

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - November 2013

Archaeological Finds at Silchester

Dr Elise Fraser, who is the Finds Manager on the University of Reading Silchester Project Team, began by explaining that Calleva Atrebatum was a Roman town in the middle of central southern England. It had been an iron age town for the Atrebatas people, and an important place for trade. In Roman Britain, 'all roads led to Silchester' and the town developed. The Saxons who ruled after the Roman era were keen on using water transport, and as Silchester was not close to any rivers, the town of Reading developed, and Silchester was virtually abandoned - so the earlier town has been remarkably well preserved.

The Project Director, Prof. Michael Fulford visited the Society in **October 2002**, and so this talk was able to provide a valuable update for those who were present then.

The first archaeology on the site was done by the Victorians, who from 1864 - 1909 carried out a series of excavations. At that time, there were still some standing ruins, and the Victorians discovered Roman pots, hypocausts, mosaics, etc (many now on show in Reading Museum). This early work was able to find the stones, but not the timber structures. The Victorians were interested in finding complete items of, for example, pottery - but discarded the small broken fragments. They had dug excavation trenches, and when a wall was encountered, they had chased that. Despite the limitations of their work, they constructed a large detailed plan of the most complete surviving town of the Roman empire, showing the road pattern, the iron age ditch, the basilica, and other stone buildings.

In more recent times, it has been possible to do a geophysical survey of the entire site, which has shown that the Victorian plan was remarkably accurate. In addition, with the aid of kite mounted cameras, aerial photography has helped to record the archaeological features. For the last 17 years, work has concentrated on an area known as Insula IX. It includes a building that is not aligned to the road grid - which is not what would be expected of a Roman site. This year, an area in Insula III has also been investigated - in part to test the theories about Insula IX. The Victorians thought they had found a bath house, although the current excavations have shown no evidence for that, so far.

In Insula IX, an area about 50 metres square has been examined, and has revealed not only the house on the unexpected alignment but also things below that, and an iron age street. The house respects the alignment of the earlier street, and it appears that there was a building there before Roman times, and that the latter used the existing foundations for a later structure. Elise's task as Finds Manager is to ensure that everything found is cleaned, recorded, identified and dated. The cleaning and marking of items is carried out on site, (no matter what the weather) and then the items are put into bags for later examination. This year alone produced 80 large boxes of finds, not including over a ton of brick - to be added to 17 tons of material previously found. Information about the finds is then given back to the team on-site, to help them plan further work. Finds are either 'bulk finds' - pieces of pottery, bone, ceramic building material, glass, nails, etc, or 'small finds' - such as precious metal objects, coins, complete pots etc. There are also 'environmental finds' samples of soil that might include seeds (for evidence of people's diet) or hammerscale (giving evidence of metal working). Many of the items are very, very, small, so a 'good eye' is needed to spot them!

This year alone there was 0.3 tons of pieces of pottery found - some 24,408 sherds, which all had to be marked to show the site and context of where found. Such pottery fragments are useful as a dating tool (better than, for example, coins). The style of items of pottery would change with the 'fashion of the time',

and so is often the key piece of evidence. The most common types of pottery found are Silchester Ware - a locally made coarse material used for cooking vessels from about the 1st century BC to the 4th century AD; Alice Holt pottery - wheel made presentation and storage vessels from near Farnham, dating from 40 AD to the 4th century; and Samian ware, which was imported pottery, made in a mould. This was not suitable to use for cooking in, but showed the status of the owner as being able to have the 'latest fashion'. It typically dates from the 1st - 3rd centuries AD. Made in large quantities, it often has makers marks on it - the name of the mould maker, the person who finished it off, etc - an early form of advertising.

Animal bone fragments also give clues as to what the population were eating, but other animals' remains, in particular dogs, have been found. More such skeletons have been found at Silchester than any other British town, as apparently Silchester was exporting hunting dogs to the rest of the Roman empire. There are also 'dog related' finds - such as a carved knife portraying a pair of dogs, unlike anything found elsewhere in the Roman world.

Ceramic building materials - roof tiles, floor tiles, box flue tubes from hypocausts etc all give useful evidence of the types of buildings that had existed, even if the structural stone of the supporting walls had later been taken to be re-used elsewhere. A building that had a good tiled roof was clearly not just a 'storage shed'! Many of the tiles also had interesting marks on them - from when they were left out to dry. From a variety of animal foot prints, (or even hobnail boot marks) left in the surface, it is apparent that animals were able to wander freely around the drying area - and that such tiles were not thrown away, but turned over and used. Almost all of the whole pottery items being found now are in wells. Silchester was not close to a river, so there were many wells to provide a source of drinking water. At the bottom of virtually every well would be found a pottery vessel (something the Victorians had not discovered). These were put in the well as a sacrificial offering - the jars having the head chopped off, or a hole put into the side before being deposited.

Other small items found included intaglios, made to mark the waxes on documents. Ornatly carved, there was clearly a skill in making the tools to carve such miniature objects, as well as that of the carver who would have had no magnifying aids. Other 'personal' items included tiny brooches or items used by the Romans for personal grooming. Unique to Silchester are some tiles found with the name of Nero stamped into them, dating from AD 54 - AD 68. It is thought that they were on the roof of a building commissioned by the Emperor Nero - an indication that Silchester had influence to the highest levels within the Roman empire.

Items from the work in Insula III were much more varied - for as well as some Roman inscribed Purbeck marble or a 1st century carved Carnelian intaglio, there were Victorian clay pipes and even a 1980s plastic button. The excavations had revealed the presence of previous archaeologists !!

One 'unexpected find' was what looked like a 'green blob'. Once cleaned up, it was revealed to be a silver coin dating from AD 25 - AD 35, showing Verica, ruler of the Atrebates. However, he is portrayed as if a Roman emperor. The reverse side shows an iron age torque - Verica showing both his British heritage and his Roman allegiance.

The Romans, Elise said, had the same 'desires and wants' as we do - to have nice things, and a nice place to live, and she not only illustrated this with photographs of the site and finds, but had also brought a selection of items for the audience to see. Most of these are included among the illustrations shown on the Project Website, <https://research.reading.ac.uk/silchester/> which also has a lot more information on the long-running project.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, December 10th when the Society will hold its Christmas Party, whilst on Tuesday, January 14th, Fred Freeman will tell us about Life as the Village Chemist