

A Votive Figurine from Little Hallingbury

By Chris Lydamore

In amongst the Romano-British objects on display in the museum is an enigmatic clay figurine. We don't have very much information on the figurine other than it was excavated at Goose Lane near Little Hallingbury in the early 1970s as part of a substantially amateur series of assessments and excavations carried out in advance of the construction of the M11 motorway.

The excavations were documented in a summary booklet written by Ian Robertson which was published in 1976. The section on Goose Lane is very brief but does give a little information.

"Little Hallingbury, Goose Lane: A scatter of Roman pottery found during field walking in 1972 enabled Mr T. A. Betts to undertake an excavation with the West Essex Archaeology Group in 1973 in advance of Motorway construction. This was found to be a complicated site with an Iron Age hut circle underlying Romano-British features which included a complex of ditches and the foundations of a small rectangular wattle and daub building some 4.00m x 2.50m. Some eleven coins were recovered from the site, which, with the exception of one minted in AD 148-9, were all minted in the period AD 258-285."



The figurine is made of local naturally occurring "found" clay and was clearly bonfire fired, presumably as part of a cremation. The figurine was discovered inside one of the two jars that are displayed next to it in the museum and which originally would have contained the cremated remains of the deceased. The jars, in conjunction with the coins recovered from the site, have been used to date the figurine to the late 3rd century.

Although impossible to say with certainty it is not unreasonable to presume that the figurine was made from clay excavated during the preparation for a cremation and probably fired as part of the subsequent cremation process. It was then placed into one of the two jars along with cremated remains before being buried.

The figurine has caused much discussion and speculation over the years: Perhaps it was a votive offering to guard the deceased in the afterlife, perhaps it was made to form a tangible link between the cremation ritual and the land it was carried out on, maybe in some way it was supposed to be a representation of the deceased person? There are nearly as many theories as there are people who have viewed it. Unfortunately, with so little information to go on, the original purpose of the figurine is likely to always remain a mystery.

