

PROFESSOR ROBERT NEWSTEAD AND FINDS OF ROMAN MILITARY METALWORK
FROM CHESTER

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Although some Roman finds had been discovered and published from the seventeenth century on, these tended to be the large unmistakable items such as altars or architectural fragments, it was not until the later part of the nineteenth century that more attention was given to the smaller, often less well preserved fragments of metalwork. In 1886 W. Thompson Watkin published his survey Roman Cheshire, exhaustively collating all the evidence for the county, including early manuscript accounts and antiquarian collections. Apart from the coin lists, the finds of brooches and other metalwork recorded from Chester is pathetically small (Watkin p.202-208), though it provides a useful account of some of the items which have since gone astray. 1886 was a milestone in another respect as it marked the opening of the Grosvenor Museum, which was to house the collections the Chester Archaeology Society has accumulated since its foundation in 1849, and the arrival of Robert Newstead who was appointed as Curator of the collections of the Chester Society for Natural Science. It was not long before he was involved with the display and conservation of the archaeological material, housed in the same building, and with the reporting of excavations and finds from the region. Amongst his early archaeological publications, which appear from 1899 onwards, is a record of a small angular military bronze buckle from Hunter Street 1898 (JCAS 6 part 2, p.160 pl.3 fig.5, acc.no. 30.R.1898) which can be dated to the later second century A.D. (Oldenstein 1976 p.215-6 Taf.76 no.1010). This has since been paralleled by finds from excavations in more recent years, such as an unpublished piece from Abbey Green 1975-8 small find no.908.

From the near single handed reporting of finds and structures accidentally uncovered by building activity in the city, he extended his archaeological activity into rescue and research digging in Chester, Cheshire, south Lancashire and North Wales. Although his first major excavation was the Roman cemetery at the Infirmary Field, dug at irregular intervals between May 1912 and 1916, it is his excavations in the Deanery Field, the north eastern corner of the fortress, between November 1922 and 1938 which has been of greatest significance to our understanding of Roman Chester (Pl.I). Unlike many of his contemporaries, Newstead was meticulous in retrieving every scrap of evidence within the limits of his resources and the archaeological techniques of his time. His retrieval of the ironwork hoard and other finds from the redevelopment site on



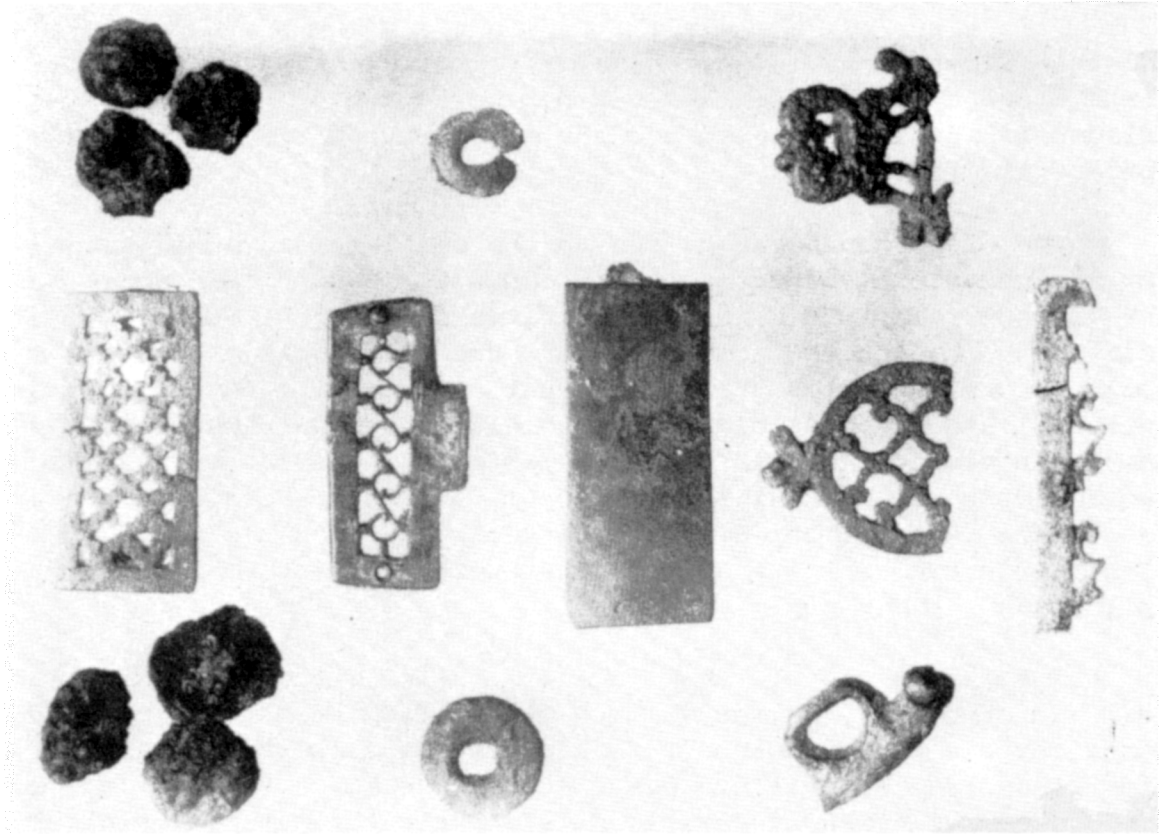
Pl.I: Prof. Robert Newstead excavating in the Deanery Field, Chester, April 1935 (photo. by H.S. Woodward, Chester).

Hunter Street in 1914 is typical. It included the first find of iron scale armour from Britain, which he recognised and discussed in his published account (Pl.II.A; JCAS 27 part 2 1928 p.73-4 pl. III.8, IV).

The importance he placed on the small finds can be gauged by the occasional bitter comments added to the end of some of his reports. In 1899 referring to finds from Bridge Street, some of which had been acquired for the Archaeology Society's collections, he notes that 'The rest were sold for fabulous prices; and I am told that some of them were purchased by American visitors' (JCAS 6, 1899, p.398); in 1914 excavations were undertaken on the site of the Co-Op Stores, Foregate Street - 'There was either a remarkable scarcity of small finds or a leakage through the hands of the workmen' (JCAS 27, 1928, p.102).

The richness of the finds he did retrieve on his own excavations, or by paying workmen on building sites, has been of considerable value, not only as a source of comparative material for finds from excavations during recent years, but also as a record of what was discovered on sites now totally obliterated. His essays at conservation especially of the ironwork, may in some instances appear primitive, but they have in the main proved to be effective. Effective enough so that in some cases, such as the fragments of lorica segmentata from Kings Buildings 1921, a correct identification could be made when it was rediscovered (JCAS 27 part 2, 1928, p.91 no.3-8 Pl.IX). Belt plaques and fittings (Pl.II.B), buckles and decorative studs (Pl.III.A) and pendants whole or incomplete (Pl.III.B) received the same weight of attention as the coins, pottery or worked bone. He was just as particular whether he was publishing inscriptions, or the scrawled graffiti on a 'luggage label' (Pl.IV.A; LAAA 18, 1931, p.140 no.127 Pl.L).

His work was recognised both in Chester when in 1936 he was granted the freedom of the city, and internationally when he provided exhibits for the British contribution to the Augustan Exhibition of the Roman Empire, which opened in Rome in 1937, illustrating the Roman occupation of Chester with plans, photographs and casts of local finds (JCAS 31 part 2, 1936, p.125). Although he only published thirty eight articles and pamphlets on archaeological subjects, in contrast to the hundred and forty or so on natural history, they contain a wealth of factual information about the finds, especially the military aspects of the occupation of Chester, which was recognised by his contemporaries. As Professor Droop, a colleague on some of his later excavations noted in the obituary 'He was untiring in recording traces of Roman occupation, as chance or building operations brought them to light, and the small sums he was



II.B



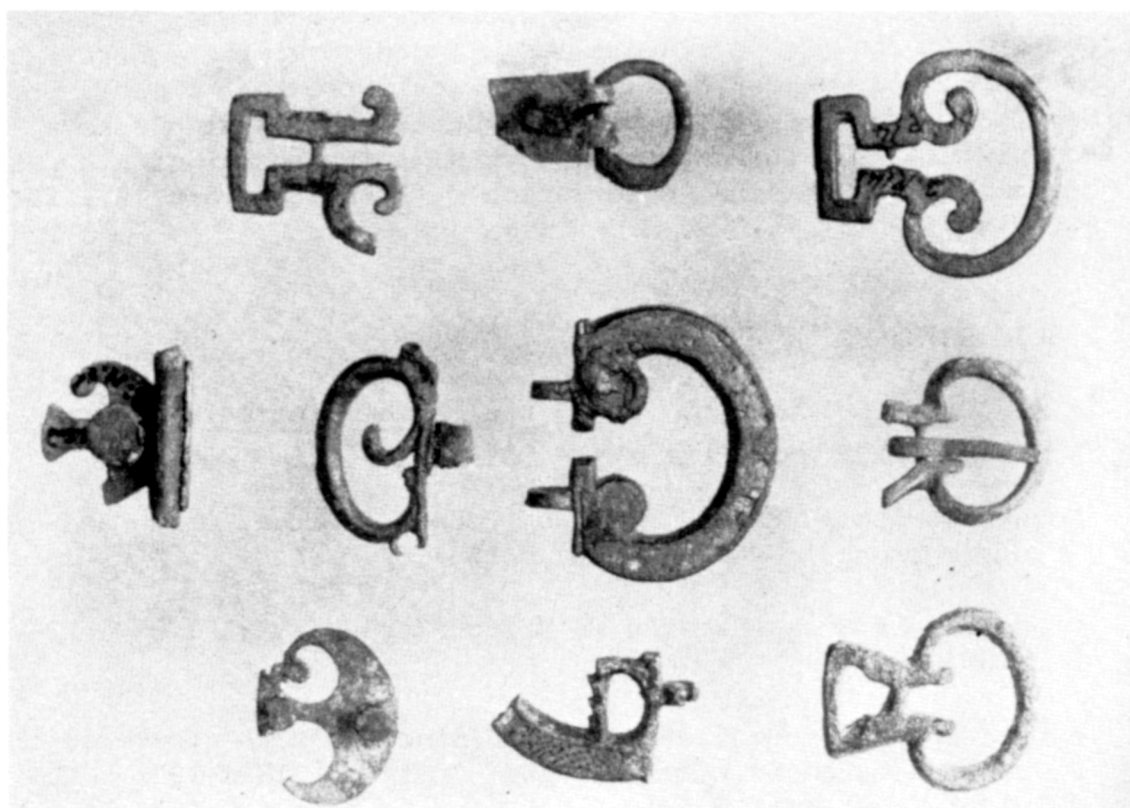
Pl. II. A

constantly expending to save potsherds and other finds from oblivion must have totalled a large amount over the years; and he was not a wealthy man... There was little that I could teach Newstead about scientific digging, but most of what I know of Roman work in Britain I learnt from him, the result of his years of patient work and observation' (JCAS 36 part 2, 1948, p.180-1).

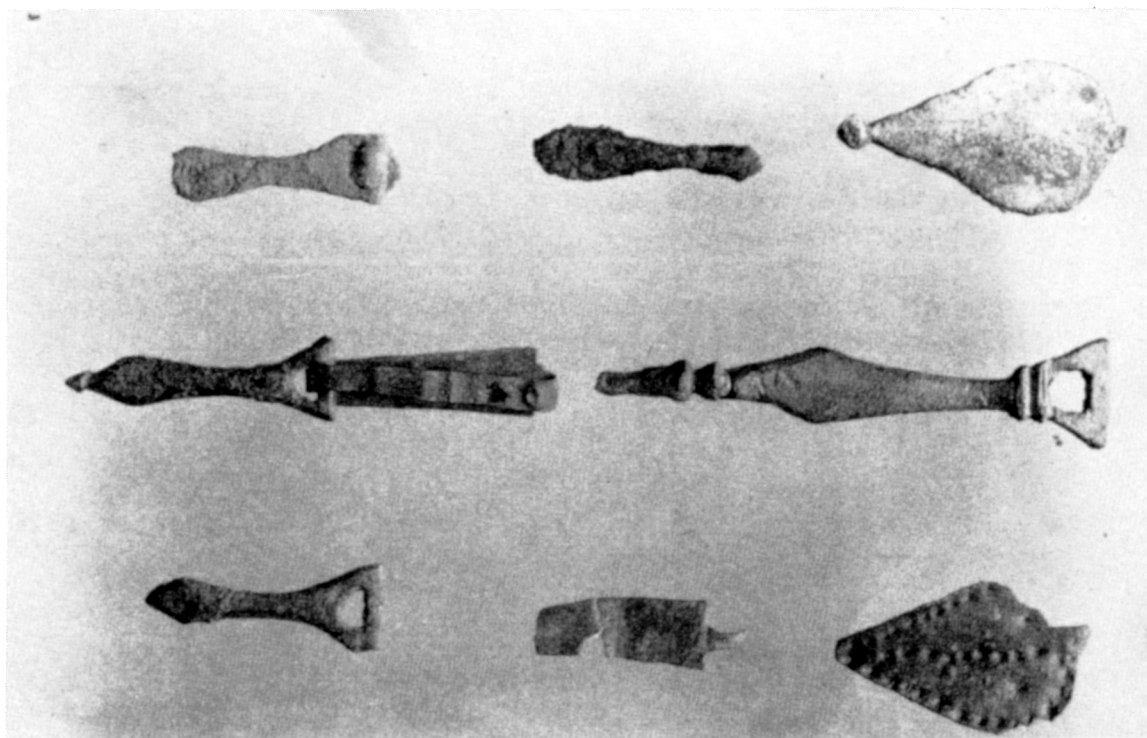
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- 'Records of Archaeological Finds at Chester' JCAS 27 Part 2 (1928) p.59-162
- with J.P. Droop 'Excavations in the Deanery Field, Chester 1928. Part 1: The Excavations' LAAA 18 (1931) p.6-18
- with J.P. Droop 'Excavations in the Deanery Field, Chester 1928. Part 2: The Finds' LAAA 18 (1931) p.113-156
- Pl.II.A:** Iron Scale armour from Hunter Street, Chester 1914
II.B: Iron hob nails, copper alloy belt plaques and fittings, Deanery Field, 1928.
(photos. R. Newstead). Scale 1:1



Pl.III.A: Copper alloy buckles, two with enamel inlay, and pelta-shaped plaques, Deanery Field, 1928.



Pl.III.B: Copper alloy, lead, and iron pendants, Deanery Field, 1928.

(photos. R. Newstead). Scale 1:1

with J.P. Droop 'The Roman Amphitheatre at Chester' JCAS 29 (1932) p.5-40

with J.P. Droop 'The south east corner of the Roman Fortress, Chester' JCAS 29 (1932) p.41-49

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LAAA Liverpool University Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology (1908-1948)

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APPENDIX I: A CHECK LIST OF SOME FINDS OF ROMAN ARMOUR FROM CHESTER

Although most of the items listed below survive only as small fragments, this preliminary catalogue will give some indication of the size of the collections of military finds from Chester gathered over the last seventy years or more. Smaller fittings, such as the decorative belt plaques or fastening loops for the lorica segmentata, are common, weapons less so, though at least seven decorated scabbards have been identified to date. Unless stated to the contrary, all items are in the collections housed in the Grosvenor Museum, Chester.

A: Finds of lorica segmentata

- no.381.R.1976 Large fragments from Kings Buildings, Chester 1921
Newstead JCAS 27 part 2, 1928, p.91 no.3-8 pl.IX
no.382.R.1976 two fragments with parts of hinge in situ. old
collns.

Unpublished items from recent excavations (consisting mainly of AE fittings with fragments of lorica attached).

- St. Martins Field 1964, small find no. 51
Crook Street, 1973-4, small find no's. 196, 412, 661, 665, 755,
and an unnumbered item from layer 68.
Abbey Green 1975-8, small finds no's. 1426, 1919, 2568, and
perhaps no's. 1677 and 1802?
Hunter Street School, 1979 small find no's 507, 1036.
Hunters Walk, 1980 small find no's 533, 545.

B: Finds of scale armour

- (i) Bronze for sewing on to linen backing in rows.
no.377.R.1976 two examples from the Deanery Field 1928.
Droop and Newstead LAAA 18 (1931) p.135-6 no.8
pl.XLVII

(ii) Bronze - linked together on all sides
no.377.R.1976 one example Deanery Field 1928
Droop and Newstead LAAA 18 (1931) p.135-6 no.8
pl.XLVII
no.Go 19 two fragments from Goss Street 1948, not included in
the excavation report.

Unpublished items from recent excavations
Newgate/Pepper Street 1963-4 small find no. 142 = no.376.R.1976,
at least six fragments
Frodsham Street 1966 small find no. 64b four lumps

Goss Street, 1973 small find no's 1287, 1816, 1834.
Crook Street, 1973-4 small find no's 841, and fragments from
context no's I 29; and I F 52.
Abbey Green, 1975-8 small find no's 625, 1992

(iii) Iron - lorica squamata

Hunter Street 1914 (Pl.II.A) now in the British Museum
no.1928.8-9.4; 1928.7-9.5 and 1928.7-9.6.

Newstead JCAS 27 part 2, 1928, p.73-4 pl.IV and III
no.8

Manning 1985 p.146 no.T1-3, Pl.71.

Deanery Field 1922-3, Newstead LAAA 11, 1924, p.77 pl.III i.

Goss Street 1973, small find no. 2594, unpublished

C: Finds of chainmail

(i) Bronze

no.375.R.1976, old collns. ca. 14 links.

Unpublished items from recent excavations

Frodsham Street 1966, small find no. 158

Old Market Hall 1967-9 Phase III small find no's. 614, 869

Lower Bridge Street, 1974 small find no's 249, 250 (mixed iron
and copper alloy)

(ii) Iron

Deanery Field, 1923, now in the British Museum no.1928.7-9.8

Newstead LAAA 11, 1924, p.77-8, pl.III no.3

Manning 1985 p.146 no.T3a Pl.XVIII.

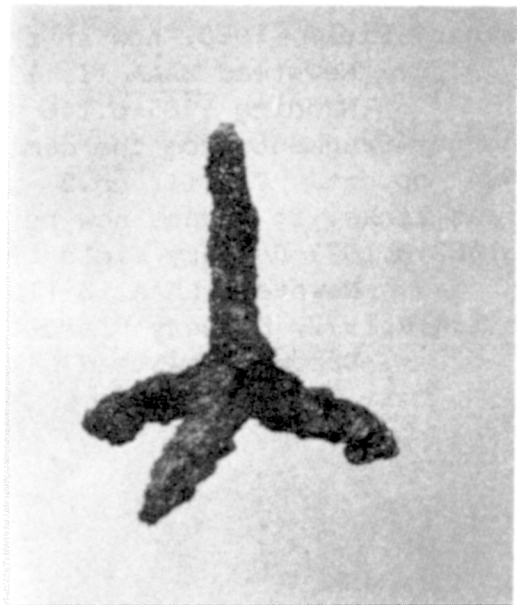
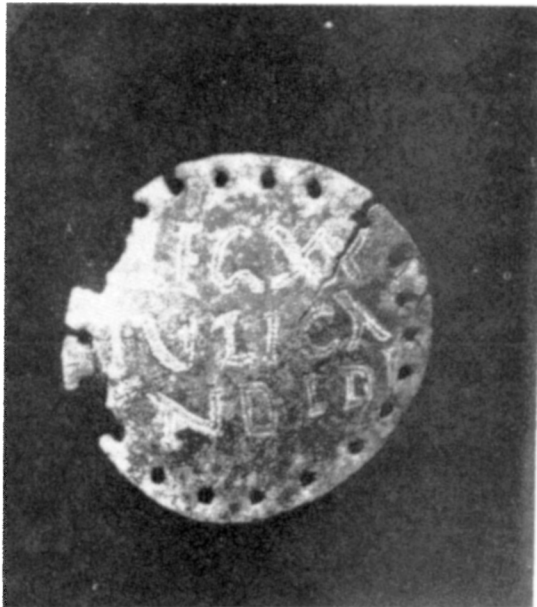
Another fragment from the same site and illustrated by Newstead
1924 op.cit. Pl.III no.2 is described as iron with a row of
brass links. It cannot now be located.

no.602.R.1977 Deanery Field 1924-6 ring of iron ?from chain mail

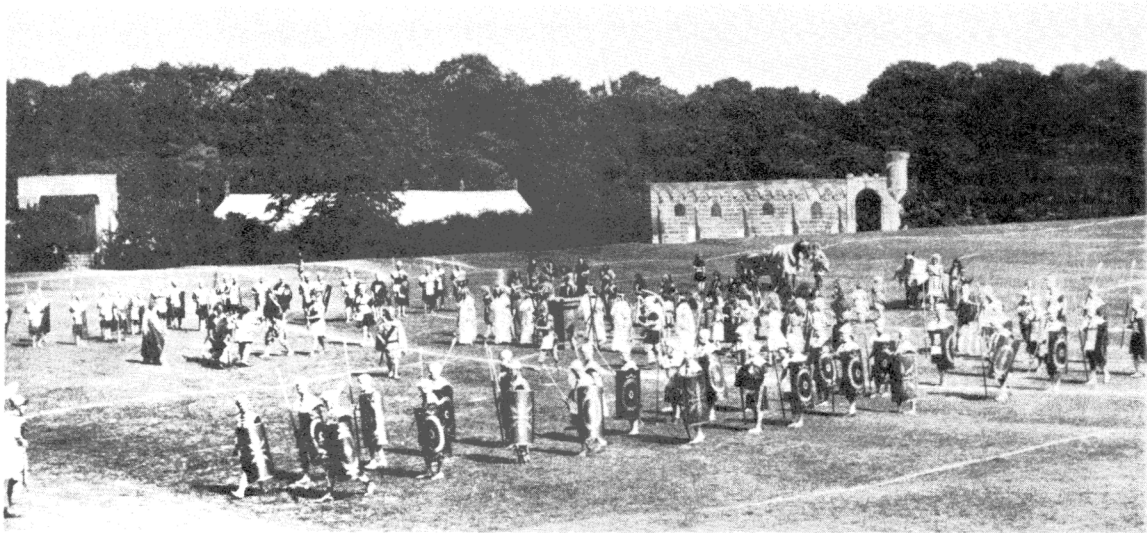
Newstead LAAA 15 (1928) p.20 no.10 pl.VIII

no.254.R.1977, Deanery Field 1928

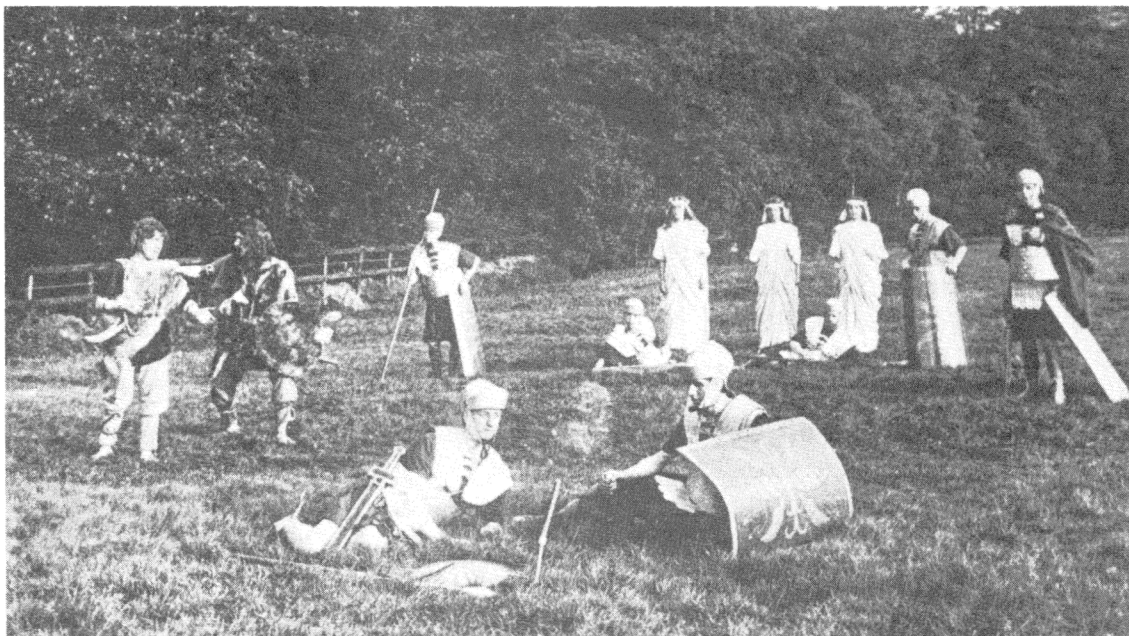
Droop & Newstead LAAA 18 (1931) p.136 no.84 pl.XLVIII



Pl.IV.A: Lead 'luggage label' "> TITIANI", Deanery Field, 1928.
IV.B: Copper alloy 'Luggage label' "LEG XX/ IULI CA/NDIDI",
Deanery Field, 1922-3
IV.C: Iron Caltrop, Deanery Field, 1928.
(photos R. Newstead). Scale 1:1



Pl.V.A: Chester Pageant 1910: Agricola with soldiers of the 20th. Legion.



APPENDIX II: A ROMAN EPISODE IN THE CHESTER PAGEANT OF 1910

In the autumn of 1909 it was decided to mark the three hundredth anniversary of the Pageant performed on the Roodee on St. George's Day 1610 under the title 'Chester's Triumph in honour of her Prince'. Various committees were set up to cover all aspects of the pageant (Robert Newstead was on the lecture committee), which was held, to the satisfaction of all concerned, in Eaton Park on the 18th to 23rd July inclusive 1910. After the Introduction, eight episodes from Chester's history were enacted. The cast list is taken from the Official Souvenir Programme which was on sale before and during the performances; the description of the action in the Roman episode is taken from the revised account published later in the Journal of the Chester Archaeological Society vol.17 (1910) p.107-119. The illustrations are reproduced from a set of original photographs now in the collection of the Grosvenor Museum, Chester (Pl.V.A, B).

Episode 1: Agricola returns to Deva after defeating the Ordovices A.D.78

Felix, a Roman Soldier	Mr. A. Hodge
Piso, a Roman Soldier	Mr. J.G. Frater
Carantus, a Briton	Mr. S. Dring
Deuccas, a Briton	Mr. L. Bebbington
Cn. Julius Agricola, Governor of the Province of Britain	Rev. J.R. Fuller
Brica, a British Maiden	Miss M. Keall
Cunobarrus, Brica's Father	Mr. George Cochrane
C. Aufidius Rufus, a Centurion	Mr. Thomas G. McQuire
Decius, a Roman Soldier	Mr. E.T. Carpenter
Valerius, a Roman Soldier	Mr. E.P. Irving
The Military Tribune	Mr. Percy Smith
Ledicca, Brica's Mother	Mrs. Mason
Lictors, Trumpeters, Legionaries of the XX Valeria Victrix, and the II Adjutrix Pia Fidelis, Standard Bearers with the Eagle and the Wild Boar, the Badge of the Legions. British Men, Women and Children, and Sutlers.	

'Although Chester, anciently "Deva", was an important garrison town during the Roman occupation of Britain, and although the City possesses a rich store of remains of that period, no record has come down to us of any scene that lends itself to adequate spectacular display. By making the episode one of a general character, applicable to any town in these Islands at that time, a scene possessing much dramatic force has been constructed.

'We are introduced to Julius Agricola, the great statesman and

warrior, whose administration of this country forms the most brilliant epoch of the Roman occupation. He was a man profoundly skilled in the arts of peace and war. He strove to conciliate the native tribes by acts of kindness, and introduced among them many of the advantages of civilisation.

'Agricola came to Deva at the close of a successful campaign in Wales. In the scene before us, he is engaged in business with his officers. A Briton steals up behind him, and Agricola turns only just in time to save himself from assassination. The native is seized by the angry soldiers, and we gather that the motive of the man's action is to avenge his bride, who has been flagrantly insulted by a centurion. The centurion is under arrest, but the Briton mistrusts the honesty of Roman justice, where the life or at least the liberty of so important an officer is at stake, and only a native has been wronged.

'Agricola, however, has the clemency to forgive the assault upon himself, and further vindicates the honour of his race by having the centurion brought to immediate trial, and after conviction, sending him to death within the hour.'