

Caerwent and Caerleon

What the Romans did for south east Wales

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On August 22nd 2010 Tim Lunt led an excursion to Caerwent (the *civitas* Venta Silurum) and Caerleon (the Legionary fortress *Isca* of the Second Legion Augusta). At the time of the Roman invasion of Britain in AD43, the south east of Wales was inhabited by the Silures, a warlike tribe based in fortified settlements on the fertile lands near the coast. These settlements included the hill fort at Llammelin Wood, on the higher ground behind what is now Caerwent.

The Silures put up a strong resistance to the Roman advance, defeating them in a battle in AD52. They were not finally pacified until AD74 when a new governor, *Julius Frontinus*, was appointed and a Legionary fortress was established at Caerleon. It is a measure of the task that the Romans faced in keeping control of this area of Wales that, of the total of three Legions controlling the whole province of Britain, one was based here until the third Century, when the troops were relocated to Colchester. Secondary forts were constructed to the west, linked by roads to Caerleon, giving a wide area of control. The site chosen for the fortress on the River Usk was strategically important; the river gives access to the Bristol Channel to the south and runs inland to the north as far as the Black Mountains. It has a tidal range in the top four in the world (with the Severn, Wye and Amazon) providing a good transport route for the exploitation of the natural resources of this region of Wales: gold, coal and iron.

The town of Caerwent developed gradually to the east of Caerleon, on the road linking Caerleon to Gloucester. It began as a trading town consisting of a few houses. In the second century it was fortified with earthen banks and 20 *insula* blocks were built inside these walls, marking the establishment of the town as the administrative capital of the Silures, the *civitas* Venta Silurum, and the Romanisation of the tribe. Later on, in the third Century, more substantial stone walls were constructed; at this time the Legion was being withdrawn from Caerleon, leaving the town more exposed. Later again, in about AD350, perhaps as a reaction to the increased instability in the countryside, the walls were further strengthened with the construction of 50 freestanding towers around the perimeter, and the south and north gates were blocked up. The town declined in importance in the 5th Century but the evidence of its Roman origins are still clearly visible in its main street, running east to west, and in the remains of the walls, temple, forum, basilica, shops and houses which have been revealed in a series of excavations from 1855 onwards.

We started the day in Caerwent, where Tim led us around the outside of the walls to the south gate, giving us an expert running commentary on the way. These walls are very impressive, as can be seen in Figure 1, rising to more than 30ft and with the towers still in situ. They are the best preserved Roman walls in Wales. We entered the town via a break in the south wall, walking up to the temple (see Figure 2). This was built in about AD330, with its entrance from the main east-west road. The deity worshipped is not known. To the left of the temple lie the remains of the forum and basilica. The forum, also entered from the main street, was a paved rectangular area which would have been enclosed with colonnades of shops. On its north side are the remains of the huge basilica, 260ft by 182ft, built in the early second Century AD and rebuilt in AD300 after subsidence. It was aisled internally with two rows of Corinthian columns and is believed to have been 65ft high. It would have provided a great space for public meetings and ceremonies, as well as small rooms for administrators and magistrates.

In the north west quarter of the town are two further excavated Roman sites. Site I is the foundation of a substantial dwelling, probably a farm of the early 4th Century replacing an earlier timber building. The building was arranged around two courtyards, the residential rooms having painted walls, mosaics and a hypocaust whose columns are still visible. The other site (VII) in this part of town is a range of buildings which were probably residential houses with shops and workshops in front; one was a blacksmith's (see Figure 3).



Figure 1
Caerwent, the substantial Roman walls and towers at the south of the town

Figure 2
Caerwent, the remains of the fourth Century Roman temple

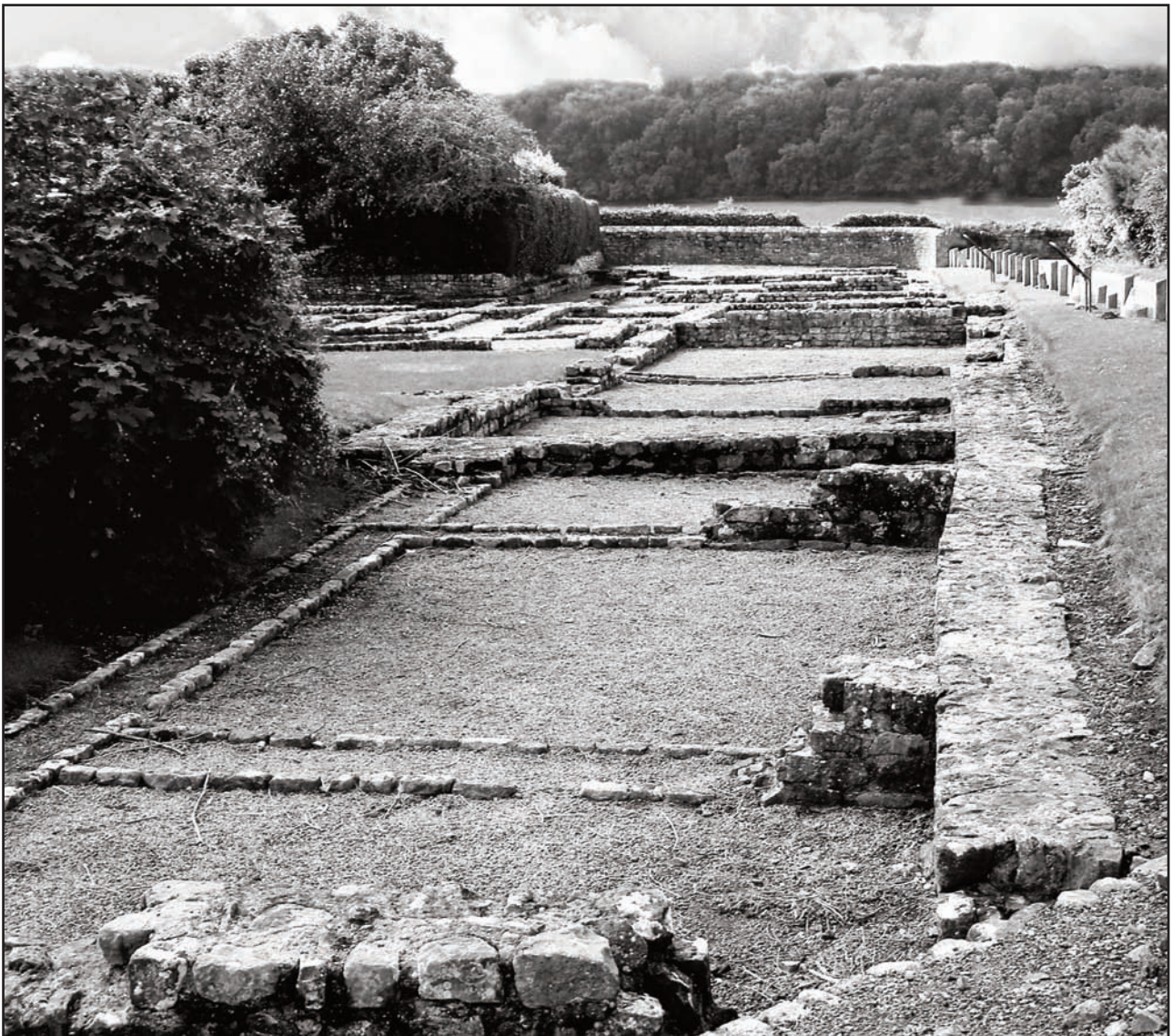


The impressive size of the basilica and these other buildings suggest that the early 4th Century was a period of prosperity in *civitas* Venta Silurius before it went into its later decline. Finally, as we ended our tour of Caerwent, we went to the parish church where the porch houses two very interesting stones excavated in the town. One is an altar stone dedicated to the god *Mars Ocelus*, a fusion of Roman and British deity and bearing the name of *Aelius Augustinus*, thought to be a Sub-Centurion from Caerleon. The other stone, the *Paulinus* stone, is one of the most important of its kind to be found in Britain, describing as it does both the military and the civil career of a Roman governor, *Tiberius Claudius Paulinus*, who commanded the Second Augustan Legion at Caerleon during the reign of Caracalla AD211-17

After this feast of Roman archaeology, we drove further west to Caerleon where we had lunch at the Hanbury Arms, reputed to be the oldest building still in use in the town. It is built on the bank of the river Usk and we could see the depth of the tidal range even at this point inland. After lunch, we went by ourselves around the well known Roman sites in the town. These included the museum with its extensive display of Roman artefacts found locally, the Roman garden and the Roman baths; there were also the remains of the barracks, the only visible remains of Roman Legionary barracks in Europe, built to house the 5,500 men of the Second Augustan Legion. They were probably first built in timber in AD75, then replaced with stone in the second Century. Finally, we came to the iconic amphitheatre built just outside the walls of the fortress in around AD90 and capable of seating up to 6,000 spectators (see Figure 4).

Figure 3

The foundations of the houses with associated workshops and shops at Caerwent



At 15.30 our party reconvened and we came to what was, for me, the highlight of the day when we were admitted to the ongoing excavation being undertaken by the students from Cardiff University and University College London, under the direction of Dr Peter Guest, Senior Lecturer in Roman Archaeology at Cardiff University. He gave us a detailed overview of the current work at the trench. The project started in 2006 when the students were given the task of surveying the areas inside the walls of the fort which, although scheduled, had previously been unexplored. One of these areas was Priory Field in the south west corner of the fort. In 2006, a magnetometry survey of this field revealed eight barrack blocks similar to those already known on the other side of the fort. In 2007, a resistivity survey in the field identified three large buildings thought to be Roman granaries. In addition to these an even larger building was located and this has been the subject of excavation from 2008 until the present time. It dates from AD80-120 and appears to have been in use for 2 centuries. It had undergone a complex series of rebuilding, at times being subdivided into 50 small rooms 4m by 4m, suggesting that it was a storehouse. In circa AD350, the internal walls of this building were demolished but the front wall was retained with lean-to buildings added to it in the Roman style. These were poorly constructed, suggesting economic decline in the town in this period. The building was later covered by a medieval barn and the difficult work to elucidate the sequence of dates is ongoing.

In 2009 and 2010, the students were sent to practice geophysical survey techniques in the field outside the walls of the fort, between the amphitheatre and the river Usk. To everyone's surprise, this survey has brought to light a monumental complex of large buildings. One is on so palatial a scale that Dr Guest suggested that it could be a rival for Fishbourne. He postulates that this may be evidence of plans to develop the fortress in Caerleon into a major settlement in western Britain. This would tie in with the potential wealth generated by the exploitation of the natural resources available in this area of Wales. This development is assessed briefly in *Current Archaeology* of Nov 2010, issue 248. It can also be followed up on the Caerleon Research Committee website www.cardiff.ac.uk/hisar/archaeology/cre. It was very satisfying for us to finish our day on such a high note, with news of fresh discoveries which are likely to lead to a total reassessment of the influence of the Romans in south east Wales.

Figure 4

The first Century amphitheatre at Caerleon

