The Old Vicarage, Mellor, Stockport

An Archaeological Evaluation

Interim Report

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Summary

An archaeological evaluation of the land within the grounds of and adjacent to the Old Vicarage, Mellor was carried out during July 1998. Photographic evidence suggested that a ditch or similar feature of unknown use and origin lay in the adjacent field to the Old Vicarage. In addition, an account of a building development that took place at the site in the 18th century recorded the discovery of a fosse (ditch) of possible antiquity. The location of the ditch and several other features were confirmed by geophysical survey. Five trenches were excavated, two across the ditch feature, two within the presumed interior of the ditch over what appeared to be linear features (considered at the time to be possible grave sites) and a further trench outside the ditch. The evaluation results concluded that the ditch was Iron Age in origin with prehistoric pottery being discovered in its lower fills and that the site either had been continuously occupied until the late 1st / early 2nd century, or had been re-occupied at that time after an earlier abandonment. Post-holes were discovered cut into the bedrock within the interior trenches. It has been postulated that the site which comprises an area of 5.5 acres could be the remains of an Iron Age hillfort that became re-occupied during the Roman occupation of the area.

Acknowledgments

UMAU would like to express its thanks to Professor and Mrs Hearle for commissioning the work and their kind hospitality and their keen continuing interest. Thanks are also expressed to Peter Hodgson and his son for their support in allowing access to their field and their generous loan of a mechanical excavator. The excavation was undertaken by the following members of the University of Manchester Archaeology Department; Alison Lidgett (supervisor), Bryan Walker, Howard Austin, Jill Kirkley-Alsop and Nicky Marshall. The report was written by the Project Manager Graham Eyre-Morgan of UMAU with illustrations by Bryan Walker and Stuart Holden.

1. Introduction

1.1 Photographs of the garden area and field adjacent to the Old Vicarage, Mellor were taken by Mrs Ann Hearle during the summer drought of 1996. These photographs revealed the cropmark of a ditch-like feature curving around the crest of the field adjacent to the house. These photographs were shown to Dr Peter Arrowsmith during his research for the History of Stockport book. Early in 1998 Professor and Mrs Hearle kindly commissioned UMAU to carry out an investigation on this possible archaeological site.

Plate 1: The field adjacent to The Old Vicarage, showing the cropmark on the left hand side of the photograph.

1.2 An archaeological investigation of a non-intrusive nature (geophysical survey) was carried out by students from the University of Manchester under the supervision of the professional staff provided by the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit. This survey confirmed that several features of a probable archaeological nature were present including what appeared to be a substantial ditch system.

1.3 The field evaluation was carried out in July 1998. This report presents the results of the evaluation, and gives an account of the archaeological finds and deposits uncovered.

2. Location and Topography

2.1 The site of Mellor Church and the Old Vicarage is centered around the National Grid Reference SJ 9818 8890, in the Parish of Mellor, approximately six miles south east from the centre of Stockport (Fig 1).

2.2 The underlying geology of the area was revealed as an area of carboniferous westphalian lower coal measures Woodhead Hill rock or Crawshaw Sandstone

2.3 The site lies on a promontory of land that descends quite sharply on three sides, while the rear of the site gently rises up towards the Pennine uplands to the east. Within the perimeter of the site lies the Parish Church and associated graveyard; the Old Vicarage, outbuildings and gardens; the new Vicarage and gardens and Glebe Cottage and gardens. Part of the access road to these dwellings and the Church also lies within the site, as does the field belonging to Knowle Farm which is presently under pasture.

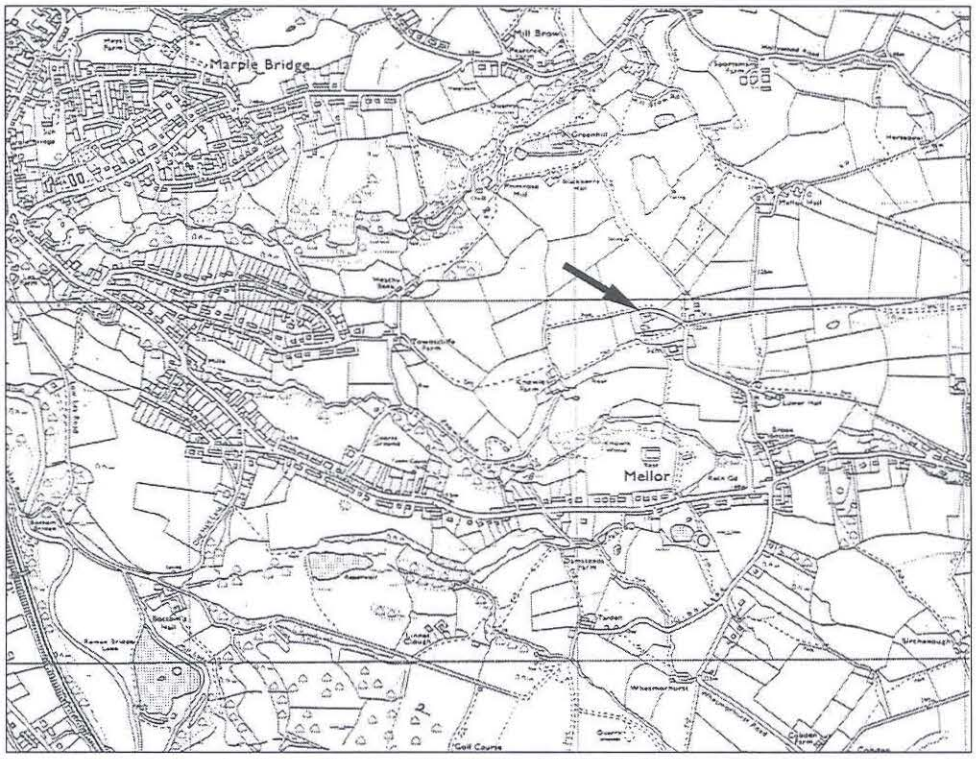

Figure 1: Site Location Map. OS 1:10,000 Series SJ 98 SW. Crown Copyright Reserved.

3. *Archaeological Background*

3.1 There has been no previous evidence for prehistoric or Roman activity at the site. The closest prehistoric sites are the recently excavated Bronze Age cairn situated at Cobden Edge and the Bronze Age barrows at Brown Low and Ludworth Intakes. Evidence for settlement in the Iron Age/Romano-British period in the Stockport Borough is virtually non-existent, with only scant poorly recorded remains coming from the Bramhall area. In fact excavation has identified only two native settlement sites in the Greater Manchester area. These are Castle Steads, Bury and Great Woolden Hall Farm, Salford, both of which are fortified enclosures. Roman evidence in the area has been restricted to the site of the fort and vicus at Melandra and a possible site on Werneth Low (a single sherd of Roman pottery was discovered). The place name of Mellor (meaning bare hill) is of pre-English origin as is Werneth and Cheadle and all three may have had a long history of settlement.

3.2 Apart from place-names there is little evidence for Anglo-Saxon activity in the area. Other than the three names mentioned most major place-names in the borough probably derive from this period. Features and artifacts from this period are also few with an Anglo-Saxon cross from Cheadle and the twin cylindrical shafts known as Robin Hoods Picking Rods on Ludworth Moor which are very similar to the Bow Stones located in Lyme Park. It has been suggested that the font within Mellor church is of Anglo-Saxon origin. However, this is yet to be confirmed and some consider it to be either Norman or Scandinavian in style. It is possible that the font was imported from elsewhere and cannot be used as dating evidence for the foundation of the church.

3.3 It was recorded by the Reverend Marriot in the early 19th century that 'some years ago' digging in the churchyard for the construction of a vault revealed what appears to have been the remains of an infilled ditch. He also reports that 'many years before' the same feature was found during the sinking of the foundations of the extension to the house now known as the Old Vicarage.

> "A deep fosse was constructed originally, for the inclosure of the position. In subsequent ages it had the fate to be filled up, and the name and place of it passed into oblivion" (Marriot, 1810, *The Antiquities of Lyme and its Vicinity*).

4. Aims and Methods of the Evaluation

4.1 The evaluation was designed to assess the date, nature and state of preservation of any archaeological deposits which might be present under the garden area of the Old Vicarage and the adjacent field. It also aimed to assess the relative importance of these deposits in relation to other local, regional and national sites of similar type and period.

4.2 The evaluation work comprised a geophysical survey by means of the resistivity method; this maps the differences in soil electrical resistance which mainly reflect variations in the water content. The measurements of soil electrical resistance were made over regular grids set out in the garden area of the Old Vicarage and the adjacent field. Survey revealed the ditch enclosed an area of approximately 5.5 acres.

4.1 Following the results of the geophysical survey six trenches were strategically placed in order to evaluate the archaeological potential of features revealed during the survey. Four trenches were excavated within the grounds of the Old Vicarage and two in the adjacent field. Any archaeological features found were then excavated and recorded by means of photography, drawings and contexting.

5. Geophysics Results

5.1 The data collected from the field was applied to a computer software package producing an image which can then be viewed. The results of the survey from the field adjacent to the Old Vicarage are shown here (Fig 2), and the curving ditch-like feature can easily be seen.

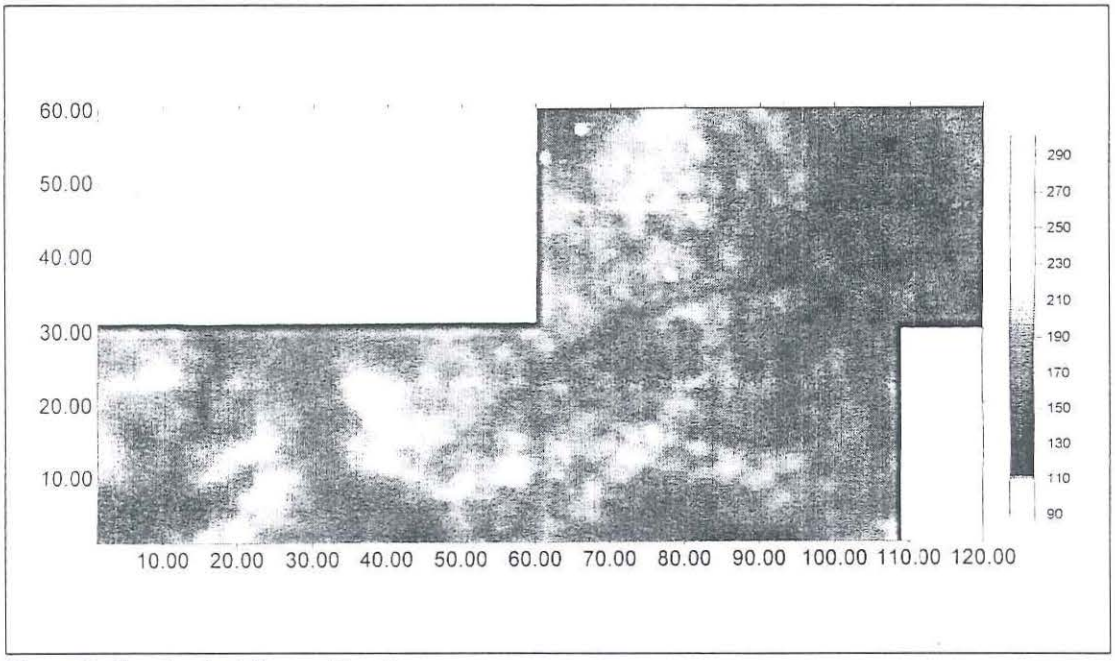

Figure 2: Geophysical Survey Results

6. Trench by Trench Results

6.1 The four trenches within the grounds of the Old Vicarage were excavated entirely by hand; the two others by mechanical means to remove the topsoil and from there by hand. The findings from each trench are discussed here.

6.2 Trench 1 (Fig 3) was aligned east-west and measured approximately 3m long by 2m wide and was excavated down to the natural bedrock at a depth of 0.47m. This trench was aligned over an area which revealed a grave-like features during the geophysical survey. However, excavation proved that no grave was present but three post-holes were. Each post-hole was approximately 20-30mm in diameter by 10mm in depth and cut into the bedrock. No artifacts or dateable materials were discovered in the fill of the post-holes. In the topsoil and lower plough soil several 17th and 18th century clay pipe fragments were discovered along with occasional sherds of 18th to 20th century pottery.

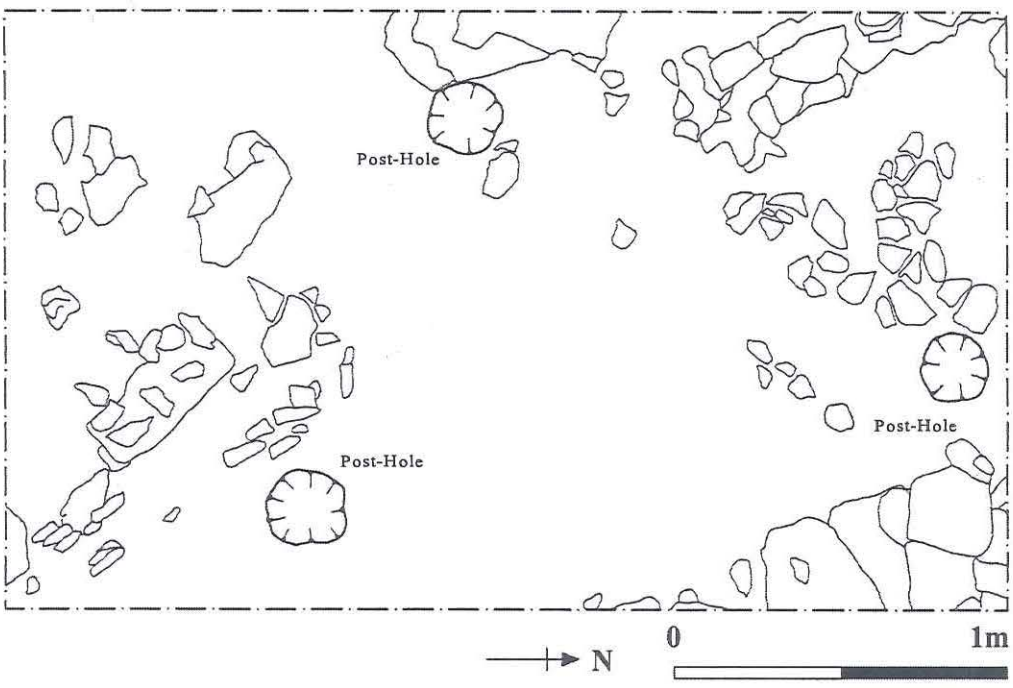

Figure 3: Plan of Trench 1

6.3 Trench 2 was excavated on a north-south alignment again over a possible feature identified during the geophysical survey. This trench was 3m long by 1m wide and excavated down to the natural bedrock, 0.45m deep. Within this trench there was 0.3m of topsoil that overlaid what appeared to be a redeposited natural fill of orange brown sand/degraded sandstone and upright pieces of fragmented sandstones within a bowl shaped cut, the edges of which were not established. The only dateable material or artifacts discovered were 18th to 20th century pipe fragments, pot sherds and glass fragments in the topsoil.

6.4 Trench 3 (Fig 4 and Plate 2) was aligned over a linear feature that appeared to be a possible continuation of the curving ditch-like feature in the adjacent field, identified from photographs taken during the 1996 drought by Mrs Hearle. The trench was aligned on a north west- south east axis at right angles to the possible feature. The trench was 4m long by 1m wide. Within this trench the inside edge of what appeared to be a substantial ditch was discovered at a depth of between 0.25m and 0.35m from the present ground surface, and beneath the topsoil and lower plough soil. The fills of this ditch were excavated down to the recognised safe working depth of 1.2m. The ditch was not bottomed and appeared to be cut at a steep angle. Within the ditch six distinct fills were observed overlying what appeared to be a possible buried turf layer that in turn overlaid a sandy clay lining that sealed the rock-cut natural. Artifacts discovered within these fills included nine sherds of Roman orange ware that belonged to the late first/early second century. This pottery represented at least three vessels. A piece of Roman tile (tegula) was also found in association with pottery. These Roman pottery sherds were discovered in the upper fills of the ditch between 0.2 and 0.4m in depth into these fills. In addition to the Roman pottery occasional pieces of cremated bone were discovered, an abundance of charcoal flecks, occasional pieces of lead, some of which had been formed, and a single piece of copper ore. Beneath the fills that had revealed the Roman artifacts, evidence for earlier occupation began to materialise with an abundance of fire cracked pebbles, charcoal and charcoal flecks, a moderate amount of cremated bone and a single sherd of probable iron age pottery. A small excavation in the corner of the ditch proved that it was continuing at the same steep angle to an undefined depth.

6.5 Trench 4 (Fig 4 and Plate 2) was 3m long by 1m wide and was offset on the same alignment as trench 3. This was in order to locate the opposite edge of the ditch to the one revealed in trench 3 and possibly to ascertain the size and overall shape of the ditch. The ditch was again located within the trench at a similar depth as in trench 3. This established that the width of the ditch at the top of the natural was 4.5m. The fills on the outer side of the ditch were excavated to the safe working depth of 1.2m. A corresponding number of fills to those in trench 3 were revealed, but this side of the ditch also displayed an abundance of large flat pieces of sandstone that appeared to have been pushed into the ditch. These stones occurred at a depth of 0.4m below the top of the ditch. The angle at which they were lying suggested that they had once been part of a rampart that had sat inside the ditched area, possibly as stone revetting. It was proven in this side of the ditch that its depth was over 1.6m but the total depth was not confirmed. The ditch itself was cut through the bedrock and lower shales with an acute upper edge that shelved before inclining at a steep angle again. Fewer artifacts were discovered in this side of the ditch although two sherds of Roman pottery and a single piece of Roman tile (tegula) were found in its upper fills. The lower fills were largely sealed by the concentration of stone, although occasional fire cracked pebbles, pieces of cremated bone and a moderate amount of charcoal were discovered.

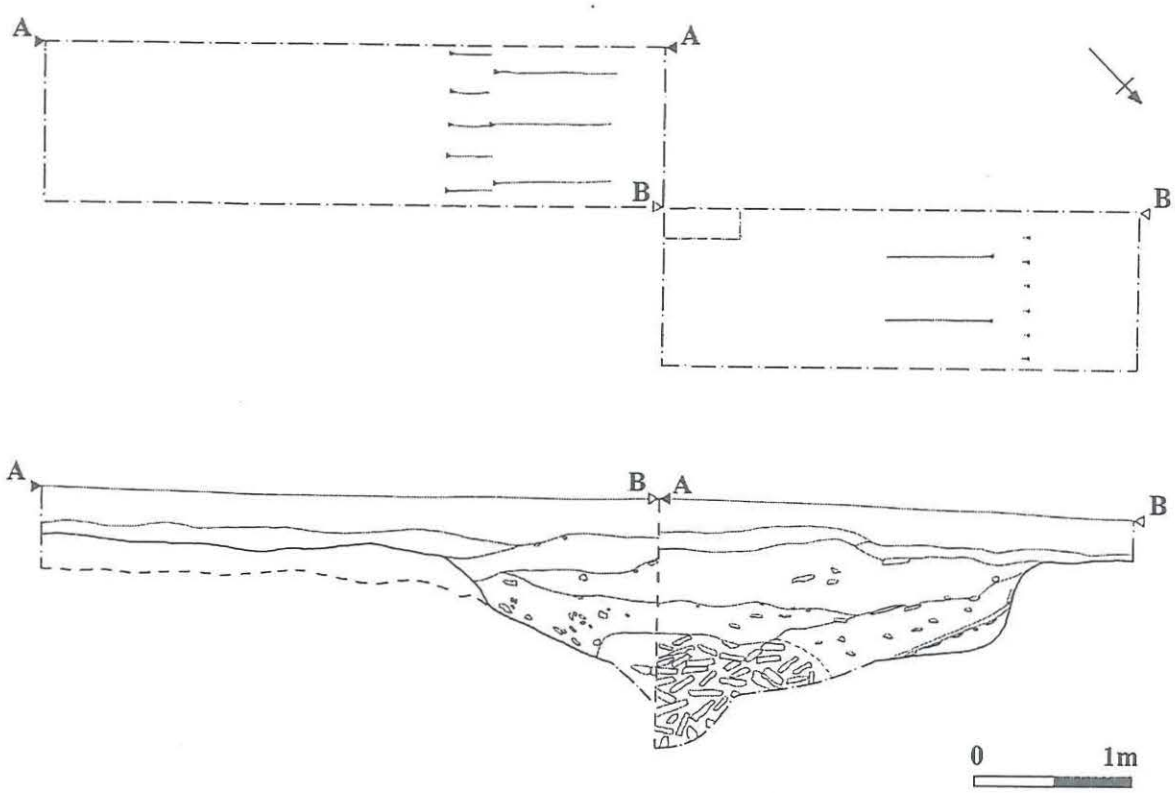

Figure 4: Plan and Composite Section of Trenches 3 and 4

Plate 2: Trenches 3 and 4

6.6 Trench 5 (Fig 5 and Plate 3) was excavated in the field adjacent to the Old Vicarage and aligned over the cropmark that had been photographed in 1996. The trench was approximately 15m long by 1.5m wide. The topsoil which proved to be no deeper than 0.15m was removed by mechanical excavator. A rock-cut ditch with near vertical sides was revealed within this trench. The ditch was 1.5m wide by 1.2m deep, bottoming on uneven plates of bedrock. Unlike the ditch in the garden of the Old Vicarage where the ditch was cut through fragmented bedrock here the rock was solid. From cut marks within the ditch it appeared as if it was originally intended to be bigger. On the interior side of the ditch stepping or terracing was noticeable, also on the exterior side of the ditch vertical and fragmented pieces of sandstone suggested that a second ditch may have been planned. The fills within the ditch revealed occasional fragments of iron slag, fire cracked pebbles, lead waste, a moderate amount of charcoal and a single sherd of Roman pottery.

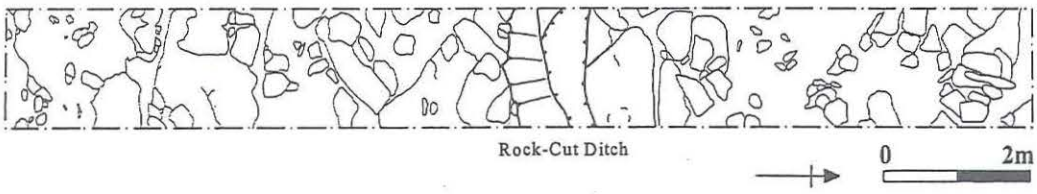

Figure 5 : Plan of Trench 5 Showing the Rock-Cut Ditch

Plate 3: The Rock-Cut Ditch

6.7 Trench 6 was excavated outside and away from the perimeter of the ditched enclosure. No archaeological features or deposits were observed in this trench.

7. *Discussion of Artifacts*

7.1 The easiest and most reliable way of dating archaeological deposits is by the study of artifacts which have been excavated from the context in which they are found. By far the most common form of artifacts are sherds of pottery vessels. These vessels are very fragile and easily broken, and therefore regularly discarded. Comparisons of fragments from excavated sites has enabled specialists to determine the date and often the place of manufacture of most pottery.

7.2 The pottery so far recovered from the site includes:

Trench 3
Roman pottery: nine sherds of orange ware from three different vessels, a sherd of cream ware, all probably late 1st century- early 2nd century. A single sherd of possible Roman pottery (unknown type).
Prehistoric pottery: a single sherd of VCP (Very Coarse Pottery) probably late Iron Age.
Post-medieval pottery: a moderate amount of 17th to 19th century wares were discovered in the topsoil.

Trench 4
Roman pottery: two sherds of orange ware.
Post-medieval pottery: a moderate amount of 17th to 19th century wares in the topsoil.

Trench 5
Roman Pottery: a small single sherd of orange ware.
Post-medieval: occasional pieces of 18th to 19th century wares.

Trenches 1 and 2 produced only 17th to 20th century pottery sherds, all from within the topsoil.

7.3 In addition to the pottery sherds that were found on the site, a moderate assemblage of other artifacts were recovered with special emphasis being placed on the finds from trenches 3 to 5. No material from trenches 1 and 2 was earlier than post-medieval in origin.

Trench 3
This trench revealed: an abundance of fire cracked pebbles. These are synonymous with pre-historic settlement sites.
A moderate amount of lead waste possibly Roman.
Occasional fragments of glass possibly Roman.
A single lump of copper ore possibly Roman.
A fragment of millstone grit quern stone Roman.
A single fragment of Roman Tile (tegula).
A moderate amount of daub possibly Roman.
An abundance of cremated bone fragments.
An abundance of charcoal flecks and pieces of charcoal

Trench 4
This trench also revealed: a moderate amount of fire cracked pebbles.
Occasional pieces of lead waste.
A fragment of Roman Tile (tegula).
Occasional fragments of cremated bone.
An abundance of charcoal and charcoal flecks.

Trench 5
This trench revealed far less artifactual evidence than the other nevertheless it did produce: Occasional pieces of lead waste.
Occasional fire cracked pebbles.
A piece of fashioned bronze (probably Roman)
A piece of tapped slag
A lead object, possibly a Roman weight (pers comm Dr JP Wild)

7.4 Considering the small amount of area actually excavated a large amount of artifacts were discovered leading to the conclusion that a vast amount of Roman and hopefully Iron Age material is there still to be discovered. In the adjacent field to the Old Vicarage a lead object was located by use of a metal detector(pers comm Mr Peter Hodgson) which has been identified as a Roman spindle whorl. In addition, a coin from the reign of the Emperor Vespasian (69-79AD) was discovered in the field adjacent to the Church and less than 50m from the site.

8. Conclusion

8.1 The excavation evidence has confirmed the presence of a large fortified ditched enclosure suggestive in style of an Iron Age hillfort and similar in proportion to the hillforts in neighbouring Derbyshire. The single sherd of Iron Age pottery and the abundance of fire cracked pebbles tend to support this suggestion. It appears from the artifacts discovered from the upper fills of the ditch that the site was later occupied during the Roman period possibly at the same time the Romans occupied the site now known as Melandra castle near Glossop, approximately five miles from the site at Mellor. What type of Roman presence was at Mellor is yet to be confirmed, ie either civilian or military, but considering the strategic location of the site and the period of occupation, it is quite likely to be military. The site is of the highest regional importance and on a national level will make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the periods present at this site. On a local level the importance is unprecedented with no other like sites in the Stockport Borough or even the Greater Manchester County.

9. Recommendations

9.1 Due to the lack of understanding that we have relating to the Iron Age and Roman periods in the Greater Manchester area and in particular the Borough of Stockport, this site has the potential to provide a great many of the answers to the development of these periods. The site also has the potential to reveal a veritable feast of Roman and Iron Age artifacts.

9.2 It is important now the chance has arisen to enhance the understanding of these periods. This can be achieved by further excavation undertaken around the Church and Old Vicarage areas at Mellor.

9.3 The site has a massive educational and research potential, that could be undertaken over a five year period aided by interaction with the local community, schools and university undergraduates, all under the supervision of the professional archaeological staff from the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit.