

the story of Colchester cemetery's first burial

It was evening and all the sky was darkening except for a hazy golden glow in the west, which threw long shadows onto the ground. The Trinovantian child was tired and fearful. He was only small, and today had been a strange day when nobody had acted as they should.

Usually the child kept close to his mother and helped her with the daily chores. He could grind grain to make flour for bread, rubbing a stone which just fitted into his fist against the large worn quern stone. He could fetch water and set it to boil in a pot over the fire, squatting as close as he dared to watch the bubbles forming. He could gather herbs from the places he knew they grew around the area of land he called home, and pick out the grass and insects and wash the herbs for his mother to use when she cooked the meat.

And he could help his mother to wash clothes in the stream, and he held the soft bundle of fleece when she span, and played with spare loom weights when she wove. He was never far from his mother during his days, and at night he would cuddle close to her, feeling the safe warmth and scent of her sleeping form.

But today had been different. Today his mother had told him that he must be a good boy and sit by himself near the fire, and he must not stray too far and he need not grind the flour, or gather the herbs. Today his Grandfather had died and his mother, and the other women of the settlement, must prepare Grandfather for his journey to meet the ancestors.

The day seemed long and wearisome, and then, as the light of the day grew dim a great fire was lit by the men, far off in the distance, and it crackled and spat flame ominously. Tall torches of tallow and reeds were set up along the way from the settlement to the fire, and the air was full of wood smoke and chatter. For people were gathering; many people; people the child had never seen before all dressed in their best wool tunics, with fine cloaks hung about with furs

Members of the Trinovantes tribe place grave goods before interring the cremated remains of a warrior. Several graves like this have been studied by archaeologists but with extensive previous gravel quarrying in the Colchester area other such sites may have been lost forever.

Picture by Peter Froste.



During the Iron Age the countryside was dotted with numerous farmsteads surrounded by vegetable plots, animal pens, fields and meadows. Each roundhouse would have been occupied by one or more families.



and leather. The women wore beads hung from their ears and woven into their plaits, and some of the men wore heavy swords in leather sheaths by their sides.

At last his mother came and the child felt safe again. Gathered up in her arms, he was petted and cosseted, and when she set him down again she draped a dark soft woollen shawl around his shoulders and pinned it with a brooch. Everybody was ready and the procession to the fire began.

Leading the procession were six strong men and they carried the body of Grandfather aloft, dressed in his best clothes, on a bed of woven hazel and willow sticks. And behind came the rest of the men, and crowds of women, and children large and small, and dogs. And one man beat a tabor with a stick to the rhythm of a heartbeat.

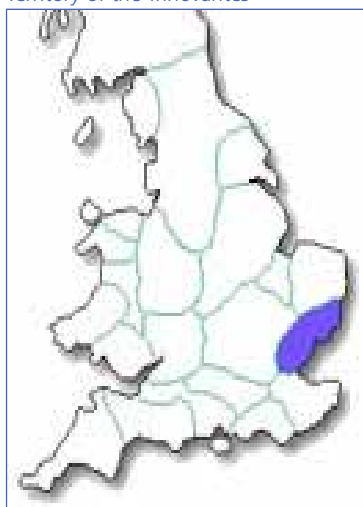
Once the fire was reached the men pushed Grandfather's bed onto the flames. The child was lifted up by his mother and his face held close against her shoulder so he was shielded from the sight of Grandfather's body being consumed by the flames. But peeping over her shoulder he could see and hear that all around people were dancing and chanting and were joyful, for it was a glorious thing for Grandfather, to travel to meet with the ancestors.

The dancing and chanting was followed by feasting, and the men drank ale and became like rowdy children. In the morning they were men again, and some returned to the grey heap of ash where the fire had been. They sifted through the ashes and embers until they found all the fragments of stark white bone, and they placed them in a large earthenware pot. They dug a hole in the ground and buried the pot, marking the place with a piece of stick.

It was around the year 10AD. The land the child called home was bounded on the south and east sides by huge defensive earthworks – now known as the Barnhall and Berechurch Dykes – and by a small stream to the north. This was a settlement on the eastern edge of the Iron Age town called The Fortress of Camulos, God of War. A few decades later the Celtic name of the town was Romanised to Camulodunum. It is now known as Colchester.

The child was a member of the Trinovantes tribe. To the south was the home of the Catuvellauni tribe and a few miles to the north was the land of the Icenii, famous for their warrior Queen Boudicca. It is possible that Boudicca rode across this land in her fury 50 years later, to sack Camulodunum, to kill the people and to raze the immense Roman temple of Claudius to the ground.

Territory of the Trinovantes



Time passed. The Romans came and left. The Anglo Saxons settled peaceably and farmed the land. The Vikings came and imposed Danelaw for a few years on this quiet corner of the country, and in the new millennium the Normans invaded and they built the huge Castle Keep on the foundations of the Roman temple. The Dark Ages fell, and the Black Death and the plague ravaged the country, killing thousands in Colchester alone. In the 1640s the bloody Civil War raged and Colchester was held under siege from the Parliamentarian army. Sir Charles Lucas and Sir George Lisle were famously martyred. History marched on; Stuarts, Hanoverians and Saxe Coburgs reigned, lived, loved, fought and died. Colchester spawned nursery rhymes; “Old King Cole”, “Humpty Dumpty”, “Twinkle, Twinkle little star” and became famous for producing baize cloth and oysters.

The piece of land where the Trinovantian child had lived so long ago, was grazed by cattle and sheep and dozed through the centuries, barely changing; scarcely feeling the passage of time until, in 1855, it was purchased by Colchester Joint Burial Board from Farmer Tettrell of Monkwick and it changed forever.

Landscaping of the site began; fences were erected and walls were built; a profusion of fine trees were planted; two chapels, a mortuary, a house for the superintendent and a lodge were built; gates were wrought from iron in a local forge. One fine Saturday in April, the cemetery was consecrated by the Bishop of Rochester in the presence of the Mayor and Corporation in their robes and finery, clergymen in sober black, and ladies rustling in wide crinolines and lace trimmed bonnets. A few days later, on May 1st 1856, the eleven parishes of Colchester town closed their churchyards, and the cemetery was opened. On the following day Thomas Bolton, a cordwainer who had lived in local almshouses, was buried and a new chapter in the history of the cemetery land began.

In the 1940s the cemetery was extended. The boundary wall on the west side was demolished and the adjoining field was incorporated into the existing cemetery. Workmen shovelled the rubble and broken bricks from the wall into wheelbarrows and trundled them away. They cleared the brambles and bracken from the edge of the field and dug out the tree roots.

And then, one afternoon, a workman’s spade found something unexpected; a ceramic pot of the Iron Age, dating to 10AD, and containing a quantity of cremated bone.

Penny Stynes

Colchester Cemetery today; the pathway lays where a wall once stood between the Victorian and 1940s burial areas and the area to the left of the large tree and beyond is where Iron Age and Roman cremation burials were found.



Afterword: *Whilst the history of the cemetery is accurate, as far as I know, the story of the child is, of course, supposition. The discovery of the Iron Age cremation pot was followed by further discoveries of both Iron Age and Roman cremation burials and pottery shards very close by meaning that the land was definitely used in the late first century BC and the early first century AD as a small Iron Age and Roman cemetery. Since then over 64,000 further burials have taken place on this land.*