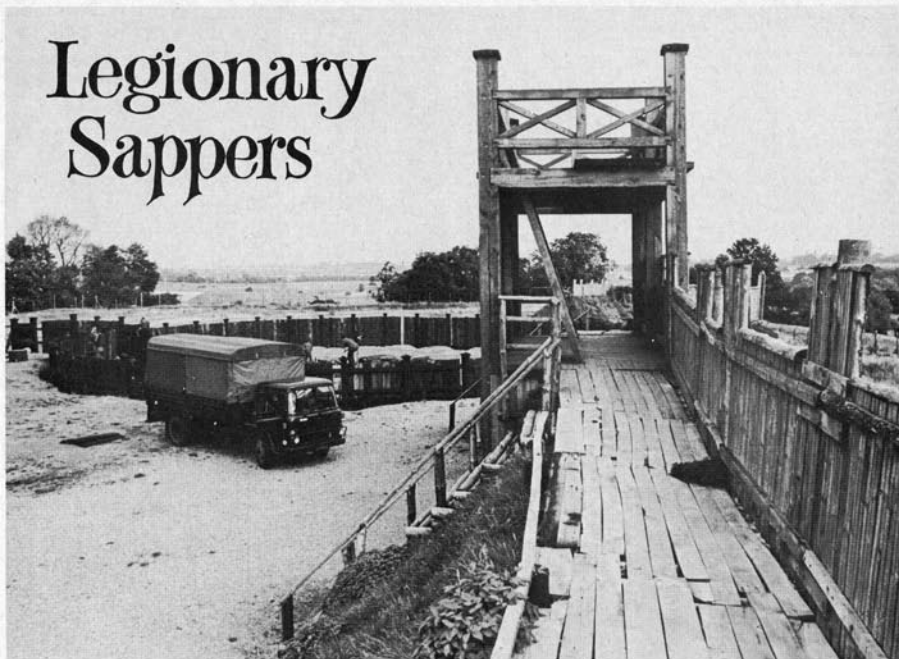


Legionary Sappers



TODAY'S SAPPER, according to archaeologist Mrs Margaret Rylatt, fulfils just the same function in the British Army as the legionary in the days of the Roman Empire. And certainly men stationed with 31 Base Workshop Squadron at Long Marston in Warwickshire have much in common with the warriors of two thousand years ago.

In the middle of Baginton village, near Coventry's airport, is an old Roman fort. And gradually, with the help of the Royal Engineers, this fort is taking shape again to just as it was in the old days.

Lunt Fort was discovered by an amateur archaeologist — although, as Mrs Rylatt puts it, "Everybody knew the Romans had been in Baginton. You cannot dig your garden anywhere in the village without discovering Roman pottery."

The Coventry museum authorities, who began to excavate the site in 1965, decided to turn Lunt Fort into an open-air museum, reconstructing as much as possible of the old turf and wood fort.

In 1970 the sappers from Long Marston made their first visit to Baginton and reconstructed the fort's gateway. Three years later they were back again, to rebuild the wooden granary building. This does not contain grain but houses a museum of models and artefacts excavated on the site.

This autumn the sappers have been back to Baginton again and have reconstructed the Lunt Fort's unique feature — a circular

arena or gyrus. This is something which has not been found anywhere else in the Roman world.

Apparently Baginton could have been a kind of Roman equivalent of Melton Mowbray. Mrs Rylatt contends that the gyrus was used for cavalry training, possibly of officers from different units. Another use might have been for displays on feast days for, as Mrs Rylatt and the Royal Engineers

found as soon as the posts and planks were in place, it forms a perfect amphitheatre.

"It's just like a whispering gallery," she told SOLDIER. "You have only to speak in a normal voice on one side of it and you can be heard quite clearly on the other."

It took the sappers seven-and-a-half working days to erect the gyrus. They followed plans supplied by the Coventry authorities and based exactly on what had been disco-



Story: John Walton
Pictures: Leslie Wiggs

Above: View of the reconstructed gate towering above the sappers in Lunt's Roman gyrus.

Right: Artist's impression of the original fort.

vered by digging. Mrs Rylatt: "We followed the actual footings and were actually able to pick out the posts. In fact we have ended up with a slightly tear-drop shape, just as the Romans did."

Elm was used because that was the timber found on the site and the construction plans followed Roman Army manuals. Mrs Rylatt added: "The Roman Army was just like that of today — it had manuals and some of these have survived. And everything had to be written in triplicate!"

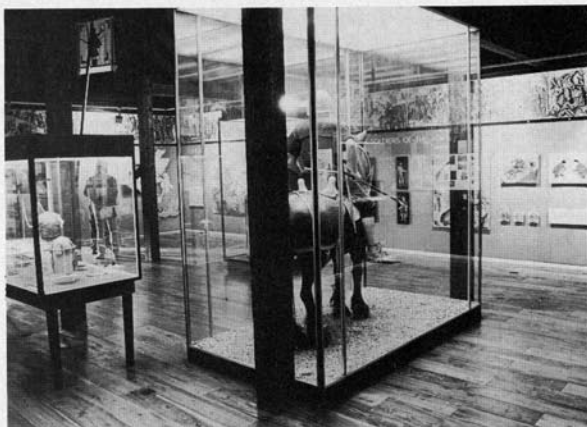
She says she is "99½ per cent certain" that the reconstruction is exactly as the fort would have looked. Further reconstruction work is planned, including workshops, and again Major George Sedman is keen that the squadron shall help. "It is, of course, something which we have to fit in with all our other tasks in serving the corps worldwide," he said. "It has to take a low priority but it is good training and gives the men a break from the workshops."

All the materials were provided by the Coventry authority but the timber was cut up at Long Marston. "We don't envy the Romans having to do it without power tools — we burned through a couple of saws," said Major Sedman.

Staff-Sergeant Brian Smith led the on-the-spot team of volunteers. They included carpenters, joiners, fitters and even electricians. Most of them volunteered to work on a Saturday to get the project finished.

Said Staff Smith: "It's been a nice break from the workshops. Normally we never see the customer but here we can meet them with the finished article."

As the last nails were hammered into place a delighted Mrs Rylatt whooped: "I could jump up and down just to look at it. If it were not for the Army this would never have been built."



Above: Reconstructed granary now a museum. Below: The gyrus is nearly complete. It is easy to picture the horses going through their training.

Top: Hammers and nails like the Romans — but the sappers also had their power drills.

