

Collecting Roman Britain, Part I

by Vincent McCarthy



'Trumpet' type fibula with red enamel decoration. 1st Century AD. 70mm long. £95.



Gilded plate brooch with black glass boss. 4th Century AD. Found in Yorkshire. 35mm long. £85.



'Hare' brooch found in East Anglia. Circa 2nd Century AD. 30mm long. £95.



'Crossbow' type fibula. Green patination. 4th Century AD. 75mm long. £65.



Silver 'horse' brooch with some red enamel inlay. Found in Norfolk. 2nd Century AD. 35mm long. £125.



Two silver rings, one with red stone inset, the other with raised pellets. Later Roman. £95 each.



Brooch in the form of a swimming duck. 2nd Century AD. Found in Suffolk. 50mm long. £95.



Pottery oil lamp with ring handle. Late 1st Century AD. 11cm in length. £65.

I came, I saw, I conquered - the invasion of Britain succinctly described by the Roman general Julius Caesar. In fact Caesar invaded Britain on two occasions; first in 55BC he landed on the Kent coast with a small army of around 10,000 men. The expedition was intended to punish the British Celts for aiding their Gallic cousins during the protracted Gallic war; but perhaps also as a reconnaissance raid to help gauge the military strength of the British.

The invaders met with stiff opposition from the British Celts who lined the cliffs at Dover and fought with extreme bravery. It was autumn and the weather turned against Caesar. Storms destroyed many of his beached ships and soon the Romans had retreated across the Channel.

The rejoicing amongst the British was short-lived as the following year Caesar assembled an armada of 800 ships with around 35,000 troops and cavalry before setting out once again for the Kent coast. This time the opposition was not so well prepared and before long the Roman legions were marching through the Kent countryside towards the river Thames. Once again the weather and tides hindered Caesar. Storms prevented his cavalry troops landing as planned and allowed the Celtic king Cassivellaunus to rally his men and harass the invaders from all sides. It was a frenzied time but eventually the Romans drew up peace deals with the main British kings. Within two months Caesar had exacted tribute and hostages and left again for Gaul where he quelled an uprising by the troublesome Gallic Celts. The Romans did not return again for almost a hundred years but in that time the British traded extensively with Rome and several of the local kings and chieftains were on friendly terms. Some visited Rome on 'state' visits.

The final full scale Claudian invasion took place in 43AD and during the remainder of the century the invaders infiltrated most of Britain which became more or less under peaceful Roman control. (The Pax Romana) They stayed for more than 350 years, leaving behind a veritable wealth of artefacts, helping us to know something of the lives they lived in this outpost of the Empire.

Personal Items

The most common object from Roman Britain is the brooch or fibula. These fasteners had been in general use since Iron Age times but with the arrival of the Romans the range of types and their sheer numbers increased dramatically. The earliest were of the fibula type with a more or less decorated bow, sprung at the top and with a catchplate to hold the pin in closed position at the base. The shape of the bow helps describe the various forms hence, 'dolphin', 'trumpet', 'fantail', etc and these were often gilded or silvered or perhaps inlaid with coloured enamels.

From the second century onwards a type of plate brooch in a wide variety of forms appears. Lozenge or circular shapes are common but zoomorphic types resembling birds or animals were popular; the horse was a favourite. These are attractive and often inlaid with red, blue and yellow enamels. Brooches continued in use throughout the Roman period so the collector will be able to find a wide range of forms at very reasonable prices.

Finger rings are another very popular item and can be found in gold, silver and bronze or brass. The earlier forms are often of a simple band swelling at the front to make room for an inlaid 'stone' of glass or cornelian carved with a deity or animal. Fortuna, for good luck, is a popular figure as is Mars for the military. Lions, eagles and dolphins are also very popular. Some rings were used as personal seals to secure private letters from prying eyes. Later rings from the third and fourth centuries tend to be more ornate often with angular or humped shoulders. From the time of Constantine Christian motifs appear on the bezels of rings but such items are scarce in Britain.

Necklaces and ear rings are scarce but bracelets of circular or open ended form are more common, especially in bronze and base silver. The decoration is generally uninspiring, comprising of stylised serpent heads and geometric patterns with punched dots and lines.

Pins are functional as well as decorative and were used for fixing hair styles and perhaps for fastening cloaks or tunics. They come in a range of sizes from around 3 inches in length to 9 inches or so and are found in bronze or bone with decorative terminals.

Amongst the earliest public building in Britain was the bath house, certainly popular in Flavian times with both the Roman and local population. Personal grooming was important and toilet instruments were very widely used. Simple and highly evocative things in bronze such as nail cleaners, ear wax scoops and tweezers for removing body hair are quite common and can be bought for as little as £20 or so in good condition. Hair combs are found in bone or wood though often in poor condition. Mirrors are usually of bronze and of disc form, one side being polished, the other decorated with birds or floral motifs.

Education and Writing

Children from the age of six or seven underwent primary education, mainly the three R's. Examples of writing exercises have been found and are sometimes available to collectors. More common are letters or notes in a cursive script written on scraps of thin wood, lead sheet or pieces of tile or pottery.

A wax tablet set into a shallow wooden frame was used with a stylus for note-taking or messages. The stylus was made of bronze or iron and had a sharp point to inscribe the wax coupled with a flat end to erase any errors. Anything pertaining to writing is popular with collectors so a decent stylus will cost around £100, maybe a little more for a decorated example. More formal letters or documents were written in ink, with a reed or split bronze pen on hide or papyrus leaves. Pens are rare but ink pots of ceramic or even lead are occasionally found. Private documents were often sealed with wax set into a bronze seal box for added security. These little seal boxes can be of round or lozenge shape, their lids decorated and onset with coloured enamels. Popular but not too expensive, £50 to £100 would buy a really nice example.

Household Items

If you were able to walk through a Romano-British town house or villa you would feel quite at home. The walls would be decorated with paintings and drapes, the tiled floor with warm rugs against the winter chill. Low tables, couches and chairs would be in place. Many artefacts would be familiar with our own day-to-day living. Lighting was provided by oil burning lamps generally made of clay with pictorial designs on the top behind the nozzle which held the wick. The larger villas boasted fine and ornate bronze lamp stands similar to those seen at Pompeii, but alas rarely found in Britain. Although oil lamps are

common in much of the Roman Empire they remain scarce finds in Britain, perhaps due to the scarcity of the olive oil which was the main fuel.

Security was obviously important as the Romans introduced locks and keys into this country. Bronze keys of various sizes from large door keys to small casket keys and even some which are fitted into a plain finger ring. Some of the larger keys have decorative bronze heads, obviously mass produced as similar designs are repeated ad infinitum. The shank was usually of iron and was made to suit the customer's needs. Most keys are from the second century AD but a few are earlier and are popular with collectors, being easily recognisable and inexpensive.

Dining was important and tables were laid with glazed plates, bowls and drinking cups. A few silver or glass vessels have survived but these are now found in museums, the ordinary collector having to 'make do' with glossy red ware. Much of this Samian or Arretine ware comes from Gaul although local potters did their best to copy it from time to time. Spoons are easily found and popular with collectors. They appear in silver and bronze or silvered bronze, mostly with small oval or round bowls depending on their function. The handle generally ends in a point, possibly to help pick up small items of food as the fork had not yet been invented. Knives are another common find usually with an iron blade and bronze handle. As the iron is almost always corroded away we find a wide range of very ornate and evocative handles on the market today. These can be erotic or zoomorphic in style.

Leisure Time

Gladiatorial shows and chariot racing were popular. Actual artefacts are virtually non-existent although action scenes sometimes appear as decoration on lamps and drinking vessels. Classical theatre became popular, even with locals as Latin became more widely known. Tragic and comic masks and clay figurines are sometimes found and the same themes are found as decorative elements on ceramic and bronze vessels. Gaming and gambling were prevalent especially amongst off-duty soldiers. Board games similar to draughts or backgammon were played, dice and counters of bone or ceramic are found especially around military sites. Some of the players were not averse to a little cheating as some of the dice are 'loaded'.



Bronze nail cleaner with green patination. Found in East Anglia. £25.



Two late Roman silver spoons. £95 & £65.



Silver ligula and probe for medical or cosmetic use. Circa 2nd-3rd Century AD. Found in Sussex. 11cm long. £125.



Bronze handle from a folding knife depicting a hound chasing a hare. The iron blade is lost. £85.



Two keys, the larger with iron shank. 2nd Century AD. £75 & £50.



A lozenge shaped seal box lid with red and blue enamel insets. Circa 2nd Century AD. £30.



A bronze stud with a male face in the Celtic style. From Lincs. Circa 1st Century AD. £65.



A bone dice. Circa 3rd Century AD. £55. (die)