

Hands On Learning

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ROMAN BUILDINGS

AH 28/B

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.

Two Roof Tile Fragments

The Romans introduced several forms of 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 tile - tegulae (singular is tegula), which were flat oblong tiles with raised sides, 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. The two fragments in this box are both tegulae. Such tiles are often quite large. 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.



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Mosaic Fragment

This fragment shows an area of white tesserae embedded in a layer of mortar. A room intended for a mosaic was usually laid with a pounded gravel base. This was covered with a lime mortar in layers of ascending fineness. After the tesserae had been set they were grouted with a slurry of fine mortar. It is thought by some that the floor was then waxed or oiled to bring out the colours. White tesserae like these were often cut from blocks of hard chalk.



Marble Fragment

Stone is difficult and expensive to transport, so you would have had to be wealthy to use marble like this in decorating your house. The thickness of this example suggests that it was used as a veneer on a wall, rather than as a floor covering. Even so, it is unlikely that the entire wall was covered. More probably the marble was used in bands, with the spaces in between filled by painted plasterwork. At Calleva Atrebatum many fragments of marble from Purbeck, on the south coast of England, have been found. But there are also fragments from the Pyrenees, from Italy and even a piece of Egyptian porphyry. This fragment is from a Roman House at Airesford, Hampshire.



A piece of carved Purbeck Marble found at Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester)

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. Small pieces of tile/brick can be seen in this sample.



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Nails

Both of these examples are known as Rosehead Square Shank nails. The long one would have been used in the construction of large timber structures such as the rafters to support heavy tiles, for example. 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 with four glancing blows of the hammer would form the rosehead (a shallow pyramid shape). 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).



L-shaped lift-key with 3 teeth

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. The shaft has a hole at the end so that it could be hung on a cord.



Corner of a Box Flue Tile

Flue tiles 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 exit at the top. Flue tiles had to be secured to the walls or to their neighbours. To help the plaster gain a grip they were impressed with a pattern usually made with a 'tile comb', rather like a fork with sharp teeth.



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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, yellow and a brick-red, as in this example, which seems to have been very popular. This glossy example is from Herculaneum, the neighbouring town of Pompeii, and is of a high quality.



Four Loose Tesserae

These tesserae are larger than those used in the rather fine mosaic fragment in this box. Nevertheless, they too were used for flooring. The mosaic shown below, from Calleva Atrebatum, which may have come from a church building, was surrounded by flooring of these red tesserae.

