

Brislington Meadows - agricultural since Roman times

Ken Taylor (2022)

It's remarkable how often the things that look the least attractive, turn out to have the most interesting stories to tell - and that's certainly true of a fragment of broken pottery found lying on the ground at Brislington Meadows.

We've probably all found lovely sherds of blue and white crockery, or even multi-coloured pieces of ceramic - with a quick wipe of the thumb they're bright and shiny as new. Yet one of the duller-looking chunks of unglazed pot to turn up at the Meadows is a tangible link to people who lived in Brislington - or whatever it was called then - during the Roman occupation of Britain which began in the year 43 and ended in 410.



Roman coarseware pottery (35mm high) found at
Brislington Meadows.

It was found on the bare earth left over from backfilled archaeological trenches, and was identified by Kurt Adams (Finds Liaison Officer at Bristol Museum) as Roman grey ware probably dating to the first half of the Roman period (it's rarely easy to precisely date a piece as

small as this - just 27 x 38mm). The pot could easily pre-date Brislington's Roman villa (built around the year 270) by a century or more. The fragment is infused with specks of mica that sparkle like glitter in the light, and it feels rough to the touch (the clay has a lot of other inclusions, making it coarse, rather than fine quality).

The archaeological excavations at Brislington Meadows in November 2021 found evidence of agricultural activity dating to the Roman period, and also Roman pottery including more grey ware and Samian sherds, both associated with cooking and dining. Samian wares are fine but aren't rare although they are among the more high status pottery types, used at table to add a little elegance and prestige to every occasion.

The full report on the archaeological survey in Brislington Meadows can be found on the Bristol City Council planning application website (https://pa.bristol.gov.uk/online-applications/files/DBC4326F5F95172C59A5F9C342330725/pdf/22_01878_P-ARCHAEOLOGY_SURVEY-3200487.pdf). It reveals previously unknown insights into the day-to-day lives of the people living here under Roman rule. Photographs of some of the finds from the 1899 villa excavation can be found in Brislington Community Museum (brislington.org).

Those who lived in the heart of the villa clearly embraced Imperial civilisation, but there were doubtless others - particularly in the early phase of the military conquest - whose experience of the Roman way of life made them yearn for a return to the earlier Celtic society of the Iron Age. It's a sobering thought that the Iron Age hillfort of Maes Knoll at the eastern end of the Dundry ridge is visible from the higher slopes of Brislington Meadows.

The link is more than visual - the source of Brislington Brook rises in the field immediately below those massive Celtic earthworks. And a stream that flows through the valley immediately below Brislington Meadows pours its waters into Brislington Brook.

The sense of connectedness in a landscape rich with life and meaning can be felt strongly here on the hill in the fields. It's not so easy to find such a place in a city that boosts our wellbeing - where feelings of social isolation and alienation from nature can be left behind - just by being there.

The excavations that showed the Brislington Meadows has been agricultural land since Roman times were paid for by Homes England as part of their plan to develop the site for housing. Their website (brislingtonmeadows.co.uk) has more details about their aims, which includes applying for planning permission as soon as March 2022.