

## 150 Years of *Conversazione*

Having attended many lectures over many years of the Huddersfield and District Archaeological Society I think I can claim with a fair degree of confidence that the one topic guaranteed to produce a larger audience than normal will be the Romans, especially the Romans in Yorkshire.

This enduring local fascination with our Roman past has a long and distinguished pedigree, for this year, 2018, marks the 150th anniversary of the foundation in Huddersfield of **The Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Society**. In fact its birth took place just a few years earlier as **The Huddersfield Archaeological and Topographical Society**, but this was regarded by its founders as far too much a parochial attitude to local history and its scope was widened to take in the whole of Yorkshire. In time the **YATS** became the present day **Yorkshire Archaeological and Historical Society** and our own **Huddersfield and District Archaeological Society** was once again reborn as a separate organisation in 1956.

The creation of the YATS in 1868 reflects the wider and growing determination of that age to bring a more objective and scientific exploration to the surviving evidence of the past. An ancient site was no longer just a potential source of wealth for the treasure diggers. It could be exploited and investigated to help us understand a way of life long vanished. The first annual report of the YATS (1869) survives and is very revealing as to membership and aspirations. The movers and shakers of Huddersfield of the day were its founders, enjoying the support amongst others of Sir John Ramsden and the Earl of Dartmouth, one of the leading landowners in the area. Ironically the present day HDAS is frustrated with some of its projects by the refusal of some landowners to allow access to their property. That the YATS took itself very seriously and expected itself to be regarded as the equal of similar societies elsewhere in the country, and indeed in Europe, comes clearly through the language of this report. It had a paid-up membership of 170 who came together not at a meeting (how vulgar!), but at a **Conversazione** (“a scholarly social gathering held for discussion of literature and the arts.”)

Although the HATS, (and then YATS) was always interested in the wider field of Yorkshire history and archaeology, around the 1860s its focus was on the exploration of the Roman fort at Slack near Huddersfield and the need to raise funds for a proper excavation and explanation of the site. The existence of some kind of Roman settlement at Slack had been known about since at least the 17th century, but now the YATS wanted to bring a more scientific approach with that brand-new -ology, archaeology, to bear.

In 1865 the HATS published a detailed report on the work at Slack which had concentrated its efforts on what was then called the “Roman hypocaust”, or the bath house. This seems to have been the most visible part of the fort at this time and there was considerable concern at the damage being inflicted upon the site by farming and stone robbers. Today we might call this first professional excavation a “rescue dig.” And indeed “rescue” on a rather grand scale, since all the remains of the ‘hot’ room of the bath house along with its furnace and hypocaust were then removed and reconstructed in the grounds of a mansion at Greenhead in Huddersfield, the home of a Mr. Beaumont. Later, when Tolson museum opened, the hypocaust was again moved to the park outside the museum. Alas, it was later removed from outdoor display because of wear and tear and to protect it from vandalism. The present whereabouts of the Roman structure is uncertain.

These early archaeologists were in no doubt that at Slack they had found the **Cambodunum** mentioned in the Antonine Itinerary. They may indeed be correct, but it remains a contentious issue with eloquent advocates both for and against. Only the discovery perhaps of some inscription still buried at Slack might solve the riddle. But one of their interpretations we can confidently dispute. Many roof tiles from Slack have been found during several excavations (including our own), and many of these are inscribed COH IIII BRE. In the 1865 excavation report this was interpreted in full as COHORS QUARTA BRETANORUM, i.e. Slack was thought to have been the home to a regiment of British soldiers serving in the Roman army. In fact the inscription in full reads COHORS QUARTA BREUCI, and the Breuci were an auxiliary regiment recruited by the Romans in what used to be called Yugoslavia.

The 1869 annual report of the YATS shows the determination of these early archaeologists to share their work with as wide an audience as possible. The Society opened and funded a museum at Slack/Outlane where the Roman finds were displayed. Where this museum was and how long it remained open is not clear, but the accounts of the Society show that it cost some £5.3s in annual rent, which seems to have been something of a drain on their financial resources. (In the bank they had in total £150. 6s. 11d.) The Society had also opened a library in the centre of Huddersfield at 6 Market Place with a Mr. John Crossley as sub-librarian and it is possible that the finds were removed to here. What exactly these finds consisted of and where they are today is something of a mystery. They might now be part of the Tolson Roman collection, but we can't be sure. The excavations were also photographed and results sold to the general public. Do any of these pictures still survive? The HDAS would love to know.

These early local pioneers deserve our admiration and respect. Their high standards and efforts helped to create a climate in which archaeology became accepted as a genuine scientific calling, alongside medicine, law and the arts with the creation of archaeology departments at most of our universities. Today, our own society, the HDAS, offspring of these early worthies, continues this long tradition of *Conversazione*, the monthly meetings attracting large audiences who come to hear the leading authorities of our day. Slack continues to attract our interest with many questions there still to be answered. The surveying and excavation over more than thirty years of the correct route of the trans-pennine Roman road was a major achievement for an amateur society, forcing even the mighty Ordnance Survey to have second thoughts. Many members are still keen to get on their knees, trowel in hand, eager to prove that the past might not be such a foreign country after all. Our archaeological ancestors would be mighty proud!

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