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# CASTELL COLLEN ROMAN FORT, Near Llandrindod Wells : A Summary of Present Information

## The Name :

The Roman auxiliary fort known as Castell Collen is situated on the right bank of the River Ithon (NGR SO 0562) about one mile north-west of Llandrindod Wells. It lies in the parish of Llanfihangel Helygen. There exists in the Cardiff Public Library a manuscript diary kept by Richard Fenton, the topographical writer, at the beginning of the 19th century, in which he gives an account of a tour which he made with Sir Richard Colt Hoare in 1804. Under May 19th, Fenton records : "We crossed the river (Ithon) by a wooden bridge (at Llanyre) and came to Cwm, the seat . . . of a Mr Williams . . . and having asked his permission, we rode on to see the station (i.e. fort), which lay a few hundred yards beyond his house. (We) saw several pieces of brick and the foundations of several stone buildings . . . Sir R. Hoare, in a ploughed field adjoining, picked up two pots of very fine pottery, with enough of the ancient glaze on it to distinguish it. The camp, Mr Williams told us, was called *Caer Gollen*, i.e. the Hazel Camp, as he supposes from the number of hazels growing over the sides of it . . ."

The first attempt at a map of "Roman Wales" was prepared for Colt Hoare's translation of Gerald's *Itinerary*, published in London in 1806. On this map Castell Collen appears simply as a site numbered '19' and in the key accompanying the map '19' has only the words "on the Ython" by it. Colt Hoare himself did not therefore adopt Mr Williams' name for the fort.

A few years later the Rev. Thomas Price (Carnhuanawc), who had just been ordained and licensed to the curacies of Llanyre and Llanfihangel Helygen prepared a drawing of the Roman remains on Llandrindod common which he dated "September 23rd, 1811" and sent with a letter to Theophilus Jones, the historian of Brecknockshire. It was published in *Archaeologia* Vol. XVIII. Apart from the great interest of its main subject, this sketch plan has in the top left-hand corner a small plan of Castell Collen. Here it is designated "Great Camp at Cwm".

Jonathan Williams, the first compiler of a history of Radnorshire, who was engaged on his work at the same period states that although it was previously known as "the Gaer", the usual name in Wales for a Roman fort site, it had come to be called "Castell Collen", and such it has remained. A century later Professor F. Haverfield observed ". . . it seems now locally established and there is no obvious substitute". If Llandrindod had existed as a place at the time it might have become known as "the Llandrindod Gaer", in the same way as the Roman site near Brecon is referred to as "The Brecon Gaer". The Roman name for this military station is not known.

## Excavations : The first series, 1911-1913

The first excavations at Castell Collen were carried out by R. Wellings Thomas from 20th March to 12th June, 1911. In his report, published in *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, October, 1911, Wellings Thomas states : "The work has been devoted almost entirely to finding and tracing

the remains of walls within the camp, and practically nothing has been done in any other direction." It was during the first phase of the excavations that the inscribed fragments of stone were found, also the set of Castor Ware cups and the ansate terminal. At the end of his report Wellings Thomas observed : "Nothing has yet been done to clear up the mystery of the west banks or entrenchments. Complete sections should be cut through the containing banks in at least two places; the corners and gateways demand explanation. The buildings within the camp need a great deal of further exposing. The pretorium should be cleared and diligent search must be made for the remainder of the inscribed stone. The land surrounding the camp, particularly in the south and east sides, should be tested for buildings, and the great question of access to the Station from the east side of the river is still unsettled." Most of these things were to be done subsequently, but Wellings Thomas at least ascertained the position of the three main buildings in the fort.

The work was continued in 1911, apparently after a short interruption, by Henry Lewis, Junior, who worked for seven weeks in August and September, with Professor R. C. Bosanquet acting as his advisor. His main objective was to excavate the Headquarters building (*principia*) but misnamed the "Pretorium" in his report, following his predecessor. A plan of the building was produced.

No work was done in 1912 and the year appears to have been given over to fund-raising activities, but in 1913 work was resumed at the end of July and continued until September 12th under the direction of Hugh Evelyn-White, a classical scholar and archaeologist. He concentrated his efforts on clearing the site of the Commandant's house (*pretorium*) and the north-east (i.e. north) gate. Unfortunately Evelyn-White's orientations are somewhat confusing and it is simpler for practical purposes to speak of the south, west, north and east sides as Wellings Thomas had done. Some other work was also done and Evelyn-White's report deals with the fort generally, summarising discoveries and finds made in both 1911 and 1913. It appeared in *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, January, 1914. A plan of the main building is included.

#### **Excavations : The Second Series, 1954-1957**

In 1954, at the suggestion of V. E. Nash-Williams, whose book *The Roman Frontier in Wales* appeared in that year, a fresh series of excavations were undertaken at Castell Collen. They were sponsored by the Radnorshire Society with financial support from the Welsh Church Fund administered by the Radnorshire County Council. The Director of the excavations was Mr (now Professor) Leslie Alcock, who states in his report, 'The defences and Gates of Castell Collen auxiliary fort', published in *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 1964: "Attention was concentrated on unravelling the history of the fort. To this end substantive trenches were dug across the ramparts and all the gates were examined. Minor excavations were also made in the interior. During the second season (1955), a small-scale exploration of the area outside the fort led to the discovery of an extra-mural bath-house, which was largely explored during the last two seasons. The fort itself was also re-surveyed." Unfortunately no definitive report was produced for the bath-house and the reader is referred for an account of it to the interim reports which



appeared in the *Transactions of the Radnorshire Society* in 1956 and 1957.

The aim of "unravelling the history of the fort" was partly achieved, although there is not complete agreement among students of Roman Britain about the conclusion to be drawn from the evidence elicited so far from the two series of excavations. Castell Collen is fortunate in as much as it is an unencumbered site and it has been extensively, although by no means completely excavated. The exploration of the bath-house was unfortunately not completed owing to its considerable size and complexity and the vicinity of the fort has not been much explored for signs of other buildings or settlements. The second edition of Nash-William's *The Roman Frontier in Wales* (revised under the direction of Michael G. Jarrett and published in 1969) contains a summary account of the site; it also states "Little has been discovered and less can now be known of the history of the internal buildings. The stone *principia* (Headquarters building) was probably preceded by a timber one, to judge from post-holes discovered in 1911-1913. Both it and the stone *praetorium* (Commandant's House) underwent structural modifications which have never been published. The single large *horreum* (granary) may well be appropriate to the reduced fort. Diagonal trenching of the *praetentura* (the area east of the *via principalis* containing the barracks) in the earlier excavations, and the trenches and boxes dug in *praetentura* and *retentura* (the area behind the main buildings to the west) in the later excavations, and still unpublished, failed to reveal any stone barracks but indicated two periods of timber ones". All the surviving finds, as far as is known, are now deposited in the Llandrindod Wells Museum, but it is suspected that certain finds made in 1911-1913 passed into private hands and these may have included coins, not many of which were found at Castell Collen in any case. A re-appraisal of finds from Castell Collen Roman Fort, 1911-1913 was undertaken by George C. Boon, F.S.A., and published in the 1973 Volume of the *Transactions of the Radnorshire Society*. Mr Boon published a second paper on finds from the 1954-57 excavations which appeared in Vol. XLVIII of the *Transactions*.

### Summary

The phases of the construction and occupation of Castell Collen may be summarized as follows on the available evidence :

(a) The building of the original fort in turf and timber by Julius Frontinus in the course of his campaign against the Silures, A.D. 75-78.

(b) About the middle of the 2nd century, A.D. the defences were revetted with stone and stone gates with projecting semi-circular gate-towers were erected. This type of gate appears to be unique for an auxiliary fort in Wales and according to M. G. Jarrett is probably the earliest example of such a construction in Britain. (Antonine period).

(c) At some time in the earlier part of the 3rd century A.D., possibly in the reign of Septimus Severus or his son, Caracalla, the fort was reduced in size. The *retentura* was abandoned and the original west defences levelled. A new west gate of irregular form with the single passageway flanked by two guard chambers was built. The reduced fort was approximately square in outline and appears to have had quartering for 400-500 men, about half the accommodation of the original fort.

(d) In the late 3rd or early 4th century, A.D., the defences and

gates were renovated and the ditches recut with a wide profile. This work may have been carried out during the period of Carausius, or more probably by Constantius Chlorus, when a general reorganisation of the defences of Britain was undertaken.

In the intervals between these phases of activity the fort appears to have been run down or abandoned and to have suffered accordingly.

Two centurial stones have survived from Castell Collen; one was found during the rebuilding of Llanbadarnfawr Church in 1878 and was subsequently incorporated in the masonry of the west wall of the porch; the other was found in the wall of a farm near the fort site and is now exhibited in the Museum.

In 1956 a fragment of an inscribed stone recording building activity by a detachment of the 2nd Augustan legion was discovered lying face down in the bath-building, where it had been re-used as a paving stone. It probably relates to the work done in phase B above as it is in a style datable in Britain to the Antonine period.

The line of a Roman road to the south of Castell Collen has been traced, along which lies a group of Roman practice camps, but no other vestiges of Roman roads have so far been discovered in the vicinity of the fort.

C. W. Newman

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From John Aubrey's *Monumenta Britannica*, Vol. II, p. 826. Facsimile copy published by the Dorset Publishing Co., 1979-1982, Editor John Fowles : annotator Rodney Legg.

"Anno 1656, as I rode from Brecknock to Radnor, on the top of a mountain (I think not far from Pain's Castle) is a monument of stones like a sepulchre, but much bigger than that at Holyhead; the stones were great and rudely placed. I think they called it Arthur's Chair, or such a name (query Sir John Hoskyns for this). But this monument did not belong to him, [more ] than did that called the Round Table in Cumberland". [actually Westmorland].

It is of interest that Aubrey rode through Radnorshire at this date. He was then about thirty, and this was a moment when he was much involved in lawsuits in the Marches. Most of the land was in Brecon, with a little in Monmouthshire. So far as is known none was in Radnorshire, though that is not impossible.

A. D. Powell