

Reclaiming the Romans

The Newstead Project



An iron helmet and mask of 1st century AD, found at Newstead. (NMS).

Trimontium

Newstead Roman fort is one of the most important archaeological sites in Scotland. Eighteen centuries ago it was one of the main command centres of the Roman army in Scotland, at the edge of the Empire that extended to Syria and the Sahara. From here at Newstead has come one of the most outstanding collections of objects from anywhere in that massive Empire. The objects give an unmatched picture of the everyday life of the Roman frontier soldier and his companions, from their common wooden tent pegs to awe-inspiring parade armour. Now these form the centrepiece of the National Museums' Roman collections. The finds were made in excavations at the beginning of this century, but from 1989 Newstead is being made the centre of an exciting new programme of field research sponsored by the National

Museums of Scotland, using the most modern scientific techniques.

Newstead (Roman *Trimontium*) lies where the main Roman road north from Hadrian's Wall, Dere Street, crossed the River Tweed. Its position, just outside modern Melrose, is dominated by the three peaks of the Eildon Hills, which gave the site its Roman name. Founded when the Roman armies of conquest moved into Scotland around 80 AD, it was a large fort, occupied by cavalry soldiers.

The First Excavations

Credit for the first investigation of Roman Newstead lies with Dr James Curle, a solicitor from Melrose, and the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. In pioneering excavations between 1905 and 1910, Curle revealed the outline of the Roman fort, details of internal buildings, three annexe enclosures attached to the main fort, and a large temporary camp for the Roman army on the march.

But the most remarkable discoveries came from an enigmatic set of deep pits. Curle records the excavation of 107 deep pits mostly in the South annexe. The deepest went 36 feet down; most were cut to below the water table. From them came most of the finds that now make up the Newstead collection. The waterlogged fills of the pits preserved objects in specially fine condition. The surfaces of iron and bronze remain smooth and unpitted by corrosion. Organic materials - such as wood and leather - have survived their normal fate of decay in the soil.

The range of the collection is immense. Two intricately decorated bronze wine jugs show how the refinements of Roman life reached even this remote part of the Imperial frontier. The series of three parade helmets, two with face-masks, stand for the highest quality of the display equipment of the Roman army, together with two decorated leather headpieces, or chamfreins, for the horses themselves. We can imagine the pomp and ceremony of the Roman army, going on as a part of army life alongside the routine business of patrolling and fighting enemies.

Armour and weapons, pots and pans, show the soldiers' everyday tasks. Some of the most evocative pieces are the blacksmiths' and carpenters' tools. They are instantly recognizable - you could pick them up and use them today. This immediacy jumps across the centuries to make us feel so close to the Roman soldiers who came north to patrol the Tweed valley.

James Curle published a full account of his discoveries in 1911. Since then, Sir Ian Richmond excavated two small trenches in 1947 and air photography has revealed a startling complexity of temporary camps around the permanent Roman

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fort. But in recent years the most active researchers on the site have been a group of dedicated amateur field workers, who have recorded many finds brought to the surface by ploughing.

New Developments

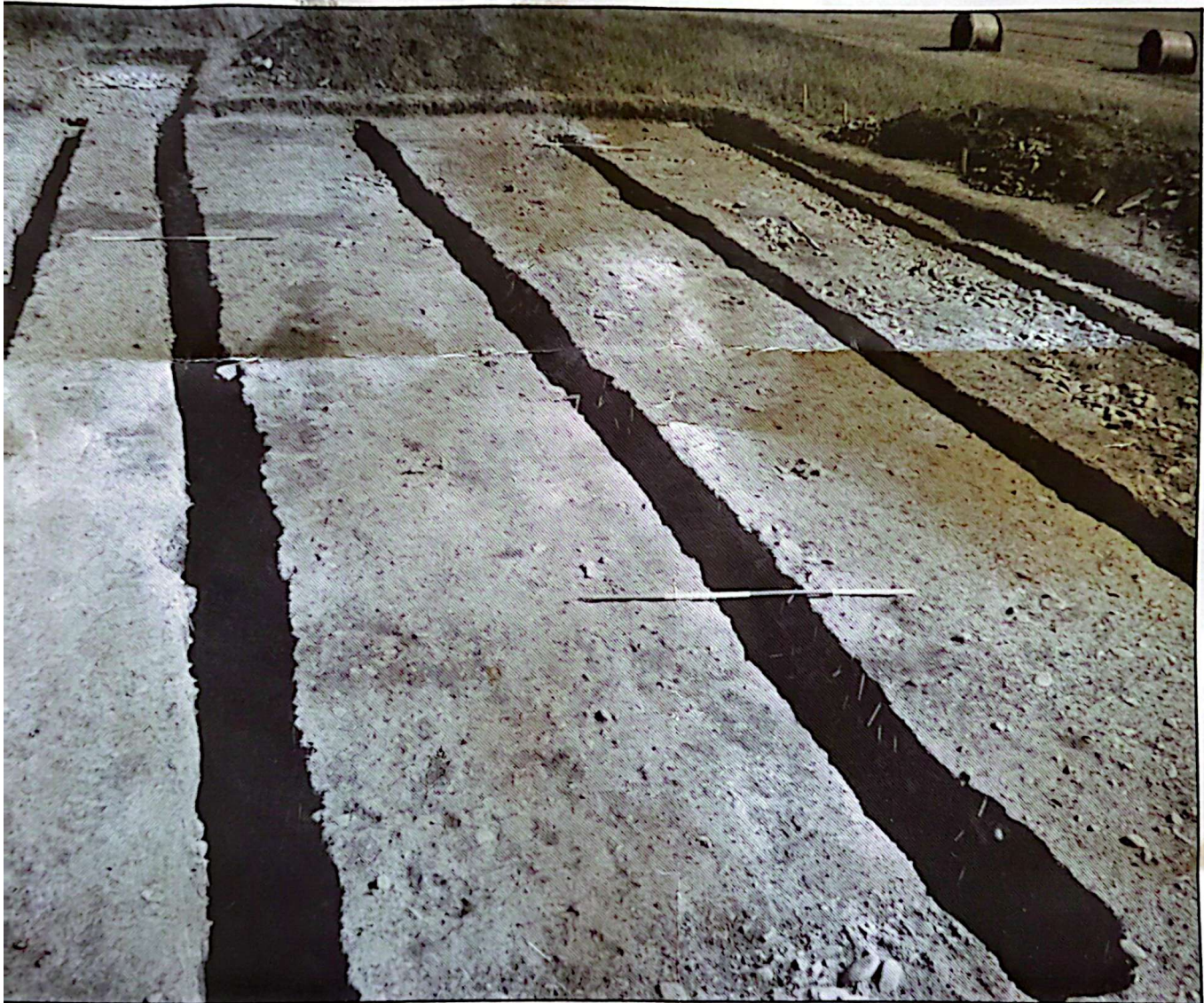
The new research programme began in a small excavation in the western part of the fort in 1987. Bradford University's Department of Archaeological Sciences found evidence for iron working on a big scale in the second century AD and showed that much of the archaeology remained untouched by Curle and undisturbed by ploughing.

There were still many questions to be answered. Although Curle's work had set new standards for its time, the science of technology has progressed dramatically in three quarters of a century. We know now how to record and study new sorts of archaeological evidence - such as carbonized seeds for

information on crops, and metal-working slags for information on technology. Archaeologists today also want to find out more about how the lives of the local native people were changed by the arrival of the invading Romans, which means extending the range of study to the whole region. In these ways new understanding can be given to the early discoveries.

These are the aims of the Newstead Project, which had its first full season in 1989. It is sponsored by the National Museums of Scotland and led by Dr Rick Jones, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Archaeological Sciences at Bradford University.

Since modern excavation is destructive as well as expensive, the Newstead Project is committed to making the fullest use of non-destructive methods of recovering information. Plotting the details of sites seen in air photos on to maps is one way. Geophysical survey is another. In 1989 the Project used magnetometer survey, resistivity survey and ground-sensing radar to show the pattern of archaeological features buried beneath the surface, without disturbing them at all.



The area dug at Newstead in 1989. The black lines mark the trenches dug by Curle, who cut through but didn't identify the traces of blacksmiths' workshops. (Newstead Project).

In 1989, five sites in the region were thoroughly surveyed geophysically, as well as work at Newstead in the north-western part of the fort and in the South and East Annexes. The results were outstandingly successful, dramatically upgrading what we knew from air photos. They have shown

the details of the defences of prehistoric settlements and internal features such as probable houses. This is the maximum that can be got without excavation.

One of the excavations in 1989 investigated Red Rig, a roughly circular enclosure, about half a mile south of

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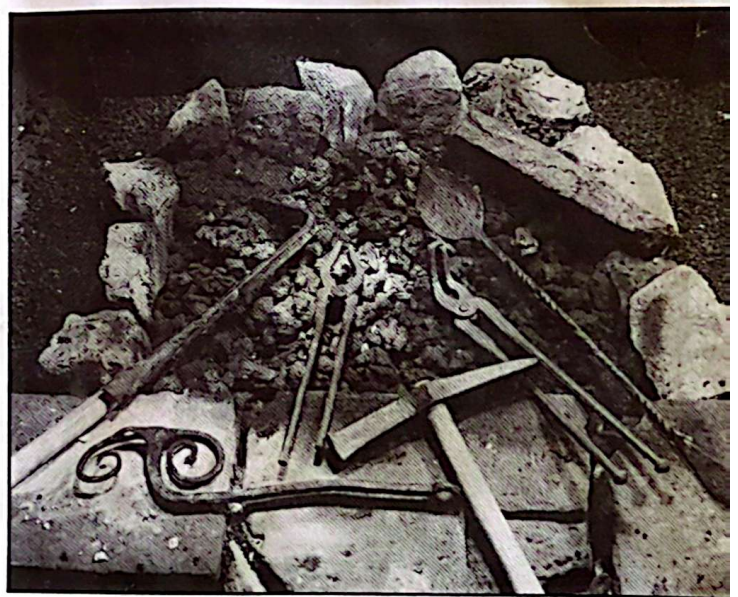
Bronze cooking vessels, probably used by Roman soldiers to prepare their meals. (NMS).

Newstead Roman fort. The most surprising discovery was that the settlement was occupied at the same time as the Roman fort. The people who lived there used Roman pottery and were working iron, providing direct comparisons with what we now know was happening in and around the Roman fort.

At the Roman site of Newstead itself, we knew little or nothing about what the three annexes were used for, even though they covered a far bigger area than the fort itself. Yet it was in the South Annexe that Curle had found most of his deep pits. This was chosen for the 1989 excavation. A sequence of streets and wooden workshops was found, probably mostly for iron-working, and dating to the second century AD. To the tools used by the Roman blacksmiths and to the weapons, armour and tools they made and repaired, which are such prominent parts of the Newstead Collection, we can now add the smithies where the blacksmiths were working.

Before both excavations geophysical surveys were carried out to define exactly where were the best places to dig. The survey in the South Annexe and the excavation now show that the area was intensively occupied, probably mostly by similar workshops. It must have been a kind of Roman industrial estate, serving the needs of the frontier army far beyond Newstead itself.

The 1989 excavation also located the trenches dug by Curle in 1906, showing that his workmen had trenched the site very energetically, and had probably found all the deep pits in the South Annexe, as he claimed. The top of one of the richest of these, Pit 22, was uncovered. It had been 23 feet deep, with a fill that contained an iron sickle, bridle pieces, leather, skulls of horse and dog, red deer antlers, and three of the four Newstead helmets. The new excavation found traces of structures around the top of this pit, and fixed its date as probably contemporary with the blacksmith's workshop next to it.



Blacksmith's tools used at the Roman fort at Newstead. (NMS).

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The top of Curle's Pit 22 exposed in 1989. At the bottom Curle found a large collection of material, including the helmet illustrated. (Newstead Project).

Reading the Evidence

A new interpretation of the pits and their finds can now be proposed. They were probably dug as wells to serve the workshops, as there was a well for each workshop plot in the area examined in 1989. They were later deliberately filled in a ritual way, with rich votive deposits.

The success of the first seasons of the Newstead Project is due not just to the efforts of a large team of archaeologists, but has depended too on the enthusiastic support of the local community in the Borders, not least the landowners and farmers. The Project is committed to communicating its results to a wide public. The 1989 season attracted interest in the media throughout Scotland. The South Annexe excavation was open to the public through the six week season, with a special on site visitor centre. Public interest peaked at an open day that attracted a thousand local people and caused traffic jams in Newstead village.

People find the Roman army and its effects at the edge of a great Empire as fascinating as ever. The Newstead Project is using modern archaeological science to make a modern appreciation of the collection the National Museums already hold. It is perhaps too easy to become complacent about how outstanding the collection is. Decades of display in the Museum have made it familiar. If it were found today, it would provoke international excitement and lavish media coverage.

The quality of the discoveries would make it more than a Roman match for the Coppergate Viking site in York, the inspiration for the Jorvik Viking Centre. Take a fresh look at what riches we have from Roman Newstead, and make time to go and see in action next summer's field season of the Newstead Project.



Re-excavating in 1989 the trenches originally dug in 1906 by James Curle. (Newstead Project).

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