

NEW VISIONS OF THE COUNTRYSIDE OF ROMAN BRITAIN

VOLUME 1:

THE RURAL SETTLEMENT OF ROMAN BRITAIN

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THE RURAL SETTLEMENT OF
ROMAN BRITAIN

BY

Alexander Smith, Martyn Allen, Tom Brindle and Michael Fulford

Series Editors

Michael Fulford and Neil Holbrook

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Back Cover illustration: Iron Age and Romano-British farmsteads at Fingland, Solway Plain,
Cumbria; photograph taken 7 July 1984. (© Robert Bewley)

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PREFACE

By Michael Fulford and Neil Holbrook

This is the first of three volumes in a series entitled *New Visions of the Countryside of Roman Britain*. These books represent one of the main products of a collaboration that dates back to 2006. In that year we agreed to work together to create a project which sought to define and evaluate the contribution that investigations undertaken as part of the planning process made to academic knowledge of Roman Britain. Our hope was that the project would play a major part in addressing concerns that were being increasingly aired about the dislocation between archaeologists charged with the investigation of landscapes in advance of development and those involved in teaching and research (who are largely based in universities). The dramatic increase in the volume of archaeological fieldwork as a consequence of the introduction of new planning guidance in England in 1990, and Wales in 1991, has been well rehearsed (for instance Darvill and Russell 2002, 52, and below in Ch. 1). This guidance articulated a clear presumption in favour of the physical preservation of archaeological remains that would be affected by a proposed development, but, where it was decided that this was not an appropriate outcome, it put responsibility on developers, rather than the state, to fund prior archaeological recording and the subsequent analysis and dissemination of the results.

As the amount of archaeological work undertaken in the UK increased in the 1990s, so did concerns about the fragmentation of the archaeological discipline and, in particular, the realisation that the enormous quantity of new data being generated on an almost daily basis by archaeological contracting organisations was having very little impact on how British archaeology was being taught and researched in Universities (for instance, Olivier 1996; James and Millett 2001, 1; and for the fact that these concerns had not gone away, Southport Group 2011, 14–17). This lack of cohesion was due to a number of factors, not least the unfamiliarity of the products of commercial investigations, which can be divided into two categories: fieldwork investigations, which normally occur prior to the determination of a planning application ('evaluations'), and those secured as a condition of consent ('post-determination' work, so-called because it occurs after the determination of planning applications). The former aim to characterise the archaeological deposits present and inform decisions on their

management; they use techniques such as surface collection, geophysical survey and trial trenching. The latter are designed to make a record of deposits prior to destruction and involve methods such as open-area excavation, strip-and-record sample excavation and watching brief. The outcomes of evaluations and small-scale post-determination works such as watching briefs are unpublished reports produced in very small numbers that are normally deposited in the local Historic Environment Record (HER). It is generally envisaged that the results of more substantial pieces of post-determination work to mitigate the effects of development will be published in conventional ways, although sometimes little more than a note may appear in a county journal. For larger excavations it is commonplace to compile a post-excavation assessment report that seeks to summarise what has been found (features, finds and environmental evidence), assess the potential of these data to address specific research questions, and propose an appropriate level of further analysis to be contained in the final published report. The reports that document the results of the various investigations described above have been termed grey literature, which we can characterise as unpublished reports produced in small numbers and with very limited distribution. Until comparatively recently grey literature reports could only be consulted by visiting an individual county or district HER in person, although the development of the on-line library of unpublished fieldwork reports hosted by the Archaeology Data Service (ADS) and Archwilio in Wales has had a profound impact on increasing the accessibility of grey literature (over 34,000 reports were available for download from the ADS in December 2015). For the two decades following 1990, however, many researchers decided, not unsurprisingly, that they would get a better return on their limited research time by restricting themselves to conventionally published, and thus more generally available, works (Fulford 2011). A number of major national syntheses published in that period therefore made little use of the new evidence generated by commercial archaeology (for instance, Cunliffe 2005; Mattingly 2006). Some academics did, however, rise to the challenge presented by the myriad of new evidence, and research students began to engage with this source on a more regular basis (early examples of

published works that made extensive use of grey literature include Moore 2006 and Yates 2007). Richard Bradley was one of the leading early pioneers in this area (Phillips and Bradley 2004) and he published an influential paper in 2006 which concluded that syntheses concerned with prehistoric Britain and based purely on conventionally published data contain serious lacunae in a number of important areas (Bradley 2006).

It was against this backdrop that we developed a proposal to English Heritage (now Historic England) for a project entitled *Assessing the Research Potential of Grey Literature in the Study of Roman England*. The concept was to examine the research dividend that could be gained from a study of grey literature relating to investigations that have discovered Roman period remains in England, and investigate ways of bridging the gap between individual typescript reports held in the HERs and overarching regional or national syntheses. The project was conceived from the outset as a partnership between academia and the commercial sector, and was designed in three stages. Stage 1 was concerned with a rapid national overview of how much work had been done between 1990 and 2004, where it was located, and an assessment of what proportion of grey literature had reached conventional publication (Holbrook and Morton 2011). Stage 2 targeted four pilot areas (Essex, Somerset, South and West Yorkshire combined and Warwickshire) for a more detailed assessment of the research potential of the grey literature (Holbrook 2010; 2011; Hodgson 2011; 2012). This work suggested that about 9000 separate interventions had encountered Roman archaeology in England in the period 1990–2010 and that, while gains in knowledge had been uneven, the evidence pertaining to the Romano-British countryside had the highest research potential both in terms of its quantity and its potential for hitherto unattempted synthesis (Fulford and Holbrook 2011).

Stage 3 was always envisaged as a national survey of England (and hopefully Wales as well), but the results of Stages 1 and 2 had highlighted the considerable level of funding necessary to achieve this, even if analysis was restricted solely to the Roman countryside. The costs of the national survey were beyond those that could be met by the resources available to English Heritage alone, and so a grant proposal was developed jointly to both English Heritage and the Leverhulme Trust in 2011. The proposal was accepted and work commenced in March 2012 on a study entitled *The Evaluation of PPG16, 'Grey' Literature and the Rural Settlement of Roman Britain*. Initially the area of study was restricted to England,

but, thanks to a second grant from the Leverhulme Trust in 2015, we were able to expand the area under consideration to include Wales. Even with this level of funding the scale of the project was daunting, and a number of pragmatic decisions were made. The major towns of Roman Britain always lay outside the remit of this study, although an evaluation of the contribution of commercial archaeology to knowledge of these important urban centres has been published elsewhere (Fulford and Holbrook 2015). The evidence from the so-called 'small towns' was a challenge to accommodate within the resources available, and a purely pragmatic decision was taken to exclude the defended small towns. The arbitrariness of this division was always apparent to us, and we were able to rectify the situation in 2015 thanks to a generous donation from Mr Paul Chadwick that allowed us to collect data from the walled small towns. This evidence was not available in time to inform the analyses presented in this volume, although it will be included in the studies contained in the subsequent ones.

The methods adopted by the project are set out in Chapter 1, but, from the outset, one of our major objectives was to actively engage with regional audiences who had an interest in the project and its outcomes (such as those responsible for specifying and undertaking commercially funded investigations, academics and local interest groups). We were always clear that we did not wish to collect data in a vacuum without an opportunity to feedback and discuss our emerging ideas. We therefore held seven regional meetings between March 2013 and December 2014 in Cambridge, Leicester, London, Birmingham, Exeter, York and Durham, each attended by between 50–100 people, with a national meeting in Reading in April 2015 to launch the project database and a meeting in Cardiff to discuss the findings in Wales in November 2015. These meetings were dynamic events that proved extremely valuable in raising awareness of the project, winning local support and generating engagement between the project team and those with local and regional expertise. They also provided a forum to critically examine aspects of contemporary professional practice in the investigation, analysis and publication of work on Romano-British rural settlements. The value of such events is a lesson from this project that future national surveys might usefully consider.

This series of volumes is a timely survey of the present state of knowledge of the Romano-British countryside. There is already a pressing need to demonstrate to the wider community the extent and quality of the knowledge gain stimulated by the implementation of the new planning policies and the public benefit that accrues from the

considerable sums invested by developers in the investigation of late Iron Age and Roman rural settlements impacted by development. Why should national and local government require developers to continue to fund this work if its public benefit cannot be appreciated? Indeed the true potential of work done since 1990 cannot be fully realised without a synthetic project of this kind. At just over £1 million, the cost of this project represents less than half of one per cent of the estimated £200 million or so spent by developers on investigations relating to the rural settlement of Roman Britain in the period 1990–2010. In those terms expenditure of this order to make sense of much of what has gone on surely represents value for money.

This project tests a number of hypotheses relating to the Romano-British countryside through an examination of the excavated evidence. Our approach has been an integrative one, which gives equal weight to investigations reported solely in grey literature compared to those disseminated in more conventional formats. Through a consideration of settlement archaeology, finds and environmental data our overarching objective is to produce a new characterisation of the Romano-British countryside, and in this respect this project can be considered as one of a clutch of so-called ‘Big Data’ projects started, and in some cases completed, over the last few years. These include the *Fields of Britannia* project at the University of Exeter (Rippon *et al.* 2015); *English Landscapes and Identities* (‘EngLaid’) at the University of Oxford and *Hoarding in Iron Age and Roman Britain* at the University of Leicester and the British Museum. In all these projects the hope has been that, through the examination of particularly large datasets, new patterning will be identified that might not be apparent with smaller samples. Such projects pose their own particular challenges, not least that the size of the datasets does not permit a critical evaluation of individual records. For example, in this project it has not been feasible to re-evaluate the reliability of the site chronologies presented in the original reports. Undoubtedly in some cases the dating suggested by the excavators might at best be questionable or at worst plain wrong. But to have done this for all of the *c.* 2500 sites would have been a truly Herculean task. The expectation is, however, that, through amalgamating numerous interventions and looking to the bigger picture, individual biases will fade into the background and broader trends will shine through.

Another major challenge with Big Data projects is to recognise factors that might bias the data recovered, and to evaluate the degree to which patterning is a true reflection of past activities rather than a product of modern ones.

As this project is concerned with excavated evidence, a fundamental consideration is the degree to which spatial patterns apparent in the data are a product of the complex set of factors that dictate where archaeologists excavate. And these have not been constant over time. Whereas in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries much attention was focused on villas, due both to their high visibility in the landscape and the prevailing research interests of the time, from the second half of the twentieth century, and especially from 1990 onwards, the predominant factor in determining the location of archaeological work has related to where development was to take place. The project team is acutely aware of this issue and in each regional chapter they have sought to critically evaluate the causes behind spatial patterning. While the number of sites investigated varies considerably between regions, in every case the authors have been able to break away from previous characterisations based upon a small number of ‘type-sites’ and are able to present a much more subtle and nuanced analysis that draws on the richness of the data now available.

As stated above, this is the first in a series of three books. This volume considers the settlement evidence, principally the morphology of rural settlements and the architecture of their constituent buildings. Conclusions are drawn on a variety of topics including the influence of existing patterns of late Iron Age settlement on later arrangements; regional diversity in settlement form and location; variation in the chronologies of rural settlements in different parts of the country; the interplay between landscape and cultural influences on settlement, and the effects that proximity to urban centres and roads had on settlement location. In many respects this volume sets the framework for the further studies that will be provided in volumes 2 and 3, and, for that reason, sizeable parts of this book are necessarily descriptive. What this volume does not do is to offer any firm conclusions on overall settlement densities in Roman Britain as the excavated evidence is but one source for this analysis (which is better accomplished through extrapolation from extensive regional surveys and estimations from all currently known late Iron Age or Romano-British settlements contained in sources such as Jeremy Taylor’s 2007 study or Historic England’s AMIE (Archives and Monuments Information England) database. There are a few areas, however, such as the environs of Cambridge and the Upper Thames Valley east of Cirencester, where development has been preceded by so many archaeological interventions that we reach the nearest approximation to a total excavated landscape.

The second volume in the series will be concerned with the rural economy of Roman Britain and examine themes associated with agriculture, industry, transport and markets, drawing heavily on the environmental and artefactual evidence. Volume 3 will examine the rural population of the countryside, and the evidence for their rituals and religion. It will look at the visibility in the record for the multifarious identities that made up the province, and the considerable evidence for religious expression, including regional and chronological variations in burial practice. All three books are underpinned by the project database hosted by the Archaeology Data Service, which is described in Chapter 1 and Appendix 1. Launched in April 2015 this has already proved to be a valuable and popular resource: the website received over 6000 visits and 7000 downloads of reports and site plans in the first seven months following its release. The great beauty of the database is that it permits individual researchers to undertake their own analyses and follow their own research directions. Given the time-limited funding of this project there is no mechanism to update the database with new discoveries made since 2012/13. However, given

the linkages implicit in its design it should be possible for individual HERs to build upon our work and they will remain the primary source of information on the results of work undertaken within the planning system.

While we have spent much time in this project reviewing what has been learnt, it is equally important that we also look ahead as the archaeological and land-use planning communities need to learn from what has been achieved in the first 25 years of commercial archaeology, and how it has been achieved, in order to influence best practice in the future. This relates not only to the sampling strategies determined by curatorial archaeologists for the areas and volumes to be excavated, but also the way material culture and environmental data are recovered, quantified and reported. This is a key moment to evaluate past practice and set down benchmarks for the future. We will present our thoughts on the effectiveness of methodologies used to examine and report on rural settlements in a separate paper in 2017, which will draw heavily on the thought-provoking discussions that formed such a vital part of the regional meetings.

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SUMMARY

It has often been stated that Roman Britain was fundamentally a rural society, with the vast majority of the population living and working in the countryside. Yet there was clearly a large degree of regional variation, and with the mass of new data produced since the onset of developer-funded archaeology in 1990, the diversity of Roman-period rural settlement across the landscape can now be demonstrated. Drawing on the evidence from c. 2500 excavated settlements, this volume presents a new framework of eight regions for the study of rural Roman Britain, in which has been developed a characterisation of the mosaic of communities that inhabited the province and the way that they changed over time. Centre stage is the farmstead, rather than the villa that has for so long dominated discourse in the study of Roman Britain. These farmsteads exhibit substantial regional variation, from the enclosed 'rounds' evident in parts of Cornwall to the rectangular, dry-walled enclosures of north-west Wales and large enclosure complexes of the central English river valleys. Farmsteads have been classified through site morphology (using site plans), with further exploration of their associated buildings, surrounding landscape context and wealth of material culture and environmental evidence. The physical, social and economic relationships between farmstead types and other forms of settlement (villas, military *vici*, villages and roadside settlements) have been explored, allowing the demonstration of distinct variation across space and time. Many of the regional differences would appear to relate to the variable settlement patterns and social structures of pre-

Roman Britain, but there is little evidence to corroborate existing understanding of the territories of Iron Age 'tribes' and subsequent Roman administrative regions, or *civitates*.

The increased emphasis on farmsteads, as the most numerous type of rural settlement, has had a major impact on our understanding of chronological patterning in the Roman countryside. In particular the second century emerges as the period when most settlements were in use, and is therefore arguably the point at which the population was at its height, drawing us away from previous assertions of a 'golden age' of rural expansion in the late Roman period. There is, nevertheless, a notable shift in the overall focus of settlement over time away from the south-east, with parts of central and western England maintaining relatively high numbers of settlements into the third and fourth centuries A.D. These included many large farmsteads and sites that developed architectural characteristics which would define them as villas – all part of the increasing wealth that appears concentrated in this region, which could readily be described as the 'bread basket' of Roman Britain.

The analysis presented in this volume has been primarily devoted to gaining a better understanding of the nature, form and development of Roman rural settlements, while a further two volumes will focus on the economy and the peoples and rituals of rural Roman Britain. All volumes take an integrated approach, utilising many different strands of evidence in order to breathe new life into our understanding of the Romano-British countryside.

RÉSUMÉ

Il a souvent été déclaré que la Bretagne romaine était une société fondamentalement rurale, dont la vaste majorité de la population vivait et travaillait à la campagne. Pourtant, il existait manifestement d'importantes variations régionales et, grâce à la masse de nouvelles données générées depuis le début de la privatisation de l'archéologie en 1990, il est à présent possible de démontrer la diversité de l'habitat rural de l'époque romaine à travers le paysage. En puisant parmi l'ensemble des témoignages issus de la fouille d'environ 2500 habitats, ce présent volume permet de présenter un nouveau cadre de 8 régions pour l'étude de la Bretagne rurale romaine, un cadre au sein duquel s'est développée une caractérisation de la mosaïque des communautés qui ont peuplé la province et la manière dont ces dernières ont changé au fil du temps. La ferme est au devant de la scène, plutôt que la *villa* qui, elle, a dominé le discours de l'étude de la Bretagne romaine depuis fort longtemps. Ces fermes présentent des variations régionales notables, allant des enclos circulaires évidents dans certaines parties de la Cornouaille jusqu'aux enclos rectangulaires en pierre sèche du nord-ouest du Pays de Galles et aux complexes de grands enclos des vallées fluviales centrales britanniques. Les fermes ont fait l'objet d'une classification selon la morphologie du site (utilisation de plans de site), à laquelle s'est ajoutée l'exploration plus exhaustive des bâtiments qui leur sont associés, du contexte du paysage environnant et de la richesse de la culture matérielle et des restes environnementaux. Il a ainsi été possible d'explorer les liens physiques, sociaux et économiques existant entre les types de fermes et autres formes d'habitats (*villas*, *vici* militaires, villages et habitats en bordure de route), ce qui a permis de démontrer les degrés de changement divers à travers l'espace et dans le temps. Nombre des différences régionales notées

sembleraient à la fois relever de l'agencement des habitats et des structures sociales variables de la Bretagne préromaine, mais il existe peu de preuves permettant de corroborer ce que nous comprenons des territoires des « tribus » de l'âge du fer avec les régions administratives romaines qui ont suivi, ou *civitates*.

L'accent croissant mis sur les fermes, comme type d'habitat rural le plus représenté, a eu un impact majeur pour comprendre la structuration chronologique au sein de la campagne romaine. En particulier, le II^{ème} siècle émerge comme le moment auquel la plupart des habitats étaient en usage, et donc sans doute une période durant laquelle la population était à son maximum, ce qui contredit les précédentes affirmations d'un « âge d'or » de l'expansion rurale à l'antiquité tardive. Il faut noter, néanmoins, un déplacement notable de l'objectif d'ensemble de l'habitat au fil du temps marqué par un éloignement du sud-est, avec des parties de l'Angleterre centrale et ouest maintenant un nombre d'habitats relativement élevés durant les III^{ème} et IV^{ème} siècles après J.-C. Il s'agissait de nombreuses grandes fermes et sites dont les traits architecturaux les auraient communément définies comme des *villas* – tout ceci faisant partie intégrante de la richesse qui semblait être concentrée dans cette région et que l'on pourrait décrire comme le « grenier à blé » de la Bretagne romaine.

L'analyse présentée dans ce volume a pour vocation première de mieux appréhender la nature, la forme et l'évolution des habitats ruraux romains, tandis que les deux suivants se focaliseront sur l'économie puis les peuples et rituels de la Bretagne rurale romaine. Les trois ouvrages ont une approche intégrée et utilisent de nombreux éléments distincts de témoignages afin d'améliorer notre compréhension de la campagne romano-britannique.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Es wird oft behauptet, dass das römische Britannien grundsätzlich eine bäuerliche Gesellschaft war, in welcher der Großteil der Bevölkerung auf dem Land lebte und arbeitete. Doch bleibt festzuhalten, dass es sicherlich große regionale Unterschiede gab, und mit der Datenmasse die seit 1990, mit der Einführung der vom Bauträger finanzierten Archäologie gewonnen wurde, kann nun die gesamte Vielfalt römischer, ländlicher Siedlungsweisen demonstriert werden. Auf dem Hintergrund von ca. 2500 ausgegrabenen Siedlungen präsentiert der vorliegende Band ein Gerüst von acht Regionen für die Forschung des ländlichen römischen Britanniens, in welcher eine Charakterisierung der Gemeinden, die wie Mosaiksteine die Provinz ausmachten, entwickelt wurde und es wird aufgezeigt, wie diese sich mit der Zeit verändert haben. Im Mittelpunkt steht der Bauernhof und nicht etwa die Villa, die so lange den Diskurs der Forschung des römischen Britanniens dominiert hat. Diese Höfe weisen wesentliche regionale Variationen auf, von den umschlossenen „runden“ in Teilen Cornwalls über die rechteckigen Trockenmaueranlagen in Nordwest Wales zu den großen eingefriedeten Anlagen der zentral englischen Flusstäler. Die Bauernhöfe wurden durch Morphologie von Grabungen (Untersuchung der Grabungspläne) klassifiziert. In die Klassifizierung flossen Informationen assoziierter Gebäude, der Kontext umgebender Landschaften, der durch Funde abzuleitende Wohlstand und Umweltbedingungen ein. Die physischen, sozialen und ökonomischen Beziehungen zwischen den Hoftypen und anderen Arten von Siedlungen (Villas, militärische *vici*, Dörfer und Straßensiedlungen) wurden untersucht. Dies ermöglichte eine Darstellung der Variationen durch Raum und Zeit. Viele regionale Unterschiede scheinen in Zusammenhang mit den variablen Siedlungsmustern und sozialen

Strukturen des vorrömischen Britanniens zu stehen, doch gibt es nur wenige Nachweise die unser Verständnis eisenzeitlicher Stammesterritorien und nachfolgender römischer Verwaltungsgebiete oder *civitates* bestätigt.

Dass der Schwerpunkt auf Bauernhöfe, die häufigste ländliche Siedlungsart, gelegt wurde, hatte einen erheblichen Einfluss auf unser Verständnis der chronologischen Musterung der römischen Landschaft. Insbesondere das 2. Jahrhundert sticht als die Periode, in der die meisten Siedlungen in Betrieb waren, heraus und ist somit vermutlich die Zeit zu welcher die Bevölkerungsdichte am höchsten war. Dies steht im Gegensatz zu einer früheren Annahme, die in der spätrömischen Periode das „goldene Zeitalter“ der ländlichen Ausdehnung sah. Es gibt dennoch eine merkbare Verlagerung des allgemeinen Schwerpunktes durch die Zeiten, hinweg vom Südosten, während Teile Zentral- und Westenglands relativ hohe Siedlungszahlen im 3. und 4. Jahrhundert aufrechterhalten. Dies beinhaltet mehrere große Höfe und Standorte, welche architektonische Charakteristiken entwickelten, die sie als Villen definieren würden – alle Teil des zunehmenden Wohlstandes der sich in dieser Region zu konzentrieren scheint, welche ohne weiteres als die „Kornkammer“ des römischen Britanniens bezeichnet werden kann.

Die in diesem Band vorgelegten Untersuchungen konzentrieren sich im Wesentlichen darauf ein besseres Verständnis der Natur, Form und Entwicklung römischer ländlicher Siedlungen zu erhalten, während zwei weitere Bände sich mit der Ökonomie und den Menschen und den Ritualen des römischen Britanniens beschäftigen werden. Alle Bände legen eine ganzheitliche Betrachtung vor und nutzen unterschiedliche Beweisführungen um neues Leben in unser Verständnis der römisch-britischen Landschaft zu bringen.

