

Turnershall Farm – The Roman story just gets better and better

In 2002 metal detectorists discovered two of the most important burials from Roman Britain. Objects were taken to Verulamium Museum for assessment as there were two silver brooches with the burials. Very quickly a rescue excavation was undertaken. This resulted in the uncovering of a landscape dating from the Late Iron Age to the Roman period. After subsequent geophysical surveys, excavations were undertaken to confirm the wider context. The story of these Romanised individuals from the second century AD has been pieced together with the help of specialists in a variety of fields. It tells us of life and death in a far-flung Roman province that had contacts with the whole of the Empire. It is a story that begins in the Late Iron Age with a Royal site where minting and other metalworking took place. This site and possibly the family that ran it, became part of the new expanding Roman Empire with all the luxuries and benefits that this brought. They built themselves a villa, the most important building on an estate of many buildings which also included a bathhouse and imported luxurious objects from all over the known world. They probably had a house, and helped organize the local politics, in the Municipium of Verulamium. Then, after they died, were interred near to where they had lived, their house was deliberately demolished, but they were sent into the afterlife surrounded by the luxuries they had always enjoyed.

This has to be set in the context of the Oppidum (or Iron Age town) at Wheathampstead, an area enclosed between the Devil's Dyke on the west side and The Slad and The Moat on the east and south sides respectively. The importance of this site lies in its character and symbolism. Such a large construction is suggestive of the power that the Kings of the local tribe, the Catuvellauni, were able to call upon. Such formidable defences would have taken a large workforce time to excavate: time that could have been spent employed elsewhere. This would have been significant in the landscape, both physically and emotionally. As a physical site it would have dominated access along the River Valley. It would also have had an emotional presence, as its sheer size emphasized the importance of the builder and the potential power they could wield.

Simon West is the field archaeologist in charge of the Turnershall farm excavations and he speculates that this wealthy ruling class, loyal to the Roman Empire, were left to run their territory and able to keep many of their rituals and customs. Very interestingly this is a one phase development from the late Iron Age to the Mid Roman period, sometime after 150AD the villa is carefully demolished and everything is moved from the site – why? Where did they go? Did this happen at the same time as the burials? Examples of how this site continues to throw up as many questions as answers!

It leads to the supposition that previous research into Verulamium has wrongly assumed the power of the territorium did not spread so far northwards. In the last few years two villa sites have been discovered to the north: Turnershall farm and Amwell. This suggests that the power of Verulamium was greater than first thought and also challenges the idea that Verulamium was a typical Roman city. Instead we have a client kingdom, trusted by the Roman empire, with a ruling class living in luxury homes outside the town and coming into the city to discharge their civic duties and attend to their business interests. In most Roman cities the rulers would have a townhouse and used surrounding villas as a 'country retreat'.

The roman site in Wheathampstead came to national prominence with the BBC series 'Hidden Treasures', first broadcast in 2003 and subsequently repeated on cable channels. Interestingly of the six finds covered, this is the only one that did not get taken into the British Museum, an indication of the professional strength, reputation and local support of the district's museum service. Publication of the research findings in the British journal of archaeology early next year will increase national interest in it still further.

There is a strong desire to organise a 2005 summer excavation, with the support of Mr Titmus. However, funding remains a problem. In 2003 financial support came from Wheathampstead businesses and local individuals and in 2004 money was raised by the Verulamium Museum Trust. In 2005 the museum will be approaching other grant making organisations and are investigating the possibility of opening, what is one of the few research digs in the country, to archaeology students as part of essential practical work needed for their degree. The museum service is hopeful that a 2005 excavation can take place and has been especially heartened by the enthusiastic feedback from the thousands of local people who came to visit the site during the open weekends. And there are certainly many intriguing questions that Simon and his team would like to find answers to.