

# The Chester Antiquary



Newsletter of the Chester Archaeological Society

2004 Issue 1 (Spring/Summer)

## The mystery of Robert Newstead's den

**S**INCE this is my first issue as editor of the Antiquary, I have taken the liberty of offering the following by way of introduction.

When we first moved in to our house in Handbridge we were surprised by the amount of Roman pottery which turned up in the garden soil, but thoughts of long-lost villas receded when we learned that the house had been the home, for over thirty years, of Professor Robert Newstead, pioneer of Chester archaeology and a prominent member of our society during the later nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Roman material was probably discarded from his personal collection, we were told; indeed some of the sherds were actually signed by Robert Newstead himself (he was something of a pioneer in the labelling of archaeological finds). The sherds became no more than an interesting diversion while weeding, until we came across a short note by Professor Newstead, published posthumously in the society journal of 1946, where he described small excavations which he carried out in the garden during the war years (when, incidentally, he was over eighty years of age). Why was he doing this? Or rather, why had he waited so long before doing it? Whatever the reason, he did indeed find archaeological remains in the form of many Roman pottery sherds and what he describes as a 'puzzling formation of roughly-hewn blocks of sandstone', which he assigned to the Roman period. The tone of the article suggests that he was slightly disappointed by the find, perhaps it did not measure up to his expectations? Unfortunately, Professor Newstead was to fall ill and die very shortly after making these discoveries and the finds were largely forgotten.

This did mean, however, that there was the possibility that at least some of

the material found in the garden soil originated from remains on the site so, when we started to restore the outbuilding which Professor Newstead always referred to as his 'den', we took the opportunity to carry out a small-scale, but careful, assessment of the areas which were to be disturbed. This included areas under the floor of the den and under the foundations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cowsheds, which could not have been contaminated by 'Newsteadiana'. We were astonished by what we found. Our expectation had been that the Roman cemetery would continue into this area and we might, if we were very lucky, find cremation burials of the sort that have turned up elsewhere in Handbridge. However, what in fact emerged appears to be the remains of a medieval and early modern industrial workshop associated with glazing, glassworking and pottery manufacture. The finds include molten glass droplets, crucible fragments, evidence of glassblowing, debris from cutting coloured and other glass for the making of stained-glass windows and the degraded remains of a kiln and pottery wasters dating from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century. Subsequent documentary research has demonstrated that this site was once the property of a family called Dalby, who between at least 1533 and 1664 were actively engaged in both glazing and pottery manufacture. Indeed, for at least five generations, the Dalby family were the principal glaziers of most of the Chester ecclesiastical establishments; the records of the Cathedral, St Mary's, Holy Trinity and St Peter's all record their activity. The will of one Edward Dalby in 1611 records the existence of a pottery kiln. Nottingham University have very kindly analysed some of the glass and the chemical composition suggests that these activities were



This is the outbuilding that Professor Robert Newstead used for over thirty years to work on his archaeological collections. It appears to sit on top of significant archaeology (Photograph by Ian Archibald).

practised on the site for a much longer period – perhaps back as far as the early medieval period, consistent with some of the pottery evidence. So was this what Robert Newstead had been seeking during the dark years of World War II? He certainly had an interest in glass, having excavated the medieval glasshouse at Kingswood and examined glazing debris during the construction of St John's telephone exchange. He had also researched, in part at least, the earlier history of the garden.

However, Newstead's den had even more to reveal. Beneath the remains of the medieval glaziers' activity, we discovered the substantial foundations of two buildings, one of which lies more or less directly underneath Robert Newstead's den, while the other has an east-west alignment and directly

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succeeds the first. A scatter of mosaic *tesserae* in the soil suggests that these may have been significant structures. Also, underneath the foundations of the den, there was an east-west aligned inhumation burial with the partial remains of two human bodies. Associated with these buildings was further evidence of industrial activity: glass-bead making, pottery manufacture and iron smelting. Imported *amphora* fragments from the eastern Mediterranean and sherds of North African dishes suggest that use of these buildings spanned the period from the fourth to the seventh century AD and indicate possible continuity with the later glazing and potting activity on the site. The location of these structures within an extra-mural Roman cemetery, the east-west alignment, the east-west inhumation and the continuity into the post-Roman period with imported pottery, all strongly suggest an ecclesiastical context for the industrial activity. Place-name evidence may support this. The street name 'Paradise' (from the medieval 'Paradise Croft' – an irony perhaps, but it may refer to monastic buildings) backs onto the site. Keith Matthews has also identified documentary references to a possible medieval cross, located close to neighbouring Belgrave Place. Had Robert Newstead suspected the existence of this structure from evidence found in the top soil or elsewhere?

A report on the glass-working activity will appear in the Sixteenth Annales of the *Association Internationale pour l'Histoire du Verre* later this year and a preliminary report on the structural remains will be found in the next edition of our Journal.

**Ian Archibald**

## Theodor Fontane – a German visitor to Chester in 1857

**F**ONTANE is an important German writer, who has never been translated into English, and who came to England around the period of the 1848 revolutions in Europe. Although he does not discuss politics, he is part of the growing cultural revival of Germany under Friedrich Wilhem IV and the beginnings of a federal Germany with a constitution largely borrowed from the United States.

He established himself as a journalist, reporting on the arts and working as a theatre critic during his second stay in England. This was very profitable, as he had been commissioned by a number of German (Prussian) newspapers. Most of his work was originally published as letters and later in book form. He regarded London as a world metropolis of the arts. He was interested in British history in general and in the landscape of Scotland. He was not alone in Germany in being fascinated by The Wars of the Roses, Mary Queen of Scots and Shakespeare. He had a musical interest in English and Scottish ballads and visited art exhibitions, of which the Manchester Arts Exhibition was probably the most important.

He visited England three times – in Spring 1844, Summer 1852 and from September 1855 to January 1859. He left England on 15 January 1859, never to return. He is most famous for his later career as a prolific writer of romantic novels. He died 1898.

His experiences in Britain were republished in *Wanderungen durch England und Schottland* at the turn of the twentieth century and are available in a modern version of two 600 page volumes by Verlag der Nation Berlin, which is my source.

On his third visit in 1855, leaving his family behind, he rented an elegant house in North London. In 1858 he visited Scotland, which he records as one of his great experiences.

His eleventh letter – 'Aus Manchester' in *Studien über Theater und Kunst in England 1855 bis 1860* records a trip to Chester. The introduction is followed by a very full description of the buildings of Chester in which he describes Chester as 'England's Nuremberg'.

'I did not have any more contact with this new dining society and decided to leave as quickly as possible. Once again I took a bus trip through the streets with a farewell gaze at the site of this unforgettable exhibition and then I was taken to the Victoria Station of the North West Railway. I bought my ticket and in a few minutes was on my way to Chester.

Since Chester is only ten German miles away from Manchester, I could never have forgiven myself if I had failed to make this pilgrimage.

A visit to Chester was a pious duty since over the years I had enjoyed being served in the fourth and final course of dinner with Chester Cheese. There stands before one The Cheese like a picture of good times, wholesome, mild and with the colour of health. The mere sight awakens nostalgia. We make conversation about Lord Palmerston or the hot weather. The words fly back and forth over the long piece of celery in the right hand and the fingers of the left hand grasp a glass of port wine. The Chester Cheese stands solidly, immovable like a wall confronting the outside world and a banner around which all the pleasantries of the table gathers'.

I hope to include some more extracts from this forgotten visitor, where he comments on individual buildings. Had he stayed, I am sure that he would have joined the eight-year old Chester Archaeological Society.

**Roy Coppack**

## Fieldwork at Catholic High School



Mike Morris & George Storey instructing the students in the techniques of resistivity surveying (Photograph by Phil Miles)

## Chester Archaeology – work in progress

**T**HE big news of the last six months has been the finalising of an agreement between the City Council and English Heritage to undertake a three-year project on the amphitheatre – two seasons' excavation and one year's assessment. The eastern half of the area currently on display will be re-excavated; last year's trial trench in the grounds of Dee House will be completed, as will the investigation of the east entrance; and a fresh area will be opened up, again in the grounds of Dee House, south of the east entrance. The excavation is being supplemented by a geophysical survey, not only of the amphitheatre but also of the grounds of St John's church and the western end of the Grosvenor Park; a map regression exercise; and a reappraisal of the archives of previous excavations.

As previously, much of the labour force will be provided by students from Chester College and Liverpool University, plus local volunteers, but this year there will be a strengthened professional digging team. This year's excavation will run from 14 June until 24 September.

Visitors will be able to view the excavation from a walkway running the

length of the arena, on the site of the present boundary wall of Dee House. An interpretation centre and finds processing unit is being set up on the top floor of the Chester Visitor Centre. The amphitheatre project also has its own website at [www.chestercc.gov.uk/heritage/archaeology/amphitheatre/index.html](http://www.chestercc.gov.uk/heritage/archaeology/amphitheatre/index.html).

Joint directors of the project will be Tony Wilmott for English Heritage and Dan Garner for Chester City Council. Dan recently joined us from Gifford and Partners and replaces Keith Matthews, who left in February, after fourteen years in Chester, to return to North Hertfordshire. We shall miss Keith's enthusiasm and breadth of knowledge and wish him well in his new job.

Although the spotlight has been on the amphitheatre, almost half the service's efforts have continued to be devoted to studying the finds from the Debenham's excavation in 2001. This work is scheduled to come to an end before the start of work on the amphitheatre. However, there is still much to be done in completing the stratigraphic narrative before the report can be edited for publication.

The report on the Roman fortress baths written by David Mason has been

**F**OLLOWING a request from Mike Morris – Chester Archaeology, with Phil Miles and George Storey of the Society's Fieldwork Group, trained students from Chester Catholic High School, Handbridge, in the use of resistivity surveys to locate submerged archaeology.

Norma Dabrowski and her students are developing their interest in archaeology in a project that aims to reveal the history of developments in the landscape around their school in Handbridge. Students from eleven upwards have been trained to use maps, archives, surveys and other archaeological techniques, with a view to locating the most promising features for excavation. On 24 February, the Society gave a demonstration of resistivity surveying techniques on a small survey area of 800 square metres placed close to an old field boundary. Students learned how to set up the survey area and how to use the resistivity meter to record resistance. This was then followed by the downloading of readings onto a computer and publication of the results.

We were able to provide a clear anomaly, which appears to represent the early field boundary, as well as a number of other features as yet unknown. The area surveyed will be excavated by the students and Chester Archaeology service before the term ends.

The excavation will be the final piece in a landscape puzzle that is due for publication later this year.

**Phil Miles**

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submitted to English Heritage for refereeing; we hope that it will be published later this year. Work is also in progress on drawing together the results of numerous excavations in the Roman western extramural settlement. This has involved looking more widely at what effect the Roman garrison at Chester had on the local landscape and population. The site at Heronbridge currently being investigated by the Society is crucial to this understanding, as is that recently found during an extension to the Chester Business Park and scheduled for publication in the Journal.

**Peter Carrington**



## Archaeology at the University of Liverpool – a celebration of a hundred years' work

**I**N 1904 the first university department dedicated to the discipline, the Institute of Archaeology, was created as an affiliate of the University of Liverpool. A centenary conference will take place on Sunday 4 July 2004, in the Eleanor Rathbone Building of the University, at which members of staff will present an illustrated panorama of the past, current, and projected work of the department. This will be preceded by a conference gala dinner on Saturday 3 July, and succeeded by a tour of the School of Archaeology, Classics, and Egyptology (SACE), on Sunday afternoon following the conference.

Members of the Liverpool Institute, and its renamed successor department,

have collaborated with the Chester Archaeological Society on a variety of projects over the last century, and Society members are most welcome to take part in this conference and associated activities. Booking forms can be obtained from Miss P A Winker (email: [winkerpa@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:winkerpa@liverpool.ac.uk)) at the School of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology, University of Liverpool, 14 Abercromby Square, Liverpool L69 3BX; tel: 0151 794 2467, fax: 01510 794 2226). Forms and further information can also be downloaded from the SACE website: <http://www.liv.ac.uk/sacos/events/centenary/htm>.

**Zosia Archibald**

## Excursions

### Main Excursion

**3 – 7 September 2004**

(provisional dates only)

**S**OMERSET will be the destination for this year's principal excursion. The itinerary will include visits to most if not all of the following: Taunton and the Somerset County Museum; Dunster Castle; Wells Cathedral; Glastonbury Abbey; Cleve Abbey; Montacute House; Cothay Manor; and Hestercombe Gardens.

To register for further information without commitment, please contact the Honorary Secretary, David Mason (*see below for contact details*).

### Shropshire

**12 June 2004**

The summer excursion this year is to Shropshire and will take in prehistoric Mitchells Fold, medieval (and earlier) Whittington Castle and the town of Clun. A form to register for this trip is included with this issue of the Antiquary.

The coach (Meredith's) will leave from Chester Railway station at 8:30 am. The first visit will be to Whittington Castle where we will be shown the Norman Castle with medieval gardens, built on a possible prehistoric and Saxon site. A stop for coffee will be made in Welshpool at the Old Station, once the terminal of the Cambrian Railway.

Lunch will be taken in Clun, where there are cafés, pubs and much else to see, including the packhorse bridge, the church with its Norman tower and the castle. After lunch we shall visit the stone circle at Mitchell's Fold (wear reasonable walking shoes). It may also be possible to visit Chirbury. We plan to return to Chester by 7.00 pm.

## Society Information

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

### Library

Members are reminded that they are welcome to come in and browse through the Society's library at Chester Community History and Heritage.

### 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 2004.