

# RENEWED INTEREST IN THE CASTLESHAW ROMAN FORTS

**Norman Redhead<sup>1</sup>**

## Introduction

There have been no archaeological investigations at Castleshaw Roman Forts since the mid-1990s when the Saddleworth Historical Bulletin reported on the work of Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit (GMAU) in discovering the remains of extra-mural settlement beside the south gate of the Roman fortlet. But in the last two years interest has been rekindled. This article will describe recent initiatives and research and look at the future potential for further archaeological excavations at this fascinating Roman site, which is surely the jewel in the crown of Saddleworth's marvellous heritage.



Aerial View of the Castleshaw Roman Forts (GMAU Archive)

## GMAU

However, we start first of all with some sad news. At the end of March, the University of Manchester closed the Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit. The Unit was based at the University for 32 years. It was responsible for the major excavation and restoration project at Castleshaw Roman Fortlet from 1984-9, and carried out research investigations on the Roman extra-mural settlement in Daycroft Field as well as Medieval iron smelting above Castleshaw Upper Reservoir in the early 1990s.

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<sup>1</sup> Heritage Management Director (Archaeology), Greater Manchester Archaeological Advisory Service, University of Salford.

GMAU published a number of articles on the archaeology of the Castleshaw Valley as well as producing a monograph on the Roman Fortlet excavation.<sup>2</sup> In the mid- 1990s, GMAU split into two. A separate field unit (the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit - UMAU) was created to undertake commissioned work including commercial archaeology, research and community projects. UMAU was closed down in summer 2009. Meanwhile, GMAU focused on maintaining the Historic Environment Record on behalf of the people of Greater Manchester and its ten planning authorities. It also provided archaeological advice, particularly on planning applications, but also on archaeology policy, managing and presenting archaeological and historical sites, and engaging communities and schools with their local heritage. GMAU's last act was to complete the four year long Greater Manchester Historic Landscape Characterisation Project, which mapped and described changes to the landscape of Greater Manchester over the last 200 years, and culminated in a popular publication 'Slices through Time'.<sup>3</sup>

In 2009 several former UMAU staff, under the Directorship of Dr Michael Nevell, set up a new but smaller field archaeology research unit team called the Centre for Applied Archaeology (CfAA) at the University of Salford. In April of this year, a new archaeology advisory service to AGMA was also established at the University of Salford - this being the Greater Manchester Archaeological Advisory Service, headed up by Norman Redhead, formerly Director of GMAU. Over the last three years funding difficulties have had a considerable impact on established archaeological organisations in Greater Manchester and elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> but I am pleased to report that Salford University and AGMA are committed to supporting the archaeological advisory service for the next few years.<sup>5</sup>

## **Background to the Roman Forts**

Turning to Castleshaw Roman Forts, it is useful to set out the chronology of the site before continuing with a description of recent initiatives. The first military presence was established by Agricola in AD 79 in the form of a turf and timber Fort, of 1.2 hectares, housing an auxiliary cohort of infantry guarding the main trans-Pennine highway which linked the legionary Fortresses of Chester and York. This Fort was abandoned in the mid - AD 90s but the site was re-occupied about ten years later by a small Fortlet, 1950 sq. m. in size, which in turn was abandoned in the mid - AD 120s when Hadrian's Wall was established. The Fortlet was built over the top of the earlier Fort but was only a third of its size. It was unusual in layout in that it was not like most Fortlets which tend to just house barrack blocks. Castleshaw had only one barrack of six rooms which would have held less than 50 men, yet there was an over- sized granary which would have fitted well in a standard Fort. By AD 120 the

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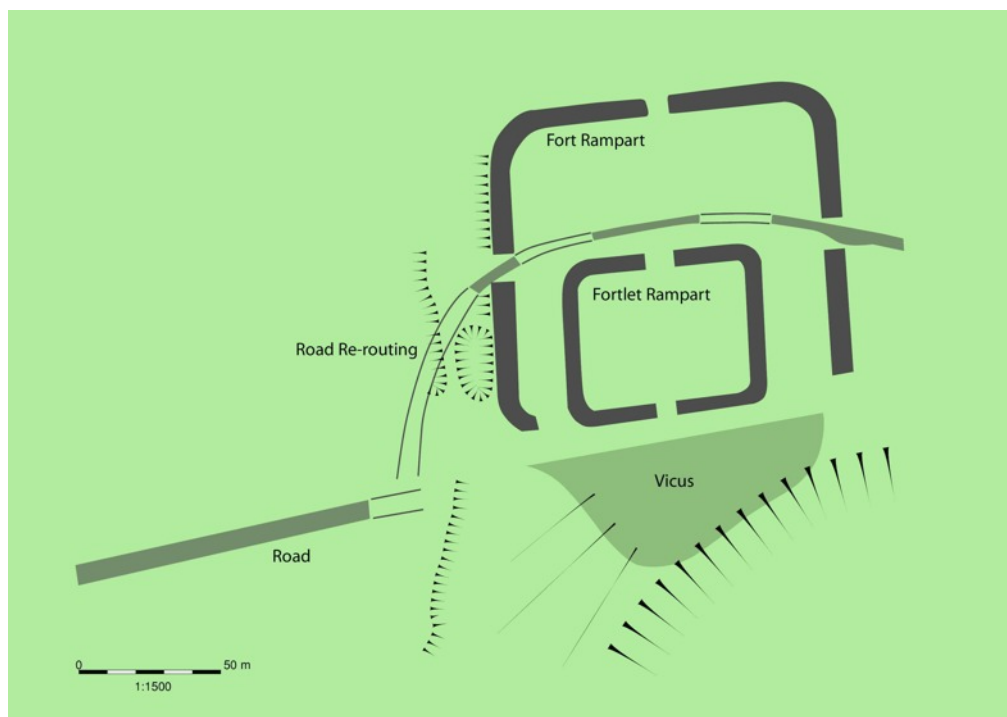
<sup>2</sup> Walker J., (Ed), *Castleshaw: The Archaeology of a Roman Fortlet*, Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit Monograph, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell L & Redhead N (Eds), *Slices Through Time: Greater Manchester's Historic Character Revealed*, Greater Manchester's Past Revealed Issue No. 5, Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit (2012), available as a pdf at [http://www.agma.gov.uk/cms\\_media/files/gm\\_historic\\_landscape\\_project.pdf](http://www.agma.gov.uk/cms_media/files/gm_historic_landscape_project.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Redhead N., *The State of Local Government Archaeology*, Current Archaeology, Issue 267. June 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Details of GMAAS and CfAA can be found at: <http://www.salford.ac.uk/built-environment/research/applied-archaeology/greater-manchester-archaeological-advisory-service>.

granary had been increased in size by about a third and a civilian settlement (or *vicus*) was established outside the south gate. This appears to coincide with the main road being diverted round the north side of the Fortlet, angling through the former Fort's west and east gates. We believe the Fortlet had two possible functions. Firstly, it could have been the nerve centre of a standard cohort, with all the buildings you might expect in the central range of a Fort such as granary, headquarters, commander's house, and workshop, but with most of the troops outstationed in the surrounding hills. Secondly, it might have acted as a supply and control centre, run by an Imperial administrator (*beneficiarius*), and used as a stopping off point for messengers and officers crossing the Pennines as well as being a store for food taxes taken from local people. GMAU's excavation found four phases of timber buildings, two for the Fort underlying two for the Fortlet. The timber buildings would have had a relatively short life span.



Plan of the Castleshaw Roman Forts (GMAU Archive)

Archaeologists undertook excavations at the site on several occasions through the 20th century. Wrigley and Buckley (1897-8)<sup>6</sup>, Bruton (1907-8)<sup>7</sup>, Rosser (1957-61)<sup>8</sup>, and Thompson (1963-4)<sup>9</sup> have left their mark on the site. In particular the early 20th century explorations had resulted in unsightly spoil heaps that masked the original remains of the Fortlet. The 1984-9 project focused on the Fortlet because the remains were so unintelligible to visitors; it was also a manageable size for the project to take

<sup>6</sup> Wrigley A., *The first excavations of the Roman Camp at Castleshaw*, Songs of a Moorland Parish with Prose sketches, 1912, pp. 298-314.

<sup>7</sup> Bruton F.A., *Excavation of the Roman Forts at Castleshaw*, *Second Interim Report*, 1911.

<sup>8</sup> Petch J.A., *Castleshaw 1957-61*, *Lancs. & Chesh. Antiq. Soc.*, Vol. 71, 1961, pp. 163-5.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, F H, *The Roman Fort at Castleshaw, Yorkshire: Excavations 1957-64*, *Trans. Lancs. & Chesh. Antiq. Soc.*, Vol. 77, 1974, pp. 1-13.



on. GMAU's work was supported by a team from Oldham MBC, who ran the landscaping project. A Working Party, Chaired by Prof Barri Jones, steered the project through to successful completion. Dave Start directed the project on behalf of GMAU and was supported by archaeological supervisors, with the work being undertaken by Community Programme trainees and volunteers.

1989 saw the completion of the Castleshaw Roman Fortlet excavation and landscaping project. Large, open area excavations and targeted trenching through the defences allowed an interpretation of the layout of the fortlet. This informed the restoration of the site so that, in 1989, a visitor could observe a 1.5 metre high earthen rampart representing how the defences may have looked when first discovered by Percival in 1752,<sup>10</sup> before ploughing reduced the ramparts. The archaeology inside the Fortlet was covered with 30 cm. of top soil to protect it and then the principal building lines were laid out as turf mounds. They included a granary, headquarters, commander's house, workshop, barrack block and oven. Four interpretation boards were set up; two on a stone plinth at the south-west corner of the Fort and two on a stone plinth on the site of the Fortlet north gate. Finally, there was a major exhibition at the end of the project at Saddleworth Museum, attended by over 11,000 people.



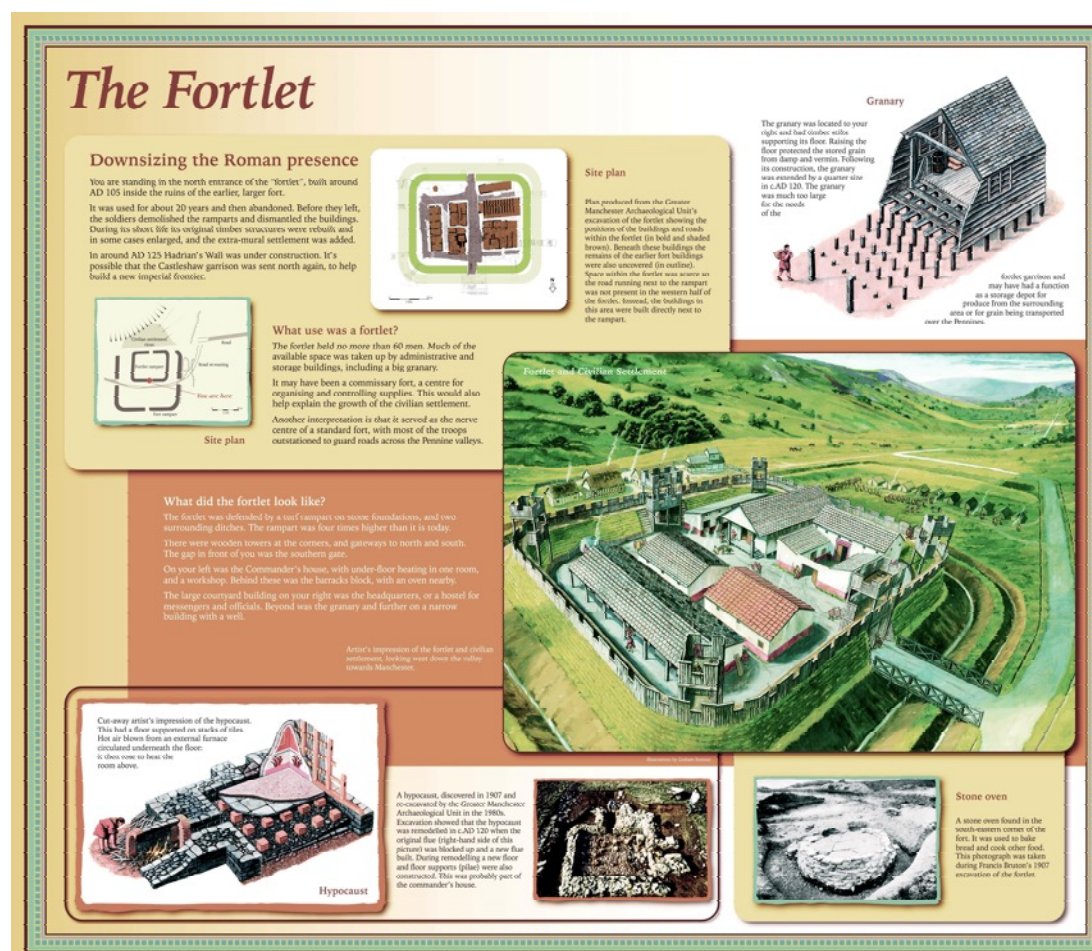
One of the worn out Interpretation Boards (GMAU Archive)

<sup>10</sup> Percival, T, *Observations on the Roman colonies and stations in Cheshire and Lancashire*, Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society, Vol. 47, (1751-2), pp. 216-30.

## Recent Initiatives

By 2010 the boards were starting to wear out; they had not suffered vandalism but exposure to extreme weather had taken its toll so that the text was becoming unreadable.

Concern at the condition of the boards, and that of the Fort and Fortlet site generally, led to the Castleshaw Working Party being re-formed in 2010 to tackle the gradual deterioration of the monument. Members include representatives of Oldham Council, Saddleworth Historical Society, Saddleworth Archaeological Trust, English Heritage, the landowner (United Utilities), the Castleshaw Education Centre, Saddleworth Museum, and the County Archaeologist. The first task was to replace the four information boards and funding for this was made available from United Utilities and the Pennine Prospects Watershed Landscape Project. The opportunity was taken to rewrite the boards, bringing them up to date with archaeological field work carried out



One of the New Interpretation Boards (Castleshaw Working Party)

in 1994-6 when a Roman settlement was discovered outside the south gate of the fort. Additionally, the artist Graham Sumner was commissioned to produce new paintings of how the Fort and Fortlet may have looked. The boards have been redesigned and the plinths they sit on have been altered to make them easier to read. Please do visit

the site to see the new boards which were formally opened by the Mayor of Oldham in May 2012.

The next task for the Working Party was to facilitate the production of a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) for the site.<sup>11</sup> This was generously funded by English Heritage, with support from Oldham Council, Saddleworth Parish Council and the Watershed Landscape Project. The CMP, which was undertaken by Northern Archaeological Associates, looked at the history of archaeological investigations, the nature of the archives and where they are held, how the archaeology has informed our understanding of the Roman occupation, and what research questions could be addressed in the future. It has also described how the site is used and by whom, how people feel about it, and how the forts might be better presented and managed in the future. Interestingly, many people enjoy the special tranquillity of the place and wish for this to be maintained.

One of the key findings was that there should be a project on the earlier Agricola Fort site similar to the one undertaken on the Fortlet by GMAU in the 1980s. The Fortlet is well presented, with a rampart about 1.5 m. high and internal building arrangements marked by grass mounds. However, the larger fort is covered with depressions, spoil mounds and long grasses and rushes, so that it is difficult to interpret and provides considerable trip hazards. A programme of new investigation and presentation of the fort remains is called for.

Armed with a range of action plans and recommendations set out in the Conservation Management Plan, it is now possible to set about re-engaging with this wonderful archaeological site. There are a whole host of research questions to stimulate this. Some of the key themes are:

- How little we understand the layout of the original Roman Fort, built for Agricola's campaign against the Brigantes in AD79.
- The 1980s dig showed tantalising evidence of an earlier Fort predating the Agricola one – can we find out more about this?
- The settlement outside the south gate dated to the Fortlet phase at around AD120 – did it extend to the north and east of the Fortlet and is there any evidence for settlement in the fort phase?
- There should be a bath house, parade ground and cemetery for the fort, but where are they?
- We do not fully understand the road layout or defences for the Fort, nor indeed the layout and function of internal buildings.
- Both Bruton and Thompson noted that they could not find a ditch on the eastern side of the Fort, even though this is the flattest and most vulnerable side of the defences. Did they just miss the archaeological evidence or is there another reason such as the presence of a military annex?

As well as the Roman period, further investigations could also be targeted to shed more light on the medieval and post-medieval development of Lower Castleshaw hamlet, which lies adjacent to the Forts site. Today there are only a handful of buildings but in the 19th century there were many more. There were weavers cottages, farmsteads, outbuildings, and a school. Historic mapping shows the extent of the settlement and we are lucky enough to have some late 19th century photographs

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<sup>11</sup> The CMP can be found on the website [www.castleshawarchaeology.co.uk](http://www.castleshawarchaeology.co.uk).



(Peter Fox Collection) which show buildings long since disappeared. Some of these date back as far as the 17th century. It will be interesting to investigate the buried remains to examine the form, function and date of some of these buildings, which themselves may overly Roman remains given their close proximity to the Roman Forts.



View of Lower Castleshaw hamlet c. 1890 (Peter Fox Collection)

During the GMAU excavations of the Fortlet it became obvious that there had been considerable Prehistory activity at the site. Over 40 worked flints were found scattered in the (later) Roman deposits; some of these belonged to Mesolithic tools or weapons dating between 10,000 and 6,000 years ago, but there were also Early Bronze Age arrow heads from around 3,500 years before present. In the early 1960s, within the fort, Thompson excavated a pit full of Beaker pottery sherds.<sup>12</sup> These are now in Manchester Museum. They indicate a domestic site of early Bronze Age date. Almost certainly the pit did not exist in isolation; the Romans may have removed most traces of a potential prehistoric settlement here but it will be worth investigating around the pit area to see if we can glean any more evidence for the character of Prehistoric activity here.

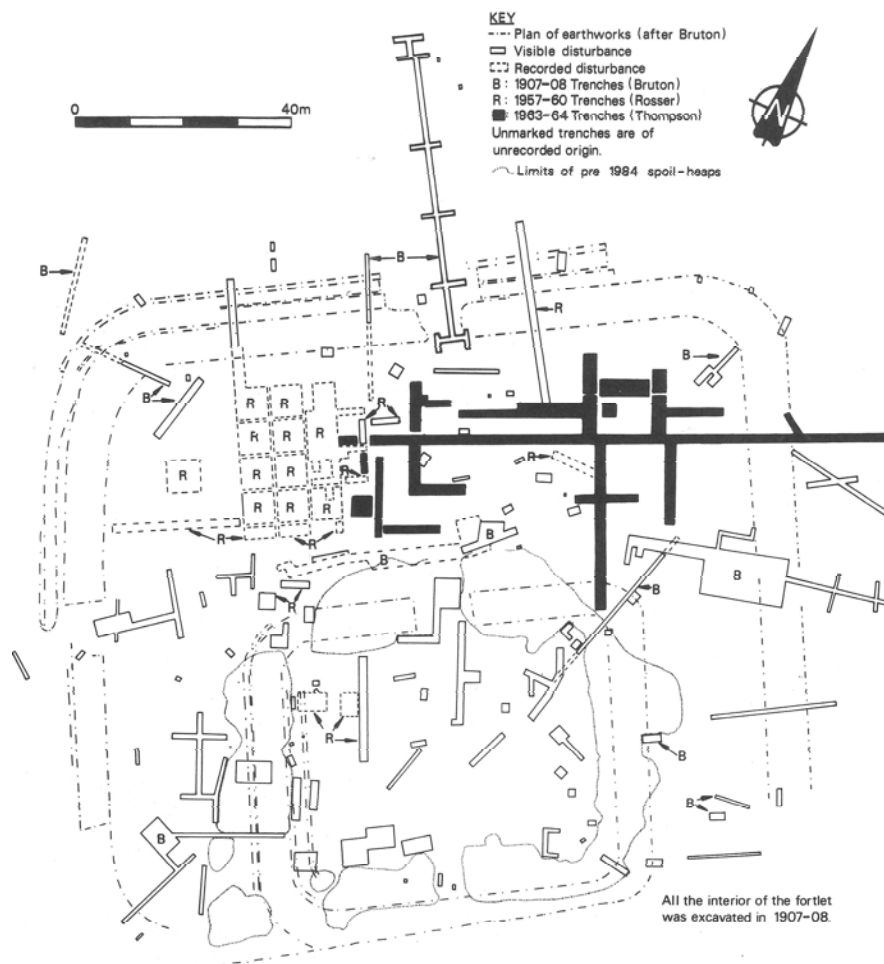
## Excavation Strategy

An essential first stage in taking forward further investigation in and around the Fort is to determine an excavation strategy. There are so many research questions and such a large area to look at that it is important to prioritise and focus on the best places to do archaeology. This will be led by research questions and the desire to better understand the archaeological remains, but also by the need to identify

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<sup>12</sup> Thompson, F H, *The Roman Fort at Castleshaw, Yorkshire: Excavation, 1957-64*, Trans. Lancs. & Chesh. Antiq. Soc., Vol. 77, 1974, p. 3.

appropriate areas where the local community can take part in excavation. Furthermore, much of the site is protected through being a Scheduled Monument and careful justification will need to be given to the Secretary of State and English Heritage for excavation.



Old Excavation Trench Plan (GMAU Archive)

In drawing up a strategy the site falls naturally into two parts: that within the Scheduled area which includes the Fort and its immediate environs, and that outside, principally to the north and east of the Fort site.

Within the Scheduled area it has been possible to identify key features to explore by re-excavating old archaeology trenches. This technique involves emptying out old backfill, cleaning the base and straightening the sides so the sections can be recorded properly. It is an effective way of providing lots of archaeological information, causing minimal damage to the Monument whilst allowing re-interpretation of previous excavations. When GMAU started their project in 1984, one of the first things they did was to map all the visible trenches from previous excavators. As you can see from the illustration these were numerous. Thompson's trenches were well recorded but unfortunately others were not so, including Rosser's extensive excavations for which we have very few records. Even Thompson's recording probably assumed a single phase of Fort. It is possible that by re-recording some of



his trenches we can find new evidence for multi-phasing, including for extra-mural Fortlet activity on the site of the early Fort.

It is proposed to re-excavate the following trenches:

- two Thompson trenches at right angles to each other that bisect the north- east quarter of the Fort and include the eastern defences,
- Thompson's trench in the area of the Bronze Age beaker pit, to look for further Roman remains but also potential underlying prehistoric features,
- an area covering part of the site of Rosser's box style trenches, in the hope that the baulks left between his trenches have survived and will contain features and deposits,
- the sites of the north and east gates which have been extensively excavated in the past but for which we have only sketchy plans (from Bruton's work),
- the line of the Roman road exiting the north gate so that we can understand its composition and direction,
- the loop road exiting the Fort's east gate as shown on Bruton's plan,
- a former excavation trench of unknown origin still visible and cut at right angles across the east rampart and assumed ditch or ditches.

One new trench is suggested within the Scheduled area, this being across the site of a former house and barn lying on the west side of Dirty Lane. This once formed part of Lower Castleshaw hamlet. It is hoped that excavation will reveal foundations and floors relating to the buildings but it may also uncover underlying Roman deposits.

Outside the Fort area, there are several specific and more general areas of archaeological potential. Most of these relate to the line of the Roman road and its borders as it drops down from Millstone Edge to the Roman Forts. Not only do we wish to examine the character and level of survival of the main Roman road but we wish also to look at the strips of land bordering it for evidence of burials, shrines, mausolea, and other structures of Roman origin. The other roads are of interest as well, particularly the loop road and the line of the north gate road. Favourable sites will also be examined for evidence of the bath house. But the intention is to investigate the origins of Lower Castleshaw as well. There are several former farmsteads, outbuildings, cottages and field boundaries that will repay investigation to help us establish a better understanding of the late medieval and early post-medieval evolution and character of the settlement.

## **The Future**

But how do we take the project forward? Obviously one of the key issues will be funding of activities. There is tremendous potential for the project to attract Heritage Lottery Funding, which would enable the local community to participate in excavating, understanding and presenting the site. Several thousand school children already visit the site each year, via the Castleshaw Centre, but it would be fantastic if they could undertake some hands-on archaeology. They are the future protectors of our heritage so it is so important to encourage them to get involved with and appreciate their local heritage at an early age. Archaeology fits so many areas of the school curriculum and above all is a fun way to learn! Funding support will be needed for a small team of archaeologists to train local volunteers in excavation techniques, recording, finds processing and reporting, as well as to oversee education activities. There would be opportunities for scores of volunteers to get involved but there is also a duty to properly record, conserve and report on the archaeology.

Archives from previous excavations are an issue in that they are scattered across several museums (Manchester, Oldham, Saddleworth, and Tolsen). An archives project could look at digitising the archive to provide on-line access to the material. Exhibitions of the finds and history of investigation could be created to tour local museums.

### **The Friends of Castleshaw Roman Forts**

The key is for the people of Saddleworth to get involved; not only to help manage the site and raise funds but also take part in the investigations. A new group called the Friends of Castleshaw Roman Forts has been established to take this on. The objectives of the Friends are:

1. to promote the advancement of education by developing public interest in all aspects of the archaeological and environmental heritage of the Castleshaw Roman Forts,
2. to support the implementation of the Conservation Management Plan for the site,
3. to help to address short term issues relating to preservation and enjoyment of the Castleshaw Roman Forts Scheduled Monument,
4. to support approaches to researching and presenting the archaeology/history of the Castleshaw Valley.

A committee has been formed over the last few months and is busily setting up a Membership Form, organising a guest speaker programme for next year, and looking at ways to engage the local community in the project as well as raising funds for archaeological investigation and management of the site. It is pleasing to note that a website has been established and is already full of information<sup>13</sup>. Several archaeology reports and publications relevant to Castleshaw's archaeology are now available to download or view, as are minutes of the meetings and a programme of events. The committee would welcome anybody who would like to help out in this exciting new project or support the aims of the Friends by becoming a member. A group of Friends volunteers, led by the author, have already started to investigate potential archaeology areas outside the Scheduled Monument. Reports on their work can be seen on the Friends website and will appear in future issues of the Bulletin.

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<sup>13</sup> [www.castleshawarchaeology.co.uk](http://www.castleshawarchaeology.co.uk)