

# SYDNEY GARDENS – ROMAN BURIALS

(FOR YOUNG HISTORY DETECTIVES)

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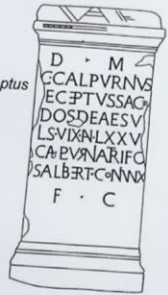
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## A Roman Tombstone from Sydney Gardens

In 1793 a tombstone was found in or near Sydney Gardens, possibly during the development of the Pleasure Gardens that opened on the site two years later.

The tombstone is that of a man named Gaius Calpurnius Receptus, who was a priest of Sulis – the goddess of the Sacred Spring in the heart of Bath.



*D(is) M(anibus)*  
*G(aius) Calpurnius [R]eceptus*  
*sacerdos deae Sulis*  
*vix(it) an(nos) LXXV*  
*Calpurnia Trifosa*  
*[l]ibert(a) coniunx*  
*f(aciendum) c(uravit)*

To the spirits of the departed  
Gaius Calpurnius Receptus  
Priest of the goddess Sulis  
lived seventy-five years  
Calpurnia Trifosa  
his freedwoman (and) wife  
had this set up

The shape resembles an altar, a suitable choice for a priest, and the inscription tells us more about his personal life. He lived to a ripe old age for the time, and his wife was a freedwoman, who started out as Receptus' slave before gaining her freedom and marrying Receptus.

This tombstone is on display at the Roman Baths, near the site of the Temple of Sulis Minerva itself, where Receptus would have performed his priestly duties.

SYDNEY  
GARDENS  
BATH

Bath & North East  
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HERITAGE  
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## Roman tombstone

The tombstone of Galus Calpumius Receptus, a priest of Sulis, was found in **1793** when the first Sydney Gardens were created (opened in **1795**).

This tombstone is now on display at the Roman Baths near the site of the Temple of Sulis Minerva itself, where Receptus would have been a priest – he is back “at work”.



## Roman cemetery

In **1861**, **1867** and **1914** four Roman stone coffins were discovered in Sydney Gardens, within an area of Roman Bathwick now believed to have been part of **Bathwick Roman Cemetery**.

The stone coffins were made from **Bath stone** and are likely to be the burials of particularly wealthy individuals.

It was common for Romans to bury their dead **outside the gates of the city**, and along a **main road**, which would have been along Sydney Place, at the west of the Gardens.

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1861

The 1864 edition of *"Aquae Solis, or notices of Roman Bath"* reports on a number of discoveries in and around Bath, including a stone coffin found at Sydney Gardens.

The article does not mention the exact location of the coffin, but it does say that *"In it was found a Skeleton, apparently that of a female about 50 years of age. **The back teeth of the jaw were worn level at the crown, the furthest were decayed, and two of the front teeth were gone**"*.

**Did you know...?** The Romans cleaned their teeth by chewing on twigs!

The first manufactured toothbrush was developed in England in 1780, just 15 years before Sydney Gardens first opened – just in time!

the same year, there was found in the Sydney Gardens a stone coffin having the exact shape of one of modern times, the corners being rounded off at the extreme corners. The lid, which exactly fitted the Coffin, and projected over the sides, was that of a female about 50 years of age. The teeth, under the crown, the furthest were decayed, and two of the front teeth were gone. The hands seem to have been displaced, and were found under the Coffin lid. The examination of the skeleton it is remarkable that in the Sydney Gardens a stone coffin of the goddess Sul, now deposited in the Library. Here also was found the elegant

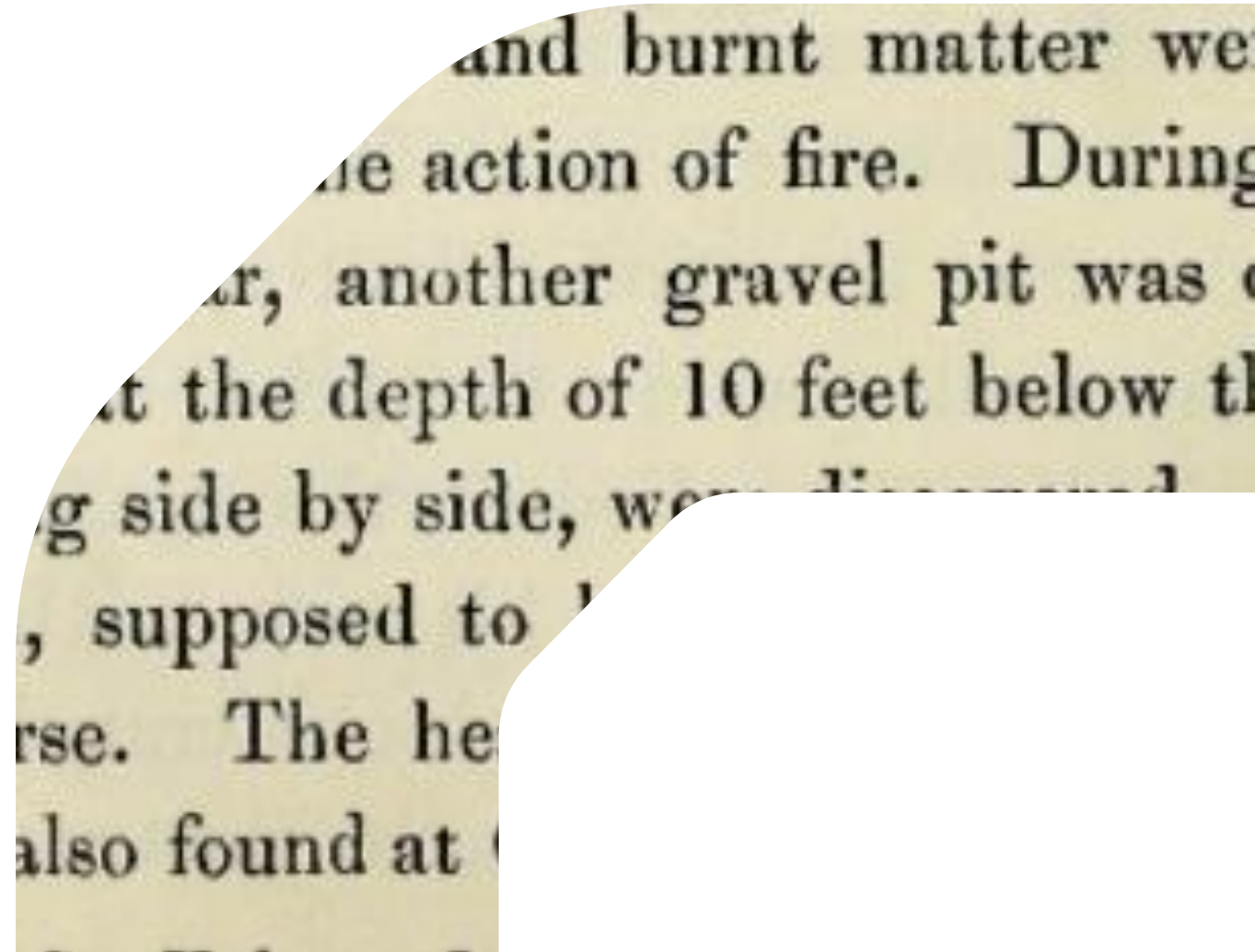
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**1867**

The 1877 Proceedings by the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society (SANHS), mention the second discovery of a stone coffin we know of.

The location of this second discovery is described as “*where a pit for gravel was opened near the boundary fence which separates the College playground [now the Holburn Museum’s grounds] from the gardens*”, and at a depth of about 3 m.

Here the diggers found, among other discoveries, “*two stone coffins, lying side by side (...). The one contained a skeleton, supposed to be that of a male, and the other the head of a horse*”!



1867

Did you know...?

Old maps incorrectly date the discovery of these two stone coffins to 1864, and that is still the date that appears in maps today.

The location of these two stone coffins is also only approximate in maps.

To help us find the right location, here is a map from 1885. It is unlikely that diggers would be quarrying for gravel in a school playground... It is far more likely that the correct location is where the cross on the map marks "CEMETERY site of", on the gardens' side of the fence.



## 1914

The Bath Chronicle reports in February 1914 that: “While workmen were engaged last Friday in digging for gravel in connection with the improvements which are being effected in Sydney Gardens, they encountered a stone coffin containing what is apparently a Roman skeleton. (...) It is believed the remains are those of a woman of mature years.”

The Proceedings of the SANHS of the same year describe the location of the find as: “in a portion of the old tennis courts (...) **at the Bathwick Street end of Sydney Place (west), about 75ft (23m) back from the railings in Sydney Place, 18ft (5.5m) from the corner of the Gardener’s Cottage, and 39ft (12m) from the hoarding forming the boundary of the Holburn (...)** and only 1ft 8ins (50cm) below the surface”.

See map from 1968 in the next page – this time the location is a lot more accurate, and they even took photos!

*Photo from Bath Chronicle, 1914*







2020

During the recent work at Sydney Gardens archaeologists recorded the corner of a building located under the new Community Pavillion.

The finds from the trench included a coin and a broken *mortarium* (the mortar part of a mortar-and-pestle).

The walls were covered for protection and left in place for future archaeologists.



2021



This year work has continued, and archaeologists have found another stone coffin at the very southern corner of the former bowling green, close to a **Roman wall**.

Inside the coffin, archaeologists found the remains of **two women**, believed to have been buried at different times. One of the women had a bead neckless and many of the beads were recovered – see next page and a link to 3D scans of the excavation of the stone coffin in progress.

Near the stone coffin, archaeologists found a **votive offering**.

### **Did you know...?**

Romans believed in an after-life and would often bury food and drink next to the coffins. They would also regularly visit the burial places of their family and ancestors and would bring food and drink to share with them.





<https://sketchfab.com/Iparchaeology/collections/sydney-gardens-sarcophagus>



