

DRAFT

Furniture and souvenirs made from the 'Roman' bridge at Newcastle

by A. T. Croom and A. Wightman

The knowledge that Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums had a number of objects made from wood taken from the 'Roman' bridge over the Tyne inspired WallQuest volunteers to identify as many examples of such souvenirs as they could find. They have been brought together in this document, which is still a work in progress – we hope to find out about more of these objects, but this is what we have found out so far.

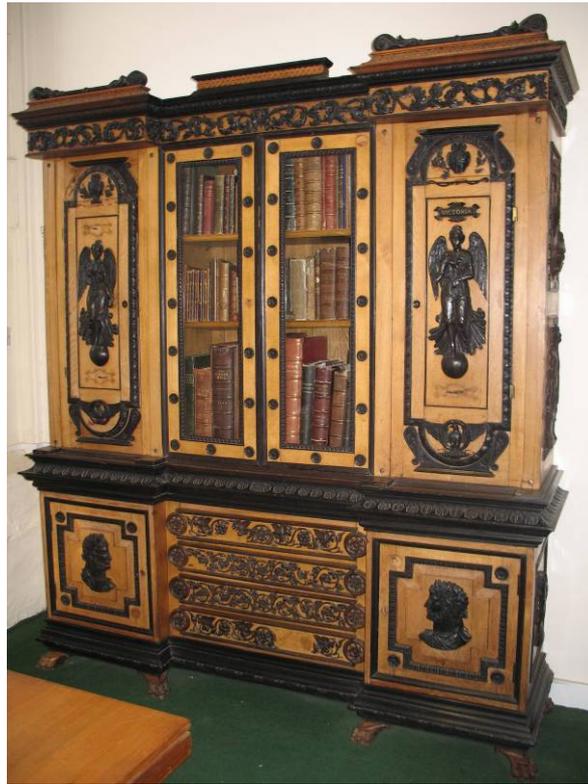
Introduction

In late March 1872, the foundations of the third pier (counting from the Gateshead side) of the Georgian stone bridge across the Tyne were removed, during an operation to demolish the existing bridge and replace it with the Swing Bridge which would allow large ships further up the river. Dr Collingwood Bruce, a local antiquarian, 'being anxious to ascertain whether any traces of Roman work could be found, obtained permission to be present at the operation' (Bruce 1905, 156). Collingwood Bruce recorded in a letter that, because of the work going on it was possible to stand within the pier 'in a manner high and dry upon what for ages had been the natural bed of the river, the stream still flowing past us on either side' (*ibid.*).

During work on the pier timber piles were recorded from what was thought were the Roman, medieval and Georgian bridges. 'The Roman oak was jet black, the outside of it friable, and the heart strong but fibrous', while the oak from the medieval piles was described as 'the heart solid, and of brown colour' (*ibid.*, 157). Wood taken from these piles were made into a number of souvenirs.

It is now thought the remains of the 'Roman' bridge might actually be the medieval bridge, and what was thought to be the medieval pier is a medieval starling (a protective wooden barrier round the pier to stop fallen trees and such like crashing into the pier itself and damaging it).

1. Book-case



1.1. *The book-case*

In a letter to his son Gainsford, dated April 1872, Collingwood Bruce mentions the idea of making furniture from the wood of the bridge:

I have got some more black oak taken out of the foundation of Hadrian's Bridge over the Tyne. We saw distinctly the foundation of the Roman, the medieval, and more modern bridge. The timber, however, must be dried very gradually; it will not be ready for working up into furniture for a twelvemonth. We shall have plenty of time, therefore, to fix upon designs (Bruce 1905, 158).

See also the discussion for no. 2 below.

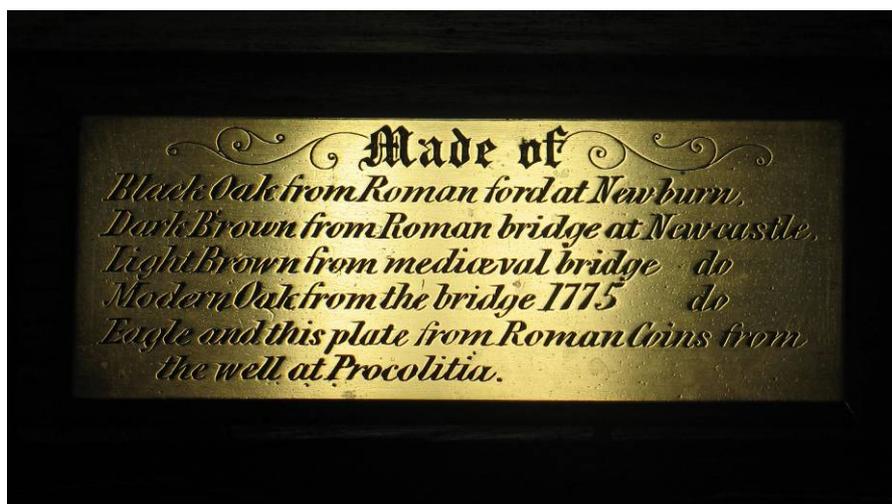
It has two sections, an upper and lower, 'the former being intended for books and coins, and the latter for manuscripts, prints and photographs' (*Alnwick Mercury*, 25 September 1875).

Discussion

The bookcase depicts the trident and dolphin carved on an altar thought to have come from the Roman bridge that had been dredged from the river in 1875, while the eagle from the top of the bookcase has an inscription saying it was cast for Collingwood Bruce in December 1879. The book-case was on display in an Art Gallery at Newcastle by 25th September 1875 (possibly the Central Exchange Art Gallery), so the eagle was a later addition to the design. The book-case was made by Carnegie and Gullachsen of Northumberland Street, Newcastle, described in advertisements of the time as upholsterers and decorators.

It passed through the family of the younger son, John Bruce, whose son John Clayton Collingwood Bruce donated it and its contents to the Laing Art Gallery.

1.2. The inscription



On the top of the bookcase was an inscribed pediment surmounted by a bronze eagle. The bronze plaque reads:

Made of
Black oak from Roman ford at Newburn,
Dark Brown from Roman bridge at Newcastle,
Light Brown from mediaeval bridge d[itt]o
Modern Oak from the bridge 1775 d[itt]o
Eagle and this plate from Roman Coins from the well at Procolitia

Discussion

The plate must have been cast in 1879 at the same time as the eagle (see below) and, like the eagle, was a later addition to the book-case. Here the wood from the Roman bridge is described as dark brown, while most other references describe it as being black. A contemporary newspaper cutting describes the three woods from the bridge used in the book case as 'the more modern being of the light colour seen in fresh cut oak trees, the timber of the middle period being a grey, and that from the oldest bridge being of the deepest black' (*Alnwick Mercury*, 25th September 1875). The river engineer Mr Brooks discovered a stone platform and 'a quantity of black oak' in the river at Newburn, which was identified at the time as Roman, although this is unlikely (Collingwood Bruce 1889, 196).

1.3. The eagle



On the back of one wing of the eagle is an inscription reading:

THIS "EAGLE"
Cast from defaced Roman coins from
the Well of Procolitia for Dr Bruce
Newcastle on Tyne Decr 1879

Discussion

The Well at Procolitia (Carrawburgh Roman Fort) is now better known as Coventina's Well. It was excavated in 1876 and contained at least 13,487 coins (and probably considerably more) as well as other finds. Collingwood Bruce published a couple of articles about the well and its contents in 1877 and helped to identify some of the coins (Allason-Jones and McKay 1985, 50). The eagle weighs 6.5kg, and if made only from Roman coins required an absolute minimum of 400 coins in mint condition and no doubt considerably more of 'defaced' coins.

Current location: Arbeia Roman Fort and Museum, accession number: TWCMS : J2867.

2. The Roman Wall book covers

The three volumes of a large version (with maps) of Collingwood Bruce's book *The Roman Wall* have wooden covers with bronze clasps. These are inscribed:

Top clasp:

THE BOARDS OF THESE VOLUMES
CONSIST OF OAK USED IN THE FOUNDATION
OF THE ROMAN BRIDGE OVER THE TYNE AT
NEWCASTLE, BUILT BY HADRIAN. AD. CXX



Bottom clasp:
THE TIMBER WAS BROUGHT
AWAY FROM ITS ANCIENT BED BY
J COLLINGWOOD BRUCE
IN MARCH 1872



Discussion

The book is mentioned in Collingwood Bruce's biography:

Dr Bruce was able to secure a portion of the piles of the Roman bridge and a portion of the piles of the medieval bridge, and he had a cabinet made of this old oak in which he kept a folio copy of 'The Roman Wall' and his copy of 'Hodgson's Northumberland', and other choice books which he specially prized' (Bruce 1905, 157).

The wood is dark brown/olive brown, with the grain very visible.

Current location: Arbeia Roman Fort and Museum

3. Chairs

One chair is mentioned in a letter to Collingwood Bruce's son, Gainsford, dated 22 May 1875:

The chair, after a Roman model and made of Roman oak, is nearly ready but not quite; it will, we expect, be sent off to you on Monday afternoon, so that you will get it a day or two afterwards. I hope you will like it, but whether you do or not the chair is intrinsically valuable, as we can prove that the oak of which it is made was growing on the banks of the Tyne in the year 120, and therefore the sap must have been flowing in its veins when throughout the Holy Land there 'walked those blessed feet which eighteen hundred years ago were nailed, for our advantage, on the bitter cross" (Bruce 1905, 334).

Two chairs were put on display alongside the book-case in September 1875:

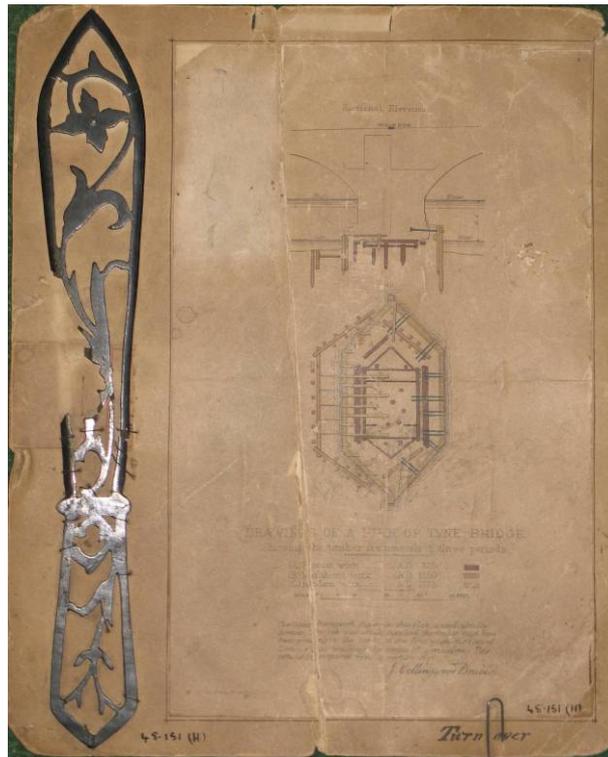
There are also two library chairs formed of oak from the foundations of Hadrian's bridge over the Tyne at Newcastle. They are decorated with a grotesque head (Roman) and a lion's head; and are covered with crimson morocco. Each of the chairs has the following inscription, on a silver plate: - "This chair is formed of oak used in the foundations of Hadrian's bridge over the Tyne at Newcastle, built Anno Domino 120. The sap must have been flowing in its veins at the time when o'er Jewry's acres walked those blessed feet which 1800 years ago were nailed for our advantage on the bitter cross" (*Alnwick Mercury*, 25th September 1875).

Discussion

The chair mentioned in the letter was a birthday present to Collingwood Bruce's eldest son Gainsford. The similarity between the comments in the letter and the text of the inscription on the library chairs suggests Gainsford's chair was one of those on display.

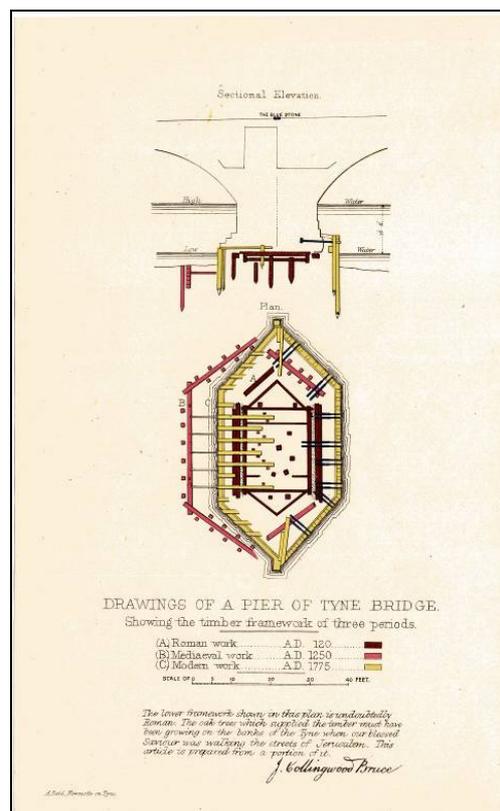
Current location: unknown.

4. Letter-opener



This consists of a piece of card which has a printed sheet glued towards one edge and the carved piece of wood towards the other edge, sewn onto the card. The wood is black and has no visible grain.

4.1. The card: the certificate on the front



The paper has a coloured sectional elevation through the bridge pier, with a plan of it below.

Beneath is written:

DRAWINGS OF A PIER OF TYNE BRIDGE.

Showing the timber framework of three periods.

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| (A.) Roman work.....A.D. 120 | [brown square] |
| (B.) Medieval work....A.D. 1250 | [pink square] |
| (C.) Modern work.....A.D. 1775 | [yellow square] |

[Scale]

The lower framework shown in this plan is undoubtedly Roman. The oak trees which supplied the timber must have been growing on the banks of the Tyne when our blessed Saviour was walking the streets of Jerusalem. This article is prepared from a portion of it.

[printed signature] J. Collingwood Bruce.

Discussion

The plan was taken from one produced by the Tyne Commissioners during the work on the demolition of the bridge (Collingwood Bruce 1875, 462). The Bruce book-case contains over 40 other copies of this printed certificate, which suggests that a reasonable number of souvenirs were made and these are unneeded surplus stock

4.2. The card: the back

On the back of the card has been glued a hand-written note and a newspaper cutting relating to souvenirs made from bridge timbers. In light of the newspaper cutting (which describes a presentation box), it is likely that the handwritten note does not relate to the letter-opener on the front of the card but is just a note about a similar souvenir. The letter-opener was part of the contents of the Bruce book-case when it was donated to the Laing Art Gallery by the Bruce family.

Current location: Arbeia Roman Fort and Museum, accession number TWCMS : 2012.710

5. Sample of wood?

A hand written note glued to the back of the card of the letter-opener (no. 4 above) reads:

“English Oak 1750 Years Old. Mr E M Stratton, of this city, recently received from Mr John Philipson, of Newcastle on the Tyne, England, a unique present in the shape of a fragment of wood taken from the bed of the river Tyne, during the erection of a new bridge lately, which is considered by experts to be a portion of the ancient Roman bridge built at this point by Hadrian about the year 120 A. D. for the passage of his army. The wood appears to be oak. It is nearly as black as ebony, and very hard and brittle”.
The Hub.
Sept 1879

Discussion

This is a quotation from the American trade journal *The Hub*. John Philipson was a member of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne. He worked first at the Mickley Coke Ovens, but later bought a shop and then a photo-engravers business. Ezra M. Stratton was an American who set up a trade journal called the *New York Coach Makers' Magazine* in 1858, which he sold in 1870 when it merged with another trade paper called *The Hub*. In 1879 he was living in New York, working in the coal business. The two men might therefore have known each other through the fuel business (Information on E. M. Stratton from the Carriage Museum of America).

Current location: unknown

6. Presentation box

Glued onto the card (see no. 4 above) below a hand-written note (no. 5) is a newspaper cutting from an unnamed newspaper:

GENERAL GRAHAM'S VISIT TO THE NORTH. The sword of honour intended for presentation to General Sir Gerald Graham by the officers and men of the First Newcastle and Durham Engineer Volunteers has just been received from the makers by Surgeon-Major R. F. Cook, of that regiment, and in a few days it will be placed on view in Newcastle. The weapon is a costly and magnificent production. We may mention that the blade is a Damascus one, that the hilt and handle are of gold and ivory elaborately carved, and that the scabbard is of solid gold, enriched with chased ornamentation. A heavy bullion tassel and scarlet and gold cord are attached. The sword and scabbard are enclosed in a box of solid old oak, the material having formed part of the piles of the ancient bridge thrown across the Tyne by the Emperor Hadrian. The wood is now black and as hard as ebony, and, as a memento of Roman energy and skill, it is in this instance most appropriately used. The general is a north-countryman by birth, and this circumstance will not lessen the interest with which the victor in the hard-fought struggle of El Teb and Tamai is regarded.

Discussion

General Graham went to Jarrow on 18th July 1884 and was given 'a presentation and a handsome sword of honour in an oak case made from the piles of the Roman bridge thrown across the Tyne at Newcastle by the Emperor Hadrian' (Vetch 1901, 281).

Current location: unknown

7. Casket

A wooden box with gold mountings with the arms of Newcastle upon Tyne on one side. There are two inscriptions on opposing sides of the lid. One (above the side with the city insignia) reads:

Presented by
the corporation of the
City of Newcastle-upon-Tyne
to
Sir William George Armstrong C.B.
with the honorary freedom of the city
conferred by the council on
September 1st 1886.
Benjamin Chapman Browne, Mayor.
Thomas Bell, Sheriff. Hill Motum, Town Clerk.



© National Trust, Cragside

The other reads:

THIS CASKET
IS MADE OF OAK
TAKEN FROM THE FOUNDATIONS
of the
Old Tyne Bridge,
BUILT BY THE ROMANS;
A.D. 120.

The casket was mentioned in newspaper reports of the time:

The honorary freedom of Newcastle-on-Tyne was, on Monday, conferred on Sir W. G. Armstrong ... The casket in which the certificate of enrolment is enclosed is of carved oak, from timber in the old Roman bridge over the Tyne, build [sic] in A. D. 120 (*Leeds Times*, 13th November, 1886; also mentioned in the *Shields Daily Gazette*, 18th July, 1901).

Discussion

A newspaper report recording the visit of the Chinese politician Li Hung Chang to Cragside, the home of Sir Armstrong, included the observation that: 'Among the interesting objects in the drawing-room is a table made out of the oaken piles taken from a Roman bridge that stood at Newcastle (*Daily News*, 20th August 1896)'. No table at the house can now be identified as this item (*pers. comm.*. P. Newton, Cragside), and although it may have been subsequently sold, it is possible the reporter confused the casket with the table it was sitting on.

Location: Drawing room, Cragside, Rothbury

8. Paper knife



Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2013

A wooden paperknife engraved with a crown and VR monogram, with a chased gold handle. The handle has 'PONS AELII A.D. CXX / REID AND SONS / NEWCASTLE' and 'JUNE 1887' inscribed on it. A bolt through the ferrule interrupts the words 'REID AND SONS'. The makers were Edgar Finlay and Hugh Taylor (trading as Horace Woodward & Co.) with a shield-shaped EF/HT mark. The handle is hallmarked Birmingham 1886.

Discussion

Gifts given to Queen Victoria on the occasion of her Golden Jubilee were put on display in Glasgow in the following year. The local newspaper reported:

The whole of the presents ... have been sent to Glasgow, and are being arranged, under the direction of Mr Hedley in the Kelvingrove Museum. The list given yesterday included the more important gifts, but amongst others not noticed were the following ... A large oak paper knife made from a pile from the Roman bridge over the Tyne, the gift of the Bishop of Newcastle (*Glasgow Herald*, 12 April, 1888).

Reid and Sons were one of the principal gold- and silversmiths of Newcastle. Established in 1788, the company is still in business in their Edwardian showrooms in Blakett Street. The first Anglian Bishop of Newcastle, in post from 1882 to 1896, was Ernest Wilberforce (grandson of William Wilberforce).

Current location: Royal Households Collection, RCIN: 33831

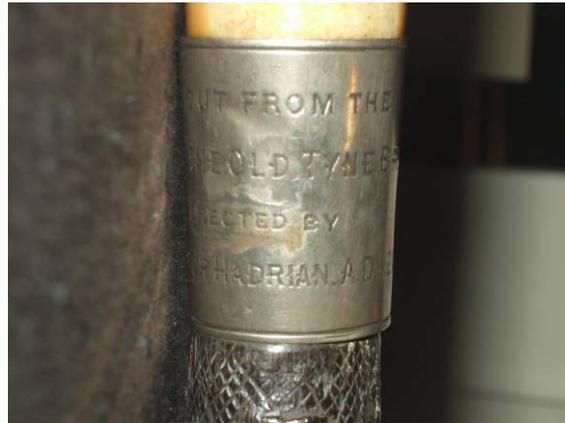
9. Walking sticks



9.1. *Walking stick*

The shaft is of dark brown wood, carved all over with figures and scenes against a back-ground of incised lattice. An inscription on a metal band between the handle and shaft of the stick reads:

OAK CUT FROM THE
PILES OF THE OLD TYNE BRIDGE,
ERECTED BY
EMPEROR HADRIAN A.D. 120



9.2. *Collingwood Bruce's staff*

Newspaper reports of the first Hadrian's Wall Pilgrimage in 1849 made mention of Collingwood Bruce's staff:

In the great hall of the Norman keep of the castle the pilgrims partook of their first social meal. Mr Bruce, as the leader of the expedition, took the chair ... We may remark, in passing, that the chair on which the president sat is made of oak, which was found buried beneath the foundations of the Roman wall, and hence must have flourished prior to the christian [sic] era, while during the journey he carried a staff formed out of one of the piles of the Roman bridge which crossed the Tyne and Newcastle, and which was erected by the Emperor Hadrian, A. D. 120 (*Newcastle Courant*, 6th July, 1849).

This is repeated in a letter from Dr Stanley, Dean of Westminster written in August 1869, which reads: 'In 1849 he [Collingwood Bruce] took a pilgrimage of twenty-five friends along the whole route [of the Wall], guiding them with a staff cut from the oaken piles of the old Roman bridge at Newcastle' (Bruce 1905, 170).

9.3. *Canon Franklin's walking stick*

A report on a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle in 1916 records:

A letter was read from Mr Richard Welford, who thanked the members for their congratulations to him on the occasion of his 80th birthday ... Mr Welford presented a walking stick made of oak from the old Roman bridge at Newcastle, and given to him in 1905 by Canon Franklin (*Newcastle Journal*, 27th July, 1916).

Discussion

It is not clear how many walking sticks were made, but the above refer to at least two: one presented to the Society of the Antiquaries in 1916 and one donated to the Laing Art Gallery in 2003.

The old bridge at Newcastle was demolished and the 'Roman' pier exposed in March/April 1872, but Collingwood Bruce was using a walking stick made from the 'Roman' bridge back in 1849. It is not clear when there would have been an earlier chance to see the remains of the bridges. Roman coins and timbers were recorded when the old bridge was swept away and the new nine-arched Georgian bridge was being built between 1771 and 1781, but there is no record of any wood being kept (Collingwood Bruce 1875, 462).

Current location: Discovery Museum, accession number: TWCMS : 2003.693, and unknown.

10. Trowel

This is mentioned in a newspaper in 1887:

On All Saints' Day the foundation-stone of a new church (to be dedicated to All Saints) at Harton Colliery, in the parish of Harton, was laid by Archdeacon Watkins.... The handle of the trowel presented to the Archdeacon was made of oak 2,000 years old, being a piece of one of the piles of the old Roman bridge which crossed the Tyne at Newcastle. The mallet was made of a piece of the old roof of the chancel of Bishop Wearmouth Church (*Worcester Journal*, 12th November 1887).

Current location: unknown

11. Disc and sample of wood



Set in a frame is a newspaper cutting taped to a piece of card with a flat disc of polished dark wood next to it. Beside the card the text of the newspaper cutting is written out neatly by hand. Underneath both of these is a flattish rectangular piece of wood.

Above the newspaper cutting, on the card, is the hand-written note: 'Newcastle Evening Chronicle, 1896'

The newspaper cutting (and handwritten text) reads:

] Relic in [
Pile of Hadrian's Bridge
Historic Oak Returns to Newcastle
Vicar's Gift for Preservation

A block of oak which formed part of the piles supporting Pons Aelii, the bridge which Hadrian built across the Tyne, is to be found a place in Newcastle cathedral. It is said to be 2,000 years old and was part of a living tree at the time of the birth of Christ.

City Contractor

Some considerable time after the collapse of Hadrian's bridge, a Mr. Wheeler of Newcastle secured a contract for the erection of another. He gave one of the piles of the old bridge to his son, then a Dorset Rector, who fashioned it into a lectern.

He gave a block of the oak to a Dorset Vicar who has now presented it to Canon Mangin for preservation in S. Nicholas Cathedral.

At the bottom of the handwritten text is the addition:

(The small round piece is the same oak, which has been polished.)

Discussion

Despite a detailed search, it has been impossible to trace the newspaper cutting to an exact date within the year 1896.

Current location: South wall, St Nicholas Cathedral, Newcastle

12. Lectern

The newspaper cutting above (no. 11) refers to a lectern made for a Dorset rector called Mr Wheeler.

Current location: unknown

13. Sample of wood



A fragment of wood with sawn surfaces on top and bottom mounted on a wooden board. An old paper label (now incomplete) glued to the wood reads:

A pile of the R[oman bridge]
at Newcastle
AD 120

Current location: Discovery Museum, accession number: TWCMS : 1995.2473.

14. Sample of wood



A rectangular fragment of sawn wood, with modern bolts in the upper and lower surfaces. An old label glued to the piece reads:

Oak
from
Roman Bridge
Newcastle Tyne

Current location: Great North Museum: Hancock, accession number: NEWMA : 1956.363.

Photographs

All photographs © Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums unless otherwise stated.

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