

# REVEALING TRIMONTIUM



very much  
from your  
family  
as I don't  
drop on  
the  
since

Yours very  
sincerely  
James C. ...

# REVEALING TRIMONTIUM

The Correspondence of  
James Curle of Melrose,  
Excavator of  
Newstead Roman Fort

Edited by

Donald Gordon, Fraser Hunter  
and Phil Freeman

ARCHAEOLOGICAL LIVES



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Archaeological Lives

Cover: James Curle later in life. © Courtesy of HES. Mary Curle Album.  
Assorted letters sent to Curle.

Graffiti of Dometius Atticus on the backing plates of military decorations. Photo by Neil McLean,  
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## Foreword

As one of James Curle's grandchildren growing up in Melrose I was always aware of the Roman camp and his part in its excavation. It was only later, on finding bundles of his letters, that I began to understand the extent of his correspondence and his enthusiasm for learning. His passport, which I possess, shows the extent of his travels in the pursuit of such knowledge, even the smallest detail.

His great love of the Borders and of Melrose made him the man that he was. But the fort at Newstead was the overriding interest of his life as the Report on the excavation shows.

I am delighted that the publication of the letters will add to the appreciation of the wide interest he showed in many aspects of archaeology.

*Lady Jean Cameron of Lochbroom*

## Acknowledgments

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

We gather here some of the key groups of correspondence by and to James Curle, a solicitor in Melrose in the Scottish Borders and a prominent antiquary (Figures 1.1–1.2). He is best known today for his excavation and seminal publication of the Roman fort of Newstead (*Trimontium*), near Melrose,<sup>1</sup> the results of which still influence scholarship to this day, but some of his wider interests have been recognised by scholars assessing his Swedish antiquarian work.<sup>2</sup> Four main groups of correspondence totalling 156 letters or notes, published here with accompanying critical apparatus, are used to illustrate his working methods around the Newstead excavations and on other antiquarian topics. One set is his correspondence with various staff members in the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum, primarily Charles Hercules Read and Reginald Smith; a second, smaller set comprises the surviving correspondence with curators in the same museum's Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities; a third series was to Francis Haverfield, the foremost Romanist of his day in Britain; and a fourth, more eclectic set illustrates wider links, especially to continental scholars.<sup>3</sup> As discussed below, the archive history of these four sets gives each a coherence. To this we have added other relevant letters that have come our way. Curle was an inveterate correspondent, and there will undoubtedly be more archive material – his correspondence with other Scottish antiquaries is poorly represented in this collection – but what is presented here seems to us a representative sample that allows broader assessment of his important work on Roman topics and selected other aspects.



Figure 1.1. James Curle later in life.  
© Courtesy of HES. Mary Curle Album

The other key archive source for his Newstead work is his set of excavation notebooks, now held in the archive collections of the National Record of the Historic Environment in Edinburgh. We have consulted them in the course of this work but have not attempted a

<sup>1</sup> Curle 1911a. See Chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> Kidd and Thunmark-Nylén 1990; Kidd 1994.

<sup>3</sup> The first and third sets have been published previously (Gordon 2005; 2008); here we offer more extended critical apparatus and context.

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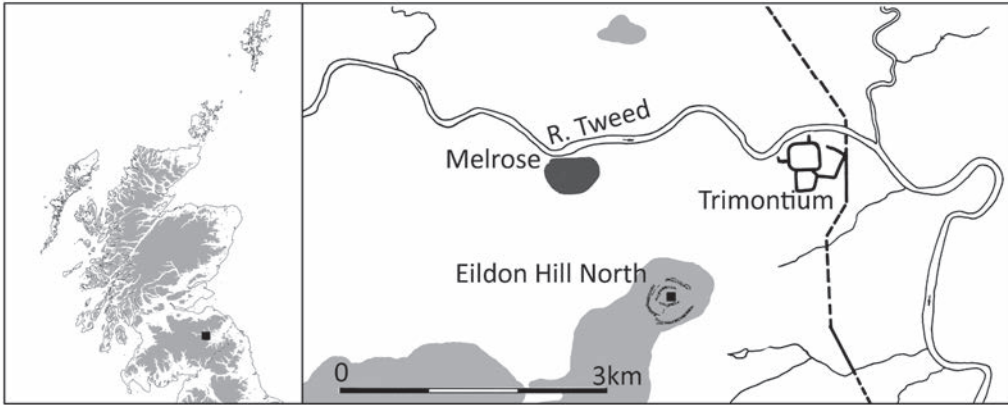


Figure 1.2. Map locating Melrose and Trimontium.  
Ground over 250m is shaded.

critical edition of them; this would add great value to the existing archive of *Trimontium* but is beyond what we can attempt here. There are two sets of notebooks. One contains a mixture of field observations (fair copies, not the original field notes which do not survive), artefact descriptions (with lists and drawings of material before it went to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland [NMAS] in Edinburgh), and notes from his reading and travels. The other is a series of thematic notebooks where he gathered and sorted information ready for the publication: one can see in these the structure and often the very wording that appeared in print, with plentiful sketches that served as an aide memoire. Curle was a very competent draughtsman, and this was clearly a key element in his scholarly apparatus; one finds in the notebooks and letters sketches of comparative material as well as his own finds, a critical tool in the days before photocopiers and scanners.

We are also fortunate in being able to draw on personal collections and family archive from the descendants of James Curle, and have used this where appropriate to add to the picture of the man.

A series of introductory essays look at Curle himself (Chapter 2), his work as an antiquary (Chapter 4), his connections to Francis Haverfield (Chapter 5), and his life as a key part of Melrose society (Chapter 6); his writing and travels took him far and wide, but he was at heart a Borderer. The groups of letters are provided with a critical apparatus in footnotes. Key individuals who are mentioned in the letters as contacts of Curle's appear in a cast of *dramatis personae* (Chapter 7); if an individual is not footnoted, this is where to find them. Figure 1.3 locates the main British and Irish places mentioned in the Letters; Table 2.1 lists his wider travels.

We have inevitably found loose ends that we cannot currently resolve, and would be delighted to hear of further leads and letters to illuminate this fascinating man.

## INTRODUCTION

### Conventions

Footnotes seek to clarify the contents of letters and their context, focusing on aspects important to archaeology. Deletions by Curle are retained but struck through, ~~thus~~. Curle frequently illustrated his letters with ink sketches. Available copies were hard to reproduce; they have been redrawn by Alan Braby. Works by James Curle referenced in footnotes are quoted simply as Curle xxxx; those of other Curles include initials to differentiate them.

### Abbreviations

BM	British Museum
NMAS	National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (now part of National Museums Scotland)
RMS	Royal Museum of Scotland (now part of National Museums Scotland)

Table 1.1: significant places in Britain and Ireland mentioned in the Letters; the numbers correlate with Figure 1.3.

1	Ambleside	22	Cirencester	43	Lochlee
2	Ardvouray	23	Colchester	44	London
3	Aylesford	24	Corbridge	45	Middlebie
4	Balmuildy	25	Cramond	46	Milsington
5	Bar Hill	26	Croy	47	Oronsay
6	Bertha	27	Dorchester	48	Polden Hill
7	Bhaltos	28	Dowkerbottom Cave	49	Porth Dafarch, Holyhead
8	Birdoswald	29	Dublin	50	Pudding Pan Rock
9	Birrens	30	Edinshall	51	Ribchester
10	Borness Cave	31	Eildon Hill North	52	Richborough
11	Bosham	32	Erickstanebrae	53	Rough Castle
12	Bow	33	Ewell	54	Santon Downham
13	<i>Bremenium</i>	34	Glastonbury	55	Settle
14	Brentford	35	Glenmailen	56	Silchester
15	Broughter	36	Great Chesters	57	Stanwick
16	Burrian	37	Grimthorpe	58	Taplow
17	Camelon	38	Guisborough	59	Torrs
18	Cappuck	39	Hod Hill	60	Torwoodlee
19	Castlecary	40	Housesteads	61	<i>Trimontium</i>
20	Chesters	41	Inveresk	62	<i>Vindolanda</i>
21	Chew Green	42	Lincoln	63	Welwyn

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Figure 1.3. Key British and Irish sites and findspots mentioned in the letters.