

A Chester Mithraic Figure Recovered?

by B. J. N. Edwards

In 1967, Mr. T. F. Kelly, of Appley Bridge, near Wigan, reported that he had in his possession a sculptured stone figure which reminded him of a small Roman statue he had once seen in Lancaster Museum⁽¹⁾. He felt that the figure, if Roman, should be displayed together with other Roman material, and, in order to confirm its nature, the present writer visited Mr. Kelly and examined and photographed the figure. It was subsequently placed on loan in Ribchester Museum, but has never been fully published as a result of certain impreciseness about its discovery⁽²⁾. Recent information, however, makes the publication of this note desirable.

The figure is of Cautopates, the Mithraic attendant with the dowsed torch, and is *c.* 2'6" (0.75 m) high as extant. It is carved in very high relief, but not completely in the round, from sandstone. It is headless, but a hole in its upper surface contains iron, lead and ? cement. There are traces of colour remaining—a bluish-green on the 'skirt' and red on the horizontal folds of the 'cape' which run across the chest. The red colour in this area appears to have been applied on top of the same bluish-green of which traces remain elsewhere. There seems to be no reason at all to doubt the authenticity of the figure.

The details of the finding, as they were related to me in 1967, were as follows. The figure was ploughed up 'about 30 years ago' (i.e. *c.* 1937) at about SD 523088 during deep ploughing (*c.* 2'0" or 0.6 m). Mr. Kelly had frequently searched the area for the head, but had failed to find it, and was also quite categorical that he had found no pottery either.

The figure thus remained an enigma, possibly related to the putative Roman site at Wigan, until it was suggested by Mr. C. M. Daniels and Mr. J. Harris that it might, in fact, be a figure from Chester described and illustrated by John Horsley⁽³⁾. Comparison of Horsley's engraving with an outline drawing made from a photograph of Mr. Kelly's figure (See Fig. 21) shows differences in the details of the garments and the precise position of the legs. The similarity of the shape of the base and of the plinth out of which the figure rises, however, leads me to think that the Chester attribution is probably correct. The fact that Horsley's illustration shows a head need not detain us. If it were present in the eighteenth century it could easily have been lost since, but its appearance in the engraving is no proof of its presence—such 'restorations' were frequent in early antiquarian drawings.

If the identification is correct, one is led to wonder how a figure which was at Chester *c.* 1725⁽⁴⁾ came to be in the ground at Upholland some two hundred years later. Certainty is not possible, but the eighteenth century ownership of the Chester figure may provide a clue. Horsley notes that it belonged to 'Mr. Prescott'. The most likely candidate appears at first to be Henry Prescott(t), described at different times as Deputy Registrar, Registrar, and Vicar General and Official Principal to Bishop Gastrell of Chester. He was said to have been 'an antiquary, and friend of Dr. Leigh, the author of the *Natural History of Lancashire, Cheshire, and the Peak, in Derbyshire* (1700)'.⁽⁵⁾ He, however, died at Wrexham in 1718⁽⁶⁾. The probability is, therefore, that 'Mr. Prescott' was his son John, bondsman for the administration of his estate when his will was proved in 1719⁽⁷⁾.

However, from our point of view, the important thing is that both men were members of the family of Prescott(t) of Ayrfield, the latter house being almost exactly a quarter of a mile from Mr. Kelly's find-spot. Fig. 22 shows part of Upholland as it was at the time of the Tithe Commutation Award in 1845⁽⁸⁾ with Ayrfield itself indicated and land belonging at that time to members of the Prescott family *not* stippled. It will be seen that the actual find-spot lies in land not then in the possession of the family, but that Prescott land approaches within about 100 feet. In the absence of an eighteenth century Prescott estate plan, it may well be that land including that which concerns us had been previously held but disposed of by 1845. Figure 23 shows the relationship between the parish of Upholland, the find-spot and Ayrfield.

There seems, then, to be quite a good case, albeit entirely circumstantial, for suggesting that the Chester figure of Cautopates which Horsley saw was transported by one of the Prescott family from Chester to the ancestral home at Upholland, and was subsequently lost (? and beheaded) only to be rediscovered by Mr Kelly nearly two centuries later. It is interesting to note that the Dr. Leigh previously mentioned as a friend of Henry Prescott published an engraving of a figure,



Fig. 21 Comparison of Horsley's engraving with a sketch from a photograph of the Upholland figure

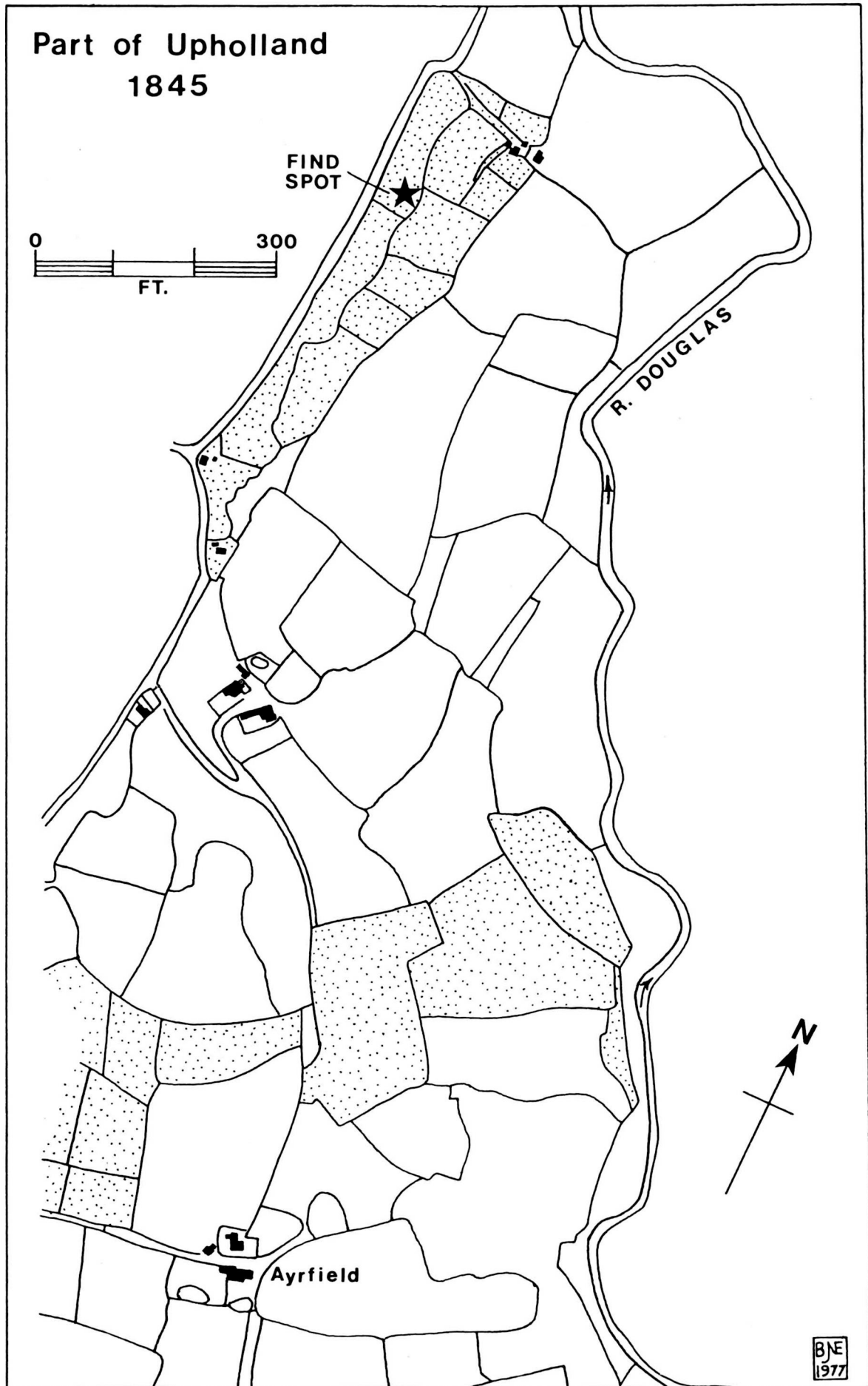


Fig. 22 Part of Upholland from the Tithe Award, 1845

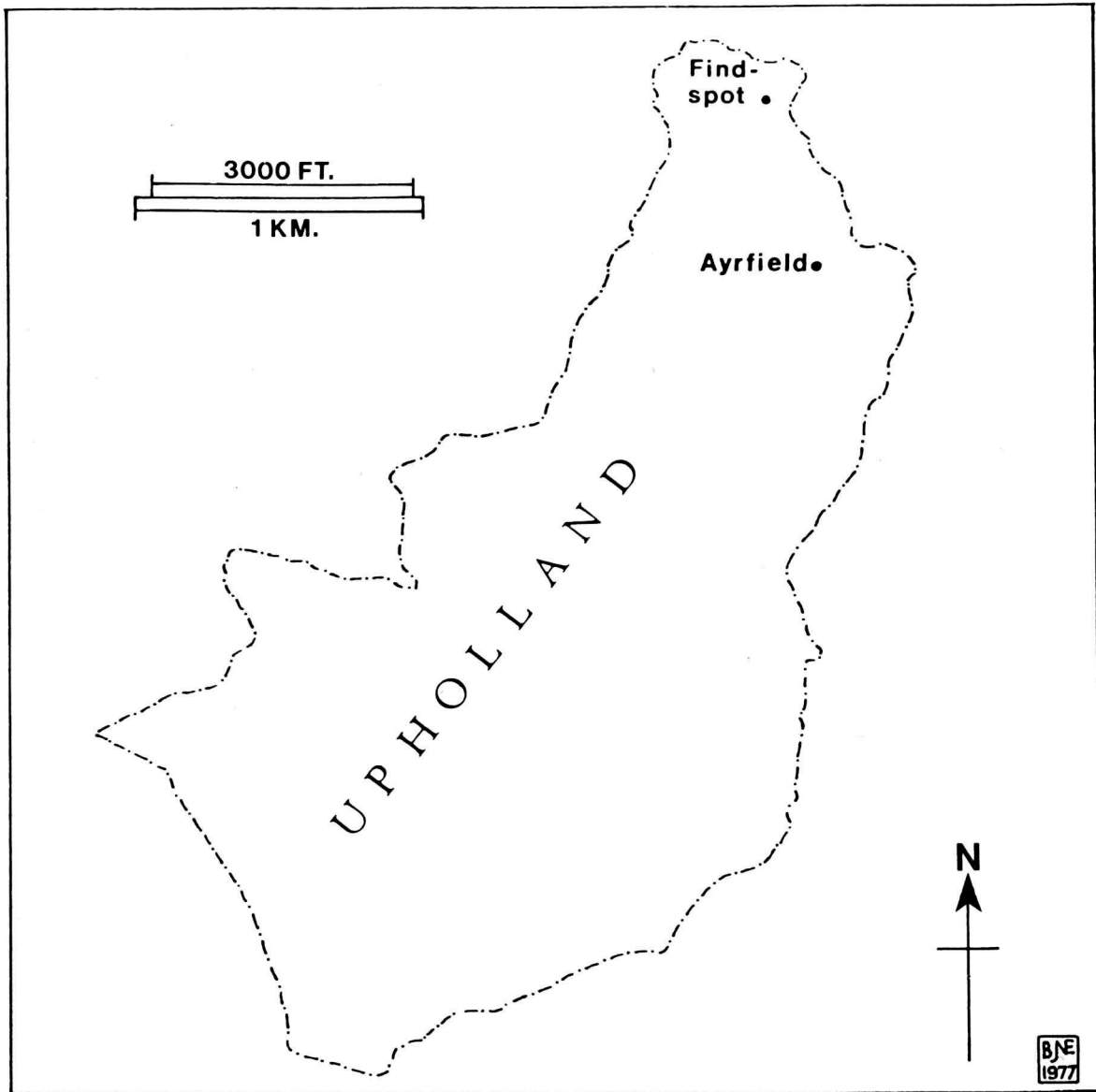


Fig. 23 The parish of Upholland showing the relationship of Ayrfield and the find-spot

said by him to be of Victory, and 'found near *Up-holland* in *Lancashire* by a Countryman as he was plowing'⁽⁹⁾; Watkin, no doubt correctly, considered it to be a cupid⁽¹⁰⁾.

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REFERENCES

1. This was, in fact, the small figure from the mausoleum group discovered at Scotforth in 1794. See Edwards, B. J. N., 'Roman finds from "Contrebis"', *Trans. Cumberland Westmorland Antiq Archaeol Soc.*, n.s., 71 (1971) 17-34, particularly 27-32 and Pl. V.
2. A brief note has appeared in *Mithras* (New Haven, Conn.) 1:1 (1972) 8. The attribution of the figure to the civil parish of Dalton in a paper by Professor G. D. B. Jones (*Northern History* 3 (1968) 16) was due to a slip on the part of the present writer.
3. Horsley, J., *Britannia Romana* (1732) Cheshire V and p. 316.
4. For the rapid preparation of Horsley's work see Professor E. B. Birley's Introduction to the 1974 re-issue of *Britannia Romana* (Newcastle upon Tyne) p.v.
5. Raines, F. R. (ed.) *Notitia Cestriensis. . . by the Right Rev. Francis Gastrell, D. D.*, vol. II, pt. I (Chetham Society, vol. 19 (1849)) 9, fn. 2.
6. Genealogical Table in Hill, E. P., *The Chronicles of the Prescotts of Ayrfield* (ed. Prescott, C. D., 1937). I am indebted to Mr R. Sharpe France, formerly Lancashire County Archivist, for this reference.
7. Administration bond in Cheshire Record Office. Horsley refers to the ownership of other Chester inscriptions in the following terms (*Britannia Romana*, 314) 'I [Two bricks] one in Mr. *Thoresby's* collection, presented to him by the late Mr. *Prescot*, and the other in that of the reverend Mr. *Prescot*, one of the prebendaries at Chester; . . . II. . . altar. . . in the possession of the reverend Mr. *Prescot*, the worthy son of the late learned Mr. *Prescot* of the same city'. John Prescott(t), b. 1690, was vicar of Waverton (4 miles SE of Chester) and prebendary of Chester (Genealogical Table cited in note 6).
8. Lancashire Record Office, ref. DRL 1/37.
9. Leigh, C., *The Natural History of Lancashire, Cheshire, and the Peak, in Derbyshire. . .* (1700) Bk. 3, Tab. (Pl.) 1, No. 3 and p. 81. The figure is also engraved on the margin of Herman Moll's map *The County Palatine of Lancaster* (1724) (Whitaker, H., *A Descriptive List of the Printed Maps of Lancashire, 1577-1900* (Chetham Society, n.s., 101 (1938)) No. 172). Moll was the engraver of the map in Leigh's book, and probably of the plates.
10. Watkin, W. T., *Roman Lancashire* (1883) 230.