

Hands On Learning

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ROMAN BUILDINGS

AH 28/A

There is evidence that in pre-Roman Britain both circular and rectangular houses occurred. They were roofed with thatch. Roundhouses were simple to lay out, but very strong and weather resistant. The normal form of wall construction would be to weave hazel or willow wattle around larger stakes, to form a very strong circular wall with a gap for the doorway. The walls were then plastered with daub, which dries to a very hard and durable surface. There would have been no windows. Light would have come in through the doorway and from a large central fire. The interior would have been open - privacy would have been minimal. Such roundhouses would have been the homes of small but extended families including maybe grandparents, first cousins, sisters and brothers.

The influence of the Romans saw a gradual change in the materials used to build houses in Britain. The materials used for construction began to change - wood and mud gave way to worked stone, tile, cement and other more durable materials.

The artefacts in this box give us some idea of these changes.

Four Tesserae

These tesserae are larger than those used in the very finest mosaics though they too were used for flooring. Two of them are made from chopped up pieces of tile or brick - this was the commonest source for reddish tesserae.



L-shaped Lift-Key

Many such keys were found at Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester), suggesting locks were quite commonplace. Like nails, each key would have to be manufactured individually by a blacksmith.



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Tile

This tile is something of a mystery. The Romans introduced several forms of roof tile into Britain. In Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester) many buildings were roofed with overlapping diamond shaped stones. The more well-known system involved two quite differently shaped roof tiles - tegulae (singular is tegula), which were flat oblong tiles with two of their sides slightly turned up to form flanges, and imbrices (singular is imbrex), which are like clay pipes sliced in half and slightly enlarged at one end. They fit together so that a tegula always slightly overlaps the one below it and on each side the gaps between the tegulae are covered by the imbrices. This is very similar to tiled roof construction still in use in many parts of the world today.



A full roof made of them must often have been very heavy and would have needed a strong and well-maintained system of rafters to support them. This tile may be a tegula, although it lacks any flanges to confirm this. The hole is also rather puzzling. Roof tiles often have holes for nails to be inserted through, but this hole seems rather too big for that purpose and was probably for a wooden peg. Perhaps, then, it wasn't a roof tile? It seems to be burned - or at least to have been exposed to smoke - on one side. Another suggestion is that it isn't Roman at all. Sometimes archaeologists can't answer puzzles from the past. What do you think?

Tile

This tile is a tegula. It doesn't have any flanges, but if you look closely you can see that one of the edges is roughened where there has once been a flange. The outer surface of the tile is red, while the inside is grey. This happened during the firing process. Perhaps the most interesting feature of this fragment is the paw-prints of a dog that can be seen impressed on it. Dogs tend to leave noticeable claw prints, whereas cats retract their claws while walking - if you look carefully there is a single claw print in front of the left-hand pad. Animal prints like this are quite common, suggesting that a large population of dogs and cats wandered freely around Roman settlements.



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Tile

This is a fragment of a box flue tile. Such tiles (tubuli) lined the walls of rooms which had under-floor heating. Shaped rather like cereal packets with their ends knocked out, they were stacked one above the other, forming a hollow pipe, through which warm air, heated in the hypocaust, could flow up the walls and the gasses flow out.



Flue tiles had to be secured to the walls or to their neighbours. To help the plaster gain a grip they were impressed with patterns usually made with a 'tile comb', rather like a fork with sharp teeth. This fragment has these characteristic marks on one side, while the other side shows traces of smoke discolouration. The initials 'C.G.' written along one edge indicate that the tile is from the Roman villa at Cox Green, on the edge of Maidenhead, which began life in the second century and lasted until the end of the fourth. Like most such country houses it followed the classic corridor pattern - a row of rooms with a corridor running along the front. In the late second century a hypocaust and bathing suite were added to the building.

Fragment of Coloured Wall Plaster

Most Roman-style buildings, even houses with few pretensions, would have had plastered walls. Those who could afford would pay for the walls to be painted with designs - often in rooms with mosaic floors. The large wall paintings that have survived at Pompeii, in Italy, show how sophisticated these paintings could be. Extensive sections of painted walls have survived in Britain at Verulamium (St Albans), Portus Dubris (Dover) and elsewhere. Some of it is finely done, producing 3-D effects, but most fragments imply simpler design schemes than those found in Italy. Fragments that have survived from Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester) show leaves and flowers. The colours used include green and a brown-red, as in this example, which seem to have been very popular.

Fragment of Opus Signinum

Opus signinum is a type of Roman flooring. In Britain it usually consisted of lime mixed with crushed brick or tile. Small pieces of tile/brick can be seen in this sample. Opus signinum could be used to create a simple but strong floor surface, or on walls, or to waterproof baths. This fragment is also from the villa at Cox Green.



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Nail

This is a square shank nail. A blacksmith would have made each nail individually. Wrought iron would be hammered into square edged rods. After re-heating the rod in a forge, the blacksmith would cut off a nail length and hammer all four sides of the softened end to form a point. Then he would insert the hot nail into a hole in a nail-header or anvil and flatten the head. This shape of nail had the benefit of four sharp edges on the shank which cut deep into timber and the tapered shank provided friction down its full length. The wood fibres would often swell if damp and bind round the nail making an extremely strong fixing. These nails were made in a variety of sizes. When the legionary fortress of Inchtuthil in Scotland was abandoned over three-quarters of a million such nails, weighing nearly seven ton, were deliberately buried in order to prevent them being re-used to make weapons. They ranged in size from 2 inches (5cm) up to 16 inches (40cm).



Glass Fragment

This is a fragment of window glass. Window glass was often made by heating the molten liquid to a temperature high enough to allow a sluggish flow of liquid glass. It was then poured into some sort of tray and tools were used to push it into the sides and the corners. The resulting pane has a matt underside, often with a grainy impression of the surface of the tray into which it has been poured, and a glossy upper side. These features can be seen on this fragment. The fragment also demonstrates that such glass would have been useful in keeping the cold out and letting light in, but that it would not allow a view in or out.



Window Grille Fragment

While the bases of the walls survive, it is much rarer to find sections of wall with the window embrasures in place. There is a lot of debate about whether Roman domestic buildings would have had many windows and how big they would have been. Also, how many of them would have been glazed? However, whether glazed or not, windows seem to have been often protected by metal (and presumably by wooden) grilles. Such grilles would have been to make the building secure, rather than to protect the glass. The largest complete British example measured 55 by 61 cm.

