



## Searching for a lost Roman road to the north of Chester

**T**HIS short paper describes one aspect of the current research being undertaken by members of the Backford, Mollington and District History Society with members of the Wirral Archaeology Group in pursuit of the course, construction and destination of the Roman route north out of Chester.

On leaving Chester via the Northgate and heading north to the Wirral peninsula, the road forks at the George and Dragon public house in Upper Northgate Street. To the right of the fork the road leads onto Liverpool Road, which heads up the eastern side of the Wirral towards Birkenhead. The road at this point was formally known as Bache Lane.

The left fork heads up the west side of the Wirral along Parkgate Road, where it used to be known as Mollington Lane. This road was used by the coach services north from Chester along to Parkgate. The route goes further up to the North Wirral coast and the coastal community of Meols.

Additionally, near the point of the Upper Northgate Road fork, another road of Roman origin went off to the east and has been tracked to the Roman settlement of Wilderspool (Warrington) and on to Manchester.

There has been conjecture regarding a Roman road north out of Chester, heading up the Wirral. Most of the acknowledged authors on Roman roads to and from Chester have reported on third-party observation regarding the existence and course of such a Roman route way. Desk-bound conjecture and short, incomplete lines, drawn on maps of the Wirral peninsular, postulate the existence and course of such a road.

The preferred narrated route traverses Mollington and continues along Townfield Lane and onwards up the Wirral via Ashcroft Farm.

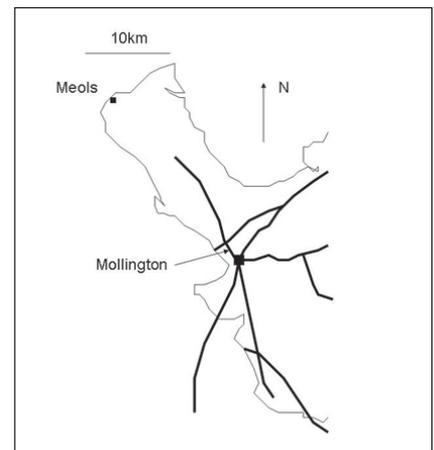
For the Romans to link the military fortress of Chester with the ancient coastal port of Meols, a road would be required. Whilst the legionary fortress at Chester had its own port and wharfs on the River Dee, access along the shifting sand bars of the Dee Estuary was possibly at best unpredictable and required the limited use of shallow bottomed boats. A port nearby, linked by a road, would increase the certainty of military supplies and access to trading routes.

Substantial archaeological finds around Meols indicate significant Roman activity, and the historical route ways and landscape in the north of the Wirral peninsula indicates the existence of a Roman road.

Following Roman road-building techniques, a straight line from the Northgate to Meols gives the lie to a possible route through Mollington. The route passes through Mollington at a point just to the west of the ancient settlement of Great Mollington (Mollington Tarrant), bisecting the fields northwards of the former Tarrant Farm, across Warren Farm, and on across Hill Farm to Ashcroft Farm.

The problem is that no points south of Willaston, some ten miles out of the Northgate, have yet revealed any measured Roman activity. Time and habitation have more than obliterated any obvious surviving signs.

However, just to the east of Willaston, archaeological finds have revealed the course of a Roman route-way along Street Hey. This road was



Simple diagram of the main roads up the Wirral peninsula

measured to be twelve feet wide, indicating it to be an economic support road rather than a major military highway. Extrapolating the alignment of this road south takes one directly to just north of the Northgate in Chester.

This second route indicates that the road alignment passes through Mollington, along parts of Townfield Lane, adjacent to Rose Farm and Tarrant Farm on their eastern side, through to the north of the Northgate. A northerly extrapolation of the alignment from Street Hey aligns with the Roman stone quarries of Storeton and the Bidston Ridge. Alignment of the Street Hey road without any doubt terminates just north of the Northgate.

It is to points south of Willaston in the parish of Mollington that we confine our current field work.

The Roman surveying trigonometry exercises, matched to digital mapping, have revealed potential courses for the roads. It is at this stage of the project that we have now instigated resistivity

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surveying, courtesy of Chester Archaeological Society, to try to locate below-surface survival and therefore prove the existence of a Roman road through Mollington.

Two sites were identified for surveying. The first was the Great Mollington town field, by the fingerpost in Mollington, which was part of Tarrant Farm and which has not been ploughed in living memory. The second site was the north-west field at Hill Farm, off Coalpit Lane, just south of Ashcroft Farm.

A group of ten volunteers from the Backford Mollington and District History Society, the Wirral Archaeology Group, along with enthusiastic help from the Chester Archaeological Society and others, were there to help lay out the grids and conduct the survey.

The first site at Great Mollington was surveyed. A full days effort of plotting

ten adjacent four hundred metre-square grids was undertaken and the results processed in less than two minutes.

Interestingly, the field being surveyed contained a seemingly very old ridge-and-furrow system.

The results of the survey strongly indicate a distinct routeway crossing from left to right in grid squares seven and eight. This is on the west side, along an old field boundary, in an alignment to the Northgate to Meols routeway.

An exploratory trench positioned on these anomalies proved inconclusive. It is clear that the land to the west of the hedge line shows evidence, possibly of a track or road, approximately four metres wide and at a depth of thirty to forty-five centimetres. We also uncovered intermittent fist-sized cobbles, which were not present in other parts of the field. In addition, there was a distinct soil change at this depth to a hard, gravelly level of sandy grit, dipping on

the west side of the feature. Below this were carbon deposits at a depth of fifty to sixty centimetres. No sign of any possible dating evidence was found.

Further resistivity surveying in the other field at Hill Farm proved equally inconclusive. Despite surveying over four thousand square metres, the results failed to indicate the existence of the proposed Roman road and, in fact, appeared to indicate the presence of a substantial building of recent date occupying the site.

Future work will involve the sinking of further test pits on the Great Mollington site to try to locate and identify below-ground survival of the Roman road and, if successful, confirm the existence of the Roman road to Chester.

**Carl Stagg  
Backford, Mollington and  
District History Society**

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## Notes and News

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### Edwin Warwick

It is with great regret that I have to report the unexpected death of our Honorary Treasurer, Edwin Warwick. Edwin has played an important role in the Society for many years and was well known to everyone. His professional management of the Society's finances has ensured that we are in a very strong position to advance the aims of the Society. A formal obituary will appear in the next volume of the Journal. Our sympathies go to Marjorie and the family at this sad time.

### Annual General Meeting

This year's annual general meeting will be held on Wednesday 23 April at 7.30pm. We have co-opted on to the Council a new Treasurer, Alan Austin, to replace Edwin Warwick and a new Secretary, Alan Williams, to replace Anthony Holliday who will stand down at the annual general meeting. These appointments should be confirmed at that meeting.

### Claverton Fieldwork Project

The Claverton fieldwork project will continue this year. Fieldwork dates will be 12/13 April, 19/20 April, 26/27 April and 3/4 May 2008.

If you are interested in participating please contact either Phil Miles or Averil Downes.

### Cheshire Archaeology Day

A reminder that Cheshire Archaeology Day will be held on 19 April at The Memorial Hall, Nantwich. The cost is £11 (£9 concessions) and booking can be made with Pam Rutherford, Cheshire County Council, T: 01244 973175, E: Pam.rutherford@cheshire.gov.uk.

### Draft Heritage Protection Bill

Earlier this month the Government published the Draft Heritage Protection Bill and is seeking feedback from interested

parties, so if you have some views this is your opportunity to air them. The document can be found at: [http://www.culture.gov.uk/Reference\\_library/Publications/archive\\_2008/pub\\_draftphb.htm](http://www.culture.gov.uk/Reference_library/Publications/archive_2008/pub_draftphb.htm).

### CBA North West Spring Reports Meeting

On Saturday 10 May at South Trafford Archaeological Group, Stockport Road, Altrincham WA15 7LP. The theme is Community Archaeology in Greater Manchester.

Talks include: The search for prehistory in Tameside; Mellor revisited; Twenty years of changes in north-west archaeology; further work on the Roman road from Manchester to Wigan; Moston Old Hall; Excavations at Wythenshawe Park and Peel Hall.

Non-members are welcome. Cost £6.00 (£13.00 incl buffet lunch). For a programme and booking form, see [www.britarch.ac.uk/cbanw](http://www.britarch.ac.uk/cbanw). In case of difficulty, telephone Mrs D Waring, 01254 619803.

## Weekend excursion to the Isle of Man 21 to 24 September 2007



Members of the Society visit the USA  
(geologically-speaking)  
Photograph © Ian Archibald

**F**OLLOWING the stimulating lecture on the archaeology of the Isle of Man presented to the Society during 2006 by Dr Peter Davey, it was decided that we needed to see the fascinating sites for ourselves. Thus an expedition, which had been mooted for a number of years, was finally realised. Peter very kindly offered to act as cicerone for the adventure and we are very grateful for the knowledge which he was able to share with us during the four days of the trip.

Travel to the island was via the Sea Cat from Liverpool which on the way out seemed like a good choice, smooth and fast, as we sailed out of Liverpool past the QE2. The afternoon of that Friday was spent in the Manx Museum, viewing the 'Story of Man' film and browsing the new Viking and medieval gallery, which had just opened earlier in the summer. This provided a convenient overview and background for the visits which we had over the weekend. Our Manx education was completed with a talk from Peter over dinner in the Empress Hotel on the shore in Douglas.

Saturday focussed on a trip along the central valley with Peel as the ultimate destination. Along the way we saw Braddon Old Church, with its fine collection of early medieval crosses. Picking up some unexpected guests from the Norfolk Archaeological Socie-

ty on the way, we visited an out of the way keel (a small chapel of early medieval date), the existence of which was a complete surprise to our coach driver, who thought he had seen every ancient site on the island. Our morning was completed with a visit to Marown Church, St Patrick's Chair, an enigmatic early Christian site, and Purt y Candas, a metal-working site dating from the sixth to eighth centuries, which required some energetic scaling of banks and ditches in order to secure access! A packed lunch was had under the shadow of the Tynwald Mound and the afternoon was spent at Peel Castle. Before a dinner at the delightful Manx National Heritage Restaurant at Niabyl, we had the strange opportunity of being able to visit America – at least a part of the American continent which got left behind when Gondwanaland split up – at the Niabyl fault.

Sunday took us to the north of the island with the churches of St Michael, Andreas and Maughold, each rich in early medieval carving. The more adventurous members scaled the Maughold hill fort. After lunch, we visited a fort constructed by the Stanley family during the English Civil War – completely unexpected among all the Manx and Viking heritage. The return to Douglas was via the famous Neolithic chambered tombs of King Orry's grave at Lonan.

Monday exposed the weakness of our decision to come to the island via Sea Cat, as unseasonal weather led to its cancellation. But this particular ill wind blew us the good of an extra afternoon, which turned out to be very welcome as we took ourselves to the south of the island to look at Rushen Abbey and Castle Rushen. Without the extra time, we would have been rather rushed in our tours of these rich locations. We also managed to fit in visits to the Iron Age/Viking sites of Balladoole and the Braaid before taking the long ferry trip to Heysham. This was followed by a coach trip to Liverpool, where we were met by the ever reliable Merediths coach in the middle of the night.

Members returned to their homes in the early hours of Tuesday morning. A bit of an adventure, but worth it for the insight we gained into the history and archaeology of our near neighbours in the Isle of Man. Many thanks to Peter Davey for his splendid commentary on all that we saw.

**Ian Archibald**

## Coins from Meols



**M**EMBERS who heard Dr David Griffiths' lecture to the Society in 2005 on discoveries at the small Wirral locality of Meols will know something about the frankly sensational character of some of the items that have been discovered at the site since at least the 1840s.

*Meols. The Archaeology of the North Wirral Coast* (Oxford University School of Archaeology: Monograph 68/ Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford) by David Griffiths, Robert A Philpott, and Geoff Egan, with contributions by more than a dozen specialist authors, appeared late in 2007.

For anyone interested in ancient artefacts from any period from the Mesolithic to the nineteenth century, this has been a much-anticipated volume.

A group of coins recently made public is likely to add to the modest stock of rare finds published in the Meols volume. The coins were collected by the late Mr Alan McKechnie over a period of some years. The specific coin types represented in this small collection, and the chronological periods from which they are drawn, parallel known types from the Meols archive. The coins have been identified by Dr Robert Philpott (National Museums Liverpool) and Dr Matthew Ponting (School of Archaeology, Classics, and Egyptology, University of Liverpool), who are both familiar with the metal finds from Meols. A full report is now in preparation.

Among the earlier coins is a *denarius* of Claudius, and what seems to be a small non-Roman copper denomination (Greek?). Among the later coins are:

copper alloy barbarous copy of a third century 'radiate' type of Tetricus II (AD 274 to the early fourth century); a bronze issue of Constantine II (AD 341-346) and another of Julian the Apostate (AD 378-383); a *folles* of Justinian (AD 527-65) or his predecessor, Justin I (AD 518-527); a Byzantine copper alloy issue either of the Emperor Constantine VII (AD 913-944) or Nikephoros III (AD 963-969); and an unknown Arabic issue. These late or post-Roman coins, and rare early medieval and Viking issues, closely follow the periodicities of published material from Meols.

**Zosia Archibald**

## Excursions 2008

**E**XCURSIONS for this year are planned for the Anderton Boat Lift and the Northwich Salt Museum for Saturday 12 May and to Denbigh on Saturday 12 July. Forms are enclosed with this newsletter, which should be returned to Margaret Ford if you wish to take part.

### Dumfries and Galloway 12 to 15 September

Building on our exploration of the Irish Sea littoral, the Society council is currently exploring the possibility of a weekend excursion this year to the Dumfries and Galloway area of South West Scotland. As well as being spectacularly beautiful, the area is rich in archaeology, including the famous early medieval site at Whithorn, Threave Castle (built by the Newsletter Editor's namesake Archibald the Grim!), Sweetheart Abbey and Robert the Bruce's cave. The most likely date is the weekend of 12 to 15 September. This will only happen if there is sufficient interest. If you are interested, there will be a form at the Annual General Meeting or contact the Society's Chairman, Ian Archibald, at 67 Handbridge, Chester CH4 7JF.

**Ian Archibald**

## Society Information

### Contacts

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*Fieldwork co-ordinator* Mr Phillip Miles (address as for Mrs Kathryn Miles)

### Library

Members are welcome to browse through the Society's library at Chester History and Heritage (general books) and Chester University (journals)

### Internet

<http://www.chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk>

The *Chester Antiquary* is published twice a year, in Spring and Autumn. We welcome letters and articles from Members. Contributions for the next issue should be with the newsletter editor, Dr Ian Archibald, no later than 30 September 2008.