

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE  
EXTENSIVE URBAN SURVEY

# IRCHESTER

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Funded by English Heritage

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## **BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT**

This is one of a series of reports compiled by Northamptonshire County Council's Historic Environment Team as part of the English Heritage funded Extensive Urban Survey (EUS) of Northamptonshire, which is intended to provide an effective information base and research framework to guide the management of the county's urban archaeological resource. The survey encompasses all urban settlements and others that may have had some urban attributes, from the Roman period to the 1930s. The only exception is Northampton, which is the subject of an Intensive Urban Survey in its own right.

Each report comprises three distinct sections: a detailed description of the town in each major period; an assessment of potential and definition of a research agenda; and a strategy for future management. A consistent approach has been taken in the presentation of the description in each report with detail being presented under each standard category even where this has no direct obvious relevance to the urban aspects. This section has however been presented in the form of a gazetteer with standard headings so enabling the reader to identify those sections of particular interest. The Irchester report by Jeremy Taylor covers just the Roman settlement as it lies in isolation from any later settlement. Other contributions to the EUS on digital mapping, database input and related work for the EUS have been made by various individuals including Christine Addison, Chris Jones, Paul Thompson, Rob Atkins, Phil Markham and especially Tracey Britnell and Abi Kennedy.

The first objective of the report is to determine layout, character and chronology of development of the Roman town. An attempt has been made to identify the various components of the town which are likely to have left identifiable archaeological remains and, as far as practicable, to define the exact location and extent of these buried or upstanding 'monuments'. They have also all been assessed for likely current survival and their potential to contribute to research objectives. The relationship of the town to its hinterland has also been considered and the potential for study of that interaction has been assessed. In this way the report aims to provide a well founded research framework, establishing the current state of knowledge of Irchester Roman town and defining a research agenda which can guide future archaeological investigation within the town. Conservation objectives have also been defined. This report should be viewed as a starting point rather than a definitive study, which it certainly is not. If this report serves its purpose then it will need to be regularly reviewed and substantially revised in future years as archaeological investigations are undertaken.

Given the limitations of time, which inevitably must guide the conduct of a countywide project, it has been necessary to limit the depth of investigation. No original archaeological earthwork or other such field survey has been conducted, but all available existing archaeological data has been consulted. Mapping from aerial photographic sources in the Northamptonshire SMR, CUCAP and the NMR has been completed. Each town has been visited to examine the topography of the town and an assessment attempted as to the general state of archaeological survival.

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## SUMMARY

Irchester is one of 14 nucleated settlements incorporated in this study that probably acted as a local or regional centre during the Roman period. Irchester is one of 3 larger settlements in the county, which at some point during their lives, were enclosed with a defensive circuit that suggests their particular significance as local nodal points in the provincial road networks as administrative centres in the later Roman period. It does not appear to have survived as a significant focus for settlement into the Early-middle Saxon period, though there is some limited evidence for continuing occupation at the very end of the fourth or even fifth century. Irchester seems to have owed its existence to its strategic location at a crossing of the Nene Valley at the point where it is joined by the River Ise. Furthermore, it sits at a narrow point in the valley accessible from the large embayments around Wollaston and Grendon to the southwest and Rushden and Higham Ferrers to the east. In keeping with several larger settlements of the period in the region, it appears to have initially developed around a local dendritic network of roads and trackways largely to one side of a major Roman long distance route; in this instance a north south route from Kettering to Magiovinium across the Nene Valley.

Located midway between Duston and Titchmarsh, Irchester was one of a string of local centres (Duston, Irchester, Titchmarsh, Ashton and Durobrivae) located at intervals along the Nene Valley that acted as local service centres to the extensive agricultural communities located both along the valley itself and in the surrounding hills. One of the largest of the small towns locally (c.18ha) Irchester probably acted as local market, administrative focus and religious centre for one of the richest parts of the region and lay at a key nodal point in its communications network.

Little can be said in detail about the town's historical development because past investigations have failed to document the chronological evidence for discoveries with any reliability, but the locale was already densely occupied in the Iron Age and may have been a site of special significance, given its location between two major blocks of land along the valley around Wollaston and Rushden/Higham Ferrers. The unusual Iron Age enclosure, part excavated under salvage conditions in the 1960s (Hall & Nickerson 1967), may have marked an important communal focus which in part provided a context for the town's subsequent location. The construction of the main Roman road, however, probably marked the most significant event behind Irchester's subsequent development.

Irchester's extensive layout seems to owe much to essentially local considerations of access to pre-existing agricultural landscapes during the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD. Clearly well established by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the core area of some 8ha was enclosed within a rampart and ditches during the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, and subsequently re-emphasised with a stone wall and turrets. Though clearly affecting the layout of the settlement's roads and some of its buildings, this does not seem to have marked a phase of retrenchment with continuing activity recorded over much of the extra-mural zone until at least the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century.

The core area of the town was densely occupied, with many stone founded strip buildings and small 'cottage type' buildings aligned along the street frontages, and especially the chief curving north-south road through its centre. Little is known about the buildings but Baker's excavations in the nineteenth century suggest that a temple stood to the east of the north-south road, between two east west side roads, one of which probably linked the town with the main through route. Further circular stone buildings to the southwest may also have been local shrines although evidence for such an interpretation is scanty. Recent air photographic analysis of the town further indicates that another Romano-Celtic temple lay in the southwest quarter of the intra-mural area. If all were religious buildings, it would indicate that the walled part of the town enclosed a significant religious complex, which may have provided a significant impetus to Irchester's significance as a regional centre.

# **I DESCRIPTION**

## **1.0 TOPOGRAPHY & GEOLOGY**

The Roman town at Irchester is centred on a low promontory overlooking the the River Nene and is flanked to east and west by two shallow dry valleys or slades running south to north. The walled area covers most of the promontory but extensive extramural settlement extends to east and west across the flanks of the slades and also some 150-200m south upslope from the core. The geology of the valley side ranges from Northampton sand Ironstone towards the top of the slope at the south to Upper Lias silts and clays on the more even ground beside the alluvial floodplain of the river to the north.

## **2.0 HISTORICAL & TOPOGRAPHICAL DEVELOPMENT**

### **Prehistoric**

The extensive area over which the Roman town is found makes it inevitable that it incorporates earlier foci of occupation. Baker's work inside the town and field walking to the west of it, have recovered significant numbers of earlier prehistoric lithics, but it is evidence for later Iron Age occupation that is the focus of interest here.

Evidence for an Iron Age precursor to the town is limited largely to the excavations to the south of the walled area. Here salvage work in the 1960s (Hall & Nickerson 1967; Knight 1967) recognised a substantial enclosure, incorporating many pits, and possibly embellished with a stone wall or stone revetted bank. This enclosure appears to be of a type of non-settlement enclosure constructed at several locations along the middle Nene around the 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC (e.g Blackthorn, Wollaston and Briar Hill). The enclosure lies at the centre of an area of extensive occupation to the south of the town, which, because of the salvage conditions under which it was recorded, cannot be interpreted in any detail. It is clear, however, that this area was continuously occupied from this point until the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, and may have formed part of an initial focus of settlement for the town. Air photographs of the intramural area indicate a further two rectilinear enclosures which may predate the town, but are as yet undated. Recent work on the extra-mural area to the west included evaluation trenches across two conjoined enclosures visible from air photographs. These confirmed the existence of two ditched enclosures but failed to provide further dating evidence, although 6 Iron Age sherds were recovered from field walking. The absence of any recent work inside the town defences means that it is as yet, impossible to say anything about the evolution of early settlement here.

### **Roman**

In addition to the excavated evidence south of the town, there is sufficient evidence from both antiquarian work and recent survey to suggest that the Irchester began to take on its dendritic layout from at least the later 1<sup>st</sup> to early 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Knight's trial excavations indicated late 1<sup>st</sup>/early 2<sup>nd</sup> century occupation beneath the ramparts of the town, and Baker noted coins from Nerva to Constantine in his excavations of the interior. The recent evaluation trenches to the west of the town, if anything, confirm this impression. As so often, however, the absence of well recorded and targeted excavation at Irchester, prevents any detailed appraisal of its precise chronology, layout and architecture. A detailed consideration of what evidence there is, though, is better left to the individual reviews below.

## **Saxon**

There is little evidence to show any Early Saxon occupation of the area of the town but a number of earlier discoveries suggest activity continued into the early fifth century. Baker's excavations of the cemetery to the east of the town recorded an important very late Roman hoard and a cist burial inside the southern end of the walled area of the settlement also appears to have been a late fourth century event. Little evidence has been recovered for continued inhabitation of the town at the end of the Roman period except for a stratigraphically post late fourth century timber structure against the interior of the southern defences (1641/1/4). Together this evidence indicates at least some degree of post Roman occupation of the town but it does not seem to have played any significant role the subsequent development of settlement in the Early medieval period.

## **3.0 THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

### **3.1 COMMUNICATIONS**

The settlement at Ircchester has an extensive, complex and relatively well understood network of roads divided for the purposes of discussion here into two groups: the main North-south straight road crossing the Nene, and the winding dendritic network of roads and track ways, mostly known to the west of the main road which appear to run through the core of the town. The main route is typical of major Roman roads in Britain, constructed as part of a province wide network of communications routes linking major and minor centres. Traditionally these are seen as being constructed by the Roman army during or shortly after their main phases of military campaigning during the first century, a view now increasingly coming under question. To the north of the river this route survives as an earthwork and was partially excavated during quarrying in 1989 and 1994 (Keevill & Williams 1997). The date of construction of the road could not be established with certainty but the little evidence available suggests it may have been constructed, and was certainly in use, by the first half of the second century AD. It then continued in use well into the fourth century and probably beyond. Evidence for the dating of the other roads and track ways is largely reliant upon the results of trial trenching to the west of the town and the salvage excavations of the 1960s and is consequently less reliable. The trial trenching of a number of the roadside ditches to the west of the walled area was largely inconclusive as to the likely period in which the road system was first established but indicates that they predated the third century (Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit 1991).

To the east of the walled area the road layout is little understood, and constitutes a critical gap in our knowledge of the likely layout and development of the settlement as a whole. Geophysical survey to the south of the modern A45 and to the east of Chester Farm (Northamptonshire Archaeology 1997b) alongside small scale excavation by Windell (1984) provide a guide to the likely direction of roads running south of the town and out to the east. The latter broadly supports a suggestion of Baker's (1875) as to the direction of a west to east road to the south of Chester Farm. It is still impossible to be sure of the route of the main north to south road when it runs through the town, though current evidence would suggest that it runs alongside, and unusually, outside the eastern defences of the later Roman town. To the east and northeast of Chester Farm nothing is currently known of the possible road layout but the location of the cemetery partially recorded by Baker (1875) suggests the existence of further linking road probably running between it and the east-west route noted in the recent geophysics (Northamptonshire Archaeology 1993).

Inside the defences the town is constructed around a dendritic network of roads branching off a main north east to south road which may have joined the main north south road outside the north east corner of the defences. The main intramural road probably ran to the south through a gate identified by Baker in 1879 (see defences below) and recorded in section on a photograph of the A45 road cutting to the south. Its precise direction to the south, however, is little understood as it was not identified by Hall and Nickerson in their 1962 rescue work and has probably been destroyed by quarrying to the south of the A45. To the east and west of this route a number of small track ways and roads branch off; some only as far as the defensive circuit but others extending through known gates or beyond the defences presumably before their construction. To the west of the defences this network converges into a single route for a short distance until dividing into a number of small track ways seemingly to provide access to fields and meadows in the towns immediate hinterland (Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit 1992; Northamptonshire Archaeology 1994).

### **3.2 DEFENCES**

The defensive circuit, enclosing some 8ha of the core area of the settlement at Irchester, has been the subject of debate for much of the sites recent history, though without leading to significant targeted intervention on the ground. Much speculation about the origins and purpose of the defences has surrounded their ground plan in which the northern and southern halves appear to be laid out on slightly different alignments. This, alongside the broadly rectilinear plans of each half has led some to speculate that part of the defences started life as an early fort, with one side of the earlier defences subsequently removed and underlying the later core of the town. Aerial photographic reconnaissance, however, shows no clear sign of such an earlier circuit running east-west across the town.

The recent geophysical survey west of the walled area, clearly indicates that the multivallate defences are offset to north and south of the change in alignment and indicate a break where the circuit alters direction. This conceivably indicates that the northern and southern half of the defences are of different date, but equally appears to coincide with the location of the western gateway into the town. Baker's plan of 1879 indicates such a structure at this point and the aerial photographic and geophysics plots suggest a road runs through this area.

If there was an early fort at Irchester, it is clear from the 1960s excavations that it did not form the southern half of the town defences. Here the rampart and ditches were constructed during the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, and subsequently re-emphasised with a stone wall and corner turrets, probably in the third or fourth centuries.

Overall the defences seem to fit the broader plan of the settlement and its roads rather poorly and suggests, as with many Roman small towns in England that the defences were imposed upon an extant plan. At Irchester the intention seems to have been to best use the available topography and to enclose the densely occupied core of strip buildings and religious foci. The north side of the defences occupies a natural low scarp overlooking the river whilst the core settlement to the south sits on a low ridge flanked by shallow slades.

Unfortunately, the absence of modern targeted investigations of the defences, mean that little is known about the location of entrances through them. It is thus difficult at present to say what effect the construction of the defences may have had on the layout of the

settlement as a whole. It is probable that there was an entrance through the southern side of the defences where the main through road is visible on aerial photographs as Baker's 1879 plan indicates a corresponding gateway in addition to the one already noted to the west. Whether further entrances were located where other identified roads cross the defences, however, remains a matter for further investigation, although unpublished information from excavations by Robb in 1926 suggests the location of an eastern gateway at the point where the road running south of Chester House reaches the defences.

### **3.3 BUILDINGS**

The limited extent or level of recording of the excavations at Irchester significantly limits what can be said about its buildings. A certain amount of valuable information, however, is supplied by the good quality of air photographic information available, and on the basis of this and the numerous smaller evaluations and excavations it is possible to suggest the likely forms present and their zonation across the settlement.

Inside the defences Baker's excavations and the air photographs indicate a densely occupied zone fronting onto the main northeast to south through road. The precise nature of most of the buildings in this area is not easy to determine but it is clear that rectangular stone foundation strip buildings and simple 2-4 roomed unit types dominated this part of the settlement. The main exception appears to be a fairly lavish temple, probably within its own enclosure immediately to the east of the through road and sandwiched between two side roads (1641/9/1). Two stone founded round houses noted by Baker in the south west quarter of the intramural area have been suggested as further shrines, but in the absence of any additional information as to their function they may have represented houses of a type common to rural sites in this part of the region. On the available evidence, other types of public buildings, courtyard houses, and aisled buildings are absent both inside and outside the walls of the town, though the latter are generally not found in the immediate area in any case.

Outside the walls, the rescue excavations to the south indicate that this pattern of dense occupation extended at least a further 100m along both probable road frontages, and continued from at least the later first to the fourth centuries AD (1641/0/12 & 1641/0/14). Further south, early quarrying has largely removed any additional evidence, but trial trenching in the fields to the west of the walled area, and Windell's small scale excavation to the east provide some additional details. The 1981 excavation and subsequent geophysics (Windell 1984) some 400m to the east of the defences, located a simple rectangular stone building occupied from the late second to early fourth centuries AD, and lying alongside an east - west road. Similarly, limestone walls in trench 1 of the 1990-91 evaluations suggested the presence of a further stone building some 200m to the west of the defences and adjacent to another trackway or road running towards Little Irchester (Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit 1991). Together with the evidence from other trial trenches located further away from the known road frontages, this suggests that simple buildings of this type extended as ribbon developments for some considerable distance away from the core of the town but not in the same density. There is insufficient evidence at present to know whether the simpler buildings in different parts of the settlement were used for different purposes and indeed to be able to say anything of significance about possible timber buildings.

### **3.4 COMMERCE & INDUSTRY**

Evidence for craft production or industrial activity is also sparse. Field walking to the west of the town and the results of the excavations have failed to identify any significant evidence for iron working or pottery or tile production (with the exception of a single badly damaged pottery kiln; 1641/0/12), the most readily recognisable products archaeologically. Strip buildings are usually associated with workshops and, or shops for the marketing and exchange of produce but in the absence of demonstrable evidence to this effect it is still largely a supposition. If correct, however, it suggests that Irchester was quite a significant market centre regionally. The absence of modern investigation into the core of the settlement, however, and any synthetic work on the finds from the excavations and evaluations on its fringes, currently provides little opportunity to investigate the settlement's likely function as a centre for trade and exchange. Recent studies by Reece (1991) and others have demonstrated the value of assessing the total coin diagrams from larger sites in order to better understand their likely chronology, and monetary role, but at Irchester this evidence has yet to be collated.

### **3.5 RELIGIOUS RITUAL & FUNERARY**

#### **3.5.1 Temples and Shrines**

Evidence for these at Irchester relies on the limited account of Baker's excavations in 1879 and the air photographic record for the site. Consequently, it is difficult to give a detailed description of the nature of the temple discovered immediately to the east of the main through road right at the heart of the town. It is clear from Baker's account and the crop mark evidence that the building was some form of Romano-Celtic temple probably within a precinct and as such is an important example of this kind of ritual centre within a small town in Britain. No clear evidence can be given for its date but its location on a junction at the heart of the defended area of the later Roman town may suggest that it was central to the development of town and a probable reason for its location.

The functions of the two stone built round houses are more problematic to interpret, however, and as was noted above, in the absence of any corroborating evidence it is difficult to be sure these acted as ritual foci. Though this is commonly the case with circular buildings in small towns in other parts of the country, the presence of a strong local tradition of stone built roundhouse construction on rural sites in the immediate hinterland of Irchester makes it impossible to be sure.

#### **3.5.2 Cemetery**

Only one significant cemetery has been recorded at Irchester, some 500m east of the walled area though others have been suggested from early references to the southwest. Discovered during nineteenth century quarrying Baker records some 300-400 skeletons being recovered including 3 stone and one lead coffin, in addition to a significant late fourth to early fifth century hoard of bowls and other metal containers (1641/3). The extent of evaluation around the fringes of the settlement would indicate that this may be the only substantial cemetery for the town although it is possible one lay to the south or even across the river to the north in as yet uninvestigated areas. The size of the cemetery would suggest it was certainly the town's main place of burial, but Baker's (1875) account seems to imply that it only contained inhumations. If true, it would suggest that the quarried area only included the later (later second-fourth/early fifth century) burials and an earlier cremation cemetery may await discovery. Large cemeteries of this kind often display drift through time and it is quite possible that earlier burials may lie to the

west outside the quarried area. The rescue excavations south of the town recorded a further 14 inhumations which do not appear to be part of a larger cemetery but rather a parallel tradition of boundary or back plot burials documented elsewhere and particularly well recorded at Ashton.

### **3.6 LAND USE**

The early date or small scale of the excavations at Irchester, have not produced any significant sources of palaeobotanical or zoological information that could be used to understand the role of agriculture. Such information there is about agricultural practice comes from the discovery of a series of corn driers and small domestic or agricultural ovens in trenches 1, 9, and 25 of the 1990-91 evaluations to the west of the town and from Windell's 1981 excavation to the east (Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit 1991; Windell 1984). The early date of Baker's excavations in the intramural area mean that we cannot be sure whether further such structures may have existed here too but currently the evidence suggests that crop processing was only carried out on the margins of the settlement where it merged into the surrounding rural landscape along the roads to east and west.

Recent excavations in advance of gravel extraction to the north and north west of Irchester have included environmental assessments and provide a useful guide to the likely nature and location of agricultural practice on the flood plain and its immediate margins (Keevill & Williams 1997). A watching brief at Irchester quarry (Northamptonshire Archaeology 1997a) plotted the northern most margins of the fields and droveways associated with the western margins of the settlement and indicated that some of the floodplain was likely to have been open, seasonal grazing, whilst its higher margins were protected from flooding by ditches utilising the contours of infilled early holocene palaeochannels. This work and the adjacent geophysics, indicate that one function of the western road to and from Irchester may have been to allow access to this land. Immediately the other side of the river, excavations across the causeway of the main Roman road indicated that the floodplain to its west was predominantly grassland but to its east much was under arable. Together, this very patchy evidence currently suggests a pattern in which agriculture was a significant part of the occupation of fringes of the town, blurring the distinction between the urban characteristics more apparent at its core and the obviously agricultural communities in its hinterland. This picture is not uncommon among the better investigated small towns of Roman Britain and demonstrates the need to better understand the balance between agriculture and production and exchange at such sites.

## **II ASSESSMENT**

### **ASSESSMENT OF IMPORTANCE AND SURVIVAL**

**Irchester is one of a small group of relatively intact Roman walled towns in the region. The limited evidence available suggests it lay towards the apex of developed nucleated settlements within the county alongside Towcester. In the absence of significant evidence for involvement in craft or industrial production, the town seems to be an example of a local centre based largely upon the wealth of its agricultural base, and strategic location within the valley and main Roman road network. The presence of a well furnished and sizeable temple at its core may suggest that it also acted as a significant religious focus for communities within the region. Opportunities for a better understanding of the town abound but the absence of any modern excavation anywhere close to its core, currently limit what can be said about its origins, and possible administrative or market function. It nevertheless remains a site of national importance.**

#### **1.0 DOCUMENTARY**

As with most settlements in Roman Britain literary or epigraphic evidence is very limited. Although an inscription (RIB 233) re-used in a later burial provides details of some interest it is of little value to study of the town itself.

#### **2.0 ARCHAEOLOGICAL**

The broad morphology of the settlement is reasonably well known largely thanks to the quality and quantity of air photographic and geophysical survey evidence. The exception is a critical area immediately to the east of the defences. More detailed information about the architecture and function of parts of the settlement within this framework however are less well understood.

#### **Survival**

The only earthwork remains are those of the now denuded defences, which have not been subject to modern measured survey. The only excavations within the defences are too poorly recorded to be of much assistance in understanding the town. A range of rescue excavations and evaluations since the 1960s has provided useful information about the likely extent and basic form of settlement around the fringes of the town on three sides. Overall, our knowledge of the archaeology of the town is still relatively poor but we have a reasonable understanding of the survival of archaeological remains outside the walled area where the extent of earlier quarries is now well mapped and the effects of ploughing apparent. In general it is clear that superficial deposits and structures, especially those in stone of the later Roman period, have suffered significant damage except in the one or two small areas where shallow deposits of colluvium or quarry upcast protect them. The best documented areas of survival appear to be in the slade to the west of the defences and in areas of possible alluviation on the floodplain immediately to the north. The level of preservation is not known immediately to the east of the defences south of Chester House but has at least not been subject to continuous ploughing since the war. Inside the defences little is known of the survival of archaeological deposits, though the extent and nature of Baker's excavations must have caused significant disturbance of a sizeable area in its center. Little or nothing is known of the state of archaeological deposits under the surviving parts and former earthworks of Chester House itself. Given the intensive and

near continuous evidence for occupation and subsequent reworking of this area, however, it is likely to be poor.

Most of the known area of occupation is currently scheduled with the exception of two small areas to the southeast of Chester House and south of the A45 where geophysics has recorded further settlement. The greatest threat to virtually all this area continues to be from arable cultivation but any significant development within the occupied area of the settlement should require archaeological intervention. Within the defences evaluation work designed to investigate the effects of cultivation and the antiquarian excavations on the survival of archaeological deposits would be a primary concern before any further decision on intervention. Observation would be appropriate on small development proposals in the immediate vicinity of Chester House or on drainage or other lesser trenching works simply in order to help establish the depth and likely survival of any deposits.

### **2.1 Settlement Morphology and Communications**

Generally well known but later surfaces of roads and wall lines defining late Roman boundaries are already damaged. The most obvious requirements are for geophysical survey of the area to the east of the defences and to establish the location and form of any extension to the main road on the southern side of the floodplain. Furthermore, observation of drainage or cutting work alongside the A45 should be recommended in order to locate and date any roads or trackways passing south from the town.

### **2.2 Defences**

The defences are probably the best preserved single feature of the site but their extent and form on the east and north are not well known. The effects of later planting on top of the earthworks and of stone robbing from their uppermost surface also have had some affect on the western side in particular. Geophysical survey immediately to the east of the defended area is needed in advance of any threat in order to establish the form and extent of the defences, the location of entrances and their relation to the road network.

### **2.3 Buildings**

Robbing and destruction by ploughing of the foundations of many of the later Roman stone buildings within the settlement has clearly reduced the potential for their study. Post or trench built timber structures, however, are probably still largely reasonably preserved though the extent of damage caused by the antiquarian excavations is currently unknown.

### **2.4 Commerce & Industry**

Surface built structures such as kilns, ovens and corn dryers are likely to have suffered significant plough damage, but the existing evaluations suggest sufficient still survives for study. The existing records indicate the presence of moderately wealthy artefactual deposits but little or no synthetic work has been carried out to assess their potential. Such work and an evaluation of metal detected finds from the site would be of considerable help to future investigation of the industrial and commercial role of the settlement.

### **2.5 Religious, Ritual & Funerary**

The temple complex excavated by Baker was relatively well preserved and of high quality, but the existing records are insufficient to be sure of the subsequent degree of disturbance. There is a significant surface collection of metalwork from the site that would benefit from synthesis and comparison with the antiquarian finds. Any future

assessment of ritual and religion at Irchester needs to take this material into account. At present all the likely religious foci appear to lie within the walled area of the settlement and any investigation of this area in future should take this into account. The only documented cemetery was destroyed by quarrying in the last century, although some of it may still survive to the west. Future evaluation is, however, recommended in the event of any developments to the south east of the town south of the A45 and to the north of the floodplain across the Nene in order to locate any likely cemeteries.

## **2.6 Landscape & Environment**

Little paleoenvironmental assessment has been carried out on the settlement and the potential of excavated deposits are thus largely unknown. Few deposits with the exception of wells and possibly the defensive ditches closest to the floodplain are likely to be waterlogged but the floodplain is likely to provide excellent data for the riverside environment to the north of the town. The lack of analysis of excavated deposits from small towns is a problem nationally and any future work should ensure evaluation of its potential as a priority

## **3.0 HINTERLAND**

For the purposes of assessment of the hinterlands of the Roman towns an arbitrary boundary of 10km radius was established and its potential graded according to professional judgment. A wider understanding of the role of urban foci in the region and their relationship with surrounding agricultural landscapes is better reviewed as a whole and the findings of such an approach to Northamptonshire are summarized in the Roman period section of the general report of the Extensive Urban Survey.

The historic landscape has been much affected by mineral extraction and by later settlement. To the east earlier gravel extraction and the development of Higham Ferrers largely proceeded without significant archaeological record, though more recent development on the Duchy of Lancaster's land has seen much work. To the south modern Irchester and Wollaston cover significant tracts of land in the immediate vicinity of the town and early ironstone quarrying has destroyed all remaining traces of archaeology between the two. Beyond Wollaston to the south and southwest, however, lies a largely undeveloped agricultural landscape with good potential for study and a long tradition of field survey. Along the floodplain and gravel terraces to the west mineral extraction has destroyed virtually an entire landscape but much of this area underwent detailed archaeological intervention in advance and constitutes a very important resource for the study of town and country relationships within the region. Across the Nene to the northwest a small but significant area of valley fringe upland survives between earls Barton and Wellingborough but is continually under threat from urban expansion. Wellingborough itself covers a large area to the north west of Irchester and records taken during major periods of expansion since the war have tended to be fragmentary and of little present value. To the northeast, however, a significant part of the eastern side of the Ise valley is relatively intact. Given this history of development only a fragmentary picture of overall patterns of settlement and land use in the late Iron Age and Roman period around Irchester is possible.

On present evidence the Roman landscapes around Irchester do not generally present a high archaeological potential for study but two significant blocks could provide invaluable information regarding specific themes related to the town. First, the extensive and contiguous recording of the river valley landscapes of Wollaston and Grendon

together provide one of the most detailed pictures of the development of rural settlement, environment and agricultural landscape in the county for the Iron Age and Roman period. Most of the valley sides and flanking hills either side of the river in this area are still available for research and provide one of the few opportunities left to study a cross section of the Nene anywhere close to one of its most significant towns. The available evidence provides particularly rich information about the development of land use patterns and agriculture in relation to the emergence of a small group of villas on the neighbouring hills and of the town itself. In the absence of evidence for craft production of durable goods being a significant component in the development of Irchester, the nature of possible links to agricultural production are a high priority for investigation.

Second, the area immediately across the river Nene to the north of Irchester provides the opportunity to better elucidate the key elements of the road system in the valley and settlement in the immediate vicinity of the town. The area probably incorporates the intersection of routes to Kettering from the north and a possible route to the east towards Ashton. In addition to aiding our understanding of the strategic context of Irchester the area may also contain evidence for agricultural, burial or other practice in the immediate environs of the town and a contrast to evidence from more extensive studies of the valley to the west. Combined these two possibilities thus provide some opportunity to investigate specific town country relationships around Irchester but alone are probably insufficient to provide a model for the area as a whole.

### **III RESEARCH AGENDA**

The following topics for research are only those related to the investigation of Irchester itself; themes relating to the development of urbanism within the region, and town and country relations are described in the Roman period synthesis of the Extensive Urban Survey.

#### **Origins**

Do the settlement's origins lie with a significant pre-existing Late Iron Age centre or ritual focus, or as a roadside settlement of the Roman period taking advantage of its good strategic location at the confluence of two valleys? Is there any evidence of its foundation as a military fort?

#### **Communications**

How is the core of the settlement, enclosed in the later Roman period, related to the main north-south road across the Nene and its defences? How do the trackways and settlements to the south and east of the walled area relate to the core of the settlement, and is there continuous ribbon development along them? Immediately to the north of the river, is there a junction of this road with an east-west route towards Ashton? Is there a continuation of the river-crossing causeway south of the Nene and any evidence of a bridge or piling that could be accurately dated? Can the course of the river in the Roman period be traced?

#### **Defences**

Do the multivallate defences to the west and south continue around the remaining sides of the town? How do they relate to the main north-south road? Does the construction of

the defences significantly alter the layout of routes through the town and use of space in it? Is there any evidence for an earlier circuit of defences running across the middle of the settlement in the early Roman period?

### **Urban Topography and Zonation**

To what extent are the buildings and frontages within the centre of the settlement any different from those around its fringes? Do strip buildings and other simple stone foundation cottage type structures crowd along the main frontages or are there a number of more widely spaced timber buildings? Do any such differences relate to differences in function from workshops, shops and domestic dwellings to stores agricultural buildings and shrines? Is there evidence of involvement in agricultural production and storage within the core of the settlement? Is there any suggestion of buildings intended for wider public functions? Does the density of settlement lessen imperceptibly into the surrounding landscape or is there clear spatial differentiation?

### **Landscape & Environment**

Is the use of the floodplain and terrace edge different south of the river from that known to the north and west? What was the environment in the immediate vicinity of the defences? Is there any evidence for a cleared zone around them? Can wells or other deeper cut features within the settlement provide us with useful information about the urban environment? What was the landscape of the immediate area like during the settlement's foundation?

### **Craft and Agricultural Practice**

Were there other craft or industrial practices such as bone working or weaving that formed a significant part of the settlements economy? What were the main agricultural resources processed and consumed within the town? Could any of these have provided a significant source of its wealth? Can macrobotanical and zoological remains from sampling reveal information about the use of neighbouring environmental or agricultural resources (such as bedding, thatch) in the settlements vicinity?

### **Religion, Ritual & Funerary**

What was the nature and wider significance of the shrines and temples in the town? Did they occupy an early or focal place in the town's development? Which deities and religious practices were followed? Is there evidence from other parts of the settlement for related or different religious practices in non-ceremonial/public locations? Is there significant evidence of intra-mural burial? Are there other cemeteries related to the town? What is the evidence for early Roman burial practice?

### **The Later Roman Town**

What happened to settlement in the town after the middle of the fourth century AD? Did the area continue to act as foci for burial after occupation in the town had largely ended? Is there any evidence for significant nearby Early Saxon activity?

## **IV STRATEGY**

The assessment of the management and conservation priorities within the Extensive Urban Survey have been based around an assessment of levels of importance previously applied elsewhere in the county for management purposes. The grading falls into five categories:

**Scheduled:** nationally important remains that have statutory protection.

**Unscheduled national importance:** in some cases statutory protection is suggested while in others recording action may prove to be the appropriate response to threats.

**County importance:** Where significant archaeology is known or where it is likely but confirmation is required. Normally recording rather than preservation would be the appropriate mitigation strategy.

**Local importance:** where archaeology may survive but where, on present evidence investigation does not appear appropriate.

**Destroyed:** where the archaeology has been wholly destroyed.

**White Land:** Archaeology not assessed for this report.

## **1.0 EXISTING DESIGNATIONS**

### **1.1 Scheduled Ancient Monuments**

The defended core of the settlement and the immediate hinterland to the east is currently designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The Scheduled area excludes the area of Chester Farm.

### **1.2 Listed Buildings**

### **1.3 Conservation Area**

### **1.4 Registered Parks**

## **2.0 MANAGEMENT PRIORITIES**

### **2.1 Evaluation and Recording Priorities**

On present evidence the archaeology of the whole area of the Roman town is considered likely to be of national importance. The need for intervention should be considered on any developments in those areas neighbouring the scheduled area where the summaries above have indicated the likelihood of further occupation.

### **2.2 Conservation Priorities**

The existing scheduled area accounts for most of the significant parts of the Roman town but an assessment of the defences, and the impact of cultivation and earlier excavation on the remains within the defended area would be of considerable value in better managing the monument. The archaeological resource is of very limited visual value, and given the degree to which most of the important monuments have been leveled by subsequent activity are unlikely to be of great amenity value.

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