

Revealing the Past at Caerwent

by Richard J. Brewer

Venta a very ancient city ..., whose name neither the rage of men nor time has yet extinguished' wrote William Camden in 1586. As seen today, Caerwent is a small village, but in Roman times it was the administrative capital of the Silures, the tribe occupying South-East Wales. The town was known to the Romans as *Venta Silurum* which means 'market of the Silures'. It lay some nine Roman miles to the east of Caerleon (*Isca*), the fortress of the Second Augustan Legion, on the road to Gloucester (*Glevum*). The fourth-century town walls, which in places still stand to an impressive height of 5m, enclose an area of 18 ha, making Venta one of the smallest tribal capitals of Roman Britain.



● Caerwent. the south wall and towers

Besides being listed in the Antonine Itinerary - an early third-century road book listing principal routes and stopping places - and the Ravenna Cosmography - a seventh-century topographical list - Caerwent is not mentioned in Roman literature. Archaeologists have had, therefore, to dig up its remains to discover its history, what it looked like and how its inhabitants lived.

Annual excavations from 1899 until 1913 uncovered almost two-thirds of the Roman town and provided a general picture of its layout. Venta had a planned system of streets dividing the town into a series of rectangular plots (*insulae*) which contained public buildings - such as the *forum-basilica* (market-place and assembly hall) and a Romano-Celtic temple next to it - an array of shops, houses and farms. These large-scale investigations were carried out at a time when archaeological techniques were still in their infancy, and on the whole only the uppermost Roman buildings were revealed. The plan that we have of Venta, therefore, is that of the late Roman town. The earlier periods of Roman occupation still remain buried and our knowledge of the origins of Venta in the late first century



● Reconstruction of the forum-basilica. Recent evidence indicates that the facade of the basilica was probably an open colonnade

A.D. and its early development is very meagre.

The periodic investigations carried out since the conclusion of these large-scale explorations have generally been of a more limited nature. The National Museum of Wales's involvement at Caerwent has a very long history, which began when V.E. Nash-Williams excavated part of the public baths in 1923 under the supervision of Dr R.E.M. Wheeler, then Keeper of Archaeology. Two years later, the long-awaited clearance and consolidation of the south side of the town wall was begun, and Nash-Williams returned to make a thorough and most valuable examination of the whole structure. Next on the scene was W.F. Grimes, who had entered the service of the Museum when Nash-Williams was promoted Keeper of Archaeology in 1926; and in 1930 he discovered the first of the five towers now known to exist on the north side of the town wall.

Judicious application of the Ancient Monuments and Town and Country Planning Acts has prevented any development, besides very modest extensions, within the enclosed area since the 1930s. Hence, Caerwent presents one of the very few opportunities not only to excavate large areas of a Roman town, but also to display the remains of the excavated buildings to the public. In 1981 the National Museum of Wales began a programme of research excavations to improve our knowledge of Venta, especially its origins and early development. Three sites have been



● Buckle and plate of a late fourth-century belt found on the site of the basilica. The buckle is adorned with confronting dolphins and outward facing horse's heads

investigated; a large courtyard house in the north-west corner of the town; the *forum-basilica* at the very heart of the town and the adjacent Romano-Celtic temple. The latter two sites are held in Guardianship, and their excavation has been funded by Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments. The remains of the temple have been consolidated and will soon be open to the public, while work continues on the site of the *forum-basilica*.

At the centre of the town's public life, the *forum* (market-place) and *basilica* (assembly hall) appropriately occupies the whole central building-block (*Insula VIII*), north of the main street. The plan of the building is so close to that of the legionary headquarters building that assistance of surveyors and architects from the Second Augustan Legion is almost certainly to be deduced.

The site was first explored in 1907 and 1909, and almost the complete plan of the building was recovered, but there was no firm indication as to when it was first erected. In 1987 excavations began to uncover parts of this impressive building for display and to unravel its structural history. Most of the *basilica* has been revealed as well as part of the *forum*, and consolidation of the remains by the skilled Cadw masons is underway.

The *forum*, a rectangular open market-place surrounded on three sides by ranges of rooms, was entered from the main street through an archway. The



● Excavation of the east end of the great hall of the basilica, with the drain in the foreground

paved piazza provided space for temporary stalls to be set-up on market days. The ranges of rooms, which were set behind a covered colonnade, served as shops, taverns and offices. Above these, to balance the lofty splendour of the *basilica*, there would probably have been a second storey, perhaps with a terrace and more rooms. The ground floor shops consisted of a single room, with a large open front, which could be closed with wooden shutters. On the east side the shops opened onto the courtyard, whereas those on the south looked onto the main street.

● Continued overleaf

The fourth side of the *forum*, opposite the main entrance, was closed by the *basilica*, part of which is already on view. It had an open colonnaded facade and was entered by a flight of steps from the *forum piazza*. The *basilica* comprises the great hall and a rear range of rooms and chambers. Some of the walls stood, even before excavation, as much as 2m above ground-level, having been incorporated into nineteenth-century farm-buildings.

The great hall incorporated, as is generally the case, a nave and two aisles divided by colonnades supporting a clerestory like that of a great church, its lineal descendant. The walls carrying the columns were quite massive, with foundations almost 2m deep. The great stone columns, all carved from local sandstone, had shafts about 90cm in diameter at the base, and on the assumption that they were 10 diameters in overall height, we reach a figure of 9m. Allowing for architrave, entablature, clerestory and the roof, the *basilica* could not have stood less than 20m. The nave roof stood above the level of the aisles so that windows could be included to light the interior. The great hall would have been used for large public meetings and ceremonies.

Traversing the *basilica*, beneath the floor, was a box-drain which carried rainwater collected in the gutters surrounding the *forum piazza*. Massive blocks of local sandstone, some

weighing in excess of a ton, were used for the sides and capping of the drain, while the floor was paved in roofing tiles. A semi-circular inspection hole, cut in one of the capstones, gave access to the drain to clean it out.

The rear range of rooms accommodated the offices and records of the local administration. In the centre there was the *aedes*, or shrine, where statues of the Emperor and civic deities would have been housed. Its entrance, opening onto the great hall, ran the full width of the room and the floor was raised above those of the rest of the *basilica*, thus giving it some prominence. The rooms to the east, with concrete floors, presumably served as offices.

The room to the west of the *aedes* served as the *curia* or council chamber. There was no direct access from the great hall into this chamber; its south wall survives to a height of some 2m and carries painted plaster with an architectural perspective. In its later history, mosaic panels adorned the floor of this room, one along the west side at the entrance to the room, and another at right-angles down the middle, thus effectively forming a T-shape. Unfortunately, the mosaic had almost entirely gone and only fragments of the border were found. The rest of the room was floored with concrete. Cutting the floor either side of the central mosaic were channels, and corresponding chases were also found in the plaster on the south wall.

These carried the timber framework of the benches on which the councillors of the tribal assembly would have sat. Stone bases of a stepped wooden dais occupied the east end of the room from which the magistrates would have presided over meetings of the council. The features described have been observed nowhere else in Britain.

The recent excavations have unravelled much of the structural history of this massive building. It was built in

the earlier part of the second century A.D., during a period that saw much municipal building in the tribal capitals of Britain. The work of erecting the *forum-basilica* would have been a protracted business, for they were among the largest buildings constructed in Britain prior to the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages and must have placed a severe strain on resources and finance. In the late third century, the *basilica* appears largely to have been rebuilt. The roof of the great hall was stripped and the columns dismantled. As part of this reconstruction, certain of the walls were strengthened and the floors were raised. These massive works may have been necessary because of subsidence. Indeed structural problems may have existed from the outset, for two very large pits had been dug through the earliest floors to inspect the foundations.

The *basilica* continued to function as the administrative centre until the 330s, but at that time the nature of the occupation changed. Numerous hearths were found in the nave, which probably belong to a period when the great hall was being used for small-scale industrial activity. During this period the roof of the great hall appears to have remained intact. Some twenty or thirty years elapsed before the *basilica* was systematically demolished and the site levelled. Coins of the House of the Theodosius, including issues struck in the 390s, indicate continued activity on the site of the *basilica* at this very late date. The nature of this late occupation, when the rest of the town was slipping into decay and ruin, is uncertain.

The National Museum of Wales's excavations will continue on the site of the *forum-basilica* this summer (11 July - 14 August), and you are welcome to visit any day except Friday. Caerwent lies on the A48 from Newport to Chepstow, accessible from Junctions 23 and 24 of the M4.

Change over Time?

