

Archaeology Tuesdays – Child's Totternhoe Stone Sarcophagus

Some archaeological discoveries are hiding in plain sight. Tucked away under a hedge on the east side of Baldock Bowls Club's car park (owned by the council) on West Avenue in the town was what everyone thought was an old horse trough. It consisted of four sides of a roughly rectangular stone container filled with soil. Most users of the car park probably never even noticed it. One day in 2009, Steve Geach from North Hertfordshire District Council invited Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews (the writer of this post) to take a look at it as the Bowls Club wanted to get rid of it.

On seeing the 'trough', Keith's first thought was 'this is a Roman coffin'. Horse troughs tend to be much longer: in this case, the object was quite short (about a metre and a half). He suggested that when lifted, it would prove to have a hole, either in one side towards the bottom or somewhere in the base. He also asked if the Museum Service could have it.



On lifting, it did indeed have a hole in one side. This makes it impossible to use as a horse-trough (any water put inside it would drain away instantly), but ideal for a coffin, which needs to have somewhere for fluids to escape. Without going into too many gory details, bodies produce a lot of water when they decay (sometimes referred to as 'coffin soup' by archaeologists trying to be humorous), and it is important to let it seep out.

The coffin proved to weigh over half a tonne, despite being for a child. At 1.40 m long, 0.66 m wide and up to 0.62 m high, with an internal hollow of $1.03 \times 0.41 \times 0.33$ m, it contains about 0.43 cubic metres of stone. We can calculate that this volume of limestone would weigh a minimum of 670 kg! The limestone in question is Totternhoe Stone, a relatively hard form of chalk, part of the Lower Chalk that formed between about 100,500,000 and 93,900,000 years ago during the Cenomanian phase of the Cretaceous era. It has been quarried since Roman times in the village of Totternhoe, although outcrops are found in other places along the foot of the Chiltern scarp.

Before arriving at the Bowls Club car park, it had been a garden feature in a nearby property in West Avenue. A photograph sent to the local newspaper in 2009 showed it being used as a planter during the 1960s. It seems that it had already been in the garden when the householder arrived, so the trail goes cold at that point. Given its weight, it is unlikely to have moved far, so it had probably been discovered nearby. Letchworth Museum records record a collection of Roman pottery from Norton Crescent, barely 100 metres away. The houses were built in the late 1930s, and this may be a context for finding the material. Although this is about 300 metres from where current thinking puts the western edge of the Roman town of Baldock, this area could have been part of suburban development.

Transporting such a heavy object from the quarry, almost 30 km away along the Icknield Way, would have been challenging. Using a cart pulled by oxen, the journey would have taken about three days; historians have calculated that the cost would be about 1 denarius per kilogram of freight. If correct, the cost would then be almost 700 denarii. A denarius was roughly a day's pay for a soldier around AD 200, so the transport cost would be about two years' salary; in the modern British army, a Private's salary is £21,424, per year, putting the transport cost at about £40,000 in modern terms. Making comparisons of this sort is fraught with difficulties, but it gives a good impression of the sort of wealth needed to transport a coffin of this sort. Add on the cost of manufacture, and you can appreciate that whoever bought this sarcophagus for their child had a lot of disposable income. We know that wealthy people lived in the hinterland of Baldock (there will be some spectacular evidence coming up in one of these posts in a few months), while finds from the town hint that it was a prosperous place. It is easy to imagine a large villa in the countryside beyond Baldock's western fringes whose owners could afford an expensive stone sarcophagus for a treasured child. A child burial discovered in Icknield Way East in 1988, northeast of the town, had a wooden superstructure and its coffin contained an antique pipeclay goddess figurine. Although not as costly as a stone sarcophagus, the complexity of the grave and its superstructure shows that the child's parents wanted to show off their wealth and status.

Roman burials had to be deposited outside the boundary of a town. An ancient Roman law, the first section of Part X of the *Leges XII tabularum* ('Laws of the Twelve Tables') states *hominem mortuum in urbe ne sepelito neve urito* ('neither bury nor cremate a dead man in the city'). The law code was first published in 450 BC and remained the basis of Roman law throughout the empire until Justinian I reorganised and codified all laws in the 530s. Because the law about burial was so fundamental, we can assume that all the known cemeteries in Baldock lay outside its formal boundary. Outside towns, people could have burials on their own land, and many villa owners had private cemeteries for family members close to the main house.

An almost identical coffin with a similar history was found in a Wiltshire garden in 2015. Luke Irwin had been using a stone 'planter' for geraniums outside his kitchen for some years when work laying electrical cables uncovered a Roman mosaic floor. Excavations at his Deverill home by Wiltshire Archaeology and English Heritage uncovered the remains of an enormous Roman villa, built in the decades around 200 and occupied for more than two centuries thereafter. When archaeologist David Roberts from English Heritage saw the 'planter', he realised, like Keith, that this was originally a stone coffin for a Roman era child. The Baldock coffin is on display in the Living in North Hertfordshire gallery in North Herts Museum, Hitchin.

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