

## SSARG Visit to Lydney Park

A bright day dawned for our visit to Lydney Park and Gardens, as we all met at Severn View Services to share cars and toll fees on our onward journey to Lydney Park in Gloucestershire.



*Two views of Lydney Park*

Lydney Park House is situated to the east of Camp Hill, a prehistoric promontory hillfort, within which was later built a Romano-British temple, a courtyard house, a bath house and a long narrow building at the southern edge of a promontory overlooking the flood plain of the river Severn. The site also contains evidence of Bronze Age metal working and may therefore have been an important site from the earliest period of metallurgy in the district.

The grand house built in 1877 was built in the Tudor style, with rusticated stonework and a castellated tower in one corner. The house contains a small museum containing Roman coins and other Roman artefacts that have been found on site. In 1928 Sir Mortimer Wheeler and his wife Tessa, both eminent archaeologists, were commissioned to make a thorough examination of Lydney Park.



*Inspecting the display of finds in the museum*



Many small objects were found both through Mortimer Wheeler's excavations in 1928-9 and from earlier diggings, including over 8000 coins, over 300 bracelets and pins, spoons, amulets and votive inscriptions. One was a small greenish coloured stone stamp used for marking semi-solid sticks of eye ointment (*collyria*) before they hardened. A record of a prescription from oculist Julius Jucundus cites three different ways of using it – either in drops, ie dissolved in water, or as an ointment mixed with honey, or as a tincture applied with a brush.

The mosaic fragments from the excavation show fishermen, a sea god, and tritons, showing a link to the Celtic god Nodens, (roughly equivalent to the Roman god Mars). Nodens is the god of hunting and is therefore possibly linked to the Forest of Dean to the north which, during the Roman period is thought to have been preserved as hunting grounds for Roman officials. One of the artefacts found during excavations on site was a fine example of a Romano-British cast bronze statuette of a dog, closely resembling a half-grown wolfhound. The dog image has become the symbol for Lydney Park. Nine representations of dogs are at Lydney – in the Roman world dogs were often associated with healing sanctuaries. One part of the treatment was to receive licks from a sacred dog, which they believed could heal all sorts of tumours, even blindness. At one point, a *mansio* was built to serve the needs of visiting officials. Soon after Ad 364-7 a

temple  
dedicated to  
to the god  
Nodens was  
built.



*Roman Temple to Nodens*

Professor Tolkien, being at that time a professor of Anglo-Saxons at Oxford, was invited there to stay in the Bathurst family home. Later in 1932 he published reports of the research committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London, containing an essay on *The Name Nodens* (Camp Hill was riddled with tunnels and open cast iron mines known as scowls, which may have given him the idea of hole dwelling hobbits). A curse tablet was uncovered in the early 1880s, it reads 'To the god Nodens, Silvanus has lost a ring. He has vowed half its value to Nodens. Amongst all that bear the name Senicianus, refuse though to grant health to exist'. By an extraordinary turn of luck the same ring appears to have been dug up in a field in Silchester in 1785. Now Senicianus had a new inscription written on it: Senicianus vivas in deo (Senicianus, may you live in God).



The 12g gold ring's home these days is the Vyne Museum in Basingstoke and there seems very little chance of the ring being returned to Nodens temple. Like the one ring in Tolkien's Middle-Earth, the Roman ring had gathered dust in a library for many years. The Ring Room in the museum houses Tolkien memorabilia and leaves the question as to whether the ancient ring could be the very one that inspired Tolkien.

*Left: The gold ring ©History Today*

After a splendid lunch in the dining room of Lydney House (overlooked by past incumbents lining the walls), we proceeded to climb the long step pathway that wended its way up to a Roman temple and bath complex.



At one point the path crossed a compacted refuse trench of ceramic pot shards – possibly Roman. It was good to get to the top after the steep climb. The steep bluff overlooking the Severn Estuary is rectangular and some 72m x 54m across, with many unusual and mature trees. Without them you would have a grand 360 degree view, a prize worth fighting for.

The Camp Hill promontory hill fort is listed by Historic England as a rare example of an Iron Age hillfort, most having been constructed C6th BC & mid-first century AD. The north west corner of the northern defences have been disturbed by iron extraction pits, and there are further pits on the eastern side of the interior of the fort.

Towards the southern edge of the hill fort an enclosure was created in the Romano-British period centred on the temple, with an enclosure in the south east corner. The temple has been partially reconstructed with walls standing to about 0.5m high. It measures 18m x 24m, with projecting bays in the outer wall. There are seven bays in the outer wall along which ran a stone bench. The central part of the temple (*cella*) had six piers with three shrines at the north west end. Later modifications took place including the addition of enclosing walls in front of the three bays, and a wall between the piers and the *cella*. Some mosaics were laid at this time, including one in the *cella* carrying a dedication to Nodens. The temple would have been imposing, in the Roman classical style and is thought to have been a dormitory for sick pilgrims.

To the north west of the temple is a long building aligned NE/SW which forms then lower north west side of the temple enclosure. It is 56m long with a range of rooms some of which had mosaics, opening onto a verandah or corridor. It is thought that it was used to house visitors to the temple. To the north east of this building is the bath house, which is 40m long.



*Roman bath house - the wall on the left is on the north side facing into the hill. A mine shaft can be seen, now covered by the wooden mine shaft cover.*

The bath house is reconstructed in plan on the ground with walls standing up to 1m high, and shows the usual progression of rooms with pools of increasing temperature. There is a latrine as well and 35m to the north east is a stone- built tank which supplied water to the baths. Roman bath houses usually consisted of changing rooms, latrines, sauna and massage rooms, and were often linked to an exercise area. The bath house was heated by an underground hypocaust heating system, of which some hypocaust bricks can still be seen.





*Working out what's what in the Roman complex*

From there we made our way down the slope to the beautiful spring gardens in the valley below. The rhododendrons were blooming in their full May majestic glory - we were lucky to be there at just the right time. Up on a hillside is a lovely wrought iron Italianate Folly, brought back from Venice by Lord Bledisloe in 1961, that houses a slate table erected in memory of his wife. Having walked around the gardens we all walked back to the house for tea and cake(s) and I took the opportunity to buy a replica Lydney dog brooch as a souvenir.



*Lydney Park gardens*

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