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Inherited landscapes. The Fields of Britannia Project: interim report

By Stephen Rippon, Chris Smart, Ben Pears *and* Fiona Fleming[1]

Introduction

The three-year (2010–2013) 'Fields of Britannia' project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, aims to explore the transition from Roman Britain to medieval England and Wales from a broad landscape perspective, reaching beyond the traditional site-based approach. One of the most distinctive features of the British landscape today is its intricate pattern of fields, and it is their origins that are the focus of this project. Archaeological and historical research has shown that in many areas the field systems of today were largely in existence by the late medieval period, but when and how these fields came into being is less clear. The 'Fields of Britannia' project is using a wide range of techniques to systematically explore for the first time how far the rural landscape of Roman Britain survived into the medieval period and so shapes the character of our modern countryside. This will hopefully form an important and innovative contribution to the current debate over one of the major formative periods in British history: the nature of the transition from Roman Britain to medieval England. There are three principal areas of research:

1. Land-use: an analysis of palaeoenvironmental evidence in order to determine patterns of continuity or discontinuity in land management practices from the late Roman through to the early medieval period.
2. Field systems: studying the extent of possible continuity or discontinuity in the physical fabric of the countryside by examining the relationship between late Romano-British landscapes and their medieval successors.
3. Settlement patterns: to what extent there was continuity or discontinuity in settlement patterns in different regions of Britain from the late Roman through to the early medieval period.

Regions and *pays*

Traditional approaches to the subdivision of Roman Britain have been highly simplistic, with upland/lowland, native/villa and civilian/military being typical. The definition of medieval landscape character areas has been more comprehensive, considering settlement types, field patterns and farming types. The 'Fields of Britannia' project has divided the landscape of Britain into a series of nine regions based on common physical but also cultural characteristics of both the Roman and medieval periods: South East England (south of the chalk escarpment that runs from Dorset through to the Chilterns); East Anglia; the Central Zone; the South West; the lowlands of South Wales; the lowlands of western England; the lowlands of North East England; upland Wales; and the uplands of northern England (Fig. 1). The Central Zone, for example, is characterised by its fertile lowland topography, relatively Romanised landscape, and a reorganisation of the countryside in the late 1st millennium AD that saw the creation of villages and open fields. The South West, in contrast, has a mix of upland and lowland topographies, a relatively un-Romanised landscape, and a medieval countryside characterised by mostly dispersed settlement patterns and predominantly enclosed field systems (with only limited open field). We recognise, however, that there is also variation within regions and, adopting the concept of *pays* – the complex interplay of cultural and physical facets of landscape character – have further subdivided the countryside within our nine regions to achieve a local understanding of landscape development.

Environment and economy

Palaeoenvironmental data has been collected through a search of published material and unpublished 'grey literature' in order to reconstruct both broad landscape character and local land-use across the Roman and early medieval periods in each of the nine regions. Previous attempts to collate environmental data, principally pollen, have been biased towards upland landscapes (e.g. Dark 2000), but there is now a considerable body of radiocarbon-dated sequences from lowland areas, many resulting from development-led investigations since the introduction of PPG16 in the 1990s (Fig. 2). The aim of this strand of our work is:

- To re-analyse and evaluate all published and non-published pollen sequences from the province of Roman Britain
- To identify broad landscape character in each of our regions across the late Roman and early medieval periods
- To reconstruct more local land-use on selected sites through the analysis and quantification of arable, improved pasture, and unimproved pasture species from pollen and palaeoeconomic data across the Roman and early medieval periods
- To determine continuity or discontinuity of broad landscape character and specific local land-use across a range of geographical and chronological scales

To date 287 dated pollen sequences that straddle the Roman and early medieval periods have been analysed and which include significant numbers in lowland areas.

[1] All Dept of Archaeology, University of Exeter. Contact: s.j.rippon@ex.ac.uk

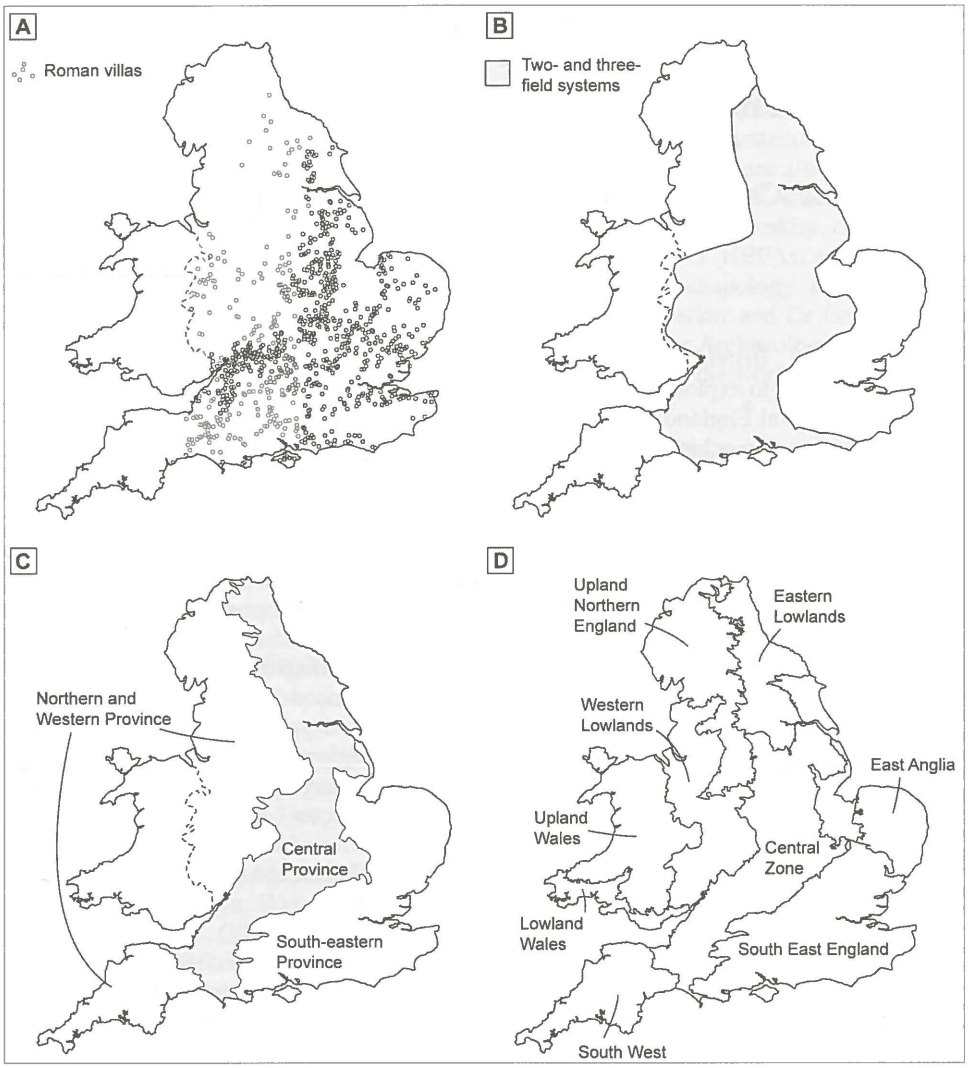


Figure 1 The sub-division of Roman Britain into the regions used in this project, which reflect broad variations on the character of both the Romano-British and medieval landscape character as reflected in the distributions of Roman villas and medieval common fields respectively (after Gray 1915; Robert and Wrathmell 2000; Taylor 2007, figure 4.9).

The pollen sequences from each region have been aggregated, and for the purposes of discussion have been divided up into four periods: Roman-British (AD43-410), Transition (AD411-499), and earlier (AD500-849) and later Early Medieval (850–1066) (Figs 3–4).

At the broadest scale, the data suggests widespread continuity of open landscapes across lowland areas, particularly in the 'East Anglia' and 'Central' regions which were the least wooded areas in all periods: here, the extent of woodland in the early medieval period was actually less than in the Roman period. In most other areas there was a slight increase in woodland in the Transition period, most notable in South East England where there were, and are, extensive areas of woodland (e.g. the Weald and New Forest), but even in these regions while there was some decrease in the intensity of agriculture in certain places, there remained extensive areas of open agricultural land. Overall, in lowland areas, there is no evidence for a major woodland regeneration or discontinuity in land-use, while in upland regions, as expected, there was a greater degree of discontinuity, suggesting that traditional models of a 'retreat from the margins' still hold true.

Field systems

The second part of the Fields of Britannia project is an examination of the relationship between the field systems of late Roman and medieval Britain. The two specific aims are:

- To analyse the excavated evidence for the survival and use of late Roman boundaries into the 5th century and beyond
- To analyse the relationship between late Roman boundaries and medieval features within the historic landscape

For the purposes of this analysis, the historic landscape (as mapped on Ordnance Survey First Edition Six Inch maps) has been divided into three broad categories: open fields enclosed by agreement (where the furlongs and many individual strips survived as post-enclosure fields); non-open field landscapes of enclosed fields (closes) of likely medieval origin; and the post medieval Parliamentary enclosure of open fields and former common land (Fig. 5). This strand of the project is ongoing, but data has been fully collected and analysed for the four principal lowland regions: South East

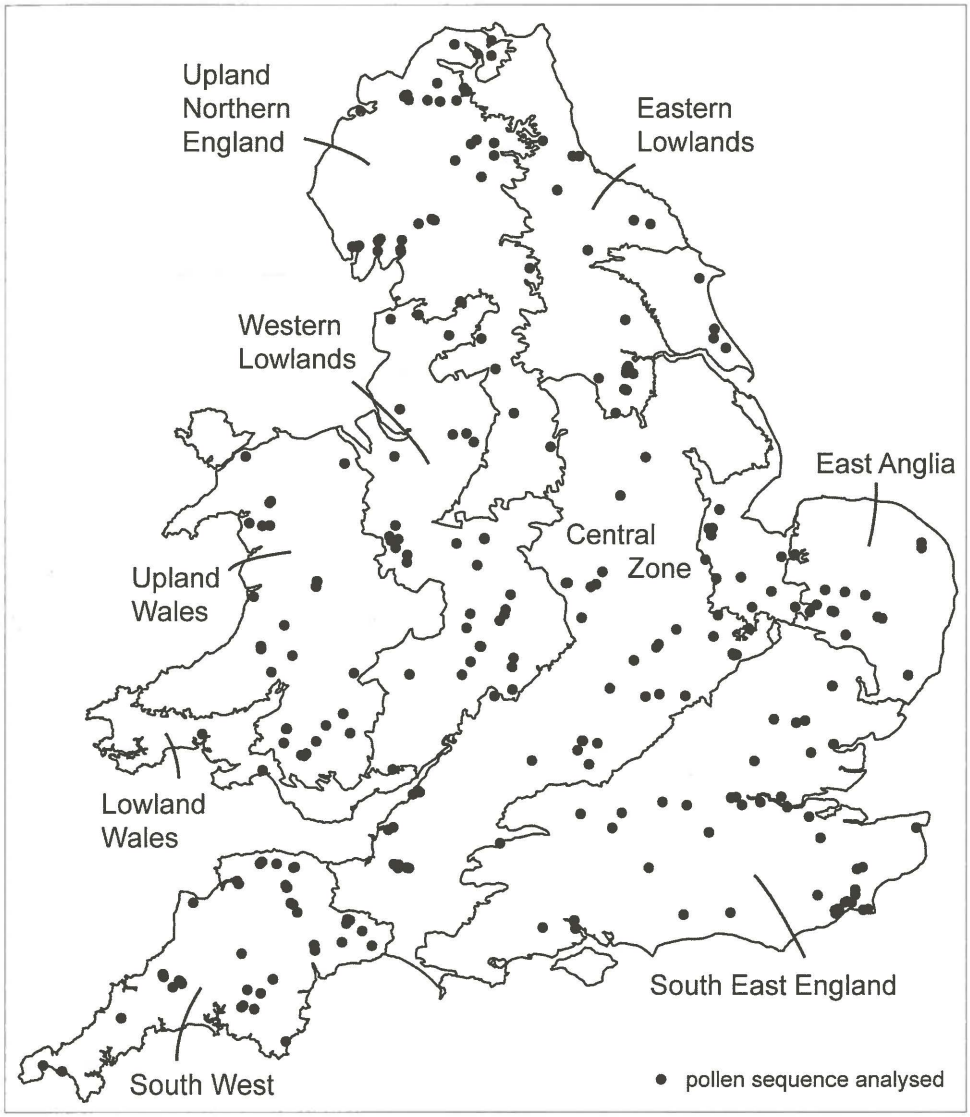


Figure 2 Distribution of sites with dated palaeoenvironmental sequences that straddle the Roman and medieval periods.

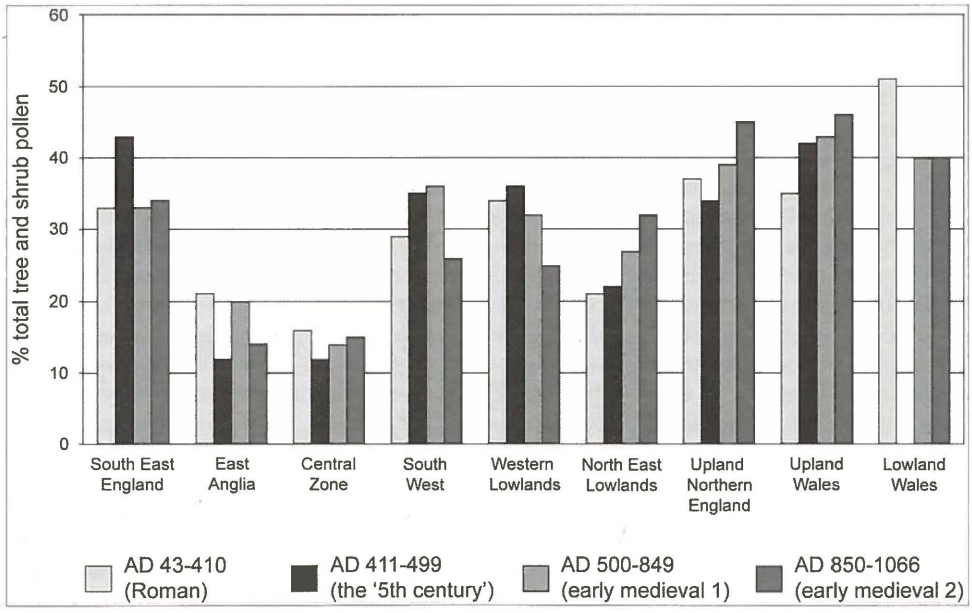


Figure 3 Summary of the amount of tree and shrub pollen (ie woodland) across the different regions of Roman Britain, and how this changed during the Roman and early medieval periods.

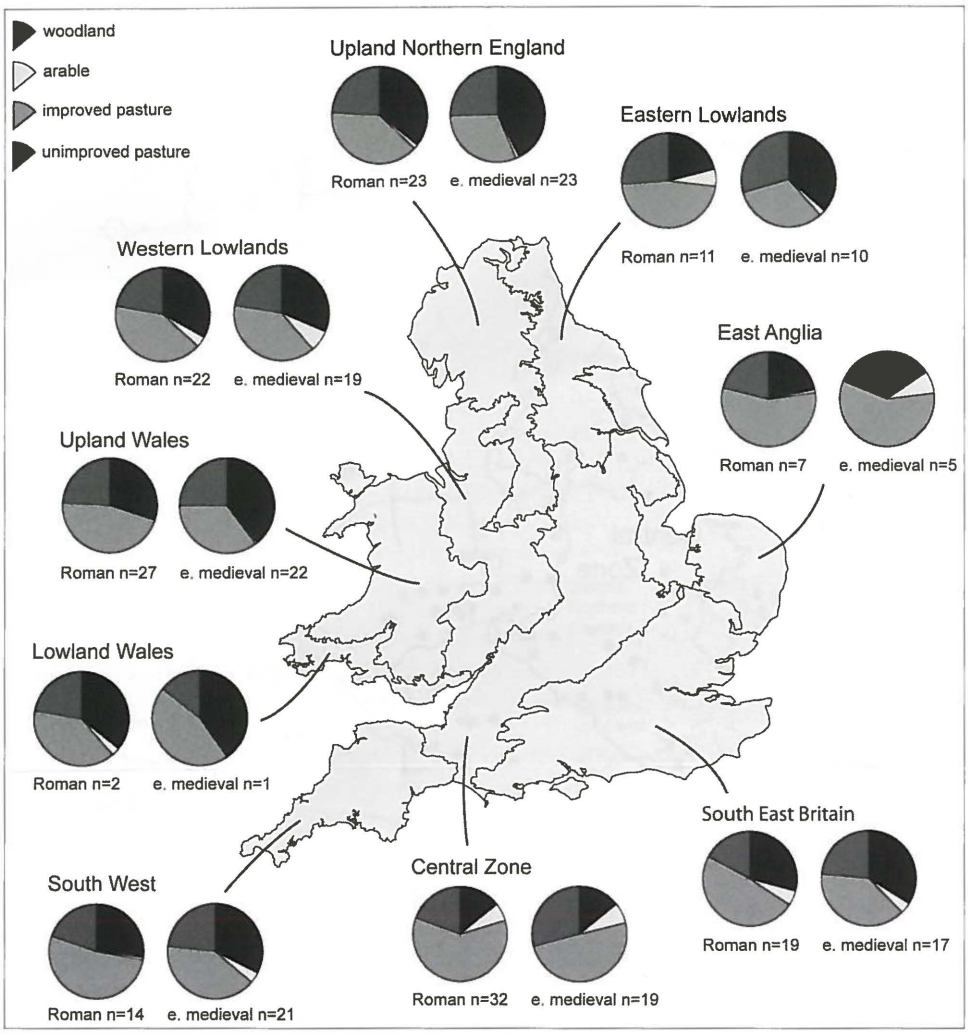
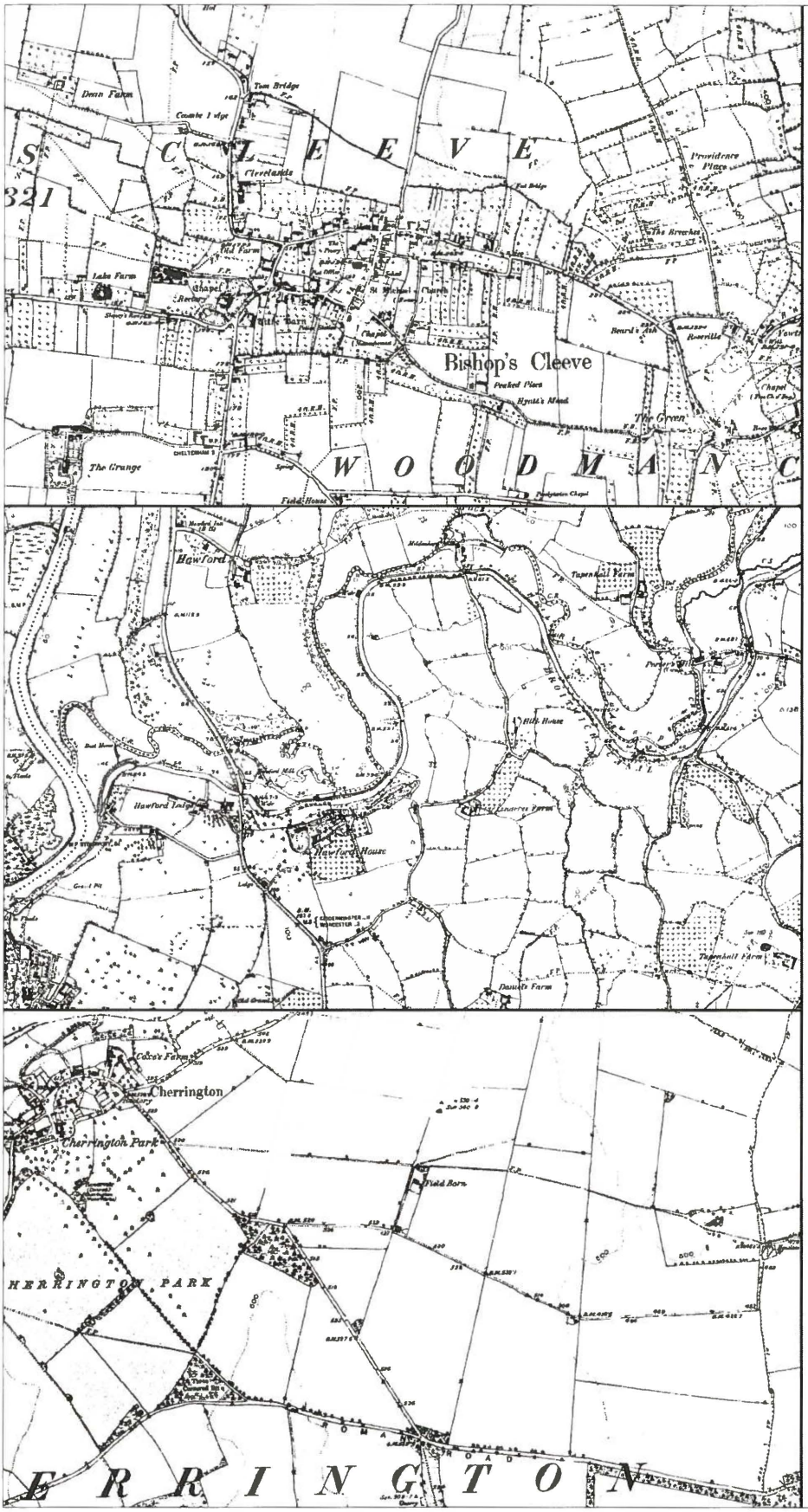


Figure 4 Summary of main land-use types across the different regions of Roman Britain, and how this changed during the Roman and early medieval periods.

England, East Anglia, the Central Zone, and the Western Lowlands. Whilst being judicious in excluding Roman boundary features whose dating may suggest that they were abandoned before the 4th century, over 500 sites have currently been identified. As we are seeking to explore the extent to which Romano-British landscapes survived into the medieval period, those sites that fall within historic landscapes characterised by post-medieval Parliamentary enclosure (about 150 of the total of 500), have been excluded from statistical analysis.

Central to our approach has been placing the results of excavations in context, by using GIS to superimpose them on the First Edition Ordnance Survey Six Inch map in order to see how the excavated Roman and early medieval features relate to the historic landscape (the present-day patterns of settlements, roads and field systems that, although still in use today, are often many centuries or even millennia, old). Sites are assigned to one of three categories (Fig. 6): cases where an excavated Romano-British ditch shares the same alignment as an excavated medieval feature, or a component within the historic landscape; cases where excavated Romano-British ditches are on the same orientation as medieval features and/or the historic landscape; and where there is neither of these relationships. All too often, the results of an excavation are presented in isolation from the surrounding landscape, and one example of the dangers of this can be seen at Seighford in Staffordshire. The published report simply shows the outline of the excavated trench (Fig. 7A) which included a field boundary ditch that contained fifteen sherds of late Romano-British pottery (Fig. 7B). The conclusion that this was a Romano-British ditch appears reasonable, until the trench plan is superimposed upon the OS 1st edition Six Inch map, which shows that this feature was in fact a 19th century field boundary: the pottery was clearly residual (Fig. 7C). On a larger scale, however, placing published excavation plans in the context of the historic landscape can reveal remarkable continuities, as at Hunts Hill Farm, in Upminster, Essex, where Late Iron Age, Romano-British, and Early Saxon features are all on the same orientation as the present day landscape (Fig. 8). Sites such as this do not suggest complete continuity in land-use, as there will no doubt have been shifts in the balance between arable and pasture as the wider economy and market conditions fluctuated, but they do make it likely that this area of countryside saw continuous management of some kind that prevented woodland regeneration.

Across each of the regions examined so far (all lowland) there is an unexpectedly high degree of potential continuity between Romano-British and medieval field systems. At Saxons Lode Farm, on the Worcester Plain (Western Lowlands region), for example, excavated



Fossilised common field strips at Bishop's Cleeve, Gloucestershire (Vale of Gloucester pays, Central Zone region)

Medieval 'closes' at Claines, near Worcester, Worcestershire (Worcester Plain *pays*, Western Lowlands region)

Post-medieval enclosure, perhaps by Parliamentary Act, at Cherington, Gloucestershire (Cotswolds *pays*, Central Zone region)

Figure 5 Examples of the three types of countryside into which the historic landscape as depicted on Ordnance Survey First Edition Six Inch maps have been subdivide (© Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2012). All rights reserved. (1890 and 1891 (top), 1886 and 1888 (middle), 1889 (bottom)).

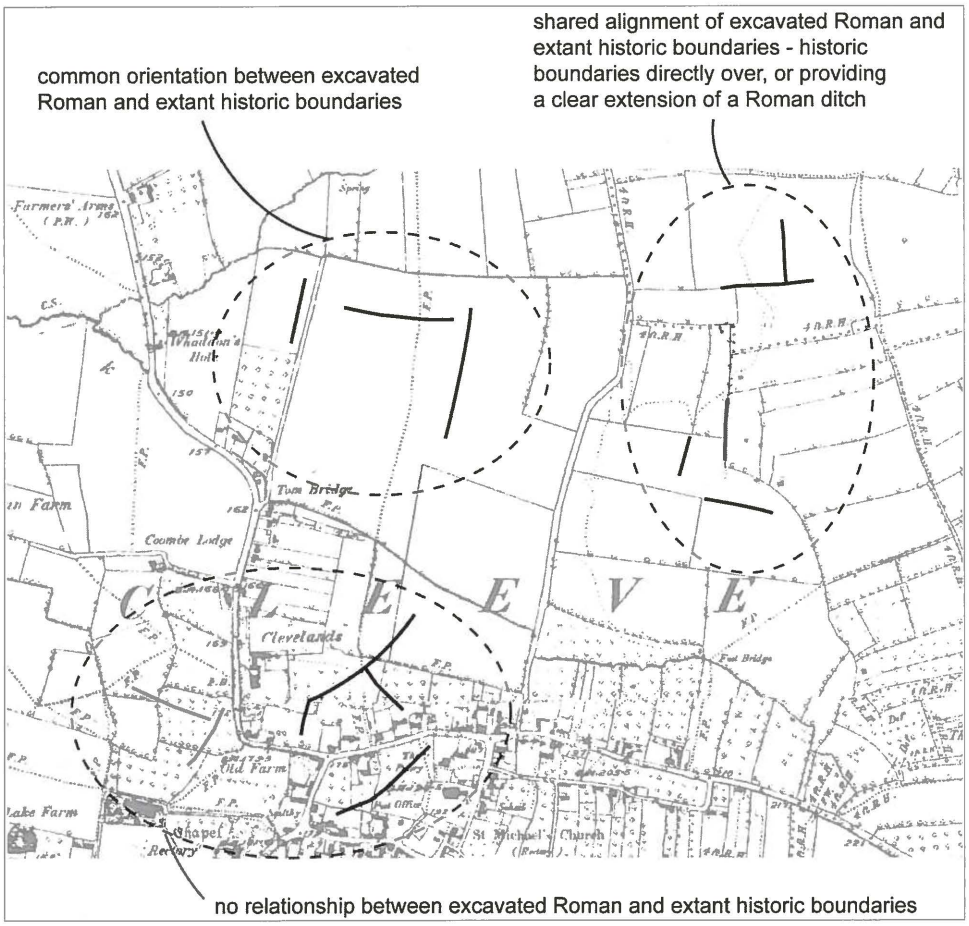
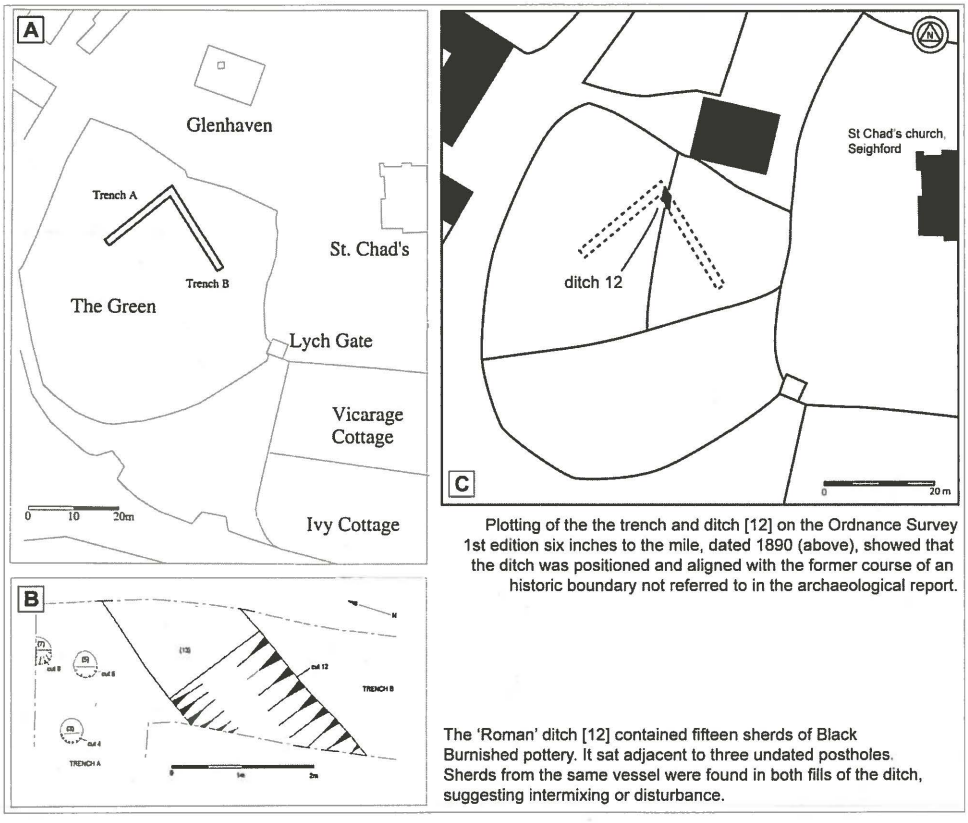


Figure 6 Types of relationship between excavated Romano-British features and the historic landscape (© Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2012). All rights reserved. (1890 and 1891).



Plotting of the the trench and ditch [12] on the Ordnance Survey 1st edition six inches to the mile, dated 1890 (above), showed that the ditch was positioned and aligned with the former course of an historic boundary not referred to in the archaeological report.

The 'Roman' ditch [12] contained fifteen sherds of Black Burnished pottery. It sat adjacent to three undated postholes. Sherds from the same vessel were found in both fills of the ditch, suggesting intermixing or disturbance.

Figure 7 Seighford in Staffordshire: placing the trench plan in the context of the Ordnance Survey First Edition Six Inch map reveals that what was thought of as a Romano-British ditch was in fact 19th century (after Hyam 2003; © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2012). All rights reserved. (1890).

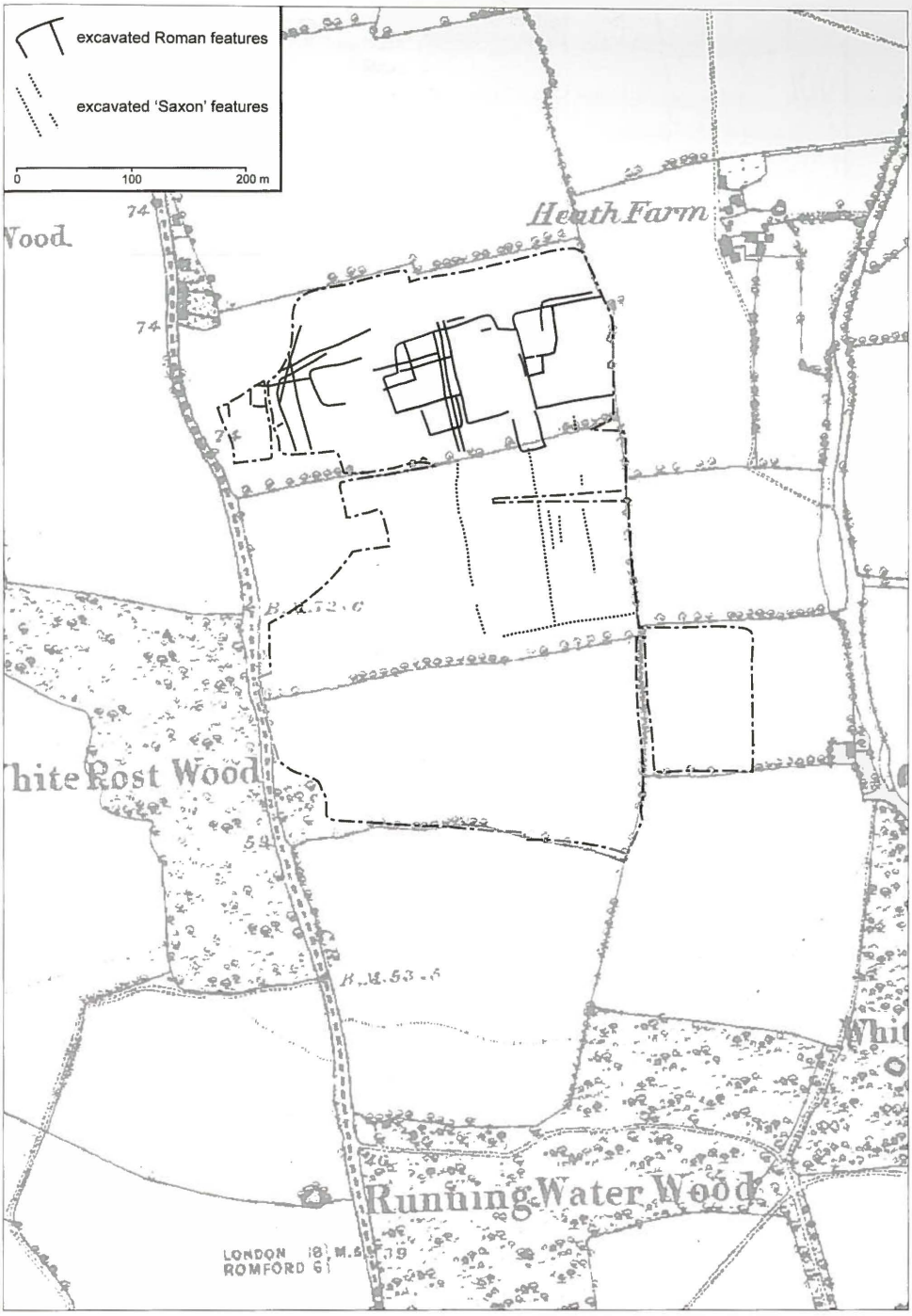


Figure 8 Hunts Hill Farm in Upminster, Essex: Late Iron Age, Romano-British and Early Saxon features all share the same orientation with the historic landscape of today, suggesting broad continuity in landscape use for the past two millennia (after Howell et al 2011; © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2012). All rights reserved. (1881)).

Roman and 'Anglo-Saxon' boundaries share a common orientation with elements of a common field system now fossilized as field boundaries within the historic landscape as mapped in the 19th century (Fig. 9). Based on the data collected so far, in the Western Lowlands region 57% of Roman boundaries share a common orientation or alignment with the later historic landscape, rising to 66% in South East England. Analysis at the *pays* scale is also illuminating, and has revealed the extent of local variation in landscape history. In the Vale of Gloucester *pays*, for example, 79% of Roman boundaries set within areas of former common field appear to have influenced the general orientation or specific alignment of medieval fields or furlong boundaries, although in the Vale of Evesham – an adjacent *pays* – this drops to only 40%. Mapped across the regions studied so far, there is a marked decrease in potential continuity from the South East, across the Central Zone and into the Western Lowlands (Fig. 10).

Settlement patterns

The relationship between Roman-British and early medieval settlement patterns has been examined in three county-based case-studies (Norfolk, Somerset and Kent), principally through the use of online Historic Environment Records. The major research aim has been to systematically assess the spatial relationship between Romano-British settlements in different *pays* with the nearest early medieval occupation, Domesday manors,

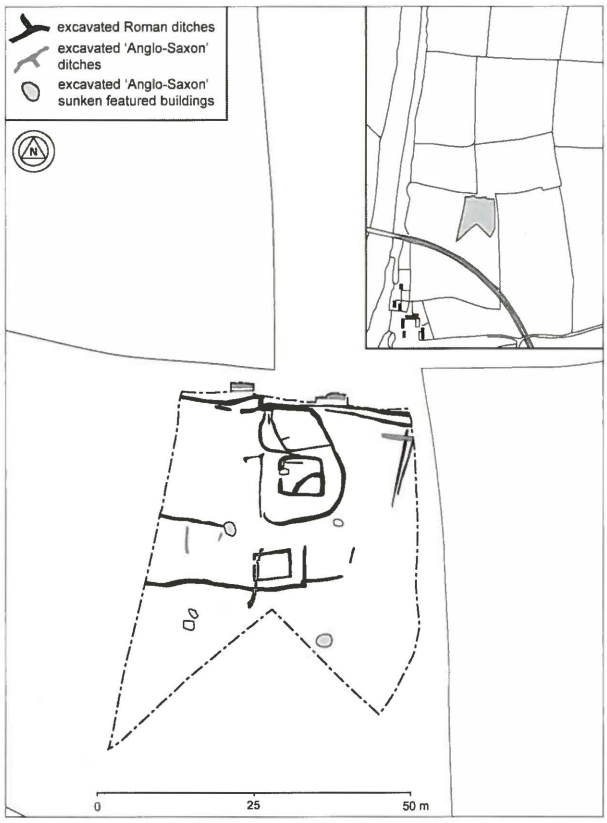


Figure 9 Cropmarks and results of excavation at Saxon's Lode Farm in the Worcester Plain pays of the Western Lowlands region, overlain on First Edition 6" mapping (redrawn). Roman and early/mid Saxon boundary features share a common orientation, which is also fossilised within the pattern of enclosed common field strips in the historic landscape. The presence of sunken-featured buildings suggests that there may be continuity of occupation after the end of the Roman period (after Barber and Watts 2008; © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2012). All rights reserved. (1887)).

and parish churches. Whilst finer analysis of the results is still in progress, a degree of settlement contraction in the early medieval period is evidenced across all *pays*, although it is far greater in some compared to others. In Norfolk, for example, which has the benefit of a continuous ceramic sequence, on the acid loamy soils of the West Norfolk Lowland 62% of Romano-British settlements have evidence for 5th to 7th century occupation within 500m, whereas on the shallow, calcareous soils of the Chalk Escarpment the figure is just 46%. Across the heavy, clay, soils of the Boulder Clay Plateau the figure is lower still, at 37%. Unfortunately, large parts of Roman Britain became aceramic in the early medieval period, and in order to assess the potential degree of settlement continuity in these areas, all that can be done is to compare the distribution of Romano-British settlements with the location of parish churches and Domesday vills. Once again, however, there are very clear differences emerging between different areas.

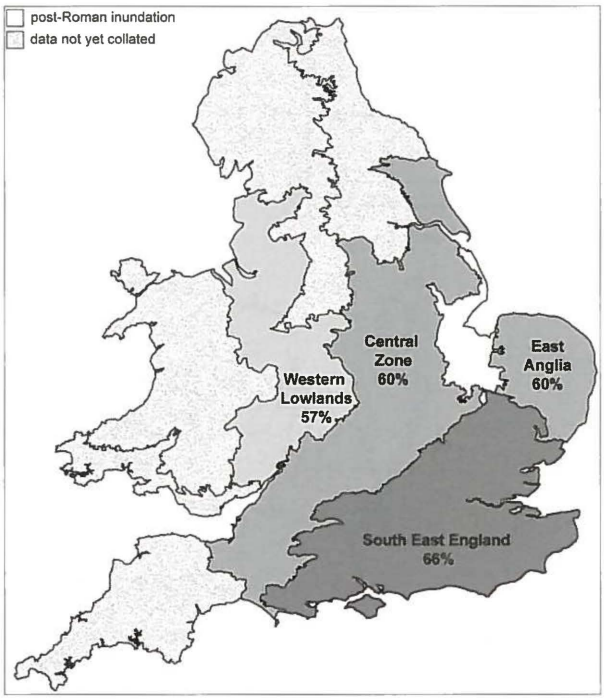


Figure 10 The proportion of excavated late Roman boundaries whose alignment or orientation is reflected in the medieval field pattern across four of the 'Fields of Britannia' regions: Western Lowlands, Central Zone, East Anglia, South East England.

On the clay soils of the Mid Somerset Lowlands, for example, 27% of Domesday manors and 25% of parish churches have evidence for Romano-British occupation within 500m, whereas on the calcareous soils of the Limestone Scarp the figures are just 23% and 19% for Domesday manors and parish churches respectively.

Once completed, the results of the project will be published by Oxford University Press in a book titled *The Fields of Britannia: regional landscapes in transition AD400–1000* (to be published in 2013–14).

Project webpage: http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/title_84580_en.html

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