Locating Undiscovered Ancient Sites with the New Mapping Feature on the ARCHI Website

Before the Internet, there were two kinds of detectives — lucky ones and not-so-lucky ones. At least that is what I thought and included myself in the latter group. This didn’t frustrate me too much because, like most other detectivists, I gained so many other non-material rewards. Often it was enough to enjoy the fresh country air or marvel at the sight of the morning dew in a spider’s web. However, at other times I would ponder on thoughts of this Land’s ancestors and wish that the next signal would be a call from there — in the form of something like a Celtic gold stater or a Roman gold aurum. It was all too many months of pondering on thoughts like these that I started to question the definition of luck. Was it really a purposeless, unpredictable and uncontrollable force? Or, was it possible to nurture it and encourage it to help me make that special find? I answered “No” to this question and set myself the challenge of bringing about a change of luck through my own actions.

Undiscovered to me at the time, I had known where to start since early childhood. These bedtime stories of pirates, and then, when I could read for myself, books like Robert Louis Stevenson’s Treasure Island and then the Indiana Jones films — they all had something in common — maps — treasure maps.

So, this is where I started. Not on maps from fairy tales, though, but with real maps, because behind many of them lie true stories more unbelievable than fiction. I started by looking at the contours of the land, the alignments of roads, parish and field boundaries, fieldnames and place names running with the contours and cartographer’s annotations on the maps of antiquity. I was looking for anything and everything that could firmly put an ‘X’ on the hitherto un-trodden pastures shown on my copy of the map of the lands I had access to. This ‘X’ would mark the spot where my luck was about to change and I would find evidence of an ancient site not yet known to archaeology.

You may think that things are much easier now we have online map services such as Google, Bing Maps etc. However, even if they are so easily available now, there is still an art to the interpretation of maps for the location of undiscovered ancient sites. This is because that behind the modern maps delivered by, for example, Google Maps, there is a much more complex historical story. Recognising particular landscape features and properties appearing to be hidden, but actually in plain sight, could be the key to success.

Free Old Maps Online

In order to make it easier to unravel the historical stories behind modern maps, I’ve built a new Old Map Search page on the ARCHI website (www.archi.com). You can access the feature on the ARCHI website at: http://www.archi.com/archi_maps_os.htm (Fig. la) or via a standard ARCHI Search at (http://www.archi.com/index_form.htm) (Fig. 1b).

Note that the former webpage has the option of searching for maps in your current location. Even though I say it myself, it is great for when you’re out and about with your mobile phone.

To give you an archaeological context to the map, the search will also give you a list of archaeological sites and monuments from the ARCHI database within 10km of the location you choose.

Place Names and Maps to Discover Ancient Sites

If you read my previous article on the ‘Secrets of Field Names’ (Treasure Hunting, January 2015), you will be aware that the place name element ‘Castle’ has an association with Roman sites. Hence, in order to find all UK places with this element in their name (and possibly Roman sites), I first did a search on the ARCHI Ancient Place Names Finder at http://www.archi.com/archi_placename.htm and found the name ‘Castlehow’ (from Castlehow Reservoir) (SD 99 09) in my area of interest.

I then typed this place into the Old Map Search Form on the ARCHI website (http://www.archi.com/archi_maps_os.htm) and chose the 2nd place with that element (i.e. Castlehow Reservoir (SD 99 09)). This will bring up a list of Search Results from the ARCHI Database of Archival Historical Sites and Monuments near this place and also a link to a Satellite, Road and Historical Ordnance Survey Old Map overlay (Fig. 2 & 3). Zoom into the map in Fig. 4 and look for the ‘CAMI’. Once you have found the ‘CAMI’, move it to the centre of the map and click ‘Satellite’ and zoom into the satellite image (Fig. 5).

This terrain map shows that the Scheduled Roman Fort at Castlehow was positioned on the side of a small hill in a sheltered valley within an otherwise exposed moorland area. This Scheduled Ancient Monument is the site of Rigodurnum, a Brigantian settlement. It has clear steps up and down the valley, although it is overshadowed by higher ground on all sides and lies along the Dees Valley (Chesters) to Brougham (York) Roman road (source: Wicke). Also, my own research has shown at least two other Roman forts with a similar topography to this one. Further, note the name ‘Dirty Lane’.

There is a body of evidence which associates negative names such as DirtyFoul (i.e. Pollucausos) with Roman sites.

Click here -> for Archaeological and Historic Sites Data in this area.

Click Here -> for the location linking to old map overlay.

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will search for Archaeological and Historic Sites and Monuments in the area (Fig. 4). If you’re actually in the field (so to speak), there is also a link to download and install the ARCHI Discover Archaeology Android App to use with your Android mobile device. Note that the iPhone version should be available towards autumn 2016.

Some of the sites in the list will also be Scheduled and out of bounds to detectivists. However, many others withlie on the less spectacular topography, so your search for undiscovered Ancient Sites focal point is now very effective. These are often in areas not yet explored.

I also cross-reference the find spot locations with nearby place names marked on various map sources. So, once you have discovered the characteristics and the landowner that the area of your ‘X’ is available to search, your luck may be about to change. In fact even just looking over the maps and place names in the above example above, I can already see what looks, very much like a previously unknown site (Fig. 6). Set September of a later, possibly Roman, field system...