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MANCETTER. A MID-FIRST CENTURY HALF LEGIONARY FORTRESS.

The Roman site of MANDUESSEDUM has been known for very many years. The name derives from the Celtic "mandu", meaning 'small horse', and "essodo" borrowed early from Gaulish into Latin, meaning 'war chariot' or simply cart. The name appears in the Antonine Itinerary, ITER 2 from Richborough to Birrens in Scotland, via Wroxeter, Chester, York and Carlisle. Much of this route as far as Wroxeter is followed by the Watling Street, today's A5, and the village of Mancetter, with its Church and Manor House, lies on the eastern outskirts of the North Warwickshire town of Atherstone, which itself grew upon on the Watling Street.

Mancetter stands on the rising ground on the west of the River Anker which flows north-west to join the River Trent. On the eastern side of the Anker, stretching from the A5 to the Hartshill Ridge, is the site, covering many hectares, of the Hartshill-Mancetter pottery industry, Mortaria being the main product, and where kilns have been excavated over a number of years. Adjacent to this, and straddling the Watling Street are the remains of a burgus, i.e. a defended enclosure, one of a chain on the Watling Street. The line of the defences are clearly visible. Dr Graham Webster considers that the chain was created under the Emperor Constantius Chlorus, following the recovery of Britain upon the fall of Allectus in AD 296, as a system of strong points, and which had a relatively limited life. The burgus was sited within an already built-up area and its construction resulted in earlier dwellings and other buildings being destroyed. It is situated on the A5 near the present village of Witherley, in the vicinity of the "Bull" hotel.

The Legionary Fortress

Earlier 'antiquarian' writers have referred to earthworks on the hill on which the Church and Manor House stand, and postulated a Roman "station" but it was not until 1956 that the first evidence of military occupation was obtained. In that year, Adrian Oswald, then Keeper of Archaeology at Birmingham City Museum, trenched an earthwork he had noticed near the Almshouses (site "i" on plan). The bank proved to be medieval, but beneath it lay a Roman military ditch from which he recovered a sherd of mid-first century samian Form 29. In 1964 a water main was being laid near the entrance to the Manor House, and a small coin hoard was found consisting of nine dupondii and four asses, all Claudian, and mainly imitation issues dating from the early years of the conquest together with three earlier denarii. A soldier may have buried his savings and failed to retrieve them.

Some few years later in 1968, the opportunity arose for the Atherstone Archaeological Society, under its director Keith Scott, to carry out a further excavation of the eastern defences near to Oswald's trench, and once again mid-first century pottery was recovered from the ditches. It was now possible to talk in terms of a Roman fort at Mancetter, and to show the alignment of the defences on the east side.

In 1975 the owner of a house next to the Manor, in digging a hole adjacent to his drive to instal a Victorian lamp post, came upon two amphorae and the fragments of a third. The hole was extended by the excavation team, and the emplacements where these containers had been set upright, and a foundation trench were identified. The houseowner then permitted a good portion of his front garden to be excavated, although the results were nowhere near as dramatic as the amphorae find. Of vital significance, however, was the recovery in this excavation of three pieces of lorica segmentata, a possible indication of a legionary presence. It is known however that the lorica was also worn by some auxiliary infantry units. In the following year the local authority improved the alignment of a bend in Quarry Lane (site "iii" on plan) and it was necessary to carry out a rescue excavation. Though limited in extent, this revealed the end of barrack block with a centurion's latrine pit, from which a very fine group of flagons and lamps was recovered. The flagons, twelve in all, are double handled with a squat ovoid body, and most probably they come from the same factory. Dr Graham Webster considers they fall into the early Flavian period.

The excavation group's attention next turned to the location of the Western defences, and the opportunity arose for a machine trench to be put in the field sloping down to the railway during 1977 (site "iv" on plan) and the existence of a punice ditch was proved. Permission was obtained to mount a major excavation in the following year 1980 and in addition to the punice ditch, the two inner ditches of the defences were located (plan site "ivb"). It was now possible to be confident that two sides of the fortress had been defined, and subsequently, an M.S.C. scheme in 1984 excavated at site "iva" approximately 100 feet of the punice ditch. The scheme was sponsored by the Atherston Archaeological Society. The military bronzes, the samian, and the coarse pottery recovered all place the dating firmly in the mid-first century. Apart from confirming the alignment of the Western defences, these two major excavations give some assistance in assessing the location of the West Gate., and suggest the Northern defences lie beneath a road, an housing estate and other buildings, and are going to be difficult, if not impossible to locate.

The Fortress Interior.

By 1980, the time was ripe for attention to be given to internal buildings, and the then owners of the Manor house gave permission to excavate the disused kitchen garden (site "v" on plan). This took several seasons, complicated by the fact that the same owners gave the group the opportunity to excavate the old farm yard adjacent to Quarry Lane (site "vi" on plan). Both proved extremely rewarding, although inevitably producing more questions than answers!

The Manor House kitchen garden, site "v", revealed evidence for a principal building of the military first phase, consisting of substantial foundation trenches with nine inch square post settings at 2' 9" centres, the back fill being of clay, contrasting sharply with the sandy gravelly matrix. The major

part of this building lies further towards the Manor House and was outside the area of the excavations, but sufficient was revealed to permit identification as either the principia or the praetorium. Two later ditches cut across the excavated area introducing complications, and the major building itself was superseded by a granary, construction of which was unfinished.

Site "vi", The Mancetter Farm farmyard was even more rewarding for the excavators. It showed clearly the existence of the initial occupation, and in particular one of the demolition pits relating to this phase was of outstanding importance. From it came a South Gaulish form 29 bowl tightly dated to AD 45-55.

All the Phase 1 samian is within the date range of AD 45 - AD 60 with the bulk probably belonging to the early 50s, and the majority is from La Graufesenque, and almost certainly pre Flavian. There are several examples of Montans ware which probably reached the site in a single consignment. No British site is known to have received mid-first century Montans ware on a regular basis except possibly London. It is interesting to note that many footrings, in particular the group from site "v", are unworn, especially the plain forms, and it is just possible that these represent dumped vessels from store.

The above mentioned samian form 29 bowl is particularly interesting. It was made by a South Gaulish potter named MURRANUS who has a recognisable style, and who placed his stamp on the inside of the base after moulding the bowl. These stamps appear relatively often. Some of his bowls bearing his stamp have decoration in a quite different style to that normally found, and the moulds are clearly acquired from other mould makers. The Mancetter bowl falls into this category.

Free style scenes on this type of bowl of this date are not common, and this one has an elaborate venatio scene consisting of a bear hunt. Most of the figures belong to a rather small range of common South Gaulish types, but this is the first time they have been brought together, and there are no close parallels for the decoration as a whole. The mould maker, on stylistic grounds, is considered to be LICINIUS.

The same pit produced a Dobunnic silver coin of ANTED c. AD 20, which at the time of discovery was the furthest north ever found. There were large sherds of coarse pottery with paint of several colours adhering to the inside, and close by a number of paint pigments. Most startling of all the finds were several small "Eye-Ball" beads provenanced by Margaret Guido to the Black Sea area outside the Roman Empire. These are unique in Roman Britain. From this and other demolition pits of the same period came also glass, fine wares and lamps, and from another pit relating to Phase 2 an as of Vespasian minted in Rome in AD 71 showing little signs of wear, and giving an indication of the terminus post quem of the second period of occupation.

It was also possible whilst working in the farmyard to record features revealed in the foundation trenches of the new vicarage on the opposite side of Quarry Lane, the most significant of which was a ditch on a north/south alignment but

beginning to turn west (site "vii" on plan). In the farmyard, ditches of military appearance were also located cutting the buildings of Phase 1. An enigma in this area was revealed at the extreme limit of the excavation, in the shape of a construction similar to a pottery kiln, built in local stone, but with a very long flue tunnel with a stone filled drain in the floor. There was much charcoal in the bottom of the oven, but all the evidence suggests that high temperatures were not achieved. There was no trace of the manufacture of clay products, and it is suggested that it was used for heating water. A piece of bronze sheet was found among the charcoal.

The Southern Defences.

In 1989 permission from the landowner was obtained to mount an excavation in the field to the south of Quarry Lane (site "viii" on plan) with the object of locating the southern defences, and examining buildings within them. An area 220 feet by 18 feet was machine stripped, and a similar area likewise in 1990. As the archaeological examination proceeded it became clear that once again later ditches, military in character, cut diagonally across the area, however Phase 1 buildings were revealed and the two inner ditches fronting the rampart were also located and examined. The outer, punic ditch was discovered in an extension to the main area of excavation at a distance of some 65 feet from the second of the two main defensive ditches. No trace of the rampart was located, but with the sandy subsoils prevailing, and other evidence, there is a good probability of a timber box rampart similar to that identified by Dr Webster at Wroxeter.

Coins and pottery from these two seasons relating to the Phase 1 period are again Claudian in date, and a most interesting lamp was recovered bearing a mythological scene of the centaur, Nessus carrying Deianeira, the wife of Hercules across the River Evenus. A bronze cart fitting recovered high in the fill of one of the later phase ditches crossing the buildings, cannot be assigned any specific date within the period, but bearing in mind the fact that Mancetter soils are very acid and it is rare to have metal finds in good condition, this bronze, weighing twelve ounces is in virtually mint condition. One further matter of considerable interest is that beneath all the military activity, and effectively sealed by it, a pit containing a quantity of carbonised grain was located. This is a rare find in the West Midlands, and in view of its importance a full specialist analysis is being carried out, and additionally English Heritage are undertaking a radiocarbon dating.

As a bonus to the 1990 excavating season, Jim Pickering, who has added so much knowledge to the archaeology of the Midlands through his aerial photography over the years, was able to obtain a series of photographs of crop marks in the field south of Quarry Lane showing the line of the defensive ditches thus extending considerably our information thereon.

The location of the southern defences establishes three sides of the fortress, and although the northern defences are yet to be discovered sufficient information is available to be confident that the first fortress is a least 9 ha (22/23 acres) in size. A full size legionary fortress should be 50 - 60 acres.

The Legionary Fortress in its Historical Setting.

In the immediate post-invasion period after AD 43, Aulus Plautius, the task force commander, and the Governor of the Province of Britannia, retained Leg XX at Colchester, his headquarters and seat of government. Leg. 11 under Vespasian was engaged in the advance along the South Coast, and probably occupied the fortress which has now been recognised beneath the town at Silchester. The major stores base at Lake Farm near Wimborne, Dorset, dates from this period, and there are military buildings associated with the fleet underlying the later palace at Fishbourne, together with finds of military material both at Chichester and Dorchester, all relating to this phase of operations. Leg IX, the 9th Hispana, was deployed in the east, and it probably occupied the fortress at Longthorpe on the River Nene. There was no legionary presence at Lincoln in this period, though an auxiliary unit may have been placed there.

The base of Leg XIV, the 14th Gemina, has not yet been identified in the immediate post-invasion period, or during the existence of the Fosse Frontier Zone, though there are slight indications that suggest Towcester. It is certain that the legion was deployed in the Midlands, filling the gap between the 2nd Augusta and the 9th Hispana, but it would not have been placed on the frontier, and the Mancetter dating makes it quite clear that the site was not occupied at this time.

The term of office of Britain's first Governor, Aulus Plautius came to an end during the autumn of AD 47, and his successor arrived to find his province in a state of chaos. Caratacus having withdrawn to Wales and the Marches following his defeat in AD 43 had built up his fighting strength, and had struck into the area controlled by Rome. Tacitus records Scapula was faced with serious disruption, "hostile tribes had irrupted violently into the lands of our allies". Scapula dealt with the situation promptly and successfully, but subsequently giving consideration to the security of the Province, it became clear that the Fosse Frontier was untenable, and the decision was taken to advance the frontier zone into the valley of the River Severn, and take the war into Wales. This decision, on the evidence obtained at Mancetter, marks the establishment of the Legionary Fortress, our Phase 1. circa AD 48/50. At the same time the 20th Valeria was moved from Colchester to Kingsholm, Gloucester, and the 2nd Augusta to Lake Farm, Wimborne, and later to Exeter.

By the mid-fifties, sufficient progress had been made in the Marches and the Dee estuary area for the legionary base to be moved forward, closer to the scene of operations. The new Governor of Britain, Quintus Veranius, was to implement Nero's decision to conquer Wales, and it is from this time (AD 56/58) that the construction of the legionary fortress at Wroxeter may be dated. Mancetter was vacated and demolished, but there is a

possibility that an auxiliary unit was placed there.

In AD 60, the Boudican rebellion broke out, and Dr Webster has suggested that the final battle leading to the defeat of Queen Boudica and the British tribes may well have taken place in the Mancetter area - certainly the topography is a good fit, coupled with the time scale involving troop movements. The revolt was a considerable shock to Rome, and the army was involved in repacification and revenge within the Province necessitating the reoccupation of vacant fort sites, and the construction of new ones. It is reasonable to assign Phase 11. at Mancetter to this very fraught time, but the end of all military involvement at Mancetter is not so easy to determine, nor at the moment can the indications of later phases be dated with confidence. It may well be, as with Wall, Staffordshire, that a reducing garrison was present, and the site "V", "V1", and "V11" military ditches, and those cutting across site "V111", are pointers to a progressive reduction in the fort size. Ultimately the need for troops in the north under Agricola in the late 70s and 80s and the construction of Hadrian's Wall (commenced circa AD 122), led to the site being finally given up. At Wall there is clear evidence, from the excavations on the hill top by the Church, of similar sequence.

Mancetter has proved to be a site of major importance, and will continue to produce information in future years on a relatively short period of time in comparison to the whole Roman period in Britain. Fortunately much of the interior of the fortress is scheduled and will be available for further research.

As to the future, the excavating group of the Atherstone Archaeological Society are already planning their next season and assuming that permission for access is obtained, will be examining more of the western defences with a view to locating the West Gate of the fortress. Looking ahead, of prime importance, is the recovery of more of the plan of the interior of the fortress especially that of the major building, site "V".

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MANCETTER.
Legionary Fortress Plan.

Scale 1 : 2000

