

Excavation of the Roman Cemetery on Botchergate, Carlisle

8th December 2016

Dr Richard Newman

The Appleby Archaeology Group welcomed Dr Richard Newman from Wardell-Armstrong Archaeology to their December meeting. Richard is a Senior Project Manager at the company and is currently responsible for the post excavation work carried out by the company on the 2015 excavations in the William Street car park at the rear of the site of the new Cumbria County Council offices in Carlisle. The excavation had been funded by the County Council prior to the commencement of building work.

Richard began by giving a brief overview of Carlisle as a very early Roman military site and then as a fully fledged Roman town. The first fort in Carlisle had been on the site now occupied by the castle and on the Stanegate, the road connecting some of the earliest forts between the Tyne & Solway. This fort was built in the first century & its southernmost extent was defined during excavations some years ago in Annetwell Street. The Roman town grew up around this fort in the later first century and the early part of the second century. By the end of the second century, there was a considerable town south of the fort and this was later walled, although, it should be noted, probably not on the same layout as the later medieval walls.

Botchergate was outside the walls at this time and indeed was probably under agricultural use until as late as 1810, when the Citadel was reconstructed to include a wide entrance to the city – until then, the English Gate had been a smaller opening to the southwestern side of the old Citadel. The area became a suburb of the city & was built upon by the Victorians, fortunately for the archaeologists these buildings did not contain any cellars.

Roman burial practice was to locate their cemeteries outside the walls of their towns alongside major roads and burials had been found in previous excavations to both north and south of the development site. Cremations were carried out in the cemetery and were often associated with feasting – burnt animal bone is often found with cremations. The remains were placed into urns, often of the type commonly used in the home, before burial.

Richard explained that excavation of the site had revealed a number of phases of use. The earliest phase had been a ditch, probably of late first century date. The ditch was not aligned with any later features, so its use is unknown. The second phase was a formalised cemetery of the late first & very early second century. Cremations of at least 46 individuals were found at this level, many with grave goods consisting of pottery which had clearly been made especially for burial. The cemetery had been laid out in plots and analysis of the remains show that these were civilians rather than military personnel.

The burial urns had been removed from the site and taken to Wardell-Armstrong's facilities near Carlisle for detailed examination. This had revealed that the burials were mainly of adults, although one young child and one baby had been discovered. Some token internments were found, these were not of bodies but of some reminder or token of someone who had died and been buried elsewhere. Animal bone was present in almost all cremations, mainly of pig and sheep.

By the mid second century, the cemetery had been abandoned and a clay surface had been laid down. This might well have been for industrial use and could have been of either Roman or British origin. Two circular buildings were later constructed on this surface. Soon after, in the mid second century, there were strip buildings, properties and back lots, typical of the vicus which inevitably grew up outside a Roman fort. By the early third century, the site had been abandoned once more and there were no more signs of settlement until the twelfth or thirteenth century.

Richard concluded by showing slides of the pottery goods - cremation urns, oil lamps etc. which had been found during the excavation and which is Roman pottery of the best state of preservation ever found in the North of England. This is primarily because of the relatively undeveloped nature of the site. Some of the pottery is on display in the foyer of the new Council building and the remainder will eventually be curated by Tullie House, once the post excavation work has been completed.

After answering a number of questions from members, Richard was warmly thanked for his interesting talk.