

The Reconstruction Images

Together, these two images are an excellent illustration of cultural contrasts. The Roman image shows the centre of a prosperous town around AD 300 with all its major public facilities in place. The Anglo-Saxon image shows the exact same location in the town some 350 years later when Canterbury had evolved into what was principally an agricultural community with a strikingly different landscape. The images are two of a series of reconstruction drawings executed by John Bowen, formerly architectural draughtsman and illustrator for Canterbury Archaeological Trust.

In Canterbury's Roman Museum you can see other reconstruction drawings of Roman and Anglo-Saxon Canterbury (c. AD 300 and AD 750 respectively), produced by a different artist. The style is quite different from the ones in this pack and the view in the museum images is looking across the town to the north while the views here look to the south. When you have used these Notes to familiarise yourself with the main features of the ancient town you might like to compare these visual interpretations and discuss them with your pupils or students.

How we have gathered the evidence

Creating these vivid images has only been possible after many years of archaeological excavation in the city, supported by observations made during a variety of building works such as trench cutting for mains services (gas, sewage and the like).

As far back as 1868 random discoveries were being made by James Pilbrow, during the installation of mains drainage systems. Pilbrow was not an archaeologist, but the City Engineer. Although he had a definite bias towards things Roman, he is notable because his interest led him to both record and publish his findings which was unusual for that time. Pilbrow's discoveries have since been reinterpreted to some degree, but his basic observations have been extremely useful as supportive evidence to 20th century archaeologists and as indicators of evidence in parts of the town where, as yet, we have been unable to excavate.

It is since the middle of this century that the vast majority of archaeological discoveries in Canterbury have been made. During the latter years of World War II the Canterbury Excavation Committee carried out and recorded many small scale investigations on bomb-damaged sites prior to their redevelopment. It is thanks to those dedicated archaeologists that all periods of our history then began to receive the attention they deserved. The Excavation Committee continued to make significant discoveries during the 1950's and 1960's.

In the mid-1970's it was decided that Canterbury needed a full-time archaeological team to cope with the growing number of sites destined for redevelopment. Such sites presented opportunities for large scale excavation and in 1975 the Canterbury Archaeological Trust was established. Its principal aim was to

excavate, record and publish the archaeology threatened by major building works. The Trust now operates not only in the Canterbury district but in many other parts of Kent.

'Below Ground' Archaeology

When you walk around Canterbury today you will see nothing of the buildings depicted in the two reconstruction images. They are interpretations of archaeological evidence found below ground. Most of the physical evidence for Roman and Anglo-Saxon buildings has not survived over the centuries. Durable materials from dilapidated buildings were re-used by successive generations while the organic materials (like the wood and thatch of Anglo-Saxon homes and workshops) have left little trace, as organic materials usually decompose in the earth. Some buildings were victims of fire and doubtless other acts of destruction during turbulent times.

Any surviving 'below ground' evidence for a building can appear in two forms: as positive features and negative features.

Positive features

These are actual physical remains; for example, the foundations of masonry buildings, clay walls. They rarely survive in their entirety and most often are found in fragments.

Negative features

These are 'ghost' features; for example where masonry foundations have been 'robbed' or dug out by later builders (such as the Normans) for their own use. 'Robber' trenches leave just the hollow shape of the original stonework and are a common feature of archaeological remains. Another example is post holes, where original timber posts have rotted, often leaving only a dark stain in the ground. This may be the only surviving evidence for the original building.

By plotting both positive and negative features on a site, we can begin to reconstruct the original ground plan of a structure. To take the interpretation a step further, archaeologists may decide to make a reconstruction image. Such pictures add life and atmosphere to what might otherwise be rather 'dry' technical records. To try and compose as accurate an image as possible, archaeologists look at the evidence they have found through excavation and compare their findings to other sites where the physical remains are similar, but more substantial. Famous sites like Rome and Pompeii have wonderful examples of standing Roman buildings to study, while experimental research on Anglo-Saxon sites helps us to reconstruct the architectural styles of this period of the past.

Evidence lost in the soil

Perhaps one of Archaeology's greatest limitations is highlighted by the fact that organic evidence (like wood, leather, textiles, food, the soft tissue of humans and

animals and the organic part of their bones) is so often lost through decomposition. Food remains will decay fastest through animal action in the soil (ants, worms) especially if buried near the surface. In soils where oxygen, warmth and moisture are present (as on many British sites) other types of organic material will gradually be broken down by bacterial action. Hence the majority of Anglo-Saxon homes and workshops, made largely of timber and thatch, have disappeared.

Exceptional survivals

If warmth, moisture or oxygen is absent there is a far greater chance of preservation. Hence remarkable survivals like The Mary Rose and the Bronze Age boat found at Dover, both in waterlogged conditions (no oxygen).

The Dead Sea Scrolls discovered at Qumran, a few miles east of Jerusalem on the west bank of the Dead Sea, survived in desert conditions (lack of moisture) while the body of The Ice Man, found on the border of Italy and Austria, had survived because of his permanently frozen environment.

'Above Ground' Archaeology

Standing remains of Roman and early Anglo-Saxon buildings to see in Canterbury today are rare.

There are only three known Roman examples. They all lie outside the area depicted and constitute parts of the Roman town wall. They are Roman Quenin Gate (p. 23 and Fig. 3) and two sections of the original Roman wall (p. 22 and Fig. 3).

From the early Anglo-Saxon period you can still see remains at St Martin's Church (p. 35) and St Pancras Church (p. 37). In both these cases, the earliest phases of building work may well be from Roman times.