

# **Roman Hampshire: A strategy for research**

**D. E. JOHNSTON**

The post-war years have seen a quickening of the sense of urgency in archaeology, almost to neurotic proportions at times; and a realisation that, however sensitive we may think we are to patterns in time and the movement of events, those events can still take us by surprise. Forty years ago we were utterly unprepared for the opportunities that war-time bombing would offer for urban research; but more recently we have been equally slow to realise that the opportunity would occur again in a different form, as the dying centres of our historic towns become due for renewal and redevelopment. Meanwhile, in the countryside, our archive of research material has been disappearing at such a rate that it might well be totally exhausted by the end of the century.

The crisis reaction to this was the creation of 'Rescue', both as a concept and as a reality in the form of a new Trust for British archaeology, pledged to cope with the crisis and at the same time to make the public aware of it. Since those heady days of the early 1970's panic has given way to calmer reflection, the economic squeeze has slowed down the rate of destruction, and archaeologists have become more hard-headed and professional. So we can pause for a while to contemplate the curious theoretical legacy of the crisis period.

Crises have a habit of polarising our thinking into opposites that are not always very helpful — we are all familiar, for example, with the way a threat to a building or site seems to offer us a choice between the stereotypes of 'progress' and 'preservation'. So in archaeology there have been those who sought to make us choose between 'rescue' and 'research' as criteria for the spending of public money — or even for the application of our own time and efforts, which are equally finite. Superficially, this distinction has much to recommend it, as it separates those sites that one must excavate now (or lose for ever) from those that can be left for posterity; the fallacy, however, can be demonstrated by a Hampshire situation

that could be matched in almost any part of the country. The line proposed for the completion of the M3 is a 12-mile section through, among other things, a zone of dense Romano-British settlement some three miles north of Winchester. To treat the motorway route simply as a linear site would produce meaningless and even misleading results. In practice, a general study of the whole area by air photography and fieldwork has made possible a choice of specific sites for excavation along the route — the selection of research priorities in a rescue situation. Here and elsewhere the rigid distinction between research and rescue is seen to be unhelpful; rescue is simply research archaeology under duress.

The crisis is still with us, of course, but less acutely; the need for selection was forced on us long ago by financial constraints, and the need to agree on 'priorities' is still urgent. The opportunity for long-term planning produced a large number of 'Implication Surveys' in which the implications of redevelopment were worked out in financial estimates and recommendations for action; expectations thus raised have sometimes remained unfulfilled, but generally the single author of a Survey has been replaced by a Committee to implement its recommendations. Only too often, however, the Committee seems to have become a substitute for direct action, and the proliferation of Surveys and 'Surveys of Surveys' has caused some dismay. In 1974 the Hampshire Archaeological Committee was formed to coordinate and initiate research and to advise on how public money should be allocated. Five such county committees are represented on the Wessex Archaeological Committee, which now has its own professional Unit to implement its policy of excavation. At both regional and county levels shaping a policy involves balancing priorities, and at a Hampshire conference in 1978 a number of us were invited to review the archaeology of the county, period by period, and to make recommendations for the future. The reviews will appear elsewhere:<sup>1</sup> in this paper I am concerned to explore the thinking behind my suggestions for the Roman period.

I assume that we shall be actively searching for evidence; what kind of evidence, and what questions shall we ask of it? 'Archaeological evidence in its simple form can never answer historical questions . . . We must ask historical questions of historical sources, and never get the two mixed up' warns Dr. Richard Reece.<sup>2</sup> His illustration is carefully chosen; the absence of coins in the decade AD 400-410 on a site can be wrongly interpreted as desertion of that site. In fact, the supply of coins had dried up and the absence is normal for sites of this period. Desertion becomes a historical fact

only when the coin evidence is shown to be peculiar to that site *and* can be 'calibrated' against another site that shares the peculiarity but has the added advantage of a historical explanation safely chronicled in historical sources. This is true enough: but surely what the example illustrates is not so much the limitations of the evidence as inadequate research? For if we knew nothing about the coin pattern of the period, the desertion idea would be a reasonable inference; provided that we distinguish hypothesis from fact, we can ask whatever questions we like of our evidence.

One could, moreover, challenge this narrow use of the term 'historical' if it is limited to particular events that definitely happened. The history that we are writing from material of both kinds includes not only narrative but much else beside — much that will never be susceptible to proof as fact. I feel that it is important to stress this here, as we must feel free to ask historical questions of our archaeological evidence; the price of this freedom is the responsibility for distinguishing clearly the nature of the answer.

When we turn to Roman Hampshire, our first question illustrates this point nicely. It is: what was the ancient unit most closely comparable to modern Hampshire, and how do we define it? In other words, are we obliged to limit our activities to the County? To take the second version first: if we are thinking of priorities in spending public money, then the county boundary must be the limit. And the same constraint should apply to a county organisation like the Hampshire Field Club or the County Museums Service, though in the case of a site or archaeological zone that crosses the boundary a joint responsibility for its welfare is clearly an urgent priority. An important example of this is Silchester, whose walled area accounts for a salient in the county boundary. The town site has long been in Hampshire, but the finds from excavations remain in Berkshire. Even so, this is only part of the problem, for the *territorium* of Silchester, as yet undefined, remains divided. The proper unit for study is the town and its administrative region taken together, and this must mean cooperation across the county boundary. Recent fieldwork around the town by the Calleva Field Study Group has pointed the way in this.

In our quest for an ancient unit to correspond with our modern county, we might turn to the ancient political geography of this part of Britain. Our sources tell us that before the conquest this was the territory of the Atrebates.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, the reorganisation of tribal areas into administrative districts or *civitates* divided this region between the Atrebates and the Belgae, Silchester being the

capital of the first and Winchester of the second. An additional complication is the possibility that Cogidubnus' new kingdom, the Regni of Sussex, might have extended north-westwards as far as Silchester<sup>4</sup> — at least, until the extinction of the kingdom at the end of the first century. We should expect these boundaries to have been precisely defined in Roman times for financial and administrative purposes. Defining them from archaeological material alone is probably impossible, and we can do no more than guess. Exactly half way along the Roman road linking the two *civitas* capitals stands the Wheatsheaf Inn, the site of a Roman building and associated settlement. It has been suggested that this might have been a temple marking the boundary.<sup>5</sup> Searching for such boundaries might seem a waste of time without documentary help; but what was of great concern to a Romano-Briton should be of concern to us, too. And to say that this is beyond the scope of artifactual evidence may not be true, either; for one essential fact of Romano-British life was undoubtedly the bureaucratic control of the individual and the associated paperwork (of which very little has survived in Britain), which in turn affected the economy at the local level, and this in turn should leave some artifactual evidence. An individual farmer would be registered either in Silchester or Winchester, and his farm would have an 'orientation' in that direction, and that would be the market for produce and the source of essential supplies. If we could characterise the products supplied by the two sources, such as pottery, or bricks and tiles, we might be able to define a spatial pattern that would otherwise remain pure guesswork. It would be pedantic to enquire whether the question is 'archaeological' or 'historical': the answer may not be strictly a historical fact, but it would certainly be a helpful hypothesis. This particular piece of research would be sophisticated and time-consuming, with no guarantee of success. But the quantity of material recovered from Romano-British sites in Hampshire should make it worth attempting.

There is another version of this regional approach that introduces a chronological dimension. We do not know at present how long the two civitates, the Belgae and Atrebates, continued to exist as valid entities. We do know, however, from our documentary sources that from about AD 213 Britain became two provinces, with our region forming part of *Britannia Superior* whose capital was London. A further subdivision, however, in 284 put us in a new province, *Britannia Prima*, whose capital is understood to have been at Cirencester.<sup>6</sup> Silchester was now in an interesting position, between

the two provincial capitals of London and Cirencester. Our estimate of the boundary is extremely speculative but as far as we know Silchester was in Prima and like the rest of our region was now tributary to Cirencester in place of London. This change of 'orientation' would doubtless have had some influence on the regional economy, perhaps in public spending on roads and communications, arrangements for collection of tax and the movement of produce from farms and villas. The four (and later, five) provinces of Britain formed a single Diocese, whose Treasury and administration was in London; was the produce of our Hampshire fields moved via London to the northern garrisons, or used to maintain the field armies and coastal defences of the south and west — or even shipped overseas? The Cirencester connection may perhaps be reflected in the activities of the 'Central Southern Group' of mosaicists<sup>7</sup> who are best regarded as an offshoot of the Cirencester workshops but based possibly on Silchester and seeking new business in an area of increasing affluence; interestingly, their works so far identified are confined largely or entirely to the province of Prima. However, without supporting evidence from properly documented situations for 'calibration' we would be unwise to read much historical significance into this.

Accepting, then, that we are thinking of a wider region of which Hampshire forms a major part, what are the questions that we should be asking?

Our first must concern the conquest of AD 43. The documentary evidence<sup>8</sup> is limited to references to the 'capture' of the Isle of Wight and to largely unlocated hillforts and battles in the south. What was the pre-Roman political temperature among the southern Atrebates, and what was the impact of the Roman invasion? If it is thought improper to answer these questions from archaeological evidence, we can substitute three specific questions: was Danebury refortified and taken by storm? Was there a naval base at Bitterne? Was there a road westwards from Bitterne through the New Forest, and if not, why? At Danebury, Professor Cunliffe's interpretation of some of the skeletal evidence as battle casualties may be tenuous, but his identification of anti-Roman refortification is more plausible.<sup>9</sup> The behaviour of the roads suggests that the army might have passed that way, turning inland towards Cirencester, and if the coastal road was indeed omitted through the New Forest, that could imply simply that the fleet was thought a more satisfactory life-line.<sup>10</sup> At Bitterne, Flavian occupation is proven, the harbour a near certainty, the Claudian depot a mere guess.<sup>11</sup> Our factual knowledge

of the countryside and the two towns in the first century AD is extremely scanty, for Hampshire; in Sussex, by comparison, the documentary and archaeological evidence combines to give us a picture of pro-Roman sympathy and collaboration followed by rapid Romainsation in both countryside and town. The pattern is unlikely to be repeated in Hampshire. But we must look for it; and either the evidence for it or the fact of its absence can be calibrated against the Sussex situation.

When we turn to the economic development of the region, we find there is much to do; much, moreover, that is not peculiar to Hampshire, but concerns the whole of lowland Britain. Our theoretical framework has two principal elements — the development in Britain of a 'state society' and the pressure on native agriculture and industry to produce a surplus. What was the provision for the consumption or disposal of this surplus? This can be answered in the case of pottery from the New Forest<sup>12</sup> and Alice Holt,<sup>13</sup> but is more difficult for other produce. In theory, the answer could be extracted from faunal and environmental material, principally animal bones, seeds and soil analyses. It could be possible to assess the likely crops and their yield, allowing for the probable loss of fertility over four centuries and using the discovery that some chemicals do persist in the make-up of soil as indicators of its previous history. In practice, we now have the personnel and facilities in Southampton University for this research to be pursued. We are moreover making some progress in the analysis of certain settlements and their productivity,<sup>14</sup> and also in the pattern of villa estates, especially those groups that appear to have a focal villa as a collection point.<sup>15</sup>

The MARC 3 study of the area north of Winchester is the only study to give us an integrated picture of the Romano-British landscape in Hampshire, with settlements, villa(s), fields, roads and tracks. It gives us the physical relationships, and a chronology is emerging from excavation. If the relationship of the one probable villa and three other masonry structures to the rest is not particularly illuminating, the relationship to Winchester certainly is, and the Director, Mr P.J. Fasham, has allowed me to offer an interpretation of it. There appears to be a zone some three miles deep to the north of the city, cultivated but free of settlement. These fields could have been worked from the city. Beyond that is an arc of more or less continuous native settlement with villas beyond that again. A unique discovery in this zone is a series of long fields, 70m wide, whose regularity betrays the hand of the official surveyor; what was the legal and administrative status of this area, and how

far did it extend? A similar settlement-free zone may have existed to the south of Winchester, too, but the picture is unclear and probably distorted by the large estate of the Twyford villa. Silchester seems to have had an utterly different pattern; the dearth of villas of decurion status has long been noted<sup>16</sup> but recent fieldwork and air photography has shown a considerable density of settlement within a radius of about 1½ miles. So the problems of the relationships of villas, settlements and towns are far from solved in Hampshire — or anywhere else, for that matter.

It has been suggested that our Romano-British material in Hampshire, if responsibly interpreted, could be of help outside the Roman period. A model of an urban society with a strong rural component and strong supporting data could well be useful for the understanding of later, medieval, society. In this connection, a recent study of small towns in Hampshire includes a consideration of the Romano-British origins of many,<sup>17</sup> and the same researcher is considering the nucleation of late Roman settlements and their relationship with medieval villages.

The question of 'continuity' at both ends of the Roman period is still unresolved. Excavations in Winchester, and particularly at the Lankhills cemetery<sup>18</sup> have told us much about the latest urban phases, and a link with the sub-Roman building in the final phase of the nearby Sparsholt villa is possible. Meanwhile, the forthcoming study of the transformation of the Twyford villa estate into the medieval parish should set an example for future villa studies. At the beginning of the period, continuity from Iron Age farm to Roman villa is by no means common, and it may be rare; elsewhere I have advanced the hypothesis of the third-century revival of defunct villas and the creation of new ones.<sup>19</sup> This is a hypothesis that must be tested against new evidence.

To bring the discussion down finally to the strictly practical, it is tempting to offer a 'shopping list' of priorities for fieldwork and excavation. This is impossible, for several reasons. For one thing, it is hard to compare the merits of long-term and urgent claims, and for another much of the work is done by professional archaeological units, each with its own set of priorities. Most importantly, however, public money is devoted to rescue excavation, and this is inevitably on a 'catch-as-catch-can' basis. In other words, our choice is often made for us; sometimes, however, we are offered a choice of research priorities in a rescue situation and an overall policy is helpful in guiding our choice. Occasionally, advice is sought — as in the recent case of a local archaeological society looking for a simple

site for a training excavation. Such offers can generally be fitted into an existing scheme for research. Finally, therefore, let me emphasise that the day of pure research and fieldwork has by no means passed. I hope that in this paper I have indicated some lines on which such research could profitably be pursued.

### Acknowledgements

This paper originated in one of the series of seminars on 'Strategies for Hampshire Archaeology' in the Department of Archaeology at Southampton University. I am grateful to those colleagues from Hampshire and adjoining counties whose contributions to the discussion have been incorporated into the present text, and who have allowed me to discuss their discoveries with them. A brief summary of these conclusions was subsequently included in a review of recent work to a conference sponsored by the Hampshire Archaeological Committee and the Adult Education Department of the University. This present paper is not, however, a statement of official policy, and the responsibility both for the ideas in it and their treatment is mine.

David E. Johnston

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> S. Shennan et al. (eds) *The Archaeology of Hampshire* (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> in D.E. Johnston (ed) *The Saxon Shore* C.B.A. Res. Rept. 18, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> A.L.F. Rivet *Town and Country in Roman Britain* (1964).

<sup>4</sup> G.C. Boon *Calleva: the Roman Town of Silchester* (Newton Abbot 1964), 43-4.

<sup>5</sup> A.L.F. Rivet *op. cit.* 140.

<sup>6</sup> J.C. Mann 'The Administration of Roman Britain' *Antiquity* 35, 1961, 317-20 esp. p. 319.

<sup>7</sup> D.E. Johnston 'The Central Southern Group of Romano-British Mosaics' in Munby, J. and Henig, M. (eds) *Roman Life and Art in Britain* B.A.R. 41, 1977.

<sup>8</sup> Suetonius, *Vespasian* iv.

<sup>9</sup> B.W. Cunliffe 'Danebury: First Interim Report' *Antiq. Journ.* 51, 1971, 240-52 esp. p. 251.

<sup>10</sup> D.E. Johnston *Roman Roads in Britain* (1979) p.40.

<sup>11</sup> M.A. Cotton and P. Gathercole *Excavations at Clausentum, Southampton, 1951 - 1954* HMSO 1958.

<sup>12</sup> M.G. Fulford *New Forest Roman Pottery: Manufacture and Distribution, with a Corpus of the Pottery Types* BAR 17, 1975.

<sup>13</sup> M.A.B. Lyne and R.S. Jefferies *The Alice Holt/Farnham Roman Pottery Industry* C.B.A. Res. Rept. 30, 1979.

<sup>14</sup> P.L. Murphy *Early Agriculture and Environment on the Hampshire Chalklands c. 800BC - AD 400* Unpublished M.Phil Thesis, Southampton University, 1976.

<sup>15</sup> e.g. Stroud. cf. S. Applebaum 'Roman Britain' in H.P.R. Finberg (ed) *The Agrarian History of England I.ii* (Cambridge, 1972), p.176-7.

<sup>16</sup> G.C. Boon *op.cit.*

<sup>17</sup> M.F. Hughes *The Small Towns of Hampshire* H.A.C. 1976.

<sup>18</sup> G. Clarke *Pre-Roman and Roman Winchester pt.2. The Roman Cemetery at Lankhills* Winchester Studies 3 (Oxford 1979).

<sup>19</sup> in M. Todd (ed) *Studies in the Romano-British Villa* (Leicester 1976) p.71-92.