## CHAPTER 3. WHY WROXETER MATTERS: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DEFINED AREA

This chapter reflects on the evidence gathered in the previous chapter to draw out the significance of the site under four headings: evidential, historical, aesthetic and communal.

### Evidential

***Above ground***

The visible evidence for Wroxeter Roman City is, with one spectacular exception, not readily apparent yet it is there nonetheless and repays the time and effort spent in seeking it out. The exception is, of course, The Old Work itself (Figure 3.1). The largest free-standing wall left in any town in Roman Britain, it has served as Wroxeter's iconic monument, testament not least to the ruggedness of Roman architectural design and construction. Around it, and visible for the past 150 years, are the remains of the town baths, the only complete large civil town baths visible anywhere in Britain (Bath is of course the other notable example but it is not complete, nor is it readily intelligible to the visitor). Were the forum to be added to the existing attraction then the site would become the only place north of the Alps where one could see a combination that, in Roman times, was common to every major town throughout the Empire.

**Figure 3.1: The Old Work and the baths (HAN118 and 119) under snow.**

**Figure 3.2: WRC's defences (HAN305), behind Glebe Cottage.**

Outside the baths area, the next most prominent evidence can be found at the extremity of WRC: the town defences (HAN309). The lack of stone in their construction means that they are less visible, and are certainly less spectacular, than those at Caerwent, Chester or Silchester. In places Wroxeter's defences are no more than a gentle rolling slope and grassy ditch (Figure 3.2) but elsewhere they convey their former formidable nature (the stretch by the hotel is one such, as is the less accessible stretch at the north-east corner). Indeed, their appearance echoes the appearance of the many Iron Age hillforts that can be seen in the county, such as Old Oswestry or Caer Caradoc, or even the Wrekin itself, visible from the heart of Wroxeter. This link is not as tenuous as it might appear in that the inhabitants of the town may well have been trying to emulate their ancestors in designing and building their defences.

One last visible legacy of WRC is its roads. Some are visible within the fields, with careful observation at the right time of year, but much more obvious are those present day lanes that perpetuate the former street grid. These include especially Patch Lane,

the cliff lane, the main road from Norton through to the village (Watling Street), the Horseshoe Lane and the green lane running past the football pitch (HAN404, 407, 400, 401 and HAN402) Figures 2.30; 2.33). These relic features have of course only survived because they are still used but they could have a wider interpretive role for the visitor. Patch Lane, for example delineates the entire south side of the fortress while the Watling Street, from its junction with Patch Lane through to the former smithy at the crossroads delineates much of the west side of the fortress. In consequence, one can stand on the observation platform overlooking the baths and, looking to the south, see one half of the entire fortress of Wroxeter. It is experiences like this that makes Wroxeter special. Such a feat would be impossible in Colchester or Gloucester, Lincoln or York. By standing next to the football pitch, on the other side of the Ironbridge road (B4380), one can experience the topography of the Roman town with all its complexity, while experiencing the expansive views of the Severn Plain and the hills all around, including the 14 visible hillforts (Figures 3.3 & 3.4). From this spot too the Roman soldiers, standing on the invisible northern ramparts of the fortress, kept a close watch upon their newly conquered and settled territory.

**Figure 3.3: The Breidden from Wroxeter with Atcham village (foreground).**

**Figure 3.4: Lawley and Caer Caradoc from Wroxeter.**

In seeking Wroxeter's Roman past it is all too easy to forget that its urban existence for 600 years was a blip compared to its use as farmland. Situated as it is in the heart of the Severn Plain, the predominant view is of farmland so it is fitting that within the area of WRC farming predominates too. Accordingly, the survival of the farm buildings at the core of the town echoes the importance of farming to the community at Wroxeter. The farm buildings, and the housing related to the farming industry scattered around the village, from the solid wealth epitomised by The Cottage to the basic existence of the farm hands hinted at by 1 & 2 The Ruins, give as complete a picture of High Victorian farming as to be found anywhere in the county. Yet this legacy remains virtually invisible to the visitors who are generally focused entirely on things Roman. Fortunately, the buildings are still there to be interpreted and brought back to life in a new role.

Of no less importance, but somehow isolated from the Roman town is the wonderful church of St Andrew. This is one of those classic English churches in which the whole history of a settlement, its ups and downs, can be mapped on the building itself, if you have the time and patience to read and understand it. To focus on the Roman period alone at Wroxeter is thus to miss the point: the evidence on the site points to a much broader and more interesting story than just one more Roman town that failed.

**Assessment of Significance**

**The above-ground archaeology of Wroxeter is key to attracting visitors to WRC; in this the Old Work and the ruins of the baths have the greatest part to play being the most spectacular elements of the site. The ruins are a rare instance in Britain of seeing a complete plan of a Roman civic building but the complex could be made even more spectacular and relevant to understanding Roman urban design through excavation and presentation of the town forum. The defences are less well known due to their current inaccessibility but enabling visitors to walk their course would bring home to people just how large WRC was.**

***Buried***

It is difficult to assess the amount of buried evidence at WRC since in spatial terms so little of it has been excavated. All significant excavation has focused on three *insulae* of the town: HAN504 (forum), HAN505 (baths) and HAN508 (south of forum) out of a total of 48. Other investigations in the remaining *insulae* have been so slight as to give little clue as to their use and density of occupation. Our apparently comprehensive nature understanding of the town has come from remote surveys, either the extensive geophysical survey of 1995-7 (Gaffney and Gaffney 2000; White, Gaffney and Gaffney forthcoming) or the aerial photographic surveys by Dr Arnold Baker, J.K. St Joseph and others (Baker 1992; White, Gaffney & Gaffney forthcoming). Some rough calculations may perhaps be used to illuminate the problem. It is known that stratigraphy in the major excavated *insulae* is 1.5-2m deep. This is likely to be at the extreme end of deposit depth and one can assume perhaps that the average over the whole town is ca. 1m. If this is accepted, then the total amount of stratigraphic volume can be calculated by the formula of multiplying the area (78ha.) by the depth (1m) to give 780,000m³. If the depth were ca. 1.5m, then the volume would be an extra 390,000m³, a total of 1,170,000m³. Calculating the excavated area of the town is more difficult since the trench sizes and depth of excavation varies considerably, and with the exception of Barker's baths basilica excavation all excavations have been by trench or box trench method. Barker's excavation was roughly 140m by 80m by 1m, giving 11,200m³. If we round up the excavated area to include Webster's and Atkinson's and Bushe Fox's excavations, the total is probably at least 50,000m³. This would be just under 5% of the 1.7m³ suggested above, or under 10% of the 780,000m³.

Where excavation has been carried out, the survival of remains has been good or excellent. The condition of the artefacts, especially those vulnerable to acidic soil such as bone or shell, is good indicating an overall neutral pH, although recent prolonged use of Nitrogen fertilizers may have altered this balance. This is in contrast to the immediate hinterland which has slightly acidic soils, a variation that may be attributed to the use of lime mortar and plaster for the major stone buildings. Accordingly, it can be anticipated that where mortared buildings are not present in the town, preservation of bone and other artefacts will be poorer than in the core of the site.

As with most sites, there has been considerable build up of remains of successive phases of occupation in the same place since there was no concept of totally clearing or levelling a site before reconstruction took place. The phenomenon is most obvious on the road surfaces, such as Watling Street between the Baths and Forum where the comparative heights of the porticos demonstrate differing ground levels between the 2nd century (forum) and 4th (baths) This means that the remains visible to us by aerial or geophysical prospection across the town are likely to be the latest although interpretation of the plots has highlighted components of different chronological phases

(see below; White, Gaffney & Gaffney forthcoming). Inevitably, therefore, there is only one phase that can be characterised in detail without the benefit of excavation, the main civilian occupation of the town, from roughly the Hadrianic period (AD 120s) to the end of the 5th century (ca. AD 490s).

*Early Roman (Military; ca. AD 55-90; HAN551)*
Within the area of the Roman town, our understanding of the buried archaeology of the Roman military sites is relatively weak given that these remains lie at the bottom of the sequence of stratigraphy on the site. Excavation of the buildings inside the fortress has been limited to the small and fragmented areas of archaeology seen by Webster during his excavations of the baths.

**Assessment of Significance**
**While the remains of the fortress hold some interest they are not as significant as the wider pattern of military archaeology around Wroxeter. The assessment of the temporary marching camps carried out by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England and published in the mid 1990s demonstrated a large number of military instillations around the town (Welfare and Swan 1995). These include a small fort south of the town that was identified and investigated by J. K. St Joseph, two marching camps immediately north of the town rampart, a further camp in Ismore coppice immediately to the west of Wroxeter and another in the grounds of Attingham Park (ibid) as well as forts at Uffington and Duncote (ibid, fig. 126). To these can be added the vexillation fortresses linked to the campaigns of conquest slightly further afield at Cound and Leighton (White, forthcoming in Burnham and Davies *Roman Frontier of Wales*, 3rd edn.). Taken together the central Shropshire military camps represent the densest areas of Roman military activity in England outside of Hadrian's Wall (Welfare and Swan 1995, fig. 2).**

*Early Roman (Civil; ca. AD 90-120; HAN552)*
Assessment of this phase of the town's history is problematic since so little work has been done. Only in Atkinson's and Webster's excavations has this level been reached. In the latter, some evidence was found for the reuse of military buildings into the civilian phases. The only other elements of the early town that can be defined are the street grid, which was clearly established at its fullest extent at this period, as is demonstrated by the partial burial of elements of the street pattern under the later town rampart in the north of the town (*insulae* XLIII-XLVIII; HAN543-548). More intriguingly, the Roman camps lying around Norton farm, immediately to the north of the town, appear to be overlain by trackways and enclosures also partially buried beneath the defences which would imply that the early civil period saw the creation and use of a landscape in the immediate hinterland of the town that, for whatever reason, was then disrupted by the creation of the town defences (HAN556; Figure 3.5). This area represents a high priority for both research and protection.

**Assessment of significance**
**It is virtually impossible to gauge the significance of the early civil period within the town since it is the most opaque of all the phases of the town's history, lying as it does between the fortress and the mature town. However, from the fact that the later defences in places overly the road grid established in this period it can be surmised that the town was from the outset planned to be one of the largest urban settlements in Britain. Further work on this phase will be crucial for**

**characterising the ambitions of the civilian establishment at this period and its potential is high given that it is deeply stratified.**
**The possible identification of an early Roman landscape in association with the Roman town represents a potentially unique survival within Britain. These fields are still currently under plough although recent geophysical survey has demonstrated that the cropmark features still survive. It is therefore an urgent priority to secure the future of these remains by taking this field out of cultivation so as to preserve it for future investigation.**

**Figure 3.5: The cropmarks around Norton Farm (HAN556) as plotted by RCHME [English Heritage].**

*Civil period, (ca. AD 120-490 HAN553)*
This period of Wroxeter's history is the most comprehensively understood and there is too much information to easily summarise. The remains have been characterised and described in detail (White and Gaffney 2003; White, Gaffney and Gaffney forthcoming) giving for the first time an over view of the whole town, or at least those elements of the town that are visible in the aerial photographs and in the geophysics. Broad patterns can however be presented. Both survey sets demonstrate that the central *insulae* of the town have many masonry buildings, mainly town houses of various sizes including substantial courtyard buildings, linear houses with three or four rooms and corridors and simple strip-houses aligned onto street frontages. Some public buildings can also be identified, notably the forum (*insula* IV; HAN504), public baths (*insula* V; HAN505) and probable main temple (*insula* I HAN501; i.e. beneath the farm buildings). Other temples are visible south and north-west of the baths. A cattle market, *forum boarium*, has been tentatively identified in *insula* III HAN503 along with a possible *mansio* in *insula* XIII HAN513. The

*insulae* adjacent to the east defences appear to be filled with lower status structures while the *insulae* in the south of the town have a scatter of masonry houses set within open land. North of the Bell Brook, a cluster of dense, low status housing parallel to the rampart has been detected, an arrangement that echoes the position of housing in an Iron Age *oppidum* or hillfort (HAN534). The north-west part of the town shows a street grid laid out over the Bell Brook rather than respecting it. Pits are densely packed within these *insulae* indicative perhaps of an industrial area. If so then the industry might be water-dependent given the proximity to the Bell Brook (tanning and fulling have been suggested; White and Barker 1998).

The infrastructure of the town is relatively well understood too. The defences seem to have been earthwork through the town's life although they began as a rampart with two ditches before reaching their final form as a single rampart with broad single ditch and counterscarp bank. There is some debate as to whether the defences were in stone or were earthwork (as is argued by Barker 1985, for instance). As yet too little has been examined to decide this question. The line of the town's aqueduct is known although the extant earthworks were ploughed out only 50 years ago. Elements of the street grid survive as modern lanes but the bulk of the road system is known only from cropmarks. There have been suggestions that there was a bridge across the Severn but there is no conclusive proof of this and a ford is as likely. Masonry in the river appears to relate to medieval or post medieval fish weirs (Pannett 1989). Activity in the immediate hinterland is relatively well understood although cannot be examined in detail here. GIS modelling indicates a preference for settlement location on the pastureland in the immediate hinterland, indicating that livestock processing may have been an important element in the town's economy (Gaffney and White 2007).

**Assessment of Significance**

**There are few towns in Britain that provide the level of detail and comprehensiveness of data that Wroxeter can furnish for this period. The other towns of similar calibre – Caerwent, Silchester, Verulamium – are much more extensively excavated and / or damaged by ploughing. Similarly, their hinterlands have not been subject to extensive modern survey, with the exception of Silchester. Wroxeter thus has enormous potential for helping us to understand what an important town looked like in Roman Britain and how it functioned. To some extent this has been demonstrated by the work of the Wroxeter Hinterland Project but potentially there is much more that could be done to characterise the site. We would single out two interlinked areas of research that could enable considerable enhancement of our understanding of the site: geochemical prospection to test some of the hypotheses relating to the industrial areas of the site and a paleo-environmental survey of Wroxeter and its hinterland to characterise economic and agricultural change in the town throughout its existence.**

**It is also important to realise that for the Romans, towns did not stop at the defences. They counted the immediate territory around the town as part of its area and thus key elements of the town are located beyond the defences, a fact that modern management must take into account. Not the least of these elements are the cemeteries. These have been investigated in a number of locations at WRC, notably on both sides of the Horseshoe Lane by Wright (1862), Atkinson (1924) and Houghton (1968). Only Wright was successful in discovering undisturbed graves and it seems clear that the cremation cemeteries known along this road**

**are now lost. Another cemetery lay just south of Norton farm but this too has only yielded cremations found by Wright. However, the fields to the west of Norton appear to show evidence for enclosed cemeteries which, if the case, would indicate a 3rd or 4th century date. These features have yet to be confirmed or excavated. They are under plough and are vulnerable to metal detectorists. Removing the threat of both is a high priority.**

*Late Antiquity (ca. AD 490-650; HAN554)*
This phase has only been identified in excavation with the classic exposition being Barker's excavations on the baths basilica (phase Z) (Barker et al. 1997). The phase can be characterised as the remodelling of pubic space into a private demesne perhaps for a warlord or bishop, creating timber buildings designed and executed in Roman mode. Surrounding *insulae* (HAN502, 504, 506, 509) have produced evidence for similar structures even though not fully recognised at the time. Quite how widespread this phase of occupation was across the town is unclear but it is likely that the focus was small, as with other Late Antique sites known from the continent or North Africa. Despite the much diminished area of occupation, the nature and scale of the evidence suggests continuing urban activity (White 2007). Note that this phase is not susceptible to aerial or geophysical survey yet is the most vulnerable phase as it lies at the top of the stratigraphic sequence. There has been a suggestion that the early defences on the southern lip of the Bell Brook (if that is what they were) were remodelled in this phase to provide a defensive feature defining the northern limit of this reduced core of the town. Further work is needed to confirm this picture.

**Assessment of Significance**
**This is perhaps the most important phase in Wroxeter's history in that no other site in Britain has produced as much evidence of urban occupation of this date. It has huge regional and national significance in helping researchers to understand and characterise this difficult period. The value comes in particular from the association of a very large dataset of stratified artefacts that can cast considerable light on how the transition from Roman material culture to a Brittonic one occurred. While is it not possible to fully characterise this phase spatially its importance and accessibility as the uppermost layer in the town suggests that it carries a high priority for future work.**

*Early medieval and Medieval (ca. AD 650-1500; HAN555)*
Excavation in the town centre has implied the virtual abandonment of the area within the walled circuit around AD 650. The only exception to this appears to be the church, or rather the cross known to have stood within the churchyard until the 1740s. This Mercian style cross dates to the late 9th century and it is thus a possibility that the whole town was abandoned after ca. AD 650. However Bassett (1992) has argued on various grounds, not least the presence of a college of priests at Domesday, that before the church there was a Brittonic monastery established in the vicinity of the ford. The buried remains in the churchyard, although inevitably complicated by the existence of the cemetery, has potential as the providing the longest unbroken sequence of occupation / use in the whole town.

The existence of a church implies a village too and it can only be assumed that the Anglo-Saxon village of Wroxeter lay around the church, as has now been proven at the neighbouring village of Atcham, which also has an Anglo-Saxon church. That being the case it is assumed that the later medieval (or more probably early post-medieval)

cottages within the village are located over earlier medieval predecessors. If so, then the earthworks of the houses abandoned in the mid-19th century may well have a buried archaeological sequence extending perhaps unbroken from the Roman period through to the 19th century. Note that these earthworks extend around Topsy cottage and also into the spinny at the three-road junction outside the Wroxeter Hotel. There is no evidence that the medieval village extended south of the brook defining the southern edge of the town circuit. Also relevant to this period is the site of the manor house and fish ponds lying in the field between the ford and the southern defences. Wright dug here in 1859, uncovering a small inhumation cemetery of unknown date but the prominent earthworks (HAN306) presumably contain stratified evidence of the house occupied by Le Strange family.

Within the rest of the town, buried evidence for this period is limited to the remnants of strip fields which appear in some of the aerial photographs and geophysical plots. There is potential for mapping these against the only surviving map of the open field system by John Rocque (SA 6900/1).

**Assessment of Significance**
**These remains are unlikely to be of great rarity in the region but nonetheless have enhanced significance for two reasons. First is that the protected status of Wroxeter since the 1970s means that radical change here is unlikely and thus threats to the buried archaeology are not severe. Second is the fact that the Anglo-Saxon, medieval and post-medieval village at Wroxeter epitomises an important, and dominant theme in Wroxeter's history, namely its existence as an agricultural community. This significance is enhanced by subtle, but still extant, traces of the agricultural organisation of the landscape within and around Wroxeter, especially the relics of open fields.**

**Overall assessment of the buried archaeology**
**Wroxeter's buried archaeology represents a virtually untapped resource for understanding how Romano-British towns were founded, settled, inhabited and finally abandoned. It then goes on to provide evidence for the medieval period right through to the present day. For some of the phases of occupation (e.g. the 5th-6th century) Wroxeter offers our best hope nationally for characterising and understanding this difficult period while in others (main civil period and early civil) it represents the best preserved example of any large Roman town in Britain. The latest phase of work on the site has demonstrated that much can be achieved in research terms without causing long-term damage to the site and the development of new procedures and technologies should be allowed to continue in an organised and coherent programme of research to develop our understanding of the town as well as permitting further development of scientific approaches to archaeology.**

***Artefacts***
The study of the material culture of the Roman city is a relatively neglected area in spite of some important early studies carried out on discoveries from the town. The earliest records relate to the usual antiquarian discoveries of coins, brooches, statuettes and sculpture, including the four military tombstones and fragments of a Jupiter column. Bushe-Fox was the first to adopt a more scientific approach to the material culture through his extensive pottery reports which did so much to underpin his stratigraphic narrative. His excavations were the first too to carry out analysis of environmental data

recovered. In contrast, Atkinson's work was much less concerned with a proper analysis of the cultural material tending instead to focus on the spectacular discoveries made in the forum, including the gutter find, inscription, silver mirror and diploma. None of these early excavators found significant amounts of material and were often selective in what they kept. With the start of modern excavation under Webster the practice of selection of pottery and other finds continued for a while until, in the mid 1960s, Barker adopted a more comprehensive approach to collection of artefacts. It is from these two excavations that the bulk of Wroxeter's material culture is known since Graham Webster gradually adopted the approach of keeping all finds, although never sieving spoil as Barker did to retrieve finds.

The exceptional quantity and quality of the remains from these two excavations, and the complete coverage they afford of the whole sequence of the town's Roman history, offer a unique insight into the economy and society of the town yet the potential of these remains largely untapped (Cool 2006, 231-2). The finds from the baths basilica excavations alone offer huge quantities of artefacts for research: 1.5 tonnes of animal bone, 1 tonne of pottery, over 7000 stratified coins, 11,000 small finds in total. This is one of the largest groups of stratified material culture of Roman date from anywhere in Britain. Its analysis could cast considerable light on changing patterns of the Romano-British economy, on changing social mores and dress styles and on the economic basis of the town (Cool 2006).

While much of the material has been studied, it has not been brought together in such a way as to realise its potential and far too much of the data rests in archives, inaccessible to researchers and the public alike. If studied and put into the context of the excavation it has the potential to revolutionise our understanding especially of the latest, 5th-6th century material culture, but will also cast considerable light on the adoption of Romanised lifestyles by the *Cornovii*. Furthermore, study of the stratified material will enable some context to be restored to the material found by earlier excavators, especially those working on *insula* V (HAN505). Work on this extensive collection is undoubtedly hindered by the division of the material between Shropshire Council and English Heritage. If at all possible these collections should be housed together so as to be capable of joint study.

**Assessment of Significance**

**The material culture collected from the site at Wroxeter represents one of the largest and most comprehensive of any stratified Roman dataset from Britain (Cool, pers. comm.). Despite this its research potential remains largely unrealised due to the failure to fully study the material culture, especially from the Baths Basilica site. This mistake should be rectified through a concerted research programme designed to study and characterise the assemblage recovered from the site with a view to establishing a benchmark for the material culture of 5th and 6th century Britain. In order to facilitate this, it is further suggested that this nationally important collection be brought together to create an archaeological resource centre on the site, establishing a major resource for the study of Roman Britain.**

**Historical**

Wroxeter's historical importance is less certain than its archaeological legacy because history is in many senses more intangible in the absence of written records. Thus it is merely speculation that the Emperor Hadrian could have visited the town during his stay

in Britain in AD122 (Webster 1993). That the speculation has been made at all is based on the fact that the forum and baths complexes appear to have been started at this time although only the forum was completed within Hadrian's lifetime, as is demonstrated by the finest surviving inscription from Roman Britain (Figure 3.6). Less speculative, but still nonetheless not recorded by history, is the fact that Agricola's tenure of his first provincial governorship involved marching from Wroxeter with the 20th Legion, with whom he had been Legate a few years previously, to subdue the tribes of northern Wales, and especially Anglesey. The drama of this latter event captured Tactius' imagination much more than the fact that his father-in-law had marched from the north gate of the fortress at *Viroconium*.

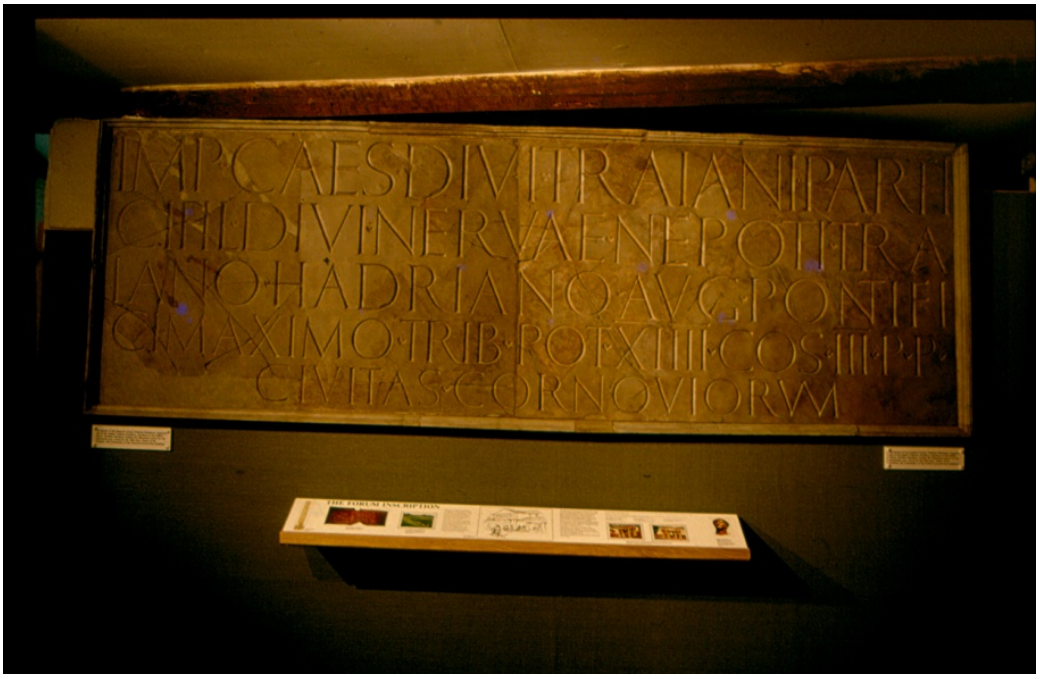


**Figure 3.6: The Forum Inscription, Rowley's House Museum. Dated to AD 129-130 it is acknowledged as the finest Roman Inscription in Britain.**

Of other Roman visitors we know even less: did any of the House of Constantine who visited Britain ever visit Wroxeter? It seems unlikely but we shall never know for certain. We can be almost certain that there will have been periodic visits by the governor of the province, not least in his capacity as travelling judge, but such visits have left no visible trace. Even when the archaeology points to the presence of significant people living in Wroxeter, as is the case with the occupant of Building 10 (the large sixth century building sitting on top of the baths basilica) we are frustratingly unable to put a name to the person. This has not stopped others doing so, however, with possible occupants including Vortigern and even Arthur (Philips and Keatman 1999). In truth, such a building, and such a spot, are unlikely to have ever housed such men not least because there are no 5th or 6th century defences to go with the occupation on the baths basilica. Rather, it is likely that the occupant was a senior cleric, perhaps a bishop, reflecting the crucial importance of the Christian community in resisting the pagan Anglo-Saxon communities to the east.

It is here that Wroxeter's historical significance can really take off because Wroxeter is the place where we can see the birth of the elements of medieval and modern Britain.

We are so used to thinking about the division between the English and the Welsh that it is difficult to remember that this situation came about only after the 5th century. In the Roman period, Wroxeter was buried deep within the province of Britannia, away from immediate threats. The collapse of Roman Britain in the first decade(s) of the 5th century suddenly catapulted Wroxeter to the frontier. There is some evidence that its people, and those of the rest of the province of *Britannia Prima* (Wales, the West country and the Welsh March) were organised enough to resist the invading Germanic peoples, unlike the other three provinces of Britain (White 2007). This heroic role eventually ended not with the fire and sword ascribed to Wroxeter's demise by Thomas Wright but by a political carve-up negotiated between the powerful kingdoms of Penda's Mercia and Cadwallada, the Prince of Gwynedd whose mutual need for an alliance to fight King Oswald of Northumbria outweighed their political differences. Wroxeter was the price paid for this unholy alliance. Later, 9th century Welsh Poets would speak wistfully of the heroic resistance of the 'White Town on the Tren' but the *Realpolitik* of the period was much more prosaic (Rowland 1990).

**Assessment of Significance**

**It is difficult now to remember that Britain was once a united island. The fragmentation of Britain into its four nations occurred in the immediate post-Roman period, and the archaeological evidence places Wroxeter at the heart of this period. WRC offers a powerful locale to explore the historical and cultural identities of the British. Similarly, its early history is associated with two classical figures who epitomise Rome's early relationship with Britain: Agricola and Hadrian. These elements in combination tell a powerful story of Roman and British relationships, and how the identities familiar to us for 1600 years first came about.**

**Aesthetic**

The principal aesthetic values of Wroxeter are poetic and artistic, expressing in particular a link with its surrounding landscapes. The inspiration derived from Wroxeter, especially its demise, by the Welsh poets writing for the Brittonic-speaking courts of the Welsh Princes has been noted already. The location of the narrator in the poem *Canu Heledd* is of interest and significance: Heledd stands on the Wrekin watching the town burn, lamenting for the death of her father and relatives in battle. The linkage between the town and the most prominent hill seen from Wroxeter is thus clear and is highlighted too by the same root for their respective names, both now and probably in the Roman period too.

**Figure 3.7: WRC from the Wrekin. The white Wroxeter Hotel can clearly be seen immediately above the rape field in the centre ground.**

For the local villagers of the medieval period, the presence of the Roman town was never quite forgotten and the disappearance of the town was explained by the charming story that it had been burnt down by a flock of sparrows with lighted matches on their tails. Another mythical account of the destruction of the city also appears in an epic tale, *Romance of Fulk fitzWarin*, written in the late 13th century (White & Barker 1998). In this tale it is noted that when William I conquered the area, the burnt and buried remains of the city were inhabited by the spirit of a giant, Geomagog, which was subsequently defeated by Pan Peveril, King William's champion, and fifteen other knights.

The embracing of classical traditions, a central theme of the Enlightenment, provided the stimulus for the creation of the neighbouring Attingham Park from c. 1770 onwards and the construction of Attingham Hall in 1782-5 for Noel Hill, the first Lord Berwick. The close physical relationship between Attingham and Wroxeter prompted Humphrey Repton, designer of Attingham Park, to propose the addition of a spire to St Andrew's, Wroxeter to make the church more visible from the steps of the newly completed hall. Thomas, the second Lord Berwick, had a great fascination with the classical world, evidenced by his tour of Italy in 1792. In addition to purchasing various antiquities, he commissioned Philipp Hackert to paint a picture of the excavations at Pompeii, which can still be seen in the Picture Gallery of Attingham Hall. Thomas's interest in local Roman artefacts is indicated by a burial urn, displayed in the library of the Hall, which was discovered by his workmen in 1798 at the junction of the Rivers Tern and Severn.

**Figure 3.8: Thomas Girtin's watercolour of the North side of the Old Work with Wroxeter Church framed in the doorway. The pond in the foreground has been transposed from the other side of the wall since a contemporary watercolour shows the north field under the plough.**

The developments at Attingham would have brought noble visitors to the area, prompted by the discoveries of Roman remains, to gaze at the edifice known as the 'Old Work'. The construction became a favourite subject for illustration appearing in 18th and 19th century journals and books about Shropshire antiquities. It was the subject of several paintings, including a romanticised view by Thomas Girtin (a celebrated Romantic landscape artist) produced during his tour of north Wales and the border county in 1798. In the case of Girtin's picture (Figure 3.8) the monumentality of the Old Work provides a foil (albeit distorted) to the atmospheric landscape beyond, to the south (White & Barker 1998).

The aesthetic appeal of, and public interest in, the remains of the city, in particular the Old Work, was further enhanced by the excavations of the adjacent bath-house undertaken by Thomas Wright, beginning in 1859. The imposing nature of the Old Work, set next to the well-preserved remains of the bath-house, provided dramatic scenes of labyrinthine buildings captured for posterity by illustrators and photographers alike. In fact, the photographs produced as souvenirs of this excavation are some of the earliest known examples taken of an archaeological investigation anywhere in the world (Figure 3.9). The drama of the site was further enhanced by Wright's own lurid account of the demise of the town which he envisaged as an orgy of fire and pillage by Saxon hordes with one of the unfortunate inhabitants–'the old man in the hypocaust'–crawling into the hypocaust there to die clutching his life savings. This is easily the most potent of Wroxeter's images in the popular imagination, as is demonstrated by the painting entitled *The Fall of Uriconium, Wroxeter* by Thomas Prytherch, who lived in Topsy Cottage in Wroxeter village and died in 1926. This magnificent painting now at Kenilworth Castle provides an embellished and highly romanticised view of the remains uncovered by Thomas Wright with the Old Work in the background, and is reminiscent of paintings of Classical scenes in Italy produced by earlier Romantic artists (Figure 3.10).

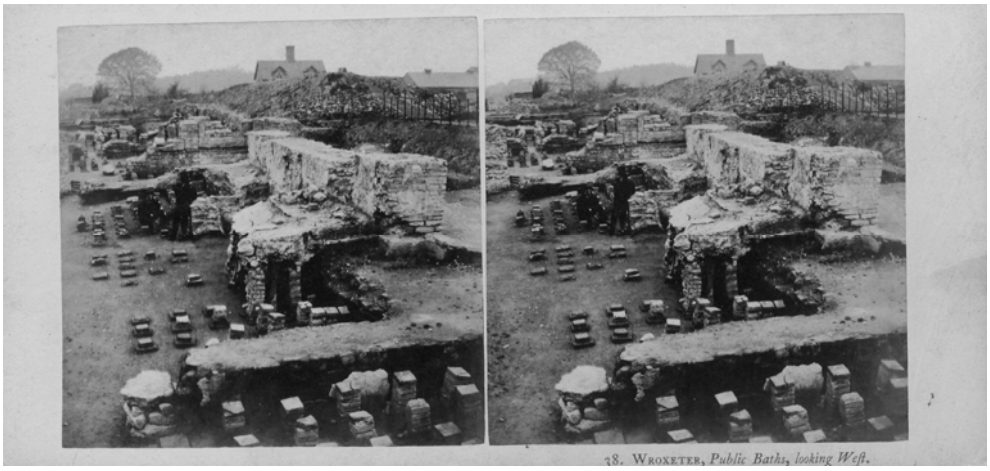


**Figure 3.9: Stereoscopic souvenir photograph of Wright's excavations, 1859. Note 1 & 2 The Ruins visible behind the spoil heap.**

**Figure 3.10: Thomas Prytharch's 'The Fall of Uriconium' (ca.1920) English Heritage, Kenilworth Castle**

The excavations undertaken by Thomas Wright, JP Bushe-Fox and Donald Atkinson also prompted a fair degree of literary interest in Wroxeter. Charles Dickens reported in some detail on his visit to the excavations in 1859 in an article called *Rome and Turnips*. A.E. Housman visited the site and it inspired him to write *On Wenlock Edge*, an atmospheric poem about *Uriconium* (which he shortens to 'Uricon') and the surrounding landscape. It appeared in his first and most famous collection of poems, *A Shropshire Lad*, published in 1896. Archaeological work undertaken at Wroxeter and at the Roman towns at Silchester and Caerwent inspired H Lang Jones to write a series of poems, which were published together in a slim volume entitled *Songs of a Buried City* in 1913. Probably in the same year Wilfred Owen, who lived locally, wrote his descriptive ode of the city, *Uriconium*. A less joyous poem, *Viroconium*, composed by Mary Webb (another local writer) in 1924 seems to relate her feelings about the site with the terrible events of the previous decade. She was also inspired to write an essay for a local society entitled *The Return of the Romans: a Dream of Uriconium* in 1923. The Roman remains at Wroxeter also inspired John Buchan to write a bizarre tale called *The Wind in the Portico*, published in 1928, in which ancient supernatural forces are re-invoked with deadly consequences! Perhaps the most successful realisation of Wroxeter in literature, however, and certainly the most widely read, is Rosemary Sutcliffe's *Dawn Wind* (1961). This evokes Wroxeter's demise in the quasi-historical context of the 9$^{th}$ century Welsh poem *The Lament for Cynddylan*, itself set in the 6$^{th}$ century. She skilfully evokes the atmosphere of the abandoned town through reference to its known archaeology; the forum inscription, the shops and the herringbone tile floors of the *macellum* to build a vivid image based on Wright's Old Man and the story of fire and sword, concluding this part of her novel with the observation that "Viroconium was not a place to live in any more."

The archaeological artefacts recovered from the city, as chance finds or discovered during excavation, are also invaluable in helping modern communities understand the lifestyles of those who occupied the town. Many objects have aesthetic appeal in terms of their design, manufacture and use. The more complex and intricate items, such as glassware or particular personal and household objects, tend to have a greater aesthetic value. The most beautiful and ornate of all the personal items so far discovered at Wroxeter is a silver mirror, discovered during the excavation of the forum in the 1920s (Atkinson 1942). It is considered to be the most lavish example of a Roman mirror found in Britain (Figure 3.11). The inscription from the forum, meanwhile, inspired the artist Eric Gill to create a new font-style based on its high aesthetic qualities.

**Figure 3.11: The Wroxeter Mirror. A 30 troy oz. silver mirror, one of the finest examples surviving from the ancient world.**

Artists' impressions and reconstruction drawings can make a tremendous difference to the way archaeological remains are perceived and understood. Amédée Forestier's drawing of Watling Street and the forum, produced for the *Illustrated London News* in 1925, vividly conveys the bustle of town life in its heyday (Figure 3.12) (White & Barker 1998). Over the years various artists have been commissioned to produce drawings based on the results of archaeological excavations, including Alan Sorrell (Figure 3.13), Peter Scholefield, Heather Bird and Ivan Lapper (White & Barker 1998).

**Figure 3.12: Amédée Forestier's reconstruction of Wroxeter Forum.**

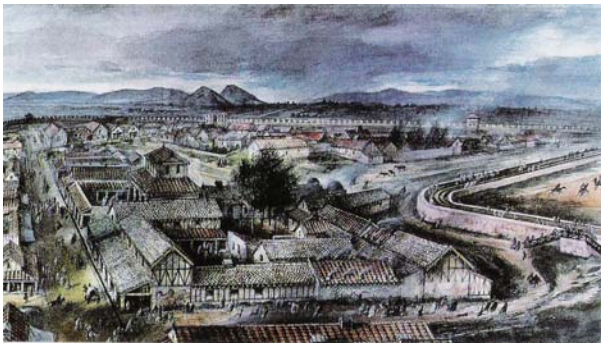

**Figure 3.13: Alan Sorrell's reconstruction of the Bushe-Fox buildings.**

**Assessment of Significance**

**Wroxeter's aesthetic legacy is bound up in diverse forms: poetry, art, artefacts and literature. This legacy is deep: the earliest poetic elements date back to the 9th**

**century while the popular myths inspired by the melancholy of the ruins may go back further yet. Latterly, the legacy has been more firmly tied into the cultural aesthetic of the European Enlightenment and, latterly, the aesthetic of research. Yet still the thread of popular myth and story surfaces, reinterpreting and building on the legacy of new discoveries to create different interpretations and visions of Wroxeter's past.**

**Communal**

While local people often profess never to have been to Wroxeter, the reality is that it does impinge upon people's consciousness through school visits if nothing else. With such a major resource on the doorstep and with Romans in the curriculum, it is no surprise that so many schools take advantage of the site making up to a third of all visits during the year. Getting pupils to engage with the site and its archaeology can be daunting but has been made considerably easier by the fine work of the Shropshire Museum Service Education Officers and the substantial resources committed by English Heritage in the form of the buildings and resource centre (Figures 3.14 & 3.15). These are soon to be substantially upgraded by EH Properties and Outreach following a large grant to improve the facilities used by schools. The site is a major resource not just for the West Midlands but also for the north west since it is the nearest major civilian site available to the conurbations of Liverpool and Manchester.

**Figure 3.14: School children reconstruct the columns of the baths basilica.**

**Figure 3.15: Fran Yarroll of Shropshire Museum Service dressing school children in Roman costume.**

During the life of the Wroxeter Hinterland Project (1994-7), the nascent depth of interest in the site was made visible through the boost in visitor figures while the work was in progress, even though most of the project fieldwork was not actually carried out at Wroxeter. The need to recruit volunteers as a workforce for the project also demonstrated the huge demand for public involvement in archaeology in the area. From an initial start of 24 names in autumn of 1994, the final project volunteer database was more than 400 with more than half of these having participated actively. Within the town, many local people participated in the collection of data for the resistivity survey, itself led by a local inhabitant, Jon Guite. In addition to the collection of data by volunteers and by visitors on open days (Figure 3.16), there was a Young Archaeologists Club branch some of whose members have gone on to have careers in archaeology, while from 1995-2002 there were guided tours of the site every year that proved very popular with visitors Figure 3.17). These also included themed days, such as the Ermine Street Guard Roman days and the 'Poets at Wroxeter' event.

**Figure 3.16: Volunteers collecting resistivity data during an open day in 1996.**

**Figure 3.17: County archaeologist Mike Watson guiding visitors at Wroxeter in 1996.**

Of more lasting social significance perhaps is the sustained cultural influence of the training excavations, a theme that has been explored recently (Everill & White forthcoming in Schofield ed.). This degree of influence is hardly surprising since the excavations from 1966-1985 often employed a combined total of 150 excavators per week for five weeks. The social interaction between the excavators was one aspect of this: a number of marriages and even more relationships were fostered during the excavations but there was also the interaction with the village and local inhabitants. Not everyone welcomed the large numbers of diggers appearing each year but there is no doubt that the spending power of the excavators was considerable and the five week excavation period provided a substantial boost for the income of the village Post Office ensuring its survival well into the 1990s. The same can be said of the Horseshoe Pub and, to a lesser extent, the Wroxeter Hotel.

**Assessment of Significance**

**Locally and regionally, WRC has a huge impact, actual and potential, on educating young and old alike in the evidence for Roman Britain. It is a key site for the West Midlands and even for the North West. It is has a significant role in training opportunities for all kinds of archaeological work and for other areas of the National Curriculum. Enhancement of the education facilities would significantly increase the impact of the site, potentially turning it into a National Centre for archaeological research and training based on high-quality archaeology.**