



The archaeology of Congresbury

The village of Congresbury lies on a main road, the A370, and on the River Yeo which flows across the moors out to the Severn Estuary. Rivers played an important part in early and later settlements. The River Yeo is tidal as far as Congresbury Bridge and boats were used to transport goods to and from other trading places.

Congresbury could be reached by sea going boats until as recently as 1900. The village lies at the edge of the Moors and this has helped to make Congresbury a good place in which to live for hundreds of years.

Long before the Romans came to Britain, a traveller lost a polished stone axe in the area now known as Congresbury. The axe was probably an offering made as a sacrifice to a god. It was apparently not for everyday use as it was highly polished.



A Romano-British pottery kiln © Wessex Archaeology

To the north of the village lies the prominent Cadbury Hill. Finds from the Neolithic and Bronze Age suggest that the hill was an early focus for human activity, and in the Iron Age a large hillfort was built there. Because there are several hillforts with the same name this one is referred to as Cadbury Congresbury (or CadCong for short!)

The people built their homes in the area, grew crops, made clothes, jewellery, and weapons of iron. The moorland provided summer grazing for cattle, wildfowl and fish, fuel and timber. The hillfort was occupied for many centuries.

The Romans occupied Britain in AD 43 and soon established themselves in the Southwest. They had a large pottery industry at a site just off Venus Street producing plates and bowls.

The pottery produced there is known as Congresbury Ware. It is light grey in colour. Fragments of this can be found in many gardens for miles around. You may be able to find some in your own garden.

The people still had their own gods, and built temples next to the hillfort on a site known as Henley Wood. Henley Wood was excavated in the 1960s and archaeologists discovered many offerings which had been made to these gods.

One item was a beautiful pre-Roman bronze figurine of a female with a decorated collar round her neck which may have been one of their goddesses, along with bronze rings, brooches, glass beads, and cosmetic tools.



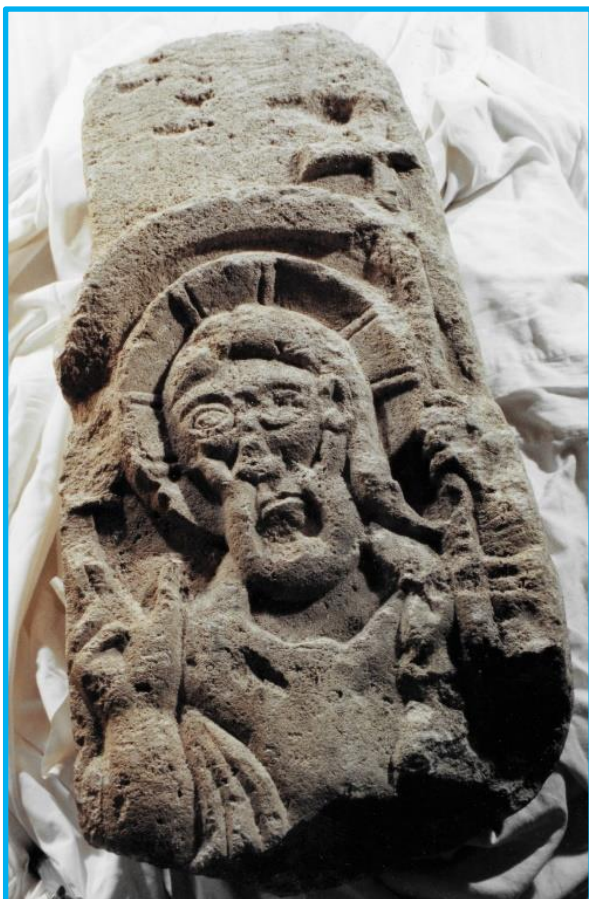
The Henley Wood bronze figurine © Weston Museum

They also found a lead curse tablet. People used these to write messages about what they would like to happen to anyone who had upset them! A cemetery in which over 50 bodies had been buried was discovered as well.

Nearby, at the edge of where the river is now, a Roman style villa was built. The wealth of the builder is clear in the use of mosaic floors and central heating. There was also a possible boat house. It is known as Wemberham Villa and evidence from it tells us that the North Marsh was habitable through the 2nd – 4th century AD, probably due to the use of sea walls and drainage.

After the Romans left Britain, around 410 AD, there is a mystery concerning the disappearance of the people who had been living, trading on and around the hillfort. Archaeologists are beginning to understand that in some areas, the hillforts were re-strengthened around the 6th Century AD. People were again living, working and trading in the area.

Studying the 'finds' after an archaeological dig it was discovered that the people had imported Roman wine, pottery from Syria, North Africa and France. A large timber hall had also been constructed, showing that the hillfort was being used in a very different way from before. These features suggest that a post-Roman revival was taking place and have been found at other well-known sites such as South Cadbury and Tintagel.



A carving of Jesus © Congresbury History Group

Sometime early in the 6th Century the inhabitants of Cadbury hillfort moved out and down towards the river. A new group of people, maybe Christian West Saxons, had invaded Britain and appear to have formed a new village near the present church of St Andrews (consecrated 11 July 1215). Skulls and a complete skeleton of a 60 year old Saxon man were found in the present graveyard in 1950.

The present church is believed to have been built on the site of an earlier wattle, then stone, church built by St. Cyngar (or Congar), who came to England in the sixth century as a Christian missionary. Documentary proof of St. Cyngar's presence in Congresbury comes from one of King Alfred's most trusted Bishops. Bishop Asser, a Welshman, wrote an account of the life of King Alfred in 893 and records that Alfred gave him the monasteries of Congresbury and Banwell.

In 1995 several pieces of carved stone were discovered nearby. They are believed to date to the late Saxon period and appear to be part of a shrine to St Cyngar. According to Professor Michael Costen, expert on Anglo-Saxon Somerset, the name Congresbury is best understood as "St Cyngar's Monastery".



A carving of an unknown saint © Congresbury History Group

Several of the fine objects from Congresbury, Henley Wood and Wemberham are on show in the museum.

