

Castleshaw Roman Fort: Archaeological Evaluation of land north of the fort defences

2017



Friends of Castleshaw Roman Forts volunteers undertaking the evaluation

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Friends of Castleshaw Roman Forts

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Background

As part of the Castleshaw Roman Forts Hinterland Survey, the Friends of Castleshaw Roman Forts (FoCRF) carried out an archaeological evaluation of an area of land north of the defences at Castleshaw Roman Fort, within an area centred on grid reference SD99840973. The land is owned by United Utilities and farmed by David Hirst. This area has received very little previous archaeological attention, a geophysical survey carried out during the 2014 'Rediscovering Roman Castleshaw' project and some trenching by Bruton in 1907 being the only known investigations, although there is evidence for other old, unrecorded trenches.

The project aimed to establish the presence/absence of Roman deposits in a triangular area bounded by Dirty Lane, the defensive ditches on the north side of the fort and the north gate Roman road. This work builds on the previous year's evaluation which focused on the character of the road and possible extra-mural activity suggested by geophysics. The evaluation exercise would inform future research excavation in this area by establishing the level of survival, character, relative significance and potential of archaeological remains. Scheduled Monument Consent was secured to undertake the work.

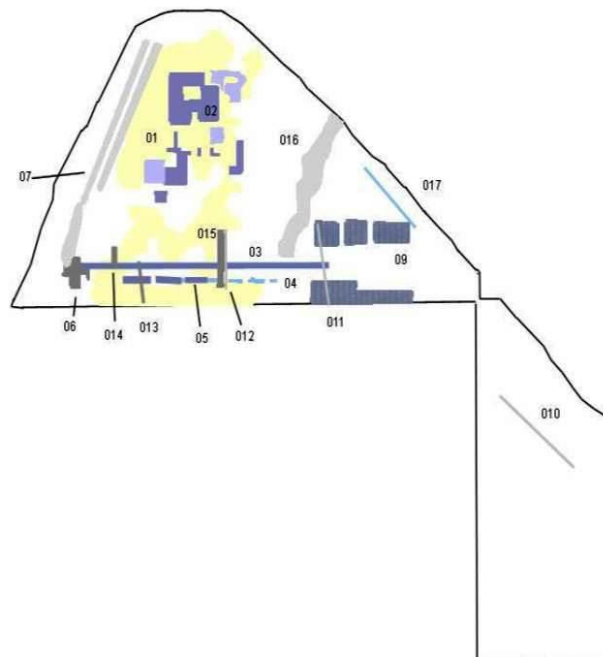
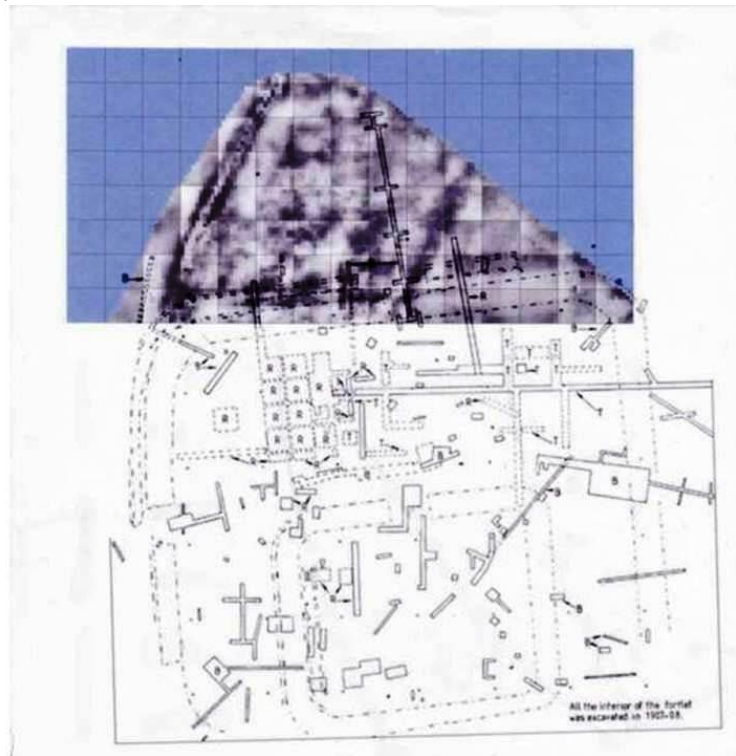


Plan showing approximate location of the investigation area in relation to the fort's northern defences (in darker green), together with the location of the 2016 trenches and test pits

The investigations were undertaken by volunteers of the Friends of Castleshaw Roman Forts and were led and reported on by Norman Redhead.

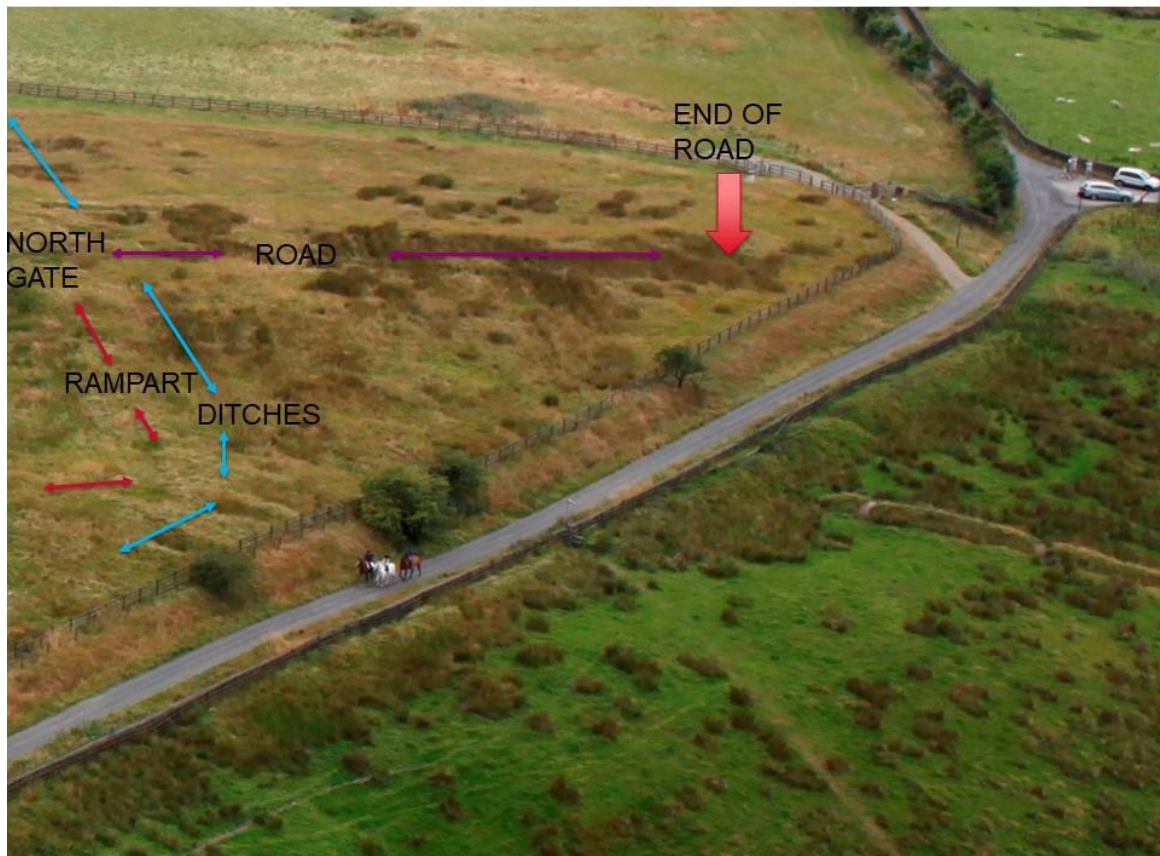
This report can be accessed as a pdf on the Friends of Castleshaw Roman Forts website: www.castleshawarchaeology.co.uk .

In 2014 Tameside Archaeology Society carried out a resistivity survey of the area north of the Roman Fort defences. The two images below show the geophysics results laid over the 1984 Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit survey of former excavation trenches, together with an interpretation plan. Of especial interest for the 2017 investigations, were the presence of a former field boundary (016 on the interpretation plan), the probable outer ditch represented by 09, and the old excavation trench 011.



Plan showing Tameside Archaeology Society's interpretation of the resistivity survey, taken from their geophysics survey and report (TAS 2014).

Evaluation Methodology



Oblique aerial photograph from 2014 showing principal Roman features on north side of fort

The archaeological research strategy for Castleshaw Roman Forts is set out in 'An Excavation Strategy for Castleshaw Roman Forts' (Redhead 2013). Relevant to the 2017 evaluation is the following:

Research Objective 10. Understanding the immediate hinterland. Little work has taken place outside the interior of the fort. The question of a possible 1st century *vicus* remains an important issue for further investigation. Currently there is only evidence of a settlement associated with the 2nd century fortlet and, as yet, no sign of a 1st century precursor. This is quite unusual given that most auxiliary forts did have associated civilian communities, drawn by the attraction of a permanent garrison of troops keen to spend their pay. However, investigations of the surrounding area have so far been limited.

Scheduled Monument Consent was obtained for the evaluation and allowed for:

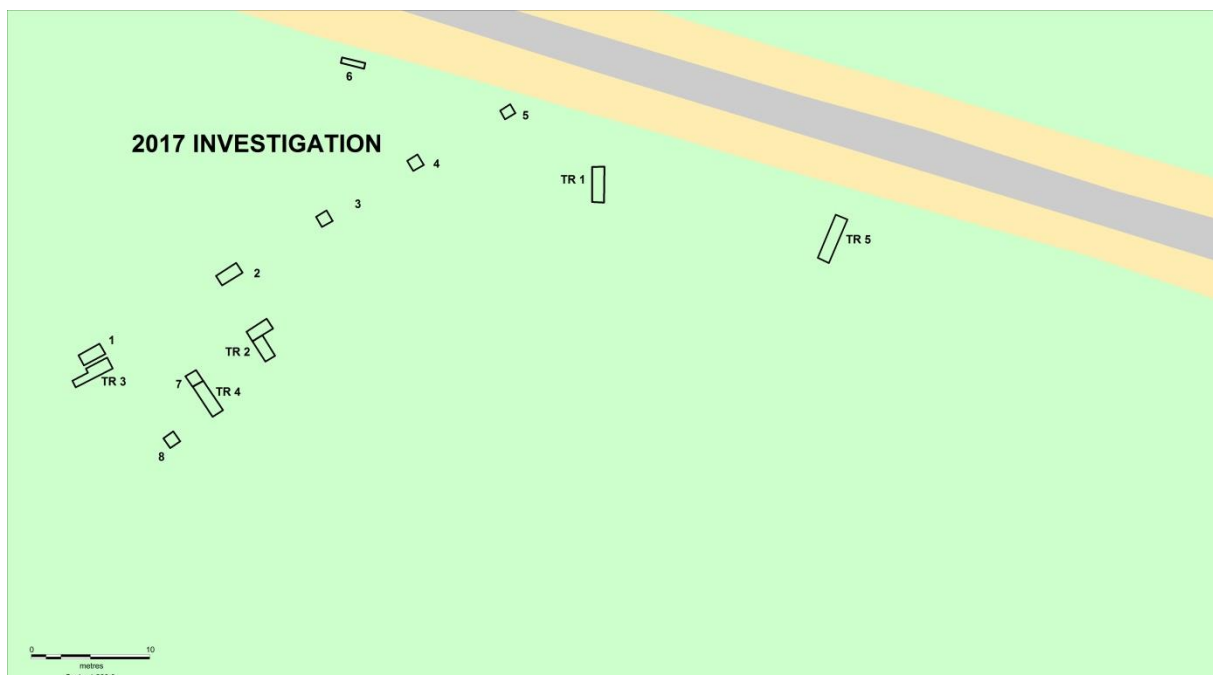
- Archaeological test pitting in the area to the north of the Roman Fort northern defences and bounded on the west by the Roman north road and to the north and east by Dirty Lane. The test pits will be dug at regular intervals to give good coverage across the area to determine the presence or absence of Roman features and deposits.
- Locate and partly re-excavate several old excavation trenches located in or close to the north defences.
- Undertake archaeological trenching across the site of a former field boundary identified in the 2014 geophysical survey.

The investigations were carried out on three days: the 24th June 2017, 9th September 2017 and the 8th October 2017. The 9th September exercise was severely hampered by poor weather and waterlogged ground conditions, whereas the other two days were dry and yielded better results.

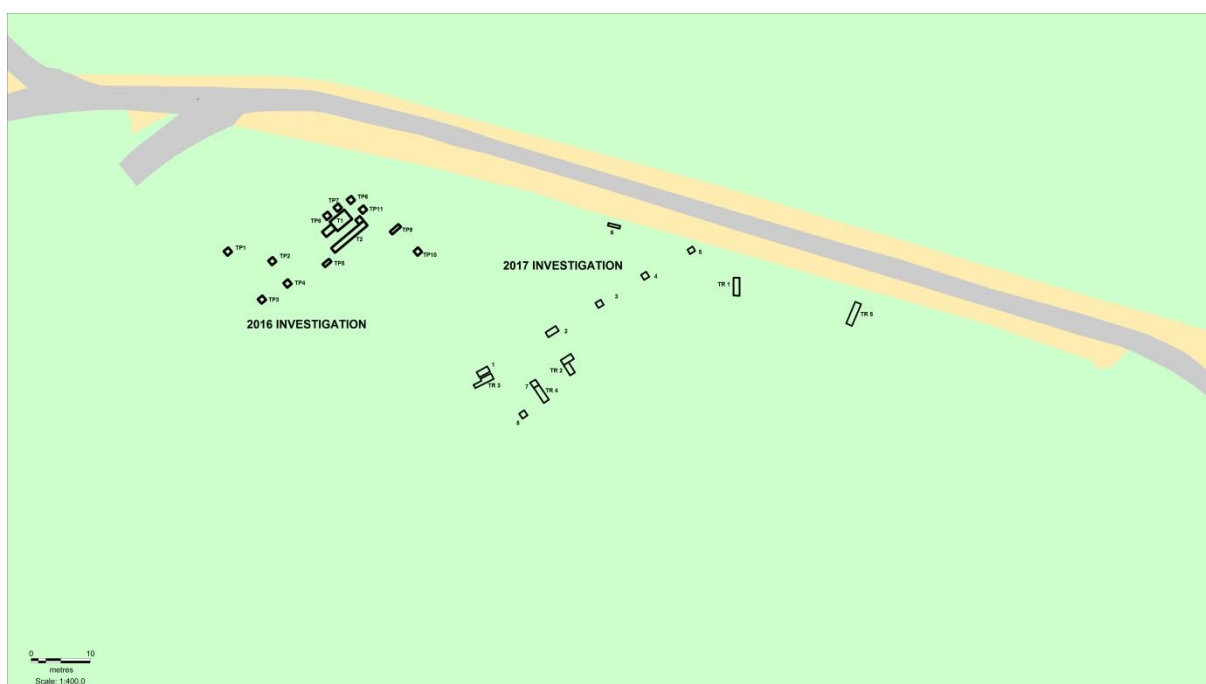
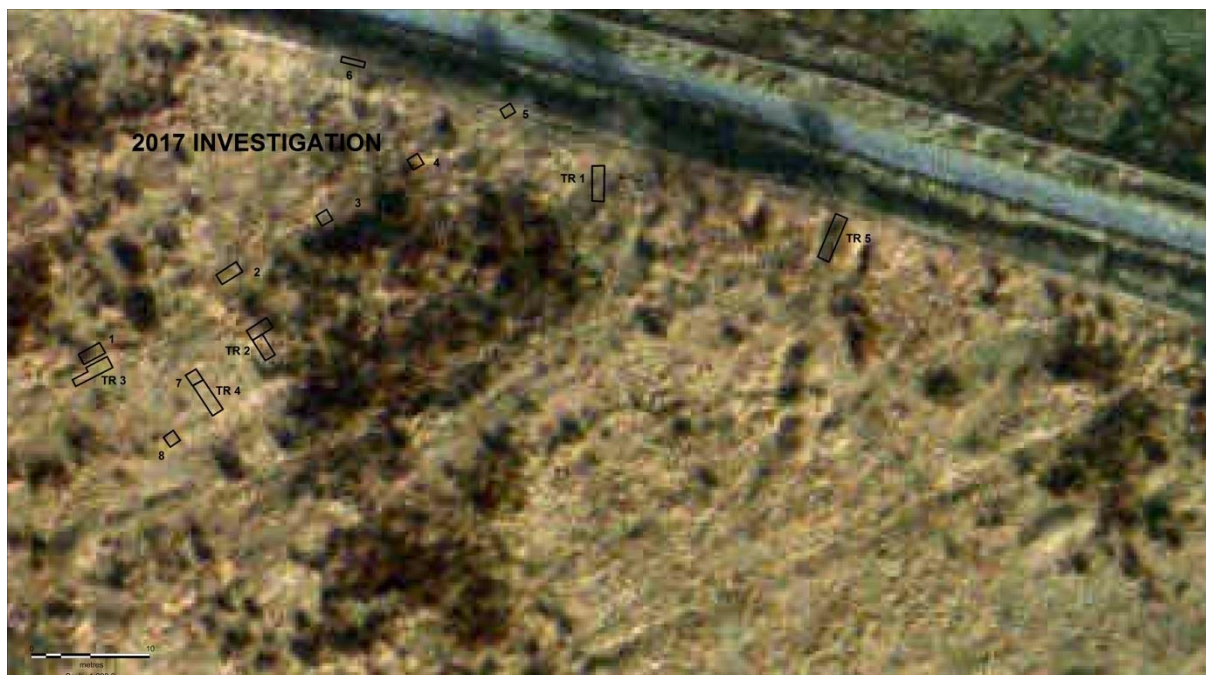
Test pitting consisted of one metre square sample excavations, with several of these expanded to form trench explorations. A written description and photographic record was made of each test pit and its position recorded. The depth of natural and overlying stratigraphy was recorded. Finds were cleaned and described. This report sets out the results of the test pitting and a copy has been lodged with the Greater Manchester Historic Environment Record and put onto the Friends of Castleshaw Roman Forts website. An Oasis record form has also been created.

The investigations were undertaken by a mixture of experienced and inexperienced volunteers drawn from the Friends of Castleshaw Roman Forts, under the directorship of Norman Redhead. A risk assessment was prepared and agreed with the land owner. All test pits and trenches were excavated and backfilled in one day so that no holes were left overnight.

Initially five test pits were dug in a line parallel with but several metres to the north of the outer defensive ditch. One narrow test pit was excavated across the line of the field boundary, and several test pits and trenches examined old excavation trenches and an area of potential Roman activity just to the east of the Roman road.



Plan of the location of test pits (single numbers) and trenches for the 2017 investigations. In the image below they are shown overlain onto the late 1990s Cities Revealed aerial photograph.



Plan showing location of test pits and trenches for 2016 and 2017 in area north of the fort's defences

Results



Excavating the line of five test pits on 24th June 2017

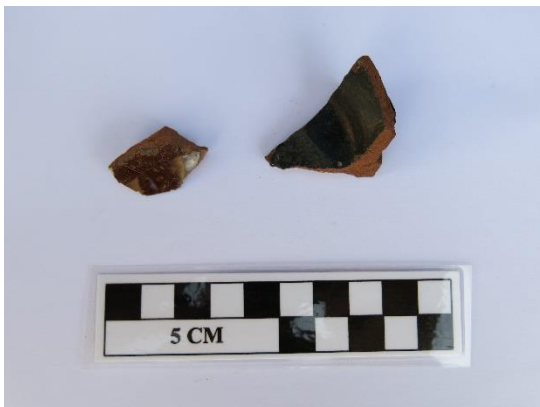
Test Pit 1

The western most test pit was 2 metres by 1 metre. It revealed the edge of an old excavation trench dug at right angles across the road leading from the north gate (seen on right edge of photo below). 12 cm of turf and topsoil were removed to reveal a 10 cm deep layer of mid- to dark grey silty clay loam over up to 15 cm of mid grey-brown silty clay loam. This in turn lay over mottled white and orange silty clay with occasional small sandstones and grey silty clay loam patches with frequent charcoal flecks/pieces. A shallow Roman deposit of burnt material was found overlying natural. This contained a sherd of grey ware and a nail. In the plough soil layer above the Roman deposit was found a fragment of Roman melon bead, a rim sherd from the neck of an orange ware flagon, along with several sherds of post medieval pottery including a nicely decorated body sherd of late 17th/early 18th century trail slipped ware.

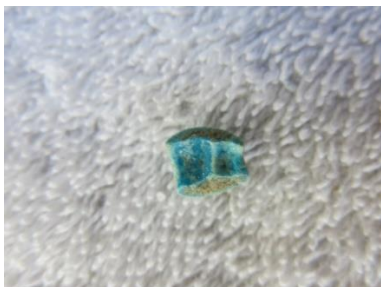
Finds from topsoil comprised one base sherd black glazed earthenware and one body sherd brown glaze, from plough soil came one base and four body sherds black glazed earthenware, two body sherds white glaze, one piece of clear, flat glass, one body sherd of trail slipped ware, one spherical piece of lead, one piece of daub, two nails, one small fragment of possible Roman blue-green glass, one Roman flagon neck sherd. The shallow Roman deposit above natural yielded a melon bead fragment, one nail and one body sherd of grey ware.



TP 1 after removal of topsoil (above) and showing the shall Roman deposit immediately above natural (below)



TP 1 finds. Left: post medieval pottery from topsoil 001. Right: artifacts from plough soil 002 including possible Roman nails, a Roman flagon neck, and a sherd of trail slipped ware



Finds from shallow Roman deposit 003, including a fragment of melon bead, a nail, and a body sherd of grey ware

Test Pit 2

This was 2 metres long by 1 metre wide and was located over the line of an old excavation trench running north from the rampart. This appears to have been dug by Rosser in 1957 but is not reported. The old trench backfill was excavated to reveal a well-cut trench with vertical sides going down into natural clay. It was 1.25 metres wide and about 40 cm deep. Within the back fill, and therefore unstratified, were several Roman finds, including: a rim sherd of mortarium, a base sherd of grey ware, and a piece of daub, probably for a timber building wall. These finds might indicate that there was a building nearby. There appeared to be no evidence of Roman activity in the undisturbed stratigraphy alongside the trench cut.

Finds comprised three body sherds brown glazed ware, one black glazed, one piece of daub, one very worn based sherd of Roman grey ware, on one rim sherd buff coloured Roman mortarium rim, one flat piece of gritstone with curving edge c 1 cm deep and broken on inside of unknown function.





Finds from the old trench backfill in TP2

Test Pit 3

Located in the middle of the transect of five test pits running parallel but outside the fort's outermost northern ditch. This test pits revealed c 10cm of turf and topsoil and 15cm plough soil. Sealed under this were a number of stake holes, cut in to natural, but there was no discernible pattern and it is not known what these were for. The stake holes contained a light to mid-grey silty clay fill, c 5-6 cm diameter, and were mainly angled rather than vertical.

Finds from the topsoil comprised two sherds dark brown glaze ware, one black glazed earthen ware rim sherd, two body sherds of dark glazed earthenware one of which had a bubbled and pitted surface on both sides, one base sherd white glaze, three body sherds of white glaze, one body sherd transfer printed ware, two clay pipe fragments, one piece of burnt bone, one piece of daub and two small, weathered body sherds of possible Roman orange ware. From the plough soil came three sherds black glazed earthenware, one bubbled brown glazed body sherd, one white glazed sherd, one trail slipped body sherd, on clay pipe stem fragment, one iron object heavily concreted and possibly a thick nail.





001



002

Test Pit 4

This test pit was comparatively shallow, with natural being exposed at only 20-25 cm. The reason for this became apparent when parallel linear markings were observed cut into the natural orange clay. These represent plough cuts, this part of the site having been reduced and truncated by deep ploughing.

Finds comprised one small white glazed body sherd from the topsoil, with the rest coming from plough soil and consisting of one base sherd and one body sherd of brown glaze wares, one body sherd of white glaze with interior blue pattern, one clay pipe stem fragment and two decorated clay pipe bowl fragments, one body sherd of black glaze, one flat piece of light green-blue glass and one small body sherd fragment of worn orange ware.





Test Pit 5

This was located close to Dirty Lane at the eastern end of the transect of five test pits. A shallow topsoil of c 10 cm over a similar depth of brown-grey plough soil which gave way to natural subsoil. A sondage in the corner of the test pit confirmed that this was natural and that there was no evidence for Roman activity at this part of the site.

Finds were limited to two body sherds of black glazed earthenware and one body sherd of brown glaze, all from the topsoil.





Rob, Holly and Cheryl start on TP 3 and right, Tom and Alan excavating TP 5



The 9th September evaluation involved two test pits and two trenches but heavy overnight rain made conditions very difficult

Test Pit 6

This was two metres long by 0.5 metres wide, located at right angles across the line of the earth bank field boundary that is shown on the resistivity survey to be running north to south through the investigation area. To the north of Dirty Lane, opposite the test pit, the field boundary is still a prominent earth bank and is likely to be medieval in origin perhaps associated with the Cistercian period of farming. However, in the study area this bank has clearly been flattened by ploughing; but the fact its alignment continues, as shown on the resistivity plot, suggests that at least the basal deposits survive. Unfortunately, the test pit was saturated with water running down the hill after continual overnight rain and it was not possible to proceed beyond de-turfing.



Nora and John contemplate their test pit which can be seen filling with water

Test Pit 7

This one metre square test pit examined a flat area close to the Roman ditch. This area was well drained. 10 cm of topsoil and 10 cm of brown-grey plough soil came off to reveal a shallow deposit, of 5cm, of mixed clay and grey silt with some small to medium grit stones which appeared to be an old mixed, trample layer. Set into this layer was a base sherd of Roman grey ware with a dark buff coloured interior. There was also a small possible, worn body sherd of orange ware, although this could be burnt shale. The presence of the well-sealed base sherd in association with the possible trampled layer suggests the potential for Roman activity in the immediate area. This is reinforced by the presence of a thin layer of mixed light grey silty clay loam with flecks/lumps of charcoal and small patches of orange-red (heated) clay, which lay directly above natural. This was suggestive of a fire related activity.

Finds from the topsoil and plough soil (001/002) comprised a large base sherd, two body sherds, one handle fragment and one rim sherd of dark glazed earthenware, one plain orange body sherd in a hard fabric, three body sherds and two handle fragments of white glazed wares, and one rim sherd of transfer printed ware.



TP 7 showing 'trampled' layer and sondage in corner with on the right a close up of the burnt deposit on top of natural



Finds from TP7 001/002, left, and the Roman pottery base from 003 (the possible trample deposit)

Trench 1

This was located over an unbackfilled old excavation trench, assumed to be dug by Bruton's men to chase the line of the outer defensive ditch as it approaches the north-east corner of the fort defences. Given the flooded nature of the old trench, it was decided to only excavate down to the base of the plough soil layer in a spit alongside the old trench. The trench was 3 metres long by 0.5 metres wide alongside the old trench, widening to a metre wide on the north side beyond the old trench. Trench 1 was only 4 metres from the Dirty Lane.



Trench 1 during excavation

There was a c 15 cm deep deposit of old excavation material sealing the former turf line and topsoil which was about 12 cm deep. Under these was a layer of mid- brown silty clay loam which sealed on the north side of the trench natural mid-orange clay loam and in the rest of the trench a light grey-brown clay loam. This latter deposit is taken to be the upper fill of the Roman ditch, being similar to upper ditch deposits encountered in previous excavations.

Finds from the topsoil and plough soil consisted of four body sherds of black glazed earthenware, two body sherds white glaze ware, one fragment of brick, whilst from immediately beneath 002 came a piece of glass waste of light blue-green colour.



Trench 1 located close to Dirty Lane (just beyond the fence) and, in the right photograph, showing the clear difference between natural orange clay on the left side of the trench and light brown fill of the ditch



Trench 2

This was an 'L' shaped trench designed to explore the old excavation trench revealed by Test Pit 3 but closer to the fort defences. It proved impossible to excavate out the old trench backfill due to water ingress so attention was focused on a strip of ground alongside the trench. Following removal of 12cm topsoil and 15cm brown plough soil it was found that natural yellow clay was evident except in the north-west part of the trench where there was a shallow deposit made up lenses of charcoal, occasional small patches of burnt red clay, small patches of light yellow silty clay and light brown silty clay loam. This deposit contained three pieces of iron smelting waste. One piece was large and consistent with molten slag coming into contact with the ground and cooling there. The pieces were heavy and clearly had a considerable percentage of iron within them. This would be typical of a bloomery

furnace in which over 50% iron is left in the slag. The bubbled and slightly glassy dark grey slag material suggested high quantities of silica, again consistent with bloomery furnace slag. Its association with patches of charcoal is suggestive of waste from a cleared out bloomery, which could be located nearby.

Finds from the topsoil and plough layers comprised: one dark glazed earthen ware handle fragment and one body sherd, one body sherd brown glazed earthen ware, four white glazed wares including a tea cup or bowl base, a plate rim and a container rim, one body sherd transfer printed ware, one small sherd a yellow glaze patterned ware, one small body sherd of feather slip ware and one clay pipe stem fragment. There were no Roman finds from these layers.



Left: finds from the topsoil and plough soil, right: iron smelting slag from the burnt deposit



The 8th October evaluation, with Test Pit 8 to the left, Trench 3 in the background and Trench 4 on the right.

Test Pit 8

Located on line of outside ditch on 'platform' near north road. One metre square test pit. 18 cm deep topsoil then 12 cm deep brown plough soil removed to reveal a stone surface across half of the pit, with thin medium sized stones laid flat. These were set in mid-brown silty clay loam which extended across northern half of pit where there were very few stones. A sondage was excavated in the north-east corner, where natural yellow-orange clay was encountered at 13 cm deep.

Finds comprised from top and plough soils, five body sherds dark glazed earthenware, four body and one rim sherd white glaze, three transfer printed, two brown glaze, two trail slipped wares and four clay pipe stems.





Trench 3

This was located to pick up the edge of the north road and ran towards a low bank next to the platform area noted previously. The trench was about 1.3 m wide and 3 m long, but then extended 1.5 m to the west to pick up the road. Trench 13 lay close to Test Pit 1 dug earlier in the year which had revealed the edge of one of Bruton's lateral trenches across the north road. Evidence for the road was in the form of medium to large gritstones, with one stone being set on edge and possibly representing a kerb. Between the stones was a matrix of grey shale and mid-brown silty clay loam. The road was not as well preserved here as further north towards the terminus (50 metres from the north gate) and may have suffered from plough damage, as several stones lay outside the road edge and could have been dragged there by ploughing, although they could also be interpreted as a surface providing access from the road to a building. Beyond the road, across most of the trench was a mixed deposit comprising mid- to dark grey brown silty clay loam, with several patches of white clay, a number of fragments of burnt (red/orange) daub, and plenty of charcoal flecks. One fragment of melon bead came from this surface, along with a piece of glass and tile. It is felt that this layer could be the site of a Roman building next to the road, but it was not excavated so further investigation would be necessary to confirm this – but it had a different, more complex feel to much of the rest of the examined area north of the Roman defences.

Topsoil finds (001) comprised six body sherds dark glazed earthenware, four of brown glaze including one base, one white glaze and one transfer printed body sherd, one trail slipped body sherd, four non-glazed earthenware body sherds, and three clay pipe stems. From 002 (plough soil) came two rim sheds, one handle fragment and 5 body sherds of dark glazed earthen wares, one dark and one light brown glaze body sherd, one light yellow glaze body, one white glazed body sherd, one fragment of brick and one clay pipe stem. Two sherds of white glaze and one of light brown glazed body sherds, together with a hob nail came from 002 within a westerly extension of the trench. 003 was the mixed deposit forming the top of the Roman stratigraphy. From the surface of this came nine pieces of hob nail, one piece of Roman glass, one piece of daub and a fragment of melon bead. There was also a large fragment of orange-red tile which broke into small pieces when lifted.



Trench 3 in early stages of excavation above, with the stones of the road evident in the trench extension below





Finds from Trench 3: Topsoil 001 (left) and plough soil 002 (right), with material from the top of Roman deposit 003 below, including the melon bead



Trench 4

This was 3 m long and extended south-east from Test Pit 7 towards the outer ditch across an apparent platform. There was 10 cm depth of topsoil over 12 cm of brown plough soil. The trench was found to comprise of two very different layers. In the southern half was a soft mid-brown silty clay loam whilst the northern half had mid-yellow orange clay which was natural subsoil. On the surface of the latter was charcoal flecking and occasional pieces of burnt red daub suggesting some evidence for being contemporary with the Roman fort occupation. This thin layer of burnt material was sealed under a thin deposit of mixed yellow clay similar to that seen in TP7. The brown clay loam was not excavated but the line separating this from the yellow clay ran in a west to east direction and appears to represent the edge of the outer defensive ditch.

The topsoil (001) contained one rim and two body sherds dark glazed earthen ware, two body sherds of brown glaze, six body sherds of white glaze, and one brick fragment. From the plough soil (002) came one rim, one body and one base sherd of dark glazed earthenware, one body sherd of dark brown glaze, three body sherds and one spout white glaze, two brown glaze handle fragments from same vessel, one clay pipe stem and three pieces of burnt daub including one with wood impressions. There were no Roman finds from the top of the burnt layer or the ditch fill although the daub from 002 appears to be Roman and probably displaced by ploughing.



Trench 4 showing exposure of plough soil layer (top left), after removal of this deposit to reveal natural yellow in top half of trench and mid- brown silty clay loam in lower half (top right), whilst below shows the intersection of these two deposits which represents the edge of the (unexcavated) outer Roman ditch.



Finds from Trench 4: 001 above left, 002 above right

Trench 5

This trench was c 4 m long and cut alongside an old excavation trench evidenced by a deep depression – this is thought to have been dug by Bruton in 1907-8. The trench was located outside the north-east corner of the fort rampart and was dug to confirm that the old excavation trench was sunk into the defensive ditch. The section revealed a shallow deposit of old trench spoil which sealed the former turf line. Beneath this was 28 cm deep topsoil (001) and plough soil (002) lying above a light grey-brown silty clay loam, with some small patches of light grey silty clay loam. This material ran for just over 3 metres, with cut lines for the ditch edge showing against natural yellow-orange clay on either side of the trench. On the south side of the trench there were bands of light grey and darker grey silty clay representing layers tipping down as fills within the ditch. The ditch fills were not excavated, but the curving edge clearly indicated the ditch was starting to turn to follow the curve of the rampart corner.

From the topsoil (001) came two body sherds black glazed earthen ware, one shed white glazed, two clay pipe stems, one piece of 'u' shaped iron, and five pieces of green and blue coloured glass waste. The plough soil yielded two body sherds of black glazed earthen ware and one fragment of clay pipe bowl.



The grey-brown fill of the ditch contrasts with the dark yellow-orange natural clay which can be seen on the surface at the two ends of the trench. The scale is one metre. The section shows the line of dark grey line of decayed turf of 1907, sealed by a shall deposit of spoil from the old trench excavation.



Detail of southern half of trench showing the natural clay on right and the edge of the ditch clearly visible where the grey-brown fills are showing. The fort rampart is off to the right of the photograph. In the foreground is the dark turf line of the old excavation trench.



Finds from topsoil 001 and 002 (below)



Conclusion

Of the eight test pits excavated, TP1 and TP7 produced stratified Roman finds associated with deposits that are indicative of Roman activity. TP2 was able to define the character of an old excavation trench, the fill of which contained several sherds of Roman pottery suggesting activity nearby. TP3 had no Roman finds but did reveal a series of stake holes which may be of Roman origin, whereas TP4 and TP5 were negative which suggested there was little or no Roman activity in this part of the site. TP4 was noteworthy for showing evidence for deep post medieval ploughing which had cut into the natural subsoil. TP6 was not completed due to poor ground conditions; it was targeted on a potential medieval field boundary. This is a piece of work that should be undertaken in the future, particularly given recent advances in our understanding of the medieval grange site and associated field systems (see forthcoming report on Waters Clough). TP8 produced no Roman finds but did reveal a stone surface beneath the plough soil. This surface may give rise to the flat area evident in this part of the site and, given the presence of Roman activity from trenches nearby, can confidently be assigned a Roman date.

Five trenches were excavated. Trenches 1 and 5 were targeted on old excavated trenches left as visible depressions. They confirmed that the old excavations had partly revealed the outer defensive ditch as it sweeps round the north-east corner of the fort. The evaluation revealed only the top of the ditch fills, enough to determine the edges of both sides of the ditch which was found to be three metres wide. The evaluation has thus demonstrated the presence of the ditch on the north side of the fort, yet we know from the excavation of 2014 (University of Salford 2014) that the ditch does not continue along the corresponding east side of the fort. It is now possible to identify a wedge-shaped area, between the known ditch

on the north side and the 2014 excavation trench, which should be prioritised for further investigation to determine what happens to the ditch as it curves around the corner of the rampart. The outside edge of the fort ditch was also identified in Trench 4, with the upper fill contrasting with the natural yellow clay beyond the ditch.

Trenches 2 and 4 produced slight evidence for Roman extra-mural activity, in the form of shallow lenses of silt with small patches of burnt clay and charcoal. The iron smelting slag that came from this deposit in Trench 4 is similar to that recovered in the 2016 evaluation of the terminus of the Roman north road. This new evidence supports the theory that parts of the area outside the north defences was used for iron smelting. We know that the Castleshaw Valley had the right resources for iron smelting ie. bands of iron stone and abundant timber for charcoal, as several bloomery furnaces have been found around the top of the Upper Reservoir (Redhead 1996). Given the small percentage of area so far investigated it is perhaps not surprising that furnaces have not yet been found. To date, an resistivity survey has been undertaken in the area north of the fort defences, in difficult conditions with high vegetation growth. It is recommended that a magnetometer survey should be undertaken, when the vegetation has been closely trimmed, to identify magnetic anomalies which might represent a furnace site.

The area examined by Trench 3, and before it TP1, appears to have produced the strongest indicators for the presence of extra mural activity. Located beside the north road this flattish area produced Roman artifacts sealed in the top of deposits under the plough soil horizon, including melon bead fragments, pottery hobnails, glass and pieces of tile, as well as patches of charcoal and burnt clay. The road side location, flatness of this area, concentration of Roman finds, together with the presence of charcoal and burnt clay, suggest that a building was located at this site or nearby less than 10 metres from the defensive ditch. It must be stressed that in Trench 3 the Roman deposit was not excavated. We have no evidence for structural features such as post holes, floor surfaces or foundation trenches, but it could be that they are sealed under the deposit and could in any case be quite ephemeral remains for a former timber building. This area would certainly repay further investigation.

The evaluation test pits and trenches of 2017 have built on the work of the previous year which was focused on the road terminus area around 50 metres north of the north gate. This year's work has confirmed that there has been extensive ploughing which has caused truncation and removal of Roman deposits. It has also provided evidence for extra-mural activity which was probably thinly spread and focused on iron production and perhaps other industrial activity. Whilst only a small area has been evaluated, there are indications of 'hotspots' of Roman finds and deposits that might indicate the site of former buildings. The line of the outside ditch has been confirmed through re-examining old excavation trenches and through two new trenches. In terms of Research Objective 10 (Redhead 2013), there is now good evidence for extra-mural activity outside the northern defences, but only occurring sporadically and appearing to be more military than civilian in nature. There have not been enough stratified finds to definitively assign this activity to the fort phase (late first century AD) as opposed to the fortlet phase (early second century AD). Further and more extensive investigations would be needed to determine more exact dating and the location of structures.

Acknowledgements

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Tim, Sue, Margaret and Dave excavating Trench 4

Sources

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