

# Lost Treasures

No. 6 - Chester

15<sup>th</sup> September 2005

***Welcome*** to this exciting new six part 'adventure archaeology' series presented by antiquarian Mark Olly.



***The North West has one of the richest histories in Britain but archaeologists have only just scratched the surface.***

***Mark went out and about in search of some of the North West's most intriguing lost treasures, legendary heroes and hidden history. Discovering how ordinary people frequently unearth lost treasures right on their own doorstep and demonstrating how anyone can help in solving some of the most puzzling mysteries in history by applying basic detective skills and commonsense.***



***"I call it adventure archaeology because you never know what you're going to turn up!"***

***Mark Olly***

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Nearly two millennia ago, visitors to the edge of the Roman Empire would have been confronted with the massive walls of a huge legionary fortress city, the northern capital of Roman Britain... [Deva](#) or as we know it today, [Chester](#)! The name Chester derives from the Roman word 'castra' or fort.

The modern city of Chester sits on a sandstone cliff or bluff overlooking the [River Dee](#) and for more than two centuries archaeologists have unearthed thousands of artefacts, piecing together a fairly accurate picture of Roman Chester from excavations around the city. Like many great tourist cities in Britain, modern Chester has capitalised on its strengths of heritage and history, which attract more than 6 million visitors a year from all over the world.

[You may be wondering what lost treasures could you possibly find here? Well think again, current discoveries are just the tip of the iceberg... Amazingly, more than 90% of the Roman fortress still lies buried below Chester's modern streets and buildings...](#)

For example, beneath a baked potato café you'll find the most amazing Roman architecture. Hidden in the basement there are the sandstone foundations of a Roman building, complete with soak-away and hypocaust or central heating system! While modern Chester goes about its daily business, there are also subtle reminders of a powerful Roman legacy in many of the street signs.

The Roman invasion force of 50,000 men advanced in three lines across the surrounding plain but encountered ferocious resistance from British tribes. In a combined land assault and naval supply operation, the Roman legions fought their way up through the Cheshire Gap and established a frontier base strategically controlling the River Dee. The 20<sup>th</sup> legion, [Valeria Victrix](#), victorious after its crushing defeat of [Boudicca's](#) rebellion in 61AD, later assumed command at Deva and consolidated an earlier timber fortress with local sandstone.

By 200AD the fortress had grown to 61 acres – the size of 40 football pitches – and contained the massive [Principia](#) or legionary headquarters, the mysterious 'elliptical' building, barracks for about 5,000 men, huge granaries, hospital, bathhouse and workshops. Outside, a civilian settlement of traders and 'hangers on' supplied the legion with every conceivable need.



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The most spectacular lost treasure found to date has been the remains of the impressive stone amphitheatre - the largest stone built arena in Roman Britain – located just outside the fortress walls.

The amphitheatre was an accidental find, discovered by a headmaster in 1930 and is currently the biggest Roman dig in Britain; in a unique partnership [English Heritage](#) and [Chester City Council](#) are working together to uncover new information about its significance and role.

Archaeologists [Tony Wilmot](#) and [Dan Garner](#) are responsible for the complex investigation and explained that the amphitheatre has two concentric, wide stone walls that held up timber floors and seating. This very imposing and emblematic building of Roman rule was built on a bluff, looking down the River Dee and out towards Wales. The dig has discovered not just the walls but also the actual sand from the arena (complete with teeth and bones of participants) and part of the Roman road surface.

The amphitheatre was probably a focus for military drills and combat training as well as entertainment.

Our regular contributor and weapons expert [Mike Loades](#) explained why Romans were such a successful fighting machine and their obsession with superior technology and discipline.

Your bog standard Roman soldier had many disciplines to master and kit to carry. They would have had their lightweight armour and helmet, shield, spear and *gladius* or short thrusting sword. As a fighting unit the Roman army was truly formidable. The lines of soldiers fought an arms length apart and in front of each other, their rigid discipline kept unit formations tight and it was this combined with well rehearsed combat skills, refined weapons and fitness that ensured their victories.



The strategic location of fortress Deva was brilliant. The River Dee also gave the Romans a forward base for the possible conquest of Ireland.



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More importantly, perhaps, the river was a vital artery for supplying a vast military operation with goods from overseas and industrial sites further upstream, indeed at [Heronbridge](#), about one mile from the fortress, archaeologists found remains of a Roman quayside about 100 yards from the present course of the river. During excavations of the surrounding area, however, they made another far more horrific discovery...

In 1929, just south of Chester not far from the discovery of the Roman quayside, archaeologists were investigating what looked like a Saxon fortified stronghold and uncovered a mass grave, which points to a violent event in the dark ages.

Records indicate that in about 613 AD two armies fought to the death during the [Battle of Chester](#). Saxons under [King Aethelfrith](#) marched 250 miles south from Northumbria to destroy a smaller force of Welsh Britons...and it wouldn't have been a pretty sight.

In a show of faith monks from nearby [Bangor on Dee](#) prayed for the Welsh army. It was a costly mistake. Saxon king Aethelfrith took exception and his pagan forces massacred 200 unarmed monks.

The Welsh forces were slaughtered and archaeologists believe Aethelfrith built a huge defensive stronghold to repel any possible retaliation from the Welsh.

Was this grave and the skeletons discovered casualties from the Battle of Chester? [Dr. David Mason](#), Project Director of the Chester Archaeological Society, thinks it highly likely.

At just a few feet below the surface at least 100 bodies had been carefully laid side by side suggesting they were victorious Saxons and many had grotesque injuries. Two of these skeletons were removed for detailed examination. One a young adult male aged about 18 and another aged around 40 both had sword blade cuts to the skull, some to the face and the hands.

Carbon-14 dating placed the skeletons around the time of the Battle of Chester, which could make this the oldest battle cemetery ever found in Britain. Death and burial often provide the most tangible evidence archaeologists have to go on and this extraordinary find was made by a member of the Chester Archaeological society who had been searching in a nearby stream. He found large amounts of Roman pottery, which led to a large search of the area, uncovering the remains of Roman buildings and the Saxon war graves.



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Accidental finds by ordinary people often help to increase our knowledge of Roman life and death and less than a mile from the city centre some routine building work gave a Chester family more than they expected. Joyce Humphreys and her family were undertaking a bit of underpinning on their home when they came across what looked like a clay pipe. After carefully digging around it, it turned out to be a pottery urn. In fact it was a Roman cremation urn dating from around the first century AD, the invasion period. Joyce emptied it out at first but quickly replaced the contents and gave it to the museum for closer inspection. The bones have now been returned to Joan and lie, she hopes, at peace, buried in her garden.

Roman Emperor [Julius Caesar](#) dictated that all burials had to be outside city walls for reasons of public health. Joyce's house is situated on one of the main routes out of Chester and there's more than a strong possibility that these houses are built on a huge Roman cemetery. The Romans were in Britain for about 350 years so there could be as many as 30,000 to 40,000 Roman souls, which lie buried beneath modern Chester.

Between 1883 and 1892, Victorian antiquarians discovered the largest number of Roman tombstones found in Britain. These are now displayed in Chester's [Grosvenor Museum](#), and each one tells a different story.

Roman society embraced many different religious beliefs, the population was superstitious and respected supernatural forces often hedging their bets by adopting many different local deities and small household gods. Tombstones would reflect this and also often depicted scenes from the sea as they believed that souls of the dead travelled over the sea to 'the blessed island' to be at rest. It was also the custom to leave food and drink at graves on anniversaries and birthdays.

Life expectancy in Roman times was short and death at an early age commonplace. Death was also a form of macabre theatrical entertainment; crowds packing the local arena would relish wild beast fights, execution of criminals and gladiatorial battles. With so much blood and gore, sand was pretty useful to soak up the mess and within the sand of the Chester arena finger bones, human teeth and a chin bone have been discovered.

A small Roman plaque found in Chester in 1736 graphically reinforces the ultimate price paid by gladiators but a quick kill wasn't the point.



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Gladiators were matched against each other to display their skill, increase the entertainment and delay the moment of death.

One of Chester's most impressive lost treasures is also its most mysterious. The [elliptical building](#) was a remarkable structure but its exact purpose is unknown - nothing like it exists anywhere else in the Roman Empire, even in mighty Rome itself.



Ironically, this magnificent monument became a casualty of progress in the 1960s when its ruins disappeared under a modern developments – a lost treasure, gone forever? Happily, not quite.

Fortunately, archaeologists managed to record a detailed picture of its growth and decay. One theory is that it was designed as a symbol of power depicting the might of the Roman Empire and impress local nobility.

By the time Roman rule collapsed in Britain around 410AD buildings like this fell into disuse but evidence suggests the elliptical building survived for several hundred years.

Out of this power vacuum the name of one man, possibly a general commanding a highly trained cavalry force, emerged to counter the Saxon threat. This unique round building may well have been the headquarters of this legendary hero whose actions have since echoed through eternity. His name? Arthur...but that will be another story!

As the amphitheatre dig nears its conclusion, the big question is what does the future hold for one of Britain's most important Roman monuments? The archaeologists must find ways to display and conserve their finds, engage the public and continue the search for new and compelling evidence of our ancestors.



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Chester, like everywhere in Britain, illustrates the broad and colourful tapestry of our history as it continues to unfold and **everyone** has a role in its discovery and celebration.

With special thanks to:

Chester City Council  
English Heritage  
Roman Tours  
Cymd Yall

**Take a good look around where you live; are you standing on a lost treasure?**



**If you'd like to find out more about the history of the area and do some of your own exploration and research check out the following links:**

## ***Romans in Britain***

*A great site for the 7 – 10 year olds.*

[www.brimms.co.uk/romans](http://www.brimms.co.uk/romans)

*For a comprehensive history of the Romans, 100 BC to 450 AD in Britain visit:*

[www.romans-in-britain.org.uk](http://www.romans-in-britain.org.uk)

## ***Chester***

*The city council's site offers you a wealth of knowledge about the town, maps, attractions, archaeology and information on the **Grosvenor Museum**.*

[www.chestercc.gov.uk](http://www.chestercc.gov.uk)

## ***English Heritage***

*Link to the main website, find out all about the work of English Heritage and access to its sites across the UK.*

[www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk)

***Got a term you don't understand?***

***Check it out here:***

<http://archaeology.d.dictionarypage.co.uk>



## Get Involved!



**Send us details of your local lost treasure:** Click the **your treasure** tab on the main [www.lost-treasures.co.uk](http://www.lost-treasures.co.uk) website or email the team at [info@lost-treasures.co.uk](mailto:info@lost-treasures.co.uk)

### Portable Antiquities Scheme

Established in 1997 the **Portable Antiquities Scheme** is a countrywide community archaeology project to encourage the voluntary recording of archaeological objects found by the public in England and Wales - people who use metal-detector, go out walking, gardening or just going about their daily work. The objects found - if properly recorded - offer an important and irreplaceable source for understanding our past. At its heart are the Scheme's **Finds Liaison Officers**, offer everyone a way to log all the finds for public benefit. The data recorded - itself an important educational resource - published on: [www.finds.org.uk](http://www.finds.org.uk)

*The site gives you public access to over 134,000 records and over 52,000 images of finds, as diverse as prehistoric flints to post-medieval buckles – and new finds are going online every day! Emails to [info@finds.org.uk](mailto:info@finds.org.uk)*

## Presenter, Mark Olly



Born and raised in Warrington. Mark Olly established and runs the **Celtic Warrington Project** archaeological unit (CWP), whose aim is to document all prehistoric and Dark Age remains in the Mid Mersey Valley, North Cheshire and South Lancashire. This unique historical project for the North West is revealing an unsuspected picture of the region in Dark Age times.

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Mark writes on archaeology and other subjects for local and national press.

His books include the '[Celtic Warrington & Other Mysteries](#)' volumes, which have been based on six years of research. His other interests are wide ranging and include, musician, artist, photographer, and archaeologist, having trained at Liverpool University. Mark also holds a Certificate of Ministry and a Diploma of Biblical Studies and is part of '[Dalraida The Norsemen](#)', a dark age, living history, re-enactment aspect of Celtic Warrington.

Mark joined forces with **Virtual-Knutsford** in June 2000 and his work features regularly on the site. The second of Mark's '[Celtic Warrington & Other Mysteries](#)' volumes, which covers Knutsford and surrounding areas, appears in regular instalments. Find out more at [www.virtual-knutsford.co.uk](http://www.virtual-knutsford.co.uk)

## Title Music from the series...

The title music from the series comes from Finnish band, '**Nightwish**'. If you'd like to find out more information about them check out: [www.nightwish.com](http://www.nightwish.com)

**'Lost Treasures'**  
is a Planet X Production for  
ITV Granada



**Producer:** *Phil Hirst*  
**Exec Producer:** *Eamonn O'Neal*  
**Presenter:** *Mark Olly*  
**Editor:** *Paul Tovee*

This fact sheet was compiled for ITV Granada  
by Jacky Fitt – [www.wordstofitt.com](http://www.wordstofitt.com)



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