

Excavations at Durley Hill: 2015

Roman building beneath Keynsham cemetery

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Following analysis and discussion of the results of geophysical surveys carried out by John Oswin and his team at Durley Hill between 2013 and 2015 (for consolidated results *see Figure 1*), an agreement was made between BACAS, BaNES, Keynsham Town Council and the Association for Roman Archaeology (ARA) to run a small excavation during July 2015. This would attempt to locate and investigate potential structures in the south-west corner of the cemetery.

The research aims and objectives, set out in the Project Design and Written Scheme of Investigations (Lewcun 2015), were to:

- Ascertain the nature and quality of a small section of the building revealed by the geophysical survey at the south end of the cemetery extension.
- To gather dating evidence for the use and abandonment of the building and, if possible, for its construction.

Robin Holley directed the excavation, assisted by Marek Lewcun and various other BACAS members. A single rectangular trench, 7 x 2 m oriented east to west, was positioned in the south-western corner of the cemetery (*Figure 2*). The trench was positioned at right angles to the structure(s) indicated by the geophysical survey.

Directly below the overburden was an area of re-deposited subsoil of mid-reddish brown silty clay with flints, sandstone fragments, pebbles and gravel/grit. Iron objects, pottery, tesserae and ceramic building material (CBM) were recovered from this context. Below this was a layer of firm, dark greyish brown, silty clay with included pennant sandstone, CBM, flints, burnt materials and occasional fragments of limestone. Other artefacts recovered included bones, iron and lead objects, pottery, shell, tesserae and some small finds. This context was very disturbed which suggests that it has been subject to robbing at numerous times from the early medieval to the post medieval period.

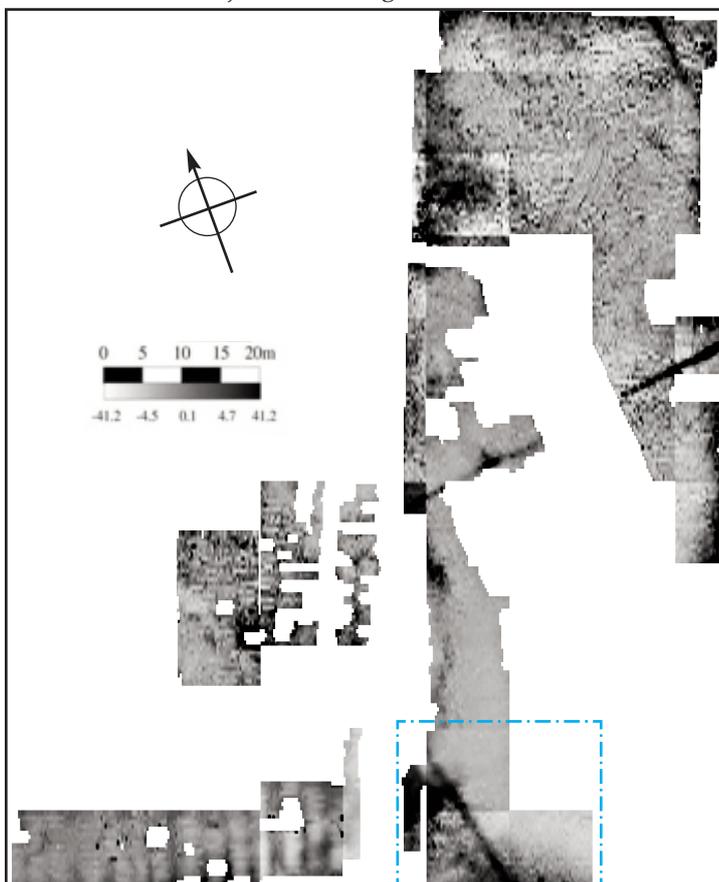


Figure 1 left
Consolidated resistance survey plan.

Figure 2 below
The location of the excavation trench, indicated by the red box, overlaid on the results of the geophysical resistance survey at the south end of the cemetery extension.

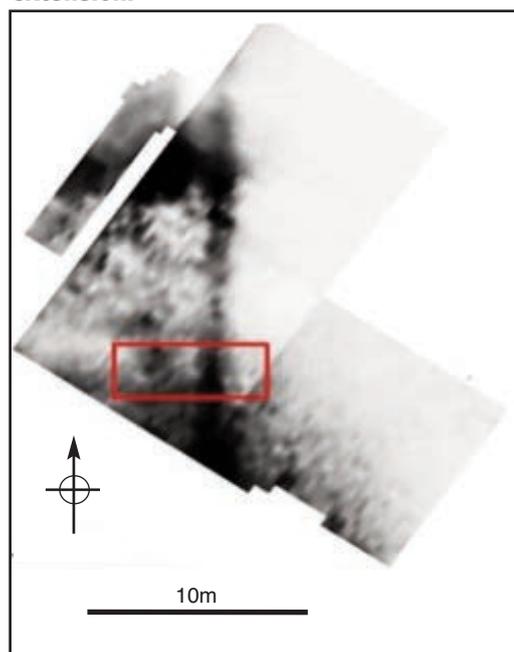




Figure 3 top Photograph of the trench when the linear wall was first exposed, west facing.

Figure 4 East facing Photograph of the linear wall.

Figure 5 Photograph of the linear wall, the drainage stones or soakaway, the spread of stones and the area where the opening in the wall was blocked.



As the team excavated deeper a re-deposited spread of stones was set in a firm matrix of silty mid brown to reddish grey clay located in the western end of the trench, followed by a spread of sandstone and limestone blocks, varying from small to large. Some blocks suggested they had been faced and possibly came from a wall in the immediate area. It was also noted that several of the limestone blocks had been in contact with heat as the surfaces were reddened by exposure to fire.

Eventually the main wall, identified in the geophysics, was exposed running north to south across the trench (*Figures 3 and 4*). The wall was built into a U shaped cut with sloping sides and a flat base. The wall was constructed of pennant sandstone and other roughly hewn stone, some with signs that they had been faced or worked. The section of exposed wall measured 3m long, 60cm wide and up to 40cm in-depth. An 82cm wide section of the wall, perhaps a door or window, had been closed off at some point with a selection of large stones (*Figure 5*). When this closure occurred is conjectural but could have taken place in the late Roman or early medieval period. One large stone had an ammonite fossil on the surface, which is a common find around Keynsham.

The lower fill of the wall was constructed from pennant sandstone blocks laid in a herringbone pattern with stones of varying sizes and up to 70cm in depth, clay was used for bonding these stones.

The range of artefacts recorded as 'small finds' suggest a variety of activities on or close to the Durley Hill area of Keynsham from the Neolithic/Bronze Age to the post-medieval period, but the majority of the small finds date from the Romano-British period.

A total of 156 pieces of animal and bird bone were recovered, typical of a Romano-British site, and it would appear that the majority of the species identified are domestic animals (cattle, caprovid, and pig) which were probably the main source of meat. There were also a relatively small proportion of bird bones.

A single worked pointed bone was recovered, its exact use is unknown and dating is problematic, but it came from a sealed Romano-British context.

858 pieces of CBM were collected. The collection all came from the Romano-British period and includes pieces from box flue tiles, floor and roof tiles. Also found were 17 pieces of tesserae made from red tiles. The condition of the collection varied, mostly showing signs of abrasion as a consequence of weathering and damage from periods of demolition of the building.

21 pieces of flint were recovered, mostly fragmented pebbles sourced locally, some showing various degrees of thermal damage by fire. The presence of this burnt flint is of interest, but was not datable. Three struck flints were found and recorded as small finds. None of the flints were in pristine condition, all being chipped or abraded. The collection is difficult to date precisely but possibly dated to the late Neolithic or early Bronze Age.

A small collection of glass was recovered which dated from the Romano-British to the Victorian period. All were recorded as small finds.

The assemblage of ironwork was varied and the objects quite diverse in date and function, many of the iron pieces unrecognizable and badly corroded. The collection includes large and small-headed nails typically used for structural purposes. Also recovered were a small number of hobnails. Most of the nails cannot be dated closely but are likely to have originated in the Romano-British period.

447 individual stone tesserae were recovered. The tesserae were of variable size and shape, and most showed evidence of abrasion suggesting that they were stray to this specific area.

Many large to small roughly hewn pennant sandstone blocks and fragments were also recovered, many showing signs of weathering or perhaps the rounded surfaces caused by the hooves of animals walking over the stones.

There were a significant number of pennant tiles for flooring and perhaps roofing but only two tiles recovered had nail holes. The pennant stone was probably sourced from a local quarry in the area.

Several pieces of ashlar blocks of Bath stone from the Box/Corsham area of Wiltshire were recovered. These blocks had been shaped and used in a previous building. It was also apparent that several of these limestone blocks had been in contact with heat as their surfaces were reddened by fire. A small number of flat roofing stone fragments manufactured from Oolitic limestone were recovered. 12 stone objects were classified as small finds:

- Six pieces of pennant sandstone appear to have markings on the surfaces which have been tentatively interpreted as graffiti (*Figure 6*), but might have been caused at the time of the demolition of the buildings.
- A pierced white lias small tessera perhaps used as a bead.
- A pierced oval shaped stone possibly a bead or toggle (*Figure 7*)
- A number of rubbing or hone stones.
- An oval-shaped stone, probably a Romano-British slingshot.

Figure 6 right
Photograph of a piece of pennant sandstone with graffiti.

Figure 7 far right
A pierced oval shaped stone possibly a bead or toggle.



The excavation produced a total of 208 pottery sherds. Much of the assemblage was small insignificant fragments mostly in a very poor condition, highly abraded with damaged surfaces. This suggests they came from buildings in the immediate area and subsequently were transported to this location by the movement of the soils or the demolition of the structures. The Roman pottery collection consists of Black wares, New Forest fine ware, Oxford ware, Severn Valley ware, sandy coarse and grey wares from unknown local kilns, and all date from the late 3rd to 4th Century.

The success of the excavation was in positively uncovering the linear wall identified in the geophysics. However, the key objectives of form, purpose and date of this structure remain unresolved.

The wall exposed during excavation was very well built, there being three courses of finely cut masonry blocks surviving above a broader foundation trench packed with two layers of pitched sandstone slabs. A cut had been made through the wall at an unknown period; its function is not at present fully understood. This was subsequently blocked up with rubble and clay topped with large stone blocks. No trace of a floor surface was found.

Surprisingly, there was virtually no evidence for roofing; only two pennant roofing stones had holes bored through them. This may imply a very systematic dismantling of the structure to recycle material, or that this part of the structure was not roofed. A large number of assorted loose tesserae were recovered, probably originating from the main buildings. The pottery assemblage was generally poor, consisting of fairly small sherds and rims, mostly of the late 3rd and 4th Centuries and not in a great number. No coins were found. This reflects much the same evidence recovered by Avon Archaeology in 1998. Their report suggests that the area did not see very much human domestic activity and may have been an open area, perhaps a garden. Our excavation may support the theory that these structures were outside of the main building complex.

The combined results of the numerous geophysical surveys, our excavation and general re-evaluation of the site, still lead to questions regarding the function of the whole complex and whether it is actually a villa. The ARA is keen to continue work at the site in the coming years and BACAS hope to remain their partner in this.

During the course of the excavation we were lucky enough to run a very popular and successful open day; visited by Graham Soffe (Chair of ARA) and Gill Hellier (Chair of Keynsham Town Council) and have press coverage in numerous newspapers and on the local ITV news.

Acknowledgments

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