

ROMANCING THE STONES



What's this? Walter Elliot kneels to examine another find in "Trimontium"

IN A grey mist, a lonely figure slowly trudges, head down, over the red earth of a ploughed field. It is Walter Elliot, doing what he has done every winter weekend for 30 years — searching for evidence of the Romans.

His walk takes him up and down a series of four fields that were once Trimontium, the biggest Roman camp in southern Scotland, on the edge of the Border village of Newstead — a site which is currently the focus of a planning controversy, with locals campaigning to prevent a £2.2 million road link cutting across it.

He can only search in winter and early spring because the site of the fort is still agricultural land, but from long familiarity he knows every stone and tuft of grass, and as he walks the furrows, he is seeing in his mind's eye the Roman streets, the temple, the bathhouse, officers' centrally-heated homes and the huddle of buildings that were barrack blocks and service areas for the 2,000 soldiers and camp followers who lived in Trimontium.

It is Elliot's deepest desire to form a Trimontium Trust which would undertake a new excavation

of part of the site and also establish a Roman museum near the fort.

"Trimontium was one of the most important Roman forts of the north and it could be a marvellous tourist attraction. After all, there are Roman museums every four or five miles along Hadrian's Wall but there's nothing for Trimontium."

Last autumn his wish was partially granted when a team from Bradford University conducted a small dig and magnetometer survey of one of the fields in search of Roman brick kilns. They were able to prove what Elliot has long suspected — that Newstead was the centre of a large pottery and brick-making industry. He even knows some of the potters' names. Further excavation of the kilns could provide more information about an industry which supplied most of Roman Scotland with its products. Examples of Newstead pottery have been found on the Antonine Wall, for example.

Elliot describes himself as a poor woodcutter, for until last year he was a fencing contractor with his own woodyard in Selkirk. He now works on various freelance projects connected with his Roman and historical interests. He is a Fellow of

Romans almost by accident when, as a young man, he came under the enthusiastic influence of two Selkirk bakers, Bruce and Walter Mason, who walked the Newstead fields for years and built up a vast fund of knowledge about the fort.

THE current anti-road campaign has the support of Kenneth St Joseph, emeritus professor of aerial photographic studies at Cambridge, who has been photographing Trimontium from the air since 1945 and feels "it should not be interfered with because important information as yet undiscovered could be destroyed".

Surprisingly perhaps, Elliot feels differently about the "threat" to the site, garrisoned by the Romans for almost 150 years and first excavated at the turn of this century by a Melrose solicitor name of Curle. "The trouble is not knowing exactly where the road will go," says Elliot. "If it cuts across Trimontium, there will be fairly extensive excavations before it is laid and, from the archaeological point of view, that could be a good thing. It all depends on whether cash would be available to excavate it properly."

This officially neglected treasure house has proved fruitful ground for Elliot, who never walks the fields without finding something. He has lent many of his finds to local museums and to the National Museum in Edinburgh. They include bronze bells from the barrack blocks; items of harness and saddlery; a dagger; a stone head of Minerva from the temple site; boxes of glass beads; Roman weights; pieces of pottery; coins and intaglio-carved gemstones from Roman rings.

He holds out a fragment of brick and says with awe: "Look, that's a Roman finger print. I'm going to send it to a police surgeon to ask what he can tell me about the man who made it."

Another recent find which thrills him is a brick bearing the claw-marks of a field mouse which scratched out an ear of corn left in the set brick. Yet another brick shows the footprints of a dancing lamb... "That tells us they made their bricks in the spring or early summer."

Newstead, to Walter Elliot, is a place of romance. Metal detectors are prohibited on the site and he does not see his finds in terms of monetary value but as invaluable evidence of past lives.

"I see this fort as a Wild West town, barricaded against hordes of Indians whooping outside. The people who lived here must have been like the early settlers in America."

Liz Taylor