

Lost City of the Legion

New discoveries on the site of the Roman fortress at Caerleon



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

Foreword



“Caerleon is the best preserved and most accessible Roman legionary fortress in the UK, and I was delighted to have the opportunity to visit the excavations in 2010. The research that has taken place at the site since 2006 is of international importance, and the excavations in Priory Field have produced a wealth of new evidence about the fortress and its garrison. The results of the new geophysical survey are particularly significant as they have located a complex of previously unknown Roman buildings, which could lead to a change in the way we think about how Britain was conquered and occupied by the Roman army almost 2,000 years ago. The archaeological work and these new discoveries have certainly captured the imagination of the public, with more than 7,000 people visiting the dig and dozens of people volunteering on site. The project has clearly demonstrated the importance of archaeology in telling the story of our past and has shown that, in an age where we think we have all the answers, the past can come along to surprise us.”

Alun Ffred Jones, Minister for Heritage

Introduction

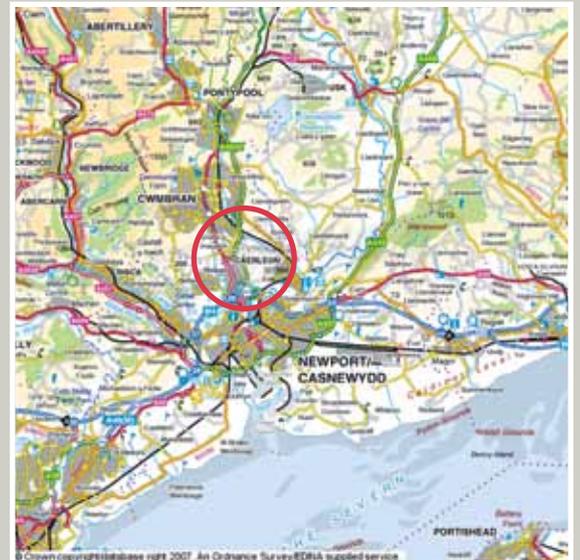
Archaeologists from Cardiff University and the Institute of Archaeology, UCL have spent the past 5 years uncovering remarkable new evidence of the Roman fortress, *Isca*, that lies beneath the modern town of Caerleon in South Wales. This phase of research is now finished and this booklet celebrates some of the project's most important achievements.



The archaeological surveys and excavations in Caerleon have identified many previously unknown Roman buildings - including an entire monumental suburb - and brought to light thousands of objects used and lost by *Isca*'s inhabitants many centuries ago.

Together with our partners, Cadw and the National Museum Wales, we are committed to involving the public in all aspects of the cutting-edge research we undertake at Caerleon - whether as volunteers on the excavations or encouraging people to visit the site (in person as well as virtually through the internet).

Perhaps one reason why archaeology continues to be so popular today is because we cannot know who we are without an understanding of where we come from, or the histories that have shaped the places we live in. Archaeology literally brings the past to life, and many of the questions we ask of the inhabitants of *Isca* - Who were they? How did they express themselves? How did Roman soldiers and native Britons learn to live together? - are equally relevant in today's world too.



The Legion & the creation of Roman Wales



“on the Silures neither terror nor mercy had the least effect; they persisted in war and could be quelled only by legions encamped in their country.”

Tacitus, Roman historian

The legionary fortress at Caerleon, which the Romans knew as *Isca*, was established in AD 74 or 75 during the final campaigns to subdue the fierce native tribes of western Britain, notably the Silures who had provided the most determined resistance to the Roman advance.

The fortress was constructed by *Legio Secunda Augusta* (the Second Augustan Legion), who were part of the original invasion force and, under the command of the future emperor Vespasian, had already brought large parts of southern and south-western England under Roman control.

The Legion consisted of over 5,000 heavily-armed professional soldiers, all of whom were Roman citizens and enlisted in the army for at least 20 years. Legionaries were the backbone of the Roman army and, with these men defeating almost everyone who stood against them, Roman imperial power grew to encompass large parts of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Even Britain, across the Ocean, became part of the Empire after the invasion ordered by the Emperor Claudius in AD 43.

At the time of the conquest there were about 30 legions in the Roman Empire, 3 of which would be permanently stationed in Britain. Caerleon offers a unique opportunity to study the Roman army and the spread of a Roman way-of-life, because much of the legionary fortress and its associated civilian settlement lie beneath open ground, unlike the remains of the other 2 British fortresses at Chester and York which are deeply buried and much disturbed.



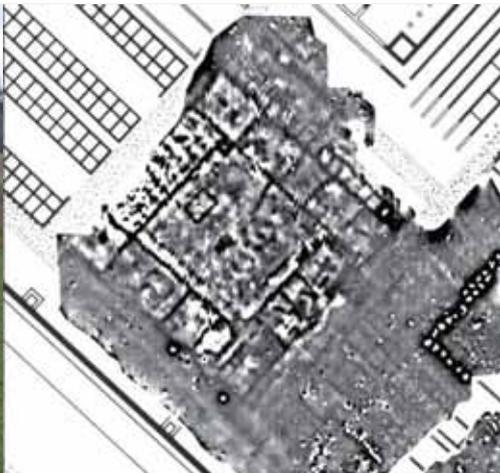
Caerleon was first recognised as Roman *Isca* in the 19th century, and antiquarians and archaeologists have since recovered a great deal of information about the legionary fortress. Today visitors can see the iconic amphitheatre dug by Mortimer Wheeler in the 1920s, part of the excavated legionary bath-house, as well as the collection of unique artefacts on display in the National Roman Legion Museum.

Cadw:

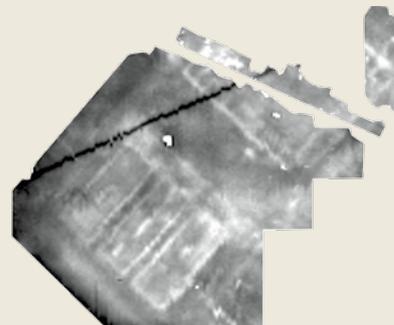
www.cadw.wales.gov.uk

National Roman Legion Museum:

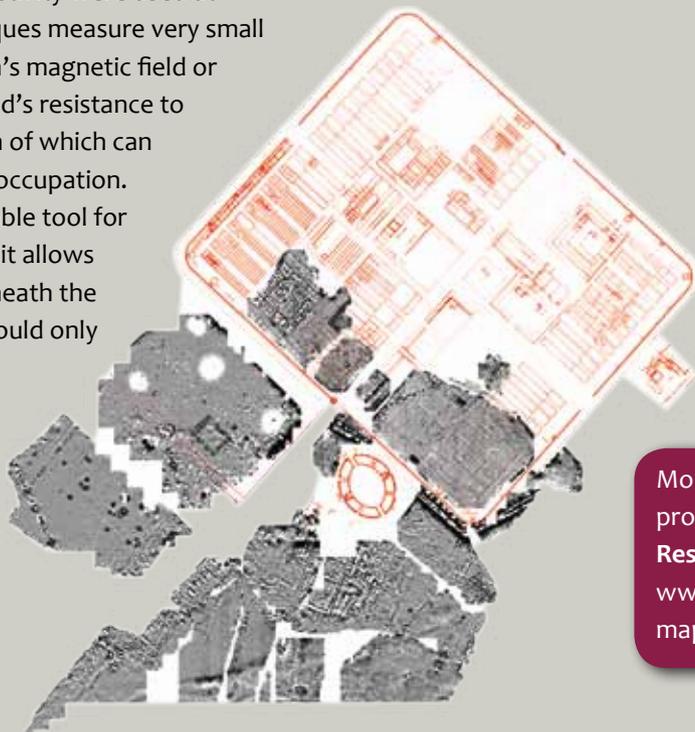
www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/roman



Mapping Isca



Magnetometry and resistivity were used at Caerleon. These techniques measure very small fluctuations in the earth's magnetic field or differences in the ground's resistance to an electric current, both of which can be the result of human occupation. Geophysics is an invaluable tool for archaeologists because it allows us to 'see' buildings beneath the ground, which before could only be done by digging.



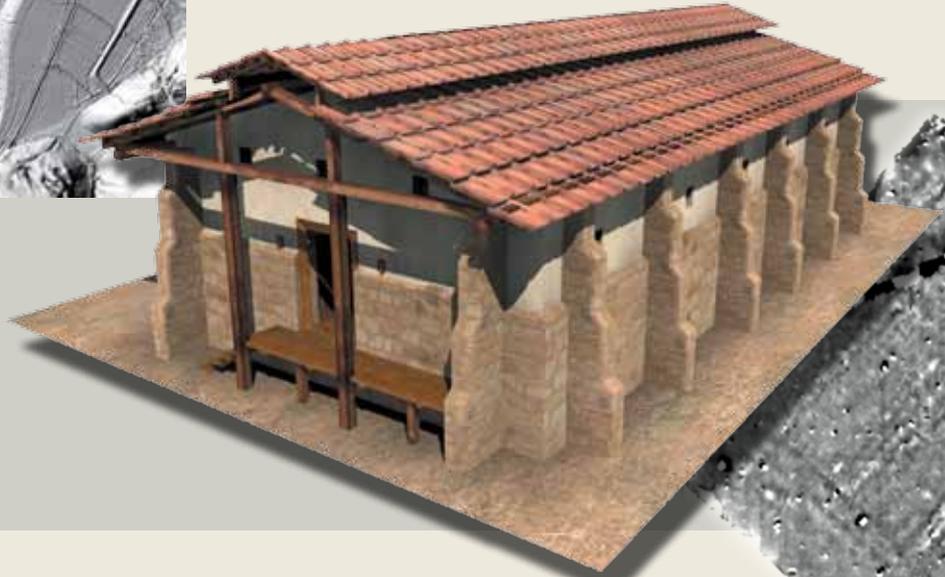
Geophysical surveys of areas within the legionary fortress have located at least 18 military buildings, including barrack blocks, granaries, stores and a very large metal workshop. These surveys were undertaken by students and staff from Cardiff University as part of the Surveying and Prospection course for undergraduate archaeologists, and in 5 field courses about 15% of the fortress's interior has been explored.

More information on the *Mapping Isca* project can be found on the **Caerleon Research Committee** website:
www.cardiff.ac.uk/hisar/archaeology/crc/mapping-isca

Mapping Isca



The surveys in Priory Field in the south-western corner of the fortress, located 8 barracks, 3 large granaries and a courtyard warehouse, parts of which were excavated in 2008 and 2010. Iron smithing took place in the huge workshop complex, one of the largest buildings in Roman Caerleon, identified beneath the running track of the Caerleon Endowed Schools.



A trial trench was excavated in 2007 in Golledge's Field, across a building thought to be the quarters of a centurion of the Legion's elite first cohort. This field had been excavated in the 1930s though it was never published and only a few records survive. The trench located the building and found evidence that its internal courtyard had been converted into a well-maintained garden (an intriguing insight into the life of the fearsome Roman centurion).

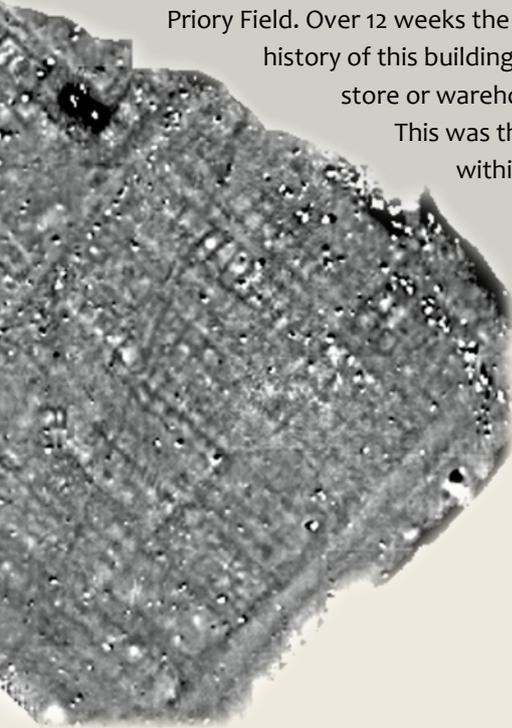
Excavating a legionary store building



In 2008 and 2010, Cardiff University and the Institute of Archaeology, UCL excavated about 70% of the front wing of a large courtyard building in Priory Field. Over 12 weeks the team of archaeologists uncovered the history of this building, almost certainly the fortress's main store or warehouse, constructed some 1900 years ago. This was the first ever research-led excavation within the fortress at Caerleon, and the first modern excavation of a legionary store anywhere in the Roman Empire.



The excavations uncovered the building's main entrance, a guardroom, a possible stairway, and four small square storerooms. The later history of the store building was particularly interesting as it seems other structures were built up against its front wall, though none of them were very well built and a least 1 fell down. If these buildings were Roman then there is a strong possibility that this part of *Isca* was occupied much later than the usually accepted date of AD 300 for the fortress's abandonment by the Legion.



Priory Field: armour & a legion of finds



The excavations recovered over 1,700 metal and glass ‘small finds’, including numerous pieces of armour and weapons that were discovered scattered across one of the storeroom’s floors. The iron objects were in a very fragile condition and they were lifted in blocks to be excavated later under laboratory conditions. Finds of armour are surprisingly rare from Roman Britain and the discovery includes at least part of a set of *lorica segmentata* (segmented body armour), as well as elements of more elaborate equipment that soldiers and their officers would have worn on parade and at official ceremonies.

All of the objects recovered during the excavation will tell us about the people who lived in Caerleon - the clothes they wore, the equipment the soldiers used, the types of food they ate and how they cooked it, and how they lived their day-to-day lives. Many of the artefacts survived in remarkably good condition and will end up on display in the galleries of the National Roman Legion Museum.



“ Everyone who lives, works or visits Caerleon is aware of its extraordinarily rich history. During the excavation the excitement and anticipation brought about by the numerous finds, that included unique and highly important items, was palpable, and I very much hope archaeologists will keep returning to discover the many more hidden secrets lying in Caerleon’s soil. ”

Councillor Gail Giles
Archaeology graduate & volunteer finds-washer



A carved stone recovered during the excavation in 2010 shows the torso of a bare-chested man, possibly with his hands tied behind his back and with a most unhappy expression on his face. This very unusual figure comes from a much larger carved frieze - is it possible that it represents a defeated and perhaps enslaved Silurian warrior from a victory monument somewhere in *Isca*?

An inscription was found in 2008 among the collapsed and robbed-out remains of the building. This records the work of men under a man called Flavius Rufus who was the Legion’s Primus Pilus, the ‘first rank’ or senior centurion (equivalent to the regimental sergeant-major in the modern British army). Rufus was probably responsible for the construction of at least part of the building we excavated.



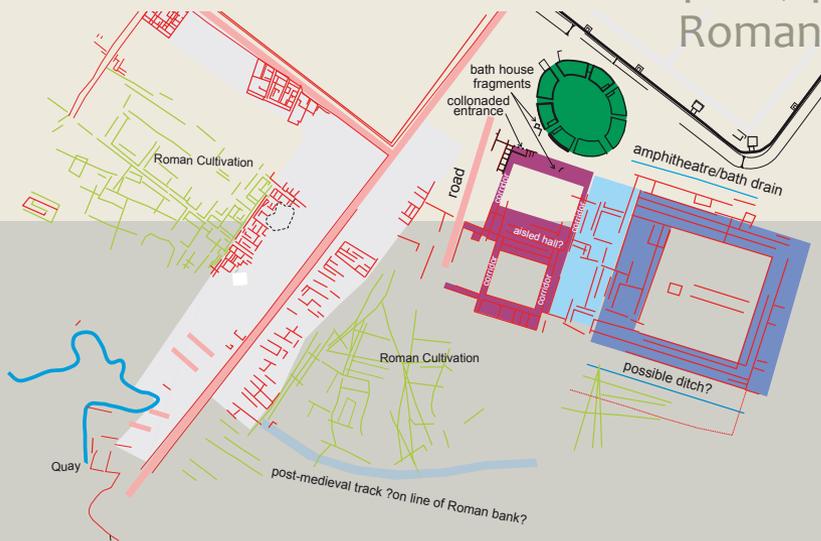
A new monumental suburb

One of the most exciting discoveries made in Caerleon during our project was the identification of a complex of large monumental buildings outside the fortress between the River Usk and the amphitheatre. This new suburb was completely unknown before its discovery by students who were using geophysical equipment to survey this part of Caerleon in 2009 and 2010, and it is a major addition to our knowledge of Roman Britain.



In 2010 2 small test pits, excavated close to the River Usk, revealed what is thought to be a quayside wall where ships would have docked and unloaded their cargoes for the military garrison at Caerleon and other forts across Wales. The Usk was tidal at this point and it connected *Isca* with the rest of the Roman Empire, allowing people, materials and new ideas to spread into Britain.

The identification of a new settlement and port in Caerleon is a major new discovery that could change how we understand the conquest, pacification and colonisation of Roman Britain.



At the moment we cannot be certain when these buildings were built or what they were for, but their size and layout suggests that they were public buildings that could have included markets, administrative buildings, bath-houses and perhaps temples. This suburb of civic buildings looks like it should be at the centre of a town or city, but we have found no evidence for the presence of a large civilian population living around Caerleon. So, what is going on?



The presence of this suburban complex of public buildings implies that the fortress was intended to become a major administrative centre in western Roman Britain, like York in the north, but this for some reason never happened. Perhaps it was felt that Rome's military and political power needed to be located in separate places in South Wales, and it was decided to build a new administrative capital for this region 9 miles away at Caerwent rather than at Caerleon.

Training - students & volunteers

“ *Those last six weeks at Caerleon will always stay with me. I feel incredibly privileged to have taken part in the project and to have played a small role in shaping the long history of Caerleon.* ”

Cardiff University student



The surveys and excavations at Caerleon were undertaken by professional archaeologists and students from Cardiff, London and other UK universities. It is important that the next generation of archaeologists learn how to excavate and understand archaeological remains, and training was an important aspect of the excavations in Priory Field. As well as university undergraduates and postgraduates, the project involved students from schools and colleges too, including a group from Colchester Sixth Form College, who gained their first experiences of ‘real’ archaeology at Caerleon.



A small army of enthusiastic volunteers joined the excavations, working in the trench or helping to wash the thousands of finds we excavated. People of all ages and from all walks of life – from the UK, Europe and the USA - joined us for the occasional afternoon, weekends, or even for the full 6 weeks. Many people are interested in being involved in archaeological research and it is important that opportunities exist for the public to volunteer on excavations like those in Caerleon.

Involving the public - site events

“ My daughter has to become an archaeologist now! Thank you! ”

Famille Memaitre from France,
visitors to the Priory Field excavation.



The Priory Field excavations were open to the public every working day, and 7,000 people came to see ‘Real Archaeology in Action’ throughout the 2008 and 2010 seasons. Special open weekends were held where visitors could find out how the excavation was progressing and join in special activities, such as making pots, dressing up as legionaries, pot-washing, or sampling Roman bread and other ancient culinary delights.



Engaging the global community

“ Just a note to thank you for the postings on the blog of the Priory Dig. I will be 60 years old next year and I followed every day from here in Littleton, Colorado. This was better than any reality TV program. ”

Blog fan from the USA

Read the **Priory Field Dig Blog** at:
www.britarch.ac.uk/caf/wikka.php?wakka=CaerleonLegionaryFortress

In 2008 the Minister for Heritage published a strategy for the Welsh Historic Environment to encourage public engagement in the nation's rich heritage. Archaeology can contribute to improving community wellbeing, economic vitality, lifelong learning, as well as local distinctiveness and the national identity.

The archaeological work at Caerleon has played an important part in meeting many of the objectives outlined in this ambitious strategy. The past belongs to us all, and archaeology has an important role to play in engaging people with the historical remains that surround us and make us who we are.

As well as providing for people to visit the excavations in person, the internet was an important tool in communicating with the world about how the excavations were getting on and what we had found. The daily 'Dig blog' received over 37,000 hits during the 2 excavation seasons, while news of the discovery of the new complex of monumental buildings very quickly spread around the globe. The story was covered by the BBC, S4C, local and national newspapers, as well Yahoo News. The article about the new discovery on the Guardian newspaper's website was hit 500,000 times over the first weekend alone!

Find out more about the **Minister's strategy for the Historic Environment in Wales** at:
www.wales.gov.uk/topics/cultureandsport/historic



The future



“It’s a joy to witness the exhilaration of children in discovering the fascinating secrets of the Roman past.”

Paul Flynn MP

Find out more about Roman Caerleon on the **Caerleon Research Committee** website:
www.cf.ac.uk/hisar/archaeology/crc

The new monumental suburb identified outside the walls of the fortress is extremely important for understanding Roman Britain, and much remains to be discovered about this unique complex of buildings. When were they built?

What were they for? What happened to them and why were they abandoned? How well do the remains of these buildings survive? These and many other questions can only be answered by further research, enriching the heritage of Wales and the UK. Caerleon is a fascinating place, and will continue to be one of the most exciting archaeological sites in Britain for years to come.



The excavations in Priory Field produced over 1,700 metal and glass artefacts, over 6,000 sherds of pottery and more than 100 kg of animal bones. All of this material has to be cleaned, conserved, marked and sorted before being identified by specialists who will help piece together the story of this part Caerleon in Roman times. The aim is to publish the excavation report as quickly as possible and to make the results available to the general public via the internet.

Cadw: www.cadw.wales.gov.uk

National Museum Wales: www.museumwales.ac.uk

Cardiff University: www.cf.ac.uk/share

UCL: www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology

Council for British Archaeology: www.britarch.ac.uk

The Roman Society: www.romansociety.org

Acknowledgements

The surveys and excavations in Caerleon would not have been possible without the support of many organisations and individuals. The work between 2006 and 2010 was funded by Cadw, Cardiff University and UCL, and we would also like to thank staff at the National Roman Legion Museum for helping to make the project such a success. Dr Tim Young of GeoArch deserves special mention for leading the geophysical surveys and for his assistance during the excavations.

The excavation team camped in Priory Field during the summer months in 2007, 2008 and 2010, and we are grateful to our many friends in Caerleon and Newport who made us welcome and who were always there when we needed help. Rather like the Roman army, an archaeological excavation digs on its stomach and special thanks go to Steve Ash of Caerleon Cricket Club and Lorraine Cashman of the White Hart, who provided our meals and kept us going even when it looked like the rain would never stop. Archaeology is about people – whether in the past or today – and we could not have achieved so much in Caerleon without the enthusiasm of the many archaeologists, students and volunteers who made the past 5 years so exciting and enjoyable. This is for you.



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