

# Prestatyn 1984-5

An Iron Age Farmstead and  
Romano-British Industrial Settlement in  
North Wales

Kevin Blockley

BAR British Series 210

1989



# Prestatyn 1984-5

An Iron Age Farmstead and  
Romano-British Industrial Settlement in  
North Wales

by  
Kevin Blockley

with contributions by

Denise Allen, Justine Bailey, J. C. B. Barrett,  
Peter Berridge, G. C. Boon, Kenneth Brassil,  
David Crombie, Marion Day, S. J. Greep,  
Kay Hartley, Julian Henderson, Martin Henig,  
Kate Hunter, Gillian Jones, Julie Jones,  
J. B. Kenworthy, D. F. Mackreth, Ruth A. Morgan,  
Peter Nicholls, J. B. Stevenson,  
Margaret (Bulmer) Ward and Mike Weetman

BAR British Series 210  
1989

# Contents

	Page
<i>List of Plates</i>	vii
<i>List of Figures</i>	viii
<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
Acknowledgements	1
Introduction	3
Romano-British sites in the area	4
Excavations at Prestatyn Meadows 1973, <i>by J B Stevenson, J C B Barrett and J B Kenworthy</i>	10
Trial excavations at Melyd Avenue 1980, <i>by Kenneth Brassil</i>	11
Excavations in 1984-85, <i>by Kevin Blockley</i>	13
Part I: The site	13
Summary	13
Period I: pre-Roman occupation	13
Stake walled roundhouse I1	13
Timber structure I2	17
Working area I3	18
Working area I4	18
Working area I5	19
Miscellaneous features of Period I	19
Levelling of Period I occupation	20
General discussion Period I	22
Period IIA: Timber buildings and masonry Bath-house	23
Building R1	23
Building R2	24
Building R3	24
Building R4	26
Building R5	31
Bath-house R6	34
Building R7	41
Building R8	43
Miscellaneous features of Period IIA	44
Ditch 2661	45
Period IIB: Timber buildings and extension of Bath-house	46
Bath-house R6	46
Aqueduct	50
Structure R9	50
Structure R10	50
Buildings east of ditch of Period IIA/IIB	53
Building R11	53
Building R12	53
Dating evidence for Period II occupation	54
General discussion of layout Period II	55
Period III: Drainage gullies	55

Period IV: Hill-wash deposits and timber building	56
Building R13	56
Hill-wash deposits	56
Destruction of the bath-house	56
Dating evidence for Period IV occupation	56
Period V: Hill-wash deposit	56
Period VI: Pebble lane	59
Period VII: Recent activity	59
Part II: The finds	83
Conservation report, <i>by Kate Hunter &amp; Dave Crombie</i>	83
The Coins, <i>by G C Boon</i>	87
Objects of copper alloy	87
Brooches, <i>by D F Mackreth</i>	87
Finger rings, <i>by Martin Henig</i>	99
Miscellaneous objects, <i>by Kevin Blockley</i>	100
Objects of lead, <i>by Kevin Blockley</i>	104
Objects of iron, <i>by Kevin Blockley</i>	106
Objects of worked bone and antler, <i>by S J Greep</i>	111
The Roman glass, <i>by Denise Allen</i>	117
Lithics, <i>by Peter Berridge</i>	124
Objects of stone, <i>by Kevin Blockley</i>	124
Miscellaneous ceramic objects, <i>by Kevin Blockley</i>	136
Romano-British ceramic tile	136
Loomweight	138
Counters	138
Part III: The pottery	139
Introduction	139
Samian ware, <i>by Margaret (Bulmer) Ward</i>	139
Mortarium, <i>by Kay Hartley</i>	155
The coarse pottery, <i>by Kevin Blockley</i>	156
Fabric Classification	156
Pottery Catalogue	158
Amphorae	158
Other Imports	158
Coarse Wares	160
Discussion	169
Part IV: Specialist reports	171
Infant burial, <i>by Peter Nicholls</i>	171
Botanical remains, <i>by Julie Jones</i>	171
Analysis of the brooches and crucibles, <i>by Justine Bailey</i>	179
Analyses of enamels and glasses used in the decoration of brooches from Prestatyn and its archaeological interpretation, <i>by Julian Henderson</i>	181
Moulds, <i>by Kevin Blockley, Marion Day and D F Mackreth</i>	183
Industrial waste, <i>by Kevin Blockley</i>	192
Tree ring studies, <i>by Ruth A Morgan</i>	194
Leather, <i>by Kevin Blockley</i>	211
The Animal bones, <i>by Gillian Jones</i>	211 - 221

Excavations on Ysgol-y-Llys playing field 1985–86, <i>by Mike Weetman</i>	223
Conclusions, <i>by Kevin Blockley</i>	223
Abbreviations	225
Bibliography	225



## Introduction

### *Location* (Figs 2, 4 and 5)

The site is situated at the bottom of Melyd Avenue, Prestatyn on a gentle southern slope extending down from the 15 m contour (NGR SJ 062817). Chester (DEVA) lies 39 km to the east and Caerhun (KANOVIVM) 28 km to the west. Known Roman sites and roads in the area are shown in Fig 5.

### *Geology*

The geological sequence at Prestatyn has been dealt with in great detail by E Neaverson (Newstead 1937, 228–32) and will only be summarised here.

High ground to the north, above the 15 m contour, consists almost entirely of glacial deposits of variable character. They include gravels, sands and clays often of lenticular form. Boulder clay lay on the plateau whilst down-slope (south) the 1984–5 excavations revealed a sequence of glacial sand overlain by a deposit of peat, of variable thickness, in part sealed by redeposited glacial sands presumably washed down-slope over the peat, wedging out to within 10 m of the southern edge of the excavated area. Consequently the majority of the Period I and II occupation deposits overlay or cut into the redeposited sand. Further down-slope, however, the occupation cut into the natural peat.

### *Previous Excavations on the Site* (Fig 3 and 4)

The site at Melyd Avenue was first discovered by a local surveyor Mr F Gilbert Smith on 30 March 1934. He and Professor R Newstead excavated several sections along the line of the 15 m contour locating a ditch (Fig 3), as well as investigating the lower-lying ground to the south (Smith 1934, 60–3) and locating numerous tiles bearing the official stamp of the Twentieth Legion – LEG XX VV. Further excavations were conducted in 1935 by the same excavators (Smith 1935, 48–51) and again in 1936 and 1937 by Professor Newstead who excavated further trenches and three masonry buildings (Newstead 1936, 74–6; Newstead 1937, 208–32; and Newstead 1938, 175–91). In 1951 Graham Webster excavated a trench on the plateau (Webster 1952–3, 11) but a detailed report has not been published. A further trench was excavated by Mr Tobias in 1955 (FHSP 1956, ix) but the precise location of this trench is also uncertain and it was never published.

The next recorded excavation was conducted by Messrs Barrett, Kenworthy and Stevenson in 1973, in the south-east corner of the Meadows Estate, a little to the west of the previous excavations (Barrett *et al* 1973, 39). No buildings were located in the 1973 excavation which yielded building rubble datable to 'not later than c AD 150 ... in the upper fill of a ditch ...' (see below).

During 1976 Professor G D B Jones excavated a trial trench near Fforddisa (Fig 4), north-west of the 1930s excavations, to investigate a possible fort or annex located by aerial photography. Here Professor Jones located 'one outer and two inner ditches ... fronting a substantial clay rampart ...' (Frere 1977, 358–9).

More recently, in 1980, Mr K S Brassil (for the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust) excavated a trial trench, on the Melyd Avenue site, from a point a little south of the ditch located in the 1930s excavation, to the stream at the foot of the field (CPAT 1980, 8–9).

The 1930s, 1950s and 1976 excavations were all undertaken for the purposes of research whilst the 1973, 1980 and present excavations (1984–5) were rescue excavations conducted before the site was developed for housing.

For a location plan of the excavation trenches dug between 1934 and 1985 see Figs 3 and 4. The 1930s trenches are approximate, located from published plans (Newstead 1938, figs 1 and 2).

Results of the 1973 and 1980 excavations have not been published in full to date, and are included in this report (pp 10–11).

### *Reasons for Excavation in 1980 and 1984–5*

Extensive trial trenching had taken place in the 1930s but the information gained on the timber structures was so limited that further excavation was felt essential for the understanding of the settlement before the housing development could be allowed to start.

The trial trench excavated by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust in 1980 was designed to sample the site and 'seek better information on the depth and extent of various deposits ...' (CPAT 1980, 9). This excavation showed that the northern part of the field was extensively eroded, leaving no Roman stratigraphy above the redeposited natural sands, whilst down-slope the Roman deposits were better preserved with good



survival of stratigraphy and *in situ* timber posts. Further south still the area was found to be too waterlogged to have been extensively occupied in Roman times.

The housing development did not proceed quickly after the 1980 excavation, and no further work was thought essential until more detailed plans for the development of the site were put forward in 1983.

When planning the excavation strategy for 1984 the previous excavation trenches in the field proved to be invaluable in pinpointing the most likely areas to produce well stratified Roman occupation. The aims of the 1984 excavation were to establish the layout, date and function of the Romano-British timber buildings and to provide a more secure sequence of construction and dating for the Bath-house excavated in the 1930s. This objective remained unchanged in 1985 when further areas were excavated.

The rescue work undertaken in 1984-5 was followed by a limited research excavation and resistance survey on the plateau to the north, in an attempt to provide further evidence of the possible fort(s) postulated by Smith and Jones in 1934 and 1976 respectively. For a report on these trenches see p 223.

#### *Method of Excavation in 1984-5*

The 1984 excavation, designed to investigate an area of intact Roman stratigraphy, was 33 m by 22 m in extent (pl Ia). A smaller area 18 m by 8 m was also excavated to look in detail at the Bath-house and put it on view to the public. A total of 660 sq m was excavated in 1984 from 14 May to 23 November, with an average team of 12 excavators and a small back-up team on finds processing and educational work.

Topsoil was removed to a depth of *c* 40 cm, by machine using a 360 degree excavator, onto deposits of hill-wash sealing the Roman occupation. The remainder of the deposits, between 50 cm and 90 cm deep were excavated by hand.

Once the results of the 1984 excavations had been evaluated over the winter months it was considered essential that further open area excavations, linking the Bath-house with the timber buildings and extending south of the baths, should be conducted.

The 1985 excavation team was extended to an average of 25 excavators and a larger back-up team including a conservation assistant, finds processors, educational staff and administrative assistants. Consequently an area 27 m by 24 m was fully excavated (pl Ib), and a further area (11 m by 26 m) excavated to the north-east of the 1984

site to investigate a ditch located in 1980 and checked for evidence of occupation outside it (to the east). A similar system of topsoil stripping by machine was used in the second season of excavations but the hill-wash sealing the Roman occupation was also removed by machine to a total depth of *c* 40 cm leaving *c* 90 cm depth (maximum) of stratified deposits to be excavated by hand. The 1985 excavation was undertaken between 29 May and 28 September.

A total of 47 weeks excavation was conducted in 1984-5 over an area of *c* 1,544 sq m.

#### *Recording System in 1984-85*

A continuous number sequence was allocated for the stratigraphy and each context recorded on a separate recording form (a total of nearly 2,800 contexts were recorded). Other types of recording forms were; a materials record sheet for small-finds (a little over 2,000 small-finds were logged); context materials form for general finds from each context and a sample form for technological and environmental samples. A small-finds book was also kept to log and illustrate (in sketch form) each find as it came out of the ground. The context and materials forms were entered into computer during excavation to speed up post-excavation analysis and sorting. Other recording methods included a catalogue of colour transparencies and black-and-white contact prints taken during the excavation.

Planning was based on a grid-system. A base-line was laid out along the north edge of the main trench and a permanent grid of four-metre squares established. A1-size sheets of drafting film were used for a plan of individual features at a scale of 1:20 with an overlay for a small-finds plot (at the same scale) and further overlays of the stratigraphy as required to prevent the plans from becoming cluttered. Sections were also recorded on the A1-sized sheets, but at a scale of 1:10, whilst a 1:50 scale plan of the site was drawn up for a contour survey.

Detailed plans and sections at a scale of 1:10 and location plans at scales of 1:50, 1:100 and 1:200 were drawn on A4-size sheets of drafting film. These are all retained in the site archive.

#### **Romano-British sites in the area** (Fig 5)

Few large-scale excavations have been undertaken on Romano-British sites in Clwyd, and the known sites may be counted on the fingers of two hands. The vast majority of finds have been made along the north coast, with a scatter of finds in



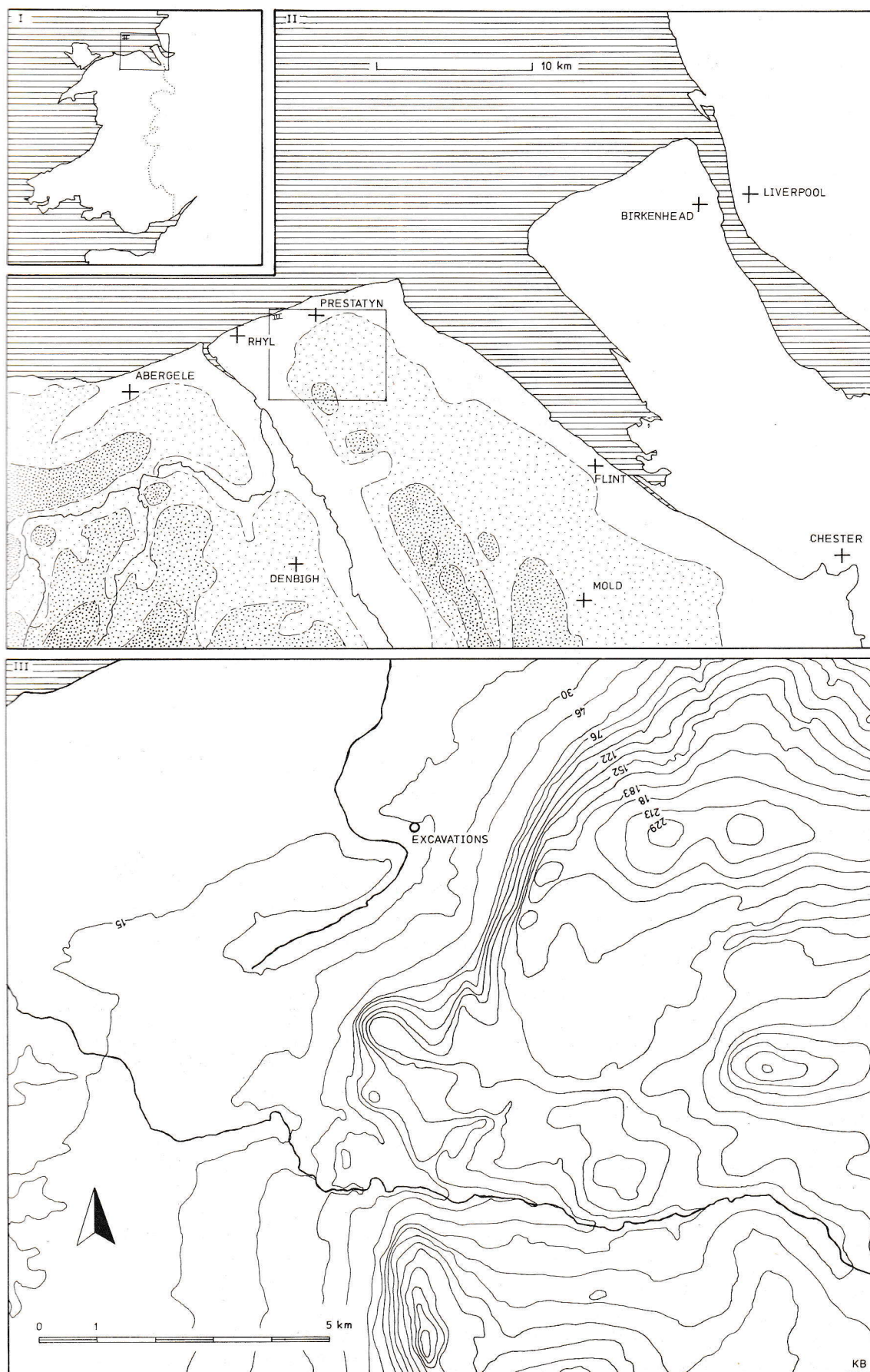


Fig 2 The position of the site.



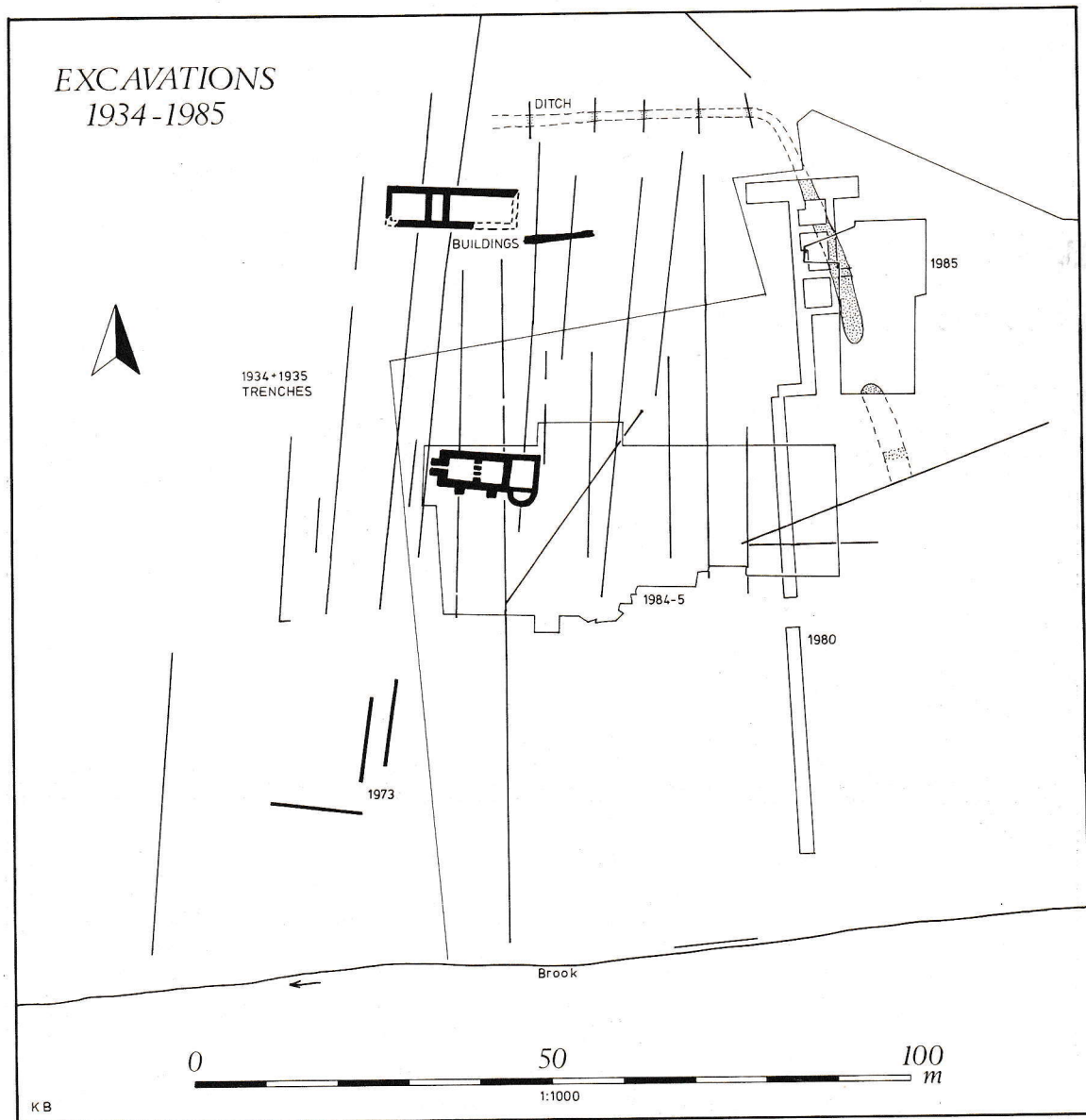


Fig 3 Location of excavation trenches, 1934-1985 (scale 1:1000).

mid-Clwyd. Upland areas, west of the Vale of Clwyd and south of Corwen are virtually devoid of archaeological finds of a Roman date.

#### *Military Occupation*

No Roman forts are known in Clwyd, although perhaps two or even three await discovery. Strategic sites where forts may be expected are St Asaph, Corwen and Ruthin.

The first, St Asaph, is suggested as the site of VARIS, mentioned in the *Antonine Itinerary for Britain*, under Iter XI. Excavations by Dr J L Davies in the grounds of the Old Canonry, St Asaph, failed to locate Romano-British occupation (*Archaeol in Wales* 1981, 42), but pottery and tile fragments have been found west of the

A541 (SJ 045 731) and to the south near Bryn Polyn (Goodburn 1979, 269). It seems likely, therefore, that the location of Varis should be sought near Stanley Hospital or Bryn Polyn, on the summit of a ridge between the rivers Clwyd and Elwy.

The Corwen area is a further strategic location – a fort may have been situated where the Caer Gai to Chester and St Asaph to Corwen Roman roads converged to cross the River Alwen some 150 m west of Corwen. A fragment of a Twentieth Legion antefix tile and supposed Roman building have been found at Corwen (*Llangollen Advertiser*, 1910, 25th February).

The third possible site for a fort is at Ruthin. Several sherds of pottery were found at Ruthin