The 1972 - 73 Excavations At Binhester

The last of a series of excavation in the Commandant’s bath suite at Binhester by the Bishop Auckland Archaeological Research Group was begun in 1972 directed by J. G. Rainbird and managed by the writer. The excavation was undertaken in co-operation with the Department of the Environment, which in the final stages was to consolidate the remains within the building protecting them. The room designated w by Hooppell and the more than half of Room u available were uncovered.

Plate 4 of the Taylor drawings showed that Proud had exposed Room w and some of Room u. Hooppell’s text, however, presented difficulty in the analysis of what was to be uncovered. That “beneath this third room are hypocaust-pillars” is suggestive of a floor still in situ, but in 1972 the floor was entirely absent, apart from about a square foot adjacent to Room w. At the same time, it is clear that Proud’s excavations in the bath-suite were exploratory, and the most likely explanation for Hooppell’s conclusion is that the existence of a floor was deduced from the evidence of the pilae exposed then.

The pilae as exposed in 1972 had survived in varying condition and height, with broken flue tiles and flooring among them. In the south-west of the room, two almost complete pillars lay at collapse angles among the concrete débris, with more than a foot of apparently undisturbed silt lending support. While this indicated gradual decay following abandonment of the building, there was no dating evidence, and later intrusive disturbance could not be entirely ruled out. Adjacent to the Proud trench in particular, the amount of opus signinum flooring fell short of requirement, which suggested its purposeful removal.

While, as the ‘Vinovia’ drawings showed and their uncovered excavation trench attested, it was certain that Proud/Hooppell had excavated only in the east corner, it seemed possible that others had preceded them there and elsewhere in the room. If such earlier explorers had been the Georgians, as seemed the most probable, their exploration had been undertaken less intensively than in other rooms of the bath-suite. The digging had been casual, unsystematic. Furthermore, with the unearthing of the bones of a calf and a sheep in the middle of the room, it was concluded that a hole had been dug for their burial either by another more recent predecessor of Proud or a successor earlier than those currently engaged. Farmer Wedgewood, however, rarely present as a spectator, explained that some forty years earlier he had not dug from the surface to bury the animals, but had merely widened a hole which had recently appeared, and which he attributed to mining subsidence. While this seemed unlikely and was later shown not to be the case, so too was the possibility of a collapsed floor. The most likely explanation for the subsidence was that of the settlement of excavation backfill, possibly emphasised by the collapse of a pila or two left in position by the Georgians.

While the Group dig in the Hall garden in 1969 had shown it to be arguable, Hooppell’s suggestion that the hypocaust “appeared not to have been used in the later period of the Roman occupation of the building” is again likely to have been deduced only from what he could see of rooms u and w. The latter was clearly a hot bath, with hypocausted underfloor and flue tiles around its three outside walls; its opus signinum floor largely intact with a large mass of opus signinum across the alcove for retaining its water. It may have seemed to Hooppell that the hypocaust space beneath the room had been deliberately packed with débris, as though for support for the upper floor and effectively cutting off heat. However,
when the Group began its removal, the débris was soon succeeded by silt which also filled the hypocaust space. It could safely be concluded that the débris, abutting the silt, had been thrust sideways by the downward pressure of the material above. That the silt had accumulated since Hooppell’s time was discounted as highly improbable, the nature of its strata more likely reflecting changes in the condition of the ruined building at ground level.

Hooppell’s uncertainty about whether there was a doorway linking rooms t and u may have arisen from the absence of a threshold as was still evident in 1972. However, with part of the wall between the two rooms surviving at a level lower than the rest and at the same level as the supports for the other two known thresholds in the building, there seemed little cause to doubt its existence.

By now, especially because of the certain absence of a supporting wall beneath the end of the wooden building, it was considered that the point had been reached when excavation should be completed in conjunction with Ministry consolidation. The rooms were cleaned for photographs, and work set aside pending the arrival of the Wall team.

The arrangements with the Ministry for 1973 did not go according to plan. On the 6th December 1972, the Ministry Superintendent of Works, Mr. Lancelot, had inspected rooms t, u and w, and a formula for consolidation was agreed. The Group would need to clear Room t before the arrival of the Ministry team, and during its consolidation, to complete the excavation of rooms u and w for their consolidation. In the first place the Wall team, under Charles Anderson, arrived earlier than anticipated, on the 22nd February, and immediately set to work on Room u, which fortunately the Group had prepared well in advance. More importantly, however, the estimation of a month to complete its consolidation was not so much a miscalculation as a misunderstanding, presumably on the Group’s part, since in that one month the Ministry’s work in all three rooms would be complete.

Caution was now needed as the Group, having photographed its strata, faced the task of removing the silt under Room w in very restrictive space and in very poor light at weekends only. At the same time, with the Ministry making good progress in Room t and pressing hard, there would soon be a hold up if the original plan was pursued. In these changed circumstances, the amended plan was that the Wall team should complete the excavation as the writer made daily visits to the site. Consolidation would not then be delayed unless anything significant was uncovered. In the event, nothing to delay progress was found with a complete absence of artefacts making dating impossible.

Conclusion
For the first time in the recent 20th century excavation history of the Commandant’s bath-suite, evidence had been obtained for its disuse and decay over a long period. Whether disuse coincided with abandonment of the fort or the abandonment of the Binchester site as a whole remained open to question; that some answers might be found when the small area of the suite yet to be excavated eventually became available remained a doubtful possibility.

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References