

86 FINDING FACES - 1990

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During the 1990 season visitors to the Roman Painted House were treated to demonstrations of the technique of facial reconstruction from skulls. This was thanks mainly to Brian Philp, Director of the Kent Archaeological Rescue Unit, who both encouraged and promoted the experiments and also to the Painted House Trust which provided the space necessary for the displays. Both organisations contributed financially. The project was called 'Finding Faces.'

The response from the visiting public was excellent, with many people returning again and again to monitor progress. The project appealed enormously to children, almost 5,000 of whom were given special tasks. Some 1,000 of the children who took part were French, so it was also a very good exercise on international relations! Teachers stressed the value of the children coming face to face with reconstructions of the appearance of REAL Romans, Saxons etc. as an experience which brought history vividly to life. As they hurtled out through the door many a small child was heard to exclaim "That was brilliant . . . I'm going to be an archaeologist when I grow up!"

In terms of publicity for the Roman Painted House, the project captured the imagination of the media. Excellent coverage was given in newspapers, magazines and on TV and radio both here and in Belgium, France and Holland. In December the project was featured on Radio 4's "Woman's Hour."

THE WORK OF RECONSTRUCTION

First a plaster of Paris copy is prepared from the skull, providing a foundation for the reconstructed tissue. The plaster skull is then studded with carefully measured pegs placed at 21 specific points which show average soft tissue depth. Clay is then used to recreate the major muscles of the face, with more clay being applied over the 'muscles' to bring the fabric of the face up to the level of the tops of the pegs. The underlying 'muscles' help to define the contours of the face, while the measured pegs limit the build-up of soft tissue. (The validity of this technique was demonstrated in 1989 when the reconstructed face of a young murder victim was identified after publication in national newspapers.)

The next stage involves making a mould of the clay sculpture. Plaster of Paris is applied to the head in 12 sections which are then dismantled and reassembled to form a hollow receptacle. This is filled with molten wax to produce the final form. As a final flourish the sculpture is given a life-like appearance with the addition of artificial eyes, wig, eyelashes, etc.

The photograph shows a reconstructed face in wax of a 21-25 year old Romano-British woman. Her remains were excavated by the Kent Archaeological Rescue Unit in 1974 in a small family burial ground at Northbourne. Her favourite blue and green glass bead necklace and a twisted bronze wire bracelet had been placed on her breast, whilst two pottery vessels, dateable to the third century ad, were found by her right hip.

She suffered from spinal bifida, a congenital deformity which affected her sacrum (the part of the spine which forms the back of the pelvis). This is not a severe manifestation of spinal bifida and was, perhaps, uncomfortable rather than crippling.

She was 5'2" tall and enjoyed excellent regular teeth which must have resulted in an attractive smile. The upper part of her face appears to have been rather pretty with a high forehead, well spaced eyes and a straight, slender nose. Indeed her nasal opening was so narrow that she is likely to have been a rather snuffly individual, habitually breathing through her mouth to reveal her protruding upper teeth, thus spoiling the harmony of her features in repose.



The blond wig is temporary and she should eventually have long mid-brown hair which could be interpreted as being either fairer or darker. Eye colour is depicted as hazel. Her Romano-British context need not necessarily imply Mediterranean origin, and indeed her ancestry may have been Celtic.

* The Excavations at Northbourne were published in 1978 in issue No.52 of the Kent Archaeological Review.



The reconstructed face of a young Romano-British woman from Northbourne.