

What ever happened to Cautopates? - Bill Aldridge – 2021

In 1937 the headless statue of a Roman Mithraic deity was found by a local farmer, Thomas Kelly, while deep ploughing in a field in Appley Bridge. In Dr David Shotter's, book *Romans in Lancashire* <sup>(1)</sup>, he describes the find as 'Cautopates, the companion of Mithras representing the setting sun' and suggests a strong possibility of there being a Mithraic temple in the area. Strangely though, the statue does not appear in Shotter's subsequent publications or in any other book on the history of the Romans in this area - but why? How could such an important artefact be ignored and where is the statue now? The explanation makes for quite an intriguing story.

For me, this story begins in Hindley Library one bored afternoon in the late 1970's when I saw the statue on display on the first floor of the building. It was part of a travelling exhibition of Roman finds from the Greater Manchester area, put together by Yvonne Langtree of Wigan Museum Services. At the time my interest in history and archaeology had yet to develop but I was impressed by the range of objects on display – in particular, the stone carving of this headless figure, legs crossed holding an extinguished torch. It was about 66cm (i.e. 26 inches) high and if I remember rightly the label said 'Cautopates, attendant to Roman god Mithras'.

It was a few years later before I came across the statue again, this time in Shotter's book where it was described as being found in Dalton, 5 miles from Wigan. By then I had been hooked by the archaeology bug and had become a founder member of the Wigan Archaeological Society (which formed in 1982). One of our early projects was to check through the Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) for the Wigan Metro area – checking for errors and make any additions. The SMR (now called the HER - Heritage Environment Record) was created by the Greater Manchester Archaeology Unit, and is now maintained by its successor, the Greater Manchester Archaeological Advisory Service. It was, and still is, the primary source of information for both the planning authorities and those researching the local history. Checking through the list, there was no entry for the statue of Cautopates, but perhaps not surprising as Dalton lies in West Lancashire and, therefore, should only appear in the Lancashire records <sup>(2)</sup>.

Mithraism was popular with the Romans throughout the Roman occupation of Britain, particularly with the army. The cult originated in Persia and in the Roman version the Mithras is always shown killing a bull. A number of Mithraic temples have been discovered in Britain particularly in areas with a strong military presence such as Hadrian's Wall where three have been found. The discovery of a temple in London in 1954 caused quite a stir and was reconstructed for tourists to appreciate in nearby Temple Court, Queen Victoria Street (it has now been returned to where it was originally found). To find one in the Wigan area would certainly be something quite significant, adding to the important discoveries made in recent years, including the huge Roman bathhouse excavated in the town centre in 2005.

But was there a temple as Shotter had suggested and what had happen to the statue? At the time of his book, the statue was said to be on loan to the Ribchester Museum. However the GM HER record has it as being with Kelly's descendant, frustratingly though, there was no indication of who that was. A visit to the reference library in Wigan (now the Museum of Wigan Life) provided the answer. A selection of newspaper cuttings and letters, particularly from Kelly himself, shed the light on this mystery revealing a sad story of misunderstanding and missed opportunity.

Thomas Forest Kelly was living in Pepper Lane in Standish at the time of the find but later moved to Speakmans Drive in Appley Bridge which is next to the fields he was farming where he said he found the statue. Having discovered it in 1937 <sup>(3)</sup>, it wasn't until 1967 that he brought it to the attention of the authorities i.e. H.H.G. Arthur, chief librarian at the Wigan Library. Kelly had been carrying out his own investigations of the site looking for the statue's head as he was convinced there was a Roman presence in the area, but had failed to find it or any pottery evidence. He had also been reluctant to divulge the exact location of the site but in a later press article <sup>(4)</sup> he indicated that it was where the local stream had been diverted <sup>(5)</sup> (this was certainly in Appley Bridge, not Dalton - the confusion was the result of a mistake later admitted by the SMR recorder). He was, however, keen for the statue to go on permanent display in the Library (and then the Powell Museum at the bottom of Millgate which was to be commissioned the following year).

H.H.G. Arthur showed great interest in the find and even arranged for a base and cabinet to be constructed for its presentation. Things went wrong, however, when he made the mistake of contacting the local press in which he cast doubts on the statue's provenance, suggesting a Roman site in the fields

of Appley Bridge to be unlikely. In the article he concludes the statue had probably arrived there by 'someone who did not realise what it was or its value'.<sup>(6)</sup> As you can imagine, Kelly on reading the article, was not best pleased, particularly as it went against what he had told Arthur about the 'material facts' of his own investigations. In a letter to the Library, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the librarian's actions and he immediately withdrew his offer for its display. Kelly did allow the statue to go on display two years later at the Ribchester Museum - for how long I'm not sure but it was certainly still there in 1981 according to an article in *Lancashire Life*<sup>(7)</sup>. It was while it was there that it went on loan to the travelling exhibition that I saw in Hindley. Why the Museum returned it to its owner is not clear but could well be due to insurance costs but the statue was never been seen again in public.

Arthur probably arrived at his opinion about the statue after speaking to Ben Edwards, the then County Archaeologist for Lancashire, who at the time had interviewed Kelly. Edwards' report, published in 1977 in the *Journal of Chester Archaeological Society*<sup>(8)</sup>, makes very interesting reading. As early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, great interest was being shown in the remains of the Roman fortress at Chester. Many of the finds unearthed were being catalogued by the antiquarians and sold to private collectors. An illustration of one of these was of a statue of Cautopates which had subsequently gone missing. It was pointed out to Edwards by a colleague that it was very similar to the statue Kelly had found. Could it be the same one? If so, how could it have ended up in Appley Bridge? Looking into this, Edwards discovered that the owner in 18<sup>th</sup> century had been a Mr Prescott who happened to have family living at Ayrfield Farm. This farm is only quarter of a mile from Kelly's find spot in Appley Bridge. If this connection is true, then there is strong possibility that this is how the statue (if it's the same one) found its way there. How it got buried in a field is another matter but this certainly casts doubt on there being a Roman presence in the area.

Even so, it is a great shame that such an important figure should go unseen. Whether there was or wasn't a Roman temple in Appley Bridge, the statue itself has great significance for the North West in general. A Roman tradition in the local area, however, still persists with rumours of finds over the years. Nothing else unfortunately has ever turned up. A figure said to be Roman Victory, was reported in Up-Holland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, again by ploughing, but was identified by the antiquarian W.T. Watkin as Cupid<sup>(9)</sup> and so could possibly be Medieval. Also according to a 2002 newspaper article<sup>(10)</sup> a Samian bowl measuring 12 inches in diameter, was found in Appley Bridge but nothing else is known about this. Kelly himself was certainly convinced he had a Roman site and did actually produce another item, which he referred to as a fire altar. This also went to the Ribchester Museum. We know this from the *Lancashire Life* article which shows both items on display (the image shows it to be about half the size of the statue). Fire altars were sometimes a feature of the Mithraic ritual<sup>(11)</sup> although quite rare - we can only assume it came from the same site. Kelly studied Mithraism and together with his friend Alan Rogerson (of Orrell bike shop fame), joined the Mithraic Society. He even attended the International Mithraic Congress when it was held in London in 1976<sup>(12)</sup>, where both his objects were presented (apparently to great acclaim).

By the time I came to look into the story, Kelly had already past away and his family no longer lived in Speakmans Drive. However I managed to locate his daughter, Mrs Milligan<sup>(13)</sup>, who was still living in Appley Bridge and so arranged to meet her. She told me that she had inherited the statue from her father<sup>(14)</sup> but had always hated it and never wanted it in the house as it had brought nothing but bad luck to the family. She had therefore put the statue up for auction at Sotherbies, not long after her father had died. She thought it had gone to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford but my enquiries there proved this not to be the case. On contacting Sotherbies, the statue had apparently been sold to a private dealer/collector for an undisclosed sum. They could not disclose the contact details of the new owners but said they would approach them on my behalf for information about it but no reply was forthcoming. It would appear that the statue is now in some private collection perhaps not even in this country.

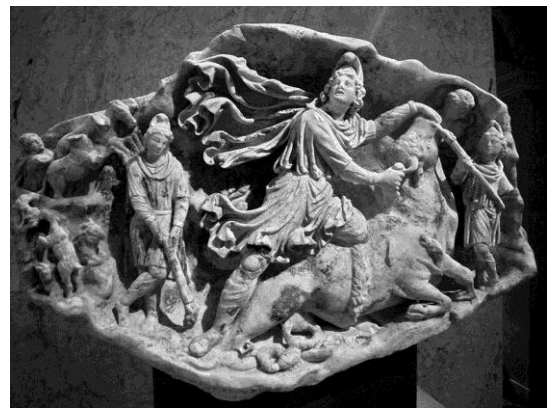
As it happens, in recent years, a strong Roman presence has been detected in the West Lancashire area. Finds such as pottery and coins were found in the late 1990's early 2000s by Ron Cowell at Dutton's Farm near Lathom and, very significantly, there is exciting news of the recent discovery of a large Roman fort in the Burscough area. Current investigations are being carried out by Bluestone Archaeology (as reported in Wigan Archaeological Society's recent Newsletters<sup>(15)</sup>). There must surely have been a road connecting Burscough with Wigan and it's quite possible the route would have gone through the Douglas valley, perhaps along Dalton Lees and past the site in Appley Bridge. Could Mr Kelly have been right all along? - who knows, we can only hope that one day we'll find out.

References:

1. Romans in Lancashire - Dr David Shotter (Dalesman Books 1973) pp.56-57
2. Lancashire HER No.1873. Strangely enough it also found its way onto the Greater Manchester's HER No. 9083.1.0, added in the mid 90's and listed as 'Dalton (Roman Sculpture)' - and also Cheshire's HER No.8430/24.
3. Lancashire Evening Post (1<sup>st</sup> May 1969)
4. There is some confusion with the date as an article in the Observer (4<sup>th</sup> August 1967) gives 1937 whereas the later Evening Post<sup>3</sup> as it as 1932
5. Examination of early OS maps reveals that the stream in question had been diverted in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.
6. Liverpool Echo (6<sup>th</sup> August 1967)
7. Lancashire Life (October 1981)
8. Chester Archaeological Journal No.60 - Edwards, B J N. (1977) pp.56-60
9. Roman Lancashire W. T. Watkins (1883) p.230
10. Wigan Observer (1<sup>st</sup> October 2002)
11. <http://www.soudavar.com/MITHRAIC-SF2.pdf> pp.274-275
12. Bulletin of the of the International Mithraic Congress (1976) pp.8-9
13. Mrs Milligan passed away in 2018 however the information and photos she provided have been invaluable and much appreciated.
14. The fire altar apparently had already gone to his friend Alan Rogerson which I haven't been able to confirm.
15. [www.wiganarchsoc.co.uk](http://www.wiganarchsoc.co.uk) Newsletters [No.221](#), [No.224](#) and [No.235](#)



Cautopates attendant of Mithras  
(Wigan Archives)



Cult of Mithras - from Aquileia in Northern Italy  
(Wikipedia)



Fire Altar  
(Mrs Milligan)