

*The Slaughter of the British; Excavations at Heronbridge* was the intriguing title of the last talk of the season to the Appleby Archaeology Group. Dr David Mason, the county archaeologist for County Durham spoke about the excavations at Heronbridge near Chester. This had brought to light strong evidence of the Battle of Chester circa 616AD. A battle which influenced the history of the British in the North West.

Heronbridge stands on the west bank of the River Dee two kilometres south of Chester city centre along side what in Roman times was Watling Street. It is free of modern settlement and the small area that has been explored has been found to be rich in archaeological material from the time of Romans to the English Civil War. Excavations following the Second World War identified an extensive civil Roman settlement along Watling Street. This ribbon development had a planned layout and there was evidence of industrial working.

Before this in 1929 remains of Roman buildings had been discovered and over the next year or two excavations took place. Attention was focused on the Roman remains but there was a surprise when a number of later burials were discovered. The bodies, some interred singly and some in a mass grave, had been buried in the ruins of the Roman buildings. Subsequent analysis showed that the remains were of men aged between 20 and 40 years who had been killed in a battle or a massacre. There were no grave goods and no dates could be placed on the burial at the time they were found.

Seventy years later the mystery of the burials remained but the bodies had vanished possibly because they had been re-interred or destroyed by bombing during the war. In 2001 a new Heronbridge Project was set up to revisit the site of 1930's excavations and to investigate the most obvious feature of the site, an earthwork which encloses a crescent-shaped area of fourteen acres, lying between the Roman road and the river.

Over the next four summers groups of volunteers led by Dr Mason dug a number of trenches to examine the earthwork. These excavations revealed remains of Roman buildings below the mound and a deep ditch and defensive rampart which surrounded part of the mound but had never extended along the riverside edge. The rampart had been supported by stones robbed from the ruins of the Roman buildings and tombstones taken from the cemeteries along Watling Street.

There was no evidence of modification or repair to the defences or of buildings within it which suggested that it had only been in use for a short time. Flax seeds found in the ditch were carbon dated to a range of dates from the late seventh century to the early ninth. The soil containing the seeds, now lying in the ditch, appeared to have post dated the cutting of the ditch by a considerable period of time. It is now thought likely that the ditch and ramparts were constructed before the mid eighth century. Documentary evidence, for example from Bede, suggests that the only event that would have necessitated such a defence was the Battle of Chester.

An outcrop of rocks which can be seen on the west bank of the river, when the water is low, led to the discovery of an ancient riverbed, an inlet quay with a track way leading from it. Two graves, robbed in antiquity were found on the rocky promontory. Several elaborately carved stone sculptures were removed from the silt and from these the archaeologists came to the conclusion that there had been an impressive monument on the outcrop marking the burial of two adults and a child.

Excavations near the 1930's site located more burials when part of a mass grave pit was exposed and was clear that this had been a battle cemetery. The bodies had been laid side by side, in rows which partially overlapped, and most had sustained head injuries,. Two skeletons were removed for analysis and radiocarbon dating. Both belonged to well built men, the elder aged about 40 and the younger about 20. Both had sustained fatal head injuries and other sword inflicted wounds which suggested that they had been in the thick of the fighting. Signs of previous injuries made it likely that they were experienced soldiers. Radio-carbon dating indicated that the men in the mass grave were the casualties of the Battle of Chester, and because the bodies were in a fully articulated state, it is likely that they had been buried near the site of the battle.

At this time Britain was made up of small kingdoms competing for power. It is known that King Aethelfrith of Northumbria had swept south and west from his capital in Bamburgh to confront the Britons and that he had met a hastily gathered force of West Britons near Chester. There had been a great slaughter in the battle that took place and the Britons were defeated.

The great care with which the bodies had been placed in the grave suggested that they belonged to the victorious army of Aethelfrith rather than the defeated forces. Recent radio-isotope analysis of the enamel of the teeth of the skeletons has confirmed that those buried were indeed warriors from Northumbria. There is also a strong possibility that the earthwork defence was constructed by the Northumbrian forces following Aethelfrith's victory. However it was short

lived as he was later defeated near Bawtry by a combination of the main British force from the west and of King Raedwald's army from East Anglia.

Dr Mason concluded by saying that the dating of both the battle cemetery and the earthwork to the seventh century have greatly elevated the importance and status of the Heronbridge complex. If it is officially recognised, Heronbridge could qualify as the earliest identified battle site in England.

A number of questions were taken before Dr Mason was thanked for his very interesting and informative talk.

Phyllis Rouston 25/4/07