

Wirksworth Archaeological Society end of year report 2018

In connection with progress at the new Wirksworth Heritage Centre I have been asked to provide a summary of our recent archaeology and an overview of work; this also usefully provides an end of year report. The request took me back to the basic objectives of what we have been doing. Some of you have been with us since the beginning in 2006 and some of you are perhaps quite new to the group, so a review might be helpful.

We were formed in 2006 as part of an initiative to focus on the gap in understanding of Roman activity in this area. Wirksworth, in particular, was under-examined in archaeological terms, and even those very few archaeological examinations which had taken place in the town were woefully badly reported, for example, the dig in Church Street in which the Wirksworth Scaetta was found was recorded only in one single paragraph in a local newspaper. Secondly, the Peak District had a missing Roman town - Lutudarum. It is known to exist from inscriptions on Roman lead ingots and from the Ravenna Cosmography, a list of the cities, towns and fortresses of the Roman empire. In this list, which was considered to be assembled from a Roman map of Britain, Lutudarum was recorded between Veratino (Rocester or possibly Chesterton) and Derbentione (Little Chester) but it was considered "lost" and consequently, many had attempted to claim it as their own on the most spurious of evidence and in the strangest of locations. Wearily, this nonsense is still happening - I read an article last week which claimed that Lutudarum was the *Roman fort at Crich*. There is no Roman fort at Crich.

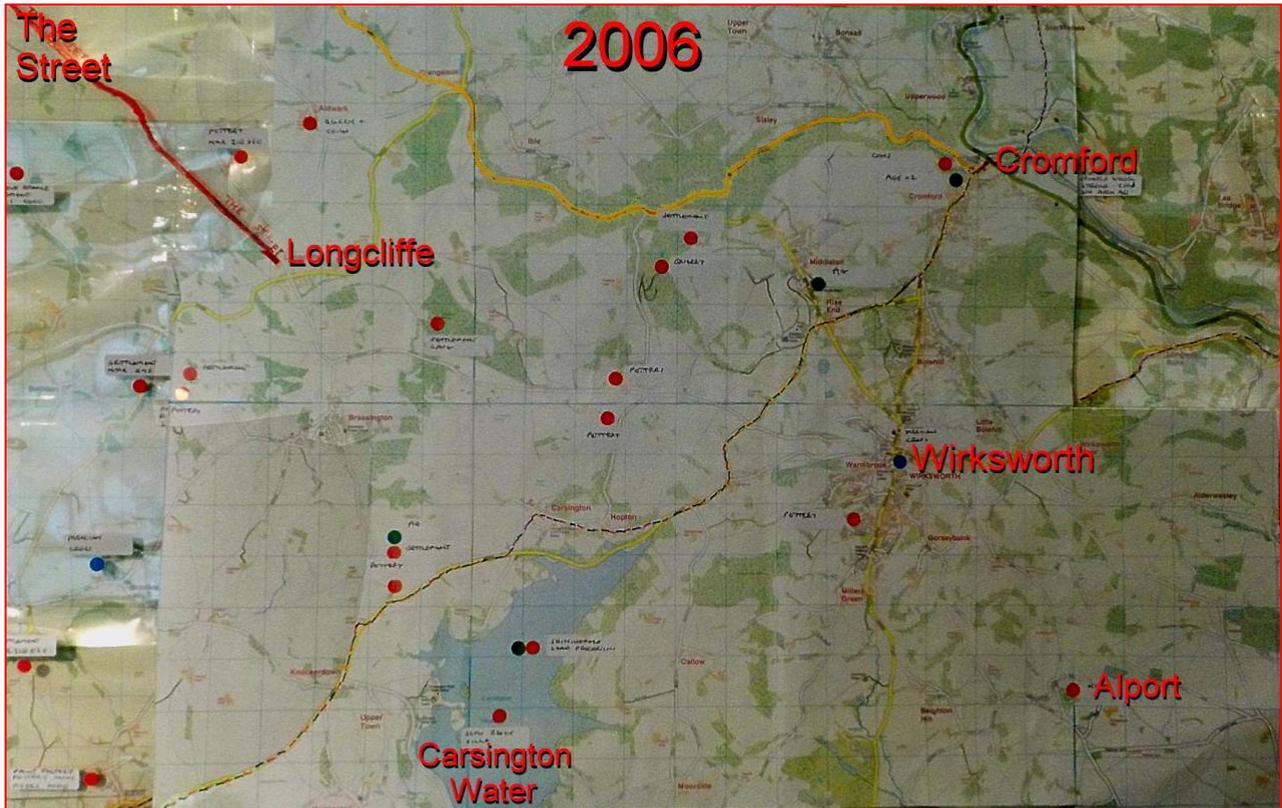
When I approached Derbyshire County Council in 2006 for a grant to start the work, the strategy was to find Lutudarum by the simplest possible means: by looking for its road network. We would then seek to expand what we knew by small-scale work such as test pitting. This was really the only strategy available given the limitations of time, money and expertise in a small community group such as ours. The view, in this strategy, was that the road network would tell us where to look for lost Lutudarum; we would then undertake local work to see if this could be supported by small-scale finds and then any major work would have to be the business of greater experts than us. It was not, and is not, the purpose of the Wirksworth Archaeological Society to expose a villa or a whole Roman town and dig it up, it is only our purpose to find it. We have in the process of doing this pursued other useful work which has fallen to us to undertake. In addition, it was essential that we reported efficiently and quickly and we have always done so.

I include two maps in this report. The first is the map of Roman roads and finds in this area as it stood in 2006. Roman roads are red lines. Finds are red dots. You will see that if anyone asked where Lutudarum should be sought in 2006 there was barely any location in the search area where there was, realistically, enough evidence to even consider looking. The road situation was equally bad. In the area bounded by Rocester and Little Chester only Long Lane was "certain" and, to the north west, The Street from Buxton faded out at Longcliffe. Despite many stretches of it still existing over the high limestone plateau nothing secure had ever been found on the direct line which was presumed to exist between Longcliffe and Little Chester, after nearly 200 years of fruitless searching. We ourselves got off to a bad start though, by looking at a potential route associated with what was thought by antiquarian authors to be a Roman road at Longwalls Lane; our initial archaeology was enthusiastic but inadequate and we were properly proved wrong, it was medieval. This resulted in a complete rethink.

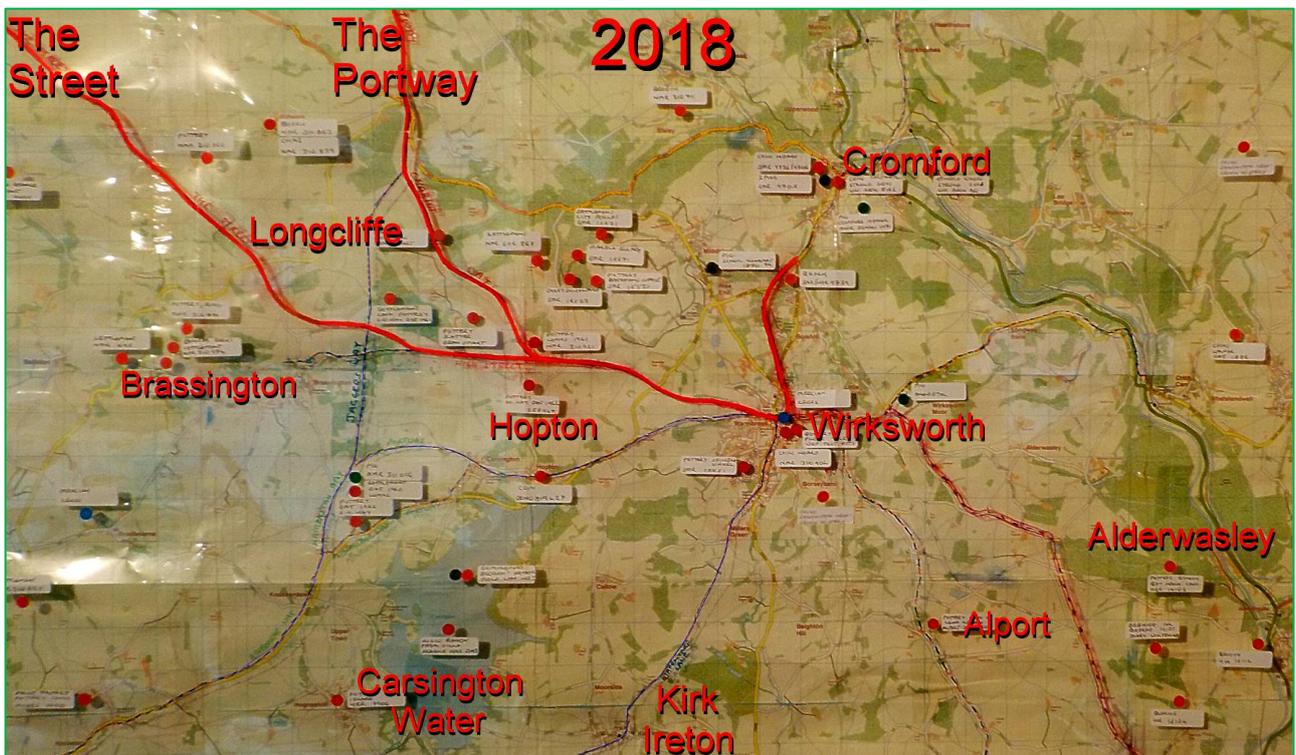
The rethink was severe and involved starting with the need for us to despatch all existing local Roman “knowledge” to the bin and to start from scratch based on properly recorded archaeology and reviewed primary research. Derbyshire antiquarian authors in particular were not to be used as the basis for anything. This is what we then did with The Street from Buxton. We reviewed the entirety of what we could find that had been written about it and the whole of the available existing archaeological basis for it. We found that the former was atrocious and the latter barely capable of representing a coherent understanding even of its width, let alone of anything else. A sense of mild shock ensued, I had expected this road to be properly understood, but here it was, with real knowledge buried under 200 years of speculation and antiquarian dross.

We began a “blank page” search by looking at all the pre-turnpike maps of the district for evidence of the road. A key moment was the discovery of the 1723 map of Brassington Moor which showed the Street, not carrying on a straight line from Longcliffe but turning eastwards to Wirksworth along Brassington Lane. This was supported by a land sale document in the Gell Archive which referred to Brassington Lane in the 1600s as the “Highe Street”. Finally, Burdett’s map of Derbyshire of 1767 was also found to show the line of The Street as being Brassington Lane and Wirksworth. These three pieces of evidence had not been available to previous workers and produced a level of certainty combined with the archaeology which put Wirksworth on a Roman road once and for all.

Since then we have taken a similar approach with the Portway, which is the Roman road from Brough on Noe to Wirksworth, although in the case of the Portway we had to undertake virtually all the archaeological work ourselves except for some sections nearer Brough which the estimable Peter Wroe had undertaken. In due course we worked our way through the list of roads around Wirksworth, some of which, on examination, were medieval and some of which, on examination, were Roman. The most recent being our examination of North Lane on the Chevin by Milford earlier this year. This strategy is now all but complete, there are perhaps only two roads which require our attention, one north of Hopton and the other Longway Bank (Wirksworth to Whatstandwell) where the later turnpike diverges from the original alignment in two places. In all fairness, there are roads which we may suspect are candidates for having Roman origins, such as Wapentake Lane (Wirksworth to Kirk Ireton, Bradley, Compton, Norbury and Rocester) but these are in use as modern roads, have traffic thundering along them and they cannot be examined. Also, there are roads which are beyond our remit, Long Lane from Little Chester to Chesterton (Newcastle under Lyme) is an example. Our remit is within 10 miles of Wirksworth and much as Long Lane urgently needs to be examined, not even its width is known, it is beyond our defined limits.



Roman roads and finds recorded the southern White Peak in 2006



Roman roads and finds recorded in the southern White Peak in 2018

So our search for Lutudarum, based on its road network, is all but complete and has proved an extremely successful strategy. Wirksworth appears to be the only reasonable and realistic candidate within the search area.

I said that the second part of the strategy was about small finds and here again you will see a vast difference between the state of play in 2006 and the state of play today. Some of this is due to our efforts in terms of examinations and test pitting, but some of it is due to ourselves and others being more thorough in recording. You see, one of the significant features about surveys such as the North Derbyshire Archaeological Survey (Clive Hart) and Peaks Romana (Bill Bevan) is their studious and careful approach to recording. The search for lost Lutudarum had never been the subject of this type of approach until it became part of our strategy, based on these forebears. You can see from the 2018 map of finds that there is an intensity of Roman finds north and west of Wirksworth around Hopton as well as south and east of Wirksworth around Alderwasley and slightly off the map to the south at Hazelwood and around the Chevin at Milford, where there are many pottery kilns and other finds.



Work in progress at North Lane

Of the town itself, I am often told that if Wirksworth were Roman we should have found large amounts of pottery, building features and so on, but this is misleading, for that to happen you have to know exactly where to look, be lucky enough to find a ditch or a field full of pottery by chance or discover another indication which attracts your attention. Urban areas are difficult. We should be well aware of the cautionary tale of Chesterfield. In the words of Gladwyn Turbutt, one of Derbyshire's noted historians, until the fort at Chesterfield was discovered in 1971 during development work, there had been so few finds in that town that the presence of a fort *had long been doubted*. This is indeed the case, before 1971 the Roman finds of Chesterfield amounted to a

couple of urns and six coins, it was even thought that Rykniel Street bypassed it to the east. So you see, the position for Wirksworth is in many ways better than for Chesterfield in 1971, we have identified Wirksworth as being on more than one Roman road and we have known hotspots of Roman pottery and floor tile around the south and east of St Mary's.

We have a strategy of test pitting around the town as opportunities arise and the purpose of this is to identify hotspots, in doing it we have had other positive outcomes, St John's Street was very revealing during our work in 2016 in medieval terms, so too the grounds of the Old Manor House. This also resulted in an attempt late in the autumn to find a suspected medieval pottery kiln site at Wigwell Green, although this was not successful and we will try again next year. Test pitting is slow and for every successful and interesting test pit we have to dig at least two others which may have nothing in them, or produce entirely post-medieval results. Yet here again, the position now is vastly different to the position in 2006. At that time the only recorded Roman pottery was from Pittywood Road, whereas now we have finds near the church, St Mary's Gate, Orchard House and the Meadows. We will carry on with this approach, if we are lucky enough to find something exciting then we can bring in the heavy guns and they can have a look. I have confidence in our approach though, for as much as there was next to no Roman pottery from Wirksworth in 2006, there was also not a single shard of medieval pottery recorded in the town in 2006 and now we find both with regularity.

It may often seem that we creep forward in small-scale things but the totality of these over the last 12 years has led to an explosion in our understanding of Wirksworth and its hinterland, which we can be proud of.