

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - October 2002

Silchester

Professor Michael Fulford was the speaker at the Wargrave Local History Society's October meeting, when he told us about Silchester: *the Roman town in the light of the current excavations*.

Professor Fulford began with an aerial view of the site; a line of trees marks the town walls, parching of the surface indicates the Roman street pattern below, whilst at the east end there is an amphitheatre just outside the town wall. The site - with good water sources available from wells, and easily defended as it is on high ground, was the centre of an area as far as the Thames - Wargrave being close to the northern limit of its administration.

Archaeological excavations were carried out by the Victorians in 1893 - 4, and showed the basic pattern of the Roman town - the first that had been examined in this way. Their discoveries were mainly of the 3rd and 4th centuries, but as the Romans were there for 400-500 years, Silchester was not a 'one period' town. Work began in the late 20th century, therefore, to find out more about the earlier history, the reasons for its origins, and why it did not remain in use after the Roman period. Excavations begun about 20 years ago had investigated the 'public' buildings, and so the present project hopes to examine the 'ordinary' houses of the townspeople.

The present 'Roman town life project' began in 1998, with on-site excavations for about 6 weeks each summer, and is about half complete. The area of about 3000 square metres includes one large house which appears to have had a complicated history. Originally of timber construction, these were replaced by two stone dwellings, which became linked together to form an aisled hall, with metal working trades taking place at one end. The floor surfaces no longer survive, but had already been ruined by around 250AD. The floor foundations, however, did include complete undamaged first century pots, buried in the corners, possibly as an 'offering' when the house was built.

From the time of the stone buildings, there is evidence of hearths for iron working, and nearby there were hearths for silver and gold work too. Although no mosaics have been found in this house, there are quantities of tesserae - both cubes and chips, and a floor of similar material from a previous excavation is now in Reading Museum. The previous wooden house had painted Roman plasterwork, which placed it in the earliest stages of Roman occupation - maybe as old as 25BC.

A major effort this summer had been to examine the Roman road - although Roman roads are well known, they have not often been excavated. The dating of the Silchester examples is not certain, though early. They are built of selected local gravels, with larger stones removed, compacted and arranged to give a smooth surface with a regular camber. Part of one road was over a pre-existing well - so the 'in-fill' will help in dating the road. Another notable discovery has been a well with its oak lining to a depth of 5 metres. The timber is well preserved, with the

jointing still clear, but as the tree ring patterns are - seemingly - unique to Silchester, it has proved difficult to date this so far.

Many other pits have been excavated (some in the 1890s), and the items found - from ornately carved knife handles or jewellery to animal remains will give an insight to the life of the township. Some of the bone had been cut to extract marrow, or boiled -- maybe to extract grease, maybe to make soup, or maybe to ensure all the meat was used when supplies became hard to get. The chemical nature of the pit had also preserved grains of barley and wheat, lentils, fish bones, lots of eels, and also lots of hemlock. Amongst the 'rubbish' discarded by the 3rd century was inscribed Purbeck marble - indicating that in earlier times this had been a rich town.

The on-site work will continue next July and August, maybe giving more clues as to the lifestyle of the Silchester people, or why the town came to be deliberately abandoned at the end of the Roman era.

If you would like to find out more about this work and see some pictures, then visit the official website at <http://www.silchester.rdg.ac.uk/>
