

# New Evidence for a First Century Roman Fort at Longtown Castle, Herefordshire

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## ABSTRACT

*Recent excavations at Longtown Castle have shown that its unusual square enclosure was originally part of a first century Roman fort. The base of the rampart was built of blocks of turf, with no evidence of timber or stone components. Artefacts from excavation trenches within the enclosure, including pottery and the remains of two kilns or ovens were dated to the later first century AD.*

*It seems likely that Longtown fort was built during the Silurian campaign of 47-78AD as part of a network of interconnected forts, each a day's march from the next. Longtown fort now fills a notable gap in the sequence between Abergavenny (Gobannium) and Clyro on the River Wye. Given that it was never rebuilt in stone, it probably fell out of use during the second century AD.*

**Keywords:** Roman auxiliary fort; turf rampart; Longtown Castle; sondage; Dressel 20 amphora; Samian ware; Severn Valley ware; Silurian wars

The parish of Clodock and Longtown lies at the heart of the marcher barony of Ewyas Lacy in the south-west corner of Herefordshire on the border with Wales. At Longtown there are the remains of a Norman castle with a fine stone keep with inner and outer walled baileys, occupying about one third of an earlier ditched and embanked enclosure, some 1.5 hectares (3.5 acres) in area (FIG. 1). In the past, antiquarians noted this square outer rampart and identified Longtown as the Blestium of the Antonine Itinerary XIII, although it is now generally accepted that Blestium was at Monmouth. Roman remains were reportedly found during the building of Longtown School in 1869, but what they were and their whereabouts is now unknown.<sup>1</sup> In more recent years small scale excavations failed to produce any evidence for Roman occupation<sup>2</sup>, leading modern historians to cast doubt on Longtown's Roman origins.<sup>3</sup> Various writers have suggested that the rampart could be Iron Age, Roman, Saxon or Norman<sup>4</sup>, but there are problems with each of these interpretations. The shape is too rectilinear for a typical Iron Age fort or a Norman motte and bailey. At over 5m in height the rampart is too high for a Roman fort and it is too far west for a Saxon *burh*.

The Longtown Castles Project<sup>5</sup> was set up by Longtown and District Historical Society in 2015 to investigate the origins of Longtown Castle and a nearby motte and bailey. Two seasons of excavation during 2016 and 2017 were planned and executed under the direction of Herefordshire Archaeology (Herefordshire Council's archaeology service), with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund and many local volunteers<sup>6</sup>.

## METHODS

Before the detailed planning of the excavations, the entire outer bailey was surveyed using resistivity and magnetic gradiometry, as well as a number of ground penetrating radar transects. These were all surprisingly uninformative and showed no indications of any definite structures. A drone survey was carried out by Aerial-Cam Ltd, to provide multiple digital images which were processed into a 3-dimensional surface model of the castle (FIG. 1).



FIG. 1 Digital surface model of Longtown Castle showing features mentioned in the text.

The castle and its surrounding area are designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument, so archaeological intervention was restricted to small scale, targeted excavation. Five trenches were dug on the eastern bailey of the castle grounds during two consecutive 3-week seasons in July 2016 and 2017 (FIG. 2). The excavation was carried out with a core staff of three professional archaeologists supervising around 12-15 volunteers each day.

Trench 1, dug in 2016, was a cross-section through the eastern rampart exposing the full height of the internal structure (FIG. 3). To minimise disturbance to the earthwork, advantage was taken of an existing breach through the rampart giving access to a field gate. Stepped sections were first cut into the slope to allow for safe excavation of the full height of the rampart, followed by the removal of turf and topsoil from the whole of the slope to reveal the rampart stratigraphy behind.

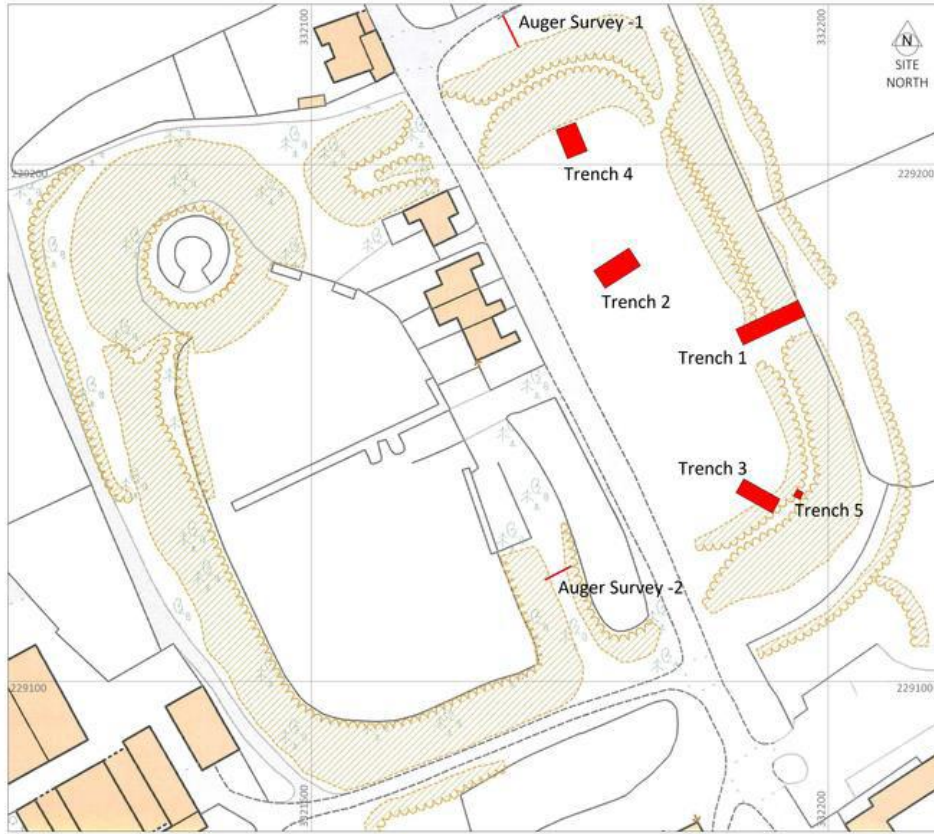


FIG. 2 Plan of Longtown Castle with the position of the excavation trenches

Trench 2 (6m x 4m) was excavated in the approximate centre of the bailey in 2016. In 2017, it was re-opened and extended by 3m. Two further trenches were opened, Trench 3 (8m x 3m) to the south and Trench 4 (6m x 4m) to the north of the bailey. Trench 5 (1.5m x 1.5m) was placed to investigate the south-east corner of the rampart.

Pottery finds were identified and dated by Roman and Medieval pottery specialists familiar with ceramic fabrics from the West Midlands and Welsh border. Charcoal samples were radiocarbon dated by the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre (SUERC). All radiocarbon dates have been calibrated using the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit calibration program OxCal 4.





FIG. 3 The fully exposed section of the rampart

## RESULTS

The section revealed by Trench 1 showed that the rampart had been built in three distinct phases. The earliest phase rose to a height of 0.55m above the natural ground surface and was clearly made up of stacked turves that had decayed to a claylike consistency (FIG. 4). The second phase, raising the rampart to a height of 5 metres, was made up of layers of earth, gravel and decayed sandstone. These were identifiable as locally derived material and were presumably sourced mainly if not entirely from the ditch surrounding the rampart. The layers were of varying thickness, with no apparent pattern to the sequence. They had remained in



place long enough for a layer of turf to grow on them before the third phase was added raising the height of the rampart to around 5.5 metres. No stone structures were found on or within the rampart and neither was there any evidence of post-holes or timber revetments.

FIG. 4 The base of the rampart in Trench 1 showing decomposed turf bank

No artefacts were found within the rampart except for a few sherds of abraded 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century pottery in the upper layers that may have been introduced by burrowing animals. Samples of the turf from the bottom of the rampart were collected and processed by flotation to recover small amounts of charcoal for radiocarbon dating. These returned a calibrated date range of 117-355BC (P=0.954; SUERC 77729).

Excavation of Trenches 2, 3 and 4 revealed that what had completely obscured the geophysics results was a quantity of rubble derived from the construction of the school in 1869.

In Trench 2, after the removal of several layers of debris, the main feature revealed was a 13<sup>th</sup> century metallated road surface with possible building footings on one side and a ditch on the other. Within the medieval deposits six sherds of Roman pottery were also found. Two sondages (test pits), cut through the medieval road surface and ditch (FIG. 5), immediately yielded exclusively Roman material.

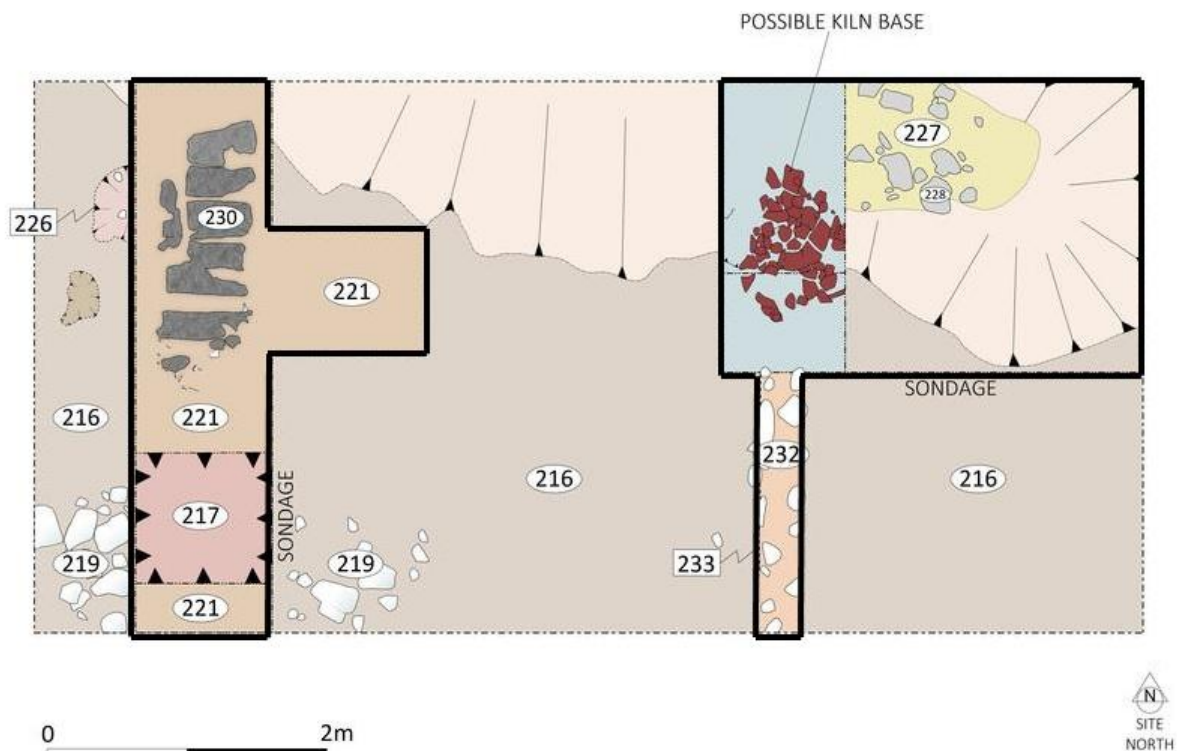


FIG. 5 Plan of Trench 2 showing the exclusively Roman deposits (black outline)

The uppermost deposit of the eastern sondage contained a single large piece (236g) of Dressel 20 amphora and a blue glass bead (FIG. 6). Immediately below this a layer containing charcoal provided a radiocarbon date range of 24-125AD (P=0.954; SUERC 77732). Within this date range, however, a narrower peak stood out at between 51 and 86AD (P=0.58). This charcoal-containing deposit overlay a structure consisting of flat broken pieces



of sandstone that appeared to form the base of an oven or kiln (FIG. 7). Associated with this was a collapsed flue leaving from the south side and extending the full width of the trench.



FIG. 6 Dressel 20 amphora piece and glass bead from Trench 2



FIG. 7 Kiln or oven base in Trench 2.

The western sondage first exposed a mass of fragments of burnt clay, interpreted as a demolished oven. This overlay a surface of seven parallel radially-split oak planks of roughly the same width (FIG. 8). These had been carbonised by indirect heat from above, suggesting that they were either a platform for the oven or, equally possibly, part of a more extensive walkway, this being the only part to have survived. A radiocarbon date for these timbers of 56-352BC (P=0.954; SUERC 79152) reflected when the tree (or trees) was growing and not when felled and used, and was therefore not inconsistent with a later Roman context. Deposits deeper than the timbers were investigated through a 1m square deepening of the sondage at the southern end. Here there was evidence of an earlier metallised surface under which lay a thick deposit of mixed grey silt, sand and gravel extending to bedrock. Eleven sherds of Roman pottery were recovered from this deposit and charcoal provided a radiocarbon date range of 53-131AD (P=0.954; SUERC 77733).



FIG. 8 Carbonised timbers in Trench 2.

Overall, 23 Roman pottery sherds were recovered from Trench 2, mainly oxidised coarse wares, some of which could be identified as Severn Valley ware. Vessel form was difficult to determine, but a ring-necked flagon, a triangular rim jar and a medium-mouthed jar with a round, everted rim were noted. Most of the pottery was identified as first century, with some possibly extending into the second century, which is consistent with the radiocarbon dates.

Six sherds of Roman pottery were recovered from Trench 4, the most notable a sherd of first-century Samian ware from La Graufesenque in southern France. However, charcoal from this context gave a radiocarbon date of 1036-1157AD (P=0.954; SUERC 77730), indicating that

Roman material had been redeposited during the medieval redevelopment of the site, which had involved clearing all previous deposits down to bedrock.

Trenches 3 did not penetrate deep enough to encounter Roman deposits, due to the thickness of medieval stratigraphy, and contained no Roman material. Neither did Trench 5, opened at the top of the southern part of the rampart.

No Iron Age artefacts were recovered from any of the trenches, although a 1st century Colchester type brooch was recently found in a field adjoining the castle. No ceramic building materials were recovered from any of the Roman deposits.

## DISCUSSION

All the dating evidence (pottery and radiocarbon) points to a first century Roman occupation of the site, possibly extending into the second century. This would appear to have been the first settled occupation at Longtown Castle, as no significant artefacts from earlier periods were found (except for two possibly Neolithic worked flints mixed in with the medieval deposits). Moreover, the Roman levels lay just above bedrock in Trench 2. Although the turf core of the rampart produced an apparently Iron Age radiocarbon date, this would be expected if the charcoal had been in the turf for a considerable time before being used in the rampart, or if it had derived from tree heartwood, possibly hundreds of years old. The radiocarbon date is therefore not inconsistent with a first century AD date for the bottom of the rampart.

The amount of turf needed to construct the first phase of the rampart must have been considerable, suggesting surroundings dominated by grass pasture, much as it is today. We found no evidence of a forest soil build-up between the Roman and medieval deposits, indicating that the site continued to be grazed during the post-Roman period.

While only a relatively small number of Roman artefacts was recovered from the excavations, this was from a very small area, with around half of the pottery coming from the 1m<sup>2</sup> sondage in Trench 2. In total around 132m<sup>2</sup> (approximately 2.3%) of the eastern bailey was excavated but this included only about 12m<sup>2</sup> of undisturbed Roman remains. It seems likely therefore that further excavation on the site could yield far more information. In Trench 3, despite excavating to a depth of >2.5m, we did not break below medieval deposits, so it is likely that any Roman levels are very deep at this end of the bailey. The depth of the Roman levels, compounded by the heavy redevelopment of the site during the medieval period, explains why previous excavations were unsuccessful in recovering Roman material.

Given the evidence now for a Roman presence at Longtown, could the ramparts have been part of a first-century Roman fort? The 'playing card' rectangular shape, often cited by authors as typical of Roman forts, is clearly not a feature here. Its size is also relatively small at 1.5 hectares. Small, square Roman forts are, however, relatively common in Wales and the Marches, with at least 13 recorded so far under 2.5 hectares in area.<sup>7</sup> These smaller forts



would have been occupied by a cohort of 500 footsoldiers (*cohors quingenaria peditata*), although some, such as Gelligaer in the South Wales valleys, had an annexe which may have allowed an additional contingent of cavalry.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Longtown Castle also has a northern bailey, thought until now to have been constructed in the medieval period, but which could originally have been an annexe to a Roman fort.

Many of the first century forts in the South Wales and Herefordshire area were constructed during the Silurian campaign of 47-78AD. Situated on the Silures eastern border, the Longtown area would have been in the first line of attack by *legio XX* marching out of Glevum (Gloucester). As the army advanced westwards, territory gained was consolidated by the building of forts, initially from Usk in the south to Wroxeter in the north and beyond. These early forts were placed within a day's march of each other, to ensure that they could be quickly reinforced in the event of attack. Tacitus gives us a very vivid description of the campaign and the problems the Romans had to face.<sup>9</sup> At least eight prominent Iron Age hill-forts are situated in the Longtown area and, while not all may have been occupied at this time, hostile forces were likely to have been present in some strength. Until now, a notable gap in the network of known Roman forts between Usk and Leintwardine has existed, leaving a 2-day march between the auxiliary fort at Gobannium (Abergavenny) and the vexillation fort at Clyro on the Wye<sup>10</sup>. A fort at Longtown now fills the gap, being half-way between Abergavenny and Clyro (FIG. 9).

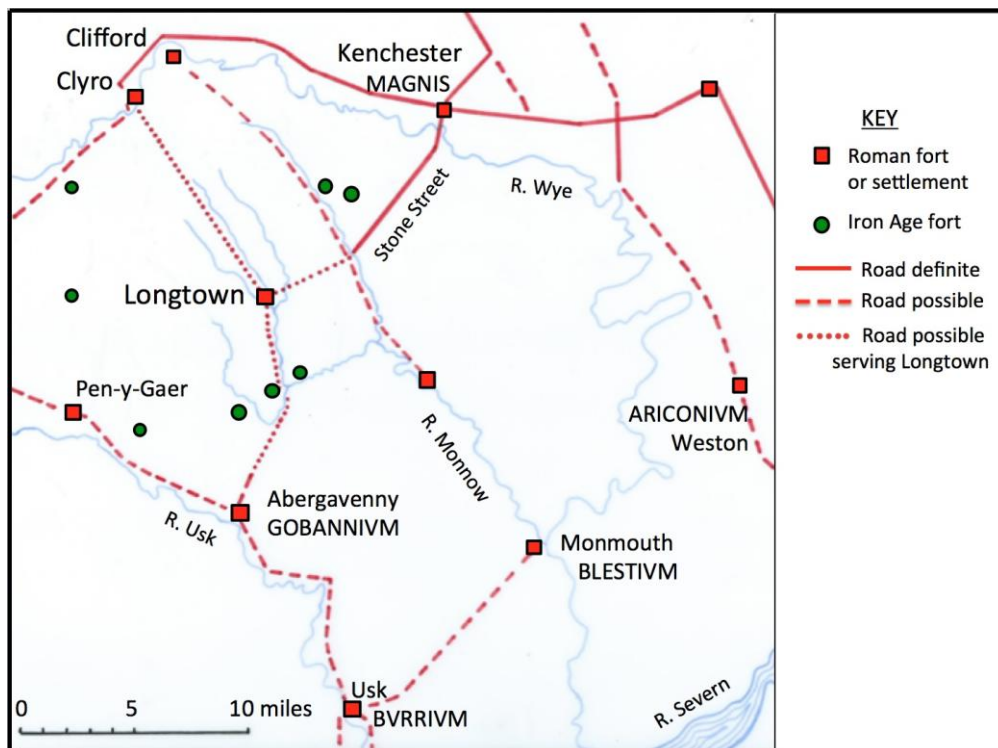


FIG. 9 Map showing features referred to in the text.

Once the front line of conflict moved on, small forts like Longtown would have been manned by auxiliary troops recruited from the provinces for policing and peace-keeping duties<sup>11</sup>.

With a garrison of around 500 soldiers and possibly cavalry, the Longtown fort would have needed constant resupplying from the towns of Gobannium or Magnis (Kenchester) on the Wye, both a day's march away. It seems likely that Stone Street, still visible between Magnis and Bacton in the Golden Valley, would have continued onwards to Longtown, passing Lower Maescoed, where local tradition claims a Roman origin for the straight road across the common. FIG. 9 shows this and other possible Roman roads in the area, which could now repay further investigation.

In conclusion, the first century date and the type of pottery point to a Roman presence at Longtown, while the shape, size and turf construction of the first phase of the ramparts strongly suggest an auxiliary fort. The second phase of rampart building raised its height to at least 5m, which is beyond the typical height of the fighting platform of earth and timber Roman forts, although this could vary considerably<sup>12</sup>. Clearly, this second phase is of post-Roman construction and this, together with the third phase, we deal with elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> The fact that Longtown fort was never rebuilt in stone towards the end of the first century, as many others were<sup>14</sup>, suggests that it was falling out of use even then, and was probably abandoned by the middle of the second century. No Roman artefacts have ever been found outside the area of the fort, so it appears that Longtown was probably a purely military site, with no *vicus*.

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## Footnotes

1. Kelly's Directory 1905
2. Stanford 1965; Ellis 1997
3. Ellis 1997, 78; Shoemith 1996, 209.
4. Ellis 1997, 78; Remfry 1997, 32. English Heritage 2003, 26
5. Longtown Castle Project website - longtowncastles.com
6. Hoverd 2018
7. Burnham and Davies (2010) detail 15 forts fitting this description, but two of them have uncertain dimensions.
8. Brewer 2010; Campbell 2009, 28
9. Tacitus, republ. 2014.
10. Blockley et al. 1993; Olding 2009, 16
11. Burnham and Davies 2010, 90
12. Chester is thought to have had a rampart 2m in height (Bidwell 2007), while that of Beulah (Caerau) in Wales still stands at 3.7m in places (Jones and Thomson 1958). At Abergavenny, the rampart was 4.3m to the platform (Blockley et al. 1993).
13. Cook and Kidd 2019.
14. Bidwell 2007, 47; Moorhead and Stuttard, 2012, 117.

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