Staff news

Goodbye to Keith ....

In February, Keith Matthews, formerly Senior Archaeologist with Chester Archaeology, left Chester and moved to North Hertfordshire. Keith worked in Chester for nearly fourteen years so for the last issue of the newsletter we asked Keith to describe some of his many achievements. That was just Part 1 – here we have Part 2.

'The Archaeological Service stopped doing contract fieldwork in the mid 1990s, which came as a bit of a blow: I'm a field archaeologist and didn't relish becoming office-bound. The way ahead for me was through research projects looking at sites not under threat of development. Through this, a fruitful relationship with the University of Liverpool was forged. The first joint project, at Poulton, revealed the foundations and cemetery of a medieval chapel associated with a short-lived monastery.

My efforts were also concentrated on a site in Carden Park where there was documentary evidence for an eighteenth-century hermit. A group of struck flints was also found in the 1980s. Over several seasons, we found not only evidence for the hermit, but also Bronze Age, late Mesolithic and late Upper Palaeolithic occupation.

During the 1990s, the Archaeological Service also developed links with the (then) Chester College of Higher Education, providing teaching for first year history students. In the late 1990s, this developed into a full-blown Honours Degree course in archaeology. I was largely responsible for developing the programme, setting the courses and their detailed syllabus and a significant part of the teaching. Thanks to the success of the course, in 2003, the College fitted out space in the History Department as a dedicated lecture room and offices for archaeology. The College has now appointed a full-time lecturer to develop the course still further, so it is going from strength to strength.

From 2000 onwards, the focus shifted towards the amphitheatre in Chester. What I always tried to do with the project was to emphasise that the site is not a Roman amphitheatre pure and simple. The site is a complex piece of urban archaeology – as complex as anything else in the historic city.

In February 2004 I began work in North Hertfordshire as the Archaeology Officer charged with bringing to publication the excavations on which I worked in the 1980s before coming to Chester so I've come full circle.'

Keith Matthews

.... welcome to Sarah

Keith's lecturing post at Chester College has been filled by Dr Sarah Semple who welcomes this opportunity to introduce herself.

'My passion and enthusiasm for archaeology has led me to pursue the discipline for thirteen years, in a career that has spanned both the academic and commercial worlds. Whilst specialising in the archaeology of early medieval Britain, my research interests cover the long-term use of landscape, the archaeology of Britain from prehistory to the present and also includes a particular enthusiasm for landscape archaeology and history and for interdisciplinary research.

I completed my first degree in 1994 at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, specialising in medieval archaeology. I then worked in contract archaeology for two years, taking part in projects as far afield as East Africa and the West Indies as well as excavating in England with the Oxford Archaeology Unit. In 1996 I returned to full-time education at Oxford University, completing first a master's degree in Historical Research, followed by a doctoral study on how Anglo-Saxon populations used, named and perceived the more ancient monumental remains in the landscape around them. During this time I continued to run excavations and surveys relating to my particular fields of interest.

In 2000 I re-excavated the site of a rich seventh-century female barrow burial on Roundway Down, Wiltshire, and in 2001 initiated investigations at the site of Scutchmer Knob in Berkshire. In 2002 I was awarded a research and teaching fellowship in archaeology at St Cross College, Oxford. This allowed me to pursue my growing research interest in early medieval cult activity – focusing on the evidence for votive deposits of weaponry from English rivers and lakes. The fellowship also allowed me to experience full-time teaching at Oxford University.

My current research can be divided into three areas: the topography of early medieval administration and governance, pre-Christian and Conversion-period cultic landscapes and the recognition and reuse of ancient prehistoric remains by later medieval communities.

I am thrilled to be back in the North-West where I grew up and particularly pleased to have found myself in a vibrant academic department where history and archaeology are combined and where strong links have been forged with Chester Archaeology.'

Sarah Semple
University College Chester

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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The Past Uncovered

FOUR-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGY

October 2004

Gladiators at the amphitheatre

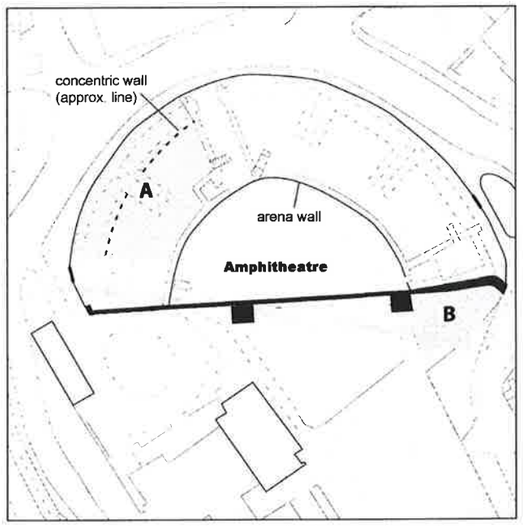
At the end of the first season's excavation, Dan Garner, co-director of the project, sums up the many exciting discoveries made over the past few months

THE Amphitheatre Project was set up to explore the archaeological potential of the site and its immediate environs. This will help us to formulate future strategies and place the monument within its surrounding landscape.

Area A

Located on the north-west side of the amphitheatre, opposite the Newgate, this has been the area where most advances in knowledge have been made. Before excavation began in June we were unsure just how much archaeology would survive, owing to two previous campaigns of archaeological investigations in the 1930s and 1960s and the possibility of cellars associated with buildings still standing on the site until the 1950s.

Fortunately the large 1960s trench occupying the area between the 'concentric wall' and the arena wall had only been partially excavated by F H Thompson. Much of the vital archaeological evidence for ground-level slots for timber beams (interpreted by Thompson as evidence for a timber amphitheatre) had survived for re-examination. Fortunately the cellars associated with properties on the street frontage were located beneath the modern road and little damage had been done to the archaeology within the excavation trench. In fact, other than the previous archaeological investigations, the only real damage inflicted to the amphitheatre during the twentieth century was caused by a network of service trenches to install sewer pipes, manholes and the foundations of a brick garage and car inspection pit.



Plan of the amphitheatre showing the areas of excavation

We soon realised that some time during the later eighteenth or nineteenth centuries a certain amount of ground reduction had taken place, probably in preparation for a programme of new building. This had removed most of the post-Roman stratigraphy from the trench. Consequently, only the deeper features such as cess-pits and wall-robbing trenches remained. Much of this year's work has concentrated on the excavation and recording of these features.

The trenches dug to rob out stone for other buildings removed large sections of the amphitheatre walls, though the lines of the walls can still be identified. Interestingly, all of the major stone robbing appears to predate the appearance of the medieval cess-pits, though the precise date is still unknown. It would certainly appear that there were two phases of stone robbing: the first was aimed at the stone of the 'concentric wall' and minor entrances, carefully leaving the outer wall intact and thus suggesting that the latter still had a function; the second phase of stone robbing concentrated on the outer wall, but interestingly the stone robbers were working from the outside of the amphitheatre and seem to have taken care to leave the inner face of the wall intact, again suggesting that it still acted as a sort of boundary.

Area B

Area B was located in the gardens of Dee House opposite St John's Church. To date, much of our work in this area has been aimed at the excavation and recording of a post-medieval stone building furnished with a full height cellar. This building appears on Hunter's map of 1796 and the backfill of the cellar included pottery of nineteenth-century date. However, the associated stratigraphy suggests that the building is far older than this and its origins may be associated with the monastic enclave known to have existed at St John's prior to the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century.

Chester City Council

Future work

A second season of excavation will be carried out next summer. The sections exposed by digging out the wall-robbing trenches have given us tantalising previews of the complex Roman archaeology still to be excavated in Area A. The over-riding importance of Area B is that unlike Area A the post-Roman stratigraphy is clearly intact and a full archaeological sequence from the first to the twentieth century should ultimately be recovered from our excavations next year.

Artefacts galore

Thousands of artefacts are recovered from an excavation of this size, all needing to be cleaned, sorted, catalogued, packaged and analysed. Thanks to the many volunteers and students who have helped us to do this we can now begin the task of preparing a report.

Those readers who have been following the progress of the excavation through the web site and newsletters will have seen the diverse range of artefacts found throughout the summer, from early Roman pottery, brooches, buckles and musket balls to a worn-out shovel blade left behind by the 1960s excavators!

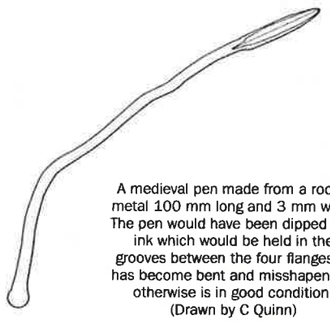
In the early stages of the dig most of the finds were from the topsoil or the backfill of the earlier excavations. However, they are now helping to provide us with some interesting information about the history of the site. A large group of seventeenth and eighteenth-century pottery from Area B appears to be the result of rubbish dumping. Amongst the eighteenth-century pottery are pieces of attractive, good quality tablewares, including fine white stoneware plates and tin-glazed ware painted with Chinese style patterns, possibly made in Liverpool. The quality of the pottery suggests that some of it came from a prosperous household.

Some very interesting medieval finds have also come to light such a copper-alloy pen and a seal matrix.

Amongst the Roman finds is part of a sword handle made from bone, glass vessels, necklace beads and pottery bowls and dishes decorated with lions and gladiators! Some of the early Roman pottery, imported from France, which went out of production at about the time that Chester was founded, is adding to our evidence for Roman activity on the site before the amphitheatre was built.

Dan Garner and Gillian Dunn

This is a partnership project jointly resourced and funded by English Heritage and Chester City Council. You can keep up to date with the amphitheatre project on our website: www.chesteramphitheatre.co.uk.



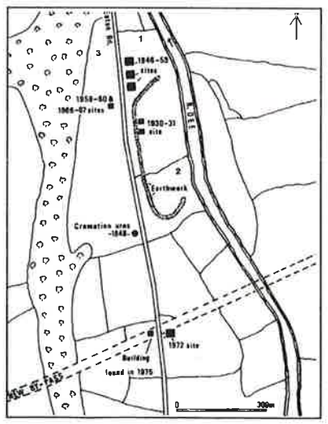
A medieval pen made from a rod of metal 100 mm long and 3 mm wide. The pen would have been dipped into ink which would be held in the grooves between the four flanges. It has become bent and misshapen but otherwise is in good condition. (Drawn by C Quinn)

Heronbridge news

THE third season of the Chester Archaeological Society's excavation at Heronbridge concluded at the end of August. The site, which lies 2 km south of Chester city centre, was first discovered by a member of the Archaeological Society in 1929. Subsequent excavations found an extensive Roman settlement and evidence for early post-Roman activity. Dr David Mason, the project director, has prepared a short update which will be followed by a more detailed report in the February issue of the newsletter.

Roman quay

Previous seasons' work in the area of the site where a natural watercourse, modified in the Roman period, met the ancient river cliff, had revealed graves cut into the rock and fragments of a sculptured stone slab depicting a funerary banquet were recovered. This year the silts in front of the quay were investigated and the level of the original head of the river at this point was established. Two more rock-cut pits along the quayside, thought to have held mooring posts, were also found, giving a total of six. Another fragment of sculptured relief from the funerary monument erected at the edge of the quay in the later Roman period was recovered along with items of free-standing sculpture.



Previous excavations at Heronbridge

Post-Roman earthwork and 'battle cemetery'

A section through the ditch of the earthwork was successfully completed and much organic material recovered, some of which will be sent for Carbon 14 dating.

A small area of the possible battle cemetery overlying part of the Roman settlement was also examined. At least fourteen bodies were observed laid side by side and in overlapping rows. Samples will be subjected to Carbon 14 dating and the date of this mass burial, which the late Graham Webster speculated might be connected with the Battle of Chester fought in *c* AD 613, will finally be settled.

David Mason
Chester Archaeological Society

The project is supported financially by the Grosvenor Estate (landowner), the St John's House Trust, Bristol Myers Squibb, Roman Research Trust and the Local Heritage Initiative Scheme of the Heritage Lottery Fund operated by the Countryside Commission and the Nationwide Building Society.

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An American president in Chester

As the USA gears up for its presidential election this November a piece of pottery has been found in Chester which commemorates a race for the presidency over 160 years ago

A local resident recently brought in a quantity of pottery which he had found in his city-centre garden to Chester Archaeology for identification. Amongst a fascinating array of pottery dating from the sixteenth century was the base of a nineteenth-century bowl or dish. The inside of the base is printed in black with a portrait bust of a smartly dressed gentleman. The portrait is bordered by flags carrying the names 'Tippecanoe' and 'Thames' and below by the motto 'Harrison & Reform'. Research has shown that this was a campaign slogan of William Henry Harrison who successfully ran for election in 1840, as the Whig party candidate against the Democrats. He was inaugurated as the ninth president of the United States in 1841. Unfortunately he became ill soon after and died on 4 April 1841, becoming the first president to die in office. Harrison was a national military hero and the flags on the pot commemorate battles in which he led troops to victory.

The Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811 was against a confederacy of Indians who were attempting to prevent encroachment on to Indian lands. The Battle of the Thames took place on 5 October 1813 during the War of 1812 against the British.

What was this piece of American political propaganda doing in a garden in Chester? The development of transfer printing in the late eighteenth century meant that pottery could be produced as souvenirs of national or international events and political and military figures were often commemorated in this way. There is a record of a Harrison supporter in America giving a banquet for which he bought a full set of dishes with the motto 'Harrison & Reform'. Vast amounts of pottery were exported from Britain to America particularly from the Staffordshire potteries where it was produced especially for the American market. This pot may have been owned by a Whig supporter in Chester or it may have been sold as a second in this country.

The bowl or dish with a portrait of Harrison

Julie Edwards

We are grateful to Mr P Deedy for bringing the pottery to our attention

Book news

Alan Richardson. *The Romans in the Manchester area: how they shaped the landscape.* Privately published, 2004.

Straight sections of road which still use the alignments of their ancient predecessors are a reminder to us of the Romans' achievements in surveying. A related subject, less familiar in this country, is centuriation -- the laying out of regular plots of farmland, especially around colonies of retired soldiers.

Alan Richardson has been looking for evidence both for roads and centuriation in the north-west for over twenty years, and this book brings together the results of his research around his native Manchester. As a retired scientist, not surprisingly there is a large mathematical content to his writing, which archaeologists may feel uncomfortable with, but so there would have been to the work of the original surveyors!

Alan has been ploughing a lonely furrow in the region, and it is too early to be sure how many of his ideas will stand the test of time. However, interest in large-scale Roman surveying in Britain is now growing, and one feels that he has highlighted an aspect of the Roman occupation which has been underestimated in the past.

This book has been privately published by the author as a labour of love, for which he deserves our thanks.

Peter Carrington

Copies are available from: Dr A Richardson, 16 Thorpe Field, Sockbridge, Penrith, Cumbria CA10 2JN; email: alanrichardson@ukonline.co.uk. Price £20 incl p & p.

County news

Revealing Cheshire's Past – the exhibition

Revealing Cheshire's Past is a project working towards improving access to information about the archaeology of Cheshire.

A community exhibition touring libraries and community venues around the county, a series of free archaeology fact sheets and a new website have been produced so far.

In October 2004, the Salt Museum in Northwich will be the venue for the launch of a new exhibition which will explore life in Cheshire since prehistoric times. It will feature archaeological discoveries and amazing artefacts from across the county to show how Cheshire has changed since the Ice Age, and bring the story of Cheshire's past to life.

Chester Archaeology and the Grosvenor Museum were delighted to loan objects from their collections.

A Saxon bone plaque, one of the objects on loan for the *Revealing Cheshire's Past* exhibition. The plaque, which would have been attached to the end of a belt or strap has a 'tree-of-life' motif. It was found at the South West Angle Tower in the 1960s. (Length 56 mm)

The exhibition will show at six museums until January 2006 including the Grosvenor Museum from 3 September – 13 November 2005. The project is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. For further information tel 01244 603997 or www.cheshire.gov.uk/archaeology

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