

THE ST. CUTHBERT'S ROMAN MINING SETTLEMENT, PRIDDY, SOMERSET : AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHIC RECOGNITION

by

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NGR centred on ST 542507

ABSTRACT

The existence of the St. Cuthbert's Roman mining settlement on the Mendip Hills, probably first noted in the 1720's, was confirmed in the 1950's and 60's by surface finds and limited excavation. This paper records the extent of the site recognised on aerial photographs, and attempts to interpret its function and relationship to the other Roman mining sites and finds in the Priddy and Chewton Mendip area. The location of finds from the site are listed as an appendix.

INTRODUCTION

The archaeological evidence, accumulated since the 1820's, of the Roman mining settlement at Charterhouse on Mendip, Somerset, has been considerably advanced by excavations in 1993-94 by Professor Malcolm Todd (1995). He has retrieved dating evidence (pottery and coins) from ditches at the Roman fortlet, and from the newly identified Roman mining grooves or 'rakes' nearby, which puts beyond any doubt the fact that the Roman military occupation of the Mendips began in the Claudian period (AD 41-54) and that the exploitation of the mineral deposits, predominately the lead ore galena, had begun in that period.

The Roman road from Old Sarum terminates at Charterhouse-on-Mendip which was the main Roman mining centre on the Mendip Hills. However, in the last fifty years archaeological evidence has gradually come to light of Roman exploitation of the ore fields in the Chewton Mendip and Priddy area. The Roman sites and finds in this area are marked on the plan, Figure 1, which also shows the main ore fields; Stockhill¹ and West End in Chewton Mendip, and Chancellor's Farm in Priddy. Although at present there is no direct evidence of Roman mining in these ore fields, such activity can safely be assumed at Stockhill, and perhaps could have taken place in the other two ore fields.

The St. Cuthbert's Roman mining settlement at Priddy, lies on the south-facing slopes of North Hill and about 1 km south west of the Stockhill ore field. The extent of this site as recognised from aerial photographs (see plan, Figure 2) and its role in the Roman exploitation of the mineral deposits in the area will be fully discussed later in this paper. Where no original published reference has been identified, the relevant data in the Somerset Sites and Monuments Record, County Hall, Taunton will be cited; the reference being prefixed by PRN (Primary Record Number).

Appended to this paper is a listing of the various Roman finds from the St. Cuthbert's site. It is hoped that a detailed description and analysis of these finds will be published in the future.

¹ On high ground, but often wrongly known as Stock Hill; correctly recorded on modern Ordnance Survey plans as Stockhill which was the family name of the landowners in the 16th-19th centuries.

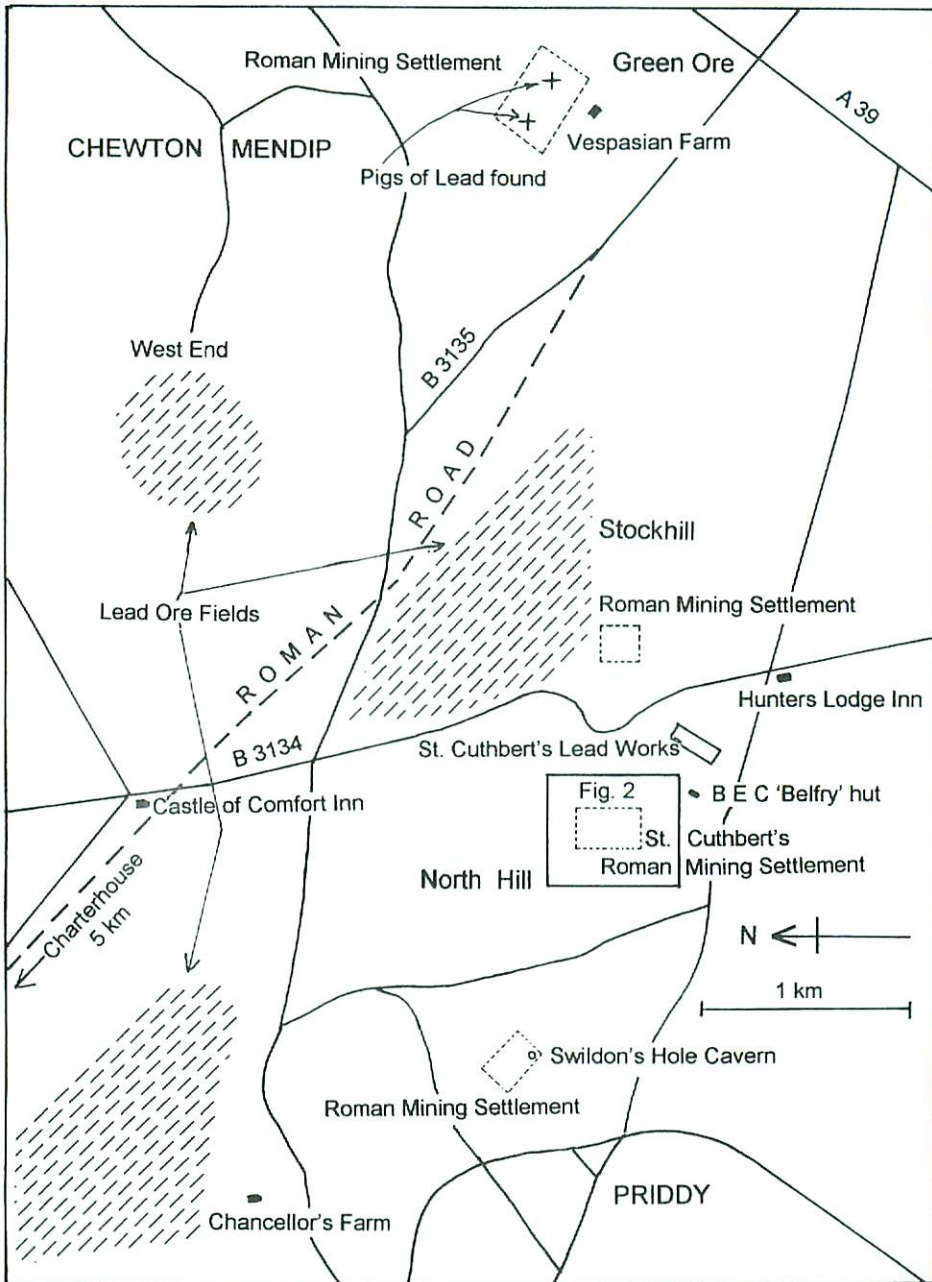


Figure 1. Sketch map of the Priddy-Chewton Mendip area on the Mendip Hills, Somerset, locating the St. Cuthbert's Roman site in relation to other Roman sites and finds, the main lead-ore fields and the Charterhouse on Mendip-Old Sarum Roman road.

ROMAN SITES AND FINDS IN THE PRIDDY AND CHEWTON MENDIP AREA EXCLUDING THE ST. CUTHBERT'S SITE

In 1948 H. E. Balch told G. W. Ridyard, an Ordnance Survey investigator, that there was a Celtic field system at Stockhill before it was ploughed in 1946 prior to afforestation. The annotation "many ancient earthworks and enclosures here" is applied to an area centred on ST 550507 on a map in Wells Museum (PRN 23227). In 1948, in this same area, Ridyard found Romano-British pottery (grey ware), partly smelted galena, charcoal and many fragments of haematite (PRN 23228).

In 1956, in a field north of Rookery Farm (now Vespasian Farm), Green Ore, Chewton Mendip, four Roman pigs of lead of Vespasian's reign (AD 69-79) were exposed by ploughing at ST 57485137 (Palmer and Ashworth, 1958) and, in 1992, one more of the same period was unearthed in the same field at ST 57675140 (PRN 23209). Excavations nearby from 1956 to 64 by Ashworth (1970) revealed a first to fourth century Romano-British settlement and metallurgical site centred on ST 575514. To the east of Vespasian Farm, and possibly connected with the Roman settlement, indistinct crop marks of linear features centred on ST 580511 were noted on aerial photographs (PRN 23275).

In the 1950's and 60's there were many finds of Roman pottery in an area north east of Priddy village which includes the entrance to Swildon's Hole Cavern. Limited excavations in this area in 1964 (Barlow, 1967) located a substantial wall with painted plaster indicating a superior Roman building, possibly a 'villa', in woodland at ST 53115145 and, in the next field to the west, rough walling at ST 53105146. Roman pottery and other finds from the excavations were dated first to fourth century. There was also evidence of lead smelting and silver extraction by cupellation. Barlow's suggestion that the 'villa' could have been the local residence of one of the civilian contractors who worked the Roman lead mines on Mendip will be discussed later in this paper.

In 1982, the present author (Williams, 1984) noted an extensive area of dark soil centred on ST 53005144 in a field further to the west being re-grassed. Roman occupation material was collected here, including hypocaust tiles, droplets of lead, Samian ware and a rim sherd of fine cream texture with a yellowish-green lead glaze. The finds were deposited in Wells Museum and Norman Cook, the former Curator, was of the opinion that the glazed sherd came from the neck of a small unguent flask, comparable with two such vessels recovered from a stratified level, dated circa AD 70, at Colchester (Verulamium)². The spread of finds at the Priddy site show that it extended over about four hectares.

THE ST. CUTHBERT'S ROMAN MINING SETTLEMENT

Archaeological history of the site

In the 1720's the Somerset antiquary John Strachey noted that "...about ½ a Mile S. E. from Pridye is a Square Entrenchmen.¹ Surrounded w.¹h small Pits & within it are severall

² Although no direct parallel to the Priddy flask has been recognised in the Somerset area, it does have many characteristics of the Roman lead-glazed St. Rémy ware found in 1st century levels at Camerton and Nettleton, both alongside the Fosseyway (Wedlake, 1982, p239 & pp244-245). For Roman lead-glazed ware found in 1st century ditches at Herriotts Bridge, Chew Valley Lake, see Rahtz and Greenfield, 1977, p227 (an indented beaker) and p262 (a flanged bowl). Jope (1977) considers that the flanged bowl belongs to a grouping of Roman lead-glazed vessels centered on Somerset which includes an example from Charterhouse-on-Mendip, in Taunton Museum.

Shallow circular Areas..." (Williams, 1987a, p63). The bearing and rough distance from Priddy village, and the structural elements of the site, strongly suggest that Strachey had observed the St. Cuthbert's Roman mining settlement on the slopes of North Hill.

Attention was drawn to this site in 1951 when turf cutting in a field to the north west of the Bristol Exploration Club 'Belfry'³ hut exposed a wide scatter of Roman pottery sherds including Samian ware. Edmund J. Mason (1953) noted on an aerial photograph a small rectangular enclosure, measuring 80 feet by 40 feet, at ST 54175064, within a larger rectangular ditched enclosure with sides 250 feet by 230 feet. Excavation of the inner enclosure revealed the north east angle of a room or building, represented by rough masonry walls which may have formed the foundations of a wooden building. Finds from the clay floor of this structure included Roman coarse pottery and other domestic items, and also shapeless pieces of smelted lead and burnt-out galena. On the ground Mason observed a number of small patches of lush vegetation, some circular, within the larger enclosure which probably indicated buried structural features.

Hawkes (1968) reported that in fields at North Hill, to the north and west of Mason's excavation site, ploughing had exposed several black circular patches, each about 30 feet in diameter. Roman pottery sherds, tile, lead, and slag including litharge from silver extraction by cupellation, were collected from these features by Hawkes. The precise locations of the find-spots were not published at the time, but in 1986 they were verified on the ground by C. J. & E. Hawkes and the present author as being at ST 54065076; ST 54145082, ST 54175079 and ST 54205086 (Williams, 1987a, p63).

Aerial Photographic Recognition

In correspondence with the present author in 1986, E. J. Mason did not know the whereabouts of any original excavation notes or site plans of the St. Cuthbert's site, and he could not identify the source of the aerial photograph. However, recent examination of Royal Air Force vertical aerial photographs, held by the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society, has identified crop marks and other surface indications of Roman and later features in the site area on the following photographs: CPE/UK.2061. 11 May, [19]47. F20"/16,400'. 82 SQDN. [Nos.] 3253*-54*-55 & 4253-54. An Ordnance Survey vertical aerial photograph [19]71 082, [No.] 028*, held by the present author, also shows faint crop marks (* denotes full coverage of site). None of the photographs show the whole site clearly, so the features were plotted by amalgamating clear areas from several photographs. Recognition of features was aided by photographic enlargement and computer enhancement. Roman features, together with the sites of Mason's excavation and the finds by Hawkes, have been plotted in red on the plan, Figure 2. To create a contrast, medieval and modern features are recorded in black.

INTERPRETATION

After the Roman period the site area was not subject to agricultural improvement until parliamentary enclosure in the eighteenth century, but the fields of very rough pasture and scrub

³ In the early 1950's the Roman settlement was known either as the Belfry site or the Hunters Inn site, but it has since become known as the St. Cuthbert's site as it lay within St. Cuthbert Out parish, until a recent boundary change brought it within Priddy Parish. The Parish name is also the source of the names for the St. Cuthbert's Lead Works (in ruins) and St. Cuthbert's Swallet.

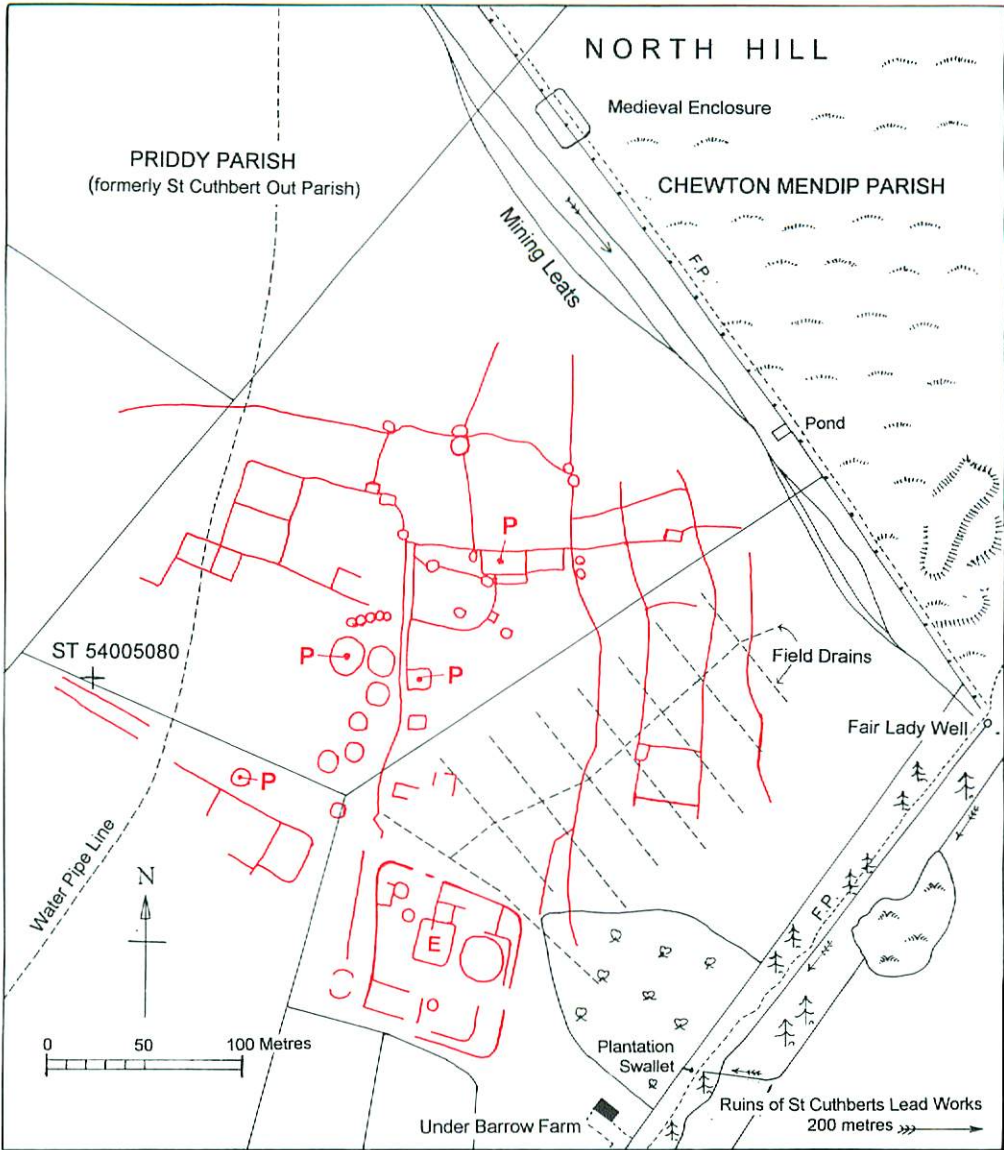


Figure 2. Plan showing the St. Cuthbert's Roman site plotted from aerial photographs. Roman features in red include 'P', the locations of Roman pottery etc. found by Hawkes and 'E', the site of the excavation by Mason. All later features are in black.

were not fully cleared until the 1940's and 50's. Although the fields have since remained under pasture, they are occasionally ploughed and re-grassed. The laying of field drains and turf cutting has contributed to the surface disturbance in the eastern field. The following interpretation of the crop marks on aerial photographs has been aided by the author's observations on the ground.

The medieval and modern features

A boundary perambulation of 1295 identifies Fair Lady Well as "Fayrewell", and the small rectangular earthwork on North Hill as "Bocfolde" (Williams, 1987b), which suggests that it was a stock enclosure or pound surrounded by open rough grazing land in the medieval period. The linear ditches, realigned in places, are identified as mining leats which start close to the summit of North Hill and then run for about 700 m parallel to the parish boundary to Fair Lady Well. The leats are positioned to collect surface water on the upper south-west facing slopes of North Hill, which otherwise would have followed natural drainage lines to Eastwater Swallet. Before the Fair Lady Well Stream was re-routed in the mid 19th century to supply fresh water to Priddy village, it would have been directed for use in the St. Cuthbert's minery before draining into St. Cuthbert's Swallet. The leats may well have their origins in the medieval period. The modern features are marked on the plan, and include the field drains in the eastern field which show up well on the 1947 aerial photographs.

The Roman features

The Roman site extends over about nine hectares between 240 m and 270 m AOD on the south-facing slopes of North Hill. Geologically it lies on Lower Limestone Shale just south of the boundary with the Portland Beds (predominantly sandstone) capping North Hill and just north of the Black Rock Limestone on the lower slopes. The natural surface water drainage, which flows to the south until it sinks into the pervious Black Rock Limestone, sets the north-south alignment of the Roman settlement.

On the northern edge of the site, natural water drainage was collected in pools along a linear east-west ditch which regulated the water supply, via ditches, to field systems to the east and west, and to the upper level of Roman occupation in the centre. This occupation area lies on a natural east-west shelf, which may have been artificially levelled and utilised for siting rectangular enclosures and buildings. The small circular features in this area seem to be linked to the water supply, and were probably connected with domestic and mineral extraction activity.

The main north-south water supply channel continues down to the middle area of the site. Here there are a number of dark circular areas, of varying size, and some square features. Finds hereabouts indicate further occupation and mineral extraction processes including silver extraction by cupellation.

The central drainage ditch continues southwards and is channelled between a low bank, still visible on the ground, and the western side of the larger enclosure noted by Mason. This ditched enclosure lies on an artificial platform which cuts into the hill slope on the northern side. It has three rounded corners (the other is not visible on aerial photographs) and gaps in the northern and eastern ditches may represent entrances to the enclosure. The smaller inner enclosure, containing the part of a building or room excavated by Mason, is marked 'E' on the plan (Figure 2). The large circular feature nearby has been identified, on the ground, as a shallow depression which still collects rainwater drainage. This feature, and others within the large

enclosure, are probably connected with domestic and mineral extraction activity. It is noted that the main alignment of this enclosure has been followed by the two modern fields to the south.

The modern field drains in the eastern field follow a different alignment to the Roman drainage ditches. The Roman ditches (some can still be seen on the ground) are components of a rectilinear field system laid out in a pattern which is common in the Roman period. There is a similar field system on the western side of the settlement and despite periodic ploughing a few low banks can still be seen on the ground. In the modern western field there is evidence of Roman occupation and fields with what appears to be a trackway which heads north-westerly in the direction of the Priddy Roman site.

DISCUSSION

The St. Cuthbert's Roman site is conveniently situated so that the natural drainage from North Hill could be directed for domestic consumption and lead-ore processing at various locations on the site. The Roman water collecting system may have extended to the upper slopes of North Hill, but evidence of this may be obscured by the medieval-modern mining leats. The field systems on either side of the settlement were used either for growing cereal crops or for grazing farm animals.

Considerable physical changes in the closed valley to the east of the site and in the extensive ore field at Stockhill have been caused by the activities of the medieval and modern lead-mining industry. As a result any evidence of Roman mining or settlement in these areas has either been destroyed or concealed. There is evidence of a Roman settlement on the southern edge of the Stockhill ore field where lead and iron were smelted.

The Roman settlement near Vespasian Farm, Green Ore, lies on the gentle slopes of a closed valley and a stream flowing through the site sinks into Island Swallet. Iron ore extracted in the vicinity was smelted on the site, but this was probably for local domestic use. There is evidence that lead and silver production was the primary function of the site which had ready access to the nearby lead-ore fields at Stockhill and West End. The apparent concealment of four pigs of lead, and the find of another on the site, is difficult to explain but misappropriation whilst in transit along the main Roman road which passes close to the settlement seems a fair assumption.

The extensive Priddy Roman site lies in a sheltered position on the gentle slopes of a promontory overlooking the stream which sinks into Swildon's Hole Cavern. This reliable water source was used on the site for domestic purposes and in ore reduction processes. Lead and silver was produced, and the droplets (or splashes) of lead found could be spillage from filling pig moulds. Lead-ore resources were available at Stockhill 2 km to the east and near Chancellor's Farm the same distance to the north. No evidence of Roman occupation has yet been found in the immediate vicinity of Chancellor's Farm, but it is significant that the nearest reliable water source for ore processing is at the Priddy site which suggests that it was the focal point of the eastern district of Roman mining on Mendip.

The suggestion by Barlow (1967) that the opulent Priddy 'villa' was the residence of one of the civilian contractors who controlled Roman mining on Mendip seems logical. From about AD 60, following initial military control, these contractors (*conductores*) were in operational control of the Mendip lead mines. They worked either as individuals or in companies (*societates*), and inscriptions on pig of lead found at Bitterne (?*Clausentum*) indicate that the *soc(ietas) Novaec.* were operating on Mendip during the reign of Vespasian. The main base for

the company would have been at extensive Charterhouse-on-Mendip Roman mining settlement, but it would be sound policy to locate one of the company's contractors at the Priddy site, 7 km distant, to control mining in the eastern district.

Barlow also pointed out that an aerial photograph shows what appears to be a trackway from the Priddy site heading in a southerly direction which could link with the trackway noted at the St. Cuthbert's site. There must have been a network of Roman trackways between the dispersed mining sites and ore fields on Mendip, which also linked with the main east-west Roman road and the Stratford Lane Roman road heading north east into the Chew Valley. The present author (Williams, 1992) noted that the Roman settlements at Charterhouse-on-Mendip, Priddy and Green Ore, which after about AD 750 had Saxon connections became monastic estates in the twelfth century. Although occupation was not continuous it is feasible that the same communicating routes were used.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the St. Cuthbert's Roman mining settlement site is shown on aerial photographs to extend over about nine hectares, it probably only represents the western sector of an extensive Roman mining complex which extends to the Stockhill ore field about 1 km to the north east. Later mining processes in the intervening valley have destroyed or obscured evidence of Roman activity, but the eastern limit of the complex is probably represented by the Roman occupation and smelting site on the southern edge of the ore field. Pottery dating shows that the St. Cuthbert's complex was occupied from the first to the fourth century, and that its main function was the production of lead and silver. There is evidence of the same period of occupation and for the production of lead and silver at all other known Roman mining settlements on Mendip. Although no pig moulds or inscription dies have been found on Mendip (or anywhere else in Roman Britain), for practical reasons pigs of lead were probably produced at each site, rather than at some central place.

The main Roman mining settlement was clearly at Charterhouse-on-Mendip but, for the reasons already discussed, it seems likely that the Priddy settlement was the focal point of Roman mining activities in the eastern district of the Mendip ore fields. In order to have effective control of this district, remote from Charterhouse, Barlow's suggestion that a Roman civilian contractor was based at Priddy seems logical. There would have been a network of trackways between the mining sites which linked with the main Roman road and nearby lowland farming settlements. The location of the Green Ore site at the eastern extremity of Roman mining activity and close to the main Roman road, suggests that pigs of lead from other sites in the eastern district could have been collected there for onward transmission. Perhaps this enhanced the opportunity for the concealment and/or misappropriation of pigs of lead in transit, as discussed. To date no evidence has been found for either Iron Age occupation or of pre-Roman mining within the Roman mining area on Mendip.

It is suggested that future archaeological investigation should be directed to:

- i) Analysing the pottery and other known finds from the St. Cuthbert's site, and from other sites if appropriate.
- ii) Keeping a watch on any agricultural or forestry activity at known Roman mining sites, to note any relevant finds and also to report on any undue disturbance of the archaeology.

- iii) Carrying out field work to identify more Roman mining sites and finds on Mendip and to locate Roman mining rakes in the major ore fields; to include further research into communication routes and to identify any evidence of pre-Roman mining.
- iv) Widening the scope of investigation to determine the social and economic relationship between the Roman mining on the Mendip plateau and the contemporary settlements in the surrounding lowlands.

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APPENDIX

Listing of all known finds from the St. Cuthbert's Roman mining site, Priddy.

The following accessions are recorded at the Bristol City Museum and Art Galley but those marked with an asterisk have not yet been found in the collections.

KEY: Acc. No. - Entry in the museum Accession Book recording number and year of the accession and the identification of the depositor. Reg. No(s) - Entry in the museum Register Book which provides a number and a brief description of item(s) in the accession.

- 1)* Acc. No. 106/1952. Mr. G. C. Boon. Reg. No. F6107. Lead mining spoil.
- 2) Acc. No. 81/1954. Mr. R. L. Gadd. Laurel Cottage, Wells Road, Priddy. Reg. Nos. F3608-F3613. 2 decorated and 4 plain Samian sherds, including two with potters marks.
- 3) Acc. No. 94/1957. Mr. K. Moracan. Reg. Nos. F3719 - F3724. 5 plain Samian sherds.
- 4) Acc. No. 120/1957. Mr. K. Read. Reg. Nos. F3739 - F3749. 1 decorated and 3 plain Samian sherds, 2 grey-ware sherds (one with lead rivet), a blue glass bead, a circular white glass disc (?gaming counter), a bronze fibula, a perforated lead disc (?spindle whorl) and a large piece of sheet lead.
- 5)* Acc. No. 305/1965. Mr. C. J. Hawkes. Reg. No. F4147. Pottery etc.
- 6)* Acc. No. 57/1966. Mr. C. J. Hawkes. Not entered in the Register Book. Pottery, slags and miscellaneous objects.

Also, a collection of plain and decorated Samian pottery found within the site area in 1951-52, held until recently by Mr. Arthur Selway, 25 Coombe Road, Bath, but now in the possession of the present author. After the pottery has been identified the collection will be donated to the Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery.

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