

TRIAL EXCAVATIONS AT SILVERLANDS, BUXTON, 1984

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SUMMARY

From January to March, 1984, trial excavations were carried out at Silverlands, Buxton, in advance of proposed development. It was hoped that these might confirm the hypothesis that here lay the site of the Roman fort. Although no traces of Roman occupation were found, this area of Buxton remains the most likely location for the fort.

INTRODUCTION

Although it has long been suspected that there was a Roman fort at Buxton, its site has long remained elusive (Tristram, 1916; Hart, 1981: 87f.). In 1983, a magnetometer survey by A. and P. Aspinall of Bradford University on a small area of waste land at the eastern end of Silverlands revealed a large linear anomaly immediately to the west of and running parallel to the steep valley slope, in a north-south direction. It was tentatively suggested that this anomaly was caused by the ditch of the Roman fort. The location of the Silverlands site (Fig. 1), at the north-eastern corner of the plateau-like Upper Buxton shelf, would have ideally suited ancient military requirements, since it is naturally defended to the north and east by precipitous slopes, and has good views along the valley and to the north. A levelled track leads to the north-eastern corner of the site, up its northern slope, and has been thought to be Roman in origin (Tristram, 1916: 91f.; Wroe, 1982: 54). A short distance to the east of the site, around the upper end of Holker Road, a number of Roman finds were made during house-building (Tristram, 1916). Furthermore, it is rumoured that a complete Roman pot was found in the allotments immediately south of the site. This was not reported to Buxton Museum, and was apparently taken to the U.S.A. by the finder; a Roman silver ring was also found here recently and sold privately (M. Bishop, Director of Buxton Museum, *personal communication*). In 1984, as a result of proposals to develop the site, a series of trial excavations was carried out. In 1986, houses were built there.

THE EXCAVATION

The area available for excavation was centred at SK 06407340, on flat waste land immediately above the crest of the steep-sided valley of the river Wye at 315 metres O.D. (Fig. 1). Before excavation it was clear that the site had been disturbed. In the south-eastern corner, where the anomaly had been discovered, was a disused allotment similar to those still in use immediately to the south. Elsewhere, in its eastern half, the site had been levelled by tipping, with material having been added up to a depth of 2.5 metres. The whole site was littered with rubble and recent rubbish. The excavations were conducted during the period January-March, 1984. Seven small trenches were opened (Fig. 2): Trench A was dug to investigate the magnetic anomaly; Trenches B-F to search for evidence of Roman occupation. A small trench (G) was also dug across the northern track to investigate its age and character.

Trench A (Fig. 3)

This measured 10.0 x 3.0 metres, and was dug east-west across the magnetic anomaly discovered in 1983. This anomaly ran through the eastern half of the trench. The area had been used as an allotment at some time during recent years. Near the western end of the trench was an earthen

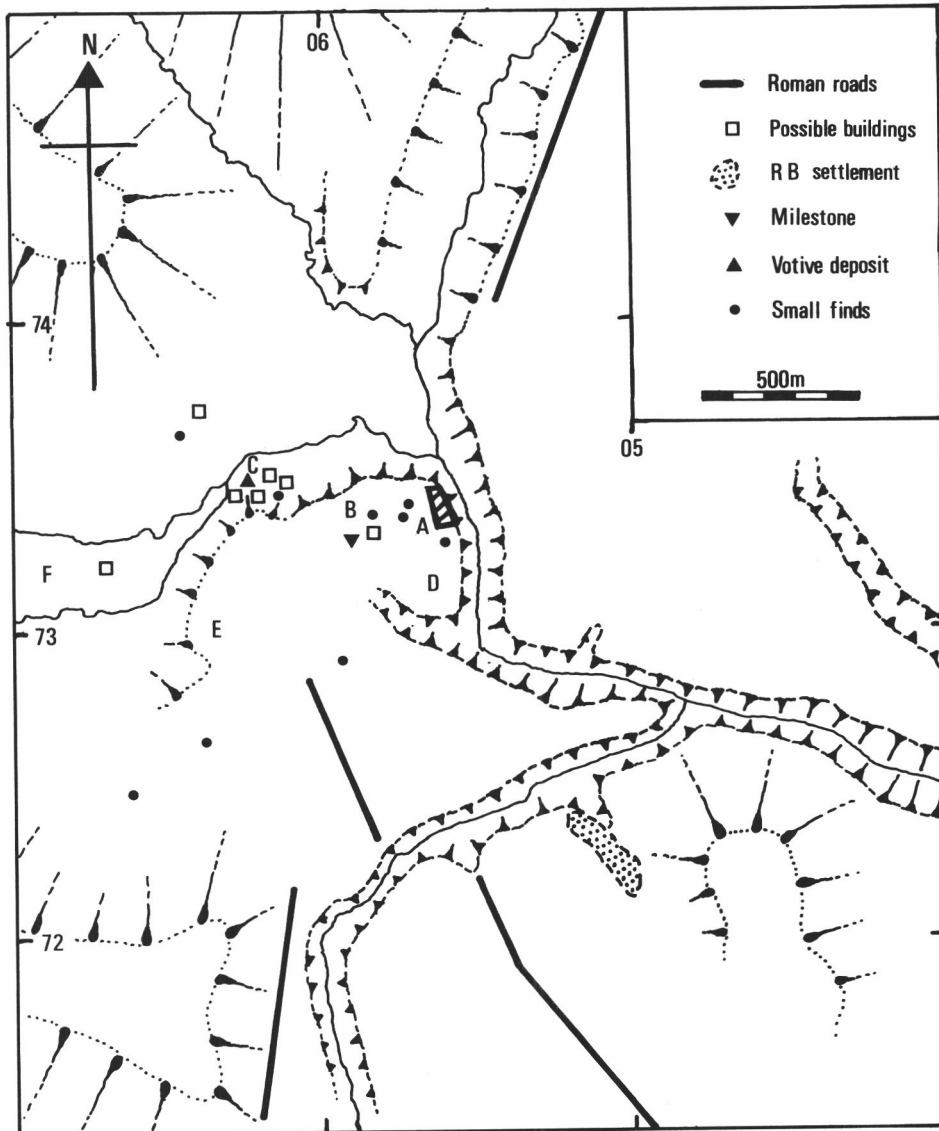


Fig. 1 Roman Buxton and the location of the Silverlands excavation. A: 1984 excavations (see also Fig. 2); B: Holker Road; C: natural springs; D: Silverlands School; E: Bath Road; F: Lismore Fields.

path, revetted to the east by timber planks. To the west of the path the black loam topsoil was approximately 5.0-22.0 cms thick. The bottom 10.0-25.0 cms of this layer contained large quantities of limestone gravel (average 0.5 cm in diameter), which appears to have been added to improve the drainage of the allotment. The topsoil contained one small sherd of Romano-British pottery (Finds, no. 1), a flint flake (no. 2) and a large number of late-nineteenth/twentieth century finds.

The orange-brown clayey loam subsoil was devoid of finds or features. The subsoil overlay

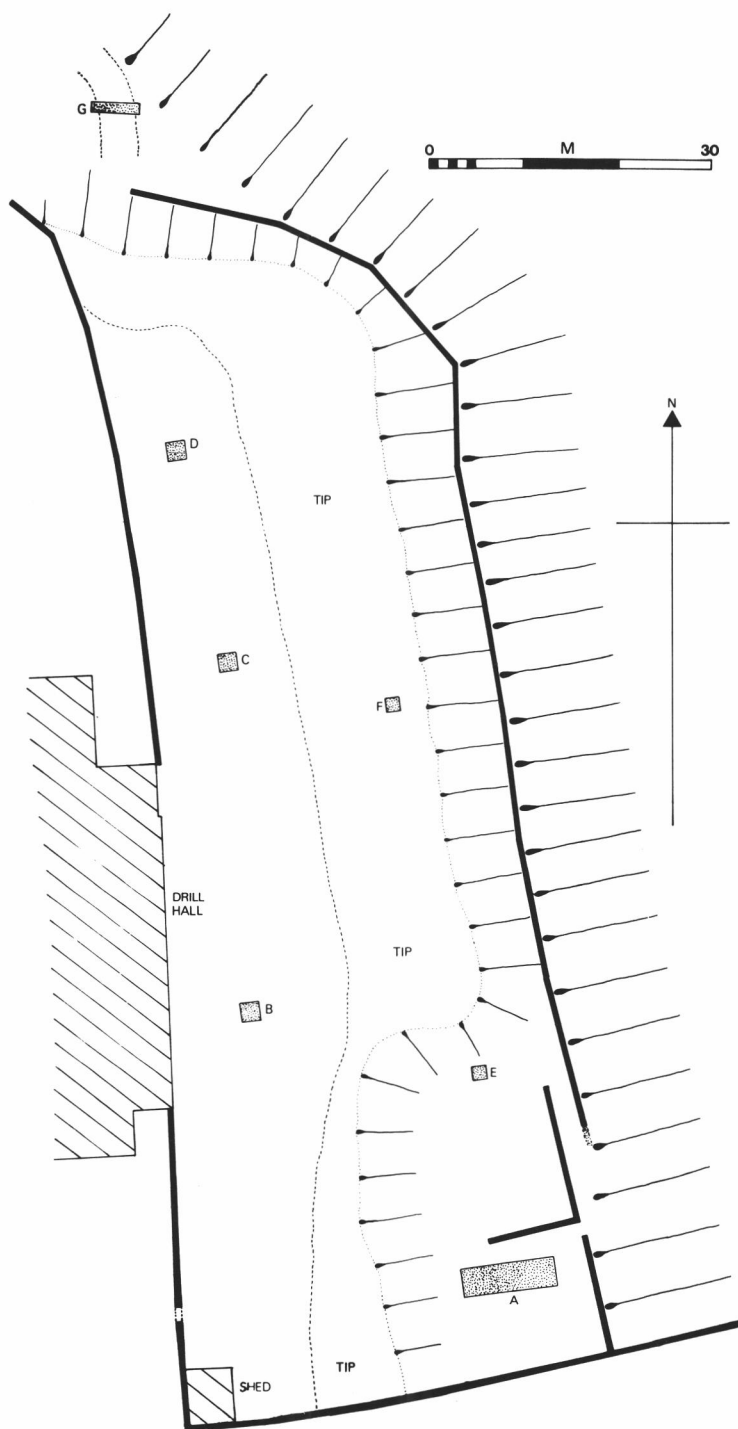


Fig. 2 Silverlands: general plan showing location of trial trenches.

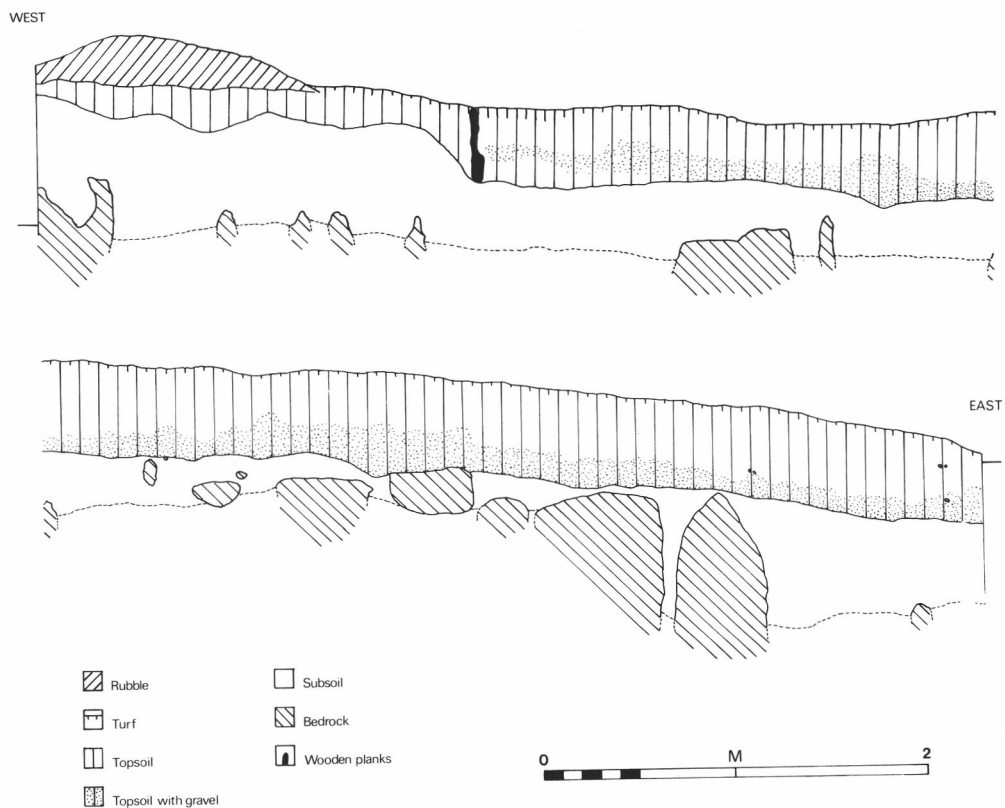


Fig. 3 Silverlands: northern section of Trench A.

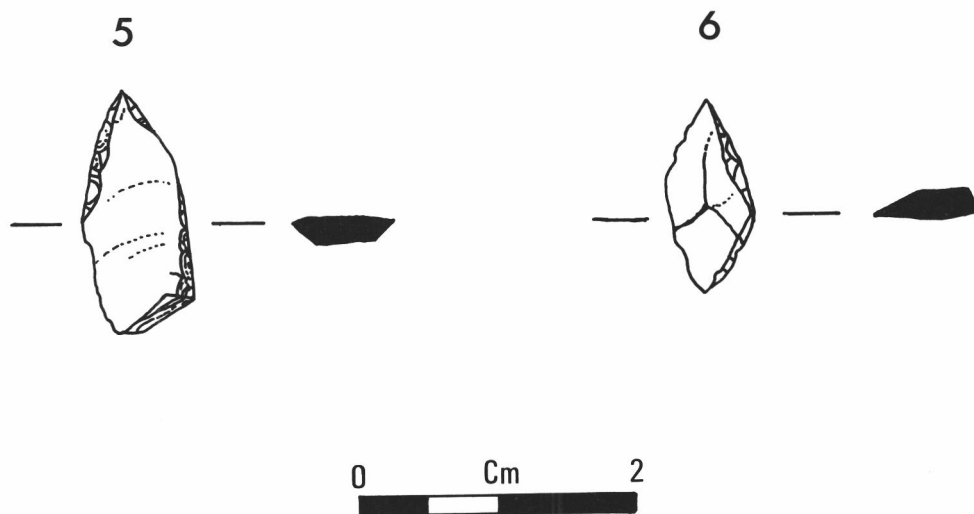


Fig. 4 Silverlands: microliths from Trench G.

limestone bedrock which had deep solution fissures. These were more pronounced to the east, where the presence of a particularly deep fissure explained the magnetic anomaly here.

Trench B

This measured 2.0 x 2.0 metres. Under 15.0-25.00 cms of topsoil were found layers of Victorian tip-débris, up to 20.0 cms thick, composed primarily of ashes. Towards the base these were mixed with a dark brown sticky humus, containing a large quantity of household rubbish, including sherds, bone, metalwork, glass and slag. To the south-east was a protuberance of limestone bedrock, which must have outcropped before tipping began. Elsewhere beneath the tip was a buried soil which contained a few Victorian sherds. This overlay an orange-brown clayey sub-soil.

Trench C

This measured 2.0 x 2.0 metres. The topsoil was 10.0-25.0 cms thick and contained a few Victorian sherds and a flint flake (Finds, no. 3). The topsoil rested either directly on bedrock, or on patches of the usual orange-brown clayey subsoil in the bedrock fissures.

Trench D

This measured 2.0 x 2.0 metres. The topsoil was 15.0-20.0 cms thick, and contained a few Victorian sherds; it overlay the usual subsoil, which was 30.0-45.0 cms thick.

Trench E

This measured 1.5 x 1.5 metres. The topsoil was 20.0-25.0 cms thick, and overlay the usual subsoil, which was 15.0-20.0 cms thick. No finds were made.

Trench F

This measured 1.5 x 1.5 metres, and was located on the tip. The top 60.0 cms comprised rubble, mortar, ashes and several twentieth century artefacts. This level overlay a layer of limestone blocks in a dark humus containing charcoal and Victorian sherds. This second layer was at least 60.0 cms thick: its bottom was not reached.

Trench G

This measured 5.2 x 1.0 metres, and crossed the track which runs diagonally up the steep valley slope from the west. The thin (c. 10.0 cms deep) topsoil overlay a 10.0 cm thick, dark brown loam, within which were patches of rounded (c. 8.0 x 8.0 cms) limestones. These displayed no coherent structure, and may well be the remnants of a cobbled surface of the track. At the western edge of the trench was a limestone block, which appears to be a solitary surviving kerbstone. The topsoil contained a large number of modern sherds, mostly of NAAFI cups. The layer below also produced a few recent sherds, together with two later-mesolithic microliths and a broken flint blade (Finds, nos. 4-6). The loam was underlain by the usual subsoil, containing no features or artefacts.

THE FINDS

1. Small rim-sherd of Romano-British type, possibly abraded black-burnished ware. Found in the topsoil of Trench A.
2. Flake of translucent yellow-brown flint. Length 20.5 mm; breadth 13.5 mm. Found in the topsoil of Trench A.
3. Flake of heavily patinated flint. Length 34.0 mm; breadth 11.5 mm. Found in the topsoil of Trench C.
4. Broken blade of dark grey translucent flint with heavy white patination. Length 12.0 mm (broken); breadth 10.5 mm. Found in the stony loam of Trench G.
5. Microlith of later-mesolithic type (Fig. 4): light grey translucent flint with slight patination; retouched on dorsal surface. Length 16.5 mm; breadth 7.0 mm. Found in the stony loam of Trench G.
6. Microlith of later-mesolithic type (Fig. 4): grey flint with heavy white patination. Length 13.5 mm; breadth 6.0 mm. Found in the stony loam of Trench G.

DISCUSSION

The trial excavations satisfactorily proved that the magnetic anomaly was not a ditch but a natural fissure. No evidence of Roman occupation was found; the only Roman artefact was a small sherd found in the topsoil of Trench A (Finds, no. 1). There was no evidence from Trench G that the track which enters the site from the north was of any antiquity. Although badly eroded it appears to have been about four metres wide and had an insubstantial cobbled surface defined at the edges by a kerb of limestone blocks laid in the topsoil. Several of these kerbs are visible further along the track below Trench G where they are retained by a limestone wall. In the nineteenth century, the steep slopes here were apparently part of Silven Cliff Park, and the track may well have been remodelled at that time to provide a walkway along the slope. However, the track has earlier origins than the park, as is indicated by an estate map dated 1800 (Tristram, 1916: 92). It was truncated by the adjacent railway, which opened in 1892.

The only artefacts of any antiquity found during the excavation, apart from the Roman rim-sherd, were the two later-mesolithic microliths and three flint flakes. Little can be said of these as all were in the topsoil and no ancient features were discovered. It is ironic that in the two recent instances where excavators have searched for Roman Buxton (at Lismore Fields and Silverlands) the finds have been prehistoric: at Lismore Fields (Fig. 1: F) the results have been more spectacular than at Silverlands (Garton, 1987).

CONCLUSION

The excavations at Silverlands have done little except to prove that the Roman fort was not situated at the north-eastern corner of the Upper Buxton shelf. However, the most likely site for a fort, assuming that one existed, is still in this general area. Such an hypothesis makes good topographical sense, and is supported by the general orientation of known Roman roads (Fig. 1; Hart, 1981: 88; Wroe, 1982: 72). The number of Roman finds around Holker Road (Fig. 1: B) — comprising building foundations, and artefacts — might suggest that the most likely site is somewhere here, or perhaps slightly further west, around Buxton Market Place. If this is the case, the fort would have overlooked the natural springs a short distance to the north-west in the valley below (Fig. 1: C), which are known to have been used in Roman times. An alternative suggestion, based purely on topographical reasoning, is that the fort lay on the easily defensible south-eastern corner of the shelf around Silverlands School (Fig. 1: D); and a third possible site, suggested by Tristram (1916), is the south-western end of the shelf around Bath Road (Fig. 1: E). However, the lack of Roman finds in the vicinity of these last two locations tells against them (Hart, 1981: fig. 8.5). The identification of Roman structures in all these areas will be difficult because of post-medieval building. However, any opportunity for further trial excavations should not be ignored.

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