

WHEN the Romans began their advance into Wales, the site of the modern town of Usk must have appeared an attractive one for a fortress. It is situated on the River Usk some 12 miles from the sea, at a point where the valley of the River Olway, which gave access from western England, meets the Usk valley leading into the heart of Wales. Thus it formed an admirable offensive base when, at the beginning of Nero's reign (57-66), the Romans decided to include Wales within the frontiers of the Empire. But the disadvantages of the site soon became apparent, especially when the strategic needs changed from that of offence into the need for a static and permanent garrison. The site is rather cramped, the river is not deep enough for ships, and finally, as the excavators discovered to their cost, it is liable even in summer to disastrous flooding.

Thus early in the Flavian period (69-96), the main fortress was transferred down river to Caerleon, where it remained for the rest of the Roman period. A smaller detachment occupied part of the Usk site until the end of the century, after which the only occupation was an industrial settlement along the road that ran through what had been the centre of the camp.

The history of the fort at Usk—indeed the very fact that there was a major fort there at all has only emerged in the last year or so due to excavations carried out by Mr. W. H. Manning of University College Cardiff for the Ministry of Public Building and Works and the College. The excavations began on a small scale in 1965 when an emergency excavation on a new housing estate revealed the cold plunge of a set of baths. This must have belonged to the early fortress, for it was bisected by a ditch of the smaller

Flavian fortress. Excavation continued in 1967 on a larger scale, both inside the modern prison, now a Detention Centre, which overlies part of the fortress, and in the field

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behind the prison, where a drainage trench was cut, providing a convenient section. The most important discovery however was the section of a bank which proved to be the bank of the fortress: this was the decisive break-through that revealed the extent of the defended area. Since plans have been made to turn this vital field behind the prison into playing fields, it was decided to mount a large-scale excavation:

half was stripped this year, and it is hoped to return next year to strip the other half.

The extent of the camp is extremely uncertain, though evidence can be adduced from two sources, firstly the excavations, and secondly the map of Usk published in 1800 in Coxe's 'Antiquities of Monmouthshire' (see page 259). The section through the defences in 1967 proved that the bank that had previously been thought to be a barrier against floods was in fact Roman, and must have been part of a defensive structure. This bank can still be followed with some certainty for about 350 metres, and possibly for a total of 700 metres, which would suggest a camp of legionary size. These earthworks can be traced farther with the help of Coxe's map, on which they are clearly marked. Indeed, the earthworks are shown going right round the whole town, but herein lies a difficulty, for on the North side of the town the earthworks enclose the medieval castle, and are almost certainly Medieval: thus it is difficult to know where the Roman defences end and the Medieval begin. Nevertheless, the

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