

Cirencester Christmas Cracker

3rd December 2016

On a cold chilly Saturday morning, we gathered in a rapidly filling Cirencester Beeches Road car park for our Christmas tour around the town's many Roman, Saxon, medieval and later sites (including a pub of course!) under the knowledgeable guidance of our club chairman, Pete Fenn.

Once we had all managed to find parking spaces we set off in a clockwise direction around the town following the course of the former Roman defences which, although now largely destroyed are still visible as a raised bank delineating the modern road layout around the town. Also following the defences is the River Churn, redirected around the outside of the walls in the Roman period. Here it feeds the medieval St Mary's mill which may have been built from stone taken from a Roman tower.

As we crossed into the interior of the town we passed the 16th century Langley's grist mill before arriving at the former site of the Roman Silchester gate where Ermin Street entered the town. Although difficult to imagine now, this area used to be a busy industrial hub when the Midland & South Western Junction Railway arrived in 1883 together with a station and later a coach and locomotive works.

We moved on to St Michael's Park, although this was the site of the first Roman activity in the area with a fort established in AD 45 there is now no trace of it remaining above ground. After the departure of the Roman army in AD 75 a civilian settlement was laid out in this area in the centre of which public buildings such as the basilica and forum were established. The apsidal end of the basilica is marked out on the modern road.



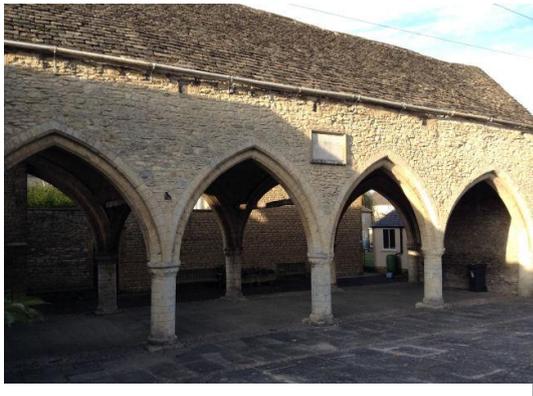
Club members at the amphitheatre

We then headed out of the town and crossed over the dual carriageway we passed over the site of the canal basin that marked the terminus of the Cirencester branch of the Thames & Severn Canal, opened in 1789. Passing through an area pitted by former Roman quarries we arrived at the spectacular amphitheatre, one of the largest known examples surviving from the Roman occupation of Britain. It is thought to have originally had a capacity for around 8,000 people.



Spital Gate

from the Spital Gate in the northern corner of the Abbey Grounds and some of the perimeter walling which is still visible along Dollar Street.



St John's Hospital

Returning back into the modern town and passing the tallest yew hedge in Europe we travelled forwards through time from the Roman period into Saxon as we headed into the Abbey grounds. It was here that a large Saxon church and crypt was excavated in 1965 on the site of the later Abbey, with the Saxon building covering the remains of a Roman Villa. This Saxon Church was then demolished to make way for the Abbey itself which was founded in 1133.

The Abbey was destroyed during the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539. Unlike many religious institutions that were only partially dismantled at this time, the demolition here was complete apart

We crossed the park, past the former Abbey fish ponds, now a lake, to find the only remaining section of Roman town bank, later walling and bastion foundations. Following the line of the wall around to the north we passed the ice house for the Abbey House before passing through the Spital Gate. We then passed the Hospital and Chantry on Spitalgate Lane before arriving at the Nelson pub for a well deserved lunch in warm and convivial surroundings.

The afternoon was spent in the wonderful Cirencester museum which houses many of the artefacts from Roman, Saxon and Medieval Cirencester. The mosaics are especially impressive.

We would like to thank our Chairman Pete Fenn for organising such a wonderful day out.