

ROMAN RELICS SEE LIGHT AGAIN

COWBRIDGE could soon become one of Wales's most historically interesting centres, says an archaeology expert.

Mr Gareth Dowdell, director of the Glamorgan/Gwent Archaeological Trust, is delighted with the progress and results of excavations by the trust so far at Cowbridge.

The discoveries to date had shown the trust was justified in choosing the town for an intensive programme of archaeological investigation, he said.

"It is already clear to everyone that Cowbridge has a fascinating history, worthy of special consideration at all times," he added. "While major discoveries have been made so far, I am convinced that the best is yet to come.

Exciting

"I have no doubt that within the next six months or so further work at Cowbridge will place the town high among the most historically interesting centres in the Principality."

He praised residents, the local authorities and the Manpower Services Commission for the help and co-operation they had given the trust in their work at Cowbridge.

Excavations being carried on now included land next to the Bear Hotel car



The Roman building under excavation in North Road.

By DEBORAH COLE

the medieval town's North defences.

All the trust's work in Cowbridge has been conducted in advance of various forms of development. It has been an attempt to unravel the history of the town before the evidence was destroyed for ever, said Mr Dowdell.

Cowbridge among the most interesting centres'

Some of the most exciting discoveries have been a very substantial Roman building, with under-floor heating, three drystone houses dating back to the early 14th Century at

early settlement took. But, he says, pottery tiles bearing the stamp of the Second Augustan Legion and pieces of military metalwork, including an iron "ballista" bolt which was fired from a heavy machine like a crossbow, suggests Cowbridge might be the site of the missing Roman Fort of Bovium. It was known to have existed somewhere between the Roman station at Cardiff and Neath.

Mr Parkhouse believes the substantial Roman building discovered at a proposed car park site at North Road, was a "mansio". That was an official guesthouse for travellers, perhaps journeying from Caerleon where the legion was based.

Pottery

The mansio, which was well constructed in local stone with a red pottery tile roof and tiled floors, was built around AD 100. But, says Mr Parkhouse, it was being systematically demolished a century later as the rising water table began to flood into the



An 18th Century cobbled yard behind 77 High Street.

park where Roman features were coming to light, he said. And behind the Midland Bank excavations had revealed part of

Hopyard Meadow, and part of a medieval merchant's house plus other traces of Roman settlement, possibly timber houses dating from the second century AD.

'Mansio'

Mr Jonathan Parkhouse, who is supervising all the excavations, believes the first settlement at Cowbridge came as long ago as 75 to AD 100. He thinks this was around the west side of the River Thaw and spread eastwards as the rising water level of the river began to create problems for the inhabitants.

It is difficult to say exactly what form this

floors of its 13 rooms.

At some time in the third or fourth centuries, part of this site was used as a cemetery. The trust's archaeologists have uncovered the grave of an infant, containing two bronze bangles.

It is not only the Roman period the archaeologists are interested in. Medieval Cowbridge is also of great importance, the founding of the town and its subsequent growth posing many fascinating problems.

One of these was whether Cowbridge expanded outside the town walls as documents seemed to suggest.

The excavation at

Hopyard Meadow had a special significance for here, with any luck, they hoped to find evidence of the expansion of the town to the west. It was not long before they were able to prove this had happened. The remains of three dry-stone buildings, dating to the early 14th Century, were silent witnesses to a time when Cowbridge was larger than at any time up to this half of the 20th Century.

Hopyard Meadow discoveries, in the form of a series of drainage trenches, showed this part of Cowbridge was also occupied during the Roman period. Fragments

of pottery vessels, along with bronze toilet implements, all dating to the last 100 years or so of Roman rule, were found in these trenches. But a more spectacular find still awaited discovery.

Monument

At the end of one of the trenches a beautifully preserved carved stone lion was found.

Mr Parkhouse believes the lion was originally part of a monument built to mark the death of either a high ranking army commander or an important local official.

It was probably sited alongside the main East-West Roman road that ran through Cowbridge, the monument being later dismantled and the stone reused in later Roman buildings thought to have existed nearby.

Mr Dowdell says he is now looking forward with interest to see what exciting discoveries future work will turn up in the area.



THE SKELETON BURIED IN THE NORTH RD. SITE IN THE 3rd or 4th CENTURY

The skeleton of an adult buried at the North Road site in the third or fourth

DIGGERS DESCEND

New hunt for proof of Roman fort

Archaeologists descended on Cowbridge this week, hoping to find more clues to the town's history in the time of Roman occupation.

The Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust are excavating at the rear of the Midland Bank - a site partially explored in 1981.

The trust has been allowed in ahead of foundations needed for an extension of the Bear Hotel's kitchen.

Discoveries at a variety of sites in Cowbridge have shown that the Romans were in the town for over 250 years and that the settlement covered a very large area.

But the size and location of the military buildings that archaeologists believe

existed has yet to be discovered.

During the 1981 excavations behind the bank, one edge of a very large ditch of Roman date was found.

"The full extent of the ditch could not be explored within the limited area then available for excavation," said Mr Jonathan Parkhouse, who is leading the dig.

"But it was apparently of a sufficiently large size to have been a defensive ditch around a small fort.

"Judging by the sherds of pottery from it, the ditch seemed to have gone out of use in the early second century.

Many of the troops stationed in the South Wales forts were being withdrawn then in order to police the northern frontier of Britain along Hadrian's Wall.

This week's excavations are alongside the area where the ditch was discovered.

Mr Parkhouse is hoping the dig will disclose what sort of defensive ramparts were there.

"One of the problems which needs solving is where a fort could have been positioned in relation to the Roman road which ran along the line of the present-day High Street," he said.

"There is a possibility that the military installation at Cowbridge was not a fort but a works depot, and this theory may be supported by the evidence of large-scale metal working in Cowbridge, found when the trust was excavating the Bear Field."

When foundations were dug for the leisure centre, an extensive complex of industrial features was uncovered.

In 1977 the Trust found

Missing piece of puzzle sought

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evidence of Roman military occupation at 75 High Street.

In 1981, the remains of a 13-roomed bath house were uncovered on North Road.

The structure's plan showed it was built by the second Augustan Legion, the army unit responsible for the conquest of South Wales around AD75.

The archaeologists still quietly dream of proving whether Cowbridge was the site of a "lost" fort called Bovium.

The fort is mentioned in a third century document known as the Antonine Itinerary.

"We have plenty of evidence of the Roman army being in Cowbridge," said Mr Parkhouse. "But what we have not got so far is a fort.

"It would be marvellous if

this new excavation provided that missing piece of the puzzle."

Mediaeval remains found on the adjoining section in 1981, proved to be the site of the North Gate of the mediaeval town which fell out of use in the 17th century.

The finds, notes, drawings and photographs from all the trust's work in Cowbridge have been studied and analysed and will form part of a report which will be published.

Free deal

Free Christmas shoppers' car parks on Saturdays in December are expected to operate in Bridgend again this year.

The parking, at offices owned by the council, will be sign posted by the RAC.



The Roman building under excavation in North Road.



An 18th Century cobbled yard behind 77 High Street.



The skeleton of an adult, buried at the North Road site in the third or fourth century.

Roman dig under threat

Council digs out £1,500 to help dig

LOCAL councillors have come up with £1,500 to help cover the cost of an archaeological dig at Bear Field, Cowbridge.

Cowbridge with Llanblethian Community Council approved a committee recommendation to make the money available to the Glamorgan/Gwent Archaeological Trust to excavate the area which is earmarked for a leisure centre.

As well as financial support the council promised to back the trust in their attempts to persuade the Vale of Glamorgan Borough Council to allow enough time for a thorough excavation on the site before the leisure centre is completed.

Leaflets

The trust are prepared to carry out the excavation alongside contractors working on the leisure centre. They fear if the field is not excavated important archaeological and historical details of Cowbridge's past will be lost forever.

Mr Gareth Dowdell, director of the trust, has said the site probably holds the key to the origins and development of Roman Cowbridge. He hopes to find the missing Roman fort of Bomium somewhere on the site.

The community council are hoping the borough and county council's will follow their lead and provide some financial help for the trust to excavate Bear Field. They are also helping to make the people of the area aware of the archaeological sensitivity of the site by distributing leaflets in the area on the trust's behalf.

Coun David Busher, mayor of Cowbridge, said

"The site could consolidate Cowbridge as a centre of Roman archaeology which would be of tremendous benefit to local traders and rate-payers.

ARCHAEOLOGISTS COULD BE faced with a race against time to uncover important Roman treasures on land in South Wales. Excavations are taking place at Bear Field, Cowbridge, where the Vale of Glamorgan Borough Council propose to build a leisure centre.

And councillors are in no mood to hold up the development to allow the Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust to carry out their lengthy excavation work.

The council do not yet own the land. But they have made it clear that as soon as they do the archaeologists will be asked to leave.

The trust wrote to the Vale leisure services committee expressing "deepest concern" at the leisure centre proposals on land which is "of extreme archaeological sensitivity".

They have asked for a meeting with the council to discuss the matter and this has been agreed.

And local resident Mr A J L Alden wrote to the committee saying: "I was rather concerned to read there is a possibility that the development of the sports complex in the Bear Field will proceed at such a pace that a full archaeological dig of the area will not be possible.

"As I was responsible for the initial discovery of the pottery which started

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off the excavation, I am concerned that further knowledge of the Roman occupation of Cowbridge may be lost.

"There appears to be a strong likelihood that Cowbridge is the site of the 'lost' Roman fort of Bomium. It would be somewhat irresponsible to bury under bricks and mortar, or perhaps destroy, this historical evidence."

But the chairman of the finance and policies committee, Coun John Cotter, said they had been pressing for the leisure centre in Cowbridge for many years.

He said the archaeologists could continue working at their field until it came into the council's ownership. Then work would start immediately on the leisure centre and

the archaeologists would be asked to leave.

"Bear Field has been there for many years. If these people wanted to have a look at it why haven't they done it before? Why have they always got to wait until somebody wants to carry out development?"

But Coun David Eastwood said the trust had to cope with a lot of work and were short of funds.

They had strong evidence that the field would be of great archaeological importance. The people of Cowbridge would not like to see it destroyed for the sake of a leisure centre.

"They must be given time. It is deplorable that as soon as the land comes into the council's ownership building work will start. It's disgusting. I don't think the people of Cowbridge will thank us for destroying a part of their heritage."

Welsh digs threatened

WELSH archaeological sites of national and international importance will disappear without trace unless Government funding is increased, it was claimed yesterday.

More than 20 top sites throughout Wales are now in jeopardy and Dr Hubert Savory, former keeper of archaeology at the National Museum of Wales, wrote to the Secretary of State for Wales, Mr Nicholas Edwards, yesterday to demand extra funds for digs in South Wales.

The four archaeology trusts covering Wales have received £344,000 from the Welsh Office for work on sites due to disappear under the bulldozer this year — £116,000 short of the sum they asked for.

Dr Savory, the chairman of the

largest trust, covering Glamorgan and Gwent, said in his letter that the present level of funding to the trust was insufficient to maintain minimum requirements for digs.

Excavations of a lost Roman fort and township at Cowbridge are threatened by the lack of funds as the site is due to be developed as a leisure centre next April.

"The Cowbridge Roman township is unique in Wales and as such is of international importance — it fills a gap in Welsh Roman history and it would be a major tragedy if lack of money stopped us digging there," said Mr Gareth Dowdell, director of the Glamorgan/Gwent Archeological Trust.

Further digging at the Loughor Roman fort, near Swansea, where a commander's residence, cavalry block and granary have been found, will also be scrapped unless

£20,000 more is made available.

Backing from the Lliw Valley Borough Council and West Glamorgan County Council, as well as the Welsh Office, has already led to a one-year dig, but two-thirds of the site awaits excavation.

More than 5,000 letters are being sent to residents in Loughor and Cowbridge to gain support for the trust's case.

In Dyfed, nine major sites are in jeopardy, including a complete Roman town at Carmarthen.

A waterlogged Roman settlement at Meliden, near Prestatyn, known to contain completely preserved buildings, is one of two nationally important sites which the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust will not be able to excavate because of the shortfall.

Barbarism claim over fort site

BUILDING A LEISURE centre at Bear Field, Cowbridge, without allowing time for proper excavation of the site would be "a wanton act of barbarism," it has been claimed.

Coun David Busher, the Mayor of Cowbridge, said the Vale of Glamorgan Borough Council should allow the Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust enough time to thoroughly investigate the field, which might be the site of the missing Roman fort of Bovium.

If they refused to do so, they would be disregarding the view of the local community, he added. At the borough council's leisure services committee last week, Coun John Cotter, said the archaeologists would be asked to leave the site when the council became the owners.

He said: "Bear Field has been there for many years. If these people

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wanted to have a look at it why haven't they done it before? Why have they always got to wait until somebody wants to carry out development?"

Distressing

Mr Busher replied: "Coun Cotter's attitude is naive. Everyone thought that Bear Field was to be left untouched for at least two or three years. It was only as a result of the borough council's decision to build a leisure centre on the site that this problem arose.

"I find it distressing that the Vale council and Mr Cotter do not seem to take into consideration the views of the people of Cowbridge.

"The council seem to have misunderstood the intentions of the Trust and think they want sole use of the field for excavation. But the Trust are quite happy to carry on their work there alongside the developers.

I can only describe the attitude of wanting to go ahead with development without allowing sufficient time for investigation as Philistine."

Attention

The Trust wrote to the chief executive of the borough council, Mr John Gau, giving details of the results of trial investigations at Bear Field.

They drew particular attention to the fact that by the middle of last week, over 133 archaeological features had been revealed. These included

stone walls, trenches and substantial timber buildings together with evidence of metal working.

Archaeological finds from the investigations include coins, pottery and metal objects which can be dated to the period between circa 100 and 350 AD.

All these features have been discovered within an area of less than 200 square metres. Bear Field itself extends over an area of nearly 21,000 square metres.

Ancient gate needs £8,000 repair job

A medieval town gate at Cowbridge may get an £8,000 facelift to stop it falling down.

The ownership of the 600-year-old South Gate has been in dispute for some time, and this has held up repair work.

South Glamorgan councillors were told by their director of environment and planning, Mr Ewart Parkinson, yesterday, "The South Gate is a structure of immense quality and if allowed to deteriorate would be a significant loss to the county's heritage."

Council masons now employed on the Roman site at Barry could repair a bulge and cracks, but if no maintenance was carried out the gate's condition could worsen.

Mr Parkinson said that before local government reorganisation in 1974, the gate was owned by the former local authority. The present town council said it subsequently passed into ownership of Vale of Glamorgan Borough Council, but the borough says Cowbridge still owns it.

Yesterday the county's planning, policy and development sub-committee agreed to carry out the £8,000 job if the Welsh Office paid half and to seek early meetings with Vale and town councils about future maintenance.