

Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society Newsletter: May 2013

Archaeology in Birmingham

Metchley Roman Fort and the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Plaza

The final part of the development of the new Queen Elizabeth Hospital was completed in November. This is a plaza, a public space between the new hospital entrance, the University of Birmingham's Medieval School, University railway station and the University's main campus. The plaza includes the main pedestrian to the new hospital entrance.

The location and extent of the Roman fort is known from remains that survived above ground into the 20th century and from archaeological excavations in the 1930s, 1950s, 1960s and most recently between 1996 and 2010 as part of the new hospital and developments on the University campus. The fort was originally constructed in the middle of the first century AD and the site remained occupied into the second century. Excavations have shown that it began as a square fort defended by rampart with a double ditch in front, and entered by timber gateways with towers. It was subsequently enlarged with annexes, also defended by ramparts and ditches. Later, a smaller fort, defended by a rampart and single ditch, was built inside the earlier one. The fort contained timber buildings, including barrack blocks, granaries, workshops, the headquarters building and the commandant's house.

The Plaza contains the northern part of the fort, which was designated a scheduled monument in 2002, and includes the defensive lines of the first fort, the northern annexe and the later, smaller fort. The innovative design of the plaza protects archaeological remains below ground whilst interpreting them above ground. The defensive lines have been indicated in the Plaza design by banks representing the fort's ramparts, and the line of the main north-south road through the fort has been indicated. Interpretation panels explain the site to visitors.

Excavations on this part of the site have shown that the archaeological remains of the Roman fort are very shallow, in places as little as 100mm below the present ground surface. The design and construction of the path and the banks along the line of the fort's ramparts has therefore avoided intrusion into the existing ground surface. A geotextile membrane was been laid on the surface and the banks and path built up from that. Machinery used for constructing the banks moved along each stretch of bank as it was built to avoid travelling directly on the geotextile. Service ducts and bases for benches and lighting alongside the path are contained in the built up material, so that they do not intrude into the ground surface.

The plaza is publicly accessible at all times. It is on the other side of Vincent Drive from University rail station.

Visit www.birmingham.gov.uk/archaeology for general information about archaeology in Birmingham and information about new discoveries.



Metchley: Representations of the forts defences and interpretation panel



Archaeology in Warwickshire

Archaeologists working throughout Warwickshire over the past year have all been severely affected by the endless wet weather followed by the continuing cold snap and snow. Personally I have never worked outside in such a miserable year and have seen first-hand the problems it has caused.

Work at Mancetter

Archaeology Warwickshire recently watched a large amount of soil stripping in Mancetter, just to the north of the vexillation fortress. This exposed relatively small number of Roman features, characterised by some long stretches of relatively narrow ditch containing Roman pottery. Although a preliminary date on the pottery suggests it is from the 1st century AD, and therefore probably associated with the army, it is still somewhat uncertain what the ditches represent and if they might be associated with a vicus attached to the fortress. A single very large ditch with a curving corner *is* almost certainly military in origin and seems most likely to be part of a previously unrecorded military annexe on the north of the fortress. Fortunately a single sherd of unabraded Samian ware, the most useful kind of pottery you could hope for, was found at the very bottom of the ditch and is likely to help considerably in dating its construction.

At the same time a further site was being excavated by Alex Jones (who gave the recent talk on Metchley) on part of the north-west defences of the fortress. This has exposed the two known ditches along with a previously unknown third, outer, ditch at this point. A note by Alex will appear in the next newsletter.

Mancetter has a particularly tricky geology for archaeologists to deal with as ditches often do not show clearly when the ground is stripped down to geological natural. The soil must also be acidic as it attacks pottery and metal finds and both sites were plagued with water filled features.

Staffordshire Hoard

Further work was carried out on the hoard site in November 2012. The work was commissioned by Steve Dean of Staffordshire County Council and by English Heritage. It was the first time since 2009 that the field had been ploughed and the detector survey was essentially carried out to find if anything had been missed from the previous work and if additional finds existed which were not related to the known hoard site.

The work was carried out by Archaeology Warwickshire and consisted of a metal detector survey, in association with a team of expert detectorists (including those who found the site of the Battle of Bosworth) and a fieldwalking survey. This was carried out with the help of volunteers from Stoke on Trent Museum and locals from Hammerwich.

No new hoards were discovered, probably to the relief of most people involved as the cost of

buying a large number of new items would have been somewhat scary. However, a few items associated with the existing hoard were found. The largest of these was a gold/silver alloy cheekpiece, the pair to the one previously discovered in 2009 by Terry Herbert, the original finder, and the team from Birmingham Archaeology. Other items included a small gold and garnet cross, several small gold and garnet fittings and numerous extremely small silver fragments, probably pieces of the smashed helmet. They include some 'pressblech' foils with images of warriors on them. The larger items had all clearly been ploughed away from the initial hoard site whilst some of the smaller finds were within the backfill of the original excavation. This might seem shocking but if you consider that most were less than 1cm square and less than 1mm thick then you might get an idea of the faintest blip that makes on most metal detectors and how hard they were to find.

The fieldwalking was successful but did not actually find very much of great age. The oldest find was a single Neolithic/Bronze Age flint scraper and the earliest sherd of pottery from the whole site dates from the late 1400s to the early 1500s. The vast bulk of the pottery appears to be late 18th to 19th century and seems to have been dumped on the field along with 'manure' in order to improve the soil. This goes along with Della Hooke's note that the field was still heath until around 1840 and suggests that it had never been farmed throughout the Roman or medieval periods. This was also borne out by the detecting survey which did not find a single Roman or later medieval object.



Detectorists surveying along transects



A fragment of 'pressblech' foil showing part of a shield, suit of mail and spear shaft



Tiny gold and garnet eagle head. Similar objects had previously been found in the hoard and may have come from a single larger item



Small gold and garnet cross shaped mount



A screwed up gold item, possibly a second cross



A wet detectorist holding the second cheekpiece