**Roman Britain – what happened in our local area?**

Julius Caesar invaded Britain in 55 BC and both he and other Roman writers left a record of the country and its inhabitants. There we find the name of the supreme British commander Cassivellaunus, probably leader of the Catuvellaunian tribe later linked with the Hertfordshire-Buckinghamshire-Cambridgeshire region. Their capital was to be Verulamium, and the old name of the Watford hundred, Cassio, has been associated with this tribe, though this has still to be proved.

Roman occupation has been detected in this area during excavations for a new bunker on Sandy Lodge Golf Course, and more extensively nearby at Hamper Mill. This site had been damaged by flooding which made it difficult to work out the precise shape of the Roman building, but plenty of finds survive. These include the best Roman pottery, samian ware imported from Gaul, and so valuable that it was repaired with lead rivets if it broke. Less precious pottery also remains, alongside rubbish found in pits on the site, and a few poor coins. The general impression is of a poor community, probably more British than Roman, living within reach of the important Roman town of Verulamium but at a much lower social level. Hamper Mill’s heyday seems to have been in the 2nd century AD, but the site was important enough to have attracted people to it as early as Mesolithic times

**Netherwlyde**

The native-style farm at Hamper Mill contrasts with the richer home found within a few miles of Netherwylde Farm, Colney Street, Aldenham. Here also the site has been too badly damaged for us to know for certain what the main house looked like. Apart from a large barn and tile-kiln nearby, the main survivor from Roman times was a corner of a large 4th Century Bathhouse.

It is well known that the Roman way of life attached great importance to the ritual of bathing. The Bathhouse was often attached to the main villa, to lessen the fire risk caused by the need to heat the water and thus the steam for the hot room. Netherwyldee seems to have had two Bathhouses, and the remains from the main one suggests that it must have been quite impressive. No mosaic pavement was found and only one tessera block was turned up on the whole site, but the fragments of painted wall plaster showed that the owners had an eye for beautiful surroundings.

Information is too scarce to enable us to know where Netherwylde’ s neighbours were. Roman finds turned up years ago at Munden House, just outside Watford, but others may lie hidden still. Given accurate recording and a little luck, one day it might be possible to plot precisely how many Roman houses were built and lived in around Watford at a particular time.

**Life in Roman Britain**

Julius Caesar described part of the land we know as Hertfordshire as heavily wooded, but after the successful Roman invasion of 43 AD under the Emperor Claudius, Roman methods spread into the countryside. Straight Roman roads fanned out northwards from London, some taking a new important Roman town of Verulamium, and in the countryside, villas and estates were built to provide food for the growing towns.

Evidence from excavations allows us to build up a picture of the landscape in Roman times. Many of our modern trees were present – alder, ash, beech, elm, oak, poplar, and silver birch – and the woodlands provided homes for red deer, fallow and roe deer, wild boar, fox, hare, badger, otter, wild cat, pine marten, polecat, and rabbit. Even smaller creatures have been found such as mole, rat, field mouse, toad, and frog, amongst the bird population could be found pheasant, rook, crow, pigeon, woodcock, lark, thrush, and sparrow. All these creatures, those that were edible would undoubtedly have been eaten, but some may have been kept as pets; across the borders of Buckinghamshire at Latimer Roman villa a domesticated cat’s skeleton was found.

Farm animals were also like today – pigs, cows, sheep – with horses to do some of the work. Bees were kept, which was important as honey formed the main source of sweetening as well as being a preservative. Poor people would have eaten little more exciting than coarse bread and bean and pea broth, with occasional meat, but the wealthy villa owners would have done very well, to judge from accounts of banquets which have come down to us.

They would have had some home-grown fruit and vegetables, home-ground flour and freshly made bread and an abundance of meat and fish available, as well as cheese, of which smoked varieties were favoured. The main difference between Roman and modern cooking is that the Romans made great use of liquamen as their seasoning, and the nearest modern equivalent is a strong anchovy-style fish stock. Lead cooking utensils were often used, which eventually poisons the system, and another problem was that the use of stone querns to grind the flour meant that the bread was rather gritty and tended to grind down the teeth. This and other health hazards meant that life expectancy, as far as can be judged from surviving tombstones, was not much beyond the thirties, though a few managed to survive a great deal longer.

**The Influence of St Alban**

In the Roman city of Verulamium lived a citizen called Alban, who sheltered a Christian priest and was put to death in his stead, thus becoming the first Christian martyr in Britain. The event has pinpointed to 22nd June, 209 and as Christianity spread an important shrine grew up on the site of his execution. This waned under the influence of Anglo-Saxon paganism, but legend says that in 793 King Offa of the Mercians was resting in Bath when he was ordered by an angel to disinter Alban and place his relics in a shrine more worthy of them.

Whatever the reason, Offa found a Benedictine monastery in St Albans in 793, and followed the custom of financing its upkeep by making it a grant of lands and estates in Hertfordshire and elsewhere. One such grant of land was at Cashio, and thus began the link between St Albans and the community later to be known as Watford.