

Archaeological Evaluation of the Roman Road beside Water's Clough, Castleshaw

May 2017



Friends of Castleshaw Roman Forts volunteers undertaking test pitting

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Background

As part of the Castleshaw Roman Forts Hinterland Survey, the Friends of Castleshaw Roman Forts carried out an archaeological evaluation of an area of land adjacent to the south bank of Waters Clough and to the north-west of the Castleshaw Centre, Waterworks Lane, Castleshaw, located at SD99470921. The land is owned by United Utilities and farmed by David Hirst.

The project was designed to undertake a geophysical survey and test pitting across the projected line of the Chester to York trans-Pennine Roman road as it approaches Waters Clough before climbing up to Castleshaw Roman fort some 400 metres to the north-east. The evaluation took place on 13th May 2017.



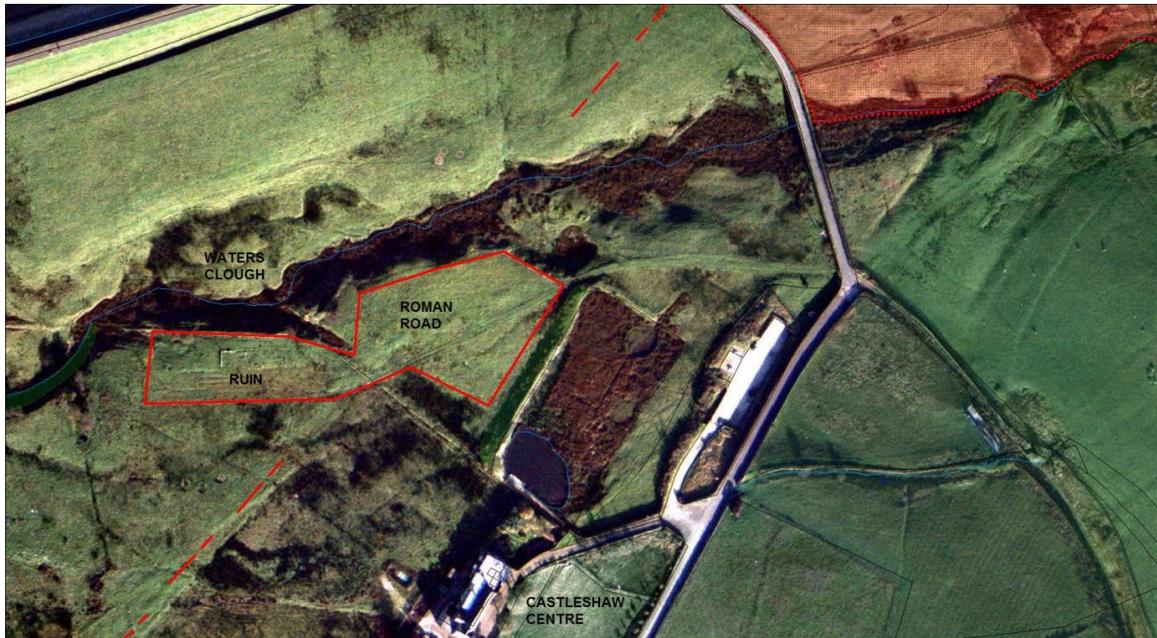
Location of investigation area (marked 'Roman road')

Phil Barrett led the geophysical survey whilst the excavations were directed and reported on by Norman Redhead.

This report can be accessed as a pdf on the Friends of Castleshaw Roman Forts website:
www.castleshawarchaeology.co.uk .

Objectives of the investigations

The area of interest is the area marked 'ROMAN ROAD' on the late 1990s aerial photograph below. The road is believed to enter the site from the south-west and pass through the marked area before crossing Waters Clough and then heading up to the Roman Fort above the north-east corner of the of the photograph (north is top of the photo).



The agger (raised causeway) of the Roman road can be seen entering the site at the bottom left (indicated by a dashed red line). The Scheduled area incorporating Daycroft Field to the south of the forts is the red-shaded area at the top right side of the photograph.

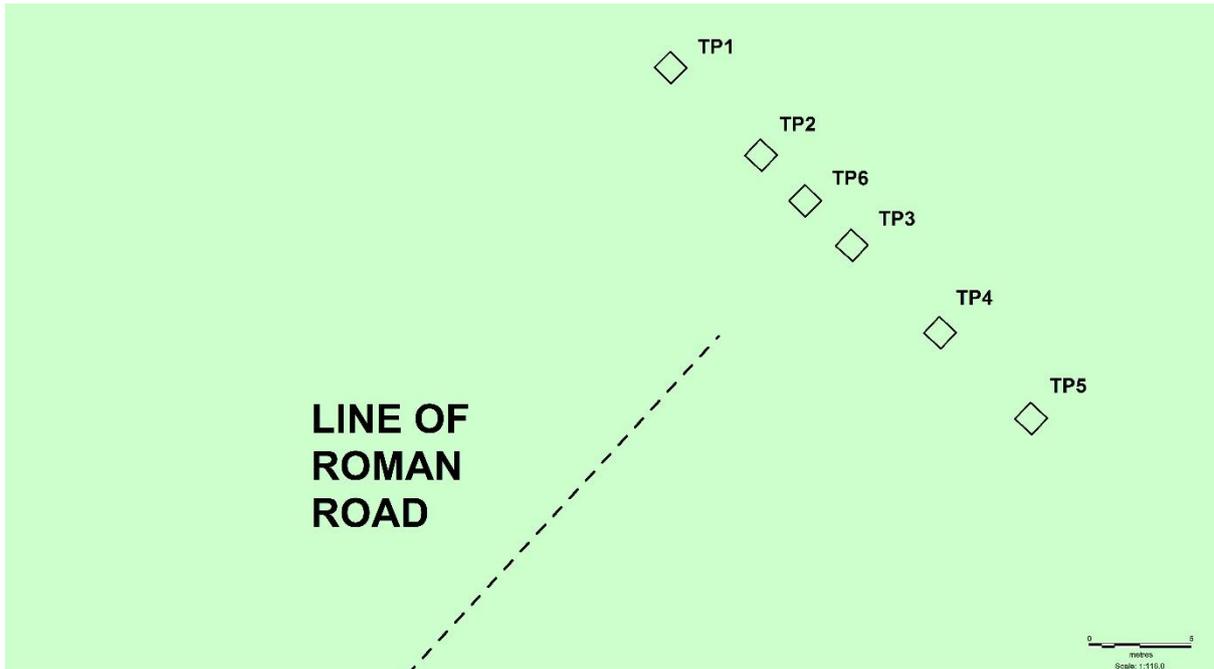
It is not known exactly where the road approaches Waters Clough nor how the road crossed the stream and it was hoped that geophysical survey and test pitting could aid understanding of the road's alignment, the character of the remains and the extent of survival. This will inform future investigations.

A resistivity survey of the area was undertaken by the Friends in 2016 and reported by Barrett and Redhead (2016). The results are shown below, overlaid onto the aerial photograph. The survey demonstrated that the line of the Roman road continued in a straight line towards the clough but appeared to be of variable survival with fluctuating widths. This suggested that parts of the road may have been cut through by later activity or removed as an easy source of stone for use elsewhere.



Plot of the resistivity survey over the aerial photograph. The Roman road shows as a black (high resistance) linear spread running from the south-west to north-east on the left of the plot. It was decided to evaluate the remains of the Roman road across the very north-eastern edge of the resistivity survey where the road appears to be less pronounced. A line of 5 test pits, measuring 1 metre square each and spaced at 5 metre intervals, was laid out at right angles to the Roman road line, as shown below, with a 6th test pit added during the evaluation.





Detail of test pit locations and numbers.

The test pits were opened up, recorded and backfilled in one day on 13th May 2016. The Friend's Frobisher resistivity metre had been upgraded so the opportunity was taken to carry out a 20 metre square survey over part of the same area examined in 2016. This replicated and confirmed the previous results.



Resistivity survey and test pitting in progress on 13th May 2017. There is a considerable drop from the bank overlooking Water's Clough (indicated by rush vegetation on the right of the picture). A bridge would have been needed to carry the Roman road over this natural obstacle.

Results of test pitting



The line of test pits during excavation. Test Pit 5 is in the foreground.

Test Pit 1

This was located to the west of the Roman road alignment on a downslope towards the clough bank. 15 cm topsoil overlay 10cm depth of brown soil, which came off on to an 11 cm deep light orange-brown silty clay loam with a few small to medium stones. Under this was a layer of white clay containing patches of charcoal and some possible stake holes. There was no discernible pattern for the latter within the confines of the test pit. It is not possible to date the stake holes nor to ascribe a function; however, in the sides of the test pits they appear to start within the brown plough soil horizon indicating a post-Roman origin. The white clay is natural and there was no evidence for agger make-up material at this point. Finds were 19th century or 20th century in date, comprising several fragments of brick, two sherds of black glazed earthenware and one sherd white glaze.



Test Pit 2

This was positioned on western side of the road. 17 cm depth of topsoil lay over a deposit of small to large grit stones in a brown silty clay loam soil. This was cleaned but not excavated. It would appear to be the remains of the foundation make-up of the Roman road, having some of the characteristic flat stones which appear to have been disturbed probably through plough damage.



Test Pit 3

Topsoil of 20 cm deep overlay 7 cm depth of brown soil, which in turn overlay 10 cm of silty grey clay loam. Under this was 5 cm depth layer of remarkably clean white clay. A sondage through this revealed mottled yellow and white clay. This is natural and the same layer as encountered in Test Pit 1. The silty clay loam deposit contained only a few stones and may be part of the make-up for the agger, albeit very truncated.



Test Pit 4

15 cm of topsoil was removed to reveal the beginnings of the white clay layer seen in Test Pits 1 and 3. The test pit was then discontinued as this appeared to be natural. Probes were inserted to test for any Roman road construction at a lower depth. This was not apparent and it is clear that only natural deposits are evident here at a shallow depth.



Test Pit 5

This test pit was beyond the east side of the projected Roman road route. Under 15 cm of dark grey topsoil was a 22 cm deep deposit of light cream and grey clay or yellow and white mottled clay, representing natural. Once this lower deposit was established as natural the excavation stopped.



Test Pit 6

A final test pit was excavated 2 metres to the north-west of Test Pit 3 to attempt to pick up the edge of the Roman road foundation material identified in Test Pit 2. There was 20 cm of topsoil, then 11 cm brown soil before a stony deposit of mid-brown silty clay loam with a mix of small to medium stones was encountered. This was part-excavated to determine its depth and character. It was found to be quite shallow, but its lower stones were set into a yellow clay on the north-western side of the test pit whereas the south-eastern side was the white clay seen in Test Pits 1, 3, 4 and 5. It looks as though we are seeing the vestiges of the foundation material for the Roman road and probably its edge, but with no evidence for a kerb or roadside ditch.



Conclusion

The line of test pits established that the Roman road is present at this point as we reach Water's Clough, but the remains are badly degraded with only the bottom foundation material surviving as quite a shallow deposit. The road appears to be laid on to a prepared, levelled natural clay bed with no evidence for road-side ditches within the confines of the test pits nor of a buried ground surface, although of course we have only sampled a small part of the road. The remains are in stark contrast to those recorded by the Saddleworth Historical Society in the 1970s during their excavation of the Roman road. Here there was an agger measuring 18 metres with a centrally placed Roman road foundation up to 0.5 metres deep and 7 metres wide (Haigh 1982, page 29).

So why such a difference at the site investigated recently beside Water's Clough? Firstly, the road is on better-drained ground compared with the wetter valley floor at the Causeway Sett site so a raised causeway (agger) is not necessary. Also, the road would have been approaching a bridge crossing so would perhaps have been narrowing at this point. The other factor behind why such poor remains of the road survived here could be that the road were recycled for the adjacent medieval grange building that has recently been discovered by the Friend's investigations. Once the bridge had gone out of use, the adjacent section of Roman road would have been redundant and would have been a rich source of readily

available stone for buildings, roads, and field boundaries – not just for the grange but later structures as well. The Roman road further down the valley may have continued to be an important access to fields as it was on a raised causeway across boggy ground so was utilised for a much longer time. Furthermore, the better drained field beside Water's Clough was probably ploughed at various times, and this activity has also denuded the Roman road foundations.

There is further work to do on the Roman road near Water's Clough. The question of how the Romans crossed the challenging topography of the clough should be investigated, together with the relationship of the medieval grange building to the earlier road. The test pitting of 13th May has been a very useful start to the process of understanding the character and level of survival of the Roman road in this area.

Acknowledgements

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Sources

Barrett, P and Redhead, N 2016 'Archaeological evaluation of land beside Water's Clough, Castleshaw

Haigh, D (ed) 1982 'Saddleworth Seven One Two'