

Aldford's towers of stone

A stone tower uncovered at Aldford this summer is changing our views on the date of the castle.

Previous excavation at Aldford Castle has been in the bailey or enclosure and across the bank and ditch but this year two small trenches on the motte (mound) were examined which showed that the survival of medieval layers was good.

The excavations, by Simon Ward of Chester Archaeology and Andrew Lowerre of Boston College USA, are part of a research project into the foundation and siting of Norman earthwork castles. The aims of the project at Aldford, about 6.5 km south of Chester, are to examine the extent and survival of the archaeological remains on the motte and bailey and to find evidence for its Norman foundation and occupation.

The first trench uncovered part of a D-shaped tower. Up to three courses of high quality masonry survived including a chamfered plinth but the facing stones of the upper parts of the tower had been robbed away. This tower can be dated to the thirteenth century.

In the other trench there was a de-

posit of clay, possibly from enlarging the ditch, a deposit of rubbish and a rough wall, perhaps for a timber-framed building. All these features contained thirteenth-century finds which were sealed by a surface of sandstone, also medieval in date.

It is clear from walking over the motte that more masonry features lie buried just below the surface.

About a quarter of the motte and surrounding ditch has also been surveyed. The results are promising and should show the location of other towers.

This year's work has, therefore, produced a surprise and maintained a mystery. The masonry castle was a surprise. Its construction would have been a major expenditure for the lords of Aldford in the thirteenth century. The mystery is – where are the Normans? The earliest surviving historical mention of a castle at Aldford is about 1215 so a Norman date has been assumed because of its form and location but it is possible that it was newly constructed at the beginning of the thirteenth century.

Simon Ward



Stone tower discovered on the motte at Aldford (photograph: S Ward)

The project was carried out with the permission of English Heritage and with the generous provision of access by the landowner, the Grosvenor Estate and Grosvenor Farms. This year's volunteer digging team was joined by a group of American student trainees who gained experience in surveying, excavation and finds work.

A large-print version of this newsletter is available. Please phone (01244) 402023 or fax (01244) 347522

The Past Uncovered

is produced by the City Council's Archaeological Service to keep you in touch with discoveries in Chester and the surrounding area. It appears three times a year, in February, June and October. Copies can be obtained from the Grosvenor Museum and other City Council venues or by post direct from Chester Archaeology. If you have any comments or questions, or would like to contribute, please get in touch with Gillian Dunn at Chester Archaeology, 27 Grosvenor Street, Chester CH1 2DD. ☎ (01244) 402023.

This newsletter is also available on the internet at: <http://www.chestercc.gov.uk/heritage/archaeology/news.html>

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County news

Salt working at Nantwich

A large Roman settlement has recently been discovered in Nantwich on the west bank of the River Weaver.

The site, extending over more than 1 ha, is being excavated in advance of a housing development and appears to be industrial in character. It was almost certainly concerned with salt production, in common with the Roman settlements at the other Cheshire *wich* towns of Middlewich and Northwich.

The waterlogged deposits include shallow pits, often lined with wickerwork and containing wooden and leather off cuts. However, the most spectacular features on the site were two large rectangular cisterns or reservoirs, almost certainly for brine. The largest feature, c 10 m x 4 m and c 2 m deep, was lined with a

thick layer of clay. The inner surface was lined with planks, supported on a timber frame of sill beams and uprights. The subsequent use of the feature as a rubbish dump and the waterlogged conditions have produced a remarkable collection of finds, including pottery, animal bone and wooden artefacts such as spades and other tools.

These large structures represent a remarkable discovery, whose nearest parallels are at the Roman salt-production site at Droitwich in Worcestershire. The excavations have helped to put Roman Nantwich on the map, adding to the history of one of Cheshire's most important urban centres.

Mark Leah,
Cheshire County Council

Excavations were carried out by the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit and funded by Bellway Homes.

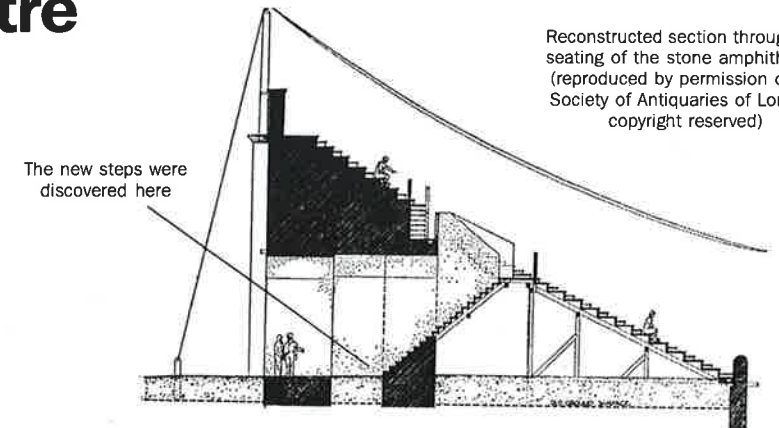
Early building found under the amphitheatre

This year's dig uncovered the foundations of an unsuspected building beneath the east entrance and a third-century reconstruction of the stairs to the seating bank.

SINCE 2000 Chester Archaeology has been investigating several areas within the Roman amphitheatre to enhance our understanding not just of the Roman monument but also the later history of the site.

In the eastern entrance to the amphitheatre we already knew there was a good sequence of Roman deposits, but this year we found a wall running on a different alignment beneath the amphitheatre foundations and so probably belonging to a different building. This is the earliest structure on the site, probably dating from the 70s AD, when the fortress of *Deva* was founded. Most of the wall had been robbed out by the builders of the amphitheatre, who had simply capped its foundations with clay.

Another significant discovery, to the north of the east entrance, was part of a staircase leading up to the seating bank of the amphitheatre. Two steps remained in place. The bottom steps had been removed in the nineteenth century and the side walls that supported them survived until the seventeenth century. However, we have been able to show that they belong to the third-century redesign of the monument. Unlike the earlier steps, these blocked the corridor that encircled the amphitheatre. It was also surprising to find that large parts of the Roman masonry were still standing until the seventeenth century. This may indicate that the medieval occupation of the



Reconstructed section through the seating of the stone amphitheatre (reproduced by permission of the Society of Antiquaries of London; copyright reserved)

site made use of surviving Roman walls, perhaps with little alteration.

Excavation also revealed the trench dug to remove the masonry of the outer wall of the amphitheatre. It cut through (and was therefore later than) the seventeenth-century deposits, which again suggests that parts of the amphitheatre remained visible until well after 1600. No medieval structures were found, reinforcing the idea that the medieval properties that occupied this part of the site consisted of alterations to the substantial Roman ruins rather than being newly built.

This year's excavations have again added more detail to the complex history of the site. It is particularly interesting to discover that the site was not earmarked for the amphitheatre from the outset, but was a later redesign of this part of the civil settlement.

Keith Matthews

Excavations were carried out with the permission of English Heritage and run as a training dig for students from Chester College of Higher Education and the University of Liverpool. Help was also provided by local volunteers.

Amongst the many finds recovered this year was a Roman intaglio or gem. It is cut on a nicolo (an onyx with a blue upper layer on a dark background) and depicts a soldier in profile. He is clad in a helmet, corslet and tunic with one arm extended to a display of captured armour. At the foot of the trophy is a shield. It is not possible to say whether the figure is the god Mars, a hero such as Achilles or a general depiction of a soldier. The style of cutting, material and size of the gem suggests a date at the end of the first or beginning of the second century. The only other gem from Britain cut with the same subject, but with the body to



Roman intaglio (drawn by C Quinn)

the front rather than in profile, and also on a nicolo, is from the fortress of the second legion at Caerleon.

We are grateful to Martin Henig of the Institute of Archaeology, Oxford for identifying the intaglio.

Up the river to Heronbridge

More than forty years since the last excavations at Heronbridge took place, rock-cut graves and evidence for a Roman quay have been uncovered.

THE Fieldwork Group of the Chester Archaeological Society have recently finished their first season of excavation at Heronbridge. The site, beside the River Dee 2 km south of Chester city centre between Handbridge and Eccleston, contains the remains of an extensive Roman roadside settlement, a 'battle cemetery' overlying part of the Roman settlement, a large oval enclosure defended by a rampart and ditch and medieval field systems and enclosures.

Previous investigations established that the Roman settlement dates from c AD 80, soon after the building of the fortress at Chester, and was occupied well into the fourth century. The earliest buildings of timber were replaced by masonry structures when the settlement was replanned c AD 120. Earlier work has been unable to date either the battle cemetery (identified as such because all the skeletons recovered were adult males, some with

sword cuts to the head) or the earth-work enclosure. One of the many theories advanced over the years is that they were both associated with the Battle of Chester fought c AD 616 in which King Aethelfrith of Northumbria defeated the combined forces of Gwynedd and Powys.

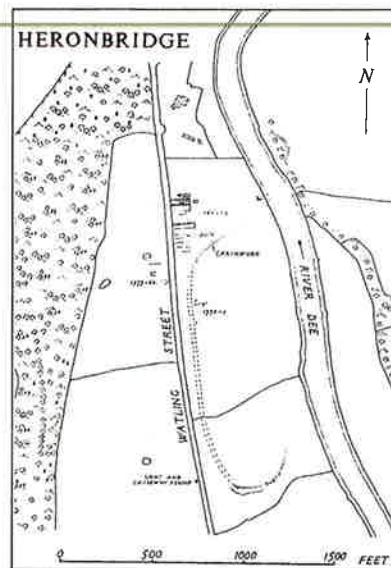
Roman settlement

This year's work concentrated on the area where a natural watercourse, modified in the Roman period, met the ancient river cliff. It was found that the mouth of the watercourse once formed a small inlet which had been used as a quay. The rock face of the river cliff had been straightened to improve access for boats and a gravel ramp led down to the north side of the inlet. Various features cut into the rock are thought to mark the positions of simple cranes or other lifting devices used to offload cargoes from barges or other small craft. It is thought that this work was carried out c AD 130. At a later date three tombs were built nearby, each consisting of a rock-cut grave, robbed out at some later time, with some form of memorial structure above.

Post-Roman enclosure

Two areas were excavated to see if the defences of the post-Roman enclosure continued along the river-bank. No traces were found and it seems that the enclosure was open along its river frontage. Another trench partially sectioned the northern arm of the rampart and ditch system. This produced material which implies that the enclosure was considerably earlier than c AD 1250. D-shaped defensive compounds sited beside rivers are a recognised phenomenon of the Viking era and,

Pieces of a sculptural relief depicting a funerary banquet scene, which would have adorned the tomb superstructure, as found in the backfill of one of the graves. (Photograph: D Mason).



Plan showing the location of previous excavations at Heronbridge and the position of the oval enclosure. (Drawn by F H T Thompson after drawings by W J Williams and B R Hartley).

rather than Anglo-Saxon, the earth-work enclosure may be of this period, perhaps constructed by the band of Norse-Irish settlers led by Ingimund who were allowed to settle near Chester c AD 903 and who later unsuccessfully tried to capture the city.

David Mason
Chester Archaeological Society

The Heronbridge Project is being carried out largely by volunteers acting under professional direction. Volunteers do not need previous experience, just enthusiasm and an eagerness to learn about the past. If you are interested in taking part in next year's season of excavation then register now by contacting Dr David Mason, e-mail: djpmason@dircon.co.uk, tel (01978) 760834

The project is supported financially by the Grosvenor Estate (landowner), the St John's House Trust, Bristol Myers Squibb, Marks & Spencer Financial Services and the Local Heritage Initiative Scheme of the Heritage Lottery Fund operated by the Countryside Commission and the Nationwide Building Society. Chester Archaeology have provided training in archaeological techniques and are currently providing support with the recording of the finds.

Temple inscription found in Roman rubbish?

Recent excavations in Boughton, on the edge of the Roman civilian settlement, have produced a remarkable collection of finds, including an important slate inscription, complete pottery vessels and over fifty coins, thrown into an ancient stream bed.

THE site, formerly the British Telecom exchange building, lies in the eastern suburb of the Roman, medieval and post-medieval town. During the Roman period it would have fronted onto the main road that led out of the east gate of the fortress.

The area beneath the former building was deeply cellared, which meant that archaeological remains associated with the former street

frontage properties have been lost. However, to the rear of the building, important Roman remains were found. The most prominent feature was what appeared to be a natural stream bed that once ran south towards the River Dee. The stream had clearly been adapted in Roman times to form a channel up to 2 m wide lined with timber and stone. Once it had outlived its usefulness the channel was seen by the occupants of Roman Chester as a convenient place to dump rubbish and was filled with great quantities of discarded pottery, building material and animal bone.

A substantial sandstone rubble trackway gave access to the western edge of the channel and various post holes, on both sides of the channel, perhaps represent the remains of a timber bridge. Other Roman features included the remains of a

possible kiln, but its purpose was not obvious.

To the west of the site, close to the present street frontage, the remains of a sturdy sandstone structure, over 2 m high, had been retained within a post-medieval cellar. At first it was thought to represent a surviving part of the Bars – a medieval defensive outwork located at the end of Foregate Street and demolished in the late eighteenth century – but further investigation demonstrated clearly that the feature was post-medieval and probably formed part of a stone staircase.

Vanessa Clarke
Earthworks Archaeology

The excavations were carried out by Earthworks Archaeology and funded by Barratt, Chester.



A remarkable find from the channel on the site at Boughton was part of a Roman inscription on a thin piece of slate.

Part of two rows of letters can be seen. Those on the upper row are S L L M and are neatly cut. There is also a marking out line clearly visible running along the base of the letters. The lower row has P [or B] E T E R and so could be read as PETER, PETRE, BETER or BETRE and are in a different style from the upper row. The form of the letters suggests an early third-century date.

The upper row of letters are almost certainly part of the formula

susceptum solvit laetus merito - 'Gladly and with joy he fulfilled his undertaking to [the god] who well deserved it'.

The obvious inference is that this inscription came from a temple, and that what is being celebrated is the building or the embellishment of the temple by a benefactor. If this is so, we have the first written reference to a Roman temple at Chester. Another possibility is that the inscription adorned a public structure such as a fountain – the 'nymphis et fontibus' (nymphs and springs) altar from Boughton shows how the Romans could attach religious associations to what we would

consider basic utilities.

The inscription appears to have been modified some time after it was finished. S S L L M is a standard formula which would have been the last line of the inscription. The

second line on our fragment was a later addition and not part of the original design. The different style, and particularly size, of the lower letters tends to confirm this. They also seem to be off-centre compared to the upper line.

Unfortunately there is no obvious translation for the letters of the second line. If the suggestion given above is correct, it would most likely refer to a refurbishment of the building some years later, and the words would have included the name or names of those responsible.

Dan Robinson
Keeper of Archaeology, Grosvenor Museum