

# The Chester Antiquary



Newsletter of the Chester Archaeological Society  
2003 Issue 2 (Autumn/Winter)

## Heronbridge Excavations 2003

**T**HIS season's work was again marked by climatic extremes; not monsoon rain on this occasion but temperatures frequently exceeding ninety degrees Fahrenheit. Work was resumed at the Roman quayside discovered last year. The aims here were twofold; to obtain more information about the quay itself and to investigate the silt deposits accumulated in front of it, in the hope of recovering more fragments of the sculptured Roman funerary slab found last year in association with the rock-cut graves. The rock immediately north of the inlet had been cut back to form a straight, almost vertical, face where small boats could tie up at high tide. A rock-cut ledge sloping down to the north was found at the base of the cut. The lowest silt deposits on this produced a collection of late-first to early-second century pottery. At a higher level, forming an horizon which marked the change from fine, light silt to a darker and coarser variety, was a layer containing many fragments of sandstone, some of which did indeed prove to be further pieces of funerary sculpture.

The nature of these fragments shows that the monument (or monuments) which had once covered the rock-cut graves was even more elaborate than envisaged last year. Two pieces come from a panel of relief sculpture of a size suitable for adorning the side of a masonry structure built over the rock-cut grave. The fragmentary slab carved with a funerary banquet scene found last year may have come from one end of the structure. Alternatively, it may have rested flat on the ledge running around the edge of the grave, in effect functioning as the lid of a sarcophagus. The most interesting piece recovered so far, however, is a life-size sculpture of the leg of a piece of furniture – very likely a couch like that depicted on last

Heronbridge 2003  
funerary reliefs  
(Photograph by  
David Mason)



year's slab. The obvious implication is that the funerary monument included a life-size sculpture of the deceased! Needless to say we shall be returning to excavate more of the area in front of the quayside next year in the hope of retrieving additional pieces of this fascinating monument.

The second area of investigation was located close to Eaton Road at the point where a dip in the bank of the post-Roman earthwork fortification suggested the possibility of an entrance. Progress was hindered by the presence of a thick layer of clay, one metre deep in places, which had been used to fill in a collection of trenches and pits in order to level up the area. It

eventually became clear that these features, which had cut into the post-Roman bank, dated from the time of the Civil War and belonged to the extensive system of siegeworks known to have been erected in this area by Parliamentary forces during the siege of Chester of 1644–6. A fortification consisting of a small ditch and/or palisade trench ran parallel with Eaton Road. Within the area explored its line deviated to form a semi-circular projection facing out towards the river while, to the rear, the ground had been lowered to form a sunken, flat-bottomed platform. It seems likely that this was an artillery emplacement positioned to take

*(continued on page 4)*

## The Amphitheatre

**T**HE Amphitheatre and Dee House continue to cause concern and generate discussion. It was decided that members should be given the opportunity to take part in an open discussion on the subject at a meeting which was held on 29 May 2003 with thirty-seven members present and one written contribution.

Mr George Storey outlined the work of the Amphitheatre Steering Committee and summarised the recommendations contained in the various reports on possible development options. He also explained the status of Dee House and that the City Council had been in discussion with English Heritage.

During the discussion which followed, seventeen members spoke, but there was no consensus as to what should be done with the site. There was a clear division between those wishing to retain Dee House and those preferring to demolish it and maximize the potential for controlled excavation of the site. However, there was agreement that whatever plan is adopted for the site that:

- any excavation of the site must be carried out to the highest archaeological standards
- the investigation of the site could, depending on which option is finally chosen, last for many years. Considerable concern was expressed as to the ability of the authorities to maintain their commitment to the project for a long period.
- the cost of a major amphitheatre project must not compromise other archaeological work in the City

**David Roberts**

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## Chester Archaeology

**T**HE past few months have been busy ones for the staff of Chester Archaeology on all fronts.

We have continued to oversee numerous commercial excavations in the city and are happy to report generally good relations with the archaeological contractors involved. A number of these excavations have produced important advances in knowledge; the challenge will be to achieve appropriate final publication rather than just reports as 'grey' literature.

The summer months saw an extended excavation on the amphitheatre site – both in the eastern entrance and, for the first time on a large scale, in the southern part of the arena. The results in the east entrance confirmed the impression of complexity gained in previous seasons, while it appears that the history of the backfilling of the arena was much longer than was argued by Hugh Thompson.

Detailed analysis of the finds from the 25 Bridge Street 2001 excavation is now underway and is scheduled for completion next spring. The recording and interpretation of such a large collection of material poses its own difficulties, but brings its own rewards as well.

Editing of David Mason's report on the Roman fortress baths – dealing not only with Dennis Petch's excavation of 1964 but earlier discoveries as well – is now coming to an end and we shall soon be seeking funding from English Heritage for publication.

Finally, our main public event has been participation in **Roman Weekend** at the Roodee, organised by *Chester Roman Tours*, which attracted over 6,000 visitors.

**Peter Carrington**

## Obituary

### Judge John Desmond Seys-Llewellyn

Judge Seys-Llewellyn died on 4 April 2003 at the age of ninety. Born in Cardiff he moved to Chester in 1947 and lived in Gresford from 1958. He was a past Chairman of the Society and maintained a keen interest in its activities. His life, both professional and personal, encompassed a wide range of interests. At the beginning of his career, while still in the army, he was involved in the Nuremberg War Trials. He practiced as a barrister in Chester before becoming a County Court judge. A keen supporter of the Liberal Party he twice stood as a candidate for Chester. He had a great interest in the Arts and was Vice President of the Llangollen International Eisteddfod. Judge Llewellyn gave a lot to the local area as well as to the Society, and he will be remembered by many people.

The Society wishes to express its sympathy to his family, particularly his sons Richard, Geoffrey and Anthony.

**David Roberts**

### A personal message from the Honorary Secretary

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those Society members who sent expressions of sympathy on the death in early June of my dear wife Anne-Marie.

### Two new editors

Peter Carrington has stepped down after nine years as Honorary Editor of the Society's journal and is succeeded by Dr Georgina Muskett who takes over the reins with volume 78, which is currently in preparation.

This is also the last issue of *The Chester Antiquary* to be edited by David Roberts. He is succeeded as Honorary Newsletter Editor by Dr Ian Archibald.

**Alison Jones**

## Excursions 2003

### Chepstow

12–15 September

**T**HE party set off on the Friday morning under brightening skies, heralding a weekend of very fine weather. Luncheon was taken at Hampton Court, Hope-under-Dinsmore, just south of Leominster. Only recently opened to the public, impressive new gardens have been created in the grounds of this fortified medieval manor-house situated beside the River Lugg. A leisurely drive down the beautiful Wye Valley brought the party to the Beaufort Hotel in the centre of Chepstow. The ancient heart of this small town, dominated by the impressive remains of its medieval castle and town walls, has largely escaped the ravages of urban modernisation and still retains charming narrow streets with shops of individual character. The castle, situated on a high cliff overlooking the Wye, was the first stone-built castle in Wales. Entered by the gateway at the lower end of the town, its long shape, hugging the cliff edge, reveals its successive stages of development. It is a very impressive and much underrated example of Norman and early medieval fortification on the grand scale. Below the castle is the graceful iron bridge over the Wye completed in 1816 by the Scottish engineer John Rennie (1761–1821) who was also responsible for Waterloo Bridge. Some distance downstream, the supports can be seen of Brunel's later tubular suspension bridge to carry the Cardiff to Gloucester railway across the River Wye. Members of the group were able to observe the enormous tidal range of the river and the great speed of the incoming tide.

Saturday was taken up with a guided tour of the town in the morning and of the castle in the afternoon. Our excellent guide for both was local resident and artist Keith Underwood. He also took the party around Tintern Abbey the following morning wearing monk's apparel in his other persona as Brother Thomas. It was a perfect morning for exploring these romantic ruins which have long provided inspiration for

artists and poets including Turner and Wordsworth.

Berkeley Castle was the destination for Sunday afternoon which has been home to the family of that name for twenty-four generations spanning more than 850 years. Originating as a military stronghold it was gradually transformed into a magnificent country home. The barons of the west assembled here before setting off to force King John to sign Magna Carta. Elizabeth I stayed here on a number of occasions and Berkeley is mentioned in Shakespeare's Richard II. The castle has also been the scene of darker moments in history, most notably the murder of Edward II in 1327. The state apartments contain magnificent collections of furniture, rare paintings by English and Dutch masters, as well as tapestries and the world-famous Berkeley silver. The castle is surrounded by splendid terraced Elizabethan gardens featuring a lily pond, bowling green, and sweeping lawns.

The final day was essentially a 'Roman' day with visits to the ruins of the Roman town of Venta Silurum 'market-place of the Silures' (Caerwent) and of the legionary fortress at Caerleon (Isca). Caerwent has the most complete circuit of Roman town walls in Britain. Portions of a number of buildings excavated over the last twenty years are also now displayed.

Like its sister legionary fortress at Chester, Caerleon was founded in the early 70s of the first century AD as part of the redistribution of forces following the final conquest of the Welsh tribes. The siting of both fortresses at the head of a navigable river estuary reflects the importance of waterborne transport in the provision of supplies. It was founded by Legio II Augusta, previously stationed at Gloucester, which as far as is known remained its garrison throughout its entire history as a military base. Less intense occupation in modern times than at Chester has made it possible to place more Roman buildings on display after excavation. As well as the Roman Legionary Museum the party visited the amphitheatre, a cohort group of

barracks, and the main internal baths. Coincidentally the baths here were discovered in the same year as those at Chester but, whereas the latter were completely destroyed, the Caerleon thermae were properly excavated and placed on permanent display under a new covering museum. After a tiring but enjoyable day we arrived back in Chester at 8.00pm.

**David Mason**

### Leeds

17 May

The Leeds area provided some fascinating experiences for the Society members and their friends who ventured over the Pennines on 17 May. Even hardened Lancastrians were heard to admit that it was 'interesting'!

In terms of discovery, the visit to the Moravian Settlement at Fulneck was perhaps the most rewarding part of the day. Founded in Moravia in the eighteenth century, this rather obscure branch of the Christian Church has spread far and wide. We learned a lot about its history and distinctive approach to religion from our two hosts, who are current members of the Settlement. They also showed us around the Settlement's extensive group of eighteenth-century buildings.

The short journey to the edge of the city took us to Kirkstall Abbey, originally built in the twelfth century by Cistercian monks, in what was then isolated woodland in the Ayre valley. Now it is part of urban Leeds, the site bisected by a major road! There was much to see here. Unfortunately, a heavy downpour, coupled with an inability of the management to open up the interior of the Abbey remains, put a bit of a dampener on the visit!

The trip ended with a visit to Oakwell Hall, between Leeds and Huddersfield. This dates from the sixteenth century and was well known to Charlotte Brontë. Both house and gardens contain much of interest, which the group enjoyed to the full. Thanks are due to Prue Wendt for organising a worthwhile day.

**Robin Wendt**



## Kendal and Gawthorpe Hall 5 July

For a 'new kid on the block' the Leeds and Kendal excursions in 2003 have been an absolute revelation. Kendal continued my awakening from Leeds and opened up more areas that I had no previous knowledge of. I was totally unaware of the attraction of the place. Who would have imagined the novelty and beauty of the Quaker Tapestries? All were superb when you consider the numbers and counties involved, but many were outstanding; the colours and the compositions simply sang out with joy.

A brisk walk along the river took in the thirteenth-century church; a few pants up the hill encountered the castle; and a leisurely stroll around the museum and art gallery rounded off a delightful morning. Museums can often present a little stuffily, but this was well laid out. Is it, however, a sign of my passing

youth that I can identify with so many of the bygone exhibits. For example, I am a connoisseur of 'thunder boxes'. We had one on the farm in Devon during the war. It was for use of ladies only – the men were adjured to use the fields with the dock leaves. We still had to empty the d\*\*n bucket though! Come to think of it, we also had one in Kent during the 1950s – we were more egalitarian by then.

The afternoon took in that little gem of a building – Gawthorpe Hall. Somewhat unfortunately we had to compete with the sight, sounds, marquees and hot dogs of a craft fair – but who would gainsay the peasantry their pleasures. Lovely to admire the plaster ceilings and wooden panelling of the interior, and wonder at the skill displayed in the textile collection. However, when I expressed a wish to

live in such a peaceful place, I was gently reminded by a fellow traveller that it needed an army of servants to make it so – and knowing my luck, I would have been downstairs not up.

And so, three 'hurrahs' to Prue. It takes a lot of work to arrange things and we are all extremely grateful for her efforts. What of next year? I can hardly wait. Will she continue the religious theme of Moravian or Quaker? Or will she go 'orthodox' and allow me to 'come out'?

**Allan York**

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### (Heronbridge Excavations 2003 *continued from page 1*)

advantage of the cover, as well as the clear line of fire provided by a natural defile running down to the river. Excavation of the remains of the bank revealed that, in places, it consisted of a core of re-used Roman masonry contained within revetments of clay, front and rear. No evidence of a gateway or other form of entrance has so far come to light and there is no sign of a causeway interrupting the ditch in front of the bank. Direct dating evidence for the post-Roman fort continues to be elusive although a late Anglo-Saxon to early Viking date still seems the most likely. Investigation of both features will continue in 2004.

A trench was excavated within the post-Roman earthwork enclosure at its north end, in the hope of finding contemporary buildings. None were located; the only feature encountered being a small gully of Roman date. Geophysical survey of part of the grounds of Heronbridge House suggest Roman occupation continuing beyond the known northern limit of the settlement.

**David Mason, Project Director**

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## Library

Members are reminded that they are welcome to come in and browse through the Society's library at Chester Community History and Heritage.

## Internet

<http://www.chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk>

The *Chester Antiquary* is published twice a year, in Spring and Autumn. We welcome letters and articles from Members. Contributions for the next issue should be with the newsletter editor, Dr Ian Archibald, no later than 31 April 2004.