SHEPTON MALLET

Romano-Britons and Early Christians in Somerset

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Showerings Limited

Archaeology and Development

'Progress' and 'The Past' are, more often than not, in conflict; irreconcilable opposites. And yet, progress inevitably is built upon the past, without it we have no points of reference; we lose our context, both for the present and the future.

At Shepton Mallet, in the summer of 1990, past and present met dramatically in just such a conflict, one moreover, in which passions were aroused, controversy raged and losses were sustained on both sides. In this account no presentation of conflicts or controversies is offered; instead, we attempt to present the archaeological discoveries and their significance, and to show how past and present may to an extent be reconciled, the one serving the other.

Shepton Mallet is essentially still a quiet market town nestling beneath the Mendip Hills in the heart of Somerset, with a documented history extending back to the later Anglo-Saxon period. Its involvement in the cloth and woollen industries brought about major expansion and redevelopment in the 17th and 18th centuries, the effect of which is still visible in the townscape of today. More recently, brewing and the soft drinks industry has had a major impact, a tradition inherited and developed by Showerings Limited, now a division of Allied Lyons PLC.

Once again, the character and ambience of Shepton is changing, as developments which will result in both residential and industrial expansion, as well as new road networks, are in the pipeline. Development, whether of an historic town-centre or within the countryside, almost inevitably affects the past. The disappearance or modification of familiar structures, layouts or landscapes, with histories and origins often quite remote, may be obvious and sometimes dramatic. Of far less impact upon our sensibilities are the features and landscapes of the past which lie buried beneath the ground. Passive and invisible, these remains may suddenly be brought to our attention and thrust into the limelight at

the very moment of discovery and recognition, in processes which can simultaneously result in their destruction or fundamental disturbance.

Such circumstances provide both a challenge and an opportunity. Modern professional archaeology has developed most often in the circumstances of this challenge, through the recognition that so much of our invisible past is threatened by development of all kinds in the 20th century, and the need for an adequate response to this threat. More recently, efforts have been made to anticipate both the archaeological resources and the threats to them, and thus to co-ordinate more effective responses where the two coincide. As this process continues archaeologists have a vital role to play in preservation of the past, both through advice and the encouragement of sympathetic development, but also, where destruction is unavoidable, through the scientific removal and recording of threatened archaeological remains.

Discovery

The narrative of history is dependent upon sources and materials, whether these be documents or remains from the past. The 'reading' of these survivals will often be a matter for the trained interpreter, whose task must then be to present his sources and their meaning in such a way as to be comprehensible and accessible to society as a whole. Thus is the narrative of our past built up and a framework of history created, into which new discoveries and research will fit.

For Shepton Mallet, documentary sources can provide us with a well-rounded portrait, the Anglo-Saxon village (formerly a possession of Glastonbury Abbey) developing into a small market town in the Middle Ages; its later prosperity dependent upon involvement with the woollen and silk industries, and latterly brewing and soft drinks. This, in the barest outline, is the origin and explanation for the existence of the present day community, whose story is documented more fully by others. What this publication seeks to illuminate is a new chapter in that history, one moreover which until 1990 was barely recognised.

Little more than a mile to the south east of the town centre new industrial and residential development of former greenfield sites is beginning, and Shepton Mallet will experience a further phase of expansion and change. Fosse Lane, taking the route of the earlier Roman Fosse Way, has been the focus for the initial stages of this development; the scene of exciting new archaeological discoveries in the summer of 1990 and hence the writing of a new historical chapter.

Early in 1988, Mr. Steve Search, prospecting with a metal detector in fields to the west of Bullimore Farm, registered a strong signal on his equipment, indicating the presence of non-ferrous metal. A preliminary investigation revealed part of a large lead box and led to the involvement of the Somerset County Museum later that year. A subsequent excavation resulted in the recovery of an inhumation burial contained within a lead coffin, lying east-west and set within a rock-cut grave. In many respects this event was a catalyst for the discoveries that were to follow, although by no means the first clue to the existence of Roman Shepton Mallet. Metal detector finds of Roman coins, ornaments and fittings had been made in the fields alongside Fosse Lane for several years previously. A century earlier a substantial Roman building was destroyed during construction work for the railway here, and earlier still, Roman pottery kilns were encountered during construction of the Anglo-Bavarian Brewery in 1864, just to the west of the town centre.

These discoveries and hints of others similar, were already enough to raise the possiblity that something more than simply a Roman villa had been sited here beside the Fosse Way. By 1989, plans for an extensive development of the land extending south from the Frome road at Charlton to the disused railway embankment and beyond, were well advanced. Initially, no provision was made for a preliminary archaeological evaluation of the site as a whole. However, the lead coffin and other metal detector discoveries in its vicinity did at least prompt an assessment of the potential for archaeological remains to survive south of the railway embankment.

The Fosse Lane Archaeological Project

In February 1990 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit were commissioned by the then landowner, Mr. Dennis Dennet, to carry out that assessment. It was quickly established that not only was the lead coffin burial one of a group within a cemetery, but that further buildings and enclosures of Roman date covered an extensive area here, close to the Fosse Way and for several hundred metres back to the east. By this time development plans for the area by Showerings Ltd., involving the construction of a large warehouse, were well advanced. Negotiations between the company, Birmingham University and Somerset County Council followed, as a result of which archaeological rescue excavations were mounted in May of that year. Following the removal of topsoil from much of the area to be affected by development, it was quickly established that well preserved remains of a very extensive Romano-British settlement survived here. Recognition of this fact prompted not only further financial support from Showerings, and subsequently English Heritage, Somerset County Council and Mendip District Council, but modifications where possible in design specifications and the construction timetable, to maximise opportunities for preservation or recovery, and recording by archaeological means wherever remains could not be preserved.

The Fosse Lane archaeological project was ultimately enabled to continue for three months, during which time almost 20,000 square metres were examined, smaller selected areas excavated more thoroughly, and many thousands of coins, potsherds, iron, lead and bronze objects, artefacts of glass, stone and bone, and both human and vertebrate animal remains were recovered. This very considerable collection of finds and records removed from the site comprises an archive of primary source material, which must now be processed and interrogated for a full interpretation and appreciation of these discoveries and their significance. For some parts of the site these records are all that now survive; in themselves unique documents. Elsewhere, it has been possible to preserve much of what was originally uncovered by archaeological means, albeit buried beneath the service areas now surrounding the warehouse development. When the

warehouse been completed the outline of some Roman building remains will be depicted on the ground, echoing the survivals below.

Recovery

Archaeological excavation in most people's minds involves digging - the removal of soil to find objects and uncover remains - the remains of the past. Fundamentally, this is indeed the case, but the procedures and approaches can vary considerably, according to the particular problems and circumstances of different archaeological sites, while the excavation process itself is only half the story.

At Fosse Lane the archaeologists were faced with a very large area (over 20,000 sq.metres) affected by the development and a very short period of time to investigate it. Sometimes it is possible to gain some foreknowledge of a site through geophysical prospecting methods. These involve such techniques as measuring variations in the electrical resistance or magnetic fields below ground, and sometimes through ground-based radar, all of which can reflect the presence of buried archaeological features. These techniques have subsequently proved very successful on other parts of the Fosse Lane settlement but could not be applied in time on the Showerings' development site. From the investigation made in the Spring of 1990 the archaeological character and potential of the whole area was nevertheless fairly clear. Thus it was proposed to strip topsoil from virtually the entire area to be developed using a mechanical excavator, and to follow this up with a manual cleaning of the subsoil horizon beneath, simultaneously defining the outline of any archaeological features and remains at that level.

The implications of this approach were fourfold. First of all, the cleaning process itself, using trowels, hoes, brushes and shovels, brought to light many hundreds of objects - the debris of former human occupants and their activities. All this material had to be recorded and kept, ultimately to be cleaned, identified and analysed. At the moment of finding, the objects were bagged, given an individual find number

identification and their position on the site established with an electronic distance measurer (EDM), which uses an electro-magnetic beam to determine fixed positions to a very high degree of accuracy.

Secondly, the cleaning and removal of surplus soil revealed the remains of archaeological features comprising wall foundations, cobbled streets and courtyards, infilled pits, post-holes and ditches, hearths and ovens, or spreads of stone rubble and debris - representing the collapse of buildings or disposal of rubbish. Some of this evidence could be interpreted almost instantly, especially where such features lay directly upon or were cut into a natural subsoil level of clay or limestone bedrock. Elsewhere, the sequence of remains was more complex and superimposed. As this evidence came to light day by day a picture of the area as a whole began to emerge and thus the need for a permanent record of these remains. Accurately surveyed scale drawings of such evidence is the recording technique most commonly applied by archaeologists in these circumstances. A surveyed scale plan of the Fosse Lane site was indeed prepared, but for detailed information of the individual features and areas a full vertical colour photographic record has been made.

Thirdly, it was soon apparent that given the extent and complexity of remains in parts of the site, allied to the likelihood that some would be totally or partially destroyed in the development, more detailed excavation was needed.

A selective sampling strategy was therefore applied, involving particular groups of remains. Ideally, the intention was to take apart and record the elements representing as wide a spectrum of the different categories of archaeological feature or structure which could be recognised on the site as a whole. Thus, the remains of certain buildings, boundary walls and ditches, floors, yards or streets and such features as pits, post-holes, graves and less coherent spreads of rubbish or stone debris were all sampled by excavation. This process of dissection involved a complementary process of detailed recording through scale drawing, photograpy, written records and the recovery and association of finds. By this means was it possible to interpret more fully the evidence uncovered

initially in site clearance, to understand better the structure and function of certain features, and in places to gain an insight into sequences of events characterising individual parts of the site and, hence, the settlement as a whole; constructing a chronology based upon the record of associated finds.

Finally, in the application of this strategy the vulnerability of so many archaeological remains quickly becomes apparent. At Fosse Lane much of the evidence was preserved beneath a surprisingly thin cover of turf and topsoil, sometimes less than 30 centimetres thick. Despite this, and the effects of relatively shallow ploughing over parts of the site, the turf and topsoil acts as a protective blanket for archaeological remains, whose survival is largely dependent upon the maintenance of that stability. The processes of weathering and decay will be most active while remains are upstanding and exposed to the elements, these are much reduced once burial is achieved, only to be reactivated again once renewed exposure takes place.

Archaeological excavation, although for the best of reasons, is thus an agent of destruction, not only when structures and deposits are physically taken apart and removed in the excavation process, but also through exposure of the surviving remains to a new unstable environment. Archaeological evidence, in so many instances, is ephemeral in nature; subtle changes in colour or soil texture can be of great importance in the interpretation of arrangements and events. The vulnerability of such remains rapidly becomes apparent once a site is exposed - weeds begin to grow, rain and wind blurr outlines and start to break up deposits or surfaces, finds still buried may be subject to renewed disintegration and corrosion, while even such apparently robust features as walls or cobbled streets will begin to crumble. The process of archaeological excavation may reveal pristine surfaces or outlines but this itself is an ephemeral and somewhat misleading impression - merely a snapshot in time, which can and will rapidly change. Photography and other recording techniques attempt to capture the essence of these remains at the moment of discovery, but their physical survival and perpetuation is far more difficult. This, above all is why archaeological remains can so rarely be preserved in situ

as found, and why, where total destruction can be avoided, their reburial is normally to be favoured.

The physical remains of the past are nevertheless evocative and are sometimes best presented in controlled environments where the processes of decay and deterioration can more readily be kept at bay. A museum environment is of course the most appropriate solution for the portable finds removed from the site, and can sometimes be applied to the site remains themselves. Out of doors only the most robust of remains - effectively stone structures - can realistically be preserved exposed in situ, providing that steps are taken to ensure their continuing preservation through care and maintenance. At Fosse Lane in 1990 this was not an easily applicable option, but should favourable circumstances arise in the future such a presentation would be highly desirable.

Archaeology

The archaeological remains discovered and recorded at Fosse Lane in 1990 tell a story. We have very few written documents for the periods represented here and none relating to this site; our understanding and interpretations depend upon physical remains, their identity and associations, and of course the records made at the moment of excavation and recognition by the archaeologist. These remains and records are therefore in themselves documents; evidence by which new chapters in the history of Shepton Mallet and its region can be written.

Before the Romans

Contrary to appearances, the story does not begin here with a Roman settlement. Man's presence is in fact documented by much earlier remains, those of finely made flint tools - scrapers, knives and arrowheads, among others. Their presence testifies to activity here 5,000 years or more ago in the neolithic period (New Stone Age). At that time the lighter soils of limestone uplands were much favoured for settlement and exploitation;

the Mendip Hills and adjacent environments, such as the foothills around Shepton, were no exception.

Several hundred flint tools and worked pieces were recovered in the excavations, but so far it has not been possible to recognise any accompanying settlement remains. The neolithic settlers were probably the first people to manage and exploit the landscape to any significant degree, progressively clearing the virgin wildwood forest which had covered much of Britain from before 7,000 BC. Their pioneering fields and pasture clearances had probably created a largely open landscape in this area by the first millennium BC, woodland occupying mainly the valley bottoms and steeper slopes. Evidence for the presence of man on the Fosse Lane site in this immediately pre-Roman period was not recognised during the excavations but subsequent discoveries of iron age pottery on adjacent development sites in the area suggest the siting of contemporary farms or villages here in the centuries before the Roman conquest. These communities may have owed a political allegiance to local strongholds such as Maesbury, nearby on the Mendip Hills, and it is surely from this background that we must trace most of the Roman inhabitants of Shepton.

Roman Conquest and Settlement

The earliest feature of the Roman period here is the Fosse Way, its course now followed closely by Fosse Lane. This great road, founded early in the conquest of Britain by Rome, eventually linked Exeter and South West England with Lincoln and the North East, via such towns as Bath, Cirencester and Leicester. This routeway was surely the *raison d'etre* for Roman Shepton, and a principal factor in its location. At its inception, in the middle of the 1st century AD, the Fosse Way will have functioned as a military supply road. Forts are suspected at Ilchester to the south and Bath to the north. Shepton Mallet, almost midway between them, would be a convenient location for another, a suggestion supported by the early pottery kilns found beneath the Anglo Bavarian Brewery site in the town. Whether a fort of the conquest period lay close to those potteries or was sited on the Fosse Way nearer to the present excavations, we cannot yet

say. No remains or finds of a military character are known from this site but the possiblity that Roman Shepton has its origins in association with a nearby military garrison must be suspected.

The other origin for this settlement must of course be sought in the native British population, hints of whose local presence has come from other sites in the vicinity, and was mentioned previously. The Romanisation of a local community must be envisaged as the basis for the settlement and its population, rather than any significant element originating from elsewhere in the Empire. Whether or not Maesbury was occupied at the Conquest, its presence is surely indicative of a local centre of native population and political power, and could thus in a sense be a forerunner to the Roman settlement.

We may never be able to untangle the full sequence of Roman settlement remains and the site's development over three hundred years or more of existence. One reason for this was the nature of the excavations. We have already seen that the archaeologist's efforts were concentrated upon recording as large an area in plan as possible; areas likely to be buried rather than destroyed by the development were not explored further, and an extensive zone fronting the original Fosse Way road frontage to the west was not examined at all. The protection of remains in this zone (except where destroyed by a former railway cutting) by landscaping, forestalled any requirement for excavation here. Conversely, this very protection has rather limited the scope of our understanding of the Roman settlement. There are hints from service trench excavations and the site evaluation carried out in the Spring of 1990 that concentrations of building remains may survive close to the Roman road frontage. While their preservation is to be applauded it is here that the clearest evidence for the full history and sequence of the settlement is likely to be found.

* When did the settlement begin?
* What did it look like?
* Who lived here and why?
* How and when did it end?

These are the sort of questions to be asked of the remains uncovered, the finds from the site and what they can tell us. By reviewing briefly these discoveries and their documentation we will attempt to answer these specific questions and provide a perspective for the site as a whole.

We have already considered some options for the origin of a Roman settlement here at Shepton Mallet, but what is the evidence?

Some of the earliest datable objects found were bronze brooches, worn as cloak and dress fastenings. Many of these were made in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, although some will have been in use for many years afterwards before their loss. Coins of 1st and 2nd century issue were also recoverd, although once again their heavily worn state indicates a long period of use.

Pottery was collected in abundance from the site, originating from many sources. Some of the most closely datable types were made in Gaul (central and southern France) during the 1st and 2nd centuries. Samian pottery can often be closely dated from its style and decoration, but once again such fine pottery may have continued in use for many years after manufacture and distribution. The same strictures apply to wine amphora, mainly imported into Britain during the 2nd century. Most of these derive from Spain or North Africa and some of the examples found at Shepton Mallet had been extensively repaired with lead rivets and were sometimes re-used as the bases for hearths. The locally manufactured pottery, known more widely as Shepton Mallet Ware from study of material recovered at the Anglo Bavarian Brewery kilns, is also early in style of manufacture. Its presence at Fosse Lane is yet another indicator of late 1st and 2nd century activity.

Together, all these pieces of evidence strengthen the case for arguing that the Fosse Lane settlement really began to develop quite early in the 2nd century AD. Without the evidence from the road frontage it is difficult to be more specific, but some sequences excavated further back, on the site of the new warehouse, support this hypothesis.

The best dated sequence of events for the whole site so far was recorded in the excavation of a stone building towards the north-east corner of the site (Building VII). The foundations and mortared lower courses of this structure defined a rectangular building approximately 15 x 8m in area. This had interrupted an earlier drystone east-west wall alignment, and at one point the walls cut into a pit containing early 2nd-century pottery. Building VII had a fairly long history, involving subsequent modification into a three-roomed structure and the addition of what may have been a veranda or corridor along its west side. Of the two extra rooms created by later partitions to the south, one had evidently functioned as a store room containing very large pottery storage vessels - one a re-used wine amphora. The second room, containing the remains of hearths, may have been a kitchen.

Around the building were cobbled yards and perhaps a covered passageway along the south side, which linked the building to a linear, drystone-wall property boundary, perhaps a replacement for that earlier wall cut through by the building. The end of Building VII must have been an event of some drama. The southern end was extensively burnt, as testified by the timbers of door sills reduced to charcoal, scorching of the internal stone walls, splashes of molten lead from the roof and scorched and shattered pottery vessels caught in the blaze - an accident in the kitchen, perhaps! Whatever the cause of this fire, its result was the collapse or demolition of the building and its levelling, an act which preserved something of the floors and contents beneath.

Building VII appears to have been occupied in the later 2nd century and may have been destroyed early in the 3rd century. Elsewhere on the site no other datable sequence was so thoroughly excavated, but the boundary walls to fields or enclosures of other types, along with ditches and some streets, seem to have been part of the earliest phases that we can recognise on the site.

What was the settlement like?

Archaeological excavation involves the uncovering of remains - the surviving remnants of buildings and structures, objects and sometimes people. Most often these remains are little more than foundations - all that is left at ground level, or what lies beneath it. To understand the shape and outlines of what remains we need scale plans and photographs. But to understand the meaning of these remains and their images requires interpretation and imagination in attempts to flesh the dry bones and surviving fragments of an archaeological site.

One of the most valuable aspects of the excavation at Fosse Lane was its extent. The exposure of such a large area at once enabled the archaeologists to see many different elements of the Roman settlement together, their character and arrangement, and thus suggest how at least a large part of it may have looked in its heyday. We know that the site was occupied for over 300 years and that in this time it changed, as buildings were put up or went out of use, streets and boundaries were moved, some areas developed or stagnated - in much the same ways that we see such changes occurring today. It is difficult to provide a snapshot of any one period, partly because so much still remains unexcavated on the site, and the full sequence of events was not fully distentangled in most areas.

To paint a picture of the site at its fullest extent we should probably go to the beginning of the 4th century, when many of the buildings excavated were in existence and apparently flourishing. As is to be expected however, there must have been many features surviving from earlier times - as, once again we would expect to see in most modern towns and villages.

The heart of the settlement - indeed its lifeline - was the Fosse Way. Nowhere did excavation touch this road, although observation of nearby contractors' service trenches revealed over one metre of cobbles and make-up in places, testifying to a long history of use and refurbishment. The settlement which developed east of the road, and as revealed in the excavations, clearly developed with reference to it. Streets, buildings and enclosures, though not always very regular in their layouts and

alignment, betray a consciousness of the road and its influence just to the west. The underlying theme of the settlement's layout is a series of enclosures, presumably fronting onto the Fosse Way, which extend back eastwards with some sub-divisions, to include various structures and zones of activity.

Boundary arrangements and the definition and use of a series of enclosures were most fully explored in the southern half of the site. Small fields or paddocks were defined here originally by ditches, and possibly hedges, fairly early in the life of the settlement. Others were defind by drystone walls, which in some instances were set into earlier ditches which had become infilled. Also at an early stage, two cobbled streets, presumably linking westwards with the Fosse Way, merged as one to continue in a north easterly direction beyond the limits of the site; bounded in places by adjacent enclosure walls or ditches. The functions of these enclosures and the activities carried out within them are not always easy to discern. Some may relate to properties fronting the Fosse Way, but others may belong to separate establishments behind, served by the side streets. Within the eastern half of the enclosure defined by the street intersection, for example, were cobbled yards and floors, traces of buildings - some perhaps originally of timber, a well, hearths and ovens, and a small group of inhumation burials. This may well have been the backyard of a property with buildings and dwellings originally facing onto the Fosse Way road frontage, although in this instance destroyed by the 19th-century railway cutting.

To the south and east of the side streets further enclosures, one of which contained a cemetery of suspected Christian burials, may belong to separate properties, the main buildings of which lie further east. One of these lay just within the excavation (Building I), its foundations partly ploughed away to the south. This building was not erected before the 3rd century and possibly not until the 4th, when it comprised two large rooms and a smaller rectangular apse to the south. A porch or entrance corridor at the north west corner had encroached upon the earlier street and a boundary wall here. A large oven had subsequently been inserted into the largest room to the north. Just to the west a small cemetery of

inhumations in rock-cut graves, including one in a lead coffin and another in a stone sarcophagus within the remains of a mausoleum, are arguably linked with Building I.

In the northern half of the site more buildings were encountered, one of which (Building VII) was almost completely excavated (as we have seen) and proven to originate sometime in the 2nd century. A series of roughly parallel stone walls running back from the Fosse Way here suggest the property divisions of separate establishments. Once again, the road frontages were not investigated, although building remains are known to survive here, now buried beneath modern landscaping. Following the fire and subsequent demolition of Building VII (mentioned previously), a substantial ditch was cut E-W across the site destroying the northern end of that building. This may have been to assist the drainage of water eastwards, but it had become completely blocked with silt by the 4th century. A small rectangular building (Building VIII) was sited partly above this infilled ditch and contained a large oven; possibly this was a smithy.

Another enclosure further to the north may originally have been separated from that to the south by a cobbled street, before new buildings made this obsolete. Principal among these was a range of rooms around an aisled hall (Building IX). Only the latest levels were excavated here, the remainder preserved now beneath a protective covering of sand and matting. This building, of some architectural distinction, was evidently in use well into the 4th century, although its origins are less certain. It was presumably a dwelling house, with a corridor or foyer to the north (the main entrance) giving access to an aisled hall. A series of four rooms behind may have been a kitchen, store rooms or living rooms, above which was probably a second storey of rooms.

The function of a second building to the east with rounded corners (Building X) is uncertain, although a large barn, possibly of half timbered construction, is suggested. This building seems to pre-date its more sophisticated neighbour to the west, Building IX possibly superceding Building X. Whether these buildings were subsidiary to Fosse Way frontage

establishments cannot be known without further excavations, but it is interesting to observe that all the recorded buildings well to the rear of the main road are orientated approximately N-S. Although reliable information is lacking, building orientation on the road frontage is more likely to be E-W, in conformity with property boundary layouts.

Unlike larger towns in Roman Britain, particularly those with some administrative status, there is no clear impression of regular planning in the settlement, as for example through the imposition of a street grid or a defensive perimeter. There was evidently plenty of space for development and the layout of buildings and ancillary activities or enclosures, while burials, normally prohibited within Roman towns, could be located more freely - presumably in relation to individual properties. No defences, in the form of a wall or boundary bank and ditch, are known or suspected for the settlement as a whole. Its full extent has still to be determined, although the valley of the River Sheppey suggests a natural boundary to the north, while the vicinity of Cannards Grave may be its southern limit. Either side of Fosse Lane between these extremities is likely to be the main focus of settlement, concentrating towards that frontage. Even here the roadside is unlikely to have been closely built up, and as these excavations prove, buildings and other activities extended well back from the Fosse Way, at least to the east. The outer limits of the township east and west are probably not sharply defined, running out into a contemporary agricultural landscape of enclosed fields and more open pasture.

Who lived here and why?

Our access, back over 1,500 years or more to the townspeople of Roman Shepton Mallet, is through the discarded fragments of their lives - their buildings, utensils, ornaments, food remains, and sometimes even the remains of the people themselves. We have little or no insights into their thoughts and feelings, day to day concerns, personal histories and fortunes, their names, or even the name of their town; although by analogy we can sometimes approach or guess at such concepts. Documents are

virtually non-existent and even the written word, as inscriptions or graffitti, is a rarity in this period. To reconstruct the past, its environment and its people in Roman Britain, and thus in this settlement, we are heavily dependent upon durable materials which have survived the ravages of time and decay. Organic remains, with the exception of bone and carbonised material, have disappeared completely, while even many of the more durable remains are subject to corrosion and a progressive disintegration. Fortunately, the limestone soils here are more benign than more acidic environments to preservation, and much can be surmised or reconstructed on the basis of what does survive, and, once again, by analogy with contemporary information more fully recorded elsewhere or with reference to parallels in other, better documented cultures - even up to our own times.

The inhabitants of this township, brought together within a social, political and economic system, created by, and dependent upon the Roman Empire, were essentially native British people. A handful of officials, craftsmen, professional people or entrepreneurs may have come from outside the province, but the indigenous inhabitants were encouraged and integrated into the Roman imperial system, rapidly assuming the veneer of its culture, religions, economy and social organisation, while still retaining something of their own individuality. In many respects this policy of integration and partnership between Rome and her provinces was the secret of the success of the Empire as a system for so long. Roman Sheptonians were the direct descendants of the iron age and earlier prehistoric peoples of Britain, and they must, in many instances, be our own ancestors.

Pottery is ubiquitous on virtually every Roman site in Britain, and Shepton is no exception. Some varieties were made quite locally even from quite early on - as the kilns found beneath the Anglo Bavarian Brewery building in the modern town testify. Local pottery manufacture probably continued elsewhere for much longer, supplying coarse table, cooking and storage wares to the settlement and surrounding farms and villages. From further afield came products of industries based in south Dorset, the New Forest, the Thames Valley or Gloucestershire; while foreign imports included wine amphorae from Spain and North Africa and Samian from France.

The other, most obvious import was coinage, by which the imperial economy functioned; the supply fluctuating over the centuries and reaching Shepton from mints in the eastern Mediterranean, south eastern Europe, Italy, and, closer to home, from France, the Rhineland and sometimes London. Many hundreds of bronze coins have already been found here, along with a few dozen silver issues, dating from the late 1st to the end of the 4th century.

The products and materials of more locally based trade, industry and commerce are only visible in the archaeological record when their more durable remains survive. We may perceive the remains of animal species eaten as food, traded or kept for their products, but much more rarely does their food survive or the crops harvested as food or for processing by man. Similarly, the survival of man's artefacts of stone, ceramic, glass or metal belie a whole range of wooden, leather, cloth or basketware artefacts, the existence of which can usually only be inferred.

Metal was utilised and manufactured often within the settlement itself. The discovery of a lead ingot or 'pig', almost certainly from the Mendip lead and silver mines, suggests its reworking here into such items as lead pipes, roof flashing, weights and counters, vessels (including coffins) and, in combination with other metals such as tin for pewter. Copper alloy - frequently bronze - was used for many small things. Jewellery and personal ornaments include brooches for clothes fastening, rings, bracelets, amulets, and toilet items such as tweezers, ear scoops, nail cleaners and pins. An endless variety of small tools, fittings and furnishings were made of bronze, including such things as small awls, chisels and punches, keys and locks, writing styli, spoons, needles, plaques, bindings and terminals for furniture or containers, belt buckles and strap ends, and more rarely, vessels or figurines. Some of these objects were occasionally produced in such materials as bone, jet or even glass.

Iron was employed even more readily than lead or copper alloy, normally for more robust and larger-sized artefacts. The range of ironwork from the site includes tools such as knives, wedges, chisels, axes, shears and awls,

nails, bolts and ring pins in many shapes and sizes, and a variety of bindings, furnishings, harnesses and other fittings, chain, and smaller implements including styli, needles and even brooches. Small quantities of iron ore and slag have been found, as well as hearths and ovens, some of which could signify the smelting of metals such as lead, tin or copper, and perhaps the smithing of iron. In a settlement the size of Shepton many of the metal artefacts will have been fashioned on the site.

Stone, in the form of the local lias limestone, is native to the site, and was probably quarried nearby. Its use as a building, paving and foundation material, with or without mortar, testifies to a local building industry, which also imported sandstone for roofing slate from north Somerset, lias roof slate from near Ilchester, and both Doulting and Ham Hill stone for building details. The timber and clay components in buildings are more difficult to quantify without surviving remains but are easily underestimated. Stone was also brought in occasionally for items such as hones, mortars and millstones. Clay appears not to have been used locally for such building materials as brick, tile or flues, possibly because local stone supplies were so plentiful and varied.

Of the people themselves, we have remains from three small cemeteries, located in different parts of the site and possibly representing different social or familial groups. Until these remains are studied in detail we cannot analyse or quantify the ages, sexes, diseases or even status of these represntatives. Many of those excavated were buried in wooden coffins (iron nails only surviving) set into rock cut graves, but rarely accompanied by any grave goods which have survived. The largest cemetery of 17 inhumations, aligned east-west and set within a ditched enclosure, included one lead coffin and another burial accompanied by a silver amulet decorated with a Christian chi-rho representation. This last object is one of the most positive identifications ever made in Roman Britain of a Christian burial - possibly in this instance of a priest - and hints strongly at the presence of a small Christian community here by the 4th century. Other burials from the site appear to be of pagans; north-south burial orientation, prone burial, occasional decapitations and objects such as nailed shoes placed in graves, support this identification.

The status of these individuals is quite unknown to us, as is their number relative to the total population of the settlement at any one time. Most of the burials seem to be of the 4th century or later. The inhabitants of Roman Shepton will have come together and flourished here over a period of 300 years or more within a social and economic system common to the civil province of Britain, and indeed throughout the Roman Empire. This was sustained by a variety of interactive factors and institutions, not all of which are apparent to us now as they apply to this site. A flourishing and populous local economy of relative sophistication must have sustained the settlement and its functions as a local marketing and distribution centre served by the Fosse Way. Artisans and farmers, tradesmen and minor officials, families, slaves and free men will have coexisted here, their contacts and horizons broadened from time to time by the passage of traders, officials and travellers up and down the main road.

Shepton Mallet will have functioned primarily as a local supply and exchange centre for a relatively small hinterland, perhaps 8-10 miles around, whose principal theme was agriculture and its produce. Local mining and quarrying may have played some role, and small-scale manufacturing or crafts supplied certain local needs as for tools, utensils, building materials, jewellery, clothing etc., but agricultural production and marketing of both crops and livestock and their products will have dominated the economy. We are relatively ignorant of Shepton's immediate hinterland in the Roman period. Other minor roads will have served surrounding farms and hamlets, the sites of which are sometimes hinted at by surface finds or chance discoveries. Further afield, the regional centre of government was at Ilchester, a walled town over 15 miles to the south west along the Fosse Way. No wealthy villas are known in the immediate vicinity and the landowning aristocracy which they represent are unlikely ever to have lived within a settlement such as Shepton. The next known settlements of any comparable size are at Charterhouse - a mining township on Mendip, and the very similar roadside settlement at Camerton 10 miles or so up the Fosse Way towards Bath. To the south east, the hilltop temple site on Lamyatt Beacon also falls within Shepton's orbit.

The End of Roman Shepton Mallet

The collapse of the Roman imperial system in Britain from the end of the 4th century was the consequence of a political severance which fatally undermined an already weakened social and economic system. Over the next few decades the old system probably devolved fairly rapidly from a unity and status within the Empire to a group of semi-independent states and proto-kingdoms run by local landowning aristocracies, such as the group who probably re-fortified South Cadbury. This, and the disappearance of a central market economy, as much as external military pressure from Anglo-Saxon or other raiders, spelled the end of towns as meaningful and functioning institutions; a fate shared by Shepton Mallet.

Famine, disease and migration may have played supporting roles, but the whole fabric and structure of a Romanised society seems to have disintegrated by about the middle of the 5th century. Outside the areas of Anglo-Saxon settlement to the east, the paucity of datable material remains surviving to document this period makes the term 'Dark Ages' particularly appropriate in much of western Britain. At Shepton there are coins and pottery which suggest that life continued to the very end of the 4th century and possibly beyond. Here and there traces of timber structures cut into the latest levels of Roman buildings may signify a post-Roman continuity of occupation for a time, though not necessarily in any form recognisable as a town, and the dating for such structures is in any case uncertain. Perhaps the latest datable object is the Christian silver amulet cross from the cemetry, although even this need not have been made much after 400 AD. A small 5th-century Christian community may indeed have been the last inhabitants of the site, refurbishing some of the stone structures or building anew in timber what may by now have been little more than a hamlet.

There is no evidence of a violent end to any parts of the settlement; far more likely is a gradual collapse and decay, hastened by deliberate robbing of the ruins for raw materials over the years. Equally, we cannot say whether any part of the site continued to be occupied after the 5th century, although at present this seems unlikely.

The Roman settlement at Shepton thus appears to have vanished without trace, erased through time and decay, until all memory of its site or very existence has been lost; only the undeviating line of the Fosse Way persisting down through the centuries. With hindsight however, might there not be some clues to the former existence of this place through survivals into more recent times?

One such may be the modern parish boundary of Shepton Mallet, crossing the Fosse Way to the north and south of the Roman settlement site to encompass it. This is in some contrast to other parishes in the locality which tend to respect the road as one of their boundaries. Could not Shepton Mallet's medieval parish reflect something of an earlier Romano-British estate or land holding based upon the Roman settlement and its immediate holdings?

Another clue may reside in Doulting and its suspected status as an early minster church in the newly christianised Anglo Saxon kingdom of Wessex. If so, was this some memory or recognition of an existing Christian community here - descendants perhaps of an earlier body? Documentary research may illuminate these questions further, in the meantime the discoveries and recovery of so much archaeological information provides a rich store of data for continuing research and analysis.

A new chapter in the history of Shepton Mallet and its inhabitants, past and present, has been sketched out. As work on these discoveries proceeds and further investigations continue on adjacent parts of the settlement, so this small town will take its place within the historical geography of Roman Britain.