ROMAN FINDS IN CHELLASTON, DERBY — A CAUTIONARY TALE

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and

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INTRODUCTION

At the request of Phil Rogers, a home owner in the Chellaston area of Derby, the Derbyshire Archaeological Society Archaeological Research Group investigated the possibility of a Roman site in his 8m square garden. Using a metal detector he had already found 22 coins, some 1st but mostly 3/4th century, a very pretty disc brooch with niello inlay, two buckles and several other pieces. All of these were found relatively near the surface. The plan below shows a concentration of 'hits' (numbered) in the top left hand corner. In addition three coins had been found in the neighbouring garden to the left.

There was also the possibility of a stone wall. When digging the land to prepare for a garden layout in 1991 a number of worked stones were found. At this stage there was no evidence of the finds found later.

The collection was referred to Derby Museum and Art Gallery where the pieces were checked by Rachel Atherton (Finds Liaison Officer for Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire). They were recorded on the Portable Antiquities Scheme database and sent on to the British Museum (BM) for assessment. The BM's opinion was that the pieces did not constitute a hoard, they were more likely to be a domestic collection.

Discussion between Derby Museum and the Derbyshire Archaeological Society (DAS) considered the potential for a Roman presence here. Chellaston is situated almost equidistant from the Rykneld Road running south-west and the lesser road to the south-east, and about 6 miles south of the fort of *Deventio*. There is no record to date for a road here and, apart from the possibility of a river crossing at Twyford, and some apparent Romano-British activity at Lows Lane there appears to be no other sound evidence. It seemed unlikely that there would be anything contemporary in the immediate area, certainly nothing as substantial as a villa. However, we could not ignore the presence of such a collection of finds so it was decided to undertake an exploratory excavation in an attempt to put the them into some context.

INVESTIGATION

A resistivity survey was carried out over the lawn area (7m × 6m) by Barbara and Keith Foster (Figs 1 and 2). The results, seen below, looked encouraging. There is a very definite line straight across the garden, parallel to the house, which looks as if it could be a service feature (the straight edge to the right is due to a garden border). However, it

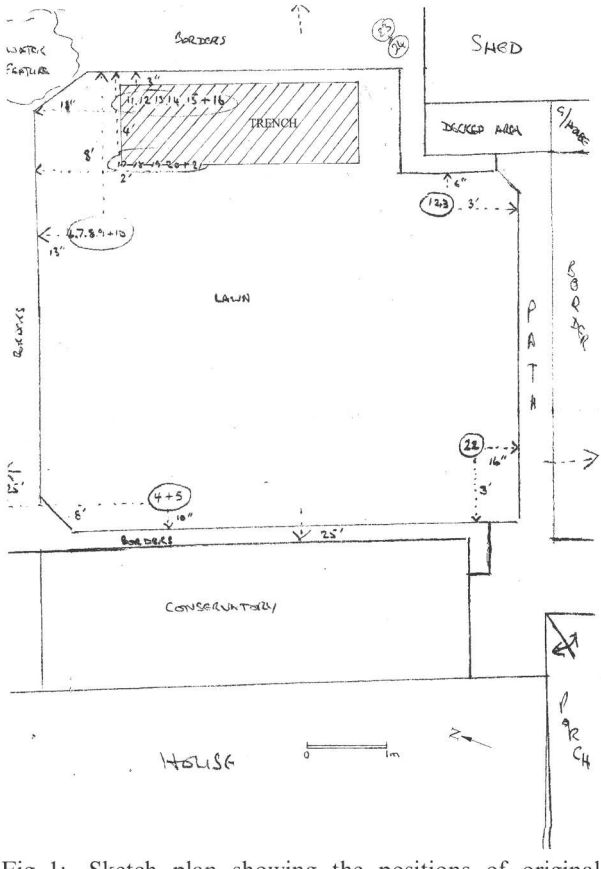

Fig. 1: Sketch plan showing the positions of original finds (P. Rogers).

is believed that all of the services run along the road in front of the houses. An apparent branching off and an indication from Phil that the stones he found ran forward from the back fence at about this point made it seem a worthwhile project.

Excavation Report

On a weekend in October 2005 a group of Society members met at Chellaston and, under the guidance of Mike Butler, a 1m × 3m trench was dug across where we had been told the potential wall was discovered to see if we could place a building.

As can be seen from the plans below, things soon became very confusing and it became obvious that things were not quite as expected.

The trench diagram above shows the contexts: C1 Topsoil, C2 Plough soil, C3 Pebbles, C4 Natural. F1 and F2 represent features which were not explored as, in both cases, they were pits containing modern rubbish. A deep pit (F1) went well into the natural bed and, for the most part, appeared to contain the remains of a car, in the corner (F2) we found a valve radio and the spoil from above these included three 1971 new decimal coins. This was all 1970s rubbish.

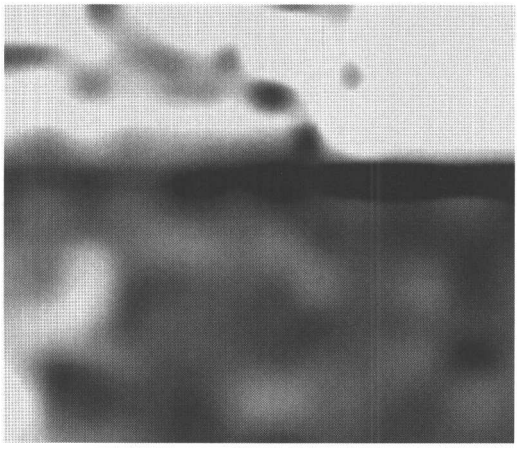

Fig. 2: Resistivity results for the main garden.

Only three pieces of interest were found: A1001 and A1002 were both Roman coins found in the top of the topsoil. The only find of any note otherwise was a small piece of 17/18th century Staffordshire slipware at the bottom of the trench, on top of the medieval field base (A3001). No large stones were found.

The spoil was systematically checked by context but the only finds were modern. Metal detecting across the rest of the lawn found more Roman coins (B in the finds list) but all were within a few centimetres of the surface.

After consideration it was decided that there was no further potential here and the trench was back filled.

The land

The garden was covered initially by a layer of topsoil, which has since compacted, and the turf laid on top of this. Both were purchased from a local turf dealer in 1991 and were reported as having been lifted from a field between the railway and the River Derwent near the Little Chester area. This is supported by an employee of the firm who remembers them working in that area at around that time.

The Stones

There was no evidence in our trench to indicate the presence of a wall the position of which is still uncertain. The only suggestion a of Roman connection was in the IX carved into one of the stones, pictured below (Pl. 1). The most likely explanation for this is that it was a much later marker for a field boundary. Quite why a Roman numeral was used is not clear — perhaps its easier to carve than a '9'.

Research into possible buildings in the area, particularly in the Enclosures Act (1804) documents, indicate that there were ancient buildings around. However, nothing positive could be found concerning the site we were investigating. The garden is situated in what was an enclosure called Derby Field, belonging at the time to Edward Brown. Making connections between the 1804 Enclosure Map and a modern version is

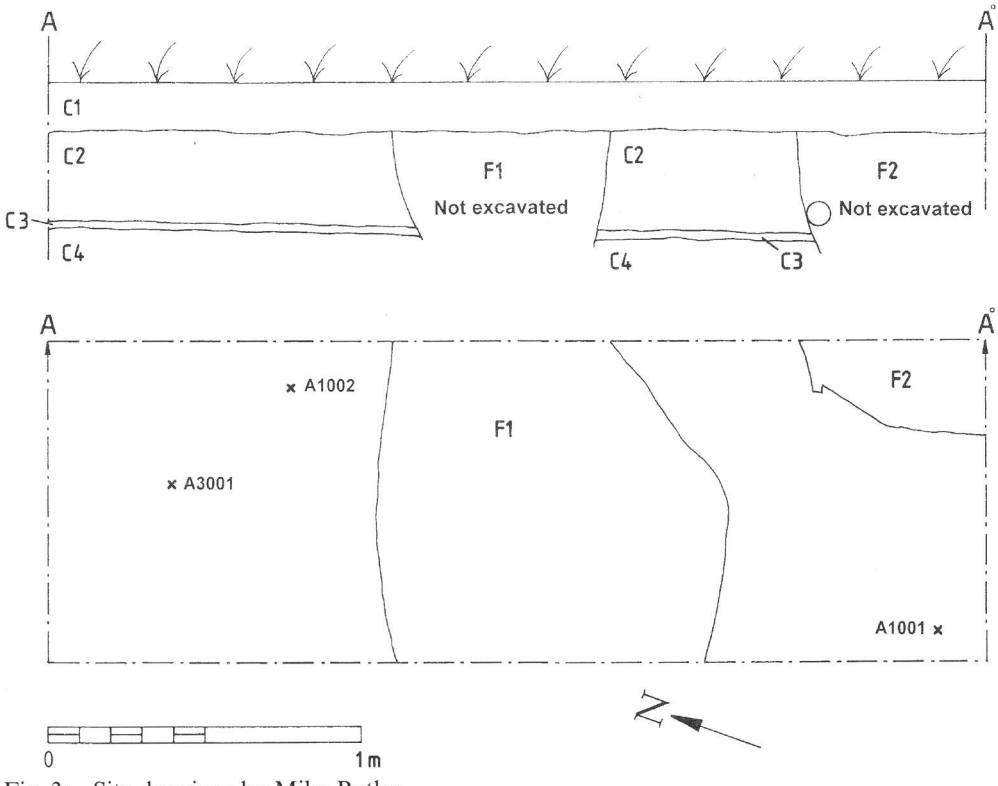

Fig. 3: Site drawings by Mike Butler.

complicated by the resiting of the Red Lion public house and the realignment of the Derby Road to accommodate a traffic island. However, there is some evidence in the documentation that Derby Field contained "an ancient homestead and garden" (Brown 1986, 79). The Enclosure Map does indicate a building in the corner of the field. RAF aerial maps, taken up to 1954, prior to the building of the modern estate, and obtained from the English Heritage National Monuments Record, show no interesting marks.

Phil Rogers is still certain that he has, in the past, found signs of a stone wall running through into the garden next door and it is hoped that further work may be done to check this in the near future.

CONCLUSIONS

It is obvious that the whole of the garden has been disturbed at various times from the building of the modern houses around the mid 1950s, and that the area in which the majority of the pieces were found had been used to bury rubbish in the 1970s. It seems most unlikely that the concentration of finds shown on the garden plan would have been maintained under these circumstances.

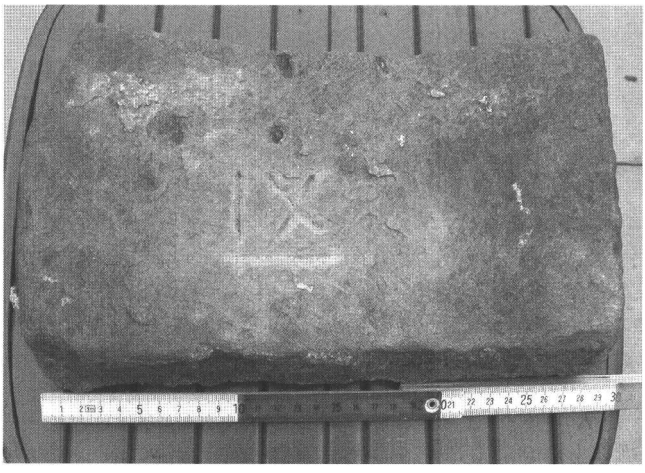

Plate 1: Stone found in 1990s.

On replacing the turf the solution to a part of the mystery became fairly evident. Lying on top of the roots in one of the turf rolls were two Roman coins. There seems little doubt that these Roman finds had been imported from the location in which the grass was grown and that they may possibly be linked to Roman activity in Little Chester. The concentration of most of the finds in one part of the garden remains something of a puzzle given the nature of the process of lifting and laying turf. The three coins from the neighbouring garden also presented a problem until it was suggested that there may have been some movement of topsoil.

Given the reference to buildings in the Enclosures Act documents, it is not unlikely that the stones could have come from one of these.

So, no Roman villa. Any disappointment is tempered by the fact that we have proved beyond reasonable doubt that archaeology can not only tell us where things were but where they were not. However, there would appear to be a case for a watching brief to be kept on turf and top soil movement in and around areas like Little Chester (where this still continues). The potential for confusion of archaeological finds records by the exporting of pieces over a wide area could be seriously misleading.

APPENDIX 1: FINDS ASSESSED BY THE BRITISH MUSEUM

21 copper-alloy and 1 silver Roman coins
2 buckles
Knife terminal with ?monkey's head
Lead token
Cauldron foot
Roman disc brooch
Phallic pendant?
Roman pot vessel rim
3 lead weights
17th century 1/2d token, inscribed "Anne Mattews"

APPENDIX 2: FINDS FROM THE DAS EXCAVATION

Trench	Context	No.	Description
A	1	001	Roman coin — nummus
	1	002	George VI sixpence 1951
	2		2 × ?worked black flints — ?not local
	3	001	Body sherd — Ticknall ware type 17/18th century
Spoil			
A		1	Modern clay pieces. Coins, new decimal, Eliz. II 2p, 1p, 1/2 p
		2	Pot sherd
		3	Body sherds: Victorian: 2 × blue and white, 4 × stoneware
Lawn			
B		001	Roman coin
		002	Roman coin
		003	Roman coin
		004	3 × Roman coins — 1 clipped

The ancient finds from these lists can be found on the Portable Antiquities Scheme Database at www.finds.org.uk.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to; Rachel Atherton who passed on the problem and supported the work throughout; Phil Rogers for encouraging us to dig up his garden; and the team of DAS members who gave up a weekend to dig in Chellaston.

REFERENCES

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Wyatt, S. and Smith, J. (1998 Copy by Archer K) *A Map of the Township of Chellaston in the County of Derby*. Based on information taken from the Award of Enclosure dated 5th July 1804 and the 1st ed. Ordnance Survey.

RAF Aerial Maps, English Heritage, National Monuments Record.