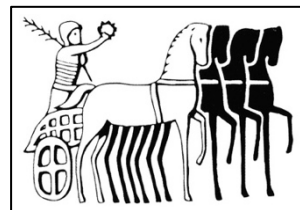


The Friends of the Colchester Archaeological Trust

News

May 2019



Mercury Theatre update by Adam Wightman

Since mid November last year, the Trust has been conducting an excavation in the grounds of the Mercury Theatre in Colchester ahead of the construction of two new extensions (the theatre's 'Mercury Rising' scheme). The theatre was built in 1971-2 and it stands on the site of Insula 25a of the Roman town (an insula is an urban block defined by streets), immediately within the Roman town wall. This insula was known to have contained several Roman town-houses and earlier Roman military buildings below these.

CAT's objective was to uncover the remains of the latest phase of Roman buildings on the site and then help inform the Council's engineers and architects on the best locations for piles. The use of piles will allow the new extensions to be constructed above the Roman remains, minimising the damage to these important archaeological deposits.

For the most part, we uncovered the plain tessellated floors and wall foundations (or robbed-out foundations) of the latest phase of Roman town-houses on the site. These probably date to the 2nd or 3rd centuries. We have been able to plan the layout of the rooms as well as uncover evidence for the presence of 'central heating' in the buildings. During the excavations we have recovered lots of interesting pieces of the buildings themselves, including fragments of beautifully painted wall plaster, as well as a significant number of small finds and many crates of pottery!

Once the visually impressive Roman building remains had been fully recorded, they were covered over again so that they could be preserved indefinitely under the new building. However, before they were covered the locations of the new piles and two new lift shafts were further investigated down to the natural sand so that we could record what would be damaged. During the excavation of the lift-pit for the southern extension, we were very excited to find part of a barrack block wall built by the Roman army around the mid AD40s.

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Roman Circus Centre

The centre is open from Tuesdays to Saturdays, 11.00am to 4.00pm plus Bank Holiday Mondays, until Saturday 28th September 2019. The tearoom is open at the same times serving teas, Italian coffees and hot chocolates along with sandwiches and cakes. Eat in or take out into the sunlit garden next to the circus remains. A small gift shop will be opening too!

Bookings for school visits and other group tours are welcome including during closed season and the Centre is available for hire by corporate organisations and societies. Call 01206 501785 for details.

If you haven't visited the Centre recently please pop in to see the latest displays: **Circuses of the Roman Empire** - compare Colchester's circus with others from around the empire; see a permanent exhibition of some of the best of **Peter Frost's Paintings** and on the outside of the building see a display of how the Roman Circus might look if planning developments allow it. Work is under way to renovate the centre's rather fragile reconstructed chariot and also to develop the large model of Roman Colchester.

Martin Newell at Roman Circus Centre

Listen to popular local singer/songwriter and author Martin Newell in a one-man show in aid of the Roman Circus Centre. This will be a fantastic afternoon of poems, songs and stories. Martin's performance is at Roman Circus Centre at 2pm on **Sunday 2nd June**. Tickets are £10 and are available from Colchester Arts Centre at colchesterartscentre.com - **01206-500900**. There will be tea and cakes for sale or bring your own wine.

Postponed

In the March edition of **NEWS** we told you about a **Chariot Day** event that the Trust were planning to hold on Abbey Fields in August. Unfortunately this event has had to be postponed until next year because of delays and difficulties in acquiring access to Abbey Fields. We apologise to everyone for this.

Free WiFi at Roman Circus House
Password: circuscafe

Can you help? The Friends are looking for someone with **web and social media skills** to look after our web pages and to create a new facebook page. If you think that you might be interested please email Mark Davies at gmarkrdavies@btinternet.com

We are also looking for one or two volunteers to help in **organising Friends coach trips**. This involves planning including a recce, booking coaches and making sure that we don't lose any members during the trip. If you think you might be able to help please call Brenda on 01206 - 825655 for a chat.

Aquila at Roman Circus Centre

The game Aquila is an interpretation of a 2,000-year-old game board and pieces discovered in Stanway by the Trust in 1996. Alex Jones created this simple-to-learn and addictive strategy game based on a Roman board-game *ludus latrunculorum*. Aquila is a game for two players aged 10 years and over. There is now a gameboard with instructions permanently set up at the Centre - so you can drop in at any time to play.

Roman Circus Guided tours are held every Saturday at 12 noon and 1pm. Explore Roman Colchester Tickets (Adults £4.50, under 16s £2, under 5s free) from the cafe.

Dates for your Diary

Mercury Theatre site visits After protracted negotiations with the builders it has been possible to overcome safety concerns to arrange for limited visits to the site to view the final phase of excavations.

The visits will be as follows:

Thursday 30th May	10am to 3pm
Friday 31st May	10am to 3pm
Saturday 8th June	10am to 3pm

Because of the very limited space which has been made available it is important that Friends try to visit, where possible, at what are likely to be the quietest times - **between 10am and 11am & between 2 pm and 3pm**.

We would be very grateful if any of you would be willing to be a volunteer guide to explain to visitors what there is to see at the site. If you think you can help please contact Philip at CAT on **01206-501785**.

During **National Archaeology Week** the Trust will be holding a special event at the Circus Centre for Friends. The event, which will take place on **Saturday 20th July** (10am - 12:30) will focus on the four most interesting sites in recent times: the Mercury Theatre, the Fenwick Treasure, Colchester Institute and the Roman circus. There will be finds for people to look at and short talks on each of the sites. The finds from the Institute are particularly interesting and include an early Roman wooden paddle.

Fordham Roman Villa Last month 30 members attended an interesting Friends talk by John Mallinson of Colchester Archaeological Group (CAG) about the Roman Villa at Fordham which the group have been excavating since 2016. The site was originally located by aerial photography and confirmed by a magnetometry survey done by David and Aline Black. CAG initially uncovered a bathhouse but over the years have exposed what has turned out to be a small villa. They have also found over 100 coins dating from the beginning of the Roman Occupation and two from the Anglo Saxon period.

Following the talk, CAG have invited us to the Fordham Excavation during their Open Day on **Tuesday 23rd July**. We have been asked to make our visit at 2pm. Unfortunately the site is not accessible by coach so members will need to use their own transport to get there. If this is not possible we might be able to provide a minibus at a small cost - Brenda can be contacted at **01206 825655** or by email at mail@bayam.plus.com.

Note: Friends who are also members of CAG can visit the site on the same day at 6:30pm in the evening.

Directions to site From Colchester take the A1124 (Halstead Road). Just before an Esso Petrol station on the left and the Bungalow Stores on corner, turn right into Wood Lane (signposted **Fordham 2m**). Follow the road for 1.3 miles. As you approach Fordham up a hill you will see a School Sign on the left. The track to the site is opposite this sign. The site is in Mill Road and the post code is **CO6 3NN**.

Mercury Theatre Update

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Having located one wall, we were then able to measure off of it and uncover two further barrack block walls to the north!

This was possible due to the fact the Roman army planned and laid out its bases in standardised patterns defined in terms of Roman feet. We are not quite finished excavating at the Mercury, with further excavations pencilled in to take place in the area of the former restaurant on the eastern side of the theatre sometime in the next few weeks. They'll be modest in scale, but we hope there will be the opportunity for more open days with access to the site perimeter to watch us work.

**... these open days have now been arranged
please see the details on page 2.**



Robin uncovering a section of one of the Roman barrack block walls

Fossilised whale bones at Dovercourt by Adam Wightman

A large trial-trenching evaluation at a proposed development site on the southwestern edge of Dovercourt was undertaken by CAT in March and April this year. The site was located on a sloping agricultural field overlooking the North Sea, where a number of cropmark features had been identified from aerial photographs. The site was also close to a number of important prehistoric sites, most notably a quarry pit at Gants farm where 208 handaxes and contemporary animal bones were recovered from an ancient river channel.

Although a small number of pits and ditches of Roman and medieval date were recorded, the majority of the cropmark features turned out to be post-medieval or modern in date. However, an exploration of the sands and gravels that underlay the site by the geoarchaeologist Peter Allen and CAT archaeologist Adam Wightman, turned out to be slightly more interesting (at least for those who are interested by Geology!).

The Dovercourt site lies on the south-east side of the Little Oakley Ridge. The ridge comprises a core of London Clay (deposited 56-49 million years ago), overlain by Red Crag (deposited 2.9-2.6 mya) and sands and gravels deposited by a large river c 550,000 years ago. This river was the Thames, which once flowed out into the area occupied by the North Sea before it was diverted into its present channel by the Anglian ice sheet c 450,000 years ago. Two smaller river channels which fed into the pre-diversion Thames have been identified in the Dovercourt area. One of the channels contained the fantastic handaxe and animal bone assemblage found at Gants farm. Peter and Adam excavated a series of deep test-pits at the site to see if either of these channels flowed through the proposed development area and to assess the likelihood of Palaeolithic artefacts being found at the site.



Fossilised whale bone from Red Crag

As with the cropmarks, just because maps and plans suggest that you might find something interesting on a site it doesn't mean that you do. In fact, the six previous geoarchaeological jobs CAT has undertaken with Peter have yielded nothing of significance, including a site which was supposed to be in the centre of an internationally important ancient river channel at Jaywick! So it was with little optimism that Adam and Peter began to excavate the test-pits and, after hand-sieving 300 litres of sand and gravel from the first test-pit, it looked like they would miss out once again. Although the sand and gravel undoubtedly belonged to the pre-diversion Thames, it was clear that it had been laid down during a cold stage when ancient humans would not have occupied this part of the continent. Expecting that the next test-pit which lay 40m to the south would contain the same deposits, they packed away their sieves and set about excavating. Lo and behold completely different sediments! Nicely bedded layers of sand and silty-clays deposited by warmer, slower-moving water were identified a metre below ground level. Had they found one of the river channels? It is likely that the post-excavation research that is currently underway will conclude that the deposits found in four of the test-pits excavated at the site belong to one of these channels, or possibly even an additional channel which has not previously been identified.

No Palaeolithic artefacts or bones were found in the sediments in the test-pits. However, their presence suggests that there is potential for artefact bearing deposits to survive on the site.

Although the ancient river deposits failed to produce any artefacts or bones, the much older Red Crag deposits which were stratified beneath contained a plethora of fossil shells and, more excitingly, fossilised whale ribs! Although not technically archaeology (there is no human activity in this part of the world for another 1.9 - 2.2 million years after the deposition of the whale bone!) archaeologists are often interested in animal bones and fossilised whale bones are not something that you get to find very regularly!

Forthcoming Friends Coach Trip - Saturday 5th October

We are hoping to organise a coach trip to Kent in the Autumn. We plan to visit Scadbury Manor, a medieval moated manor house site in Chislehurst, which currently being excavated by the Orpington and District Archaeological Society. The trip will also include a visit to the nearby Chislehurst Caves. Further information will be sent out as it becomes available.

Help needed

Café volunteers are needed to help on Saturdays during the Summer season. Could you help out for a few hours at the Roman Circus Centre Café? If you would like to volunteer please contact Samantha on 01206 501785 Option 6, or email sr@catuk.org.

Colchester Roman Circus App

Explore Roman Colchester with a free app for Android phones and tablets (requires Android 4.1 or above) and become a charioteer in our Roman Circus racing game!

Features:

- Take the reins of your own chariot and smash your opponents to bits!
- Discover three unique audio stories, including a lowly stable boy and an illustrious noble woman!
- Beautiful watercolour and vector artworks of Roman and modern Colchester.
- Featuring Artwork and Sound design created by young people from across Colchester!

Download the Colchester Roman Circus app from Google Play now and discover the history under your feet.