

Test Pitting of possible Roman bath house site near Castleshaw Roman Fort Saddleworth

6th November 2012



Volunteers from the Friends of Castleshaw Roman Forts excavating test pits

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Background

This report details the results of a test pitting exercise to establish the date, character and relative significance of a square shaped, shallow depression adjacent to the north-west corner of Castleshaw Roman Fort Defences, near Delph, Saddleworth, located at SD 9976 0971.

The test pitting was carried out as a short evaluation exercise to determine the presence or absence of Roman features and deposits both within the depression and on the site of the low banks adjacent to it. The depression shows on all aerial photographs but is not present on the historic mapping sequence. The Greater Manchester Historic Environment Record has an entry for the site, No. 10283, which suggests this is a quarry site. This interpretation derives from the work of GMAU and UMAU in 1996 as part of their survey for North West Water Landholdings. This report can be accessed as a pdf on the Friends of Castleshaw Roman Forts website: www.castleshawarchaeology.co.uk.



This aerial view shows the location of the depression in relation to the Roman Fort and Fortlet, looking north-east.

The location of the bath house is not yet known, yet there would certainly have been one at the site. Bath houses have been discovered at neighbouring fort sites. That at Manchester in Castlefield was noted by the antiquarian Whittaker in the 18th century shortly before it was destroyed for the Bridgewater Canal basin works. At Slack, near Huddersfield, the bath house was recorded in the first half of the 19th century; whilst at Melandra, Glossop, Dr Wild undertook excavations of part of the bath house complex in the 1970s and 80s. The location of the latter two bath houses suggested that the depression at Castleshaw could be a favourable site and was worth

investigating even though the HER entry suggested a more recent origin for the feature.

Methodology

Five one metre square test pits were excavated, one located near the centre of the depression, one towards the north side, one towards the eastern edge, and two were sited on slight mounds immediately to the south and west of the depression. The locations of these can be seen mapped on the aerial photograph below. Layers were excavated stratigraphically and recorded by photographs and a written description. The exercise took place on the morning of 6th November 2012 in wet conditions.



Aerial view showing location of Test Pits in relation to the square depression and the fort's defences



The digging team from the Friends of Castleshaw Roman Forts

Description of Results

Test Pit 1

Located on the south side of the depression on what appears to be a low bank. Topsoil came off onto a rubble deposit of angular gritstones in a light yellow sandy clay. This was found to be 20cm deep and overlying a brown silty loam soil with some black loam lenses. This was 20-25cm deep onto natural orange weathered gritstone similar to that encountered in TP 3. The rubble deposit could be upcast from the adjacent negative feature suggested by TPs 4 and 5. Occasional finds of 19th century pottery.



Tia and Steve excavating Test Pit 1



TP 1 looking east, showing the top of the rubble deposit



Natural orange, weathered gritstone in TP 1

Test Pit 2

This was located in an area of thistles in the middle of the slight depression evident on aerial photographs and on the ground. Removal of shallow turf and topsoil revealed compact, mixed orange and brown clay soil of 10-15cm depth. There were a few bits of 19th century pottery and one small, flat piece of glass which may be Roman due to its colour but is too small to give any certainty. Underneath this was a compact yellow clay matrix containing frequent angular gritstones. This looked like natural but when a sondage was excavated in one corner of the test pit it was found to be only c 10cm deep peeling off onto a much smoother, almost stone free layer of yellow clay which had a linear band of grey silt. This may be a negative feature. There were no finds to give an indication of dating and the excavation did not proceed further.



Sonia excavating TP 2, looking east showing top of yellow clay and gritstone layer



Sondage in south-east corner of TP 2 showing the possible linear feature filled with grey silt

Test Pit 3

Under c 15cm of topsoil was a layer of grey-brown silty clay loam with patches of black loam, yellow clay and in the south-west corner a deposit of gritstone rubble (possibly a continuation of that seen in TP 1). This mixed layer was 10cm deep and came off onto a mid-orange weathered sand (gritstone derived) which was interpreted as natural. To make sure, this was excavated and at a further 15cm depth a different layer was evident comprising mid- to light yellow sandy clay with frequent gritstones of varying sizes. This in turn was felt to be natural.



TP 3 looking east showing grey-brown silty clay layer



Jayne excavating Test Pit 3 showing the top of the orange sandy layer



TP 3 showing clay and stone deposit underlying the weathered orange gritstone sandy layer

Test Pit 4

This was found to contain soft, loose humic soil containing a number of iron pieces (such as nails and barbed wire), animal bone, and 19th/20th century pottery. A sondage was excavated in the north-east corner of the test pit and this deposit was found to be going down to 60cms at which point it was no longer possible to excavate further. A photographic scale was pushed into the deposit and a hard surface was encountered at 1 metre beneath turf level. This soft deposit appears to be infilling a deep negative feature.



Lorraine excavating Test Pit 4, showing cow femur being exposed



TP 4 looking west showing a cow femur within the soft dark grey humic soil deposit

Test Pit 5

Located at the eastern edge of the depression feature. Under the shallow topsoil was c 40cm of soft humic dark grey fill, overlying a c 30cm deep deposit of clinker and black soil. Both layers contained glassware fragments and some complete bottles, including an HP bottle and Bovril bottle. There were also 19th and 20th century pottery fragments. A sondage was dug in south-east corner of the test pit; at 75cm beneath turf level the clinker deposit was still not bottomed and the test pit was backfilled.



Rob and Morgana showing one of the bottles excavated from TP5.



TP 5 showing sondage through soft humic dark grey fill.

Discussion

The test pitting exercise has, within a day, investigated and shed considerable light on the nature of the depression. It is clear that the fill is not Roman and is likely to be 20th century in origin. There appears to have been a hollow which has been filled in with organic soil and domestic waste. The hollow may have been a small quarry for gritstone, with some upcast of quarry spoil being evident in Test Pits 1 and 2. It was not possible, within the confines of the poor weather and given the considerable depth, to reveal the base of the depression.

No finds or features could definitely be assigned to the Roman period so it is concluded that the bath house must be located elsewhere and that the Historic Environment Record is correct in its interpretation.

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