

The Roman fort at Castlehill offers some of the best landscape views along the line of the Antonine Wall, sitting almost 120m above sea-level with excellent views of the hills to the north of the Wall and a broad prospect over the Clyde estuary to the west.

The fort is not visible on the ground and is only faintly identifiable in aerial photographs, but the site is easy to locate because of a distinctive circular enclosed tree plantation that occupies almost half of the fort within its north-west corner. A small plateau at the north-west extremity of the plantation's interior may represent a former fortlet that occupied the site before the fort was constructed; here also, the line of the Antonine Wall Rampart and Ditch are known to turn sharply toward the south-west on its way towards the fortlet at Cleddans. The Ditch is fairly well preserved between Castlehill and Hutcheson Hill to the west and this is perhaps best viewed from the summit of Castlehill. The Wall's line is more difficult to discern to the east of the fort, but there are signposts highlighting its location.

HISTORY OF DISCOVERY AND EXCAVATION:

The Castlehill fort was known to the eighteenth-century antiquaries, who provided brief descriptions and very general plans. The Rev John Horsley wrote that in the 1720s-30s, the presence of thorns growing within the fort's ditches made it particularly easy to identify the fort's outline. While Alexander Gordon mistakenly placed one distance slab (RIB 2193, now in the Hunterian Museum) at Castlehill, two others were in fact found here: one was built into a cottage at Castlehill around 1698 (RIB 2196, now in the Hunterian Museum) and the other was ploughed up to the south-west of the fort in 1847 (RIB 2197, now in the Hunterian Museum). Other discoveries in the first half of the nineteenth century provided further confirmation of the fort's existence, including an altar dedicated to the Goddesses of the Parade Ground (Matres Campestres) and to Britannia by the Fourth Cohort of Gauls (RIB 2195, now in the Hunterian Museum), and a column capital that was discovered in 1847 (also in the Hunterian Museum).

The site has not been excavated, but aerial photography and ground survey since 1947 have allowed for the identification of the fort's defences, overturning the previous view that the fort was situated on top of the summit of the hill by revealing its south-eastern corner further down the hill's east slope, between the plantation and the present-day farm house. When trees fell on the summit in the early 1970s, Antonine pottery was found amongst the roots. Geophysical survey in 2008 helped to further clarify our knowledge of the fort by identifying the east and west gates, parts of the north, east, and west defences, and some of the structures within the fort's interior.

DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION:

Examination of aerial photography, on-the-ground inspection, and geophysical survey suggest that the fort had an internal area of about 1.28ha (about 3.2 acres), and that it was primarily located on the hill's east slope. While the antiquaries were almost unanimous in their description of the fort as very small, the dimensions provided by aerial survey indicate that it was actually just above average for known forts along the Antonine Wall. It is possible that the early identification of a very small "fort" on the hill's summit was actually a fortlet that was built on the site before the

arrival of the Antonine Wall and the larger fort. The column capital found to the south-west of the fort confirms that at least one building was stone, and this probably came from the fort's headquarters building (principia). Geophysical survey has provided traces of other structures within the fort's interior, including an enclosure inside the western part of the fort, but no clear evidence for the proposed fortlet. There is no clear evidence for an attached annexe or civilian settlement (vicus), but these are likely to have been present.

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