

An amazing Roman/Anglo-Saxon burial (5th century AD)

Pupils Pages

In 1980 archaeologists were excavating a site near Beer Cart Lane, in the heart of Canterbury. As they were digging down they came to a thick layer of dark brown soil. As they dug down through the layers of soil, they began to uncover a large round pit. At the bottom of the pit, bones began to appear... it was the beginning of an amazing discovery!

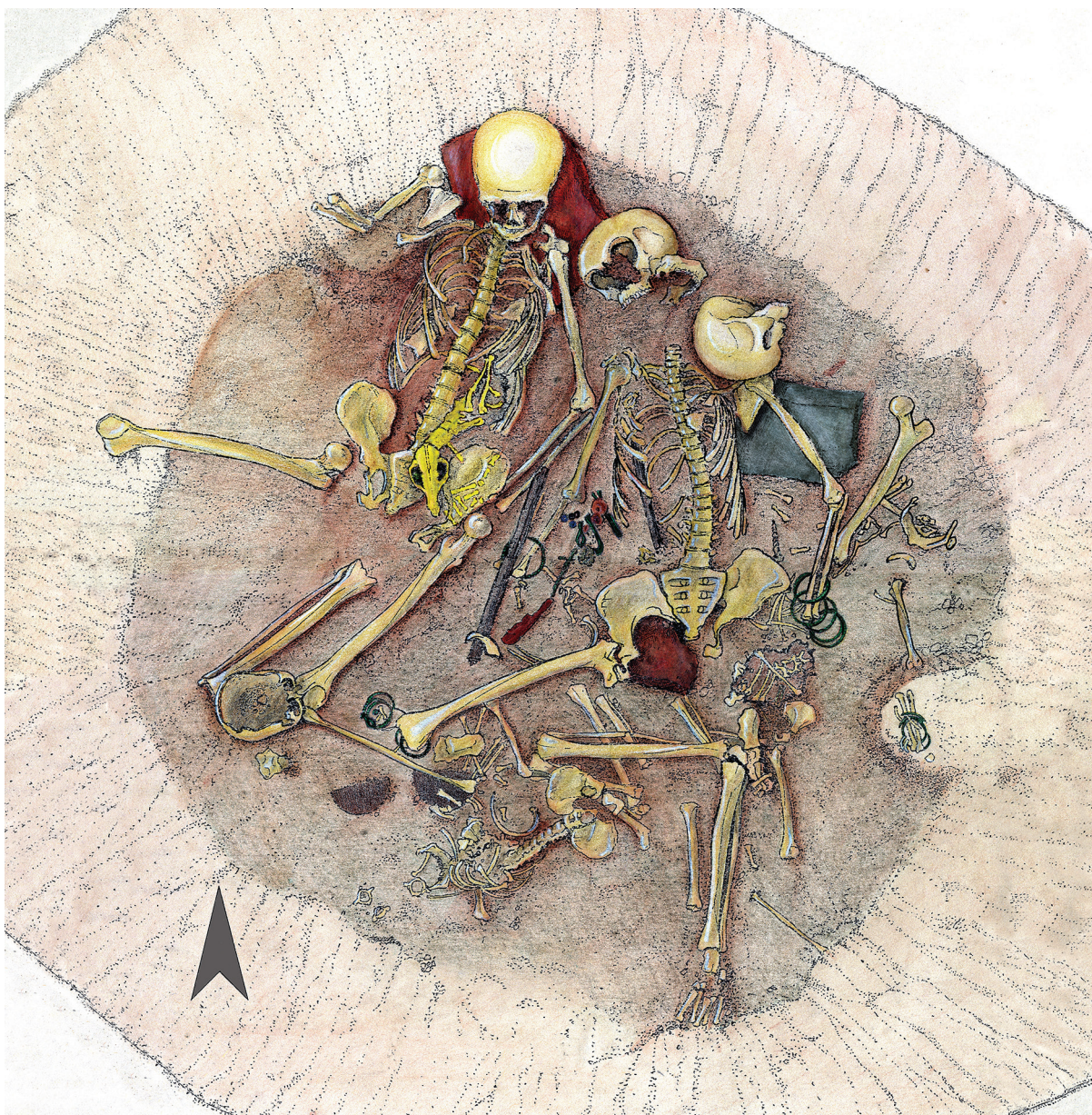


This was no ordinary grave ... Altogether 4 human skeletons were identified. The adult skeletons were almost complete. There were 2 other skulls and more bones but these skeletons were not intact. Small animals like mice and rabbits had probably moved the bones around over the centuries while they burrowed under the ground. There was also the skeleton of a dog.

- Can you find the dog in the picture?

There were numerous pieces of jewellery and other objects on and near the skeletons. Some have been coloured in the picture. Because there were so many personal possessions, they think the people were wearing clothes when they were buried.

Here is a coloured drawing to make it easier to see what there was.



- Why do you think they didn't find the clothes?
- Can you find any of the jewellery in the picture?

Now you are going to work like an Archaeologist!

Imagine you are the Director of the Beer Cart Lane excavation. You want to find out as much as possible about this discovery. You ask yourself some questions:

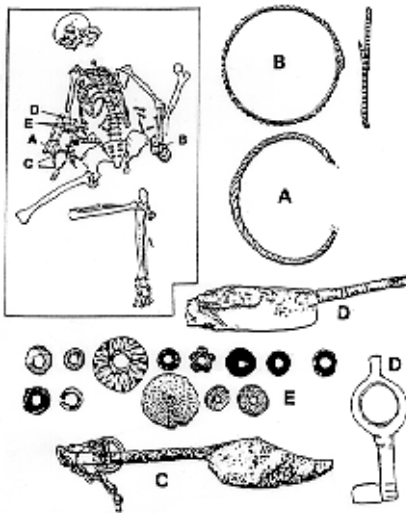
- When did these people die?
- How did they die?
- Who were they?

To try and find some answers, other people have offered to help you:

- An osteoarchaeologist
- An archaeozoologist
- A small finds analyst
- A historian

These people will examine the contents of the grave and research the site. Find out what their jobs are. You gather all the types of evidence together. We could call them 'Clues'. You record the findings by making notes and drawings.

CLUES! Skellies and Objects



Skeleton 1: Adult female

Found lying on her back. 158 cm tall. Between 35 and 45 years old at death. No evidence of disease or injury.

Objects found on or near skeleton:

A. Fragment of bronze bracelet on right wrist. Common type of 4th century AD.

B. Set of 8 bronze bracelet on left wrist. This type not seen before.

C. Small iron knife with thin blade and delicate bronze chain. Probably a woman's razor. Dated between 350 and 450 AD.

D. 4 keys and small knife, all in bronze.

E. 13 beads. 10 of dark brown or black glass, some with yellow and green decoration. 3 of amber, made by Anglo-Saxon people in Germany in 5th century AD.

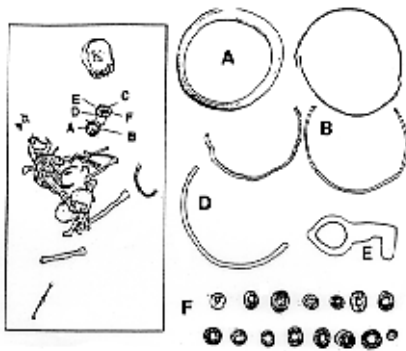


Skeleton 2: Adult male

Found lying on his back. 172 cm tall. Between 30 and 40 years old at death. No evidence of disease or injury.

Objects found on or near skeleton:

A. 2 fragments of wooden base or lid with thin layer of black tar and traces of dairy substance (bottom of a bucket?).

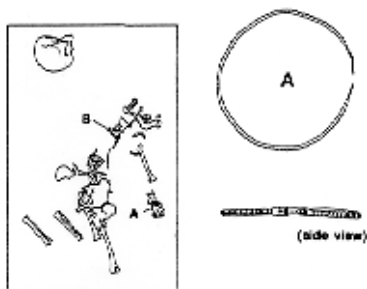


Skeleton 3: Juvenile female

124 cm tall. About 11 years old at death. No evidence of disease or injury.

Objects found on or near skeleton:

A. Unusual black glass bracelet.
 B. 3 bronze bracelets.
 C. Fragments of bronze bracelet.
 D. Fragment of ivory bracelet.
 E. Small bronze key.
 F. 15 small glass beads. Most blue and green. Roman type used in 4th dn 5th centuries AD.



Skeleton 4: Juvenile (gender not certain)

107 cm tall. About 8 years old at death. Too young to identify sex from bones. Skull fractured, possibly by small round object about 4 cm diameter.

Objects found on or near skeleton:

A. 2 bronze bracelets
 B. Small iron fragment, probably a nail. (Any clues here about the gender of this skelly?)



Skeleton 5: Dog

Medium-sized, similar to a modern terrier. Very worn teeth. Signs of arthritis (a bone disease) on left hind leg. Inner ear bone damaged during life, so probably deaf. Right hind leg broken during life with new bone growth around fracture. No other signs of injury. (Any clues here about the age of the dog?)

Some of the finds



Other finds

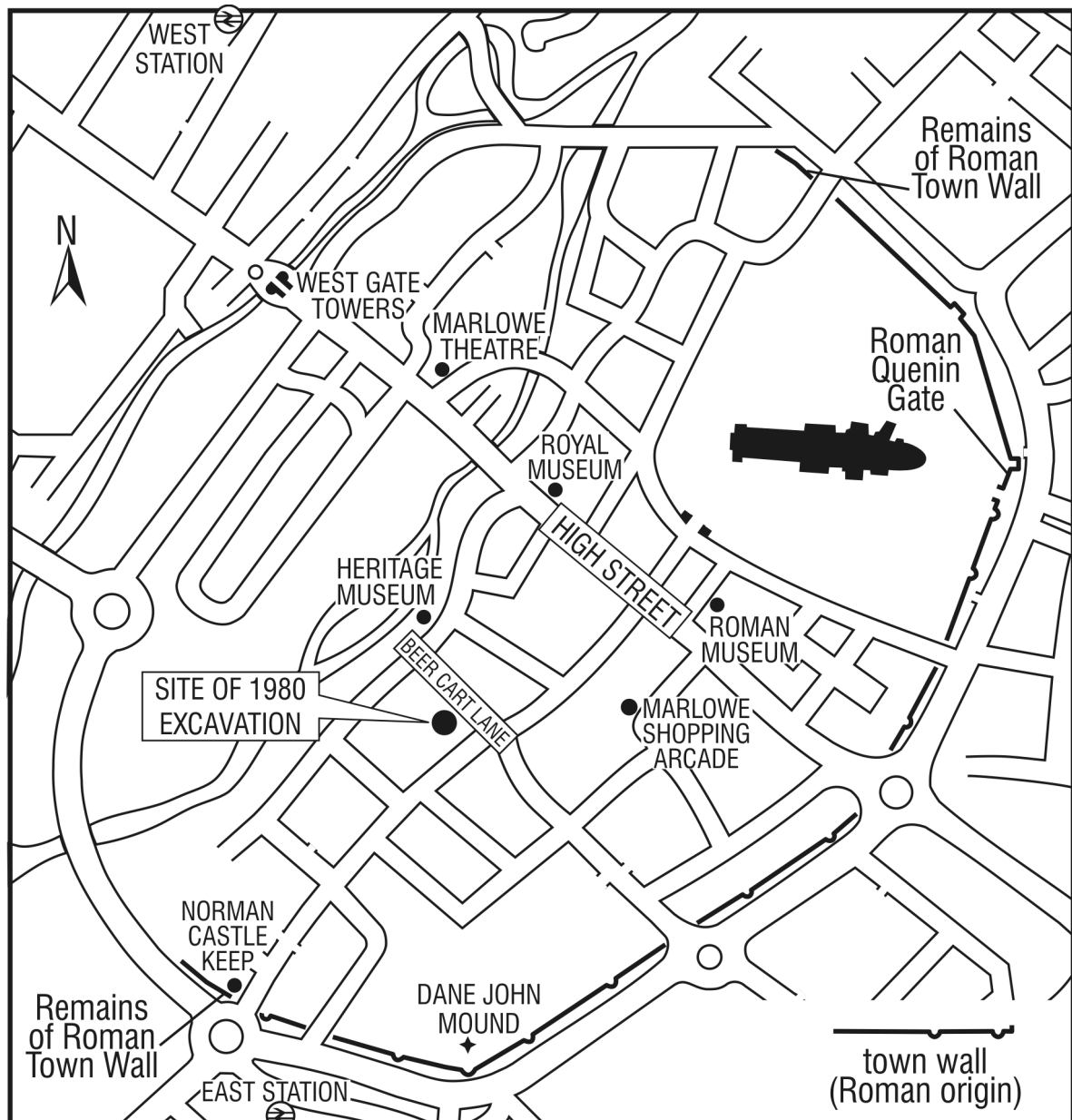
You also noticed other things in the grave. There were 2 pieces of clay tile. One was under the adult male's head, the other under the adult female's pelvis. A piece of grey stone lay under the female's upper body and there were 2 lengths of dark brown wood.

CLUES! Where the Burial was Found

Archaeologists Report about the location of the grave

When we began digging the site we found modern things. Lower down there were medieval things. Then we hit the Anglo-Saxon layers. Just below these we found the grave. The soil around it was very dark, almost black. We knew we had reached the time in Canterbury's past when the town had been abandoned.

This happened around the beginning of the 5th century AD (the very end of the Roman period). We think the 'black soil' is what is left of all the deserted buildings which fell into ruins and the trees and weeds that grew around and inside them. We know that the usual practice in Roman and Anglo-Saxon times was to bury the dead in cemeteries outside the settlement and in individual graves. These people (and a dog!) were all buried in one grave in the middle of the town. So we don't think that this was an official burial.



CLUES! Historical Documents

When events of the past have been recorded in some way (by writing and drawing) we call these records historical sources of evidence.

Several ancient writers wrote about what life was like at the very end of the Roman period. Their accounts have survived by being copied and translated over the centuries. Here are some of them:

- Zosimus (a historian writing in 5th century AD)
- Gildas (a British monk writing in 6th century AD)
- Bede (a British monk writing in 8th century AD)
- One other very important record is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle which was compiled by many writers, over a period of many years.

These people tell us that southern Britain was a very troubled and dangerous time at the end of the Roman period. There were several reasons.

1. Anglo-Saxon tribes (from Denmark, Germany and Holland) were invading south-eastern Britain. Some of them wanted to settle there.
2. Native tribes from the north and north-west of Britain were making their own attacks on people in southern Britain. They had never given in to the Romans.
3. Roman troops who had been keeping law and order in Britain for many years, were ordered to return to the Continent where the Romans had troubles of their own.
4. There were outbreaks of plague in Britain which killed many people.

**What do you think happened to these people?
Email us with your ideas! Perhaps you could send a story.**