

Preliminary report on the archaeological investigation of a Romano-British settlement at Burton Latimer, Northamptonshire

Over the last 4 months Albion Archaeology has undertaken archaeological investigations, overseen by CgMs Consulting on behalf of David Wilson Homes (South Midlands), in advance of housing development. The investigations have been completed to the satisfaction of the County Archaeological Advisor. This report presents a preliminary summary of results to coincide with open days when the site can be visited (within normal office hours) by members of the public.



Earthmoving (nearing completion) exposes Roman ditches (dark linear soil marks) which divided the settlement up into a series of enclosures adjacent to a trackway (defined by two parallel ditches). The small yellow dots are archaeologists!

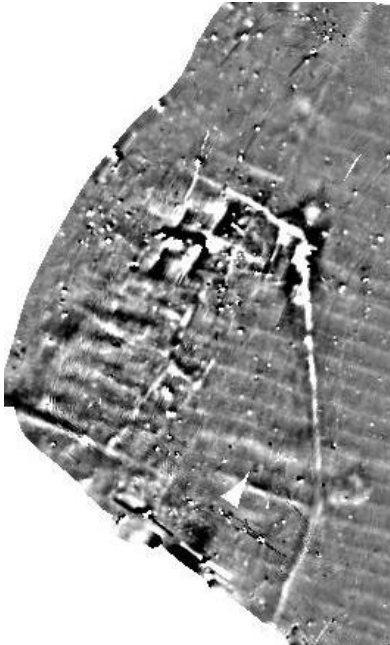
BACKGROUND

David Wilson Homes (South Midlands) were granted planning permission for residential development on the outskirts of Burton Latimer, with a condition requiring excavation of the Romano-British settlement within the site.

DISCOVERY OF THE SITE

A Roman coin hoard (along with Roman pottery, building material, iron slag and animal bone) was found in 1954 during the digging of a silage pit by the farmer.

However, the presence of an extensive settlement was not fully appreciated until 2010 when an archaeological evaluation of the site (geophysical survey and trenching) was undertaken as part of the planning application process. The remains were not well preserved, e.g. no buildings were present, probably because the land had been subject to ploughing for thousands of years. However, the site did have the potential to address a number of local and regional research questions.



*Geophysical survey showing the settlement
(ArchaeoPhysica)*

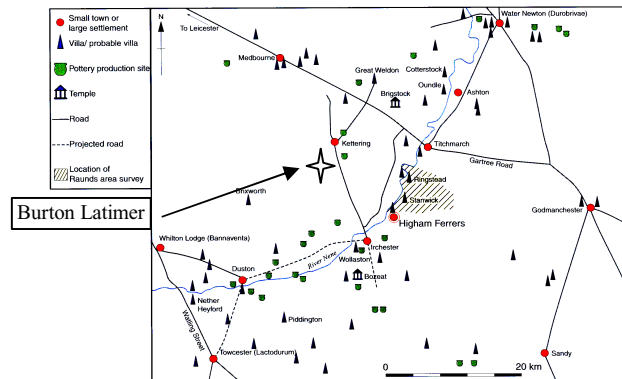
THE ROMAN BACKGROUND

The aerial photographic evidence for the Iron Age and Roman landscape in Northamptonshire is still highly fragmented, especially on the clays. Unlike the majority of sites in the Nene Valley, the Burton Latimer site was not discovered due to the presence of cropmarks but by the chance discovery of a coin hoard. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that the county was intensively occupied — characterised by large-scale agricultural landscapes, in some cases associated with pottery and iron production.

The nearest known contemporary settlement was found to the east under one of turbine bases at Burton Wold Farm. This appeared to be a low status farmstead possibly concentrating on animal husbandry.

Associated with this agricultural landscape was an extensive network of roads and trackways, villas and the development of many local market and religious centres. It has been suggested that one of these roads ran northwards from Irchester on the Nene, along the east bank of the Ise near Burton

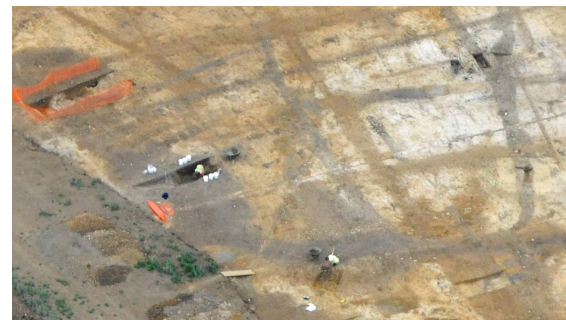
Latimer, and on towards the possible Roman small town located on the northern edge of Kettering.



*Location of the site within the Roman landscape
(from Lawrence and Smith 2009, Between Villa & Town: Excavations of a Roman roadside settlement and shrine at Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire)*

Similarly, the known and potential villas are densely concentrated along the River Nene and the valleys of minor tributaries, like the Ise. At least one such high status site is known from the Ise valley — the Rushton Roman villa, c. 2km to the north-west of Kettering.

THE RESULTS



On-going archaeological investigations (the areas of dark soil are Roman pits and ditches)

Origins and development

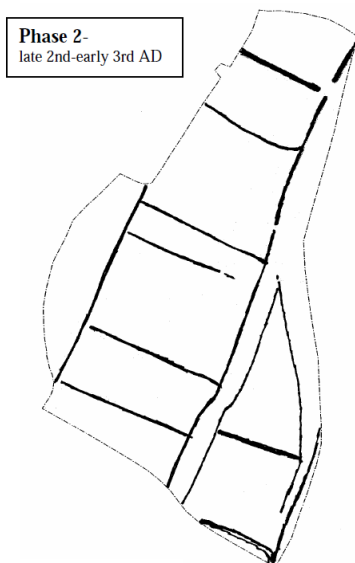
The finds recovered during the investigations suggest that the settlement originated in the later 2nd century AD. No Iron Age precursor was identified within the development area although a number of prehistoric stone tools have been found. The settlement continued to be occupied right up until the end of the 4th century AD. There is only limited evidence for any activity on the site in the Saxon period.



An archaeologist recording a Roman pit

Extent and layout

The settlement covered more than 1.8ha, extending beyond the development area to the south. In its original form it comprised a series of rectangular enclosures with an integral trackway.

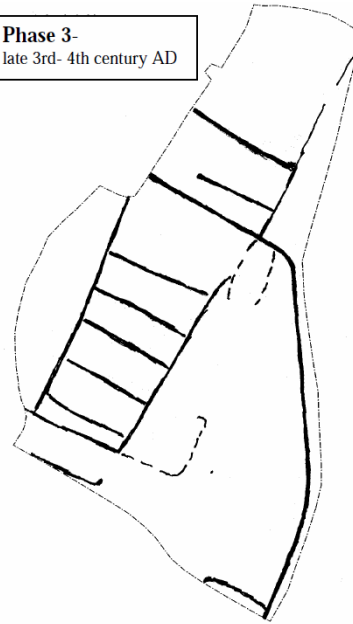


Original layout of the settlement

Originally the ditches would have featured adjacent banks and hedges. They were not for defence but formed effective barriers for livestock (just like on farms today).

In the late 3rd century AD the layout of the settlement was altered — the trackway went out of use and some of the enclosures were repositioned. The reasons for this are unclear but may be to do with changes in ownership.

Phase 3-
late 3rd- 4th century AD



Revised layout of the settlement

Buildings

Several short lengths of gullies were identified which may be the only surviving evidence for timber buildings. Although roof tile and *opus signinum* (Roman concrete) were recovered, the quantities were small, suggesting that they had been imported from elsewhere. The most substantial possible evidence for a building was a sub-rectangular area of closely packed stones which may have been the foundation for a substantial building or structure. Its location in the vicinity of the cemetery suggests an association — it may represent a tomb or mausoleum-type structure.



Closely packed stone foundation

Quarry pits

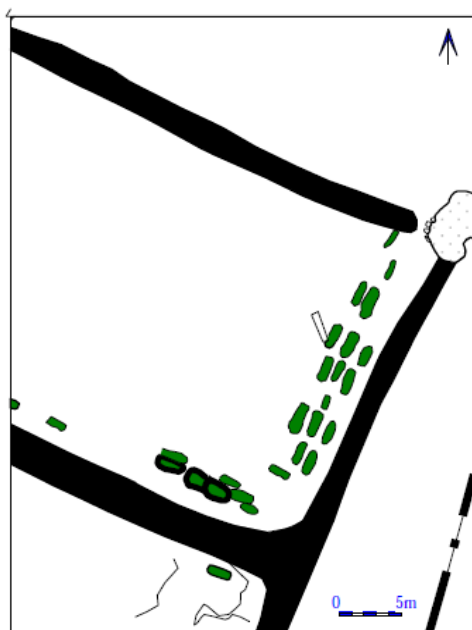
Several areas of deep pits were identified. These appear to have been repeatedly dug over a long period of time, probably to extract clay for use in buildings and structures. Some were later used as rubbish dumps and have produced large quantities of finds.



Investigation of an area of pitting requires the use of a mattock and shovel

Cemetery

The northern part of the settlement featured a cemetery containing 30 burials. The graves were positioned adjacent and parallel to the enclosure ditches suggesting that they were contemporary.



Plan of the cemetery (thick black lines = multiple burials)

The cemetery was in use during the late 3rd/early 4th centuries AD. In the majority of the graves the body had been laid out straight on its back with legs extended. There were, however, single examples of alternative body positions including crouched and prone (face-down).



Two graves under careful investigation with others visible in the background

Three main types of grave goods were found: pottery vessels, coins and animal remains.



Some of the pottery recovered from graves

Agriculture

Like the majority of the population of Roman Britain the occupants of the settlement were farmers. Charred grain recovered from ditches and pits on the site suggest that spelt wheat and hulled barley were the main cereals cultivated. The full range of crops grown will only be known when all the soil samples from the site have been processed.



Charred seeds may not look very interesting but they will reveal a lot about the economy of the settlement

A large quantity of animal bone (over 80kg) was recovered, dominated by cattle and sheep. The full range of bones are present including long bone, rib, vertebra, scapula, pelvis, phalanx, mandible, skull, tooth and horn core fragments. These suggest that both consumption and butchery was taking place on the site. The analysis of this material will provide more details on animal husbandry and butchery practices.



Several cattle skulls are part of the animal bone assemblage

Crafts

In terms of non-agricultural activities there was significant evidence from the settlement for *iron working*. More meagre evidence

for bronze, bone and leather working have been found.

Iron working is evidenced by the recovery of c. 10kg of metallurgical residues, indicating that smithing was being undertaken within the settlement. In addition to these residues, one deposit contained a relatively large number of strap and strip fragments of iron, perhaps remains of recycled items, or a smith's discarded stock. No *in-situ* furnaces survived, although several fragmentary hearth bottoms were recovered. It is hoped that the distribution of this material, especially the hammer-scale, may indicate precisely where within the settlement this activity was being undertaken.

Bronze working is indicated by small quantities of slag and the discovery of an unfinished brooch. The small size of the assemblage could suggest this activity was carried out for a limited time, perhaps by a peripatetic worker.

Finds: pottery

A large quantity of pottery (over 40kg) was recovered from the settlement. Most of it was locally made coarse ware (grey ware and shelly), much of it from the Nene Valley. Small quantities of regional imports were present, including fine wares from Hertfordshire and Oxfordshire, along with samian from Gaul (France).



Some of the pottery found during the investigations



One of the pottery vessels placed in a grave

Findings: metal

Metal objects from the settlement include: bronze coins, bracelets, brooches, rings and strap ends; an iron axe, chisel, hobnails, key, knife, nails and miscellaneous objects; and weights. While the coins and steelyard weights indicate a degree of commerce, there were relatively few items of personal adornment. Perhaps the most unusual object was the right foot of statuette. Many of the metal finds will require expert analysis and conservation before they reveal their full story.



Bronze foot and coins (spot the Roman ones!)

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The work on site has been completed to the satisfaction of the County Archaeological Advisor. It has, therefore, been handed back to David Wilson Homes who are likely to backfill it.

However, this is only the beginning of office-based study. All the records and finds need to be catalogued and computerised before they are analysed by different specialists in universities and museums across the country. Ultimately an article summarising the results will be submitted to the county journal, *Northamptonshire Archaeology*. With the landowner's permission the finds will be deposited with a local museum.

DAVID WILSON HOMES DEVELOPMENT

The new housing development has provided an opportunity to examine a 2000-year old Northamptonshire settlement. Very few such sites have been examined on this scale in this part of the county. When analysed and published it will provide a useful comparison with evidence from Roman sites elsewhere in the country.

Anyone moving into the new homes off Higham Road, Burton Latimer will do so in the knowledge that they are the first people to live on the site since the settlement was abandoned towards the end of the Roman period.

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