

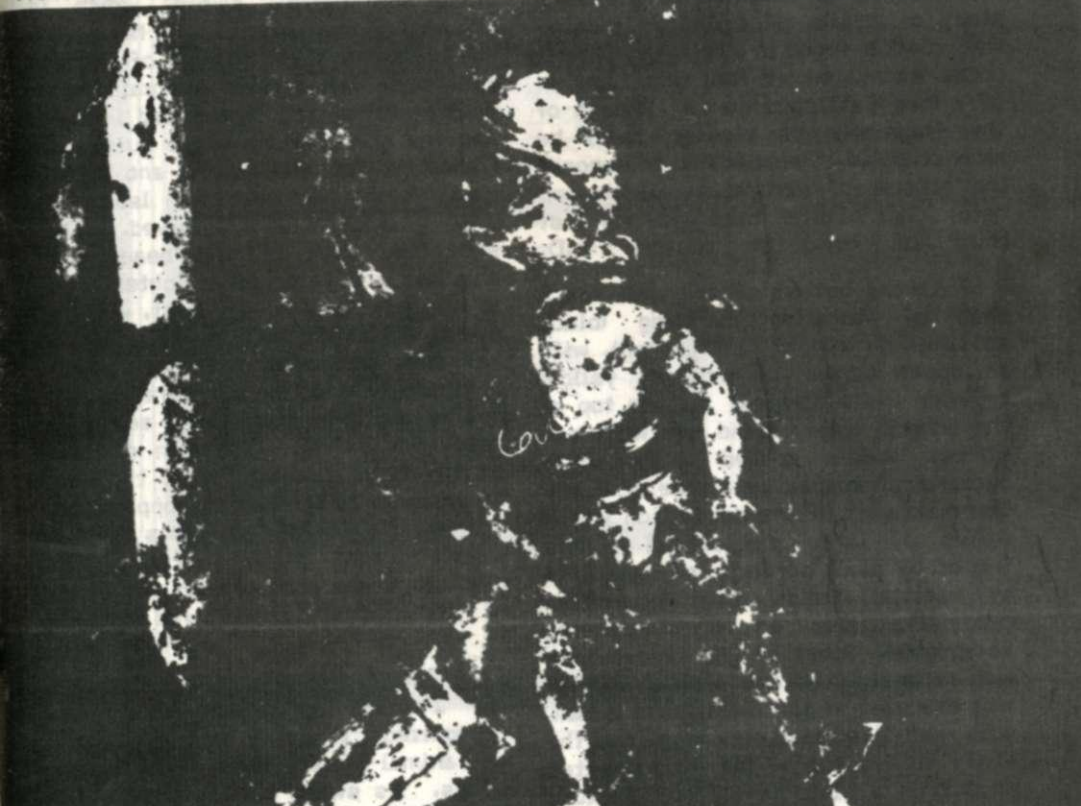


CATALOGUE

NEWS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS IN COLCHESTER

number 12

winter 1983



PAINTED WALL PLASTER
EXECUTIONS AT THE WEST GATE
THE FRENCH CONNECTION



A PAINTED WALL FROM BALKERNE LANE

Dr Roger Ling of the University of Manchester has recently completed a study of a pile of collapsed painted wall-plaster found in a room of a Roman house excavated at Bal kerne Lane in 1976 (see Catalogue no 1). Enough of the fragments of plaster could be reconstructed to enable him to suggest the scheme of decoration illustrated here. The plaster dates to the last third of the 1st century A.D.

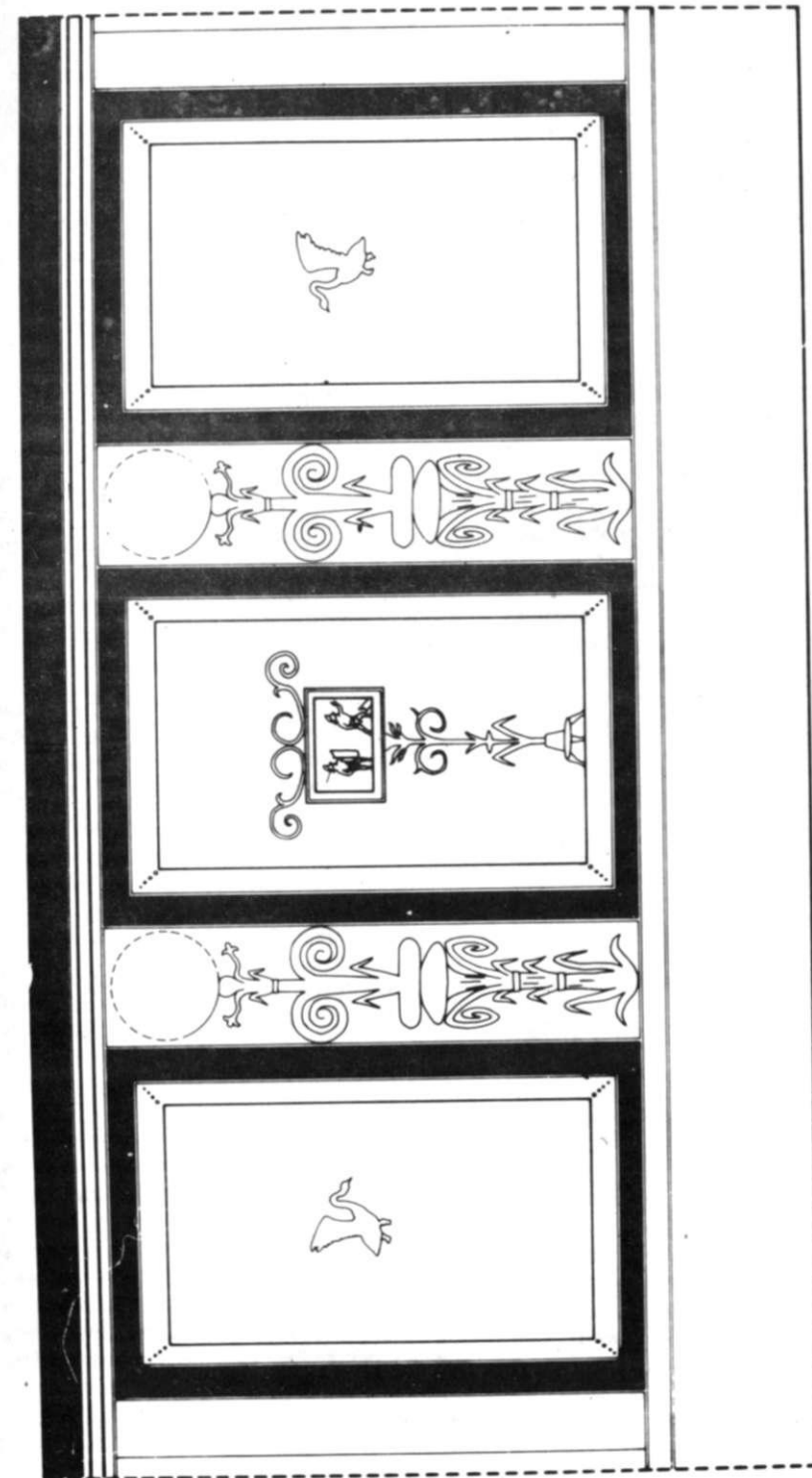
At the bottom of the wall ran a dado of imitation marbling (black splashes on a light pink ground), with an upper border of mustard yellow between white stripes. At the top of the scheme was a band of two black stripes widely spaced on a white background, topped by a zone of black. The main part of the decoration was a series of large pinkish-red panels framed by black borders and separated by vertical fields with plant-like candelabra also on a pinkish-red background. Most of one candelabrum was reconstructed and showed that it was executed in pink, white and cream, with reed-like leaves growing from the stem. At the top of the reconstructed section is a plate (a familiar feature of Roman painted candelabra).

The most interesting fragments from the wall show duelling gladiators on a green background. The most complete shows an armoured gladiator (only 125 mm high) raising his left hand to petition for mercy for his defeated opponent. His shield lies on

the ground in front of him, and he holds his narrow sword, which is dripping blood, in his right hand. The figure is painted in shades of red and pink, with the armour overpainted in yellow and white. The sword is black and the shield has a white outer face framed in red and yellow and a pink inner face. Parts of at least one other gladiator have survived. They show the back of the head, right shoulder and torso of a fighter armed in a similar way to the first, with the sword and shield held up. The figures have been put together for convenience in the reconstruction but were probably not associated because the second is ready for battle. The man defeated by the first gladiator must therefore be missing, as well as the opponent of the second. Dr Ling suggests that the small green panel showing the gladiators was probably set within one of the larger pinkish-red panels.

One other figured fragment painted on a red background has been recognized. It shows the rear part of an animal-pawed swan with raised wings. As swans have been found in similar positions in Pompeian wall-paintings Dr Ling considers that this too was set in one of the large pinkish-red panels.

Nina Crummy



* The reconstruction of the wall-plaster from Bal kerne Lane.

BONES, D____D BONES, & STATISTICS

Pottery is by no means the only thing produced by the ton during excavation. Though the weight of the bone remains from our excavations has never been estimated, the volume they take up is very similar to that of the pottery. The bones from our non-cemetery sites are being studied by Dr Rosemary Luff, who started off looking at Roman animal bones from Essex (chiefly Chelmsford and Colchester) for her doctorate, and who is now employed full-time by the Department of the Environment to report on the bones of all periods from sites which they have funded in the county. Most of the bones from the non-cemetery sites are those of animals, usually food remains, but occasionally human bones turn up to give us all cause for thought.

EXECUTIONS AT THE WEST GATE?

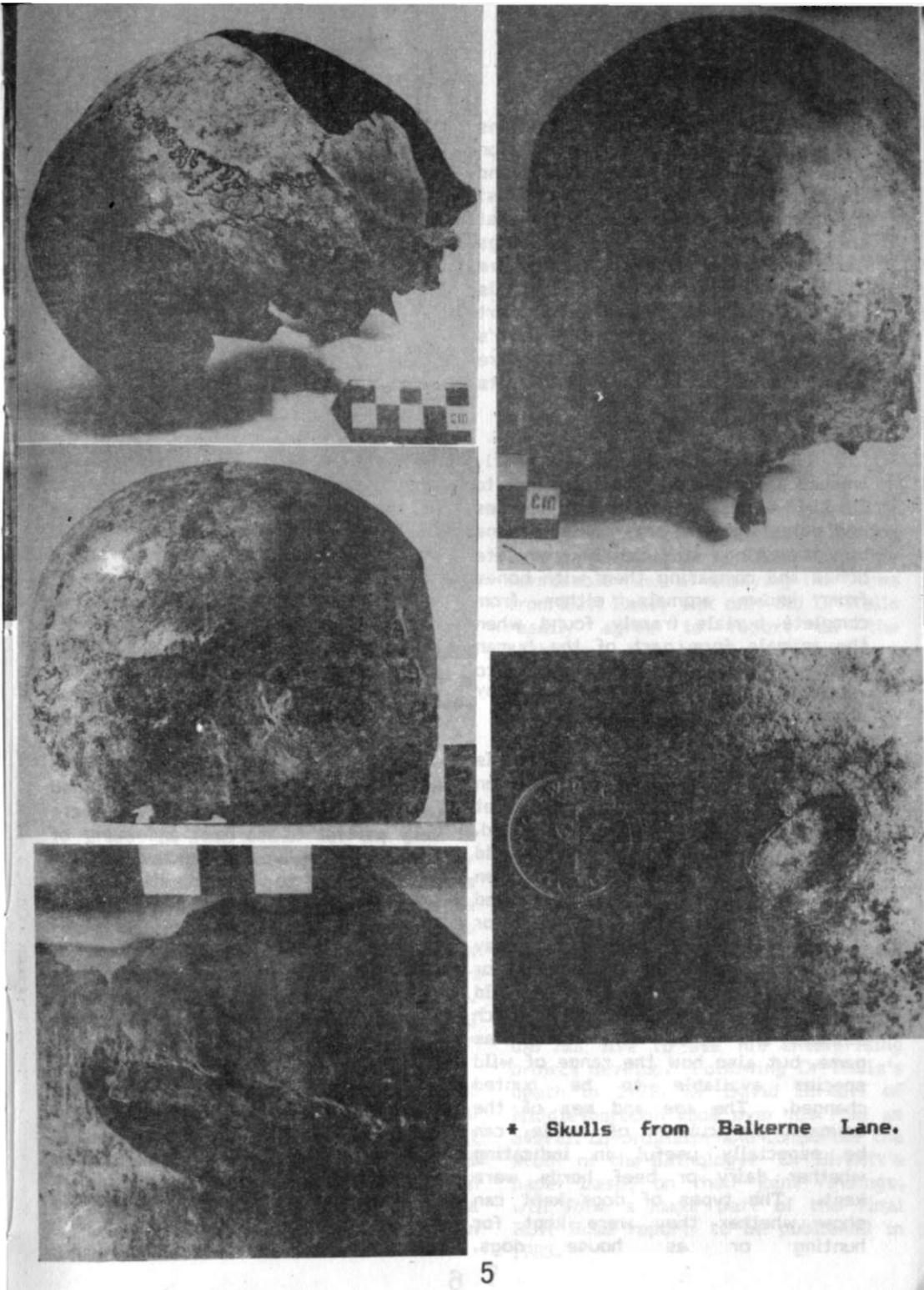
During the excavations at the Balcerne Lane site in 1974, some human bones were found in the fortress ditch which had been backfilled in about AD 50/55. These consisted of six skulls and a few other bones mainly of legs. The disproportionate number of heads prompted the thought. Were these the remains of natives who had been decapitated? During her recent examination of the bones Dr Rosemary Luff carefully brushed away at the dirt on the back of a skull and was astounded (and, gruesomely, not a little delighted) to find that she was looking at the mark of what had obviously been a blow from either an axe or a heavy sword at the base of the occipital bone. The skull was

that of a young man between 17 and 25 years old. As the skull was found in the fill of the legionary ditch just outside the west gate of the fortress (where the Balcerne Gate was later built), and as the rest of the skeleton was not found, it is tempting to suggest that the man was decapitated (on at least the second blow!) and his head displayed on the gate. It is quite an art to decapitate someone with only one blow, as poor Mary Queen of Scots discovered when she was beheaded - it took several attempts to despatch her!

Dr Luff also examined the other skull fragments and found four to be definitely male. One cranium was fractured at the front by the traditional 'blunt instrument'!

BABY BURIALS

Readers of Catalogue will no doubt recall that the Culver Street excavation produced several tiny (neonatal) baby burials. Dr Luff has now completed her report on five, possibly six, similar burials from Balcerne Lane and Lion Walk (one is medieval). She also identified eight groups of bones probably from disturbed infant burials. In the Roman period it appears to have been common practice to bury the remains of miscarried, still-born, or very small deceased infants on the parents' property.



THE ANIMAL BONES

Animal bones from excavations can yield a wealth of information about the animals themselves and about the people who kept them. Most come from the many refuse pits that are associated with the buildings found during our excavations, and are usually the remains of animals butchered, cooked and eaten as part of the diet of the town's inhabitants. Dogs and cats were often buried in either refuse pits or boundary ditches.

The excavated bones are gently washed and dried on site then sent to Dr Luff who sorts them into species and notes age and sex. This is done by measuring sufficiently complete bones and comparing them with bones from known animals, either from complete burials (rarely found when the animals form part of the human diet) or from species known to resemble early breeds such as Soay sheep.

Provided that the sample is sufficiently large, data collected on species can indicate the diet preferred at any particular period, or even in any particular household (bones recovered from a Roman kitchen floor in Augst, Switzerland showed that a favourite food was boiled or roasted pig's trotters!), or may point to a change in the species or breeds favoured. Remains of wild species can show not only which animals and birds were hunted as game, but also how the range of wild species available to be hunted changed. The age and sex of the animals, particularly of cattle, can be especially useful in indicating whether dairy or beef herds were kept. The types of dogs kept can show whether they were kept for hunting or as house dogs.

The sites of Roman temples may contain the burials of animals used for sacrifice. These can be particularly useful in providing complete skeletons. Certain diseases can affect the bones and teeth and may indicate that the animals were not receiving adequate feed, and therefore that the farmer was a poor stock manager or that times were particularly hard!

Fish bones are not often found in the Roman levels of our sites, though they are not uncommon in the medieval levels. This difference is most probably due to the small size of the bones which were much more liable to disappear in acid soil conditions than the larger mammal or bird bones. Documentary sources tell us that fish formed a popular part of the Roman diet and of course, the Romans imported quantities of fish sauce into Britain in amphorae, the large vessels usually associated with the importation of wine.

Butchery techniques are also noted to show how they have changed over the centuries. The Romans were very partial to marrow, and many of the long bones we have recovered have been broken to extract it. Other things to be looked for include evidence of the use of bones for glue-making, or for the manufacture of bone objects, such as hairpins or spoons. Horn too was a favourite medium, and though Roman horn objects require water-logged conditions for their survival, discarded horn cores can point to horn-working in the area.

Nina Crummy



* Some unfinished objects from a bone workshop at Butt Road.

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

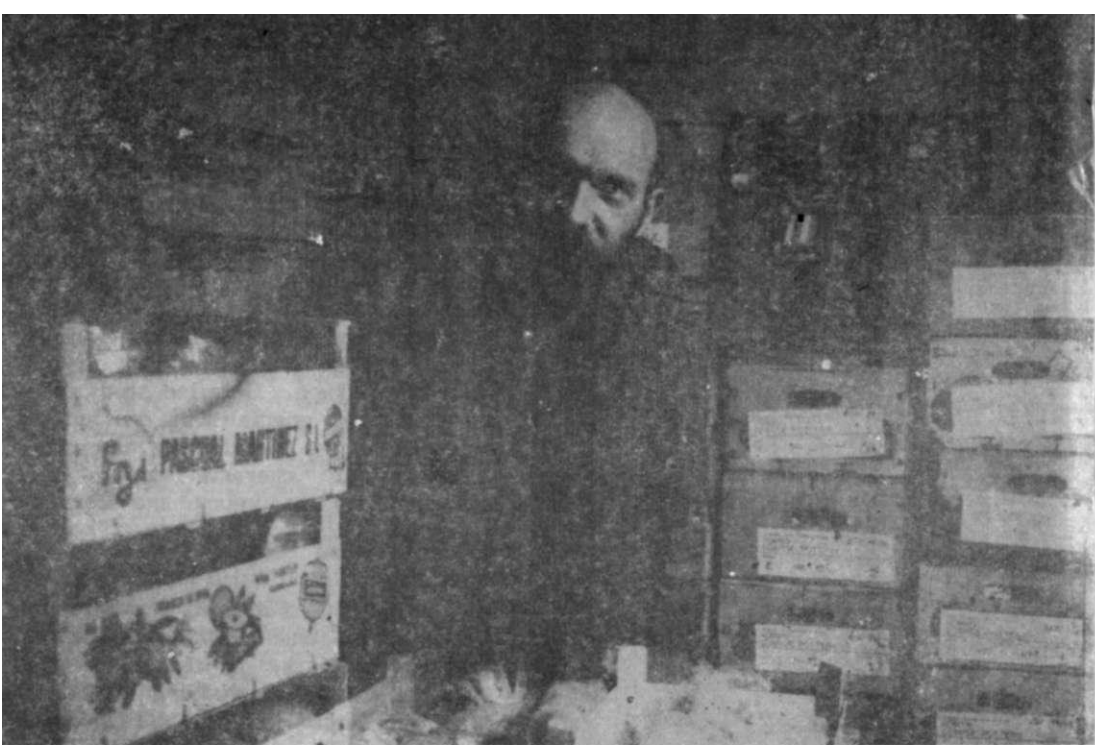
It was almost midnight on a wet Friday in June 1981. At the dock in Dunkirk the last ferry of the day discharged its cargo. The sole customs officer would be locking up for the night. No doubt the last thing he wanted to turn up at that point was a vanload of Roman skeletons. "These are human bones? Mmmmm, c'est difficile, monsieur... My superior will deal with you in the morning."

Few people can have spent a night in a 35 cwt van sleeping on top of 150 boxes of Roman skeletal remains. It was not the most auspicious of beginnings for an important stage in an international project devoted to a study of the people of late Roman Colchester!

Between 1976 and 1979 the Trust's excavations at Butt Road revealed nearly 700 graves belonging to a late Roman inhumation cemetery. Such a large number of graves not only provides insight into burial practice, but the large quantity of human skeletal material retrieved is of enormous value in developing a balanced picture of the environment and way of life of the general population in the town at the time. Detailed study of a skeleton by specialists can yield evidence of the individual's age, sex, diet, racial characteristics and susceptibility to injury and certain diseases.

In 1977 we invited the late Dr Calvin Wells, one of Britain's leading paleopathologists, to take on the formidable task of studying the bones from Butt Road. Not only did Dr Wells readily agree to report on the pathology, but he also recruited a number of fellow lecturers at France's Institute for Paleopathology and Paleoanthropology; each is to contribute to the project in his own special area of study. The Institute is part of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Lyons. The three-year programme of work in France is led by the head of the Institute, Raoul Perrot, a specialist in physical anthropology, who has waived all fees for the project - a particularly generous gesture since continental consultancy fees are usually huge!

It is a great pity that Dr Wells did not live to see his enterprising project develop. Following Dr Wells's death in 1978, Dr David Birkett of Middlesborough took over his role as overall co-ordinator and completed the study of the pathology. Dr Birkett's paper based on their joint findings, will form a major part of the final Butt Road report, to be published in 1983.



* Carl Crossan braces himself for his next package holiday with a difference

By the spring of 1981 the final batch had been collected from David Birkett's home and we were to make the first shipment to France. Raoul Perrot offered to meet me at Reims where we would transfer the boxes to his van for the last stage of their journey to Lyons. Colin Bellows, Organizer of the Friends, kindly arranged a free passage by goods ferry from Harwich to Dunkirk, from whence it would be an easy drive across the Somme to Reims. Or would it? I was not quite so confident as I woke up on the Dunkirk dockside on that Saturday morning.

Fortunately M. Bertain, the chief customs officer, turned out to be one of those officials who helps rather than hinders. After consulting various reference books and eventually resorting to a link-up with the Customs

central computer in Paris I was given an extra document and sent on my way.

At exactly 10 a.m. on the Sunday morning I met Raoul outside the magnificent 11th-century cathedral at Reims. We swiftly transferred the boxes and lost no time in finding a local restaurant - in order to discuss the bones, of course!

Finally, an appeal to shipping agents; if you would be willing to help with preparation of the customs documentation for the next shipment to France I will be very pleased to hear from you. This will be more complex than the last load as it also involves returning the first batch to the U.K. Contact me at 12 Lexden Road, tel. no. 41051.

Carl Crossan

Only 5 tons to go!

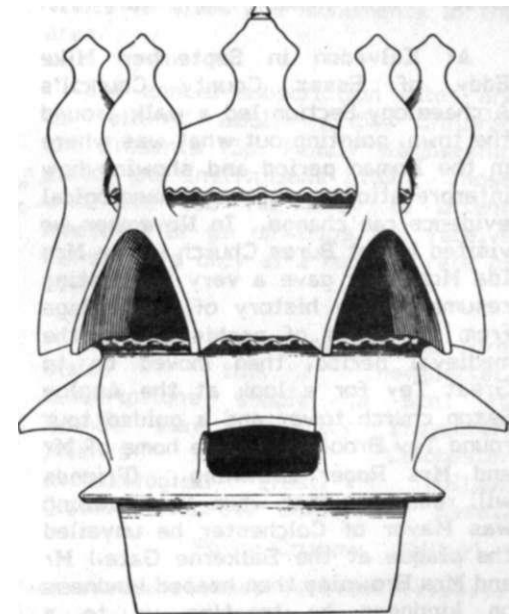
Since Robin Symonds, the Trust's Pottery Analyst, wrote in last summer's Catalogue about the magnificent system for pottery indexing set up by Mrs Sue Wade and run entirely by Friends of the Trust and other volunteers, the work has progressed so well that over half the original 12 and a half tons has now been dealt with. The team has been so proficient at sorting the pottery into its basic fabrics and types that Robin is rushed off his feet trying to keep up with them. As well as the pottery indexing many members of the team have become expert at sticking broken pots together and even at restoring missing pieces, and one member gives highly informative and interesting site tours. Several of the volunteers have also been out on the site with Nick Smith excavating beneath the tribunes' houses (see Catalogue 11). They are examining the soil below the earliest Roman layers, and recovering quantities of both Iron Age and Bronze Age pottery from it. No structures have yet been found to show the nature of this early occupation, but as the volunteers are as expert at digging as they are at indexing pottery it will probably not be long before they run some to ground!

Of course, not only the Roman but also the medieval and post-medieval pottery is being indexed, under the expert guidance of Carol Cunningham from Chelmsford Archaeological Trust. Amongst our collection she has been finding some unusual pieces of which she writes:

"Among the objects now known to have been produced by potters working in Colchester in the 13th and 14th centuries are some remarkable items of roof furniture, known as louvers.

These are large clay chimney caps often glazed with a slip-painted pattern, and usually with two tiers of vents to let smoke out, or to give ventilation. The vents have projecting canopies or baffle-plates, but the unique feature of the Colchester-ware louvers is the range of finials which decorate the baffle-plates. Many such fragments have been found from excavations in Colchester (Lion Walk, Middleborough, and the Castle Bailey) but they also occur widely elsewhere in Essex. The most complete and the most impressive example was found at Great Easton in 1964-5 (see illustration). These louvers would certainly have given a highly exotic finish to the roofs on which they were displayed."

The Trust would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have been helping with the pottery indexing and with the many other tasks which they have cheerfully undertaken!



* The louver from Great Easton, Essex (courtesy of The Society for Medieval Archaeology).

NOTES

RECENT MEETINGS

The day trip in the summer to Peterborough was not without its complications. He had just passed Cambridge and were congratulating ourselves on the good weather, when the coach broke down. Fortunately we were close to the depot of another coach hire firm who very kindly took us on to Peterborough but were unable to take us to the Early Neolithic causewayed camp at Maxey. However, Peterborough was holding its Arts

Festival that day, so we had the treat of some 'medieval' street theatre and dancing in the Cathedral close to make up for it.

At Kelvedon in September Mike Eddy of Essex County Council's Archaeology Section led a walk around the town, pointing out what was where in the Roman period and showing how interpretations of archaeological evidence can change. In November we visited Mount Bures Church where Mrs Ida McMaster gave a very interesting resume of the history of the village from the dawn of prehistory to the medieval period, then moved on to Great Tey for a look at the Anglo-Saxon church tower and a guided tour round Tey Brook Farm, the home of Mr and Mrs Roger Browning. (Friends will remember that when Mr Browning was Mayor of Colchester he unveiled the plaque at the Balkerne Gate.) Mr and Mrs Browning then heaped kindness on kindness by treating us to a superb and very welcome tea in the farmhouse. I had a very hard job forcing the coach party back into the cold for the return to Colchester!

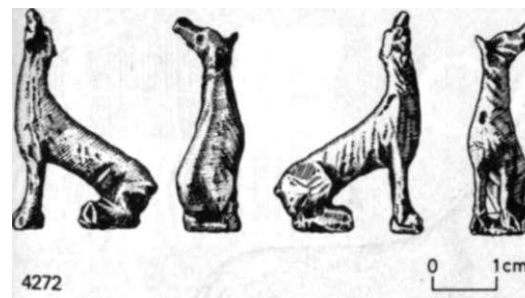
DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

The AGM this year is on January 29th. The business meeting will be held at 11 a.m. at the Trust's offices at 12 Lexden Road. In the afternoon we will meet at 2 p.m. in the lecture theatre of Colchester Public Library for talks by Nick Smith on the Culver Street site. Robin Symonds on the pottery indexing project, and Dr Rosemary Luff on some results of her research on our excavated bone, both animal and human.

On Saturday March 26th we will be going by coach to the wooden Anglo-Saxon church of Greensted near Ongar. The coach will leave the Har Memorial at 1 p.m. Seats are £1.00 each. Book with Brenda May, 5 William Close, Wivenhoe, Essex.

On Saturday May 21st there will be a coach trip to Coggeshall to see the ancient tithe barn (if it is still standing), the remains of the Abbey, and Paycocke's house. Seats £1.00 each. Book with Brenda May, address above.

The summer all day coach trip will be to Norwich (date to be arranged) where Brian Ayres of the Norfolk Archaeological Unit has kindly agreed to show us round. He may be excavating in the Castle bailey, which will be an added bonus. There will be further information about this outing.



*** Copper-alloy figurine of a sitting hound: from the forthcoming report on the Roman small finds.**

FORTHCOMING PUBLICATIONS

Two new volumes in the series Colchester Archaeological Reports will be published sometime next year. Reports published in this series represent the definitive technical account of both the sites excavated by the Trust and the material retrieved from those sites, and are the culmination of post-excavation work. The first. **The Roman small finds from excavations in Colchester 1971-9** by Nina Crummy, will be in hardback and contain about 200 pages with 212 figures illustrating some 1000 objects. The small finds have been divided into 18 categories according to function, such as Personal Ornament and Dress, Household Utensils and Furniture, or Military Equipment. There are contributions by many specialists.

The second volume is the site report by Philip Crummy on three of the Trust's major excavations. Lion Walk. Balkerne Lane and Middleborough (the last with Howard Brooks). This will also contain many specialists' reports, such as Dr Roger Ling on the wall plaster, Dr David Smith on the mosaics, Carol Cunningham on louvers, and Dr Rosemary Luff on the human remains from these non-cemetery sites.

Both these volumes will be available to members of the Friends of Colchester Archaeological Trust at a special reduced rate. There will be further information about the price and when to order.

The FRIENDS OF THE COLCHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST has been formed to provide a means of keeping interested members of the public informed about the archaeological work going on in and around the historic town of Colchester. The Friends provide the funds to publish CATALOGUE - the newsletter of the Colchester Archaeological Trust.

Friends receive two newsletters a year, attend an annual programme of lectures on the previous year's progress, are given conducted tours of current sites and can take part in a regular programme of archaeological visits to sites and monuments in the area.

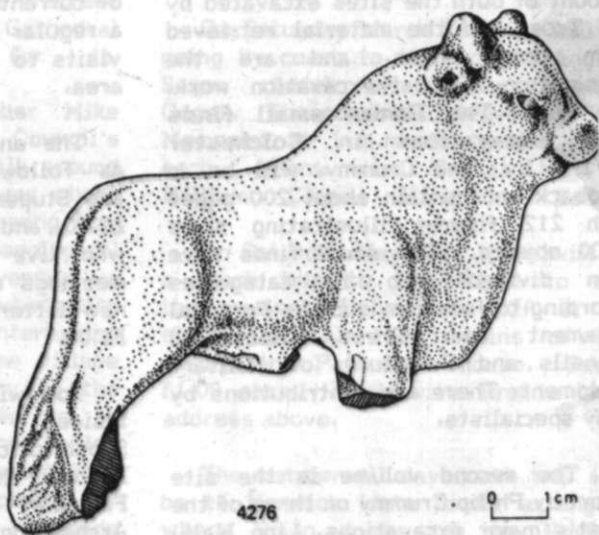
The annual subscription rates are as follows: Adults £1.50. Children and Students 75p. Family Membership £2.00. and Institutions £1.00. Those who live too far away to attend meetings or go on trips can receive newsletters only at a reduced rate of £1.00.

You will find a membership form inside this newsletter. Subscriptions should be sent to Brenda May, Honorary Treasurer, Friends of the Colchester Archaeological Trust, 5 William Close, Wivenhoe, Colchester, Essex.

Philip Crummy (Editor)

Cover:

*** The gladiator from the painted wall plaster at Balkerne Lane**



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• Pipeclay-figurine of a bull; from the forthcoming report on the Roman small finds.