

The Archaeology of Wiltshire's Towns

An Extensive Urban Survey

VERLUCIO

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1** In 1976 the Department of the Environment sponsored a study of the archaeology of Wiltshire's historic towns, aiming to assess the relative importance of the towns at different points in time as a basis for future archaeological research. This resulted in the publication of "*Wiltshire Towns: the archaeological potential*" (Haslam 1976). Since then, the book has been one of the key references for archaeologists monitoring urban development and its impact in the county.
- 1.2** A massive increase in the amount of data available and changes in legislation such as the introduction of PPG 16 have meant that a reappraisal of the situation is now due. The Extensive Urban Survey of Wiltshire has been commissioned by English Heritage to address the need. The survey aims to map the development of all of Wiltshire's and Swindon's historic towns (Fig. 1) and to examine the extent and vulnerability of the surviving archaeology and built heritage to development.
- 1.3** The origins of urban centres in England reach back to the Iron Age when the need for mutual defence concentrated populations, skills, industry and trade into fortified areas. During the Roman occupation new urban centres were linked by an efficient road system. In the Saxon period, defended towns and royal boroughs were developed and later medieval towns grew around markets as economic conditions improved or were 'planted' as planned new centres.
- 1.4** The first towns in Wiltshire appeared during the Romano-British period but all are now greenfield sites although some may have given rise to nearby settlements. Most modern towns in the county have their roots as Saxon villages or defended settlements such as Cricklade and Wilton. Many of the villages grew into small towns after the Norman invasion, often focussed around a castle or a market and in the early thirteenth century 'planted boroughs', in which individual plots of land were sold by the major landowner.
- 1.5** The definition of a town for inclusion in the survey follows the criteria laid out in Heighway (1972), by which the settlement must possess certain facilities such as defences, a mint, a market, a street plan or a judicial centre. It should also demonstrate urban attributes such as a high population, a diversified economic base and a central or key location. For the purposes of this survey however, the towns should meet these criteria historically, even if they no longer do so. This allows, for example, the inclusion of the five Roman towns in the county. The full list of towns included in the survey and the criteria for inclusion are covered in the project design (Wiltshire County Archaeology Service 1999).
- 1.6** The area of study in each modern town is defined by the size of the town as it stood in 1945, encompassing both the historic core of the town and the older industrial and suburban development. In the case of the Roman towns however, the area of study is limited to the known or conjectured extent of the entire settlement (Fig. 2). In a county such as Wiltshire this is generally based on those results gained during fieldwork and excavation rather than historical sources.

1.7 The research into each town will be encapsulated into two reports: firstly, a summary and assessment of the data gathered and secondly, an outline strategy for future management of specified sections of the urban area. This report is intended to provide a clear and up-to-date appraisal of the available archaeological and historical data for Verlucio, with an assessment of the main areas of historic settlement in the town and of the potential and sensitivity of the archaeologically important areas.

2. HISTORICAL SOURCES

2.1 This is a desk-based study, using material available within the County Council research facilities in Trowbridge namely the Sites and Monuments Record, the Trowbridge Reference Library; the Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office; and the Wiltshire Buildings Record. Historical data are generally drawn from secondary sources, normally the Victoria County History and histories of the individual towns, based on recommendations or specific requirements.

2.2 The use of primary sources in the Record Office is usually restricted to maps but sometimes other pictorial material is used. These sources are consulted to accurately locate individual entities and to trace the growth of the settlement.

2.3 In the case of the Roman towns however, as a result of the limited amount of information available, data has been drawn directly from survey or excavation reports, supplemented by data from the SMR.

3. LOCATION AND TOPOGRAPHY

3.1 The Roman town of Verlucio is situated near Bell Farm, approximately 1.25 kilometres south east of the modern village of Sandy Lane, in the parish of Calne Without. The site lies to the east of an escarpment which descends into the Avon valley and at the southern end of a ridge overlooking Bromham to the south and Beacon Hill to the south east.

3.2 The area today is used predominantly for agricultural purposes and the rich soils around Sandy Lane are used for market gardening.

3.3 The underlying geology consists of lower greensand and the site lies close to the junction of this greensand with calcareous grits.

4. HISTORICAL OUTLINE

4.1 After the Roman invasion in AD 43, a large number of the major towns we know today were created using the already existing pattern of Iron Age communities in Britain. This ensured that the new province could be governed effectively by the Roman Empire. Verlucio is believed to have been in the territory under the control of the native tribe known as the '*Belgae*' whose centre of government under the Roman occupation was at Winchester (*Venta Belgarum*).

4.2 Verlucio is mentioned in the Antonine Itinerary, a Roman document dating to the 3rd Century AD giving routes throughout the Roman empire and the distances between the various named settlements on those routes. Verlucio's location may indicate that the settlement was a posting station or '*mansio*'. The Roman road was a known Imperial thoroughfare or post route and a part of Roman law, known as the '*cursus publicus*', stated that accommodation and changes of horses had to be provided for imperial officials along all the principal roads.

5. ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK IN THE AREA OF THE TOWN

5.1 The following is a list of known archaeological events that have taken place at Verlucio. This list is drawn from information in the County Sites and Monuments Record, Excavations Register, and the fieldwork reports kept in the County Archaeology Section in Trowbridge (Fig. 3). The location of a number of the recorded archaeological events at Verlucio cannot be established.

| Event | Year | Site Name/Location | Event Type | Excavator | Reference |
|--------------|-------------|--|-----------------------|---|--------------------------|
| 1 | 1973 | Verlucio/unlocated | Fieldwalking | Nicholas Aves | CAS archive |
| 2 | 1976 | Verlucio/unlocated | Fieldwalking | Bill Ford | CAS archive |
| 3 | 1985 | North of Paddock Farm/line of the Roman road | Augering | Alison Borthwick | CAS archive |
| 4 | 1986? | Verlucio/unlocated | Fieldwalking | Chippenham College Archaeology department | Anon 1986a |
| 5 | 1986 | Verlucio | Desk based assessment | Chippenham College Archaeology department | Anon 1986a |
| 6 | 1986? | Verlucio/unlocated (behind Bell Farm) | Excavation | Chippenham College Archaeology Department | Anon 1986b |
| 7 | 1986? | Verlucio/unlocated (near to Roman road) | Excavation | Chippenham College Archaeology Department | Anon 1986b |
| 8 | ? | Verlucio | Fieldwalking | Darcy Hunt | Anon 1986a Anon 1986b |
| 9 | 1987 | Verlucio/unlocated (Trench 1-West end of the double hedge field boundary at Bell Farm. Trench 2-Hayfields Copse) | Excavation | Wiltshire Rescue Archaeology Project | Anon 1987 |
| 10 | 1993 | Verlucio/ SU 973 671 | Fieldwalking | Chippenham College Archaeology Department | Anon 1994 |

6. ARCHAEOLOGY: SITES AND EVIDENCE

6.1 Prehistory

6.1.1 No Prehistoric evidence has been retrieved from the conjectured area of Verlucio itself. However, a Mesolithic flint tool core and several undated flint tools and flint waste have been discovered nearby to the north east of the site.

6.2 Roman - (Fig. 4)

6.2.1 The Roman road between Silchester (*Calleva Atrebatum*) and Bath (*Aquae Sulis*) passes through the site and forms a noticeable kink at the edge of Hayfields Copse, near Bell Farm (**VE001**). At this point the road changes its course to the north west, before continuing on a westerly route just to the south of the modern village of Sandy Lane. This road also passes through another of Wiltshire's Roman towns, namely Mildenhall or *Cunetio*.

6.2.2 Fieldwork has revealed a series of earthworks at the site (**VE005**, Anon 1986). The corner of a right angled earthwork in Hayfield's Copse has been surveyed and described as a double bank and ditch. The earthwork straddles the Roman road but its alignment does not match that of the road. Excavation results have left the date of this feature inconclusive (**VE012**, Wiltshire Rescue Archaeology Project 1987). The earthwork was originally thought to be the remains of a Claudian fort. However, a Hadrianic coin was discovered in 1987 in the bank itself, which suggests the feature may have had a later construction date

6.2.3 Numerous finds of iron slag and kiln debris have been found in the fields to the north of Hayfields Copse by Chippenham College (**VE026**, Anon 1986) and it seems likely that the Romans were exploiting iron as a resource in this area. It is also reported that a copper ingot was discovered during ploughing near the site and that several molten copper lumps have been found over a wide area.

6.2.4 Romano-British coins, nails and pottery fragments were found during excavations in 1840 west of Bell Farm (**VE014**, Grinsell 1957). Additionally, a Romano-British structure was discovered in a test pit behind Bell Farm (**VE022**, Anon 1974) and a great deal of building material including pennant stone tiles and iron nails, which are likely to have been made locally, have been found in the area indicating the presence of other structures (Anon 1986).

6.2.5 A large and varied amount of pottery has been found at the site of Verlucio, suggesting the site was widely involved in trade. These sherds include fragments of local ware, such as Severn Valley and Savernake wares, and types from further afield such as Nene Valley and Samian wares (Anon 1986). Fieldwalking and metal detectorist activity have retrieved numerous coins and small finds from Verlucio, including brooches, glass and tesserae. (**VE023-4, VE027-8**)

6.3 Post Medieval/Undated - (Fig. 5)

6.3.1 A large mound exists immediately to the west of Bear Farm. The mound contains a cruciform structure of puddled clay and stone tile. The Ordnance Survey has recorded this feature as a post-medieval windmill mound or possibly a prehistoric barrow utilised as such. It was dug into by JS Money in 1840 (VE006, Grinsell 1957, 51). Another mound was recorded by the Ordnance Survey north of Bell Farm (VE008). To the NE of the town, aerial survey has revealed a double-ditched enclosure. This may be of Roman date and possibly a fortlet (VE002). To the south-east are indications of field-system (VE004)

7. VERLUCIO IN ITS WIDER CONTEXT.

7.1 Verlucio lies in a rich archaeological landscape. Roman villas have been located at Bowood, Nuthills, West Field Park, Heddington Wick, Silver Street Lane, to the east of Wyatts Barn and Chittoe Heath, all within a mile radius of the site. Several other features detected by aerial photography may be associated with the Roman settlement of Verlucio - in particular a square enclosure discovered to the north east of the town which may be a Roman fortlet.

7.2 Finds of slag and a furnace at the Roman villa to the east of Wyatts Barn, near Bromham suggests that iron smelting was being carried out in the local area (SMR ST96NE309). This could be related to the finds of iron slag at the Roman settlement at Verlucio. A Romano-British lime kiln is reported to have been found near to this villa which may also have supplied Verlucio as well as its own building needs (Anon 1986).

7.3 A Romano-British pottery kiln was reported by Cunnington (SMR ST96NE311) to exist to the south of Pitters' Farm (ST956684, north west of Sandy Lane).

8. ASSESSMENT

8.1 Summary of Research

8.1.1 The majority of the research carried out at Verlucio has been co-ordinated by the Chippenham College Archaeology group. This has involved a programme of fieldwalking as well as two desk based studies and some excavation. The Calne Archaeology Class has also carried out some fieldwalking.

8.1.2 A great deal of the research has concentrated upon the earthworks discovered in Hayfield's Copse but a wider area also has been investigated, dictated largely by the distribution of surface finds. The research carried out together with numerous reports of surface finds has confirmed the presence of a Roman settlement at Verlucio although its nature is far from clear. The partially revealed defences suggest that the site is indeed a town.

8.2 *Components of the Town.*

- 8.2.1** There is far too little structural data to offer even a tentative view of the form and extent of Verlucio. It is possible that the development began with the establishment of a Claudian fort (Anon 1986). The discovery of a coin dated to AD 50-54 and 1st century bead rimmed cooking vessels indicates early activity at the site. It was originally believed that the double bank and ditch earthwork discovered in Hayfield's Copse dated to this period and formed a part of the fort's defences. However, excavation has revealed that it is likely to have a later date. No finds of military equipment have yet been made.
- 8.2.2** An analysis of coins found on the site suggests occupation from c AD 80 to AD160, followed by a long period of urban settlement lasting from the 3rd to the 5th century (Anon 1986, 12). This is however a very limited insight into the growth of a settlement that may have extended to 25-30ha.

8.3 *The Archaeological Potential*

- 8.3.1** One of the principal aims of this phase of the Extensive Urban Survey is to examine the archaeological potential of the town to assist with the development of a management strategy in the later phase of the project. Whilst all of the core town may be considered reasonably important archaeologically, it is necessary to try to highlight those areas of greater interest, either because of the importance of the remains or because better than average preservation is expected there.
- 8.3.2** Verlucio is the least well understood of the five Roman towns assessed in this survey. The antiquarian researchers who have contributed considerably to understanding of the other Roman towns have little to report about Verlucio save the occurrence of surface finds in large numbers. The site has not been disturbed by modern developments and therefore not the subject of archaeological evaluation and extensive excavations. The research carried out by Chippenham College has not been published and no part of the area appears to have been subject to systematic field surface collection.
- 8.3.3** Since barely a hint of the nature of the place has emerged from these activities, it is barely possible to set down a list of research objectives. The dating of the defensive earthworks and the pursuit of the full circuit would clarify enormously the nature of the town. How this is to be conducted is unsure, since the ferrous nature of the geological deposits in the area may rule out geophysical survey. The prospects of gleaning this data from aerial photography seems to be poor.
- 8.3.4** The numerous reported surface finds include indications of building materials but the nature of these buildings has not been established. Nor is it clear whether they were set out within a street grid or whether they concentrated along the line of the Roman road.
- 8.3.5** There is a general belief among archaeologists who have worked in the area that the principal function of this town or settlement related to mining and working the iron

deposits. This is clearly a subject which needs investigation. It is possible that an intensive and well recorded field surface collection campaign would bring some clarification.

8.3.6 One of the remarkable features of the town is its association with a substantial number of Roman villas in the area and the basis for the wealth which produced this situation. Was its economy based on iron working or was it the agricultural qualities of the area which is currently well known for its market gardens?

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