

THE YEAR OF THE DISCOVERY OF THE STANNINGTON DIPLOMA

The dating of the discovery of the Stannington Roman diploma to 1760 has remained uncontested since the 1870s, despite Joseph Hunter's earlier assertion in his Hallamshire (1819) that it occurred in April 1761. The antiquarian wrote:

In the month of April 1761, a countryman, one Edward Nichols, ploughing a piece of common land called the Lawns, on the Stannington side of the Riving, discovered two thin plates of copper about six inches by five, both bearing inscriptions of which the greatest portion was perfectly legible.¹

As is well known, only one of the two tablets has survived and is now housed in the British Museum.² The museum's object label and website state that the diploma was '[f]ound in 1760', citing The Roman Inscriptions of Britain (RIB) as the source. However, I contend that the RIB's attribution of the discovery to 1760 lacks firm evidence and that Hunter's claim of 1761 represents the correct date.

The RIB editors cited Hunter's passage for context but made a significant, unacknowledged alteration to the text, replacing 1761 with 1760 while presenting the modified text as a direct quotation from the original:

'In the month of April 1760, a countryman one Edward Nichols, ploughing a piece of common land called the Lawns on the Stannington side of the Riving, discovered two thin plates of copper about six inches by five inches, both bearing inscriptions of which the greater part was perfectly legible' (Hunter).³

This change appears to prioritise the dating provided in Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum (CIL), which has consistently attributed the find to 1760, since Emil Hübner's edition of 1873. It opens with this description:

*Found the preceding spring [id est a. 1760] by a countryman, one Edward Nichols, ploughing a piece of uncultivated land called the lawns in Riving near Stannington [prope Sheffield in regione praeterea vestigiis Romanae aetatis fere destituta], in the parochial chapelry of Bradfield and parish of Ecclesfield in Hallamshire, York WATSON (1761).*⁴

The italicised text is presented as a direct quotation from 'Watson', dated 1761, but no such quotation exists. The passage is a composite, blending Hunter's reference to Edward Nichols with details from Richard Gough's enlarged edition of Camden's Britannia. Gough's text reads:

Lord Willoughby, president of the Society of Antiquaries, communicated to the Society from Mr. Watson, F.A.S. 1761, a copy of a Roman inscription

¹ Joseph Hunter, Hallamshire (London, 1819), 18.

² 'Bronze military 'diploma'. AD 124. Stannington, Yorkshire' (BM 1857,1127.1; on display, G49/dc2). A transcript of the destroyed tablet is preserved at Burlington House, London. See n7 below.

³ RIB II.1, 2401.6.

⁴ CIL VII, 1195 and CIL III, pt II, xxx after it.

found the preceding spring by a countryman ploughing a piece of uncultivated land called the Lawns in Riveling near Stainington in the parochial chapelry of Bradfield and parish of Ecclesfield [in Hallamshire] c. York.⁵

The CIL editors interpreted the phrase ‘the preceding spring’ as referring to the spring before the year of Watson’s communication in 1761. They made this explicit by adding ‘[id est a. 1760]’ without comment.⁶ However, this inference presents a problem: Gough’s phrase ‘the preceding spring’ was itself an unacknowledged alteration of his source.

Gough’s engraving and explanation of the inscription were drawn entirely from the minutes of the Society of Antiquaries of London (SAL) from 10 December 1761.⁷ These minutes record that President Hugh Willoughby read a letter from John Watson (1725–83), curate of Ripponden, transmitting the discovery and a transcript of the Latin inscription of the second tablet. Relevant to the dating is the following passage:

Mr. Watson herein transmits to his Lordship a Copy of a Roman Inscription, which was found last Spring by a Countryman, as he was plowing a piece of uncultivated Land, called the *Lawns*, in Riveling, near Stanington, in the Parochial Chapelry of Bradfield, & Parish of Ecclesfield, in the County of York.⁸

Notably, the text describes the Roman diploma as discovered ‘last spring’, a phrasing that mirrors Watson’s own wording in his letter, dated 21 October:

I have the honor of transmitting to your Lordship a Copy of a Roman Inscription which was found last Spring by a Countryman as he was plowing a Piece of uncultivated Land call’d the Lawns in Riveling near Stanington in the Parochial Chapelry of Bradfield, & Parish of Ecclesfield in the County of York.⁹

This letter from late October 1761, stating that the tablet was found ‘last spring’, clearly points to a discovery date earlier that same year. In May 1776, the year 1761 was confirmed as the discovery date by Watson himself, during an address to the London antiquarians:

In the chapelry of Bradfield was also found in 1761 by a countryman as he was plowing a piece of uncultivated land called the Lawns, in Riveling, near Stanington, that valuable brass plate beginning IMP CAESAR DIVI TRAIANI

⁵ Richard Gough, *Britannia* (London, 1789), III, 262. The CIL references the second edition (1806).

⁶ In 1936, Herbert Nesselhauf (CIL XVI.70) revised Hübner’s opening words to read definitively: Rep[erta] vere anno 1760 (‘Found in the spring of 1760’).

⁷ Society of Antiquaries of London, Minutes, VIII, 10 Dec 1761, SAL/02/008/141, 373–5. The transcript is enclosed between pages 373 and 374.

⁸ SAL/02/008/141, 373.

⁹ John Watson, To the President, 21 Oct 1761, SAL/01/01/0270.

PARTHICI F DIVI NERVAE, &c. and examined some time ago by this Society.¹⁰

These testimonies align with Hunter's dating of the discovery to April 1761. Hunter's reliability should not be dismissed. Not only did he correctly identify Edward Nichols as the discoverer, but he also had possession of the fragmented tablet for years and was the first to document its dimensions.¹¹ More importantly, Hunter identified the renowned collector and antiquarian John Wilson of Broomhead Hall (1719–83) as the person who originally informed Watson about the find and provided him with the transcript of the inscription later presented to the London Society.¹² By the time his Hallamshire came out, Hunter had spent over a decade of meticulous examination and cataloging of Wilson's extensive collections of papers and manuscripts. It is plausible that his reference to April 1761 derived from the Wilson–Watson correspondence preserved among them.¹³

One such letter from Wilson sheds light from a different angle. After learning from Watson that his transcript had successfully reached London, Wilson replied on 23 November 1761, expressing concern that Samuel Pegge (1704–96), Rector of Whittington, had not yet responded with an interpretation of the inscription, despite Wilson's earlier request. In his letter to Watson, Wilson remarked that he had contacted Pegge 'soon after it [the inscription] was found.'¹⁴ While this reference does not resolve the dating issue, it highlights the immediate excitement the discovery generated among antiquarians, making it rather implausible that news of the find remained uncirculated for over a year if the discovery had occurred in the spring of 1760.

Another critical piece of evidence comes from Father Philip Mark Perry (1720–74), who served as chaplain at Hassop Hall, in Derbyshire, from 1754 to around 1765.¹⁵ An avid reader and writer of hagiography, biography, and history, Perry worked during this period on drafting an ecclesiastical history of early Britain. While discussing the establishment of veteran colonies under Emperor Hadrian, he referred to the fuller tablet carrying the inscription and described it as having been 'lately' discovered: 'Adrian also settled some colonies of veterans in Britain, as appears from a brass plate taken up lately from under an old ruin near

¹⁰ John Watson, 'An Account of some hitherto undescribed Remains of Antiquity', *Archaeologia*, v (1779), 94. DOI: 10.1017/S0261340900014661.

¹¹ J D Leader, 'Particulars of the discovery, in 1760 [sic], of the Roman Plates...near Stannington', *Proceedings of the SAL* (1879), 2nd ser, VIII, 151–2; Hunter, 'Prefatory Letter to Wilson's Yorkshire Deeds', *Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Journal*, v (1879), 68.

¹² Hallamshire, 18n1. Alfred Gatty's enlarged edition (London, 1869) noted the SAL transcript as 'plainly in the handwriting of Mr. Wilson', 28n1.

¹³ Hunter, 'Prefatory Letter', 64–7. In Hallamshire, 18n2, Hunter extracted ten of Watson's letters to Wilson dated Oct 1761–Aug 1775.

¹⁴ John Wilson, To John Watson, 23 Nov 1761, Special Collections, Leeds University Library, YAS/MS332.

¹⁵ 'Perry, Philip Mark', *Biographical Dictionary of the English Catholics*, ed Joseph Gillow (London/New York, 1903), V, 270.

Stannington.’¹⁶ By May 1768, Perry had relocated to Spain, entrusted with the mission of refounding the English Catholic seminary in Valladolid. Around 1772, amid demanding administrative duties, he resumed work on his *Sketch of the Ancient British History* and revised the passage to specify the year of the discovery. In its final version, he wrote: ‘Adrian also settled some colonies of veterans in Britain, as appears from a brass plate taken up in 1761.’¹⁷ It is worth noting that Perry’s revision was based on firsthand knowledge: he had possession of the second tablet before it eventually disintegrated, just in time to attempt his own reading of the inscription.¹⁸

Attributing the diploma’s discovery to 1760 seems, therefore, untenable, as it rests on a series of unsubstantiated textual changes. Based on the contemporary testimonies of Watson, Wilson, and Perry, the evidence strongly supports 1761 as the correct year of discovery. If this argument holds merit, the British Museum may consider revising its entry for this AD 124 diploma to incorporate the updated dating.

ANUNCIACIÓN CARRERA DE LA RED

Universidad de Valladolid

Funding support for this article was provided by the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación, Agencia Estatal de Investigación, Spain (PID2020-113516GB-I00).

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This article (AM) has been published by Oxford University Press in *Notes and Queries*: DOI <https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjaf037>.

¹⁶ Valladolid, Archivo del Real y Pontificio Colegio de los ingleses de San Albano, ACSA 023A, draft MS, q 5, fol 1r. Perry’s use of ‘lately’ suggests this draft was likely written c1762.

¹⁷ ACSA 023A, rev MS, q 6, fol 4r. Perry initially wrote 1760 and then overwrote the zero with a one, a kind of foreshadowing of later developments.

¹⁸ Perry’s ‘*Sketch of the Ancient British History*’: *A Critical Edition*, ed by Anunciación Carrera and María José Carrera, with Carlos Herrero, Pilar Garcés, Berta Cano, Elena González-Cascos and Ana Sáez (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2009), 21–3.