

ROMAN WARWICKSHIRE

A presentation by Dr Paul Grigsby about what the Romans did for us.

Paul Grigsby is a lecturer in classics and ancient history at Warwick University where he teaches about ancient Greece and Greek religion. He also runs the Warwick Classics Network which promotes the teaching of Classical Civilisation and Ancient History in Warwickshire schools.

Paul commenced his talk by thanking everyone for coming to hear him, saying it was lovely to speak to a packed room. He's not used to having a large audience as he normally deals with students and they don't get up very early! He confessed that he's not a Roman expert and his interest in Roman history is purely personal and while his course at the university does include Roman history his focus is on the Greek and Egyptian civilisations.



The Emperor Claudius

Paul gave a brief overview of the history of humans in Britain starting with the Palaeolithic era which began around 3.3 million years ago down to around 10,000 years ago. Footprints were discovered in 2013 at Happisburgh on the Norfolk coast which are estimated to be 900,000 years old and are the oldest known hominid footprints outside Africa.

The Mesolithic era ran from about 9000 BC to 4300 BC.

The Neolithic era ran from about 4300 BC to 2500 BC and is characterised with the introduction of farming, domestication of animals, and a change from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to one of settlement. The Rollright Stones are an ancient Neolithic site located on the border of Oxfordshire and Warwickshire.

The Bronze Age in Britain lasted from around 2500-700 BC, which included the arrival of the Beaker people so-called because of the pottery beakers that were often found in their burials.

The Iron Age in Britain began around 750 BC and lasted until the coming of the Romans in 43 AD. A large hoard of 394 iron currency bars was found at Meon Hill Warwickshire in 1824. These seem to have been used prior to coins during the Iron Age period.

Roman rule in Britain began in 43 AD under the Emperor Claudius when they met fierce resistance from several tribes such as the Catuvellauni. Their chieftain, Caratacus, gave the Roman general Aulus Plautius significant problems until he was defeated in 50 AD.

For several decades the western frontier of Roman rule was marked by the Fosse Way.

Around 60 or 61 AD Boudica, queen of the Iceni tribe, led the Iceni and other tribes in an uprising against the Romans. They destroyed Camulodunum (modern Colchester) and then proceeded to do the same to Londinium (London) and then Verulamium (St Albans).

Meanwhile the Roman Governor, Gaius Suetonius, assembled a force of about 10,000 men. Legions from the west may have used the Fosse Way as a route to intercept Boudica and they chose a position to meet Boudica in a defile (a narrow pass) with a wood behind.

The British, with unprecedented numbers (230,000 according to the historian Cassius Dio) were expecting victory but the Romans stood their ground and their disciplined tactics triumphed over the Britons chaotic approach. Tacitus estimated that almost 80,000 Britons were killed compared to only 400 Romans. Boudica is said to have poisoned herself or committed suicide.

No one knows for sure where the battle actually took place, as no archaeological evidence has been discovered, although there are several theories. One theory places it at Mancetter, near Atherstone, on the Watling Street in Warwickshire.

There were four Roman forts in Warwickshire at the time of the uprising, which may have provided soldiers for the battle; Alauna (Alcester), Manduessedum (Mancetter), Tripontium (Rugby) and Lunt Fort (Baginton). Following an extensive archaeological excavation Lunt Fort has been partially reconstructed and is open to the public. Archaeology there has revealed a gyirus, a circular structure, thought to have been used for training horses and is the only known example in the Roman Empire.

With the uprising defeated many settlements sprang up in the area with farmsteads spaced about a kilometre apart. Excavated evidence suggests a focus on stock-rearing, replacing the mixed farming practise of the Iron Age.

ROMAN SITES IN THE AREA

Chesterton was a 'small town' sited on the Fosse Way surrounded by a defensive enclosure of which the line can still be followed as a low depression.

Excavations in the 1920s and 1960s along with aerial photography have revealed buildings in an irregular street network. No evidence of a temple at Chesterton has yet been discovered but a building with a tessellated pavement, painted plaster walls, and evidence of flue tile, suggests that the building was a bathhouse.



Three-colour mosaic

A Roman villa has been discovered 600m west of the church at Chesterton. A three-colour mosaic, provisionally dated from the 4th century, contains a foliage pattern surrounded by triangular panels with foliage and fruit. Another panel has mostly been destroyed. The mosaics have been protected and reburied.

One kilometre south west of Harbury, archaeologist Ed Wilson has discovered Roman pottery. As this isn't high status it suggests the site of a farmstead.

A Constantius II coin (337-361 AD) was found in the garden of Manor Farm.

Also at Harbury, Roman coins and pottery are said to have been found either in the churchyard, or in fields to the west of the church and these are now in Warwick Museum.

The site of a Roman settlement has been identified from finds of Romano British grey ware pottery located 700m east of East Fields Farm, near Deppers Bridge.

In 1998 tesserae (small tiles) were spotted in a field near Oxhill, Warwickshire and in 2002 more tesserae appeared following harvesting so it was decided that excavation was urgently required. This revealed a mosaic with a swastika type border suggesting this was the site of a Roman villa.



Roman Grey Ware

Following a field walking survey at Madhill, Tysoe, the possible site of a Roman settlement has been identified.

Fragments of Roman pottery, tile and quern stone were found and a resistivity survey indicates a possible villa site with earlier ring ditches.

In 2008, at Edgehill, a hoard of 1,155 silver Roman denarii coins was discovered in a small white ware pot buried in a field. The oldest coin in the hoard dates from around 190 BC over 200 years before the Romans conquered Britain. When Paul gave this talk at Kineton, it transpired that the person who helped him with the projector was the person who discovered the hoard. They can now be seen on display at the Warwickshire Museum.



Coins from the Edgehill hoard

During an archaeological dig at a Roman site on Edgehill, in 2015, a second collection of 440 Roman silver denarii coins were unearthed buried inside a ceramic pot. These coins range in date from 147 BC to 70 AD. The hoard is extremely rare as it contains 78 coins dating from 68-69 AD, which was a turbulent time in Roman history.

That completed Paul's talk and he then answered questions from the floor after which he was thanked by Chair, Ed Wilson, and very warmly applauded.