

Great Archaeological Sites in Monmouthshire



4. CAERWENT ROMAN TOWN



Many towns in Britain owe their origin to the Romans. Usually their choice of site was not only perfect for the conditions of the time, but was also just what was needed in the Middle Ages and beyond. As a result, when there are excavations the Roman remains in them have often been disturbed by medieval and later development, and only relatively small areas can be investigated. But Caerwent, the Roman town of Caerwent is different. Since Roman times it has never been bigger than village and most of the area within the town walls the Roman built is covered by fields. A series of extensive excavations at the beginning of the 20th century uncovered many of its buildings, both private and public.

It took over twenty years for the Romans to subdue the inhabitants of South Wales in the Iron Age, who they knew as the Silures. Initially they will have been under military control by the legions stationed first at Usk and then at Caerleon. But when they judged that this could be done safely, the Romans preferred to hand over local government to local aristocrats. This stage seems to have been reached in our area at the beginning of the 2nd century AD and the appropriate civic centre was constructed to form the heart of *Venta Silurum*, 'Market Town of the Silures' (ST4691 9054). It consisted of a large paved piazza, the forum, with at one side of it the basilica, which was a large aisled hall with a range of additional rooms at the back.

Whilst the functions served by the forum would have included being a market square, the basilica acted as law court and town hall. One of the additional rooms served as the council chamber where the local aristocrats met to govern their fellow-tribesmen – the marks left by the banks of seats they would have occupied were found when this room was excavated in the 1980s. The base of a statue put up by the council to one of the town’s benefactors is now in the parish church.

Although the town walls are now the most striking of all the surviving remains, they are much later. First to be constructed, probably at the end of the 2nd century were an earthen rampart and ditch. The rampart was faced with a stone wall sometime in the 3rd century, and projecting bastions were added in the 4th century. There were four gates, one in the middle of each side. The east and west gates were dual carriage where the main east-west road ran through the wall; the north and south gates, which were less important, were single carriageway. The south gate is particularly well preserved, up to and including part of the arch over the top, because it had been blocked up.

Next to the forum is a temple. In spite of its central location, it was not constructed until around AD 330. It consisted of a central room, the *cella*, with an apse to hold the cult statue, surrounded on all four sides by an ambulatory, and stood in a courtyard whose entrance was through a hall that lay along the main street frontage.

The stone foundations of many houses were excavated at the beginning of the 20th century. Later excavation has shown that most of those examined also dated to the 4th century, and that earlier the town had a much smaller population.

Caerleon is at NP26 5NY. There is a visitor car park off the main street, just inside the west gate. Maps: OS Landranger Series sheet 171, Explorer Series Outdoor Leisure sheet 14.

Timeline (the asterisks indicate the time-span)



You can learn more about this site, and other similar archaeological sites in Wales, by going to <https://www.archwilio.org.uk/arch/>. Please read and observe the Conditions of Use. The overall PRN (Primary Record Number) for the Roman town of Caerwent is 01026g. Individual structures within it have been given PRNs 03082g – 03094g (defences), 03096g – 03098g, 03170g – 03170g (public buildings) and 03109g – 03131g, 03169g, 03172g (houses and shops). You can search for other similar sites here too. You can contact us via social media or through the methods given at the bottom of the page. See more about the Romans in South Wales at http://www.ggat.org.uk/cadw/romans_in_south_wales/index.html.