

This is the title of a talk I gave last night for the [Hitchin Society](#) as part of the [Hitchin Festival](#). I have given a talk every year since 2004, when I started in my post with North Hertfordshire Museums, and each time I try to highlight a different aspect of Hitchin's fascinating past. As the years have gone by, I have widened the scope to include the rest of North Hertfordshire, focusing on the buried sites and standing buildings that contribute to understanding our history. This year, though, I decided to do something different.

As my work is now much more focused on the objects in our collections, as we prepare for the displays in the new museum, I decided that this is what I would talk about. These are the "small things" of my title, a term inspired by the pioneering work of American historical archaeology, [In Small Things Forgotten](#), by [James Deetz](#), originally published in 1977. James Deetz used the often overlooked details of archaeological finds to piece together narratives to cover gaps in the story of how the Thirteen English Colonies became the United States of America.



A Roman marble head, found in a shed in Radwell; it is a portrait of Germanicus, who died in AD 19, twenty-four years before the Roman conquest



A Dressel 1A amphora, dating to before 100 BC, found in a chieftain's grave in Baldock: it is the oldest Roman amphora found in Britain

I wanted to look at a longer chronological sweep, from the invasion of Julius Caesar in 55 BC through to the present day. This is a period when we think we understand how and why things changed, when we slice history up into over-neat categories such as Roman Britain, the Anglo-Saxon [heptarchy](#), Norman England and so on. Worse, from my point of view, is when we talk about these periods as if each one is populated by a different 'people': "the Romans", "the Anglo-Saxons", "the Normans", "the Tudors". Using labels in this way can make it seem as if there was a discrete time from 1485 to 1603 when everyone thought of themselves as "Tudor", for instance: know that they did not.

Life doesn't work like that. For the most part, the world changes slowly and imperceptibly. Things that can seem like dramatic events – the Roman invasion of AD 43, the Norman Conquest of 1066, the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 – because they figure so prominently in our histories rarely affect the lives of ordinary people. This is where the "small things" help to correct the picture we get if we rely on documents alone.

Looking at the objects in our collections, we can see how the changes that really do affect people take place gradually, over many years. In other words, they are processes that transform lives almost without being noticed. During the ninety-eight years between Julius Caesar and Claudius's conquest, North Hertfordshire was in no sense part of the

Roman Empire, yet people began to use Roman style objects, importing goods from places that were inside the Empire. Our kings issued coins with legends in Latin, people began to use samian ware for dining, they drank wine that they served in pottery flagons. By the time that the Roman “conquest” occurred, local people were so thoroughly “Romanised” that we can’t detect the conquest archaeologically. Our region has no forts and no military remains because there was no need to coerce people into being “Roman”: to a large extent they already were and they may even have welcomed the conquest.

The same story can be seen at the other end of the Roman period, when trade with the Empire shifted from across the English Channel to across the North Sea, initially to the Rhineland. During the fourth century, there was increasing trade with [Free Germany](#), outside the Empire. Mercenaries recruited from this area served in the army in Britain (the largest standing army in the Roman world by that time) and some may have brought families with them who settled permanently in Britain. By the fifth century, when Roman rule came to an end, germanic decoration was commonplace on a whole range of objects and this process continued as more settlers (whom we would call Anglo-Saxons at this period) arrived to join those already here.

The “small things” of our collections show that our neat period labels may be convenient – as human beings, [we love to categorise the world around us](#) – but they don’t reflect historical reality all that well. This is part of the challenge we face for telling the story of our District in the new museum: choosing appropriate and interesting “small things” that will engage and challenge our visitors.

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