

# BEARSDEN: FORT AND BATH-HOUSE

The only Antonine Wall fort to see extensive archaeological excavation since the Second World War, the fort at Bearsden is now mostly covered over by roads and houses.

Amidst this modern development, however, are the exposed remains of a Roman bath-house and latrine within the area of the fort's annexe. These are probably the best examples of preserved and visible Roman stone structures along the entire Antonine Wall, providing insights into the regular rhythms of the soldiers' daily lives. The site also provides a good example of the preservation, management, and public accessibility of ancient remains within a contemporary developed residential context.

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## HISTORY OF DISCOVERY AND EXCAVATION:

The fort at Bearsden was known to eighteenth century antiquaries, who were able to recognise the fort's defences but nothing within its interior. By the 1880s the interior of the fort had been completely built-over by houses and the Roman remains were buried and almost lost to public consciousness. Around that time, the German scholar of Latin inscriptions Emil Hübner refused to admit that a fort ever existed at Bearsden, but survey work by the Ordnance Survey in 1898 revealed traces of the fort's south-west defences. Even

this area was subsequently built-over but, occasionally, development work uncovered Roman rubbish pits and post-holes throughout the early twentieth century. Residential re-development in 1973–81 finally offered a valuable opportunity to explore this fort, for which little secure information was known. In those years, the site was extensively excavated by Prof David Breeze, revealing the fort and its annexe. This is the only major post-War excavation of an Antonine Wall fort.

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## DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION:

Excavations have revealed that the fort and annexe at Bearsden is perhaps the most unusual major site along the entire Antonine Wall. Both fort and annexe lie within a single enclosure system with an internal area of 1.35ha (3.6 acres), with a turf rampart on a 4.3m wide stone base and ditches of a single phase running around the whole. On the enclosure's west side were three ditches, with two ditches on the east, and a large single ditch with no clear opening on the south. The

Antonine Wall Rampart and Ditch served as the enclosure's northern defences, but it is unclear if the fort and annexe or the Antonine Wall were constructed first. An internal turf rampart divided this larger enclosure into a fort on the western side and an annexe on the eastern side. It is clear from the archaeology that the full rampart and ditch system enclosing both fort and annexe were built at the same time, but it remains uncertain whether this was originally designed as a whole fort that was

later divided, or if the original plan included the concept of both fort and annexe from the very beginning. The fort's principal road (the *via principalis*) ran from east-to-west across both fort and annexe (now in use as the modern "Roman Road").

Within the fort's interior were found two stone granaries (*horrea*), and at least five timber barracks or storage buildings. There was no evidence for a commanding officer's house (*praetorium*). It is probable that the unit based here outposted men to Castlehill or Balmuildy. While it is uncertain which military unit garrisoned the fort, a building inscription records work here by the Twentieth Legion. The analysis of pottery has suggested that Bearsden was one of several Antonine Wall forts with recognisable African cooking practices, and it is possible that at least some of the soldiers stationed here were either from north Africa or had been previously stationed there.

Two other stone buildings were located within the north-east corner of the annexe, a bath-house and a latrine. The bath-house was only partly constructed of stone, with a timber changing room (*apodyterium*), part-timber cold room (*frigidarium*) with a stone paved floor, and then fully stone cold plunge bath, warm rooms (*tepidaria*), hot room (*caldarium*) with a hot immersion bath, and a hot dry room or sauna (*laconicum* or *sudatorium*). Adjacent to this structure is the unfinished stone foundations of another room or building,

part of an original, but never completed, design for the bath-house. The water from the bath-house was drained to the south, where 10m away from the bath-house is a latrine block. The latrines, in turn, drained out through the annexe's east rampart into the two ditches. Scientific analysis of sewage deposits within the outer ditch indicate that at least some of the soldiers suffered from roundworm and whipworm, and that the diet was primarily vegetarian: including barley and wheat, figs and raspberries, coriander and opium poppy seeds, celery, and bramble. Animal bones uncovered in excavations elsewhere at the site, however, indicate that there was at least some minimal consumption of meat.

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