

Brocton Camp, Cannock Chase, Staffordshire: Evaluation 2006



By

Martin Brown MIFA



No Man's Land – the European Group for Great War Archaeology

For

Staffordshire
County Council

Brocton Camp, Cannock Chase, Staffordshire 2006

CONTENTS

SUMMARY

1	INTRODUCTION	2
2	HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	2
3	EXCAVATION AND SURVEY RESULTS	3
3.1	THE MIDDEN.....	4
3.2	THE HUTMENT BASE.....	6
3.3	THE PRACTICE TRENCH.....	6
3.4	SURVEY	9
4	DISCUSSION.....	9
5	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	10

Brocton Camp, Cannock Chase, Staffordshire 2006

SUMMARY

In September 2006 members of No Man's Land, Staffordshire County Council and local volunteers undertook an evaluation to assess the archaeological potential of remains dating from the period of the Great War belonging to Brocton Camp, Cannock Chase, Staffordshire.

Initial results clearly demonstrate that the Chase retains a wealth of information about life on, and the use of, the Chase during the Great War and its immediate aftermath. Survival of field remains and individual artefacts is good, whilst the apparent extent of the surviving features suggests very high potential for further discoveries and wider interpretation of the camp, and the strategic use of the Chase during this important period.

1 INTRODUCTION

In September 2006 members of NML, Staffordshire County Council and local volunteers undertook an evaluation of Great War remains and associated training features belonging to Brocton Camp, Cannock Chase, Staffordshire. The purpose of the exercise was to:

- Assess the archaeological potential of the visible remains.
- Confirm interpretations made in a walkover survey made by Northamptonshire Archaeology.
- Assess the site's potential for public interpretation and possible community involvement in further investigations.
- Gather material for a new display on 'the Chase in the Great War' for presentation in a reconstructed barrack hutment and education facility adjacent to the existing Visitor Centre.

2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Cannock Chase had been used as an *ad hoc* military training area during the 19th century, when large scale military manoeuvres took place on the open heathland characteristic of the area. In common with a number of other areas the site came back into military use at the outbreak of war in 1914 when Lord Lichfield, the then owner of the Chase, invited the War Office to utilise the ground once again. Two camps, Brocton and Rugeley, were established; each designed to house an entire Division. The camps included wooden barrack hutments and ancillary buildings, as well as supporting infrastructure: roads, sewage works, power station, and hospital. The camps were built using civilian labour and utilised an existing railway, associated with earlier coal mining activity, creating a dedicated spur to serve military needs. The site is also known to have had a YMCA, branch of WH Smith (a local firm), and a Church Army facility. Due to the presence of WH Smith there are numerous contemporary postcards depicting both the camps and individual units stationed there.

As the war progressed Brocton Camp was used, at least in part, to house German prisoners of war, and a number, of both prisoner and guard, remain on the Chase to this day in the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery close to the site of Brocton Camp (pictured below).



Initially the camps served the North Midlands and Northern England. Units trained at Cannock included the Accrington, Sheffield, and Manchester Pals as well the Sherwood Foresters, including a local lad named Tolkein. The global nature of the war was later underlined by the arrival of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade, who were moved to Cannock from Larkhill, Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, in the aftermath of Gallipoli, following friction between them and Australian Troops.

3 EXCAVATION AND SURVEY RESULTS

The overall survey concentrated on the Oldacre Valley (pictured below) on the southern periphery of the camp and associated training area. Excavation targeted three types of landscape feature:

- A midden believed to have been associated with the camp.
- A hutment base with its associated terrace.
- A section of practice trench overlooking the valley.



3.1 The Midden

Two trial trenches were hand excavated across a large midden mound, earlier rabbit burrowing activity had brought forth a range of ceramics and other material of early 20th-century date. Excavation revealed two main episodes of dumping overlying a pre-existing ground surface which contained a single fragment of crucible which may be evidence of earlier glass making in the vicinity of the site (an activity well known and documented on the Chase in the 17th century). The material recovered can be divided into several categories which include both official supply as well as personal purchases.

The Ceramic material included a fairly small range of form types; indicative of large-scale production, which was largely produced in the nearby Potteries of Stoke on Trent. Ceramics included numerous sherds bearing indicative markings which included the YMCA, NACB (Navy and Army Catering Board – the forerunner of NAAFI) and ACC. Currently definitive identification of these latter examples has not been possible but the Imperial War Museum (IWM) has suggested the Army Cyclists Corps. There were also many examples of transfer prints on the base, alongside well known makers marks, bearing a W in a lozenge which appear to denote War Office purchase (depicted below). The ceramic assemblage is currently being examined by specialists from Stoke on Trent Museum.



Other material included a range of glassware; principally bottles. Initial examination suggests many of these originally contained medicines. Other medically-related finds include a small enamel bowl. Also present were a significant number of 'OK Sauce' bottles, possibly an indication of the quality of food served in the camps. Bottles for both soft drinks and beer were amongst the finds, including an example made by the Kilner company for Burgess's

Brewery of Conisborough, which may be evidence of either the Yorks and Lancaster or West Yorkshire regiments, both of whom recruited in that part of southern Yorkshire.



One glass bottle of particular interest contained *Tavu* boot blacking. The brand is New Zealand in origin and provides a clear link with the NZRB. (far right above).

A variety of personal effects were also excavated, these included, smoking paraphernalia and an ink well. Metal finds included bottles believed to contain boot polish, foot powder and hair oil/cream (depicted below). The Cu Alloy lid for a sugar shaker was also recovered; this is likely to have been a private purchase, or tableware from an Officers' Mess. Containers for metal polish were also recovered. Evidence of ritual activity was provided in the form of the bowl of a clay pipe bowl bearing the insignia of the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffalos; a quasi-Masonic organisation.

Military training was also evident in the numbers of drill rounds recovered; these are predominantly Mk 6 .303. The School of Ammunition at Kineton suggests that at least some of the ammunition had been declared obsolescent by 1914. This highlights the pressure on the Army occasioned by the massive response to recruitment drives at the outset of war as stock otherwise destined for disposal was issued as a training aid for recruits. Drill rounds are characterised by drilled holes in the cartridge casing and wooden bullets (depicted below). Small finds of webbing and associated brassware were also recovered.



The midden also included evidence of the architecture of the camp (and of its demolition) in the form of asbestos sheeting, door and window furniture, and fire bricks from pot-bellied stove hearths. This material will be of particular importance, when combined with

contemporary pictorial evidence, to inform the reconstruction of the barrack hutment referred to above.

3.2 The Hutment Base

A meter-wide section was cut across the terrace and earthen foundations of a timber hut (depicted below). The purpose of this was to recover constructional and occupation evidence. No data was recovered. Photographic evidence from the immediate Post-War period shows that some huts were removed whole and transported from the site to serve as homes and community buildings in the surrounding villages. The lack of demolition debris here suggests that this was the case in this instance. However, further research on other hut bases should confirm these details and interpretation.



3.3 The Practice Trench

In addition to earthworks associated with the built camp, the Chase exhibits clear evidence of the extensive excavation of field fortifications (practice trenches). These include both fire trenches and communication trenches, which survive well as earthworks in a number of locations (depicted below). Further survey may reveal evidence of dugouts and weapons pits. The excavation of at least one trench system, thought to be that investigated in 2006, is shown on contemporary postcards.



A two-meter wide slot was excavated across the forward fire trench of a system on the southeastern side of Oldacre Valley. The trench was intended to examine the dimensions of the fieldwork and the corner of a traverse. The trench contained no finds, but did demonstrate evidence of both revetting and repair (depicted below). Evidence of the need for repair was suggested by erosion on the corner of the traverse and fragments of sandbagging associated with it, as if slumping had been remedied by a work party. Wire extending forward of the trench under the parapet clearly showed evidence of revetting with post and wire, but the use of barbed wire suggests either a field repair with materials to hand, or the paucity of appropriate materials, at some point during the life of the trench. The wires were associated with, and aligned on postholes in the base of the trench.





3.4 Survey

Both resistivity and walk-over survey were used to investigate the site.

Archaeological geophysics, using a resistivity meter were undertaken on an area adjacent to the midden where in-filled practice trenches are thought to survive. Unfortunately due to technical problems the results were corrupted and it is therefore recommended that further work be undertaken in this area.

The walkover survey was undertaken in the general environs of both the midden and the practice trench. Although the Northamptonshire survey, which was concerned with identifying the extent of the camps themselves, does indicate the presence of some fieldworks in these areas it does not convey the extent and complexity of the remains in the wider landscape.

It is anticipated that further remote sensing works and detailed field survey, in partnership with the University of Birmingham, will aid further understanding and interpretation of these remains, many of which have been largely in-filled.

The survey also identified a number of brick and concrete structures to the north of areas excavated; these were shown to be latrine blocks including urinals (depicted below).



4 DISCUSSION

It is important to note that this is the first integrated study of a Great War training camp and its associated backdoor training area, other studies such as the Bustard (Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire), and Silloans (Otterburn, Northumberland) have concentrated on the training features themselves. From the outset this project was conceived as an integrated study of both the landscape and the soldiers within it, setting both in the wider context of an industrial global conflict.

Initial results from the 2006 project clearly demonstrate the archaeological potential of the Great War Archaeology of Cannock Chase. Evidence, both artefactual and in the wider

landscape, retain a wealth of information about life on, and the use of, the Chase during the Great War and its immediate aftermath. Survival of both remains in the field and of individual artefacts is good, whilst the extent of remains suggests very high potential for further discoveries and wider interpretation.

The scale of remains, and the relative ease of excavation, suggests that Cannock Chase would make an excellent location for a community-based project exploring the archaeology of the conflict of 1914-18.

The survival and quality of artefacts suggests that there is a good deal of material that could be used to support public display of the barrack hutment. However, there are likely to be enough good quality artefacts recovered in any future seasons to provide material to other museums for example the Museum of Cannock Chase, or to local schools studying the period of the Great War as part of the National Curriculum.

5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks go to Staffordshire County Council, particularly Ian Wykes, for commissioning and enabling the project, and for their continued support. Thanks also go to members of NML and to other volunteers from the local community and further afield (Bosnia!). XI Regiment (RLC) are thanked for EOD cover and other invaluable input. Other specialist assistance from Stoke on Trent Museum, Imperial War Museum (IWM), SSgt Featherstone (School of Ammunition Kington), and the Great War Forum is also gratefully acknowledged with thanks.

