

The Chester Antiquary

Newsletter of the Chester Archaeological Society

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Heronbridge 2004

A third season of excavation at Heronbridge was carried out during July and August.

Work was resumed at the site of the Roman quay. Here it was hoped to recover more information about the form of the quay and its facilities and also to retrieve additional pieces of sculpture from the elaborate funerary monument later erected on the rocky promontory immediately north of the quay inlet. With the permission of English Heritage, a little over one metre of deposits in front of the quayside was removed mechanically, with the remainder excavated manually. The vertical rock face found low down last year was confirmed as the original river-cliff and inlet edge. A short distance back from this, and positioned in between and in line with those excavated previously, were two more circular, rock-cut pits. This brings the total found so far to six. Spaced approximately two metres apart and up to two metres deep, these pits probably held mooring-posts. The subsequent dressing-back of the rock face by as much as two metres, which involved the partial destruction of four of these pits, was originally thought to have been part of a reorganisation of the quayside. However, the fact that the alignment of the new rock face was parallel with the long axis of the neighbouring pair of rock-cut graves raises the alternative possibility that this was done to enhance the setting of the funerary monument erected over them – in effect, giving it the appearance from the river of standing on a raised platform.

Excavation of the silt deposits at the foot of the quay successfully located further pieces of sculpture, though not the much-desired inscription giving us the identity of these obviously wealthy citizens. Another portion of the panel of relief sculpture found last year was

recovered and matches up with the two earlier pieces. This formed the upper left-hand corner of the panel and includes not only the head of one of the two female figures depicted (probably representing the deceased lady and her maidservant) but also the end of the pediment-shaped area above, decorated with what appear to be a dolphin and a sea-centaur or Triton. Further clues were found regarding the fully three-dimensional sculpture which once sat above the tomb structure. The item of furniture, represented life-size in stone, of which one leg was recovered last year, turned out to be rather puzzling. A new fragment shows this to have resembled a four-legged, stool-shaped object with a circular, possibly boss-shaped, projection centrally positioned on the underside of the 'seat'. The upper surface of the latter has been finished to give a very smooth surface, still adhering to which is a short strip of lead. The lead is joined to the stone in such a way as to suggest that it was used as a solder to make sure that whatever was placed upon it was firmly attached. Unfortunately, unless research currently underway discovers a parallel for this object, we may never know just what that final element looked like, as we have now exhausted the easily-accessible portion of the deposits in front of the quay.

A new trench was opened at the site of the main 1930/31 excavation. The aim was to locate and, if possible, explore part of the so-called 'battle cemetery' cut into the ruins of the Roman buildings fronting onto Watling Street (Eaton Road). The 1930s excavation was successfully located and, during the course of clearing out part of it, a section of the feature then designated as the 'long wall' (in fact a side-wall of one of the Roman buildings) was re-exposed, along with underlying traces of kilns or



Bodies from the 'Battle Grave' at Heronbridge (Photograph by D Mason)

ovens belonging to the earliest phase/s of the settlement. An unexpected bonus in this trench was the discovery of the central section of an inscribed Roman tombstone, found amongst a spread of rubble thought to derive from the masonry revetment at the front of the rampart of the post-Roman fort. Enough of the upper part survives to show that it was carved with the common 'funerary banquet' scene. The first two lines of text show that it commemorated a lady whose first name was Justa and whose second began Do[. The upper parts of the letters of a third line also survive and expert scrutiny might enable their restoration. While this is the first inscribed tombstone to be found in or near Chester for forty-five years, its discovery is of potentially greater importance. It is now clear that those who built the earthwork fort over the site of the Roman settlement not only recovered what reusable stone they

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could from its ruined buildings but also removed tombstones, and presumably more elaborate sepulchral monuments, from the neighbouring Roman cemeteries. This raises the possibility that the rubble resulting from the gradual decay of the post-Roman rampart, whether spread about the site or lying amongst the fill of its accompanying ditch, might contain a collection of inscriptions and sculptures of a size and richness equal to that recovered from the North wall of the fortress.

Once the edge of the 1930s trench had been defined, excavation of a small area of previously-unexplored deposits commenced. This quickly located more burials and it soon became very obvious that this was indeed a battle cemetery. Part of a mass grave pit was exposed in which the bodies (all seemingly male, like those excavated in the 1930s), aligned west-east, had been laid side by side in rows. The westernmost row was partially overlain by the next row to the east and there were signs of yet a third row beyond that. Within a space measuring only three metres by two metres there were at least fourteen individuals. Two skeletons were fully excavated and removed for analysis and radiocarbon dating. Both had clearly sustained fatal head injuries. The results of subsequent osteoarchaeological study (by Malin Holst of York Osteoarchaeology Ltd) confirmed that they were males and showed that both had died as a result of at least four sword blows to the head. They were both well-built individuals and the elder at least, who was aged around forty, had been in battle before, suggesting that they may have been experienced soldiers.

The excavation of Trench V was continued and extended. Here the aims were to look for evidence of an entrance into the post-Roman fort and to excavate the fills in the accompanying ditch to recover samples for radiocarbon-dating of the twigs/branches mentioned in earlier excavations. These were found in abundance and, rather than mere storm debris, many had been cut through diagonally giving the impression of being off-cuts discarded during activity such as hurdle-making. A report on this and other recovered organic material is currently being prepared by Liz Huckerby of Oxford Archaeology

(North). This has already revealed that the ditch was used for flax-retting (soaking the stems as an early stage in the process of textile production) soon after it had become obsolete. Flax seeds have been selected for Carbon-14 dating, as their short life is likely to give the most accurate results – dating both the fort and the cemetery. No evidence was found to suggest there had been an entrance into the fort and the visible break in the rampart here is now thought to be due to the presence of a natural dip in the ground, enlarged by subsequent land-use.

Carbon - 14 results from Heronbridge

Bone samples taken from two skeletons removed from the mass grave have now produced two date ranges, the first of which gives a ninety-five percent probability of a date of AD 430–640 (with a fifty-nine percent probability of a date of AD 530–620); the second a ninety-five percent probability of a date of AD 530–660 (with a fifty-one percent probability of a date of AD 595–645).

The Battle of Chester, c AD 613, took place right in the middle of these date ranges and, in the absence of any other known substantial engagement in the area, the mass grave is almost certainly associated with that event. The care with which the bodies were laid in the grave suggests they belonged to the victorious army of Aethelfrith of Northumbria rather than the defeated forces of Gwynedd and Powys.

Even more surprising were the results from the ditch fill. The samples tested were flax seeds. The first sample gave a ninety-five percent probability of a date of AD 650–860 (with a thirty-six percent probability of a date of AD 680–730). The second sample gave a ninety-five percent probability of a date of AD 710–980 (with a sixty-eight percent probability of a date of AD 770–890).

These dates relate to the secondary usage of the ditch as an improvised flax-retting tank, after it had become obsolete as a defensive work. As this activity seems to have been underway as early as the middle of the eighth century, or possibly even earlier, it implies that the ditch, and thus the earthwork fort to which it belonged, was built in the

seventh century. There is thus a very strong possibility that it was constructed by Aethelfrith.

The dating of the battle cemetery and earthwork to the seventh century have vastly elevated the importance and status of the Heronbridge complex. If officially recognised as such, Heronbridge could qualify as the earliest positively-identified battle site in England, while Anglo-Saxon fortifications of this period are almost unknown.

David Mason (Project Director)

Notes & News

Excursions 2005

JUST to whet your appetite for next summer, we can announce that there will be two day trips next year. One, on or around 21 May, to the area around Holywell and Basingwerk and the second, on or around 9 July, to Anglesey. Exact dates will be confirmed in the Spring edition of *The Chester Antiquary*, when more details will be provided. We also hope to organise a short trip by car to the Anderton Boat lift near Northwich.

New Books

Two new books of local interest have appeared recently. *Prehistoric Cheshire*, by Victoria and Paul Morgan, provides a comprehensive review of the archaeology of Cheshire from the Mesolithic to the Iron Age. It is published by Landmark and priced at £19.95.

Twentieth Century Handbridge by Len Morgan and Noel St John Williams, is published by the Handbridge Area History Group and is priced at £9.50.

Reviews of both of these volumes will appear in the Spring edition of *The Chester Antiquary*.

Excursions

Somerset 3–7 September 2004

THIS year's major excursion was based in Somerset ('Land of the Summer People'). Sunny conditions prevailed for our departure on the morning of Friday 3 September and we were blessed with excellent weather throughout. After travelling down the Welsh Marches, we stopped for lunch at Monmouth. We then followed a route down the Wye Valley and across the Severn Bridge to our destination at the Wessex Hotel in Street, within sight of Glastonbury Tor.

On Saturday morning, we made our way to the charming village of Dunster, often claimed as the most beautiful on Exmoor, with its main street of fascinating medieval houses. Towering over the village from the summit of a wooded hill is Dunster Castle, home of the Luttrell family for six hundred years before it was given to the National Trust in 1976. The castle's fabric dates back to the thirteenth century but it was extensively re-modelled in the Victorian period. The twenty-eight acres of terraced gardens feature many sub-tropical plants and trees. The latter part of the afternoon was taken up with a visit to nearby Cleve Abbey, where a number of monastic buildings survive intact in a tranquil setting. The return journey to Street was made via the picturesque Exe Valley.

Gant's Mill near Bruton was our first port of call on the Sunday morning. The present mill buildings date from the mid-eighteenth century and stand on the site of an Anglo-Saxon water-mill. The mill takes its name from John le Gaunt who owned a fulling mill here in the late thirteenth century. Restored by the present owners, the Victorian machinery is still in working order and, supplemented by more recent technology, the mill now makes a modest contribution to the national grid via hydro-electricity. The gardens surrounding the mill are a delight, with the numerous dahlias a particular feature. The rest of the day was spent at Montacute House, built in the early seventeenth century on the site of a Cluniac Priory. The house is a rare example of a completely unaltered

exterior of the period, while its extensive gardens feature formal and informal designs bordered by parkland.

A very busy itinerary on the Monday began with a guided tour of Taunton town centre. This was followed by a visit to Hestercombe Gardens, which illustrate over three hundred years of garden design. Restored in recent years, these originated as Georgian pleasure grounds created by Coplestone Warre Bampfylde in the 1750s. The formal gardens were designed by Sir Edward Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll. The next destination was the Willow and Wetlands Centre at Stoke St Gregory in the heart of the Somerset Levels, where we were given a guided tour of a long-established family business specialising in the manufacture of willow products. The day concluded with a brief visit to a cider factory.

The fifth and final day began with a guided tour of Wells Cathedral, renowned for the figural sculpture on its magnificent west front. Later, after exploring Wells' city-centre and museum, our pilgrimage ended with a visit to Glastonbury Abbey.

David Mason

Shropshire 12 June 2004

Our first stop was Whittington Castle, where Chief Archaeologist Peter Brown introduced us to the history and investigation of this 'Marcher' site. The original motte had been levelled to make way for an inner bailey and attendant buildings within an outer bailey. We were invited to compare smaller castles, like Whittington and Clun with the wooden forts built by the US cavalry to subdue the native North American tribes. Such castles were designed as permanent garrisons, staffed by the retainers of local Marcher lords, and backed up by units of up to two hundred light English cavalry, brought in from the main strongholds on the Welsh border.

In the comparatively peaceful fourteenth century, domestic plans superseded military ones. At Whittington, a high mound on the southern edge of the inner bailey, referred to in a document of 1413,

is thought to be a viewing point, overlooking an early formal garden. A recent geophysical survey has provided the outlines of rectilinear features. The Whittington Preservation Trust deserves to be congratulated for developing the site so far, and for its friendly and accessible presentation of the site's history. (A visit to the website at <http://www.whittingtoncastle.co.uk> is recommended).

Our next stop was St Michael's Church, Chirbury. We were met by the Vicar, the Reverend Prebendary Philip Harratt, who gave a brief summary of the history of the church. The history of the church (which may have included a Saxon predecessor), was resumed by Chief Archaeologist, Roger Cooper, who reported the latest findings of an excavation in progress close to the church. Roger is investigating the Augustinian monastery that preceded the parish church. His colleague, Margaret Worthington, is exploring evidence for Saxon or pre-Saxon activity. It is not yet clear which of these research goals will be enriched by the latest findings. On a short tour of the churchyard, Roger pointed out the site of the cloister and fragments of monastic masonry, the probable area of the monks' graveyard and the boundaries of the enclosure.

Midday refreshments were taken in Clun. Picnickers took themselves off to the castle, while the rest chose one or other of the two traditional inns. Afternoon visits were made to the church of St George (by crossing a fine medieval saddle-backed bridge), or to the church on the hill. Clun castle, developed by the Fitzalan family against raiding Welshmen (and sometimes the neighbouring Fitz Warins), is superbly sited to command the countryside and the river crossings. It has a large motte and two baileys. Like Whittington, it was developed as a place of recreation and leisure until it fell into disrepair.

Our final visit was to the stone circle at Mitchell's Fold. Although there is little to see apart from the circle of fifteen surviving stones, the location brought home our ancestors' ability to choose sites, not only for defensive purposes, but also for religious ceremony or social gatherings. John Tindall

Theodor Fontane – a German visitor to Chester in 1857 (part two)

FONTANE was brought up in Berlin and trained as a pharmacist, working in the family business until he was twenty eight. He took advantage of the railways to visit and write about every important city in Europe. He had a remarkable sense of place and researched the literary sources before his trips abroad.

As his train arrives at Chester station, he comments that 'It may be the oldest and most interesting city in England. One is in the habit of comparing Nuremburg with Oxford, but Chester would be a better choice. All are mediaeval cities, but Nuremburg is a City State, while Oxford with its conglomeration of churches, cloisters and palaces, is a national institution. Within modern Chester is a survival of the Mediaeval City State'.

He arrives at one of the finest railway stations in Europe. 'A gigantic building that makes one realise that seven main lines meet here. From here runs the main western line from Chester to Holyhead via Bangor, crossing the Menai Straits over the famous tubular bridge, an iron arm that reaches across the sea to Ireland. The Romans had a city here and in Anglo Saxon times it was a base to make war on the Old Britains in Wales. I do not want to speak of visitors like Richard II or of Henry Percy on the day before the battle of Shrewsbury. Chester's greatest time was during the fight between King and Parliament. I am sure that I do not need to tell my readers where Chester stood in this conflict; a city which had entertained so many kings within her walls has to be loyal from head to toe. The Parliamentary

Army besieged the City for three years and only with the King's sanction did they surrender. With this one action begins and dies the history of this City. Chester's history resembles the history of one of those old aristocratic families where only once in sixteen generations is a great man born. Chester has a picturesque situation on the north shore of the Dee, where it breaks through a sandstone ridge and gives a double security to the southern side of the city. The city stands as it were a cake in an oven tin, the sides of the tin representing the walls. The city's greatest asset, the glorious sandstone walls, have nothing to defend but form a beautiful walkway. Approximately twelve feet wide with, on one side, a half man's height battlement giving the character of a narrow bridge with views to both sides; on the one side the landscape and on the other the city. Nowhere else is there such a colourful changing panorama. We begin our walk at the Watergate'.

He comments on the hills in the distance, the corn fields, the gardens with fruit trees inside the walls and the old alleys. He does not mention the gas works, which at that time were near the Grosvenor Museum, and the workshops, paper factories and small foundries outside the walls near the Castle.

He reaches the Cathedral. 'Almost a thousand years have passed since the first Christians knelt before the cross there. Under the sound of the bells, we continue our hike, until we are stopped by an old wall tower: the Phoenix. At its foot an old woman sits peacefully offering fruit. On the wall above is a notice 'King Charles was at this tower on the twenty-fourth of September 1645 and saw his army destroyed at Rowton Moor'. We pass similar towers and admire the blossom and the river shimmering in the sunlight. We reach the start point and see the famous Chester Race Course – a brown strip on a green background.'

Roy Coppack

Society Information Contacts

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 March 2005.