Our Research

The Aldborough Roman Town Project began in 2009, with the aim of learning more about the remains of Isurium Brigantium, and what it could reveal about Roman Britain. We have been using a range of survey techniques to map the buildings, roads and ditches, as well as pulling together previous work in the area. We have learnt much already, and as the survey continues more surprises await us and new questions arise.

Aldborough and Roman Britain

General thought and debate about Roman Britain has moved rapidly in recent years. But ideas about urban origins and functions seem to have been left behind by the great debates about what it meant to be alive in Roman Britain. New evidence and new ways of thinking are desperately needed.

One promising approach is to seek detailed overviews of entire towns, rather than relying on limited areas of excavation or speculative reconstructed plans. This can be done with large-scale geophysical survey, whose potential has already been seen at Wroxeter, Silchester and Caistor-by-Norwich.

Each of these sites is now deserted and largely farmland. By contrast Aldborough lies beneath a picturesque village. It is one of the most interesting towns in Roman Britain, since it was the chief centre of the Brigantes. This was a tribal group absorbed into the Roman administrative structure, which held power over the lion’s share of northern Britain. Aldborough was also perhaps Britain’s most northerly such administrative town, controlling an area of strategic significance from the later first century AD right through until the end of Roman rule.
The site has been known since the 16th century, when Roman structures were seen and first recorded by John Leland. This pioneering antiquarian also associated Aldborough with the town of Isurium Brigantium noted by the Roman geographer Ptolemy.

There was significant exploration in the 19th century, driven, it seems, by the desire to create Britain’s first antiquarian garden, with excavations, sculptures, inscriptions and a grotto to be viewed by visitors to the Lawson Tancred estate. Part of the walk along the Roman town wall and two of the mosaics from this ensemble form the focus of the Museum.

Smaller scale excavations through the 20th century investigated the defences and various structures. In the 1980s, Colin Dobinson led a Yorkshire Archaeological Society project which undertook a detailed field survey of an area outside the town walls. He also drew together all past evidence, and speculated that the town had grown up on the site of a fort, built when the Flavian imperial dynasty ruled Rome (AD69–96). He argued that this fort had influenced the street grid, and hence the modern village layout.

This hypothesis was somewhat thrown into question in the 1990s, when the widening of the A1 road to the west revealed an actual Roman fort of this period. It seemed clear that a geophysical survey would help greatly to better understand the history of this key town.
Our primary work has involved magnetometer survey. This method tracks sub-surface changes in the earth’s magnetic field, to reveal archaeological features such as walls, ditches and roads. In 2011 we complemented this with a trial Ground Penetrating Radar survey (GPR) around St Andrew’s church, which has long been believed to stand on the site of the Roman forum.

Within the main parts of the walled town, the magnetometer plots show streets lined with houses and other buildings, some with courtyards and colonnaded streets.

The street grid is somewhat different from previously thought, with no North Gate, and an earlier set of defences within the town walls. There is evidence to suggest that the town was planned using a series of long narrow insulae which were stepped in terraces up the hill to the south. This implies a rather more elaborate plan than has been previously suggested.

Outside the walls to the south-east, at the top of Studforth Hill, our survey has provided very clear confirmation of an amphitheatre. The magnetometer survey shows clearly that the extant earthworks form a truncated part of the seating bank, with evidence of the seating itself surviving. It seems that the banks were reshaped in post-medieval times to create a “mount” as a parkland feature. We need to do further work to clarify the relationship of the amphitheatre to the town walls and other nearby earthwork features, but there are tantalising indications of reuse, perhaps to create a defensible castle enclosure after the end of Roman occupation.

A Ground Penetrating Radar survey has been carried out in the churchyard, in order to clarify the existence of a stylobate of a major public building, identified in eighteenth century documents.

This survey revealed a series of deeply buried linear features which seem certain to relate to the forum square. Subject to the results from the 2012 survey, it does look as though the forum was built terraced into the bottom of the slope of the hill to the south, presumably with the basilica to the north as previously suggested. This would mean that the medieval church was built in the centre of the forum square – a pattern seen commonly on the continent but less frequently demonstrated in Britain.
We will also be returning to the Aldborough to complete the magnetometer survey of the available areas within and around the town, so that we obtain as complete as possible a picture of its topography. Recent integrated survey projects like this one have shown that we can understand a very considerable amount about urban sites through survey, and without excavation. We plan to apply this approach here, although some small scale excavation may be justified to clarify points and to enhance understanding, in particular providing chronological information.

It is early days, but already our work seems to show a rather different picture of Isurium Brigantium than hitherto suggested. The town is conventionally seen as geographically marginal in the Roman province, and of secondary importance to York – arguably a second-rate abandoned fort converted to a mundane town. However, we now begin to see indications of a pattern of planning, with major hillside terracing and grand houses with sophisticated design and decoration; such elements are not yet evident from the archaeology of York itself. Might it be that we need to rethink Roman Aldborough as a place of more significance and interest with a distinctive character of its own?

The magnetometer survey this year will concentrate on areas outside the west gate of the town, and the north eastern corner. The Ground Penetrating Radar survey will be carried out in the eastern half of the churchyard.

More information and updates on progress throughout the year, can be found on our website: www.aldboroughromantown.wordpress.com or on Twitter: https://twitter.com/RomanAldborough