

WIGAN: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOWN

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Wigan occupies a roughly triangular spur, some 40m above sea level, overlooking the meandering course of the River Douglas. A mixture of glacial and Coal Measure deposits, the spur is naturally defended by the River Douglas on all sides but the north-west, where the ground level rises gradually towards Standish. The streams and mosses beyond the Douglas to the south of the town further enhance its defensibility.

As lightly-wooded upland, it would probably have presented an attractive prospect to prehistoric colonists, but there is little archaeological evidence for such settlement. In 1933, a Late Neolithic polished stone axe was found at Gidlow. (Jackson 1934-5,74), while in 1980 a Bronze Age axe-hammer, now lost, was discovered in the Bottling Wood area (OS 23). Apart from these isolated finds the evidence for prehistoric settlement in Wigan remains circumstantial.

ROMAN WIGAN

Prior to 1982, virtually nothing was known of Roman Wigan. It has often been identified with 'Coccium': recorded in Iter X of the 2nd century Antonine Itinerary as lying 17 Roman miles from 'Mamucium' (Manchester). Rivet and Smith (1979,310) preferred an identification with Edgeworth, near Bolton, but this was partly on the grounds that no Roman settlement at Wigan had at that time been discovered.

Regardless of this question, a series of chance discoveries in recent centuries demonstrated the existence of some form of Roman settlement in the area. In 1690 a hoard of over 200 coins was found by a farm labourer at Bolton Field, Standish. The coins dated from the reign of Domitian (AD 81-96) to that of Gordian III (AD 238-244), and were found in a bronze vessel together with an engraved 'intaglio', or gemstone, and two large gold rings (Leigh 1700,92-110; Watkin 1883,238). In 1926 a hoard of 137 silver coins (spanning the period AD 54-225) was found at Boar's Head during the digging of foundations at Minerva House, Wigan Lane (Hawkes

1935,43). The location of these hoards, in close proximity to the road north towards Walton, is fairly typical and they probably represent the concealment of personal wealth, perhaps during a time of political or economic upheaval.

Other coin discoveries in Wigan have included a group of bronze coins of various emperors of the late 2nd to late 3rd century AD, found near the Market Place in 1837 (Watkin 1875-6, 69), undated examples from Millgate and Bottling Wood (WMR), 4th century bronze coins from the Mesnes and the Rectory gardens, and a silver coin of Antonius Pius (AD 138-161) found at Marylebone in 1930 (WMR). Probably the most celebrated discovery, however, was that of a gold aureus of the Emperor Vitellius (AD 69), found near the Mesnes in 1850 (THSLC 1851).

Roman pottery has been found in Millgate and Library Street (Hawkes 1935,43), and a group of 2nd century pottery (including Samian Ware) was found, together with bronze vessels, on the site of the Technical College in 1901 (WMR).

Much of the other material ascribed to the Roman period is of uncertain date. A milestone, possibly Roman, was found at 'The Elms' Wigan Lane, in 1930 (OS 22), while an altar built into the wall of the Parish Church, though inscribed with the date 1604, has often been claimed to be Roman (Watkin 1880,72). Statuary has included a number of unidentified figures found at the Parish Church in 1551 and a head (possibly of Minerva) found at Minerva House, Wigan Lane in 1930 (WMR).

Less equivocal was the discovery of a headless statue of Cautopates, attendant of the god Mithras, at Appley Bridge in 1932 (Shotter 1973,57). This was clearly of significance, suggesting the existence of a Mithraeum, and therefore probably a military garrison, in the Wigan area.

Structural evidence of Roman Wigan has always proved elusive. The 'Roman' road observed during the construction of the Baths in Millgate in 1911,



Plate 1 Wigan town centre, looking north

and stretches of walling uncovered in Millgate and King Street West (WMR) could be of any date, while other features such as the walls observed in Scholes (WMR) are clearly non-Roman.

The majority of finds occurred above the 38m contour, suggesting that the focus of Roman settlement was, as in the medieval period, on the summit of the hill rather than in close proximity to the river. The exception to this was the discovery, in the early 19th century of a number of cremation urns, charcoal and ironwork in the Darlington Street area during the construction of the gasworks (Watkin 1883,20;1887,5). This area clearly represented the cemetery of Roman Wigan, and its location at the foot of the hill was, in keeping with Roman custom, well removed from the focus of settlement. Exploratory excavations in the area conducted by GMAU in (Holdsworth and Reynolds 1981), in common with those undertaken previously in the town, produced no evidence of Roman occupation.

In late 1982, GMAU had the opportunity to investigate an area due for development as a library and museum complex, at the junction of the Wiend and Millgate and close to the heart of the medieval town (Tindall 1982-3). The project was MSC-funded, though with assistance from Wigan Borough and, latterly, HBMC(E). The excavations continued until September 1984, although with intervals dictated by the vagaries of funding and demolition contracts.

Excavation took place initially within and between standing buildings and, on their demolition, continued below them. By this piecemeal process a total area of c530 sq m was opened - by far the largest area ever excavated in the town, albeit in fragmentary fashion.

At least four phases of Roman settlement were revealed (Chapter 4), spanning the period late 1st-2nd century AD: the early phases were associated with substantial timber store buildings, probably of military construction, and the later ones with heavy industrial activity. There was no evidence of 3rd or 4th century occupation, although the evidence of the finds from elsewhere in the town suggests that Roman occupation continued into this period. Clearly a great many questions about the date, nature and extent of the Roman settlement at Wigan remain to be answered.

MEDIEVAL WIGAN

After the Roman occupation, some form of native settlement in the area is suggested by such British place-names as Bryn, Makerfield, and Ince. The existence too of later Anglo-Saxon and occasional Norse names (such as Scholes) attests to some continuity of occupation in the post-Roman period (Ekwall 1922). The name Wigan first appears in its present form in 1199, and probably derives from an Old English personal name, 'Wicga' or 'Wiga',

meaning a 'champion' (Ekwall 1922). The place-name evidence, together with the improbable story of a Dark Age battle in the Parson's Meadow area (Hardwick 1882, 22), constitutes the sum total of the evidence for a pre-Conquest settlement at Wigan.

At the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086, Wigan formed part of the Hundred of Newton, which comprised two parishes: Winwick and an unnamed settlement containing "the church of the manor of Newton" which possessed "one ploughland, exempt from all dues" (Morgan 1978, 269d). It is generally accepted that the latter refers to Wigan, although the first rector and lord of the manor of Wigan (the two titles being concomitant at this period) is not named until 1199 (Bridgeman 1888-90, 3). It is possible that the advowson, or patronage, of the parish church rested directly with the lords of Newton prior to this date. All Saints' had certainly become the parish church by the beginning of the 13th century, although the only surviving elements of this phase in the present building (rebuilt in 1849) are parts of the tower and two grave-slabs, probably of 14th century date. Wigan was one of three ancient churches in the area (Leigh and Standish being the others) until the establishment of chapelries in such surrounding villages as Hindley, Ashton, Atherton and Astley, during the 17th century.

As previously mentioned, during the medieval period the rector of Wigan Parish Church was also lord of the manor of Wigan. Consequently, Wigan Hall, which was situated on the western side of New Market Street, fulfilled the dual role of rectory and manor house. The building was rebuilt in both the 16th and the 19th centuries, and little is known of its original form apart from the fact that, like many of the wealthy homesteads that grew up in the surrounding villages during the 13th and 14th centuries it was protected by a surrounding moat. The moat was still visible in 1619, for a glebe terrier of that year refers to "walks, on the outside of the mote ditch" (Bridgeman 1888-90, 244). To the north of the hall lay the 'Mesnes', or the principal 'demesne' lands of the manor; although manorial holdings extended also to other parts of the town such as, for example, the significantly-named Parson's Meadow.

The street pattern of the medieval town is clearly reflected in the modern plan of Wigan. The main thoroughfares of Wallgate and Standishgate entered the triangular market place from the south and north respectively; Hallgate led westward to Wigan Hall, and Millgate eastward to the River Douglas, where the rector and lord of the manor's cornmill stood from at least the 14th century, and where the people of Wigan were required by law to take their corn for milling. It is not known whether the River Douglas was bridged to the east of the town, but there is clear documentary evidence for the existence of the 'Atam' or Adam Bridge, leading south-westwards from the town towards Pemberton, as early as the 14th century. In 1334 it was said to be "so broken that there was no crossing", and the grant of 'pontage' in 1333 was probably made in order that a tax might be levied for its repair (Jervoise 1931, 139).

In the area between Millgate and the Douglas were a number of wells and springs. Taylor (1901, 234) quotes a deed of pre-1293 which refers to "Le Haly Welle Kar" (or Holy Well Field) "between the land of Nicholas de Tildesleye and the water of Dogles". It is interesting to note that one of the few medieval features revealed during GMAU's excavations at the Wiend/Millgate site was a well.

Much debate has centred around the so-called 'Roman Walls' of Wigan. Watkin (1883, 200) gives two descriptions of the earthworks as they appeared in the 19th century, of which that of the Rev E. A. P. Gray in 1879 may be quoted:

"There was an agger or earthwork, with a ditch outside it, running round the hill; this crossed the Standish gate at the bottom of the hill, near the point where Dicconson Street and Church Street now meet, it followed the course of the former street, and then turning to the left crossed the Mesnes close to where New Market Street now runs; turning again it seems to have enclosed the Hall Gate, and (roughly speaking) to have gone down King Street. West across the Wall Gate and down King Street to the Free Library, where it bent northwards, and crossed the Mill Gate, where the later walls did; after this point it would naturally run along the top of the slope overlooking the Douglas as far as St. George's Church, where it turned down Church Street to the place from which we started".

The area thus enclosed would have occupied some 25 ha: considerably larger than most major Roman settlements. A more likely explanation is that the earthworks are of medieval or Civil War date. Whilst medieval town defences are unusual in the North-West (Morris 1983, 33), it seems surprising that Civil War defences should have become obscurely 'Roman' as early as 1836. Morris suggests that the defences could represent an ostentatious attempt by the burgesses of medieval Wigan to assert their new-found civic prestige, although it seems equally likely that the defences correspond to those 'mound walls', or entrenchments, thrown up to defend the town in 1642-3 (Hawkes 1930-1, 107, 112).

It was in the mid 13th century that the medieval town made its greatest civic and commercial progress. In 1245 Wigan was granted the right to hold a market every Monday, and a three-day fair at All Saints' festival (Tupling 1936, 110). In 1258 a second fair at Ascension was added. At this period the rector and lord of the manor was one John Mansell: a close advisor of Henry III and, like most incumbents at the time, absentee. Through his influence at court, Mansell obtained on 26 August 1246 a charter making Wigan a free borough (Bridgeman 1888-90, 9-10). The original document is now lost, but a confirmatory charter of Edward II, written in 1314, still survives. Wigan thus became one of the four royal boroughs of Lancashire, and its citizens received the rights and privileges of freemen or 'burgesses', including exemption from market tolls, the right to form merchants' guilds and the right to rent a 'burgage plot' of 5 roods (or just over an acre of land) as free tenants of the lord of the manor. The characteristically elongated burgage plots of the medieval borough can



Plate 2 Mather's map of Wigan, 1827

still be identified on Mather's 1827 map of Wigan and probably account too for the medieval cultivation soil observed during excavations on the Wiend.

The burgesses comprised two categories: 'in burgesses' from the town and 'out burgesses' from the surrounding areas. They had the right to elect a common council of mayor, aldermen and bailiffs (the latter to assist in the maintenance of law), and retained the privilege of sending two representatives to Parliament until as late as 1885 (Baines 1891, 252-6).

Not only did the granting of the charter, market and fair provide Wigan with a commercial pre-eminence over the surrounding districts, but it also provided a judicial framework for the administration of the town. The charter established a 'porte-mote', or local court, for the settlement of trading disputes (Bridgeman 1888-90, 10). This presumably sat in an early moot hall, or in the manor house itself, since the existence of a moot hall is not specifically mentioned until 1422 (Hawkes 1935, 6). This building stood in the market place near the parish church, and engravings of it (Tupling 1945-6, 6) show it to have consisted of a hipped-roofed building surmounting an arcade of four pairs of pillars. A central door and balcony would have served for the issuing of proclamations to the townspeople, while the belfry above

contained the market bell.

The open ground floor would have housed stalls, and was fronted by the market cross on its stepped plinth. The moot hall had become ruinous by 1720, and its functions were taken over by a new town hall. It was rebuilt, however, to survive until the demolition of both it and the market cross in 1867-8 (Baines 1891, 288).

It is clear that by the 16th century many of the traditional manorial rights were being exercised by the mayor and corporation, rather than by the mainly-absentee lords of the manor (Tupling 1934-5, 119). This was most apparent in the administration of justice, where the judicial powers of the burgesses had become broadened to encompass types of crime not within the strictly commercial brief of the porte-mote. The administration of such punishments as the cucking stool (or ducking stool), the scold's bridle, and the whipping post and stocks (both of which were situated in the market place), or incarceration in the Brideswell prison (which stood in Millgate until c1880), had devolved almost entirely into the hands of the corporation. Similarly, the same body had instituted a second market day (friday) without sanction of the lord of the manor (Tupling 1934-5, 119). This 'usurpation' of the lord's powers led to frequent and acrimonious dispute until the 17th century (Bridgeman 1888-90; Tupling 1934-5), when a

compromise solution was agreed: although it was not until 1860 that all the lord's traditional rights were finally bought by the corporation (Tupling 1934-5, 122).

The 16th century saw an expansion of Wigan's traditional industries. The traveller and writer John Leland noted, on his visit to Wigan in the 1530s, that coal mining (of importance since the Roman period) was making an increasing impact on the landscape (Baines 1891, 284). The textile industry too, which was first recorded in the area in the late 13th century, had become well established by the Tudor period and was using local wool and flax in addition to importing Irish flax. The metalworking industries, particularly bellfounding and pewter manufacture, were also becoming of increasing importance at this period (Hawkes 1945-6).

The growing industrial prosperity of the town continued undiminished into the 17th century. However, the outbreak of the Civil War in 1641, and the events that followed, represented a severe setback to the fortunes of the town (Hawkes 1930-1). During the Civil War Lancashire broadly divided between the Royalists in the west and the Parliamentarians in the east. Wigan housed the garrison of the Royalist Earl of Derby, and maintained its Royalist sympathies throughout the conflict. However, like many small strategic garrison towns in the Civil War, Wigan suffered a series of very damaging periods of occupation by hostile forces, as well as a number of skirmishes of varying severity. These culminated in the so-called Battle of Wigan Lane in 1651, when the Royalist forces were finally defeated and their leader, Thomas Tyldesley of Myerscough, was killed.

The war and its aftermath - which included a period of punitive taxation under the Commonwealth and a series of outbreaks of the plague - dealt a blow to the prosperity of the town that not even the rewards of the Restoration could reverse. It was not until the advent of the Industrial Revolution that Wigan once again rose to industrial and commercial prosperity.

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WMR Wigan Museums Records

See Also

Mather's Map of Wigan 1827.

Liverpool Mercury 18.5.1837.

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