

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

July/August 2016



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 SD99810974. 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 investigations.

The project aimed to determine if a rectangular-shaped geophysical anomaly identified in the survey of 2014 relates to a Roman period *vicus* building or from some other cause. The re-excavation of one of the old trenches cut at right angles across the Roman road running from the north gate road would allow an understanding of the character and survival of the road make-up. Other than a basic plan, there are no archaeological records for the old trenches, excavated in 1907. 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.

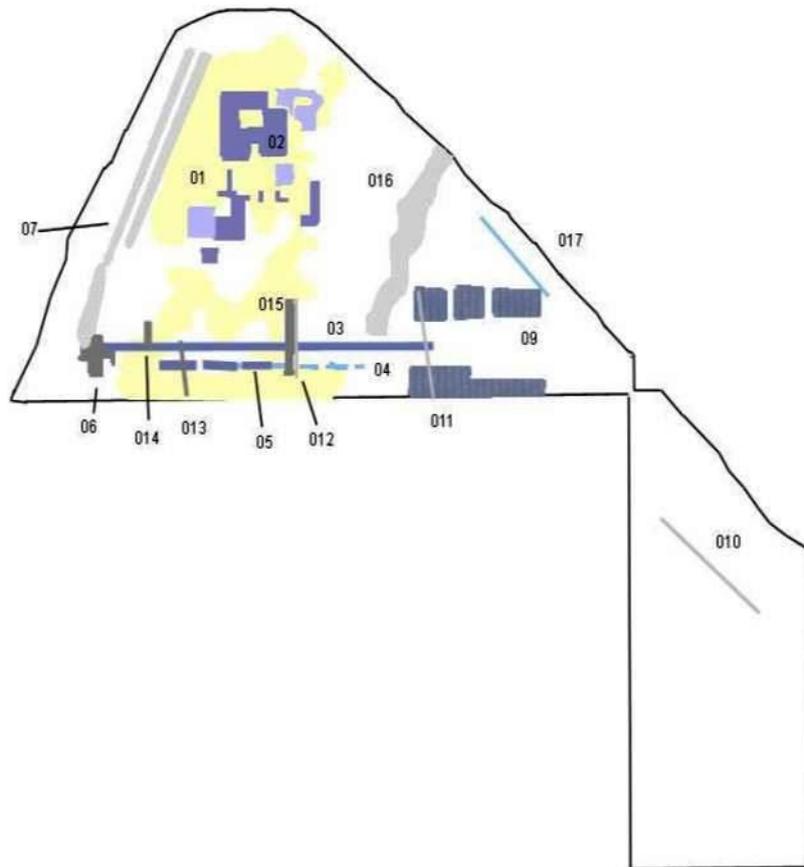


Plan showing approximate location of investigation area in relation to the fort's northern defences

The Investigations 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 .

Archaeological Unit earthwork survey of 1984 which recorded known previous excavation trenches. Bruton's trench following the road out of the north gate can be seen, with several trenches cut at right angles across the road. The Friends evaluation re-examined the area of the two most northerly trenches along with the possible square building indicated below as number 02.



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

Evaluation Methodology

The archaeological interest and resistivity survey is set out in the 2014 geophysics report by Tameside Archaeology Society and under research strategies 9 and 10 in the 'Excavation Strategy' (Redhead 2013), which also contains the excavation methodology.

Research Objective 9. Understanding the road network. It is a priority to understand more about the course of the road Margary 712 where it runs adjacent to the fort. Currently, the course of the road is unknown, given the absence of any evidence of the feature during the Daycroft Field excavations to the south of the fort and fortlet. Targeted excavation to the east and north of the fort might help identify the course of the road. Similarly, the road alignment from the north gate is also not properly understood. A combination of high resolution LiDAR survey and field survey might allow the course of this to be established at least to the point where it disappears beneath the reservoirs. Further investigation is also needed to define the course of the roads leading out of the east and west gates as well, and confirm whether they do join back with the main road.

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 the following:

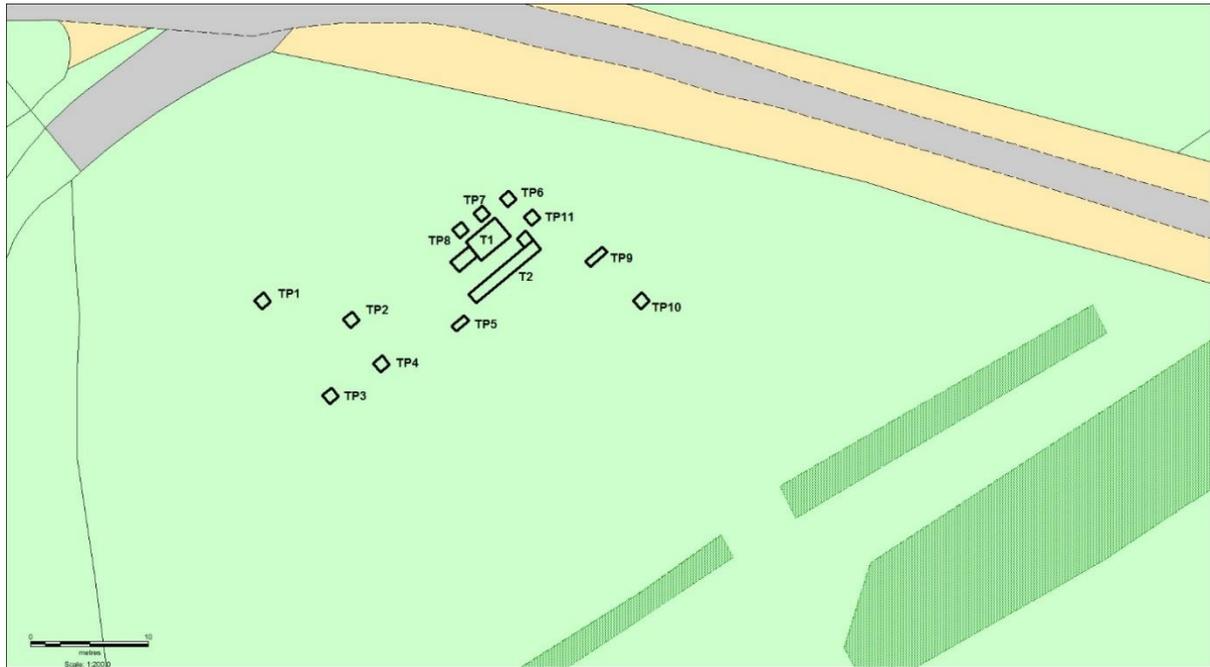
- Investigation of the rectangular-shaped geophysical anomaly identified in the survey of 2014 to determine if it relates to a Roman period *vicus* building or from some other cause.
- The re-excavation of old excavation trenches cutting across the Roman north gate road and test pitting to allow an understanding of the character and survival of road materials and adjacent activity. The old trenches were excavated by Bruton in 1907 but there is little information on what was found.
- This evaluation exercise will inform future research excavation in this area.

The investigations were carried out on two days: the 16th July 2016 and the 30th August 2016.

Test pitting consisted of one metre square sample excavations. 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.

Two trenches were excavated along the lines of old Bruton trenches cut at right angles to the Roman road. These were expanded as necessary to maximise understanding of the Roman and adjacent features. Test pits were also dug next to the road to examine the presence or absence of Roman deposits.



Plan of the location of test pits and the two trenches across the Roman road and, below, overlain on to the late 1990s Cities Revealed aerial photograph.



Results

TEST PIT 1

This was located over the northern edge of the rectangular geophysics anomaly to test for structural remains. The topsoil was 29 cm deep, sealing a shallow brown plough soil of only c 5 cm depth. Under this was an orange silty clay subsoil which appears to be natural. Finds from the topsoil comprised nine body sherds of assorted dark glazed earthenware and two

fine brown glazed body sherds. Finds from the plough soil layer included what was thought to be a Roman period black burnished ware base but on cleaning and closer examination this turned out to be an early post medieval dark glazed earthenware (image below). There were three other, later, body sherds in decorative white glaze, striped mocha ware and dark brown glazed ware. There was no evidence for any Roman deposits or features in this test pit.



TEST PIT 2

Placed to examine the southernmost part western side of the rectangular geophysics anomaly. Topsoil of 13 cm depth revealed a dark grey-brown plough soil that was 23 cm deep and overlay a mottled light orange-yellow-cream silty clay natural subsoil. There was no evidence for any Roman deposits or features in this test pit.



TEST PIT 3

Targeting the southern side of the geophysics anomaly, this test pit had 13 cm depth of top soil, 18 cm depth of dark grey changing to brown plough soil, coming off on to an orange silty clay deposit containing frequent medium sized gritstones. Further excavation revealed medium to large gritstones across the whole test pit, much of it lying at a slight angle and with pieces overlying each other. This looked like it might be structural and would certainly account for the anomaly defined by the resistivity survey. However, further investigation showed that the stones were the weathered, shattered upper part of natural bedrock and

were a natural feature rather than anthropogenic. With depth the stones became a solid piece of bedrock.

From the brown plough soil came one piece of curved molten glass, three sherds white glaze, two sherds black glazed earthenware (one base with interior glazing, one body fragment with ribbed decoration and glazed both sides), one fragment of brown glaze body sherd. From the clay overlying the stones came one body sherd black glazed earthenware, with the glaze on both surfaces and ribbing on the interior. The bubbled and crude nature of the glaze suggests an early post-medieval date.



TEST PIT 4

Located over south-eastern corner of rectangular geophysics anomaly, a few metres east of TP3. Dark humic topsoil was 14 cm deep, overlying 22 cm depth of brown plough soil. Under this was a yellow silty clay containing a moderate number of small to medium gritstones, interpreted as a natural deposit. Finds: one bronze button, one light brown glaze base sherd, 2 dark glaze earthenware sherds (one base, one body). There was no evidence for any Roman deposits or features in this test pit.



TEST PIT 5

This test pit examined a linear earthwork bank close to the western edge of the Roman road. The archaeological section showed that this bank comprised humic top soil a maximum of 50 cm deep which probably derive from the Bruton excavation of trenches across the Roman road. No finds.



TEST PIT 6

This was positioned 2 metres north of Trench 1 (the Roman road trench) to look for further evidence of Roman road side activity. There was 20 cm depth of topsoil followed by 10 cm of dark grey silty clay, which in turn overlay a thin deposit (1 cm deep) of dark grey silty clay with charcoal flecking and bits of daub. The deposit contained more shale on east side of the trench but there really was little depth to this material which could be defined as Roman, due its similarity to deposits closer to the road; but in this case there was no Roman pottery and no slag, with just two pieces of daub and a small piece of iron slag being of possible Roman origin.

Finds: three pieces orange daub, nine body sherds assorted dark glazed earthenware, one small piece possible iron smelting slag, one yellow glaze handle fragment, one body sherd yellow glaze, two body and one rim sherd of brown glaze, one white glaze body sherd, one trail slip rim, two body sherds fine dark brown glaze with dark yellow decorative interior glaze.





TEST PIT 7

This was 1.5 metres south-west of TP 6 and was located to help define the extent of the Roman deposit with slag that was encountered in Trench 1. There was 15 cm depth of topsoil, followed by 10 cm of dark grey silty clay, then a further 10 cm of dark grey silty clay but with mixed lenses of burnt material. A 25 cm wide charcoal rich deposit of dark grey-brown silty clay loam was evident along the southern side of the test pit. The impression given is that this test pit shows a continuation of the Roman deposit northwards from Trench 1, but it is patchy and dying out towards the north. This test pit had no evidence for the Roman road supporting the theory that it terminates in Trench 1.

Finds: one piece of orange daub (probably Roman), five small body sherds of dark glazed earthenware, one brown glazed handle fragment, one trail slipped ware body sherd, one speckled yellow/brown glaze body sherd, one small fragment of yellow glaze, and two small body sherds of white glaze.



TEST PIT 8

Located to test for evidence of the Roman road northwards and for Roman deposits identified in Trench 1 just to the south. Around 30 cm depth of top soil and dark grey silty clay loam came off onto a layer of light yellow silty clay loam containing frequent small to medium angular gritstones. Some of the stones lie on edge or are steeply pitched but seem to be natural in origin. The stones are very different to those in the Roman road make-up a short distance to the south.

Finds: one rectangular piece oxidised metal (possible iron blade or handle), one body sherd of hard reduced purple-grey ware with bubbled dark glaze on the interior, one fine body sherd black glazed earthenware.



TEST PIT 9

This was excavated to the east of the Roman road remains across a clear division in natural vegetation between rushes and grass. It was hoped that this change might be caused by buried Roman features or deposits. The test pit was more of a trench as it was 2 m long and 0.5 m wide. Excavation to 50 cm depth showed that under the topsoil, then dark grey silty clay, was very soft dark orange sandy silt on the west side of the trench with drier more clayey soil on the east side. The material was drier where the grass was located and the vegetation appears to reflect a change in the natural drift deposits.

Finds: one piece of oxidised iron with impression of shape in it, one body sherd yellow glaze ware, one sherd earthenware.



Left: Test Pit 9



Right: Test Pit 10

TEST PIT 10

This was located on a hard grassy area around 10 metres south-east of Test Pit 9 in order to determine the character of the subsoil and look for the presence of Roman deposits near the Roman road. There was a deep deposit of c 50 cm of mixed dark grey brown humic soil, which was quite compacted in the upper level but much softer with depth, overlying natural soft mid-orange sandy clay. No evidence of Roman deposits or features.

Finds: two body sherds of dark glaze earthenware with one piece having a thin purple-red fabric and a crude bubbly dark purple glaze internally but a smooth black glaze on ribbed profile externally. Could be early post medieval in date. There were also two glass fragments, one clear and modern, the other more green-blue in colour and with many small bubbles (which could be Roman).

TEST PIT 11

This was dug 2 metres to the west of Trench 1 to examine potential for Roman roadside activity. A thin layer of topsoil gave way to c 25 cm of mid-grey brown silty clay loam, which overlay a shallow layer of mixed dark grey silty clay with patches of yellow sandy clay and some charcoal flecking. This thin deposit sat on natural and appears to be Roman in date.

Finds comprised one green-blue fragment of glass rim, one body sherd light grey rusticated ware, both Roman in origin (see image below).



TRENCH 1

This trench, which was 5 m long by 2 m wide, was positioned across the site of a Bruton trench running at right angles across the road. The location of this trench had been mapped by the Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit as part of their earthwork survey in 1984. Bruton also cut a shallow trench running down the central axis of the road in an attempt to follow its course as it left the fort's north gate. The shallow 'u' shape depression representing the site of this trench can be seen in the section of the trench photograph below.



Excavation showed that the road remains were at a shallow depth, just c 25 cm beneath the turf. The road comprised large flat stones well laid and packed with crushed shale. Within the trench the road stones finish and a line of partly disturbed stones appear mark the terminus of the road. The edge of the road ran beyond the section on the east side, whereas on the west a one metre square test pit was excavated to reveal the road edge. Here, there was no evidence for distinct kerbing and there was no drainage ditch.

Some Roman pot sherds were recovered from above natural and in layers associated with the Roman road. Of particular interest were pieces of iron smelting slag and possible daub associated with a deposit of dark brown charcoal rich silty clay located in the north-east part of the trench beyond the road terminus. These suggest nearby industrial activity. There was also a charcoal rich patch of soil within the road surface.

Finds within the topsoil comprised: one piece of opaque grey flint (with bulb of percussion but no retouch evident), a piece of tap slag, two pieces of Roman daub, one body sherd of a thin orange fabric (possibly Roman and Cheshire Plains Ware), one thin iron nail (bent over), one long smooth piece of gritstone (possible whetstone), three body sherds of post medieval brown glazed earthenware, two small body sherds and one plate rim of 20th century white glaze. The slag was heavy, suggesting over 50% iron ore retention which fits with iron smelting technology of the Roman and medieval periods.

From the top of the road came two joining rim sherds of rusticated grey ware (see image below), from the deposit beyond the terminus of the road came a large piece of furnace lining slag (see details and images below), two joining rim sherds of orange ware (possibly a mortarium), two body sherds of similar orange fabric with reduced grey interior, one small flat piece of white oxidised lead.



The excavation team, with visitors, standing beyond the west side of Trench 1. This shows the character of the Roman road make-up, the rough kerbing marking its terminus, the one metre square test pit extension which defined the western edge of the road, and the stone-free charcoal-rich industrial waste deposit in the right-hand side of the photo.



Left: a broken sherd of rusticated grey ware from between road stones. Right: detail of the charcoal rich deposit with slag lying on its surface just beneath the left side of the ranging rod.



Views of the piece of iron smelting slag. The left photo shows a curved profile suggesting that this is furnace lining material rather than tap slag. The slag contains highly heated (oxidised and semi-vitrified) clay suggesting that this formed part of the shaft lining which has been partly replaced by slag during the smelting process.

TRENCH 2

This was excavated on 30th August to better define the Roman road. It was 7 m long by 1 m wide and was located parallel with and 2 m to the south of the Trench 1.



The excavation revealed a well-preserved road. On the western edge of the road were large gritstone flags. There was no evidence for a roadside drain, with natural yellow clay exposed at a shallow depth. Across most of the road was a mixture of angular, medium to large flat

gritstones laid roughly horizontally. These stones were the main construction material for the road and probably were overlain by smaller, rounded gritstones originally to give a smoother finish. It was not possible within the time constraints of the excavation to reveal the eastern edge of the road.

Finds from the soil above the road included: one light orange body sherd with splash-green glaze (possibly late medieval), three sherds of trail slipped ware plate rims, one dark brown glazed base sherd, one rim fine brown glazed ware, three assorted brown glazed sherds, one handle fragment in light brown glaze, 11 pieces of various types of dark glazed earthenware and one handle fragment in black glaze, one white glazed sherd, one blue/white transfer pattern sherd, one rim sherd with cream and white stripe glaze pattern, three clay pipe stems. With the exception of the possible medieval sherd, these finds date to the 18th to 20th centuries.



Photo showing make-up of central section of the road, which comprises medium sized grit stones overlying larger flag-like stones.

From the one metre square extension in the north-east corner of Trench 2 came a base sherd of Roman grey ware (probably rusticated ware) together with two fragments of Roman glass in the a green-blue colour (see image below).



The extension failed to pick up the eastern edge of the road and indicates that it has been damaged here or lies further east. Certainly, the stones were less concentrated than further west. Within the north-east extension were well-laid medium to large grit stones that could form part of the damaged road metalling or may relate to some other structure. Time constraints limited further investigation here but this should be a priority for future work.



The Roman road exposed in Trench 2 – looking west

Conclusion

The apparent terminus of the north road at Castleshaw is intriguing. When one looks for comparative examples they are not easy to find. Roman forts were built according to strict conventions but topography sometimes made one or two of the four standard gateway exit roads practically redundant; sites such as Housesteads, along with some milecastles at Hadrian's Wall, where the road would go over a cliff edge, come to mind. More local examples include Melandra (Glossop) and Manchester, which were sited on promontory sites with a steep drop on one side. These two also appear to have gateways with a very short access route to the bath house; this can also be seen at Templeborough in Yorkshire. Another example of this is Hardknott in the Lake District, where the road exiting the east gate runs for 190 metres before terminating at the parade ground (Bidwell & Hodgson 2009, p 115-7). It can be seen that, whilst Roman fort construction had to adhere to principles of layout, local topography and individual circumstances meant considerable variation in functionality and form.

We have already noted from the 2014 excavations that Castleshaw Fort exhibits peculiarities, such as the lack of a defensive ditch on the flat, eastern side of the fort. The terminus of the north road, just 50 metres from the gate is another example of a peculiarity. It was thought that the road could have continued as a trackway to ascend the north side of the valley to link up with the Manchester to Ilkley road near Blackstone Edge. The construction of the Castleshaw Reservoirs at the end of the 19th century meant that its course could be followed across the valley floor. An alternative theory was for the road to loop back round the fort to join the main trans-Pennine highway on the south side of the fort. However, the recent test pitting and trenching exercise demonstrate that the road is deliberately terminated a short distance from the fort.



Oblique aerial photo, looking west, taken during the 2014 excavations showing the position of the fort north gate and location of the road terminus.

Was the road constructed just to follow convention and abandoned once a respectful distance from the fort defences? A more plausible theory is that it gave access to a building, or buildings, in a *vicus* area or to workshops in an industrial area. Test pitting around the road terminus found discrete deposits of Roman material, including iron smelting waste,

which might support the industrial workshop idea, but test pits on the south side of the road in the area of the rectangular geophysics anomaly failed to locate a building and there was no evidence for structures in the test pits around the road terminus. Looking at the late 1990s aerial photograph shown on page 6, there appears to be in the area north of the fort defences a series of lines running parallel with the rampart. When on site these are not visible but they could represent ancient ploughing, with c 7 metres separating the lines suggesting late medieval ridge & furrow. It is possible that ploughing over a long period has removed evidence for Roman buildings and, in places, has exposed patches of bedrock where it occurs at shallow depths; it is this outcropping bedrock that has been picked up by the resistivity survey. Test pits away from the Roman road seem to be devoid of Roman finds so there is not even 'background noise' in the plough soils to suggest former buildings and activity. At the moment we have no definitive evidence for Roman buildings in this area. However, so far investigations have only examined a very small part of the area north of the Roman defences. Further evaluation should be undertaken to determine the presence/absence and character of *vicus* activity.

Acknowledgements

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Friends of Castleshaw Roman Forts volunteers beside Trench 2, 30th August 2016

Sources

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