

## Secrets of small Roman town revealed by HS2 archaeologists

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More than 400 burials have been uncovered in a Roman Cemetery and buildings excavated and artefacts uncovered by HS2 archaeologists.

As part of HS2's unprecedented archaeology programme, archaeologists have been able to excavate a Roman town in Fleet Marston, near Aylesbury, discovering more about what life was like in Roman Britain, two thousand years ago. Archaeologists from COPA JV, working on behalf of HS2's Enabling Works Contractor Fusion JV, excavated at the site for over a year, uncovering parts of the town sitting along a major Roman road.

A team of around 50 archaeologists uncovered a series of enclosures that contained evidence of domestic structures, as well as commercial and industrial activity. These enclosures developed in a ladder-like plan either side of Akeman Street, a major Roman road that linked the Roman capital of Verulamium (modern St Albans) with Corinium Dobunorum (now Cirencester) and going via Roman Alchester (near Bicester). The fieldwork traced the line of the road and uncovered the remains of its well-constructed limestone surface, and flanking drainage ditches

The team has also discovered over 1,200 coins along with several lead weights, indicating that this was an area of trade and commerce. Parts of the widened road may have been used as a market, with extra room for carts and stalls. Other metal objects, such as spoons, pins and brooches, were of a more domestic nature, while gaming dice and bells suggest that gambling and religious activity occupied people's time here too. Apart from being home to many inhabitants, the settlement is likely to have been an important staging post for travellers and soldiers passing through Fleet Marston on their way to and from the garrison at Alchester.

A late Roman cemetery, the largest of its kind now known in Buckinghamshire has also been excavated. The cemetery contained around 425 burials. As was typical in the late Roman period, the cemetery predominantly contained inhumation burials but also included some cremation burials. The number of burials, along with the development of the settlement, suggests that there was a population influx into the town in the mid to late Roman period, linked perhaps to increased agricultural production. There are two separate areas of burials suggesting the cemetery may have been organised by tribe, family, ethnic grouping.

Amongst the buried population at Fleet Marston are a number of decapitated burials, approximately 10% of those buried there. There are several instances of the head being placed between the legs or next to the feet. One interpretation of this burial practice is that it could be the burial of criminals or a type of outcast, although decapitation is well-known elsewhere and appears to have been a normal, albeit marginal, burial rite during the late Roman period.

Richard Brown, Senior Project Manager for COPA said: "The excavation is significant in both enabling a clear characterisation of this Roman town but also a study of many of its inhabitants. Along with several new Roman settlement sites discovered during the HS2 works it enhances and populates the map of Roman Buckinghamshire."

Further south on the HS2 site, on a low hill away from Akeman Street, archaeologists found evidence of Early Iron Age large enclosures with wide, deep ditches. The nature of the Iron Age activity is currently uncertain, but the enclosures suggest it the area was used for farming before the town was established. Early in the Roman period, the area was the site of open-cast gravel quarrying, possibly used for the construction or maintenance of Akeman Street and its branch roads. A stone-built corn dryer or malting oven, the latter providing potential evidence for brewing, was also constructed in this area.

Fleet Marston is one of over 100 archaeological sites that HS2 has examined since 2018 between London and Birmingham, which together provide a detailed insight into the rich history of Britain. A larger Roman settlement, Blackgrounds, has also been excavated by HS2 archaeologists in South Northamptonshire, providing more evidence of what life was like in Roman Britain.

Speaking about the excavations, Helen Wass, Head of Heritage at HS2 Ltd said: "The HS2 archaeology programme has enabled us to learn more about our rich history in Britain. The large Roman cemetery at Fleet Marston will enable us to gain a detailed insight into the residents of Fleet Marston and the wider Roman Britain landscape.

"All human remains uncovered will be treated with dignity, care and respect and our discoveries will be

shared with the community. HS2's archaeology programme seeks to engage with all communities both local and nationally to share the information and knowledge gained as well as leaving a lasting archival and skills legacy."

Overall, the excavation of the site at Fleet Marston including the burials provides a picture of the lives and beliefs of the community that lived there during the Roman period. A programme of post-excavation assessment and analysis will be carried out over the next few years, which will offer an opportunity to address questions about origins, diet, family links, lifestyles, beliefs and so on that have so rarely been asked in the region.



*Photo credit: HS2 Ltd*