

Amateur who revealed our Roman past

James Curle won fame for his work excavating the fort at Trimontium, as detailed in a new book of his collected letters

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It has taken close on 120 years to learn details of the armour Roman soldiers wore as they patrolled their stoutly built forts along the Scottish border. Last week the National Museums of Scotland revealed a fully completed brass armband, reconstructed from more than a hundred small fragments dug up from the Roman fort at Trimontium, near Melrose, in July 1906. What we saw was the most intact example of its kind, and one of only three known from the Roman empire.

As Fraser Hunter, principal curator of prehistoric and Roman archaeology at the National Museums Scotland, said: "Now that it's been reconstructed, you can picture the legionary who once wore it. It was both protection and status symbol — brass was expensive and would have gleamed like gold on his sword arm. It offers a vivid connection to this important period when Scotland sat on the Roman empire's northern frontier."

That discovery might never have happened had it not been for James Curle, the archaeologist, whose excavations at Newstead in the early 20th century first established the extent of Roman defences, and produced a range of artefacts, from face armour to carved altars, pottery, horse leather, and weaponry, to say nothing of the fort itself, that transformed our understanding of the Roman occupation 2,000 years ago.

Curle was an amateur, a local solicitor from Melrose, but one with a passion for archaeology. It had long been known that there were Roman remains at Newstead, beneath the three pinnacles of the Eildon Hills. By chance two altars had been found in the 18th century.

When Curle, with his brother, Alexander, and the local clerk of works, Alexander Mackie, started

James Curle unveiled a monument at the fort in 1928. Below, how Trimontium would have looked, and a replica of the iron Newstead helmet



work in 1904, they knew nothing "of the extent, or indeed the nature, of the site about to be explored". But he had a sense of its importance, and documented his finds in letters to experts around the world, which have now been published in collected form.

What he was working on was one of the largest Roman military sites in Scotland, north of Hadrian's Wall, covering nearly 15 acres. The ramparts of the fort at its heart were unusual in that they were

"staggered", constructed when Agricola was emperor of Rome in about AD78. It was abandoned at least twice, under sustained attacks from the Caledonian tribes, and was rebuilt under the emperor Domitian with a massive clay rampart.

Abandoned again, it was reoccupied on the orders of Antoninus Pius in about AD140, but on a smaller scale. Then, when the Antonine wall was abandoned, Trimontium was restored to its full size. It was finally abandoned in the

AD180s, under emperor Commodus. One local historian, Alistair Moffat, is scathing about the Roman occupation's achievements. "They saw, burnt, killed, stole and occasionally conquered," he writes, "and then they left a tremendous mess behind them, clearing away native settlements and covering good farmland with the remains of ditches, banks, roads, and other sorts of ancient military debris."

After an excavation that lasted from 1905 to 1910 Curle published a book, entitled *A Roman Frontier Post and its People: the Fort of Newstead in the Parish of Melrose*, which made him world-famous. The Newstead finds were shown in Holyrood Palace to George V and Queen Mary.

Curle was an inveterate collector, fascinated by the coins, rings, lamps, tweezers, wine jar handles with Bacchus heads, all sorts of brooches with attached pins, bracelets, beads, and fancy fittings on horse harnesses.

He sent some of his finds to the British Museum or to Edinburgh.

Some he sold, others he kept and some of it stayed on site, before finally ending up, mainly, at the National Museums of Scotland, where the Trimontium finds dominate the Roman collection.

They can also be seen at the Trimontium Museum in Melrose, established in 1989, displaying more than 200 objects on display on long-term loan from Edinburgh.

Experts today would be horrified at Curle's own restoration methods. Writing to Sir Charles Read, keeper of antiquities at the British Museum, he reveals he has been cleaning a brass helmet with lemon juice, "which I suppose can't do any harm".

In the course of more than 150 letters, Curle not only reveals the extraordinary range of the artefacts he digs up, but explains convincingly what they were, how they were used, and the period they covered, winning the respect of experts across Europe. Although the first letters he received back from the British Museum have a distinct tone of condescension, by the end the heads of department are hanging on his words.

Not only was he shedding new light on three periods of Roman occupation, but he also became something of an expert on Viking remains, corresponding with museums in Scandinavia. He sent drawings of his finds to antiquarians in London, Edinburgh and Oxford, along with detailed descriptions of their nature and provenance.

Today the fort has long succumbed to the plough, but the sensitive eye can see the swell of the great ramparts and, rather more clearly, the hollow of a rare amphitheatre at its northeast corner. A monument, erected in 1928, bears this inscription: "Here once stood the fort of Trimontium, built by the troops of Agricola in the first century AD, abandoned at least twice by the Romans, and ultimately lost by them after fully one hundred years of frontier warfare." It is a monument, not just to the Roman occupation, but to the Melrose solicitor, who sank his spade in the ground and unearthed its story.

Revealing Trimontium — the correspondence of James Curle of Melrose is published by Archaeopress Publishing