



# The Experience of ‘Small Towns’: Utter Devastation, Slow Fading or Business as Usual

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## ABSTRACT

*‘Small towns’ were the most numerous urban settlements in Roman Britain and the type most familiar to the population, where the social networks of the majority were played out. It is these places, not the administrative centres that provide the true urban history of the provinces. Their fate after A.D. 400 is rarely considered. The generally accepted picture is one of unremitting fourth-century decline followed by inevitable abandonment. This paper examines whether this view is correct and provides a review of the evidence for abandonment. By focusing on Baldock (Herts.), where there is a sequence extending into the fifth century, a model will be developed against which to compare other sites.*

## INTRODUCTION

Romano-British ‘small towns’ are the lesser cousins of the really exciting *coloniae* and *civitas* capitals, generally lacking the spectacular — and occasionally well-preserved — monuments that have often excited the imagination of the public (FIG. 1). By contrast, their remains are frequently invisible and poorly appreciated by non-archaeologists; most have no town walls or large public buildings with stone foundations that can be uncovered, conserved and displayed. Many of them lie beneath farmland or later urban growth, leaving no clues to their former existence; equally, the former existence of many was forgotten during the early medieval period and they consequently failed to attract the folklore that preserved the memory of more visible places.

However, they formed the most numerous class of urban settlement in Britain, if, that is, we are even entitled to regard them as a single class. Indeed, their diversity of form (and doubtless function) is probably their one single defining characteristic. They are the ‘other urban places’, defined by what they are not: they are not *coloniae*, *municipia*, or *civitas* capitals and from what little we understand of imperial urban classification, they were all lumped together by contemporaries as *vici*. In the only overview of ‘small towns’ so far attempted, Burnham and Wachter (1990, 5) recognised three specialised classes: industrial, religious and administrative. Even within these broad groups, there are few shared characteristics. Some, like Ircchester (Burnham and Wachter 1990, 142f.), seem to have been walled enclosures containing only scattered buildings; others, like Charterhouse-on-Mendip (ibid., 208f.), were large nucleated settlements; some, like Bath (ibid., 165ff.), were basically cult centres; others, like Shepton Mallet (Leach and Evans 2001, 315–16), were little more than straggling roadside settlements with no recognisable focus.

Yet behind the sheer diversity of form, we must recognise that they will have been the urban type with which most provincials were familiar. They provided local market services, by which local producers could exchange their goods for specialist-made products and for more exotic imports, make enough money to pay their taxes and exchange ideas with their peers. They were where the social networks of perhaps the majority of the Romano-British population were played out, reinforced and extended. Their inhabitants were socially diverse and included artisans, farmers, priests, slaves, bureaucrats and wealthy élites.

Their development and flourishing provide evidence for the changes wrought by the incorporation of Britain into the Roman Empire. Unlike the chartered towns, though, they were not designed to follow traditions of town-planning imported from the Mediterranean world or Gaul,

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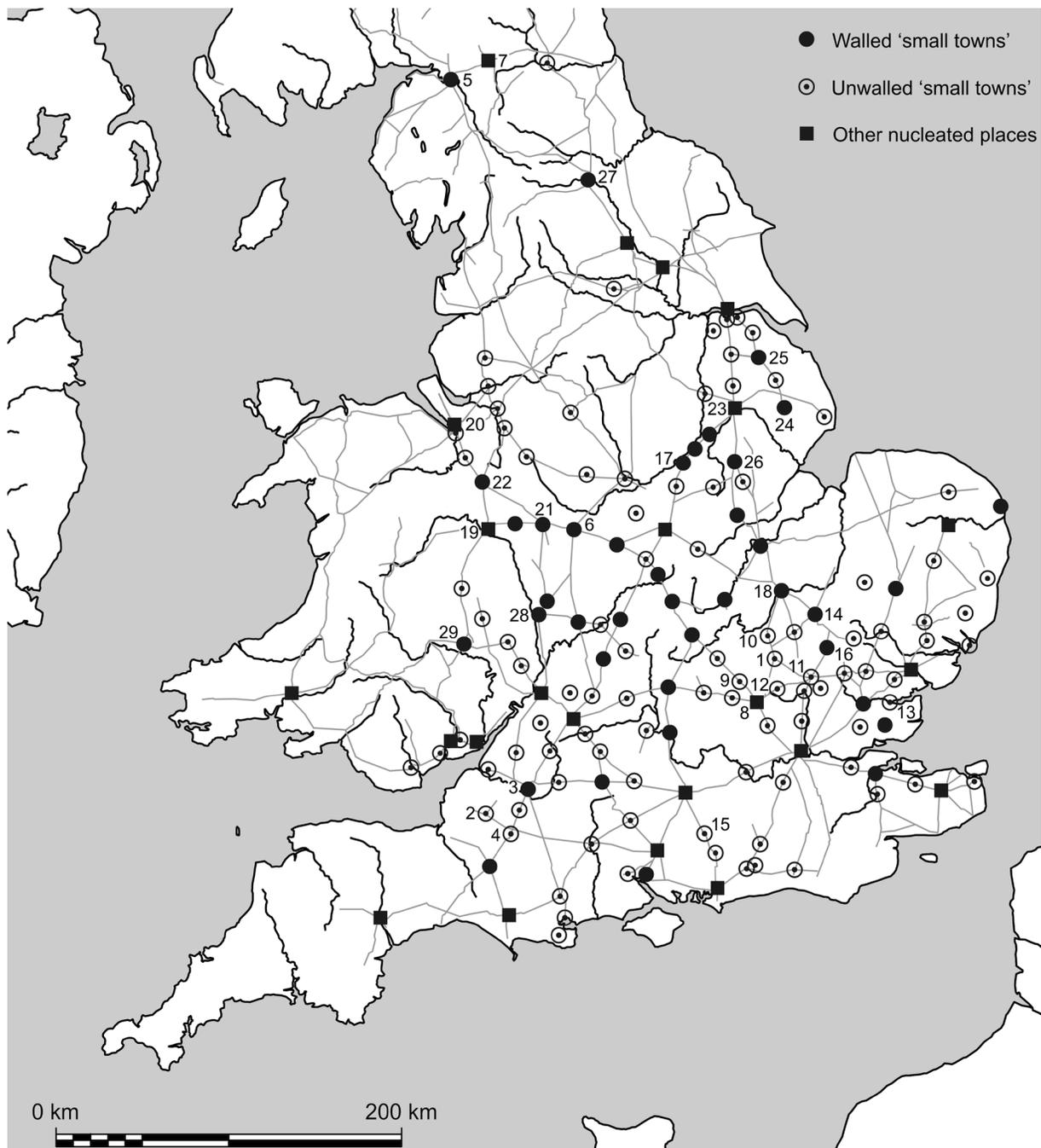


FIG. 1. 'Small towns' in Britain.

Key: Places mentioned in the text. 1. Baldock; 2. Charterhouse-on-Mendip; 3. Bath; 4. Shepton Mallet; 5. Carlisle; 6. Wall-by-Lichfield; 7. Birdoswald; 8. Verulamium; 9. Dunstable; 10. Sandy; 11. Braughing; 12. Welwyn; 13. Heybridge/Maldon; 14. Cambridge; 15. Neatham; 16. Great Chesterford; 17. Margidunum; 18. Godmanchester; 19. Wroxeter; 20. Chester; 21. Penkrige; 22. Whitchurch; 23. Lincoln; 24. Horncastle; 25. Caistor; 26. Ancaster; 27. Catterick; 28. Worcester; 29. Kenchester

with grids of streets, important administrative buildings at the centre and, eventually, a circuit of walls. Instead, they seem to have grown organically, without reference to these classical models or even to prior indigenous forms; they were a local response to changed economic circumstances and some, at least, grew from Late Iron Age precursors. It is these towns, not the administrative centres that provide the true urban history of Roman Britain.

Their fate after A.D. 400 must be a key to understanding the changes that overwhelmed the province at the end of Imperial rule. Although the detailed history of the early fifth century

remains (and is likely to remain) a subject for debate, it is clear that the changes were marked initially by political turmoil, with the appointment by the army in short succession of three usurpers (one briefly successful), economic disaster, with the interruption of coin supplies and the complete collapse of manufacturing industries, and the resulting social upheaval, with a probable return to subsistence modes of production (summarised in Halsall 2013, 11ff.). The role of Germanic settlers, once regarded as crucial to the overthrow of the Roman system, is no longer as clear-cut as it once seemed and it is evident that there was a gap of at least several decades between the end of Roman rule and the first wave of settlers.

A scan of the literature for 'small towns' reveals a distinct lack of consideration of their fate. There seems to be an unstated assumption that they cannot have survived the end of Imperial administration; the generally accepted picture seems to be one of unremitting fourth-century decline followed by inevitable abandonment around A.D. 400 (Esmonde Cleary 1989, 132; Burnham and Wachter 1990, 314ff.). This viewpoint matches well that of late Roman decline across the province, with some arguing that there was little, if anything, left of Roman culture by the end of the fourth century (e.g. Faulkner, this volume). Indeed, the late Roman period is often poorly represented in terms of finds and features on many sites.

The aim of this paper is to examine whether this commonly held view of the fate of 'small towns' is correct and to provide a critical review of the evidence for abandonment. Is the lack of late Roman stratigraphy a true reflection of the nature of the towns' histories? Is it because their post-Roman histories are generally periods of evidently complete abandonment? Does their fate match that of the larger towns and cities? Is it because we do not yet know how to deal with the evidence?

The initial focus will be on the 'small town' of Baldock (Herts.), where a truly remarkable sequence extending into the fifth century and beyond was first recognised in the early 1980s. It will be used as a model against which to compare other sites, where comparable sequences have generally not been reported. If Baldock is atypical of the sub-Roman histories of 'small towns', why and how did it survive the end of Imperial control when other places apparently did not? If it is typical, why has the archaeological evidence not been found or recognised for what it is in other places? I will conclude by offering both models for the way in which 'small towns' experienced the fifth-century transformation of Roman Britain and suggestions of avenues for further archaeological research.

In their brief overview of the final evidence from 'small towns', Burnham and Wachter (1990, 318) posit a pattern that sees the replacement of Romano-British cultural forms — including urban settlement — by Germanic cultural forms in the South and East, with potential continuity in the North and West. Noting that there are a few places where activity into the fifth century can be demonstrated on stratigraphic grounds, they point out that some towns, such as Water Newton, have yielded little evidence for the expected Germanic material, almost as if this is puzzling. This is a clear case of prejudging the question: if there is no Germanic material in what are clearly fifth-century contexts, this absence suggests something about the character of the activity that produced the stratigraphy.

### VERY LATE SEQUENCES IN 'SMALL TOWNS'

As already noted, late Roman and sub-Roman stratigraphy in 'small towns' is difficult to recognise, which leads inevitably to the interpretation that occupation ceased in the decades around A.D. 400, if not earlier. Of the well-known sites, Bath has definite post-Roman activity in the form of rubble platforms that are well dated to the sixth century (Pearce 2004, 126), while the sequence at Carlisle extends perhaps into the seventh century (McCarthy 2002, 134–6). There appears to be fifth-century activity at Shepton Mallett (Leach and Evans 2001, 97) and it can also be argued in several other places on the basis of stray finds (e.g. *Letocetum*, Wall-by-Lichfield). These are exceptions that stand out against the generally accepted pattern of early fifth-century collapse and abandonment and it is noticeable that all are in the west of Britain, in areas where early Germanic material is rarely found.

The lack of evidence for late sequences on the majority of sites is typically thought to be a measure of the rapid decline of 'small towns' in the turbulent years of the early fifth century. According to this

model, the undoubted economic collapse removed their *raison d'être*: with the failure of a market economy driven in part through coin use predicated on a military supply economy funded through direct taxation, their economic basis was removed at a stroke. To compound matters, urban life became unsustainable without the infrastructure on which it had always depended: the tax system, disposable wealth and inter-regional trade. The ensuing chaos in the countryside, where there is also a lack of evidence for continuity of production after A.D. 400, cut off food supplies to urban populations, who had to return to subsistence farming simply to stay alive.

This picture of widespread urban abandonment begs an obvious question: where did everyone go? If we postulate a catastrophic drop in population, brought about by declining fertility, smaller families and an increased death rate, we ought to find evidence for increasing numbers of burials at the start of that decline. Although large fourth-century cemeteries are known, principally associated with the walled *civitas* capitals and other large towns, they are considerably outnumbered by second-century cemeteries. If, on the other hand, we suggest outward migration from the towns, there should be a resulting increase in the rural populations, but the evidence from the countryside is usually taken to demonstrate a similar level of depopulation. If, as a last resort, we envisage massive emigration from Britain to Brittany, we face the logistical problems of transporting large numbers of possibly destitute urbanites across the Channel similar to those that beset the idea of mass Germanic migrations across the North Sea. No, there is clearly something being missed in the conventional model.

### BALDOCK: A PLACE APART?

In a number of ways, the 'small town' of Baldock (Herts.) does not conform to many of the norms of Romano-British culture. Located in a bowl at the north-eastern extremity of the Chilterns, it has been well explored (the total area of the settlement at its maximum extent was around 80 ha, of which about 7 ha have been excavated and 25 ha have been subject to geophysical survey) but hitherto poorly published. However, publication of the results of excavations since 1978 has now begun (Burleigh and Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2010) and is intended to continue until data from all the sites investigated up to 1994 have been made available. Best known for the unexpected number of cemeteries discovered in the town — to date, 22 have been investigated in whole or in part — it is only now being recognised as a town of some wealth and pretension. Nevertheless, its wealthy hinterland, which includes a number of very large villa complexes and two of only three known temple treasure hoards in Britain, its very early development in the first half of the first century B.C. and its range of burials make it a place almost without parallels.

Excavations by Burleigh on Clothall Common to the north-east of the town during the 1980s revealed unexpected sub-Roman sequences (Burleigh and Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2010, 27–8; Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2010, 134ff.). The initial discoveries were datable on stratigraphic grounds, consisting of features cut through others that could be no earlier than the end of the fourth century, supplemented by the unique survivals of stratigraphy in dolines (hollows in the chalk bedrock created by periglacial action). Associated with these features were several ceramic fabrics not attested in earlier deposits; the recognition that they were sub-Roman then permitted other features without these stratigraphic associations to be dated to the fifth century or later. Before these discoveries, Baldock was not known to have good late Roman sequences. Indeed, Stead's work from 1968 to 1972 appeared to suggest that the town had entered a terminal decline in the later fourth century and that by A.D. 400, it had been abandoned (Stead and Rigby 1986, 87).

### THE SEQUENCE

There are two principal locations in the 1980s excavations where sub-Roman sequences were identified: at California (BAL-1) and at Royston Road (BAL-15) (FIG. 2). In the former, a doline containing a lengthy stratigraphic sequence had been protected from the post-Roman ploughing that had devastated almost all the areas that Stead had investigated and remains one of the few locations where Roman surfaces have survived. Features dated to the late fourth century were sealed by one of the fills that accumulated in it through natural erosion. This horizon was cut by

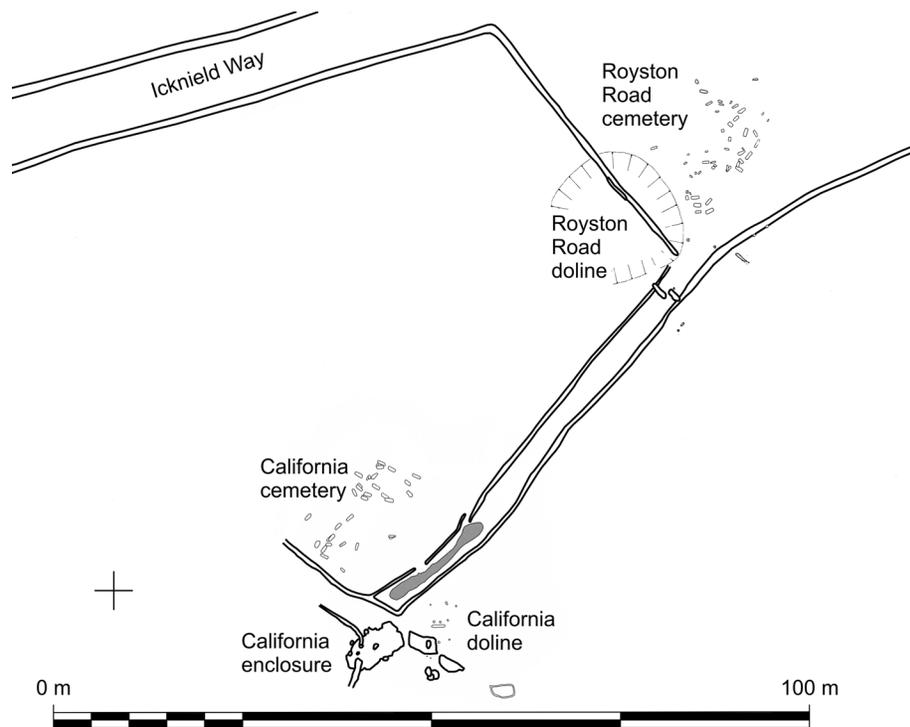


FIG. 2. The California and Royston Road sites on the north-eastern edge of Baldock.

a number of features, including quarries and roadside ditches, which were themselves sealed by further deposits or cut by later features. During initial post-excavation work in 1983, Drake and Burleigh were able to recognise a series of clearly sub-Roman phases of activity on the site that have been described elsewhere (Burleigh and Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2010; Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2010). In addition to the usual 'residual' Roman material, these very late features and deposits contained distinctive pottery fabrics that did not occur earlier in the sequence. Of course, in the light of the very late date of these fabrics, the initial assessment of 'residuality' for late Roman material may need to be revised, particularly with fabrics known to be among those represented in 'final Roman' assemblages elsewhere.

An inhumation cemetery in the north-western angle of the crossroads, probably established towards the end of the second century A.D. (FIG. 3), was marked by an unusually high proportion of intercutting and reused graves, allowing stratigraphic sequences of burials to be established. In some cases, the earliest graves in a sequence contained pottery of late fourth-century or even putatively sub-Roman date in their fills; there was a noticeable tendency for earlier dated graves to be closer to the north-east to south-west road while those of very late date were farther from it. The latest graves contained pottery of a vegetable-tempered type identical to one from Bedford (Baker and Hassall 1979, 152 Fabric A1), where it has been dated to the seventh century, although it is unlikely to be as late as that at Baldock.

The second site, Royston Road, lay some 55 m to the north-east of the California doline. Another doline, this time more extensive but shallower, lay at the southern end of the site, to the north of the road running north-east from California. A mixed rite cemetery (Royston Road) was established to its north-east towards the end of the first century A.D.; the boundary ditch for the cemetery passed through the doline, where it was unaffected by later ploughing and proved to have numerous recuts. The penultimate recut contained a slightly worn and clipped siliqua of Arcadius (*Virtus Romanorum* type, RIC IX Tr 106b) of A.D. 392–5, suggesting that it silted up no earlier than the start of the fifth century (see Moorhead and Walton, this volume). The final recut could not be dated by diagnostic artefacts but can hardly be earlier than c. A.D. 420. The penultimate recut was sealed by a deposit of inwash in the doline, on top of which a gravel road surface was subsequently laid. This showed evidence for repairs in a number of places and evidently remained in use for



EXTRAPOLATING THE SEQUENCE

Although it might be argued that the evidence so far discussed comes from a restricted part of the settlement and represents the activity of only a small number of people, these are not the only sites on which this very late activity has been found; they are simply the most complex. To the south-west of the California site, Applebaum excavated several trenches in 1932 and located the foundations of a structure incorporating a worn and battered coin of Honorius, which he suggested might indicate a fifth-century date for the building (Applebaum 1932, 250; he misidentified the coin as an issue of Theodosius I). Indeed, his suggestion that the town continued to exist into the sixth century (Westell and Applebaum 1933, 268) has rarely been commented on: perhaps it has always been seen as fanciful.

Other sites have evidence for very late activity (FIG. 6), including a quarry at The Stationmaster's House on the northern periphery of the settlement, which began to be backfilled in the late fourth century A.D. (Atkinson *et al.* 1992, 13). Two cemeteries in addition to that at California have produced late fourth-century material and continued in use into the fifth century. At one, The Tene (FIG. 4), the cemetery shows the careful organisation evident in large urban cemeteries

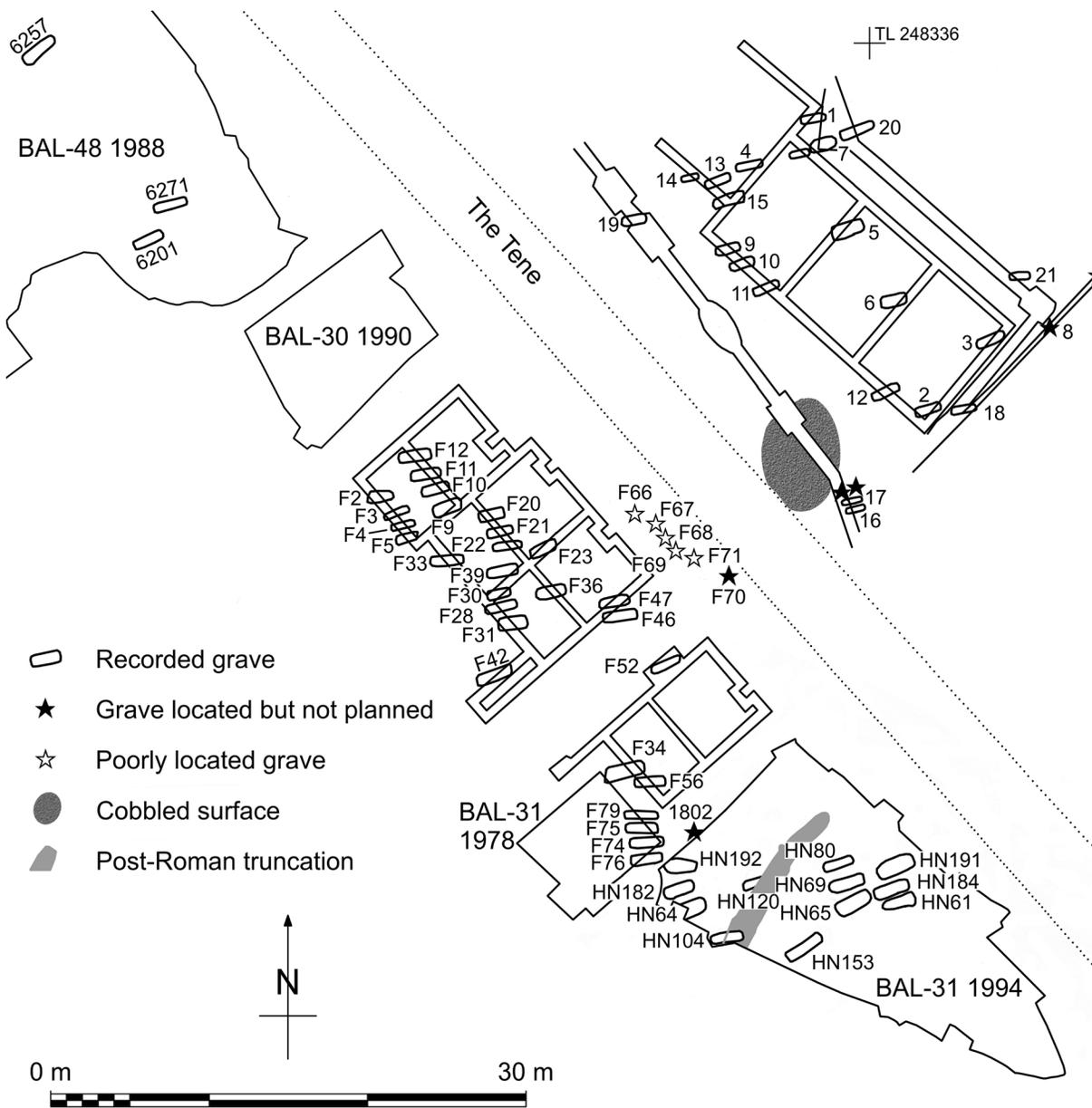


FIG. 4. The Tene cemetery.

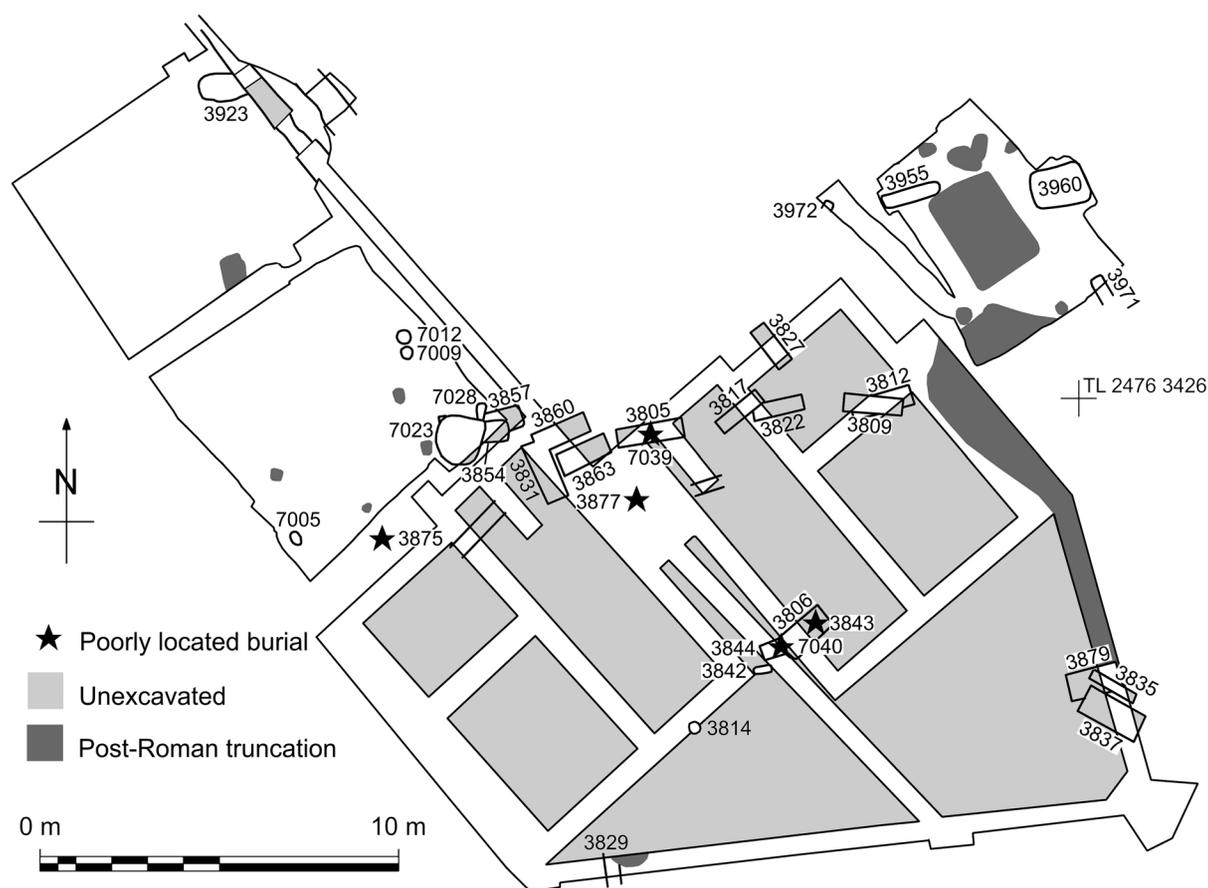


FIG. 5. The Icknield Way East cemetery.

such as Poundbury, a type that seems to have become prevalent only after A.D. 350 (Petts 1998, 115). At the other, Icknield Way East, the organisation was less strict, although it was possible to recognise rows of graves (FIG. 5). One of the latest sequences involved the careful redeposition of bone in a pit that had cut through three earlier inter-cutting fourth-century (or later) burials; the site produced unstratified sub-Roman pottery and may have been the source of a sixth-century St Menas ampulla donated to Letchworth Museum by the owner of the site in 1936 (Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2010, 136). The continuation of the road south-westward from California across the Hartsfield School site also produced evidence for a very late sequence, with a series of silts, roadside ditch recuts, and a pit stratigraphically later than a deposit containing a coin of Theodosius I.

The main sites investigated by Stead between 1968 and 1972 were on the top of the slope up to Clothall Common or close to its top, with no large dolines or deep hollow ways. Nevertheless, he did record four wells that were filled in after A.D. 350 (features A68, B18, B139 and B179), shown on his phase plan (Stead and Rigby 1986, 85 fig. 39B); however, the published concordance shows many more features dating from the late fourth century (A476, a 'hypocaust'; B8, B28, B41, quarries; B117, B176, B177 and D25, pits; C8, a gully; and D13, a ditch) and even one (A112, a pit) described as 'IV→', suggesting the possibility of a fifth-century date. None of these is shown on the published phase plans; they demonstrate that there was considerably more late activity on his sites than the plans imply.

It is also worth noting that sub-Roman fabrics first recognised at Baldock have also been found in a settlement at Pirton, 12 km to the west-south-west, where a ditch and a large pit were found to contain pottery of Fabric 54, a sandy greyware, of fifth-century date (Went and Burleigh 1990, 8). More intriguing were two conjoining sherds from a globular jar with decoration reminiscent of 'pagan Saxon' types (such as Myres 1977, nos 1625 and 2122), of fifth- to early sixth-century date. However, the fabric is not a 'pagan Saxon' type and is similar in character to Fabric 54.

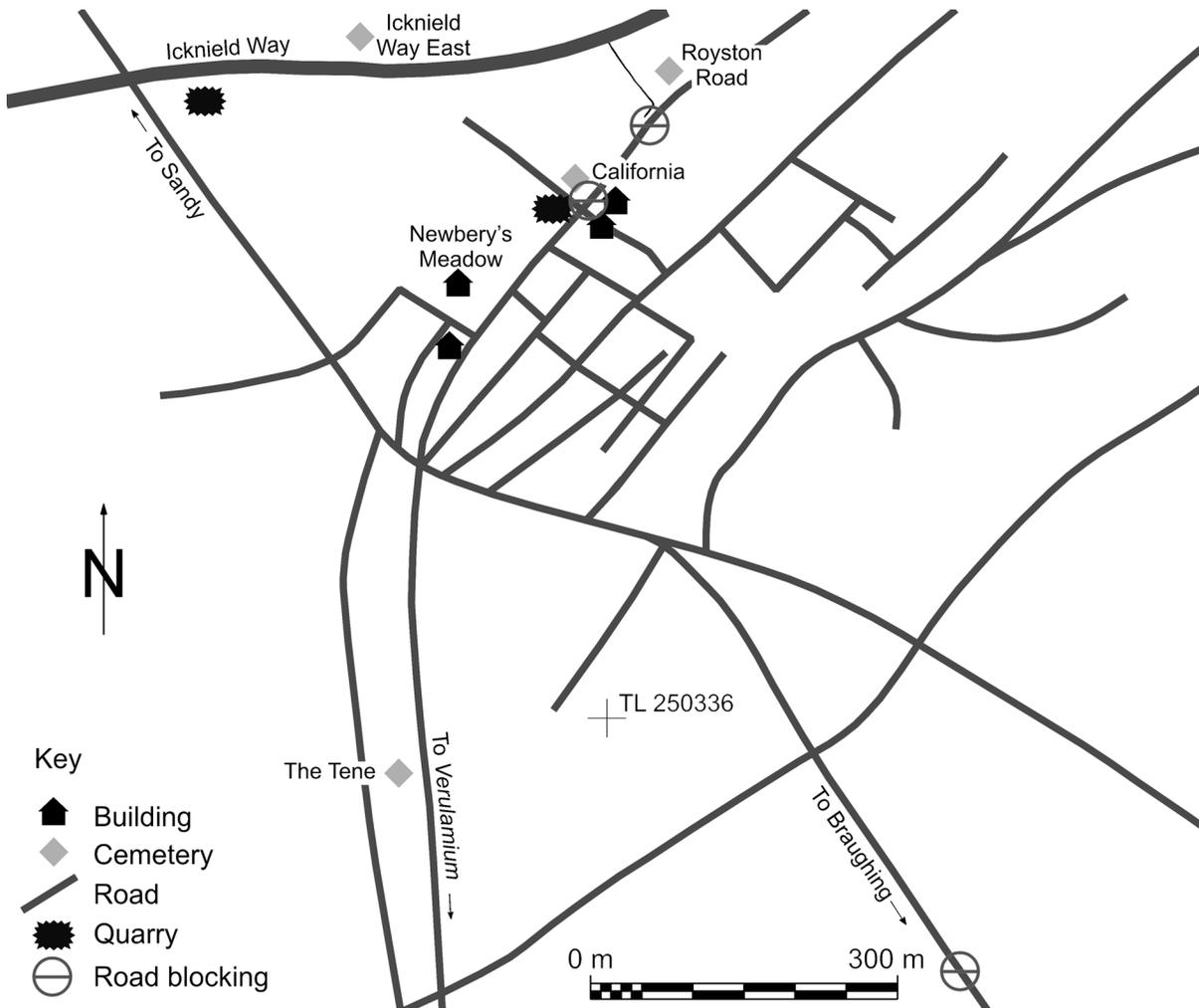


FIG 6. Sites across Baldock with activity after A.D. 400.

The greatest problem with accepting this sequence at Baldock is one that is not inherent within the dataset but one of incredulity. There are simply no sites of comparable status in south-eastern England for which this sort of continuity after A.D. 400 has been claimed and we are left with only two options: either Baldock is genuinely unique, which does not seem likely, or the evidence has not yet been recognised in other places, which also seems unlikely. A third possibility, that the data from Baldock are not what they seem and have been misdated, does not stand up to scrutiny in view of the overwhelming stratigraphic evidence.

### WIDER IMPLICATIONS

If Baldock is unique among 'small towns' in south-eastern Britain in surviving the collapse of Roman administration early in the fifth century, local conditions must have been such that it was able to remain viable as a settlement. In the context of continuing sub-Roman occupation of the fort at Birdoswald, Wilmott (1997, 224) considers that a 'prerequisite for survival and continuity would certainly be the potential of the local area to provide food'. Although there is no question of the capacity of Baldock's hinterland to produce sufficient food, there must either have been a suitable rural surplus to feed town-dwellers or those who lived in Baldock must have been at least partly self-sufficient in most items, including food. Indeed, this is what the ceramic evidence appears to indicate: there are no imports of pottery made by craft specialists and, instead, the sub-Roman fabrics are handmade, often poorly fired and lacking in standardisation. They were evidently produced by non-specialists, probably in the town or its immediate hinterland. There

is also no doubt that the settlement underwent considerable contraction from the early fourth century on, although it is possible that some of this contraction was a result of an increased density of building in the centre of the town, leading to a desertion of peripheral areas or their conversion to food production.

The closest site for which a similar sequence has been claimed, *Verulamium*, is a place with a very different status from Baldock. As well as being a walled *civitas* capital with the probable honorific status of *municipium*, it was home to the shrine of Roman Britain's protomartyr, Alban, directly attested in a late fifth-century *Vita* of St Germanus of Auxerre. Despite Faulkner's (2000, 175) rejection of the very late sequence at *Verulamium* — subsequently backed by Neal (2003) — there is ample evidence for fifth-century activity within the town; Sheppard Frere's (2010) vigorous and scathing rebuttal of their reinterpretation of his work makes it clear that such revisionism lacks foundation. Similar sequences can be proposed on at least eleven other sites (summarised in table 5.1 in Niblett and Thompson 2005, 170). As at Baldock, activity in the town seems to have been at a reduced scale after A.D. 400, but it is clear that much of the fourth century saw a thorough change in the nature of urban occupation everywhere, with the abandonment of well-established sites, which were sometimes given over to market gardening instead. This solves the problem of settlement viability in the absence of an infrastructure capable of provisioning the town: the inhabitants had the means to feed themselves.

There have long been suggestions that a sub-Roman enclave survived in the north-eastern Chilterns, an area lacking in 'pagan Saxon' burials, although items of contemporary metalwork are now being reported in small numbers through Finds Liaison Officers. Nevertheless, the distribution of finds is striking: fifth- and sixth-century Saxon burials are well known in south Bedfordshire and south Cambridgeshire but almost completely absent from north Hertfordshire and St Albans, making the northern boundary of Hertfordshire appear as a real cultural dividing line at this time. Of course, it is not necessarily the case that Germanic styles of pottery, metalwork or even burial are a guarantee of ethnic identity; nevertheless, they are markers of a cultural identity.

There is also some placename evidence, deriving in part from the Tribal Hidage, a tribute list of probably later seventh-century date. Among the smaller people of Midland England, it names the *Gifle* and the *Hicce*, both assessed at 300 hides, and the *Cilternsæte*; all three can be identified with names surviving in the present landscape. The first are the people of the river Ivel, which rises in Baldock; the second are the people of Hitchin, to the west of Baldock; the third are the Chiltern-dwellers. Moreover, all three names are Brittonic, at least in part. The river Beane, rising to the south-east of Baldock is recorded in the tenth century as *Beneficcan*; the first part of the name is a Brittonic river name, \**Bania*, with an epithet not only identical with Modern Welsh *bychan* ('small') but also showing lenition of the initial letter (Gover *et al.* 1938, 1), a post-Roman development dated by Jackson (1953, 560) to the mid-fifth to early sixth century.

There is thus evidence for the survival of Brittonic speakers in the hinterlands of Baldock and *Verulamium* and, indeed, much of Hertfordshire until the sixth century at the earliest, which appears to confirm the survival of sub-Roman populations in these settlements. At first sight, this is evidence in favour of the first of the options offered above, that Baldock is unique as a 'small town' in its survival into the fifth century and perhaps beyond. This seems to be reinforced by the lack of evidence from neighbouring 'small towns' at Dunstable, Sandy, Braughing and Welwyn. At Dunstable, there is evidence for sunken-featured buildings in the north-eastern part of the Romano-British town (Rushton and McQueen 2003, 24), although the dating evidence for them is far from clear and similar features from fourth-century Baldock are evidently of Romano-British character rather than Germanic — the Blackhorse Farm site north of the town notwithstanding. At Sandy, there is evidence that late Roman buildings were abandoned early in the fifth century, with fifth- and sixth-century 'pagan Saxon' burials found to the north-west of the (presumably abandoned) Roman town (Edgeworth and Steadman 2003, 26). There is no evidence for the end of the Romano-British settlement at Braughing, although a sixth-century brooch has been found in the northern part of the town; the Middle Saxon settlement with its Minster church developed to the north of the earlier town (Thompson 2002a, 8). The Middle Saxon settlement at Welwyn, which also boasted a Minster church, overlay the Romano-British

town, although there is currently no evidence for continuity of occupation (Thompson 2002b, 6–7).

The picture is thus one of fifth-century abandonment, followed by 'pagan Saxon' burials in Bedfordshire, usually deposited a short distance outside the former towns, and of Middle Saxon occupation in Hertfordshire, on or near the abandoned site and with little or no 'pagan Saxon' material. However, the presence of culturally 'pagan Saxon' material is no guarantee of ethnic origin: Klinge's recent study of burials from Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire suggests a broad continuity of population between Roman *Durocbrivae* and 'pagan Saxon' Dunstable (Klinge 2012, 218).

However, the north-eastern Chilterns is not the only region to lack early Saxon burials: West Sussex and southern Hampshire among others are also areas with few burials of this type. Might it be that Romano-British 'small towns' in these areas also survived into the fifth century and beyond? Assessments carried out as part of English Heritage's Extensive Urban Surveys project on towns in these areas (where available) do not discuss the possibility of sub-Roman activity. It is thus impossible to know whether or not the lack of data is a result of abandonment early in the fifth century (if not earlier) or a result of not even addressing the issue. In other words, the evidence may exist but not be recognised for what it is.

There are other questions that can be raised about fifth-century sequences in 'small towns'. For instance, post-Roman *Grubenhäuser* are being recognised at a growing number of towns in eastern England, which are interpreted as evidence for Germanic settlement. Examples are recorded at Heybridge (Drury and Wickenden 1982, 6–9), Cambridge (where they are of Middle Saxon date; Rahtz 1976, 413), Maldon (Essex County Council 1999, 6), and Neatham (Millett and Graham 1986, 33) among others, but there is no consensus on their interpretation as evidence for continuity of occupation. However, the presence of early Saxon pottery types in the upper fills of 'late Roman' features at Heybridge suggests that many were still visible at the time the material was deposited, which is hardly indicative of a lengthy period of abandonment between the two phases. There are also apparent associations with pagan Saxon cemeteries, as at Great Chesterford (Evison 1994, 49).

There is a further problem: at Baldock, there are several features that resemble *Grubenhäuser* in all respects except date, as they are dated to the fourth century. This might suggest the presence of Germanic settlers in fourth-century towns or it might be evidence for a Romano-British building tradition parallel to that of the continental Germans. However, there is a potential problem with the dating of these features: the fourth-century material associated with them must be regarded as a *terminus post quem*. The question that cannot be answered with present evidence from most places is just how long late fourth-century material continued to circulate into the fifth century (or even later). For instance, very late burials containing fourth-century objects inserted into the ramparts at *Margidunum* have been interpreted as possibly sub-Roman (Leary and Baker 2004, 34). Sub-Roman activity has been identified at Granary Close in Godmanchester (Cambridgeshire County Council 2003, 20), although as this appears to be on the basis of the recognition of Romano-Saxon pottery, the dating must be open to suspicion.

### THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

The sub-Roman period is equally difficult to characterise outside the south-east of England, even in areas where there is no hint of Anglo-Saxon settlement before the end of the seventh century. In part, this is a reflection of the lack of the types of durable material culture that enable relatively close dating during the Roman period. It is also possible that we do not yet know how to recognise a distinctive archaeological sequence for the period. Where claims have been made for continuity of urban occupation, they tend to be controversial.

In the north-west Midlands, the Anglo-Saxon takeover was late and claims have been made for lengthy sub-Roman sequences in the two major urban centres of Roman date: Wroxeter and Chester (Barker *et al.* 1997, 245; Matthews 2001, 18–19). The evidence from Wroxeter is well known, thanks largely to Barker's meticulous excavation of the baths basilica site, but the more pressured conditions of excavations in the modern city of Chester have meant that identical

archaeological evidence has long gone unrecognised (White 2007, 188); indeed, some have wrongly denied its existence (e.g. Mason 2007). It is clear that both places continued to support populations until well into the sixth century and possibly later.

The 'small towns' of the north-west Midlands have received less attention than the two major urban centres of the Cornovii. However, the Romano-British placename, *Letoceto*, survives incorporated into the name of the nearby cathedral city of Lichfield, which may be an important clue to its post-Roman development. The Old Welsh form of the placename, *Cair Luit Coit*, occurs in a number of sources, including a poem of possibly seventh-century date in the *Canu Heledd* cycle in a context that suggests it was regarded as the site of an important British church. The late fourth-century walled enclosure was still visible in the eighteenth century (Burnham and Wachter 1990, 276) and excavations in 1922 produced a small copper-alloy bowl with an embossed Chi-Rho (Thomas 1985, 122). The interpretation of the 'Staffordshire hoard' of seventh-century precious metals found close to the town in 2009 is fraught with difficulties: the simple assumption that it is a deposit of material captured by a victorious Anglo-Saxon army after the defeat of a rival is not the only possible scenario. It may instead represent plunder captured by Britons following the major defeat of an Anglo-Saxon army.

The Romano-British name *Pennocrucio* survives little altered as modern Penkridge, an important early medieval royal estate, although little appears to be known about its late Roman archaeology. Finally, the sequence at Whitchurch is every bit as uncertain, although there are hints of late stratigraphy similar to that at Wroxeter and Chester. In particular, rammed cobbling that was originally interpreted as belonging with a third-century building (Jones and Webster 1969, 212) framed clay-packed post-holes similar to sub-Roman examples excavated at Lower Bridge Street, Chester in 1991. At Whitchurch, the surface was sealed by a small circular rubble platform and associated gully with no clear dating evidence. Elsewhere, undated brine boiling lay stratigraphically towards the end of the 'Roman' sequence (Jones and Webster 1969, 210). The skeleton of a young adult male, deposited in a grave cut through the floor levels of a third-century building and associated with a late third- or early fourth-century potsherd, almost certainly post-dated the abandonment of the structures. The trepanation of the skull that appeared to be the cause of death (or at least a factor in it) is a Romano-British feature, although the location of the burial is not (Jones and Webster 1969, 209), so it probably belongs to a very late period.

In the north-east Midlands and Yorkshire, there is evidence for the continued importance of Christianity, which, it can be argued, may have provided the impetus for continuity of occupation in Wroxeter and Chester (Matthews 2003). This has been argued convincingly for the kingdom of Lindsey (Eagles 1989, 206), despite apparent early and widespread Germanic settlement (Leahy 1993, 37). Archaeological evidence from the city of Lincoln includes the well-known example of the church of St Paul-in-the-Bail, where a fifth-century origin for the church has been hypothesised (Jones 1993, 25). At Horncastle, the defended enclosure is similar to those at Wall-by-Lichfield and Penkridge and, although it is poorly dated, it cannot be earlier than the late third century (Burnham and Wachter 1990, 245). However, the pottery sequence appears to end in the middle of the fourth century. The defensive circuit at Caistor is equally poorly dated and there is a fifth-century 'Anglian' cemetery outside the walls at Nettleton (Meaney 1964, 160). At Ancaster, the defences are of a similar late third- or fourth-century date, and although the date at which the site ceased to be occupied is unclear, there is a pagan Saxon cemetery with urns dated *c.* A.D. 500 immediately south of the town (Burnham and Wachter 1990, 239–40; Meaney 1964, 151; Todd 1991, 144).

Further north, at Catterick, there is structural evidence for activity continuing into the fifth century matched by a dearth of contemporary material culture (Wilson 2002, 474). The Anglian settlement nearby at Bainesse (Wilson *et al.* 1996, 32ff.) appears to have been occupied by the middle of the fifth century, an intriguing parallel to the situation at Blackhorse Farm, Baldock. Pete Wilson (2002, 475) suggests a period of peaceful settlement and co-existence, at least during the early years of the Germanic settlement, and it is tempting to regard the population of the 'small town' at Catterick as controlling the manner and location of the Anglian settlement in its hinterland.

In south-west England, there is also limited evidence for continuing activity in 'small towns'. For instance, there are very late cobbled surfaces at Bath closely resembling those at Wroxeter and Chester which point to the continuity of occupation within the former Roman town (Pearce 2004, 126; Gerrard 2007). Although the Roman drains in the bath had become blocked, the precinct appears to have remained in use, with periodic replacement of the surface with low-grade concrete above accumulations of silt, until the rubble platform, which incorporated a block from the pediment of the temple of Sulis, was constructed (Cunliffe 2000, 144). There are also hints of fifth-century activity at Shepton Mallet (Leach and Evans 2001, 97; Snyder 1999), while White (this volume) draws attention to similar sequences at Worcester and Kenchester.

Nationally, the picture is very different from that suggested at Baldock: while some larger cities seem to have carried on as places of relatively intense habitation, especially in the West, the Romano-British populations of the majority of 'small towns' are generally assumed to have been replaced by Germanic settlers living in the surrounding countryside, while the town was abandoned (or, on a minimalist interpretation, the sub-Roman rural populations adopted germanising material culture). In a few cases, there may be evidence for culturally Germanic settlers actually within the towns, as at Heybridge. However, the conventional interpretation is based more often than not on preconceived models of what is believed likely rather than on stratified sequences; there also remains the elephant in the room of the urban populations, which cannot simply be wished away.

### MODELLING THE TRANSFORMATION

A general lack of evidence of all types for this period makes modelling the transformation from late Roman diocese to early medieval kingdoms extremely difficult and open to widely divergent interpretations. Dark (2000, 12–14) has characterised four principal models for the transformation, which he labels the 'winding down' hypothesis, the 'new establishment view' of catastrophic collapse after *c.* A.D. 400, the 'early collapse' view that sees the real transformation as taking place in the third and fourth centuries, and the 'two zones' hypothesis of Higham, with a Christian East and pagan West. Finding these views inadequate, he points to the elements each viewpoint has in common and argues that all are wrong. Instead, he proposes a 'fifth way', in the adoption of the model of Late Antiquity, a proposal that has found favour in some quarters and opposition in others. More recently, Laycock (2008, 10) has presented a sixth option, regarding the diocese of *Britannia* as a 'failed state' in twenty-first-century political terminology, riven by tribal conflicts barely suppressed during the Roman occupation.

The 'winding down' view is predicated on a slow attrition of the characteristics of Roman civilisation in the century A.D. 350–450 and the destructive nature of Anglo-Saxon mass migration from as early as A.D. 360, when Myres (1969, 63) believed that the settlement of *laeti* could be detected in Romano-Saxon ceramic forms. As Romano-British society collapsed, the Britons, who only really survived in the North and West, were reduced to an impoverished way of life resembling that of their Iron Age ancestors (Alcock 1971, 355–7; Laing 1975, 260). In this model, the scale and effect of Anglo-Saxon migration far outstripped the continental migrations from Free Germany into the Empire, in part because of the fragile nature of Romano-British culture; the survival of 'small towns' in the East was not suggested and, given the scenario of mass settlement, it could hardly be accommodated in the model.

In the 'new establishment view', which dominated interpretation throughout the 1980s and 90s, the real watershed was the start of the fifth century, when the collapse of the military supply economy in the West had the knock-on effect of killing off manufacturing industries (Esmonde Cleary 1989, 131ff.). The collapse was rapid and irreversible, while the smaller numbers of settlers than had previously been envisaged were able to dominate the now archaeologically invisible Britons politically, socially, culturally and economically. Eastern 'small towns' might survive for a short while according to this model, but continuing activity would be difficult to detect owing to the material invisibility of the Romano-British population.

In the 'early collapse' model, town life was supposed to have ended well before the end of the fourth century, with walled towns little more than enclosed villages with large areas of farmland

inside the defences (Reece 1988). Roman culture was nothing more than a veneer that was easily replaced by a Germanic culture. ‘Small towns’ were not discussed as part of this alleged decline in urban living and the picture presented by Stead (1975, 128) of Baldock as little more than an overgrown Little Woodbury did not contradict Reece’s view of the late Roman town.

Higham’s (1992, 209ff.) model, in which elements of Romano-British culture survived into the fifth century or later, was extended in Dark’s (1994) first monograph on the period to the medieval period. Political continuity was stressed, with individual *civitates* employing Germanic mercenaries whose power they could not resist after the start of the Saxon rebellion. There is again little consideration of the fate of ‘small towns’, an emphasis being placed on the survival of populations in the larger cities.

The Late Antiquity model favoured by Dark (2000, 15) stresses the importance of Christianity as a unifying feature across Britain and mainland Europe at a time when other institutions were collapsing, including the administration of the Western Empire itself. It seeks to integrate the experience of Britain into the broader European developments of the period, in which Romano-Christian culture developed alongside new Germanic culture, eventually forming a hybrid. Archaeological evidence for coin use and pottery production well into the fifth century — even in eastern Britain — is taken to suggest that a similar hybrid culture was developing before the rebellion of Saxon mercenaries destroyed it in many areas. Dark (2000, 97ff.) suggests that a broad band of territory from northern Hampshire to Suffolk and most of Sussex and The Weald remained under British control into the sixth century, much more extensive than Wheeler’s ‘Chiltern enclave’ and much later than conventional views. This chimes well with the evidence from Baldock.

Laycock’s hypothesis that post-Roman Britain experienced what was once popularly called Balkanisation, the fission of a supposedly unified region into smaller, mutually hostile units, explores the same phenomenon of territorial continuity during and after the Anglo-Saxon settlement. This is similar in some ways to Härke’s (2007, 66) comparison of the collapse of the ‘Soviet Empire’ with that of the Roman West and the swamping of indigenous cultural forms with those of outsiders (be they Anglo-Saxon immigrants or Western corporations). This processual systems collapse model explains the archaeological invisibility of post-Roman Britons and would permit the survival of ‘small towns’ well beyond the supposed cut-off date of A.D. 410.

There is no reason to believe that any of these models is mutually incompatible. There had never been a unified culture in Roman Britain, with regional styles evident in many forms of material culture, localised religious cults and huge variations in settlement patterns. The fifth-century loss of centralised political authority, combined with economic collapse, raiding and mass immigration, means that regional differences are highlighted in the archaeological record. While there were areas such as Norfolk and Lincolnshire, where early Anglo-Saxon settlement involved large numbers of people, whose effect was to overwhelm indigenous culture (even if it did not necessarily wipe out the population), at the same time, western Britain may have remained to some extent unified under an identity inherited from the former province of *Britannia Prima* (White 2007), its individual *civitates* experiencing increasing Balkanisation throughout the fifth and sixth centuries. It is at a local level that the most useful analyses can be carried out and, it can be argued, there is no one overarching model that will explain what happened to Britain, its towns, villages and farms during the fifth and sixth centuries.

The most overwhelming feature of the little data for the Britons of this period that exists (or, at least, has been recognised and published) is its sheer diversity. There is no single pattern that can be applied across the former Roman diocese. This ought not to surprise us: a relatively homogeneous and regulated system — albeit with considerable regional variation — broke down and no organisation existed to replace it. Although the developing Church organisation may have provided a baseline Romano-Christian culture (and its importance can be disputed), it was by no means the only religious culture available to the population and in the East, paganism may have retained a greater importance than is often assumed to be the case.

In this way, the approach taken by the English Heritage sponsored Regional Research Frameworks for England offers the best hope for exploration of the issues raised here. For instance, Wingfield (1995, 34) has argued that the archaeological signature of the likely survival

of *Verulamium* well into the fifth century is marked less by the appearance of features of this date within the walled enclosure than by the effect of its administration on the regulation of Anglo-Saxon land-taking and economy. The consequence of this was the survival of 'invisible Britons' throughout the sub-region and the survival of their settlement pattern, including places such as Baldock, while just a few kilometres to the north, Anglo-Saxon settlers were disrupting long-established patterns.

There are also grounds for suspecting a strong element of pagan continuity at Baldock, contrary to the Late Antiquity model. There are hints that it was an important cult centre throughout the Roman period, with a number of temples, including a possible religious complex at the very centre of the town (Burleigh and Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2010). At the same time, although there is a possible Christian cemetery at The Tene, it does not seem to have lasted as long as the unquestionably pagan cemetery at California. Indeed, there is good evidence for sub-Roman Christianity from Hitchin, where the start of nucleated settlement appears to coincide with the shrinking of Baldock, a phenomenon that may well be related (Fitzpatrick-Matthews and Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2008). It may be suggested that the Christian population of Baldock was driven out by pagans or left because it regarded the town as tainted, and was fortunate enough to find a sympathetic landowner who was prepared to allow them to settle around what became St Andrew's parish church (now St Mary's) in Hitchin.

With so few sites at which this type of continuing occupation has been detected, it is impossible as yet to propose models based on geographical location. Nevertheless, it is clear from the case of Baldock that the North-West/South-East split between different post-Roman histories proposed by Burnham and Wachter (1990, 318) is too simplistic. Baldock and *Verulamium* both survived into the fifth century as at least quasi-urban settlements, yet their close neighbours at Dunstable and Sandy shared a quite different fate. It is also worth considering the presence of culturally Germanic settlers at a sub-regional level: they appear to be absent from Hertfordshire, or at least present only in very small numbers, but more numerous in Bedfordshire and, especially, Cambridgeshire. So far it is impossible to say whether these places in Hertfordshire survived because there was no Anglo-Saxon settlement locally early in the fifth century or whether their survival was a factor in the prevention of settlement.

What is striking is that economic considerations do not appear important: there is no doubt that an economy based on the circulation of silver coinage had collapsed and that the trade in mass-produced consumer goods had also vanished. Nevertheless, the survival of settlements pre-supposes the supply of food to a population that was not necessarily engaged in farming. There is also evidence for the disappearance of at least some craft specialisations: the sub-Roman pottery from Baldock resembles prehistoric types, as it is handmade (although generally better fired than Iron Age types), while other consumer goods, such as hairpins and brooches almost vanish from the archaeological record. This does not preclude a trade in non-durable consumer goods whose production may have involved craft specialists.

It may be objected that there is still too little data from Romano-British urban sites in the sub-Roman period to be able accurately to model the process that led to their transformation or desertion. Nevertheless, the lesson of Baldock must surely be that we cannot discount the possibility of urban survival in 'small towns' well after A.D. 400. The challenge to archaeology is to recognise and characterise it, to understand the nature of postulated continuity, the social and economic networks that sustained it, and the impact of Anglo-Saxon settlement. Conversely, we need to understand the rationale behind arguments that favour desertion and its demographic consequences: did the former urban populations simply die out, did they migrate overseas, or were they dispersed into the surrounding countryside? The implications of each scenario must be explored rather than accepted tacitly as they are at present.

### FUTURE RESEARCH

In many ways, the way we write about 'small towns' after A.D. 400 can be regarded as incorporating the archaeology of expectation: all too often, we find what we expect. We 'know' that 'small towns' did not survive the end of Roman rule (if they had even lasted until the start of the fifth

century) and so we do not look for signs of fifth-century activity or, if we do, we look for the wrong sorts of evidence. Moreover, we fail to recognise the unfamiliar for what it is, so that fifth-century pottery may be written off as residual Iron Age, buildings based on sill-beams or rubble platforms are simply not spotted or (as in Chester) wrongly regarded as evidence for abandonment and collapse.

The evidence from Baldock, though, shows that relevant features can survive, even on a heavily ploughed site where Romano-British buildings are difficult enough to recognise (Stead and Rigby 1986, 32), and that there can be distinctive material culture, even if only in small quantities. It is the contention of this paper that Baldock is not in any way unique and that similar discoveries will be made in some other ‘small towns’, especially those in areas for which there is evidence that there was no early and widespread Anglo-Saxon settlement. To test this hypothesis, it will be necessary to conduct targeted work in other ‘small towns’ and to conduct critical re-examination of existing data. In particular, a search needs to be made for pottery forms and fabrics in ‘late’ contexts that have previously been written off as residual prehistoric material; such material has occasionally been reported (e.g. Gerrard 2010) but, as yet, no synthesis has been made of the range of fabrics and forms.

In those areas where there is evidence for early Germanic material, such as Norfolk or Oxfordshire, an attempt must be made to understand the interface between the two populations. What was the impact (if any) of mass immigration on the ‘small towns’ and, more crucially, on the rural infrastructure necessary for their existence? Is there any indication of what happened to the indigenous populations, both in the countryside and in the towns? The apparent invisibility of the Britons is a phenomenon that must also be addressed if, as Heinrich Härke suggests, the material of the incomers swamped native traditions and, eventually, superseded it.

There are signs of an increasing willingness at least to consider these questions. The *AD 410 Romans Go Home!* conference demonstrated that there is a broad consensus that archaeology can begin to examine the traumatic changes of the fifth century in Britain, that Britain cannot be regarded in isolation from the European mainland, and that there is still room for interpretive variety.

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