

Roman Warrington. Excavations at Wilderspool 1966-9 and 1976 by John Hinchliffe and John H. Williams with Frances Williams. (*Britannia Monograph 2, Dept. of Archaeology, Manchester*). ISBN 0-904740-02-1. Price £17.50.

It is often the case that excavations which one might have hoped would answer many of the outstanding questions of a site fail to achieve that goal, while in the process adding considerable material knowledge to our understanding of it. The Wilderspool excavations reported on here are a classic case in point. Together these excavations have thrown further light onto the nature and extent of the settlement at Wilderspool without fully clarifying it.

Thomas May's excavations of a century ago (May 1904) revealed a site of a type hitherto unknown in the north-west: a major industrial centre with a substantial trading element, a so-called 'small town' or, in the modern terminology, a 'local centre' (Hingley 1989, 25). As the all too brief discussion at the end of this volume makes clear, the key to the success of Wilderspool lay in the fortunate conjunction of a fordable point on the Mersey for the major north-south route between Whitchurch and Wigan and thence to points north, a second and no less important route running east-west between Chester and Manchester, and the navigability of the Mersey to this ford. The glimpses we have had of this local centre have been tantalising: major masonry encountered during the cutting of the Manchester Ship Canal, extensive evidence of workshops beneath Greenhall's Brewery, pottery kilns, and a hypocausted building to the south and north of the ship canal, all of which show that this must once have been a major settlement.

The importance of the excavations reported on here lies in the clarification of May's work on the Brewery site, and in the demonstration of intensive settlement on its eastern periphery. To deal with the Brewery excavations first, JHW coped with what was evidently the more difficult part of the site whose interpretation was complicated by the earlier activities of May and the local cricket team, and was further hindered by the adoption (entirely in keeping with the time) of the box-excavation method which, not surprisingly, 'led to several important relationships [being] obscured by baulks' (p. 22). Fortunately, open-area methods were soon adopted, facilitated no doubt by the sensible use of a drag-line to remove overburden. On both sites, the excavators only examined features cut into natural sand (with one or two exceptions) and on the Brewery site there is no apparent recognition of the two episodes of ploughing which have done so much to damage the late phases of occupation on the site.

The information that emerges from the Brewery site is not easy to understand and is not helped by the somewhat confusing illustrations. Figure 3, showing the relationship between May's excavations and those of JHW is an exception to this, and JHW is undoubtedly

correct to follow Thompson in dismissing any thoughts of a military rampart (here re-presented as a road with alleys running at right-angles to it). This same figure is also, unfortunately, the only key to understanding the position of the various areas, which are shown in detail on figures 4, 7, 10-12 (and none of which have north arrows).

The exposition of Area A is clear enough, and the interpretation offered as figure 5 is eminently sensible. The appearance of internal clay floors helps to support the impression that May's isolated clay floors were indeed originally within unnoticed timber buildings. Area B is less lucid, not helped by incorrect numbering of one of the key gullies in Building 1 (feature 71 numbered as 91 on p.24) and its plan shows that the excavator is surely right to be uncertain about its interpretation, as with Building 2. Personally, the reviewer agrees with JHW's second hypothesis that Building 1 consisted of an east-west aligned aisled building with courtyard attached, as with its near neighbour in Area A. The small size of the enclosure need not occasion surprise given the density of occupation here. The other areas produced less evidence although they did illuminate aspects of the original report by May.

The excavations carried out by JH, some 500m east of the Brewery site, is expounded with more clarity and there is little that the reviewer would disagree with. The phase maps are well laid out and make good sense of the palimpsest of features shown on figure 54. The separation of the plans and sections of the various structures from the relevant text is unfortunate and it is also rather a pity that the opportunity was not taken to reconstruct some of the structures identified, although the problems of interpretation of the Brewery site buildings is rightly pointed out by JHW. The oval building 2956 (Fig. 64) would have been a good candidate for such treatment.

The structural side of the report makes a very valuable contribution to the evidence for non-rural Roman buildings in the area but the same cannot be said for many of the finds reports which in fact take up the bulk of the volume (140 out of 188 pages). This applies especially to the pottery, much of whose dating evidence could have been tabulated rather than printed in full. The publication of a type series rather than groups would have enabled a clearer understanding of the development of pottery on the two sites and would have facilitated comparisons with centres such as Chester and Wroxeter. Wilderspool, as a major producer of pottery in the area, deserves full consideration but is this the way to do it? Perhaps the delay in the report's production has meant that expectations have changed. Nonetheless, there is important information to be found in some of the reports. In particular, the contribution of Gordon Hillman whose unrevised text of 1976 discussing an interesting deposit of charred grain-processing waste whets ones appetite for more. The collection of iron

tools once again emphasises the industrial nature of the site, and the unusual find of a good quality Corinthian capital described by Tom Blagg hints at other, higher status buildings in the vicinity.

All in all, this report is certainly a worthy effort which has perhaps unduly suffered from an over-long editorial gestation of 13 years during which time nothing appears to have been altered. One cannot help feeling that the information would have been of greater value published swiftly in a local journal or in *Britannia* rather than the relatively lavish treatment accorded it here. What is needed now is a report which can bring together the evidence from **all** the previous excavations and try to fathom the site's meaning. An excellent opportunity is provided by Gifford and Partner's excavations on the Brewery site in the first half of 1993 which, when combined with all previous data, will perhaps finally establish Wilderspool on the north-western Romano-British map with the prominence it deserves. It is sincerely to be hoped that we might expect such a report to appear before the next millennium.

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References

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Another Country: A Season In Archaeology by David Gerard. Published by Elvet Press, 9 Crofters Green, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 6AY, (1994) ISBN 0 9510776 4 3. Price £5.50. 133 pages, A5 format, paperback.

This book provides a witty and crisp account of 'the story of three years spent reading for a degree in archaeology'. The author took early retirement from a career teaching librarianship and turned what had been a 'background fancy for years' into a full-time degree course at Durham University. He describes the process of selection, application, interviews, rejections and acceptances leading him to a place at Durham. There are lively descriptions of his experiences over the three years and his view of the 'youngsters' on the course. It is fascinating to read his descriptions of members of the academic staff, including transcripts of interviews he recorded with two of them. The index provides a useful means of browsing through the book to find snippets on some of these characters. There are some interesting discussions about theoretical archaeology as well as descriptions of the various excavations he worked on.

Here is admirable proof that an undergraduate degree in archaeology can be achieved purely for its own sake and not simply as qualifications for a future career. It is never too late to become active in archaeology!

Philippa Tomlinson

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