

TRIAL EXCAVATIONS ON ALPORT HEIGHT, ASHLEYHAY, 1992

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In 1992, Mercury Communications Ltd. constructed a telecommunications mast and associated structures on Alport Height, adding to the line of such masts which have lately made this summit into a prominent landmark, close to the south-eastern edge of the Peak District. Archaeological interest in Alport Height was first aroused by the recovery of pieces of Romano-British Derbyshire Ware from ploughsoil (Lomas, 1955). Subsequently, a hundredweight of sherds was excavated in the vicinity of the Ordnance Survey triangulation pillar (SK30565158), near the south-east end of the flattish hilltop, as defined approximately by the 310m contour (Lomas, 1961; Fig 1). Derbyshire Ware is known to have been manufactured at a number of locations along the sandstone ridge which stretches for some 9km south-east from Alport across the Derwent valley to Holbrook (Swan, 1984: 134-5). Given both the quantity of pottery found by Lomas and the fact that it included wasters, it seems likely that the remains of Romano-British pottery-kilns await discovery somewhere on Alport Height (Lomas, 1961: 144; Swan, 1984: 134; both call the site 'Alport Hill'), and it is not improbable that archaeological evidence for other contemporary structures could also survive. Consequently, an archaeological evaluation was conducted in February 1992, before any ground-disturbance was carried out within the 31m x 21m area set aside for the compound around the new installation. This was to be situated near the north-west end of the hilltop (SK30415166), 150-180m from the triangulation pillar (Fig 1).

Major ground-disturbance was to be limited to a 4m x 4m area for the mast-base and an adjacent 5m x 5m area for a cabin-base, but topsoil was also to be stripped from the remainder of the compound. Evaluation began with the excavation of a grid of test-pits at 5m intervals, which was considered adequate for locating any plough-scatters of material relating to kilns or waster-heaps. The 24 pits, each 1m square, were excavated by hand through the ploughsoil, a sandy loam up to 0.3m thick, to the surface of the weathered sandstone. All spoil from these pits was sieved through a 10mm mesh in order to ensure a high level of artefact-recovery. Apart from modern items, however, only one small flint flake was found.

In the floor of ten pits were indications of archaeological features cut into the sandstone. These pits were extended where necessary to reveal an area sufficient to allow the features to be investigated; with the result that a total of 54 square metres was eventually excavated. In short, these features proved to be shallow and generally rather shapeless, with loamy and/or stony fills containing no sign of burning, nor any artefacts.

The excavated sample amounts to little more than 8% of the 650 square metres threatened by the construction-works, but it was dispersed over the entire area, and the negative results gave little encouragement to enlarge the sample. If nothing else, the absence of anything attributable to the Romano-British period appears to have shown that pottery-kilns of that period were not constructed all over the summit of Alport Height. Consequently, it was recommended to Amber Valley District Council that development of this site should be allowed to proceed without further archaeological investigation.

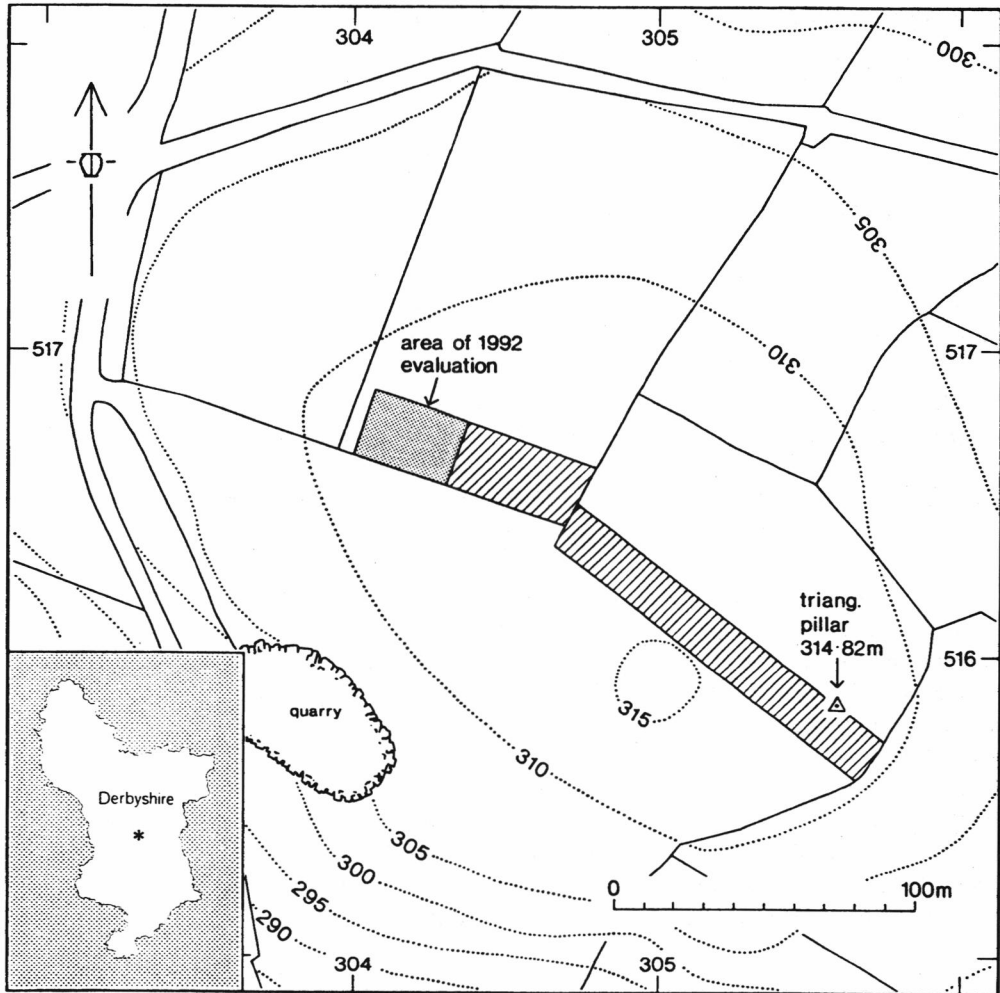


Fig 1 Alport Height: plan of the hilltop, showing field-walls and roads as unbroken lines, contours as dotted lines numbered in metres O.D., the pre-1992 compounds for radio-masts hatched, the compound for the 1992 mast stippled, and the National Grid around the border. Scale 1:2500. An asterisk marks the site on the inset map.

The evaluation was undertaken by the Trent & Peak Archaeological Trust on behalf of Mercury Communications Ltd. SM was assisted on site by Vicki Priest, John Hamshaw-Thomas and Alastair MacDonald. Fig 1 was drawn by Kate Fearn. A full set of records (written, drawn and photographic) has been lodged in the Sites & Monuments Record held by Derbyshire County Council.

REFERENCES

- Lomas, J. (1955) Derbyshire Ware - some casual finds. *DAJ* 75: 152.
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