INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

SCOPE, AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Silchester is a place that a lover of antiquity will visit with great delight: it stands upon the highest ground thereabouts, but hid with wood, which grows very plentifully all about it. Many were the Roman roads that met here, though now scarce any road; which is the reason it is so little known: it is likewise inconvenient for travellers, because no inns are near it … (Stukeley 1776, 177)

Silchester lies in a liminal location, founded at some time in the late first century B.C., between the communities of the Wessex chalklands, the Upper Thames and the Cotswolds to the west, and the newly emerging polity in the Lower Thames and Essex to the east (Cunliffe 2012). In the present day it is similarly peripheral on the northern edge of Hampshire, whose border bulges out into Berkshire to incorporate it. Nonetheless, the site has lain at the heart of Romano-British studies since the discipline of archaeology emerged out of antiquarianism in the nineteenth century. It was then that a succession of individuals laid bare the iconic plan of this Roman city to give an impression of its full urban form, influencing authors like Francis Haverfield as he formulated his ideas about the Romanisation of Britain (Hingley 2012). However, despite its intellectual centrality in the world of ideas, it yet remains a greenfield site, off the beaten track, with the lack of a nearby museum only partially remedied by a few interpretation boards. The intense investigative period of the later nineteenth century gave way to the relative quiet of the twentieth until George Boon synthesised contemporary knowledge in his two books in the mid-century (Boon 1957; 1974). Michael Fulford began a long series of excavations in 1974 which continue into the present; alongside which there have been many small-scale interventions by contracting archaeologists as the living community in and around the site coped with working within the confines of an ancient monument.

The origins for this project lay in the confluence of three overlapping interests of my own: the broader research context of the origins of Romano-British towns which I had been writing on; the development of better geophysical equipment and methods of manipulating geographical information with GIS; and a change in policy and practice in how English Heritage supported local authorities in dealing with thinking about historic urban centres.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The interface between the Iron Age and Roman worlds has always been one of my key research themes, and I have explored thoroughly the various approaches to the development of early Roman towns in Britain in a number of works, particularly in Britannia (Creighton 2006). Silchester is one of the classic examples of a major Late Iron Age settlement or oppidum that becomes a town, but also a potentially unique one in Britain in that it really does display a certain degree of nucleation and settlement density in the Late Iron Age that sites such as Verulamium and Camulodunum have yet to demonstrate.

Despite so much endeavour over the years our knowledge, as always, remains partial. In a
research framework review of Hampshire in 1996, Fulford identified as the key deficits in our knowledge: ‘the location of the cemeteries; the differential influence of the roads leading in and out of the city, the interpretation of the long linear earthworks radiating out from the town, particularly to the south, and the origins of the Late Iron Age oppidum itself’ (Fulford 1996, 31). His excavations in Insula IX are now down to the level where they are exploring the Iron Age origins in this one area, but little progress has been made in any of the other areas since this review. He reiterated similar themes 14 years later in the Solent-Thames Research Framework: the hinterland and mortuary landscapes around the city needed investigation, sampling for biological remains from cremation cemeteries should be given a high priority, the dating of late antique inhumations was required, the relationships between kilns, workshops and settlements needed to be explored (Fulford and Allen 2010). Context and setting were what were particularly missing from our understanding of Silchester. A personal interest of my own was where the larger high-status burials around Silchester might be, analogous to Folly Lane and King Harry Lane outside Verulamium, and Stanway, Lexden and Gosbecks outside Camulodunum. I had ventured an educated guess in Britannia (Creighton 2006, 135–42), but some firm evidence would have been nice.

THE ADVANCES IN MAPPING AND COMBINING DATASETS

Developing a sense of location and space through the use of a variety of survey techniques is something that moved forward radically in the 1990s as computing power enabled geophysics, around since the 1950s, to take a massive leap forward. Back in the late 1980s, with Simon Keay and David Jordan, I explored combining geophysics, surface collection and excavation to investigate the Roman townscape of Celti (modern Peñaflor, Spain) (Keay et al. 1991); we were subsequently invited to do work at the iconic Spanish site of Itálica, birthplace of Trajan, in preparation for re-presenting the site to the public at the Seville 1992 World Trade Fair. We undertook a major programme of geophysics and surface collection in 1991–2 in one of the first really large-scale surveys of an entire city, combining datasets to maximise interpretation; alas political changes meant the publication took some time to appear and never quite had the impact it might have done (Creighton et al. 1999). However, surveys like these showed the potential and in Britain were rapidly followed up by the Wroxeter Hinterland Project 1994–9 (Gaffney and Gaffney 2000; White and Gaffney 2003; White et al. 2013). In the two decades since, large-scale urban geophysical surveys have become legion, most notably in Italy where some were on modest scales, such as Fregellae (Ferraby et al. 2008), Oriculum (Hay et al. 2009), Picenum (Vermeulen et al. 2013) and Falerii Novi (Hay et al. 2010); while others such as the Portus survey covered extraordinarily large swathes of land (Keay et al. 2005; Keay et al. 2009). However, it was the combination of geophysics and other information which had worked so well at Itálica; there we had been permitted to chisel-plough lightly the until-recently cultivated ground surface before sampling the ceramics, marble and inscription fragments from the soil; at Wroxeter that was not permitted. Britain’s other greenfield sites had similar restrictions. Caistor St Edmund, surveyed recently, similarly is now under pasture (Bescoby et al. 2009; Bowden and Bescoby 2008). So, while geophysical survey was becoming routine, it was the interpretation of geophysical data triangulated with other interventions, be it excavations, fieldwalking, LiDAR or whatever else, which made for the most powerful interpretations. The development of Geographical Information Systems has made this increasingly potentially easier, and integration has been the key behind the better surveys launched in the latter part of the first decade of the twenty-first century (cf. Millett 2014). A number of examples where this has happened were explored in a conference in Cambridge in 2010 (Johnson and Millett 2013); hopefully Millett will be taking precisely such a complementary approach at the much neglected northern city of Aldborough (Ferraby and Millett 2012).

THE URBAN ARCHAEOLOGY STRATEGY PROGRAMME

Meanwhile, commercial development led English Heritage to establish an Urban Strategies Programme in the 1990s to help inform the cultural resource management of c. 35 historic towns
and cities. To facilitate development within modern towns, planning authorities needed a clear vision of what lay underneath and its significance. Sites and Monuments Records provided patchy information, so projects were initiated which helped synthesise and integrate the fragmented knowledge which existed. All the data were brought together in an Urban Archaeological Database which included the records of multiple interventions of varying quality, detail and reliability. These were then used to create a synthesis or assessment of the archaeological resource, which in turn could be used to plan a strategy for its research, investigation and preservation.

York and Cirencester were early pilots (Ove Arup 1991; Darvill and Gerrard 1994) and many Roman cities followed: Lincoln, Canterbury, Colchester, Gloucester, Exeter, Leicester. Work naturally focused on modern towns and cities where modern development was taking place; greenfield sites like Caistor St Edmund, Wroxeter and Silchester were left out being in rural settings. Verulamium was one of those hybrid cases where the thriving city of St Albans on its boundary meant it was incorporated into such work, resulting in Niblett and Thompson’s published monograph neatly summarising centuries of archaeological endeavour on the site (Niblett and Thompson 2005).

With the Roman cities under modern towns provided for and Wroxeter investigated (White et al. 2013), the lack of a synthesis of previous work at Silchester looked increasingly anomalous and a problem that needed tackling.

SILCHESTER MAPPING PROJECT: SCOPE, AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Since excavations had been undertaken here from the 1740s onwards, the literature on the site had become both voluminous and exceptionally fragmented. While the major reports had been published within Archaeologia and more recently the Britannia Monograph Series, ancillary material had been scattered far and wide. For Silchester the collation, verification and geo-referencing of all previous work and its cumulative interpretation had not been undertaken. Nowhere did a plan exist of all previous excavations and interventions. Nowhere did a comprehensive bibliography of all the previous work exist. Boon and the National Record of the Historic Environment Database (Pastscape) had made a significant start, but a lot was missing from both. Accessing and navigating the literature was a problem.

The Silchester Mapping Project therefore sought: to bring together the cartographic sources for Silchester with new large-scale geophysical prospection; to digitise all past excavations and fieldwork from the 1740s to the present day; to index as far as possible all that had been done; and to see what new elements of synthesis could be derived in relation to the national and regional research agendas outlined above. The work would also doubtless identify gaps in knowledge which in turn would allow research to be properly targeted in the future. As Silchester is one of the few almost complete townscapes known in the Roman world, the aim was also to inform the broader international debates about Roman town development and characteristics, as well as to provide a model of methodological approaches that could be taken to unravel complex sites.

This work is divided into four parts. Part I is a review of previous activity on and about the site. Part II is the Mapping project itself, its methodology and the resulting atlas, where the old evidence and interpretations are presented alongside the new evidence, combining datasets. Part III examines the defences and presents the evidence for them alongside past and new revised interpretations. Finally, Part IV is a series of essays interpreting that evidence, synthesising various issues that arose from the research themes and the survey. This attempt to separate evidence and interpretation is quite explicit, although evidence is always interpreted in the light of prevailing ideas and conceptions.

Throughout this volume historiography and our gradual construction of ‘knowledge’ will be a constant theme. Inspired ideas from the past can be forgotten, past errors can be repeated so often they become facts, and both ideas and interpretations change. A sense of that change, to understand how we have got here and how knowledge has been and can be contested, is important to gain an accurate appreciation of where we are, and how firm our current understanding and interpretations are.
It has been over 40 years since the last major synthesis of the town was written by Boon (1974). Fulford will undoubtedly write one at some point, particularly drawing upon the richness of his modern excavation data that survey data can barely compete with; but in the meantime this work is offered as a way of integrating what has been done on this iconic site, raising some questions, and providing a resource and navigational tool for all those wishing to work on the materials or the site, or simply to understand and appreciate the landscape of great delight which Stukeley encountered c. 240 years ago.