Aldford’s towers of stone

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

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

The excavations, by Simon Ward of Chester Archaeology and Andrew Lowens 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 archaeo-
logical remains on the moat 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 thir-
teenth century.

Below the trench there was a deep

post of clay, possibly from enlarging the ditch, a deposit of rubbish and a rough wall, perhaps for a timber-framed build-
ing. 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 moat that more masonry features lie buried just below the surface.

Simon 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 vol-
unteer digging team was joined by a group of American student trainees who gained experience in surveying, excavation, and finds work.

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Salt working at Nantwich

A large Roman settlement has recent-
ly been discovered in Nantwich on the west bank of the River Weaver. The site, spanning over more than 1 ha, is being excavated in ad-

ance of a housing development and appears to be industrial in character. It was almost certainly being excavated with salt production, in common with the Roman settlements at the other Cheshire salt towns of Middlewich and Northwich.

The waterlogged deposits in-
clude shallow pits, often lined with wickerwork and containing wooden and leather offcuts. However, the most spectacular features on the site were two large rectangular cisterns or reservoirs, almost certainly for beer. The largest feature, c. 10 m x 4 m and c. 2 m deep, was lined with a thick layer of clay. The inner sur-
face 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 pro-
duced 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 near-
est 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

Excavations were carried out by the University of Manchester Archaeologi-

cal Unit, and funded by Bellway Homes.

The Past Uncovered

Edgar building found under the amphitheatre

This year’s dig uncovered the foundations of an unsuspect-

ed building beneath the east entrance and a third-century recon-
struction of the stairs to the seating bank.

Since 2000 Chester Archaeolo-

gy has been investigating sev-

eral areas within the Roman amphitheatre to enhance our under-
standing not just of the Roman monument but also the later history of the site.

In the eastern entrance to the am-

phitheatre we already knew there was a good sequence of Roman depos-
its, but this year we found a wall running on a different alignment be-
neath the amphitheatre foundations and so probably belonging to a dif-

ferent building. This is the earliest structure on the site, probably dat-
ing 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 outer 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. How-

However, we have been able to show that they belong to the third-century re-
design of the monument. Unlike the earlier steps, these blocked the cor-
tor that encircled the amphitheatre. It was also surprising to find that large parts of the Roman masonry were still standing until the seven-
teenth century. This may indicate that the medieval occupation of the 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 sub-

stantial Roman ruins rather than being newly built.

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 nicola (an oval with a blue upper layer on a dark background) and depicts a soldier in profile. He is clad in a helmet, cor-

et 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, mate-

rial and size of the gem suggests a date at the end of the first or begin-
ning of the second century. The 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 nicola, 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 road 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, and the site was occupied continuously until the later centuries.

Recent excavations have unearthed the remains of a substantial building, possibly a temple or a civic building, with a large central room and a series of smaller rooms around it. The structure was surrounded by a wall, and there were indications of a possible quay or wharf nearby.

The site is important because it provides evidence for the presence of a Roman settlement close to the city, and it may have been a centre for trade and communication.

The excavations were carried out by Earthworks Archaeology and funded by Warrington Council.

Vanessa Clarke
Earthworks Archaeology

The excavations were carried out by Earthworks Archaeology and funded by Warrington Council.

Chester City Council