

THE ROMANS IN BIRMINGHAM

METCHLEY

ROMAN

FORT

*A find from the site
- a bronze dog*



THE UNIVERSITY
OF BIRMINGHAM

*Artist's reconstruction of part of the
double barrack-block, dated to around AD50*

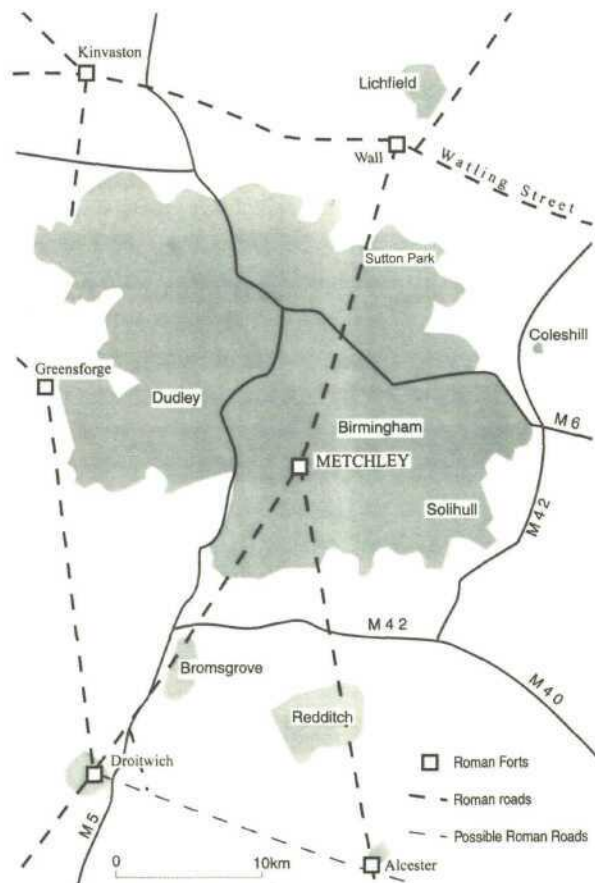
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A SITE OF NATIONAL IMPORTANCE

Metchley fort is recognised as being of national importance for a number of reasons:

- **A long period of occupation**

The site was occupied more-or-less continuously for perhaps 150 years from around AD 48. Several phases of development have been recognised (see cover plan): an early garrison fort (Phase 1), later ditched annexes (Phase 2A), a stores-depot (Phase 2B), and a subsequent, smaller garrison fort (Phase 3). The 2nd century activity (Phase 4) is the most enigmatic, perhaps representing continued, sporadic occupation by a small military detachment. Later in the 2nd century the site may have fulfilled an official function, perhaps providing overnight accommodation or a change of horses for travellers on official business.



Location plan - Roman and modern

- **An early date**

The Phase 1 fort shows a comparatively early style of military layout, including the remains of an unusual double barrack-block (see cover reconstruction).

- **Rare survival**

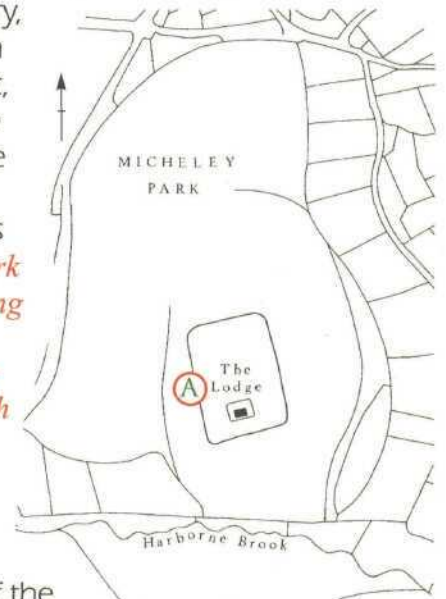
The well-preserved remains belonging to the later, Phase 2B stores-depot are also features rarely found within a military complex.

THE SITE'S HISTORY

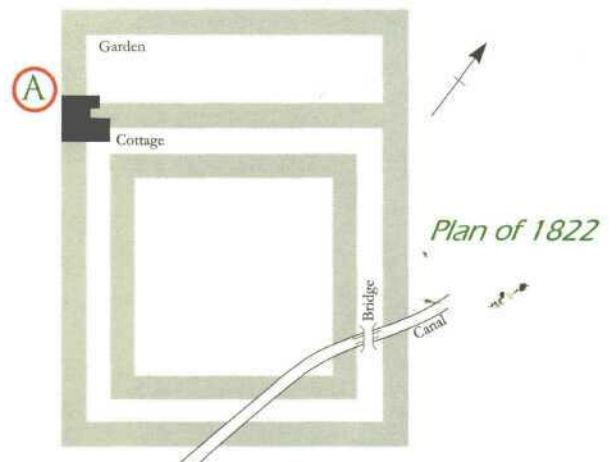
The fort is approximately centred on the Vincent Drive roundabout (see cover plan) and was first identified in the 18th century as above-ground earthworks in antiquarian descriptions and map sources (see plans below). Not everyone agreed that this was a Roman site.

Writing in his 'History of Birmingham' in the late 18th century, William Hutton suggested that, because of the unusually large area enclosed, the earthworks were, *"the work of those pilfering vermin the Danes... better acquainted with other people's property than their own"*!

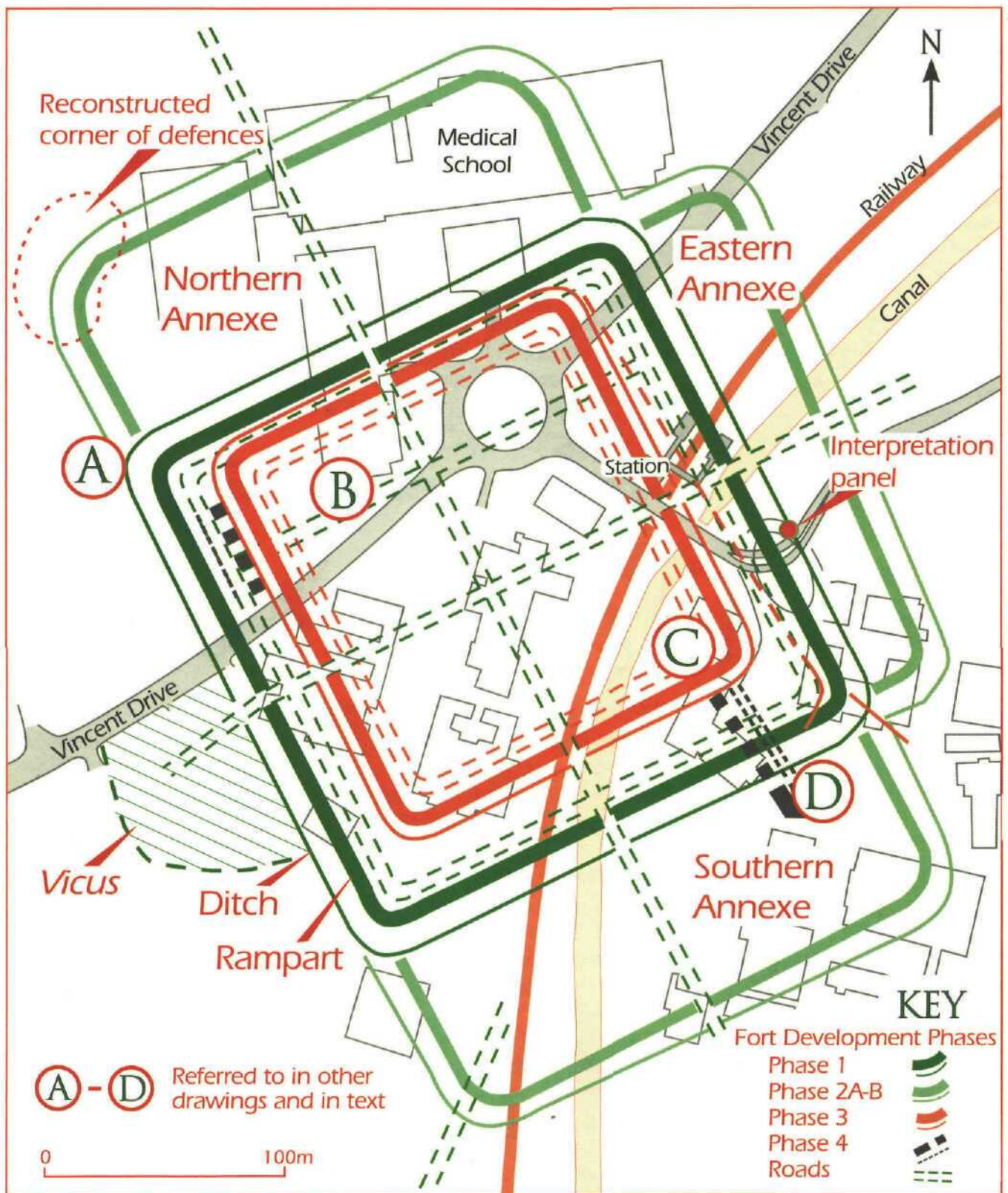
The early Roman date of the site was only confirmed in the 1930s, during the first archaeological excavations. Further excavations in the 1950s, 1960s, and, latterly from 1996 to 1999 in advance of new developments at the University of Birmingham, have identified the defensive circuits and unusually well-preserved remains of timber-framed internal buildings and other features such as ovens, hearths and pits. The layouts of the buildings can be identified from evidence such as **beam-slots** cut into ground surfaces. Part of the northwestern corner of the northern annexe has been reconstructed and is a designated **Scheduled Ancient Monument**. A band of woodland following part of the line of the fort's western defences provides a visual 'marker' of the fort's extent on this side.



Plan of 1718



Plan of 1822



Roman forts are some of the most evocative survivals of the Roman conquest and occupation of Britain. The Metchley fort, located largely within the University of Birmingham campus, is one of the most important archaeological sites in Birmingham, and one of the most important sites of early Roman date in the midlands. Metchley was one of a network of forts or temporary military encampments constructed during the Roman advance through the midlands in the middle of the 1st century AD. The fort was laid out near an important road junction, with routes leading to Droitwich and Alcester to the south, and Wall (near Lichfield) to the north. The site is near good water supplies and lies on a raised plateau, commanding wide views over the surrounding area.

This leaflet provides a summary of the results of the 1996–1999 and earlier excavations.

For simplicity, in the text the main fort alignment is said to be north–south

FORT PHASE 1 (MID-1ST CENTURY AD)

The earliest fort was square in plan, enclosing approximately 4 hectares (roughly 200m square). It was defended by double ditches cut into the subsoil and by a turf-revetted rampart or bank. The northwestern angle of the fort interior (B) on cover plan contained parts of two barrack-blocks, whose wall-lines survived as beam-slots in the soil. These were fully excavated.

Excavation of the southernmost barrack-block, located towards the western fort defences, revealed pairs of rooms, including part of the meri's and, adjoining, officer's quarters. The northernmost barrack-block was a 'double barrack' composed of two blocks constructed back-to-back, an arrangement usually adopted as a space-saving measure in early forts of the Claudian period (AD 41-54). The most completely excavated part of this building contained 16 rooms ranged in four rows of four. This suite of rooms formed the accommodation for two *turmae* (cavalry) units, each comprising a total of 32 men, with 8 men sharing each pair of rooms. The meri's accommodation was separated by corridors from further rooms located towards the two ends of this building. The westernmost range of outer rooms could have formed the officer's quarters. The innermost rooms may have housed a small workshop. Overall, the double barrack-block could have accommodated four *turmae* of an auxiliary unit. The total garrison would have been around a thousand.

Other excavated buildings, in the southeastern angle of the fort, included a granary (B) on cover plan with a raised floor, and a workshop and store building (C on plan).



FORT PHASE 2A (MID-LATE 1ST CENTURY AD)

Later, the fort was extended during its continued use, by the addition of annexes on its northern, southern and eastern sides. Like the main fort, the annexes were defended by double ditches and a rampart. No traces of buildings have been identified within the annex interiors although the eastern annex was used for small-scale industrial activity. The others may have provided a defended area for open storage or for the tethering and exercise of horses.

Also during this phase a number of the buildings within the original fort were themselves internally remodelled, many being converted to afford extra storage space. The effect of these changes was to reduce the capacity of the barrack-block accommodation. Such a rearrangement suggests a reduction in the size of the garrison, a greater need for covered storage, or both.

FORT PHASE 2B (MID-LATE 1ST CENTURY AD)

Later still in the life of the fort the Phase 1 timber-buildings were cleared from within the fort interior, although the defences continued to be maintained. This clearance was a preliminary to the laying out of a new series of buildings which did not conform with the usual regular military layout. These comprised small and irregularly arranged, temporary, timber-and-wattle-framed buildings, including sheds and fenced compounds.

The excavated northwestern part of the fort interior (B) on cover plan contained a store-building with a raised floor adjoining a fenced compound, possibly originally intended for livestock or stabling and later reused for ironworking. Other traces of ironworking survive, in the form of pits cut into the ground surface, and spreads of burnt clay representing the remains of demolished hearths or ovens constructed wholly above ground level. The southeastern angle of the fort interior (C) on cover plan contained a small sub-divided building which may have formed a combined stable and grooms' quarters.

This phase may represent the reuse of the fort as a military stores depot. The marked irregularity of the structures could reflect the need for rapid construction during an on-going campaign. Another possibility is that these structures represent an extended 'caretaker' presence.

THE EXCAVATIONS

From the latest (uppermost) to the earliest (lowermost) Roman fort, following the sequence in which the remains were found by archaeologists (see cover plan).

PHASE 4 - FORT AND OTHER ACTIVITY (2ND CENTURY AD)

The site was occupied as late as the second half of the 2nd century. It seems likely that it was used only sporadically by the military, perhaps as a fort, but it is possible that the site contained a *mansio* - a guest-house used by travellers on official business. It seems to have been finally abandoned in around AD 200.

PHASE 3 - FORT (LATE 1ST CENTURY AD)

A small fort was built during a military re-occupation of the site. It was found within the interior of what had been the earlier, Phase 1, fort. Remains of buildings were discovered inside this later fort including a granary and a cook-house.

PHASE 2B - STORES-DEPOT (MID-LATE 1ST CENTURY AD)

Some time before the building of the Phase 3 fort a number of firms, temporary buildings, along with sheds, livestock compounds, and stables/grooms' quarters were laid out in place of the military structures within the Phase 1 fort. This may represent a phase when the site was used as a military stores depot, but not as accommodation for a substantial garrison.

PHASE 2A - FORT AND ANNEXES (MID-LATE 1ST CENTURY AD)

This seems to be the main period of activity and development on the site although probably housing fewer troops than previously in its history.

The original fort containing barrack blocks and all the buildings associated with a fully-functioning military site was extended on its northern, eastern and southern sides by annexes defended by ditches and ramparts. The annex interiors were used for storage, small-scale industry, and exercising horses.

PHASE 1 - FORT (MID-1ST CENTURY AD)

The earliest Roman activity on the site was represented by a square fort defended by double ditches and a rampart. Sited on a crossing point of major Roman roads, the fort was obviously designed as a strategic military post. The interior was found to contain timber-framed barrack-blocks, granaries, a workshop and a store-building. The garrison was probably a mixture of legionary and auxiliary troops. To the west of the fort a civilian settlement or *vicus* grew up outside the defences.

FORT PHASE 3 (LATE 1ST CENTURY AD)

A later, military, reoccupation of the site gave rise to a smaller, rectangular-shaped fort, enclosing 2.6 ha., built in the interior of the earlier fort. The ditched defences of the Phase 1-2 fort were recut to provide additional protection at this time.

A turf-revetted rampart, built early in Phase 3, seems to have collapsed as it was later replaced by one with timber strengthening. Extensive excavation within the fort interior did not, in this case, locate any traces of barrack-type accommodation. This may suggest that the garrison was accommodated in tents, which would have been unusual. Contemporary buildings identified by excavation comprised a granary and a cook house.



PHASE 4 (2ND CENTURY AD)

Excavation in 1999 within and just outside the southeastern corner of the Phase 1 fort defences (D) on cover plan identified evidence of recutting of the earlier fort ditches and other military-type ditches dug on different alignments. This phase may have seen a more sporadic military occupation of the site, which may also have involved the layout of 'practice camps'. It is also possible that the later, 2nd century, Roman activity at Metchley could have been related to the use of the site as a *mansio*, used by travellers on official business along the road network, or as a stopping point for a change of horses.



ROMAN CIVILIAN SETTLEMENT

Excavation to the west of the Phase 1 fort defences has uncovered features relating to a civilian settlement or *vicus* (see cover plan) laid out under military control during Phase 1. This *vicus* comprised timber-framed buildings, hearths, ovens and gravelled trackways. It was occupied by traders and military camp followers. The *vicus* is important because of its early, Claudian date (AD 41-54) and its good state of preservation.



THE FINDS

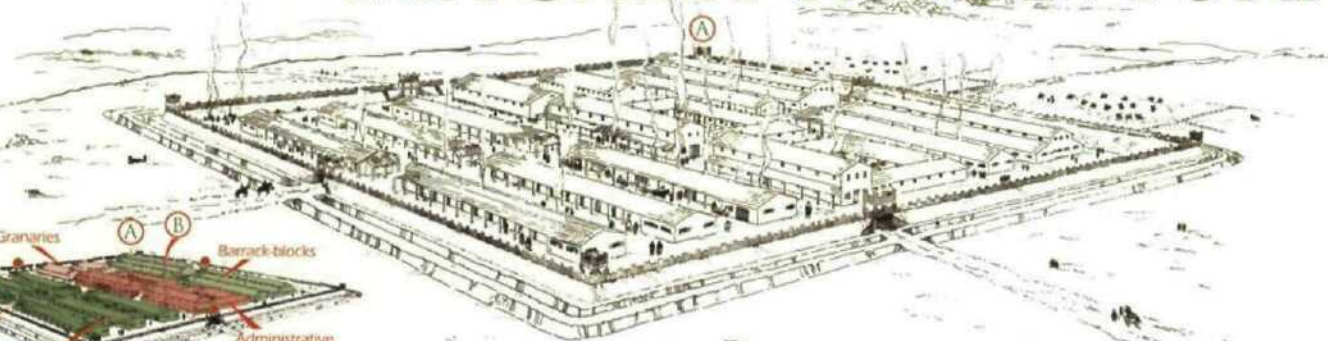
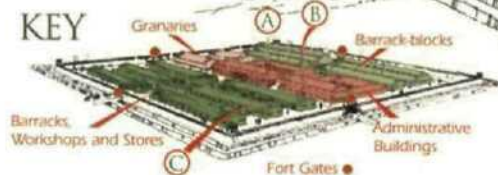
Archaeological evidence from the forts and associated features is not limited to the remains of structures. It also includes objects retrieved from archaeological excavations. These finds, principally pottery, are not solely of use for dating - they also provide important information concerning the patterns of early military supply, including evidence for the first establishment of trading patterns between the Roman military and the native economy, represented at Metchley by finds of cooking pots made in the Malverns.

The soils within the ditches contained charred seeds, pollen, and insect remains which can provide information on the environment in the Roman period. During Phase 4, for example, there is evidence for regrowth of nearby woodland which had been cleared before the first fort was built.



METCHLEY ROMAN FORT

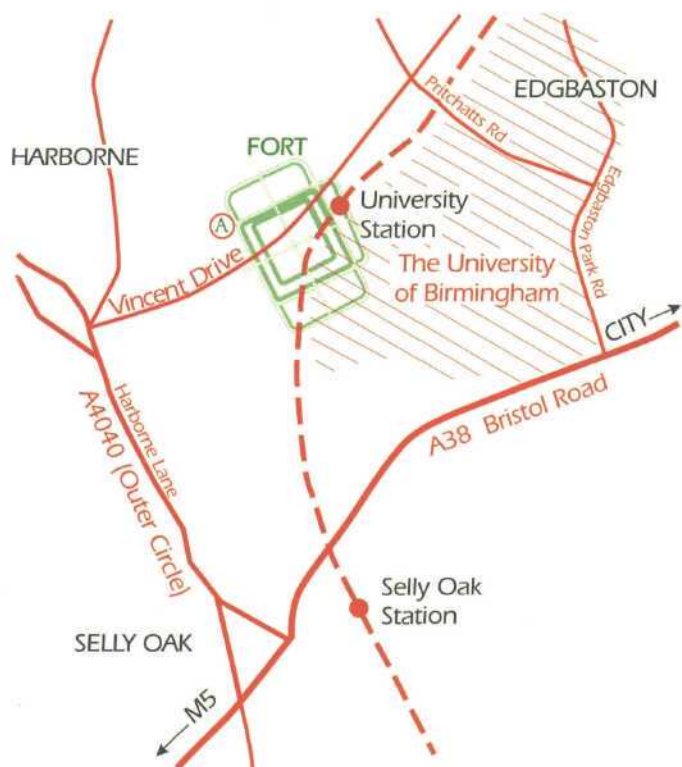
KEY



Artist's reconstruction of the Phase 1 fort, around AD 50

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HOW TO GET THERE



The reconstructed earthworks at the northwestern angle of the northern annexe defences are open to public view (see cover plan). They adjoin the western extension to the University Medical School – pedestrian access is from Vincent Drive (see plan above). An interpretation panel in the paved oval at the University's new West Gate (see cover plan) describes the main findings from the site – pedestrian access is across the canal from Vincent Drive.



One of the V-shaped, defensive ditches partially excavated.

A vertical cross-section is being examined to record the build-up of soil layers in the ditch. Each layer is given a unique number – marked on the white tags.

Using computers to map the site



'Opening' the reconstruction in 1956

GLOSSARY

Beam-slot A shallow trench for horizontal foundation timbers of a timber-framed building

Contubernia Paired rooms within men's quarters of barrack-block, usually occupied by 8 soldiers

Mansio A roadside guest house for those on official business

Rampart Earth bank defending the fort, surmounted by timber palisade providing protection to troops on sentry duty

Scheduled Ancient Monument A site recognised to be of national importance and protected by law

Turma (plural: *turmae*) Auxiliary cavalry unit, comprising 32 troopers.

Vicus A civilian settlement located outside the fort gates, but under military control. Mainly existed to trade with the garrison

FURTHER INFORMATION

Useful general introductions to Roman military archaeology are P. Bidwell, *Roman Forts*, English Heritage/Batsford, 1998; and A. Johnson, *Roman Forts*, 1983. See G. Webster, *Rome Against Caratacus*, 1981 for details of local fort excavations.

Details of the early Metchley excavations are available in volumes 58 and 72-4 of the *Transactions of the Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society* (available in the Birmingham Central Reference Library). Detailed reports will be published in the same series in 2001-2.

Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery has displays of Roman artifacts from local sites. The Roman military sites of Wall (near Lichfield) and Baginton (near Coventry) are open for public view.

For details of the Metchley excavations and other Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) projects see <http://www.bham.ac.uk/bufau>

For more information about archaeology in Birmingham see

<http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/archaeology>

The 1996-1999 excavations at the site and production of this leaflet were sponsored by the Estate Management Office of the University of Birmingham. The leaflet was produced by BUFAU with advice and assistance from Birmingham City Council Department of Planning and Architecture.

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