Silchester Insula IX

The ‘Town Life’ Project 2006–2009

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We have now completed 12 seasons of excavations of Insula IX, the city block which lies immediately to the north-west of the forum basilica. We have continued to excavate downwards over 3000 square metres in the same, north-east part of the insula and, three years after our last interim report on our progress (up to the end of the 2005 season), there is a very great deal to write about. We have almost finished excavating the archaeology which has revealed the occupation of the insula in the late 1st/early 2nd century AD and, in the northern and western parts of the trench, we have started to make important discoveries about the earlier, 1st century AD occupation.

New Discoveries

The early street grid – Period 1
We have traced the history of ‘House 1’, the building on the north-east/south-west orientation, which the Victorian excavators first recorded in 1893, back through time to the late 1st century AD. The 2008 season also gave us, for the first time, the first traces of an associated network of streets and lanes both on the same orientation as the house and at right angles to it. This street grid may be Iron Age in origin.

The burning of Calleva – Period 1
More and more evidence has emerged in the last three years to suggest that our area of the town was destroyed by fire in the third quarter of the 1st century AD. It is only after the fire that the Roman street grid, this time laid out on the cardinal points – north-south/east-west, was established and the insula created. Indeed it is this destruction which may have prompted the setting out of the new street grid. The fire was not just confined to Insula IX as we also have evidence from the 1980s excavation of the basilica of major burning around this time.

The renaissance of Calleva – Period 2
The last five seasons have revealed the first traces that we have of the character of the rebuilt town of the late 1st century AD: for the most part of timber-framed buildings, comprising residential town houses and houses-cum-workshops, but still keeping to the old north-east/south-west orientation, almost diagonal to the new Roman street grid.
The Field School

Since 2005 the popularity of the Field School has gradually increased, peaking in 2006 with over 300 participants attending throughout the six-week season. The Field School has now been running for twelve years, and it is one of the few long-term Field Schools in the UK which offers hands-on training in complex archaeology, to the benefit of our undergraduates at the University of Reading, but also to sixth-formers, undergraduates from other institutions home and abroad, and to a large number of volunteers and other participants of all ages from the local counties. It is now one of the largest such training schools in the UK, and probably in Europe.

Teaching and learning

Students acquire a basic knowledge of archaeological field techniques and site recording methods during their time at the Field School. A teaching and learning environment is created which combines short talks or lectures with regular hands-on experience encouraging students to work in small groups to solve problems and assess challenges. The aim is to encourage the development of students’ excavation and transferable skills and thus provide vocational training for professional careers in field archaeology.

Open Days

The excavation is open to the public everyday throughout the field season and organises two special Open Days for visitors each summer. The excavation receives between 5,000 and 6,000 visitors per season.

Digital Technology

The Virtual Environments for Research in Archaeology (VERA) Project

A grant from the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) has allowed the team at Silchester to develop further its virtual research environment as a model for the wider archaeological community. New techniques are being pioneered for the recovery of information from the excavation records, for example through the use of digital pens and clipboards. The VERA project has showcased and speeded up the opportunities for electronic publication of the excavation material, and the project website has developed in tandem (www.silchester.reading.ac.uk).

As with most modern excavations, Silchester already uses an Integrated Archaeological Database (IADB), facilitated by an earlier JISC grant. This database can store not just the descriptions of the archaeological layers, but also visual images and two-dimensional plans. The IADB has greatly reduced the amount of post-exavcation digitisation, and has allowed the whole team to work collaboratively in real time to get results into the public domain much faster than before.
The late Iron Age: first glimpses

2008 was the first season we were able to clearly see Iron Age features emerging from beneath the Period 1 deposits. Most significant are two early streets which represent our discovery of the first elements of the pre- and early Roman street grid and the buildings associated with it. These streets are extremely important – and evocative – as the beginnings of town planning at Calleva. We believe that they reflect the Iron Age town plan which was adhered to even after the Roman arrival in the mid 1st century AD.

The street-grid

Careful cleaning of the layers beneath the remains of the late 1st century circular building (see below, Period 2) revealed cobbled, about 4m wide, extending as a street or lane north-west/south-east. Associated ditches and pits are beginning to be revealed.

At right angles to this street or lane, more or less at the edge of the trench, a second, slightly narrower track, 3-4m in width, heads, with a sinuous curve, in a north-easterly direction towards the northern edge of the excavation trench, where it is truncated by the side-ditch of the later, Roman, east-west street. Either side of this lane, traces of side ditches are emerging, that on the north side with a break, suggestive of an entrance into a property in the north-west corner of the excavated area.

As the excavation progresses on the eastern and south-eastern side, we may expect to discover more elements of this pre-Roman grid, defining further property sub-divisions of the settlement.
Iron Age well 8328

Since the very first season in 1997, a large depression in the street surface made us aware of the strong probability that a large pit or well underlay the east-west Roman street in the north-west corner of our trench. With the likelihood that this feature would contain material which would help us date the laying down of Calleva’s distinctive Roman street grid, we prioritised the excavation of the street and the underlying archaeology.

In 2008 we completed this objective revealing a well which cut down through the gravels into the underlying clay to a depth of c.3.7m from the Roman ground surface. Deliberately placed as offerings right at the bottom of the well we found a group of four whole and two fragmented Iron Age pots; bowls, jars and a large beaker. Some of them had holes deliberately drilled through the vessel walls, perhaps to ensure that they did not float to the surface, but at the same time rendering them useless for further use. Adhering to the outside of one jar was a waterlogged maple leaf.

It is difficult to date these pots closely, but they probably belong within the first quarter of the 1st century AD. Not far above this deposit, and still in waterlogged levels, were the remains of a complete cattle skull, also probably deliberately deposited, and in skeletal form, early in the life of the well. Preliminary research on the waterlogged plant remains by Professor Mark Robinson, University of Oxford, has revealed evidence of cereals and flax. How long the well remained in use is not clear but there was evidence of rapid filling with rubbish, including pottery, such as Alice Holt grey wares, which belong to the mid-late 1st century AD, c.50-75. This suggests the well continued in use for some time after c. AD 50.
During the 2008 season, we began to uncover traces of buildings that date from around the time of the Roman conquest of Southern Britain. Evidence for occupation during this period also survives from a number of pits and wells and, even more intriguing, there is evidence for a distinct burning episode which may have been the catalyst for a re-planning of the insula in the latter years of the 1st century AD.

Claudio-Neronian buildings c.AD40-50 – c.AD 70-80

The remains of several buildings of this date have been found, all on the same alignment as the late Iron Age street grid. These buildings are associated with a number of rubbish pits and wells.

Building A – This was a rectangular building, aligned north-west/south-east, whose beam-slot foundations sealed the fill of well 8328. This building appears to have been destroyed by fire as it was covered by a layer of burnt debris which was in turn covered by the later east-west street.

Building B – Located further south is the remains of a similar rectangular building, slightly later in date, and oriented north-east/south-west. It is positioned close to the intersection of the two Iron Age streets and apparently encroaching on them.

Building C – This is a rectangular building located in the southern half of the trench. It is currently under excavation but appears, like Building A, to have beam-slot foundations and gravel floors.

Building D – One of our best preserved early buildings located to the east of the western Iron Age street is a roundhouse. The footprint of this building was defined by its yellow, clay floor, c.7m in diameter,
with traces of a central hearth. No traces of any post supports have yet been identified. Like Building A, this house also appears to have been destroyed by fire. There were abundant remains of broken pottery on its floor, as well as a residual, Iron Age silver minim of Eppillus and the larger part of a Lodsworth, greensand quernstone. This round house was associated with a number of pits and wells, the location of which suggests that there may be another building of a similar date in this area, yet to be uncovered.

**Evidence of fire**

In the north-west corner of the site, overlying Building A, a deposit of burnt daub and charcoal extends beneath the east-west street. In the north-east area of the site, at the junction between the streets another substantial layer of burning was revealed beneath the road metalling. More extensive spreads of burnt material are also emerging elsewhere, sealed beneath the remains of the late 1st/early 2nd century timber buildings in the south-east corner of the trench.

There is also evidence for the destruction of Building D by fire, and the adjacent pit 7937 contained a thick deposit of charcoal. The pair of pits (8876 & 8248) to the north also contained quantities of charcoal. Otherwise, the area beneath ‘House 1’ and between it and the east-west street did not produce evidence of a burnt horizon, though the soil is heavily flecked with charcoal. Compared with the mid-1st century fire horizons in Colchester, London and Verulamium (St. Albans), which are attributed to Boudicca, the Silchester horizon is patchy and relatively insubstantial. However we should also note the comparable, insubstantial nature of the pre-fire buildings so far identified.

We do not have a close date for the fire event. It certainly lies between the 50s and the late 70s/early 80s – the date of the construction of our Period 2 houses. An attribution to Boudicca, or the events surrounding the rebellion of 60/61, has been aired (The Times, 30th September 2008), but more work needs to be done before we know if a narrower date range can be established. The sequence from Iron Age well 8328, which contained, for example, Alice Holt pottery beneath the rectangular timber building, will be crucial to establishing our chronology.

### Period 1 wells

Five wells of this date have so far been excavated. Three of these (1503, 3171, 1586) were excavated before 2005 and were dug to depths of between 2.7m and 3.6m below the Roman ground surface. Despite the fills of each of these being characterised by a distinct lack of finds, 1586 contained a group of complete or semi-complete pottery vessels of Claudio-Neronian date at the base and 3171 contained an almost complete Silchester ware vessel base and six sherds of a large Alice Holt jar. 1503 was dug by the Victorian excavators in 1893. The fourth well (5791), dug to a depth of 2m, underlay ‘House 1’ and was excavated in 2005/6. Apart from a few fragments of wood and pieces of ceramic building material, it contained few finds, an indication, perhaps, that it had been abandoned and backfilled not long after being sunk.

### The barrel well

Well 5100 is the fifth and most recently excavated well of this period. Unlike any other of the early wells, it was found to have been lined with a re-used wooden barrel (seen during excavation, above) made of silver fir, which is not indigenous to the British Isles, but native to the Alps or Pyrenees. It is assumed that such barrels contained wine, either from the Rhineland or south-west France. If so, this barrel is evidence of the bulk importation of wine into Calleva in containers other than ceramic amphorae. A fig seed preserved at the base of this well is also the earliest evidence for the importation of this fruit into Calleva.
The excavation of buildings and associated deposits that developed after the Period 1 fire is now almost complete. Work so far seems to suggest a major hiatus in the settlement in the third quarter of the 1st century AD, during which time Calleva was radically re-planned and the Roman street grid was imposed. A possible reason for this significant re-organisation is that the town was destroyed to such a degree at this time that a fresh start was required. Fundamental to this was the creation of the insula itself, following the laying down of the new street grid.

The gravel yard

Between ERTB 1-3 and ERTB 5-8 was an extensive area of gravel metalling. Cut into this were the remains of a tile-lined and tile-filled soakaway which drained the south-east-facing elevation of ERTB 2 opposite Room 3. A line of substantial posts ran at right angles between the two groups of buildings. Since there is, at present, no clear evidence that this gravelled area gave access to the north-south street, it is interpreted as a yard, rather than a lane.

Street frontages

A major question which arises is, given that none of the buildings constructed in the late 1st century AD conformed to the orientation of the streets, how did the inhabitants of the Insula access them and the rest of the town. Although we have yet to complete their excavation, it would appear that the two street-frontages were lined with continuous fencing, represented by regularly spaced post-holes which continued around both the building (ERTB 1) at the intersection of the streets as well as past the building (ERTB 8) butting the north-south street in the southeast quarter of the trench. While there may have been gates through the fencing for pedestrian access, there were no major access points within our excavation area. The inference that the inhabitants had, in a sense, turned their back on the rest of the town is hard to resist. Indeed the one, certain cesspit of the period 5251/5354 is located right beside the east-west street adjacent to ERTB 1.

Period 2: The renaissance of Calleva

Rebuilding after the fire: the creation of Insula IX c.AD70-80 – c.AD125-50

The essence of the new build, as revealed within our trench, is of two sets of buildings separated by a gravelled area or yard. To the north was a row of three, timber-framed buildings, extending from the intersection of the two, new streets south-west across the trench to its western edge. It comprised a large, probable high status, single-storey building (ERTB 2), flanked to the south-west by a round-house ERTB 3 and, to the north-east, by a single-roomed, rectangular building with a small annexe ERTB 1, whose footprint was adapted to respect the east-west street. Just to the north of this northern row of buildings was a well 1293. Across the gravelled yard, and sharing the north-east/south-west/north-west/south-east orientation, was a relatively high status timber building (ERTB 6), most of which lies beyond the southern edge of the trench, around which clustered a group of three (ERTB 5, 7, & 8) rectangular, timber-framed buildings, among which the plans of two were relatively well preserved. In the angle between two of the small buildings was a well (6290), not yet completely excavated.

Notwithstanding this evidence of extensive re-organisation of the space within the newly created insula, the new buildings retained the general, north-east/south-west orientation, which is just becoming evident as the early street layout is revealed. Indeed Tom Keefe has observed that the ‘House 1’ footprint aligns very closely on the mid-winter sunset and mid-summer sunrise of the late 1st century AD. The new street-grid is completely ignored. While our assumption is that the new buildings respected pre-existing property boundaries, this has yet to be established.
Early Roman Timber Buildings 1–3

Though largely achieved by the end of the 2007 season, final completion of the excavation of these buildings was not accomplished until 2008. The work of the three field seasons after 2005 was mostly concerned with the excavation of floor make-ups, clay wall-footings and foundation trenches of the three buildings. While more work needs to be done on the phasing of the central range (ERTB 2), important dating evidence was recovered from its primary contexts. In particular a coin of Vespasian gives a terminus post quem of initial construction of the early 70s. Coins of a comparable date were also recovered from the base of cesspit 5251 adjacent to ERTB 1. Our interpretation of these buildings, that they represent a relatively high status town house flanked by two dependent buildings, remains unchanged. For more information on these buildings and the archaeology of this period, see intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue21/silchester_index.html.

Early Roman Timber Building 1 – Occupying what became the angle between the main north-south street and the subsidiary east-west street, ERTB 1 consisted of two rooms, both of which had floors of opus signinum. In the centre of the larger of the two (Room 1) was a rectangular, tiled hearth, built up of horizontally laid, broken tile fragments and associated with dark, charcoal-rich soils. At least three separate phases of use of the hearth can be identified, each associated with a re-laying or re-patching of the floor. Other internal features of note included a shallow, oblong pit dug up against the north-east wall and containing a partial sheep skeleton in amongst the clay infill, and a rectangular feature defined on three sides by a beam slot measuring c.2m by 1m, and containing a hard red-brown sandy clay. This building is interpreted as a service building, providing a range of functions, including as a kitchen.

Early Roman Timber Building 2 – Although the ground plan of only half of the building is reasonably well preserved, we would suggest that the surviving remains of ERTB 2 represent a residential building, initially articulated around a central reception room. The better preserved section of the building suggests the possibility of subsidiary reception rooms (R2, mirrored by R6). The surviving evidence suggests only domestic functions, though the absence of evidence for a kitchen suggests that this function was probably provided by the adjacent ERTB 1. In conclusion we interpret the building as an early town house.

A later modification of ERTB 2 saw the re-building of Room 6 using irregular-shaped blocks of limestone in the wall foundations. A cut on the southeast-facing side of the room is filled with further fragments of this material, some shaped as columns, and is interpreted as a threshold. The presence of the exotic stone, some or all of which had been taken from some monumental building project from elsewhere in the town, and the emphasis on the threshold imply a special function for Room 6. Given the nature of the direct access from the verandah/corridor it is possible that this room served as an audience chamber or, perhaps, a shrine. The first interpretation might imply that the owner of ERTB 2 now had dependant clients.

Early Roman Timber Building 3 – Less confidence attaches to the interpretation of the Period 2 roundhouse (ERTB 3). On the one hand, while the central hearth also suggests a domestic function, the concentration of votive activity, including the deposition of an infant burial, two pots (one largely complete) and the cremated remains (? sacrifices) of sheep or goat in two pits, all towards the edge of the building, also points to possible religious use. The architectural
Early Roman Timber Buildings 5–8

Considerable progress has been made with the excavation and understanding of the group of timber buildings in the south-east of the excavation trench. The three smaller buildings with their centrally-placed hearths recall the plan of ERTB 1 to the north. While they were initially interpreted as workshops, partly because all their hearths provided evidence of above-background metal concentrations, particularly of copper, zinc and lead, it is likely that they served a variety of purposes, including as domestic dwellings. If we regard these three southern buildings as of a type with ERTB 1, that leaves the round-house and the two, fairly definite houses of high status, ERTB 2 and ERTB 6, as representatives of three further types of house.

Early Roman Timber Building 5 – Positioned close up against ERTB 6 and the south-east facing walls of ERTB 7 and 8, it was hard to define any wall lines of ERTB 5. There was clear evidence of a clay floor and of a tiled hearth, presumed to be located centrally within the building. With no evidence of further (robust), structural timbers, it seemed improbable that the building could stand alone. However, the excavation in 2008 of a second, earlier, clearly stand-alone round-house, Building D (above, p.6), whose structural remains are equally as slight as those of ERTB 3, raises the possibility that both buildings could in fact have stood alone.

Early Roman Timber Building 6 – This large timber-framed building with substantial clay wall-footings extended beyond the southern edge of the trench. Within the trench is revealed one complete room, sub-divided by a partition against which a tiled hearth had been placed. The room was floored with two phases of opus signinum, the earlier of which was finished at the walls with a quarter-round moulding. The latter was pierced for a drain towards the north-east corner. Attached to the exterior of the north-east corner of this room was a furnace of brick and tile. The hearths associated with this building gave evidence of an above-background concentration of lead.

Early Roman Timber Building 7 – Separated from ERTB 6 by a gravel path, this well-preserved rectangular building comprised a single room, flanked on two sides by a corridor. There was one entrance on the south-west-facing side and a possible second on the south-east facing side giving direct access into the main room space. All the floors were of clay over gravel make-up and in the centre of the principal space was a tiled hearth. The base of the clay wall
was well preserved and, where the weight of the superstructure had pressed down so that the base of the walls of the building had sunk below the general level of the floor, traces of red-painted, wall-plaster survived on the inside face of the main room.

**Early Roman Timber Building 8** – Immediately adjacent to the north-east of ERTB 7, this clay-floored building had traces of a corridor flanking its south-east-facing side, which had slumped steeply into the fill of a backfilled well. It was difficult to define the walls of this building but the elevation which faced on to the street appears to have been stepped, rather than to have run parallel with the north-south street. Like its neighbour, there was a tiled hearth towards the centre of the building, while a second, tiled hearth was located in the south-east facing passage. The clay into which the central set of tiles was set gave high concentrations (ppm) of copper.

**Period 2: In summary**

The work of the last 3 seasons does seem to suggest a major hiatus in the settlement in the third quarter of the 1st century AD which we can now begin to associate with evidence of burning across the 3000 square metres of the excavation trench; the destruction of buildings and the abandonment and backfilling of wells. Within our trench there is no evidence for the reconstruction of pre-fire buildings or of the re-use of the footprints of these buildings. All the wells which were open at the time of the fire were abandoned and backfilled; indeed, one lay directly beneath the footprint of ERTB 2, and two were covered over by the yard or lane laid down between the two ranges of late 1st century AD buildings. So, why was Calleva radically re-planned and the Roman street grid imposed? A possible answer to this is that the town was destroyed to such a degree at this time that a fresh start was required. Was it just an accident that the wooden buildings of mid 1st century AD Silchester were burned down – or was it a more deliberate action – and if so, what prompted it? Future work will examine the nature of the burnt horizon as well as revealing the layout of the Iron Age and early Roman planned town.
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The Silchester ‘Town Life’ Project

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