

Books

Roman Forts — an illustrated introduction to the garrison posts of Roman Britain by Roger Wilson. *Bergstrom and Boyle Books Ltd.* 96 pp., 59 line drawings and 40 photos. £5.95 hardback and £3.95 paperback.

AS THE SUB-TITLE and the preface explain, this book is *not* a comprehensive study of the fascinating subject of Roman forts in the province of Britain. To aid newcomers the excellent first chapter sets the scene by explaining the organization of the four main types of military unit to be found in the early Imperial army (so necessary to the understanding of fort plans) and by taking the reader through temporary camps and the detailed plan of a typical (but imaginary) Roman fort.

The remaining chapters ably trace the development of forts against a skeleton history of the Roman occupation. The illustrations are ample and apposite, but the unwary reader should perhaps be gently reminded that the specially redrawn plans include (as ever) an element of conjecture.

Personally, I was glad to see that all measurements in the text were given in feet (which, after all, is basically what the Romans used), but I regret that the opportunity was not taken to add a metric scale to the plans. The only other criticism which I would mention, related to fig. 4 which depicts a reconstruction of the defences of a marching camp. Here, there is no fighting platform (see *Vegetius*) behind the row of stakes which sit in a tall, narrow mound, thus making it impossible to repel an attack.

Overall, Dr. Wilson's book provides a succinct but detailed outline on Roman forts in Britain. He often quotes opposing views, he has provided good references and his summary of the military organization is the best that I have yet seen. *Roman Forts* is to be recommended as an excellent introduction to the newcomer and as a very useful reference book to the knowledgeable.

NICHOLAS FARRANT

The Archaeology of Canals by P. J. G. Ransom *Worlds Work Ltd.* 231 pages (hardcover) with 26 colour and 127 black and white illustrations. £12.50

ANY READER'S HEART is likely to sink when confronted by yet another glossy folio sized book entitled "The Archaeology of . . .", whether

the subject be Tutankhamun, the Vikings, Scythian tombs, or stationary steam engines. Mr. Ransom's book is a most impressive exception to the genre, with a well written and informative text complemented by a carefully chosen selection of photographs and illustrations. In ten chapters Mr. Ransom summarises the growth, decline and revival of canals and navigable waterways in Great Britain and Ireland, with various excursions further afield; and provides descriptions of their civil and mechanical engineering, of associated structures and equipment, and of the political, social and economic framework within which their builders and users operated. Inevitably an author who endeavours to cover such a wide field in a book of only 231 pages will hardly be able to go into great depth on any particular subject; but Mr. Ransom's comments are never skimmed or shallow. His care of detail extends to the choice of illustrations, many of which are new. There are, for example, a number of superb aerial views of canals, all chosen to make a particular point, but at the same time fine pictures in their own right.

Mr. Ransom's book has a great deal to offer readers, even those who already have some knowledge of Britain's canal system. Particularly informative are his accounts of the canals of Scotland and Ireland; there must be many people who are aware of the Caledonian Canal, but not of the more impressive works of the Edinburgh and Glasgow Union Canal, opened in 1882 and tragically closed to navigation as late as 1965. This book provides an excellent description of the Union Canal, as it does of the equally impressive Grand Canal in Ireland, on which construction started in 1756, and which is happily still in use. Mr. Ransom also looks in some detail at the vitally important ancillaries to the canal itself; not just the bridges, wharves and warehouses, but also the toolbooths, stables, canal cottages and public houses. His descriptions of the complex water supply arrangements that existed for many canals pinpoint a major problem for the canal engineers, and one which has generated a variety of solutions, many of them covered in this book.

At the beginning of his book Mr. Ransom defines archaeology as the "study of antiquities". Excavation has so far contributed little to the study of canals, although the book describes some examples, and it is clear that more work may be needed in the future on waterways that have been filled

comparatively recently. What the British canal system does offer, however, is hundreds of miles of living museum, which allow the user to experience a vanished way of life in a way which Butser, Ironbridge, or the Bluebell Railway do not. To take a cruiser along the Birmingham Main Line is to go back fifty years; while a horse-drawn trip along the Llangollen Canal, where the pickmarks of the excavators can still be seen in the rock cuttings, with aqueduct, bridges, locks and canal-side features all complete, transports the traveller to the land of the eighteenth century. These are experiences which all archaeologists with any interest in the post-medieval period should undergo; and they are experiences which are brought to life in Mr. Ransom's work.

OLIVER PIERCEY

Roman Coinage in Britain, by P. J. Casey, *Shire Archaeology*, 64 pp., 12 figs, 15 pls, index, £1.50, paperback.

THE AUTHOR, who is an archaeologist as well as a numismatist of distinction, makes his purpose clear in the first sentence of his preface. "This book is not a key to the identification of coins found in the context of Roman sites in Britain; rather it is an attempt to place the coins in an historical and economic framework which defines the limits of inference within which coins may be used both as dating and as economic evidence." He succeeds so well in his purpose within the short compass of 60 pages that the reviewer, who has been endeavouring for many years to interpret the significance of coin finds on archaeological sites, felt that he had gained a fresh insight into more than one problem after reading it.

Mr Casey begins with an admirably concise and clear account of the Imperial currency system, from which we can perhaps derive some comfort today, for it reminds us that present worries about inflation and the devaluation of money were familiar to the Romans, yet somehow life went on. There follows a perspicacious discussion of the effects of this system and the changes that took place in it on the coin-losses of the Roman Britons that are the finds of the archaeologist, and from which he is often tempted to make unwarranted deductions. The Roman occupation is divided into 27 convenient numismatic periods, which are briefly discussed in relation to the coin finds of Britain. A formula giving the annual coin-loss per thousand notional coins is recommended as the best statistical basis for comparing one site with another and for producing those fashionable histograms, since this

takes into account the varying lengths of the numismatic periods — though not, of course, the irregularity of coin-flow from the mint. There are useful comments on the numismatic characteristics of military sites, with a table of the pay at various periods of different kinds of unit. Finally there is a sensible discussion of coin hoards and the problems they raise, in which the author points out that peak periods for hoards are usually periods of currency change. Many consist of the "good" money driven from circulation by a new wave of "bad" money, in accordance with Gresham's Law; others of money made valueless by the introduction of a new monetary system and therefore not worth retrieval.

The book is small but crammed with information, and has clear illustrations of 120 coins. The publisher is to be congratulated for producing a very useful work at such a low price — less than half the price of the scarcely larger numismatic paperback recently published by the British Museum, *An Introduction to Celtic Coins* by the late Derek Allen, which has a minimal text and illustrates only 14 more coins. It is true that these are enlarged two diameters, whereas Shire Publications is content with actual size, but enlargement has little advantage when coins have no hidden beauties to be brought out, and can be misleading. The British Museum has its own small booklet on the same subject as Casey's book, *The Coins of Roman Britain* by Andrew Burnett, which is cheap enough at 75p, but is merely an introductory essay of 16 pages — excellent for the student or general reader, but the archaeologist will find more than twice the value in the Shire Archaeology book.

RALPH MERRIFIELD

Also received

Tutankhamun — the untold story, by Thomas Hoving. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, 1980. 384 pp., 14 pl., index. £2.50 (paperback)

The hardback edition (Hamish Hamilton; 1979) was reviewed in Vol. 3, No. 12 (Autumn 1979), 333-4.

London: the Biography of a City, by Christopher Hibbert. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, 1980. 290 pp., many pl., 45 in colour, index. £4.95 (paperback).

A cheaper edition of a work originally published in 1969, revised in 1977.

CLIVE ORTON