

The Sword Burial

Teachers Background Notes

The Burial and its location

The discovery was made while excavating in southern Canterbury in advance of redevelopment. The site was bordered by Gas Lane, Castle Street, Rosemary Lane and Church Lane, lying just within the city walls. Today a multi-storey car park surrounded by housing occupies the area.

The archaeologists had dug down to the Roman levels. These were identified by their position in the stratigraphy of the site together with discoveries of distinctive Roman pottery, a Roman road and other dateable material. So they felt confident that this burial had taken place in Roman times. Identification of finds from the burial pit were also dated to the Roman period. All the accumulated evidence indicates that the men died and were buried sometime between AD 150 and 225.

However, this was no ordinary grave... and was suspicious for a number of reasons.

It was found inside the Roman town walls. Official burials in Roman times were made outside the walls, in cemeteries.

There were two individuals in the grave, head to toe, one on top of the other (again unusual). The position of the skeletons suggested that they had been carelessly, perhaps hurriedly, dumped in. A Roman inhumation usually takes the form of one individual lying full length on his/her back.

The two swords suggested that they were Roman soldiers (cavalrymen?). They seem to have been thrown in after the bodies. Normally at death, a soldier's weapons would be returned to an armoury.

Cause of death

There was no obvious sign on either skeleton. This is not surprising as poisonous substances and many diseases tend to attack parts of the body other than the skeleton (soft tissue, organs) leaving the bone unmarked. If an individual meets a violent death through a weapon injury the bones would not necessarily be hit or cut. The evidence from this 'grave' suggests foul play, at the very least a 'cover up' job...

Excavating Human Remains

A good deal can be learned about general health, diet, longevity and lifestyle by examining the skeletons of our ancestors. Children are usually fascinated by them. But this can also be a sensitive subject. They should be told that archaeologists

must apply to the Home Office for permission to exhume human remains. This is given once the authorities are satisfied that the remains will be dealt with in a professional manner. In due course, the majority of skeletons are re-buried, although not in their original graves.

Identifying Skeletons: Sex and Age

Skeletons can be identified to some degree by comparing them for example with modern ones of known age and sex. It is possible to determine gender in adult skeletons. The two main indicators are the pelvis and the skull. The adult female pelvis is shaped to allow childbirth. The male skull tends to have a ridge of bone above the eyebrow line. In pre-pubescent individuals it is virtually impossible to identify gender as these two areas are not yet fully developed.

It is possible to estimate the age of a young individual when he/she died by looking at how many and which teeth have erupted. In mature adults, tooth development plays a part, although to a lesser extent. More often, wear on teeth and changes in the growth of long bones in the arms and legs are the age indicators here.

Other evidence for Roman military presence in Canterbury

There is relatively little. A series of ditches were found at the Sword Burial excavation which (by their design) suggest that there may have been a fort in the area between the middle and late 1st century AD. A small number of artefacts including brooches have also been found which may have military significance.

An impressive group of horse harness pieces were found in 1978 at a site in the St Margaret's Street area. These were worn by the horse of a Roman soldier.



The harness pieces in situ at the excavation.



The harness pieces after conservation.



Two Roman cavalrymen. An artist's interpretation of the Canterbury evidence.

Occasional discoveries of things worn or used by the Roman military doesn't of course indicate a military base in the town. They may just be evidence of soldiers and other personnel passing through.

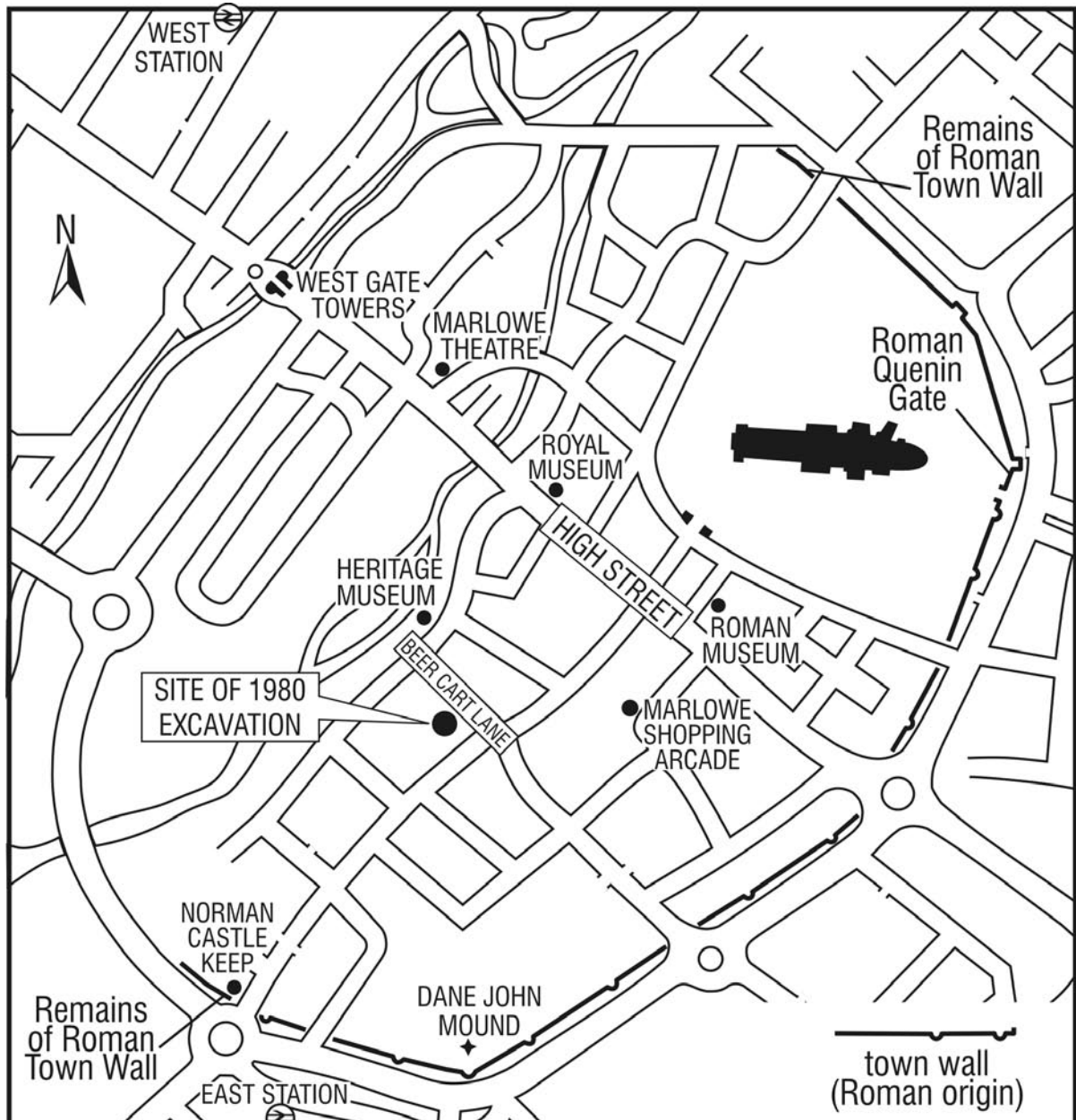
National Curriculum applications

History Key Stages 1 and 2

At KS 1, you could be selective with this material and use it when looking at evidence for what happened in the past and in the context of a time beyond living memory. At KS 2 you can include it in work on the Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings in Britain or in a local area study. Use the material to help develop skills:

observation, identification, interpretation, recording and communicating ideas and results. Who can come up with the most convincing interpretation about what happened to these men 1800 years ago? We will probably never know for sure. But it's fun and stimulating trying to find out! Children may well come up with gruesome ideas beyond your imagination...

Introduce this plan of Roman Canterbury once pupils have established that the burial took place in Roman times. They can bring in the features of the town when constructing their interpretations of what happened.



NB. Note that the evidence for a cremation cemetery in the Worthgate area is found partly inside the 3rd century masonry town wall. The burials here date to the early Roman period. We think this indicates that the original Roman town occupied a slightly smaller area, probably enclosed by an earthen boundary. In which case

this southern early Roman cremation cemetery originally lay outside it (normal Roman practice).

Across the curriculum

You could bring in elements of other subjects, for example Geography (location of site), Science (the human body, survival and decay of materials) and in particular English.

Literacy Hour

This burial is an image which can fire children's imaginations! Use it to encourage them to express their ideas both verbally and in writing. New vocabulary and descriptive work will come as part of the process. It is important that children realise there is no 'correct answer' to this mystery. They may well come up with several valid interpretations for what happened. Having done the analysis, take things a step further. The burial is a wonderful vehicle for creative writing! Children can compose stories based on the evidence, giving names to the men, setting the scene and then unfolding the events which led to their deaths.

Further reading

Excavations at Canterbury Castle, The Archaeology of Canterbury Vol 1, P Bennett, SS Frere and S Stow, pub. by Kent Archaeological Society (1982) for a detailed report on the Sword Burial and possible military presence in the area.

Excavations in the Marlowe Car Park and Surrounding Areas, The Archaeology of Canterbury Vol V, K Blockley et al, pub. by Canterbury Archaeological Trust (1995) for reports on the horse harness and a wealth of other Roman evidence from the area.