

## Excavations in Baldock, 1978

by Gilbert Burleigh

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In June, 1977, planning permission was granted for a small housing development between The Tene and the High Street, Baldock, on land occupied by a Roman Catholic Church, which was to be demolished as part of the development scheme. The sites and monuments records at Letchworth Museum and at County Hall indicated no known archaeological remains on the site, but in 1968 a rich La Tene III cremation burial had been discovered in the road now known as The Tene,<sup>1</sup> about 100 metres away, and Roman pits, ditches, the remains of a masonry building, and inhumations had all been found near the La Tene III burial.<sup>2</sup>

Permission was obtained for a watching brief on the site when construction started, and two weeks excavation time was written into the contract should anything of particular archaeological significance be found in the contractor's trenches.

Towards the end of February 1978, when all local archaeological resources were deeply involved in a rescue excavation at the Mile Ditches near Royston, a message from the site architect, Mr. M.F. Bishop of Hamilton Associates, Hitchin, said that the contractors had started cutting foundation trenches with a machine on the Tene site, and had disturbed a number of human burials.

The writer, together with his permanent team from the Mile Ditches site of three volunteers, immediately suspended work at the Mile Ditches (by this time a total of eighteen out of a possible twenty seven working days had already been lost to inclement weather at that excavation), and moved on to the site at Baldock.

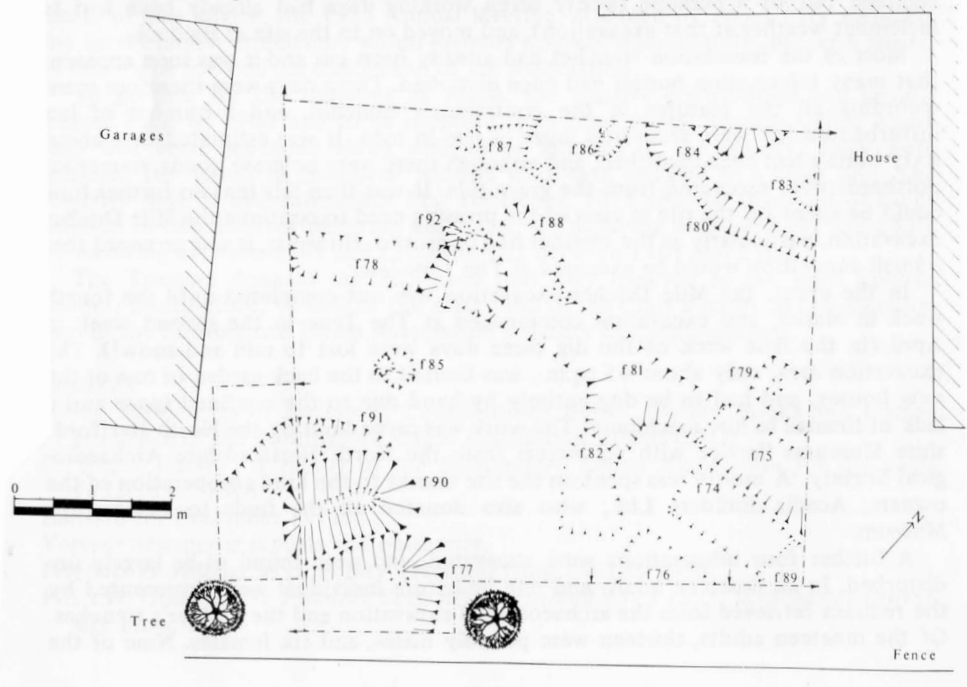
Most of the foundation trenches had already been cut and it was soon apparent that many inhumation burials had been disturbed. Three days were therefore spent recording all the features in the contractor's trenches, and a number of less disturbed burials were recovered more or less in toto. It was estimated that about sixty burials had been disturbed, and although there were no grave goods, numerous potsherds were recovered from the grave fills. It was then felt that no further time could be spent on the site in view of the pressing need to continue the Mile Ditches excavation, particularly as the weather had improved. However, it was arranged that a small excavation would be executed at The Tene later.

In the event, the Mile Ditches excavation was not completed until the fourth week in March, and excavation commenced at The Tene in the second week in April (in the first week of the dig three days were lost to rain and snow!). The excavation area, only about 45 sq.m., was limited to the back-garden of one of the new houses, and had to be dug entirely by hand due to the confined space and a lack of finance to hire machinery. The work was carried out by the North Hertfordshire Museums Service with volunteers from the North Hertfordshire Archaeological Society. A month was spent on the site thanks to the kind co-operation of the owners, Acedia Builders Ltd., who also donated all the finds to Letchworth Museum.

A further four inhumations were excavated, and were found to be largely undisturbed. In all nineteen adult, and one immature individual were represented by the remains retrieved from the archaeological excavation and the builder's trenches. Of the nineteen adults, thirteen were possibly males, and six females. Nine of the



*Above:* Roman inhumation during excavation. (Photo by Letchworth Museum).  
*Below:* Excavated features. Note the aligned graves in the bottom right-hand corner, and the rubbish pits in the bottom left-hand corner. (M.D.S. and G.R.B., 1978).



males which could be aged with a certain degree of assurance, would seem to have reached the fourth, fifth or even the sixth decade of life. The females' life span was not so extended, though two possibly attained an age between forty to sixty years.<sup>3</sup>

All the skeletons examined on the site lay extended on their backs, with their heads to the west and their feet to the east. As had been mentioned, there were no grave goods, and little or no evidence of coffins. The graves were very shallow, some being cut only a few centimetres into the chalk sub-soil, and they appear to have been marked in some way, as they were regularly aligned in rows, very close together but few, if any, cutting each other. The cemetery is dated by the many broken potsherds in the grave fills. Provisional dating places the cemetery in the late third or early fourth century A.D.

The excavation has also shown that the area was in use other than as a cemetery in the Roman period prior to, or possibly contemporary with, its use for burials. Large rubbish pits, post-holes, and shallow ditches indicate domestic occupation of the site.

Finds included considerable quantities of Romano-British pottery, including many different vessel types, roof tiles, iron nails, animal bones, shell-fish remains and coins.

It is estimated that between eighty and a hundred inhumations were on the site. Most of these burials have been destroyed by the recent development but others must remain beneath the gardens and sealed beneath the floors of the new houses. In addition, further burials probably exist under older houses and gardens to the south-east and north-west. The cemetery does not extend as far west as the mediaeval high street of Baldock (it is interesting how the mediaeval street pattern deliberately skirts to the west and north of the Roman town limits), but it must link with the inhumations found to the east by Dr. Stead in 1968.

A fuller report will be published when the pottery and other finds have been more thoroughly studied.

### *References*

1. *Ant.J.* xlviii, 1968, p.306. The La Tene period takes its name from a site near Lake Neuchatel, Switzerland. The name seems to have been adapted fairly recently for this small road in Baldock
  2. *Archaeological Excavations 1968*, H.M.S.O., 1969, p.10.
  3. Information from report by Mr. C.B. Denston, Department of Physical Anthropology, University of Cambridge, May 1979.
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