel of Antiquity, that ever was found in the island of Britain, since the Time of the Romans”. By the second half of the eighteenth century, however, the fort had become much less visible due to ploughing, and by 1800 a hamlet of about a dozen cottages had been constructed within the fort’s ramparts, but this hamlet itself had been removed in 1812, with very little of the fort left to see.

The fort was extensively excavated between 1912-14 by S.N. Miller for the Glasgow Archaeological Society, with the excavations ending with the outbreak of the First World War. Later, due to “irregularities” in Miller’s published plan of the site, Sir George Macdonald commissioned a new site survey in 1931, along with limited trenching to clarify key points of interest. Road works in 1999 at the junction of Balmore Road (A879) and Balmuilty Road initiated a watching brief and small-scale excavation, which revealed two of the fort’s southern ditches. The most recent archaeological intervention at Balmuilty is a campaign of geophysical survey (resistivity and magnetometry), carried out in 2005. Covering an area of about 11ha, the purpose of the survey was to locate structures from a possible civilian settlement (vicus) in the areas south and east of the fort. A number of features were revealed, which may indicate the presence of a vicus (or, possibly even prehistoric occupation) to the south of Balmuilty Road. Additional discoveries included a small structure about 100m east of the fort, and a possible stretch of the Military Way about 200m east of the fort.

DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION:

Excavations have revealed that Balmuilty fort had an internal area of 1.6ha (4 acres), and was enclosed by a 2.1m wide stone rampart on all four sides. The fort is one of only two (the other being Castlecary) on the Antonine Wall with stone ramparts. The stone construction of the fort's north rampart, squared north-east and north-west corners, as well as extending stone "wing walls" protruding to either side of these corners all demonstrate that the fort was built before the line of the Antonine Wall Rampart reached Balmuilty. They also strongly suggest that there was an initial plan to build the Wall's Rampart in stone, rather than turf. By the time the Wall itself began to be constructed, however, something must have changed and, when the Rampart reached Balmuilty, the approximately 4.5m wide turf Rampart ran up behind the fort's eastern wing wall and then left the fort from the northern face of the western wing at the fort's north-west corner. The fort is widely considered to be one of the hypothesised "primary forts" on the Antonine Wall, having been planned from the start as part of a six-fort series before additional ("secondary") forts were added to the line during the Wall's construction.

Despite the antiquarian testimony, the fort had only one rampart, but featured three ditches on its south and west sides and two ditches to the east. The fort featured an unusually shaped annexe, located on its eastern side, with its southern defences running very close to the modern Balmuilty Road. The annexe was a later addition to the site, which is clear from the fact that a bath-house within the annexe was located on top of the fort's original eastern ditches (which had been at least partially filled in with clay). It is uncertain how long the annexe was in use, as its bath-house appears to have had a rather short life, being demolished and covered over by a layer of clay not long after it was built.

The fort's interior is well known from Miller's excavations, which uncovered the central range of buildings, including the headquarters (principia) in the centre of the fort, two granaries (horrea), the commanding officer's house (praetorium), and additional storage buildings or workshops. Also located within the fort were the remains of a barrack-block near the north-west corner, and an internal bath-house built up against the fort's eastern rampart near the north-east corner. Four gateways were excavated (with two watch-towers for each), along with a tower in the south-east corner, and possible ballista platforms at the two northern corners. There was some evidence for destruction and reconstruction, particularly in the principia and praetorium, as well as the internal bath-house, and this may indicate that the site had two distinct phases of occupation.

Inscriptions reveal that the fort was constructed and probably garrisoned by soldiers of the Second Legion, the only Roman military unit recorded at the site. Almost all of the finds are of Antonine date, but some bronze coins of late first century date have also been found, raising the possibility that the fort may have been preceded by one of the stations built by Agricola around AD 80. Small leather shoes were found at Balmuilty (and also at Bar Hill and Castlecary), providing good evidence for the presence of women and children at the fort. A civilian settlement (vicus) has never been definitively located at Balmuilty, but a number of ditches (of unknown purpose or date) found about 200m south of the fort may represent part of such a settlement, and recent geophysical survey may have located features from this settlement to the south of Balmuilty Road.

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