

# Silchester Roman Town



## The Baths 2018

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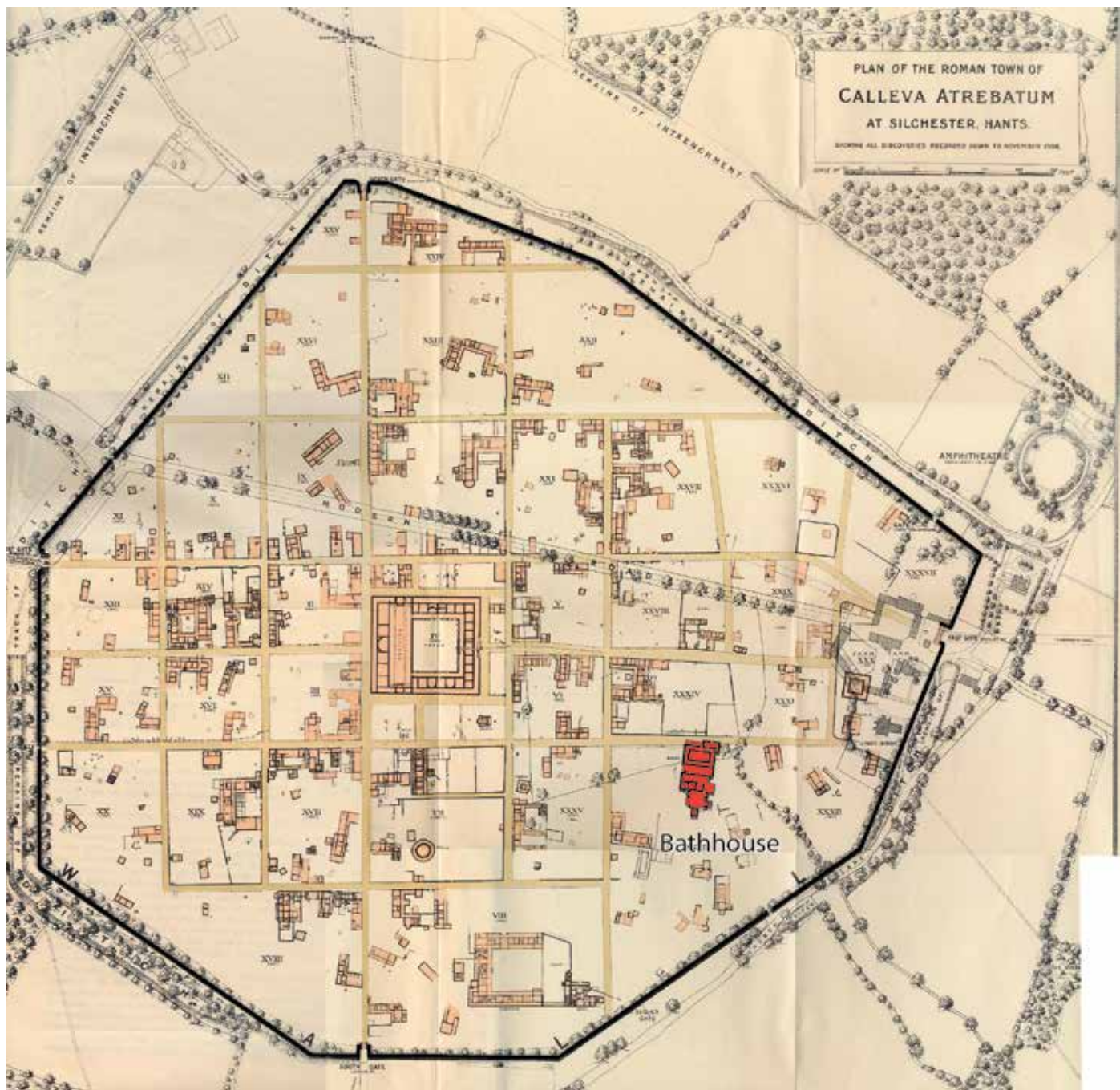


Fig. 1 Location map



Fig. 2 Photograph from 1903-04. Looking west within the latrine (Hope and Fox 1905)



Fig. 3 Nero-stamped tile from the cess pit (Reading Museum)



# Introduction

The baths at Silchester lie at the lowest point within the Roman town walls. They were first discovered and explored in 1903-4 as part of the Society of Antiquaries of London's project undertaken between 1890 and 1908 to excavate the entirety of the walled area of the Roman town at Silchester. The work was promptly published in 1905 with two important developments on the way previous seasons of excavation at Silchester had been reported: the authors recognised the great complexity of the building and made great efforts to establish its history of development with plans showing the six different phases of construction which they identified. The report also made extensive use of photography (Hope and Fox 1905).

With their focus on trying to understand the workings of the baths and how these changed relative to each other over time, there was little opportunity to discover the absolute dating of the various alterations. However a very important observation was that the first phase of the baths pre-dated the laying down of the east-west street of the town. The discovery of a Nero-stamped tile in the cess pit to the east of the latrine added further weight to the theory of an early date for the initial construction. At the same time and as a result of working within the building, few finds were made and so little was learned of daily life in the baths and how that changed over time. The aim of our excavation is to begin to address these two major gaps in our knowledge: chronology and daily life. At the same time, in re-exposing parts of the structure of the building it will be possible to learn more about the materials used in its construction and how these changed over time.

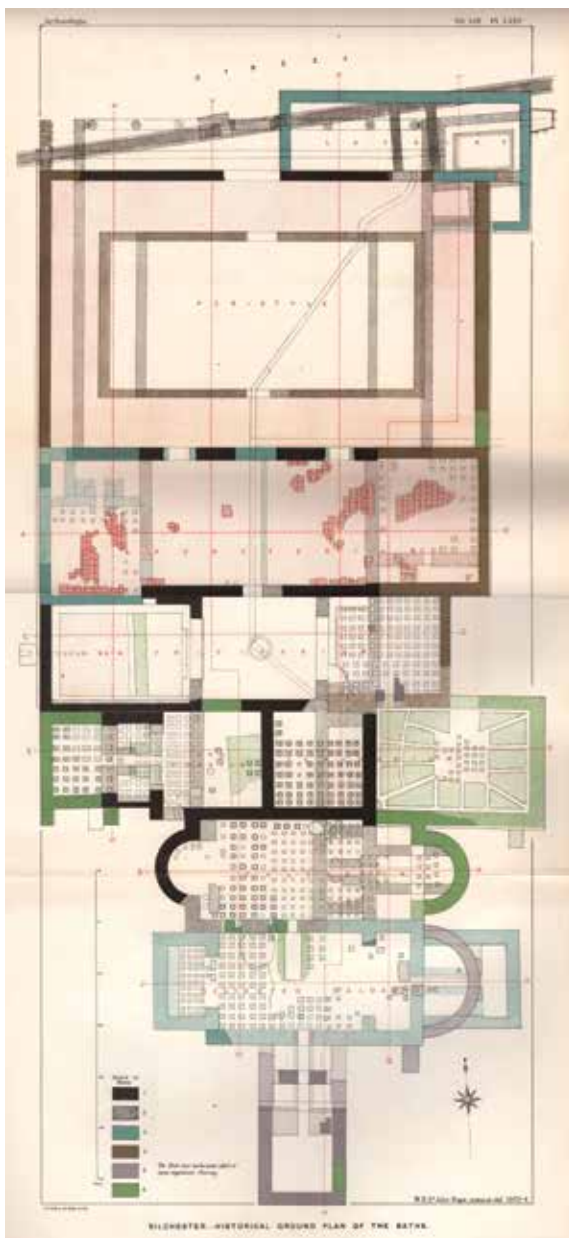


Fig. 4 Multiphase plan produced in 1905 (Hope and Fox, 1905)

## The Façade of the Baths (Trench 1)

An area of 250m<sup>2</sup> was re-excavated to expose the complete frontage of the baths including the latrine. A small excavation behind the façade investigated the sequence of surfaces and make-ups of the palaestra. This revealed traces of a north-south-aligned foundation beneath the make-up for the earliest surface of the palaestra hinting at preparatory work for the first phase or even an earlier structure which pre-dates the first, built phase of the baths.

Phase 1: the façade of the baths originally consisted of a wall of Greensand blocks, the surviving section topped with brick string courses. It was fronted by a colonnade supported by small columns of Painswick (Glos.) limestone resting on a brick-built stereobate. The wall survives to a height of 0.3m above its foundations, while the two surviving columns stand 0.33m and 0.4m high. The middle column, visible on the 1903-4 photography, had been removed. In the middle of the colonnade was the entrance

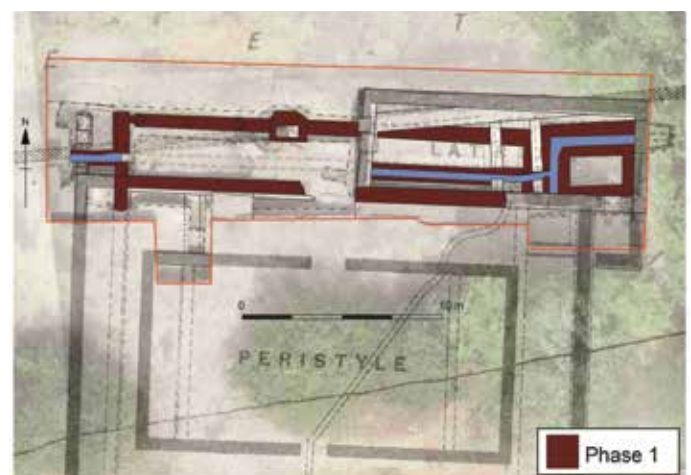


Fig. 5 The facade, Phase 1

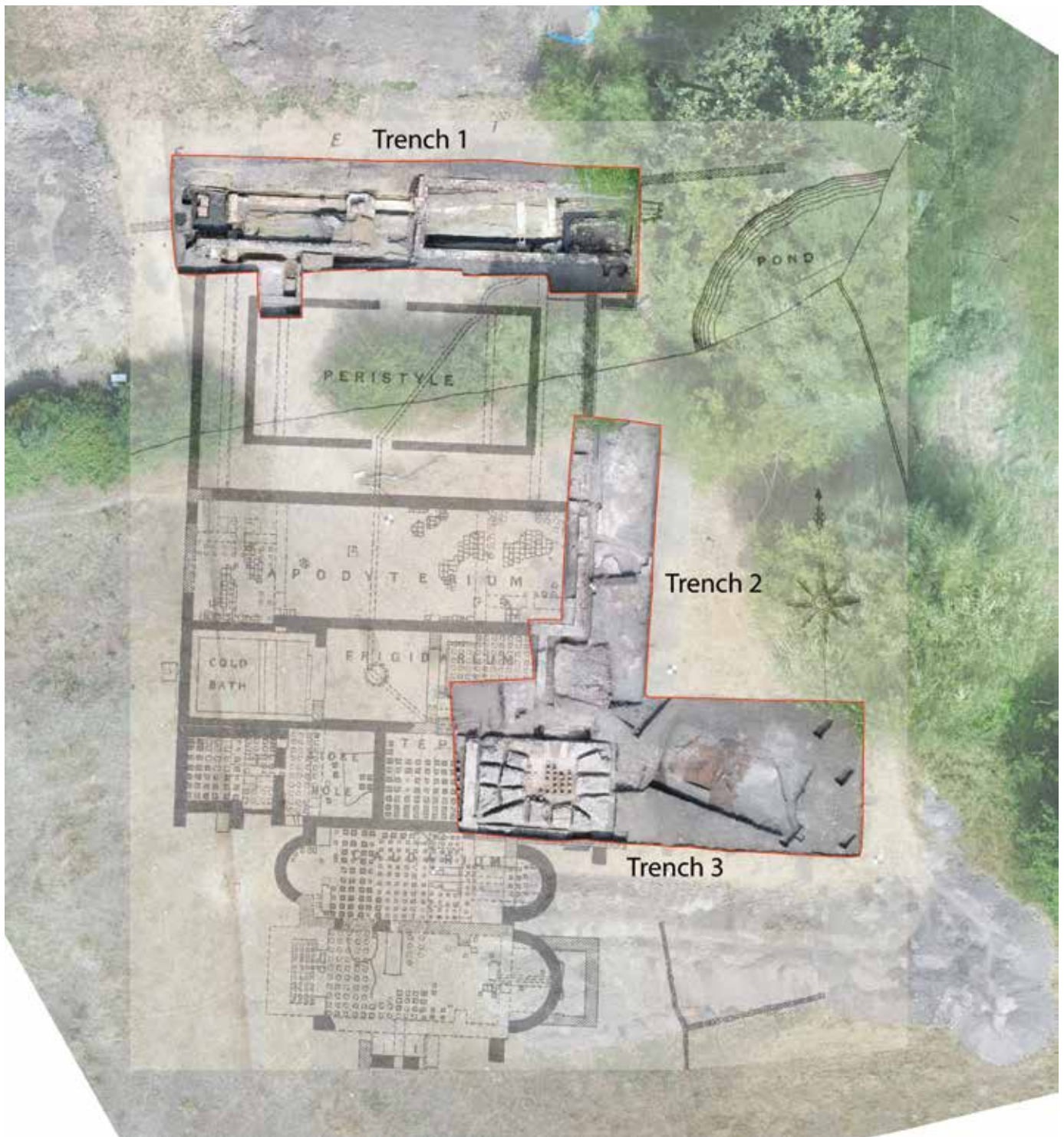


Fig.6 Trench locations

to the baths, flanked by brick piers c. 3.2m apart. A rectangular latrine block built of flint with brick coursing abutted its eastern end, its orientation slightly askew to that of the façade. This block was characterised by a water channel, 1.05m deep, which was traced around three sides, the fourth buried beneath a late extension of the façade. This was fed by a channel, lined by Greensand blocks, which ran immediately in front of and parallel with the front wall, entering the baths from the west through a brick arch.



Fig.7 Looking north. The facade of the bathhouse fronted by the colonnaded stereobate





Fig.8 Water channel at the base of the early latrine, view to south



Fig.11 Corner of the facade extension supported upon alder piles, view to west

Phase 2: although we cannot be certain of their contemporaneity, extensions to the façade were added at both ends. To the west the wall was built out a further 2m, the new build simply butting on to the old, and, where the new external, west wall was built over the water channel, it was supported on piles of alder. An east-west foundation to support a colonnade running around the interior of the palaestra is in a similar type of build and probably belongs to this phase. At the eastern end the wall, now only of flint, was built out as far as the east end of the latrine and over its southern channel.

Phase 3: a further major modification took place which involved extending the latrine block westwards, the new north wall requiring the demolition of the colonnade to the east of the entrance. The line of the new build is askew to that of the north wall of the baths, its alignment apparently dictated by the course of the east-west street of the Flavian grid. It extended as far as the eastern pier of the entrance to the baths where it turned at right angles to create a new west wall of the block.

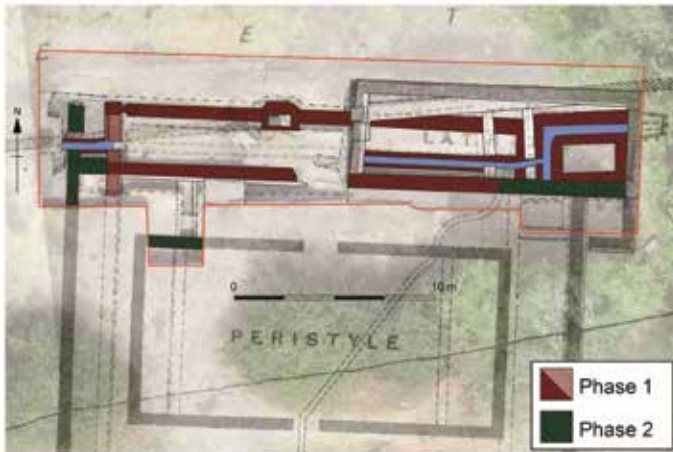


Fig.9 The facade, Phase 2

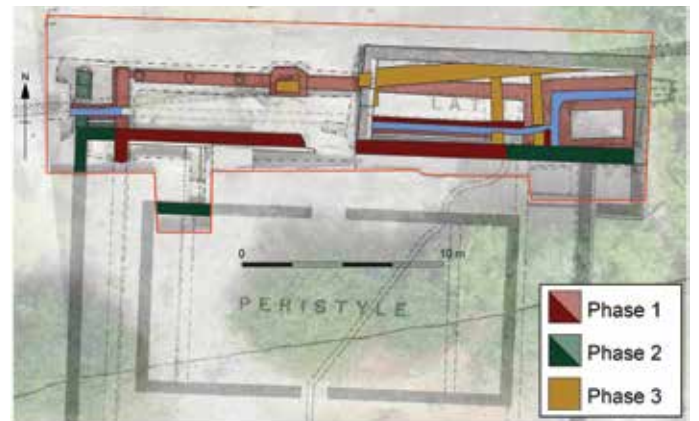


Fig.12 The facade, Phase 3



Fig.10 The extension to the western facade of the bathhouse, looking south

Though largely destroyed by later modifications, there are clear traces of an entrance, subsequently blocked, in the middle of the west wall. The extended latrine was thus trapezoidal in plan. Two cross walls sub-divide the internal space creating a possible lobby between the new extension and the original latrine. They appear to respect the water channel suggesting continuity of use. The two brick piers supporting the entrance to the baths were rebuilt on the same alignment, the western one on the reduced remains of its predecessor. The height of this suggests that ground levels had risen c. 0.7m, either as a response to the laying down of the street or to flooding. Contrary to the Antiquaries' interpretation, there is no evidence for the continuation of the new alignment across the rest of the frontage. Although the bases and the bottom of the shafts were buried by the rise in ground level there is no reason why the remaining columns and the western half of the portico could not have been left in situ. However, if the entrance had been rebuilt to give extra height, it is likely that the whole of the frontage was similarly raised which would have required columns of greater length.



Phase 4: The last major change to the frontage of the baths involved the rebuilding of the extended latrine as a rectangular structure and the construction of one, possibly two, new water channels. The north wall of the new structure now cut into the line of the street. It was made up of courses of massive blocks of naturally cemented gravel, flint and brick and overlaid the foundations of its predecessor returning at right angles to create a new west wall which was pierced by two brick-lined openings, the earlier doorway now blocked. At the east end a re-built wall included a brick archway to cover the outflow from the latrine. The positions of these openings to east and west



Fig.14 Eastern wall of the latrine with re-aligned drainage arch

indicate that new and higher channels had to be created to ensure a continuous flow of water through the latrine.

Any possible surviving traces of these new channels had been destroyed by the 1903-4 excavations. There is no evidence for the location of the new entrance to the latrine but it probably simply replaced its blocked predecessor at a higher level. No evidence was found to date this late re-building, but it is likely to have been in the later third or fourth century by which time the street had risen to within 0.2-0.3m of the present ground surface. This was the level down to which the Roman masonry was initially robbed in medieval times.

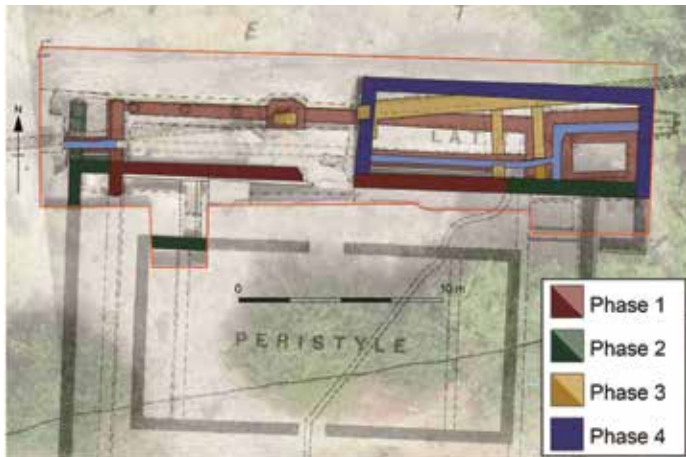


Fig.13 The facade, Phase 4



Fig.15 Looking east along the latrine



# The Tepidarium

The excavation exposed the complete footprint of the foundations of the late Roman tepidarium which was built over an earlier structure on the eastern side of the baths. Covering an area of 72m<sup>2</sup> (9.75m by 7.45m) it was of mixed construction. The central area of the floor had been supported on brick pilae, but between this array and the outer walls the floor was supported on blocks of rubble masonry between which channels ran to convey the warm air to the (robbed out) flues running up the inside faces of the outer walls. A gap in the masonry on the north side indicated where the furnace had been located, but all traces of this had been robbed away. The width of the foundations on the western side of the pilae was such that they had to be bisected by a further channel aligned more or less north-south.

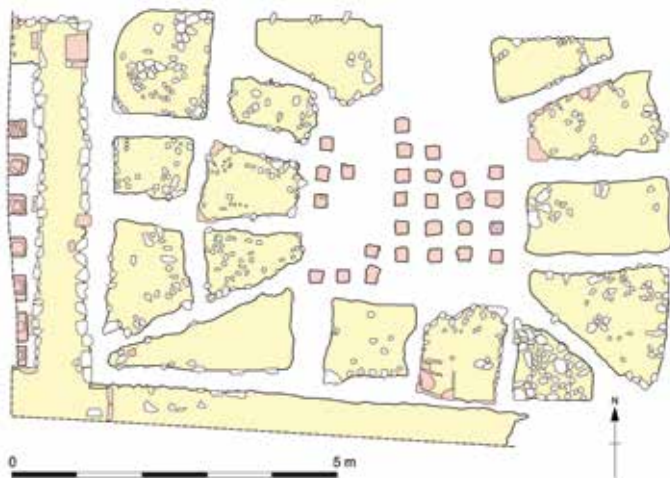


Fig.16 Hypocaust below the tepidarium



Fig.17 Pilae within the centre of the hypocaust

While the west wall had been robbed down to approximately the same level as the foundations of the tepidarium, the robbing of the south wall stepped down deeper into its foundations. This greater depth was carried on around the east and the north side where, at the base of the robbing, were the remains of a tiled foundation of an earlier structure. The greater depth to which the three outer walls of the tepidarium had been robbed suggests a different and later phase of robbing to that which had reduced the masonry of the east wall of the baths to which the tepidarium had been attached.



Fig.18 Potential early structure beneath the tepidarium



Fig.19 The tepidarium looking south





Fig.20 Trenches 2 and 3 overlying geophysics showing the alignment of the Iron Age earthwork (Creighton with Fry, 2016)

## Trench 2

To the north of the tepidarium the east wall of the baths formed the west edge of the trench which was designed to explore the deposits which had accumulated during the lifetime of the baths. These included the fill of the trench of 1903-4 which had defined the outer edge of the east wall as well as contexts which related to the robbing of the structure in the medieval period. This process had resulted in the discard of large quantities of broken CBM (ceramic building material); the stone removed elsewhere. Although a further large deposit of broken CBM remains to be excavated in 2019, the uppermost levels of Roman occupation have been reached across the rest of this part of the trench.



Fig.21 Trench 2, the eastern wall of the baths with outer surfaces covered by rubble from medieval robbing (left)



Fig.22 Trench 2 outflow drain within the eastern wall

## Trench 3

The area excavated to the east of the tepidarium ran down slope towards the stream. It extended across where the geophysics had indicated the course of what might be the Late Iron Age Inner Earthwork. Clear evidence of the trial trenching of 1903-4, running north-east/south-west across the grain of the insula, was recovered. There were also traces of the clay-filled beam slots of a medieval timber building towards the east end of the trench. Excavation and coring confirmed the ditch. By the end of the season excavation had begun on the latest Roman fills which had subsided into its fill. These were characterised by large quantities of fragmented *opus signinum*.



Fig.23 Trench 3, late Roman crushed tile surface slumping into the underlying Iron Age ditch

Hope, W. H. St John and Fox, G. E. 1905: 'Excavations on the site of the Roman City at Silchester, Hants, in 1903 and 1904', *Archaeologia* 59, 333-70.

Creighton, J. with Fry, R. 2016: *Silchester: Changing Visions of a Roman Town*, Britannia Monograph 28, London



# The Finds

The majority of the small finds from the excavation are small personal items and they occurred in quantity in each of the three trenches. Due to the nature of the excavation, many were recovered from Edwardian backfill deposits and not from newly excavated Roman contexts. The most common find was coins, most of which are late Roman in date although there is also a small number of early Roman coins. Of the 202 coins recovered, some 128 were recovered from the spoil heaps in the topsoil and backfill removed by machining and many of the remaining 74 coins were excavated from backfill. Other common finds are hairpins, the majority of bone, but with several of copper alloy and one of jet, copper alloy bracelets, finger rings of copper alloy, glass (Fig. 24) and even gold and brooches.



Fig.24 Blue glass ring

The gold ring from Trench 2 has a distorted hoop of rectangular section which is comprised of three parallel thin bands, the two outer bands end in curled terminals at the bezel, although two are missing (Fig. 25). The raised circular bezel has a narrow, scalloped collar and is missing its setting. This, like many of the finger rings is a late Roman type. Of some interest are the beads in both glass and jet, many of which are very small (c. 1–2 mm in diameter) and, remarkably, were recovered during excavation as well as from sieved bulk samples. Other small items associated with personal grooming are a comb (Fig. 27), tweezers and



Fig.25 Gold ring



Fig.26 Medieval belt buckle

nail cleaner and there are a number of counters in glass, pottery and stone. The other item of great interest is the buckle from Trench 3, probably of medieval date (Fig. 26).

Among the more utilitarian finds are a number of quern-stones, a bone weaving tablet, needles, bone inlay, handles, small copper alloy studs and tacks. There are also a number of pottery sherds bearing graffiti.



Fig.27 Bone comb

A very large amount of ceramic building material (CBM) was recovered and recorded on site with just under 10 tonnes processed by the Finds Team. The largest proportion, 4.41 tonnes, was recorded from trench 3.



Fig.28 CBM dumping



The majority was recovered from the backfill of the Edwardian excavations. In addition to the typical building material assemblages recorded on all Roman urban sites, comprising tegulae, imbrices, brick and tile, there were some more unusual forms and features.



Fig.30 Brick with comb decoration

Not unexpectedly for a bathhouse excavation, there was a large assemblage of material used in the construction of hypocausts, to provide underfloor and cavity wall heating. This included bessales, used as hypocaust pilae, as seen in the tepidarium, box-flue tiles, and parietales. Two types of voussoirs were identified, solid (cuneatus) and hollow, used in the construction of arches and vaults. The majority of the flue tile had been keyed by scoring or combing, with only three examples of flue-tiles roller-stamped with dies 38 and 39. There were also several *opus spicatum* bricks in the assemblage; these were laid on their edge as flooring in a herringbone pattern.



Fig.31 Stamped tegula



Fig.32 Stoat paw prints

Several very interesting individual pieces were recorded, including a tegula with a partial stamp which includes the letters F·R. We have so far not been able to identify any other similar example from Britain. There was also a fragment of brick on which a sketch had been drawn. The image was made using a fine four-toothed comb and includes circular and triangular elements. A tile was recovered bearing a circular impression, the dimensions of which match the stamps found at Silchester bearing the titles of the Emperor Nero, although no letters could be identified. There was also a tile with a textile impression, perhaps created by the tilemaker kneeling on it before firing. The usual range of animal foot prints was recorded. These include dog, fox, sheep and one example identified as a stoat.



Fig.33 Textile impression

A large quantity of *opus signinum*, mortar and wall plaster was also recovered. Due to the volume some was recorded and discarded on site, but a large sample was retained for further analysis. Selected fragments included those with coloured paint, mouldings and multiple layers (e.g. of mortar and plaster) as well as a sample of different fabrics. It is hoped that this sample will add greatly to our knowledge of the decorative techniques and styles used in the bath house.



# Geophysical Survey

A rectangular area (114m by 50m, 0.5ha) was surveyed either side of the extant field boundary to the west of the bath-house excavation (Fig 34). The aim of this survey was to investigate further the potential existence of conduits or leats which might have supplied water to the bathhouse.

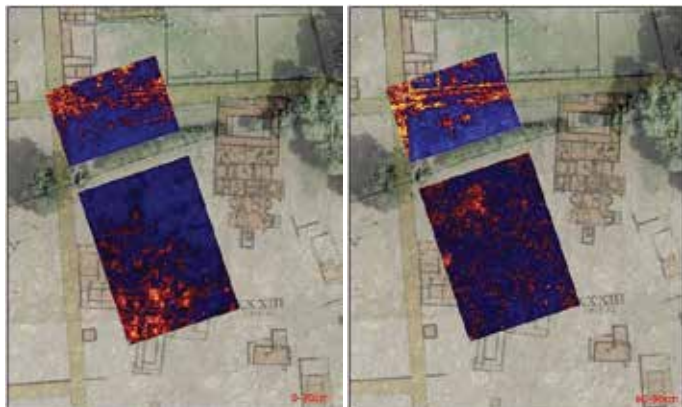


Fig.34 . Depth Slices (30cm & 90cm) showing the Bathhouse Area GPR Survey

The survey within this area was successfully able to identify known archaeological features which verified the Antiquaries plan and added detail to the previous geophysical survey of the area (Creighton with Fry 2016). The east-west street, and associated roadside buildings and walls are especially prominent. It is notable that the area within the same Insula, but to the west of the bathhouse, appears to have been relatively open, with no major structures recorded here in any previous investigation.

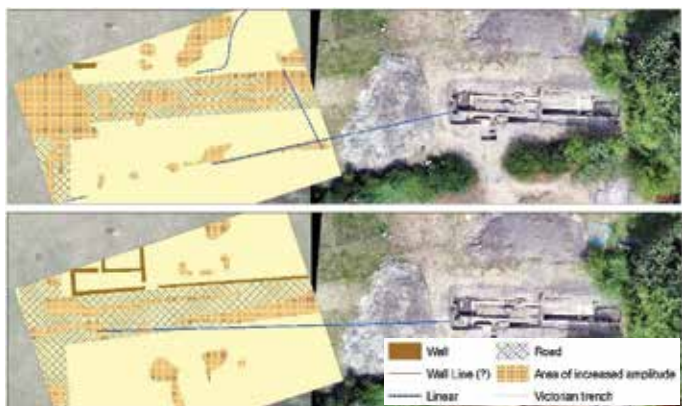


Fig.35 . Extracts from the GPR Interpretation (30cm and 90cm depth slices) highlighting the potential conduits extending towards the bathhouse

At two separate depths within this area however, faint linear anomalies (highlighted in blue, Fig 35) can be seen extending towards the excavated leat discovered within Trench 1 and may relate to such water feeds.

## Temple Area

The GPR survey within the paddocks to the west of the extant graveyard covered an area of 62m by 40m (0.18ha). The intention of the survey was to complete a series of previously undertaken GPR surveys (Thornley 2014, Fry 2016) which focussed on the course of the temenos wall surrounding three Romano-Celtic Temples now known to exist here. As Fig 36 shows, the two southern temples appear prominently within the data, indicating they are relatively well preserved. The temenos wall, extending north-south, and curving 90 degrees at its southern extent, fits almost exactly to the Antiquaries plan, validating it and linking up with the previous GPR surveys.



Fig.36 Depth slice (90cm) showing the western edge of the southern temples, and detail of the temenos wall

# Conclusions

The 2018 season has demonstrated the enormous potential of excavation and re-excavation of the baths. Re-excavation has shown that there is much more to learn about the building itself and the materials used in its construction and how it and they changed over time. Already we can see considerably more complexity in the history of the building, including evidence of an early phase, than was appreciated by the Edwardian excavators. Even though many of the finds are clearly residual, the excavation of the largely undisturbed deposits along the eastern side has already proved very promising with regard to learning about the habits of at least some of those who frequented the baths. These almost certainly included women and children. The evidence for the demolition of the building also enriches our knowledge of medieval Silchester. The confirmation that we have found the ditch of the late Iron Age Inner Earthwork offers the potential of recovering a long sequence of deposits which will reflect the changing use of the baths from its earliest days to its abandonment.





## Acknowledgements

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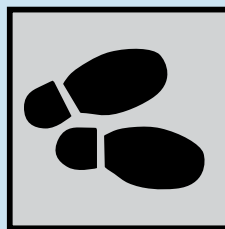
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