



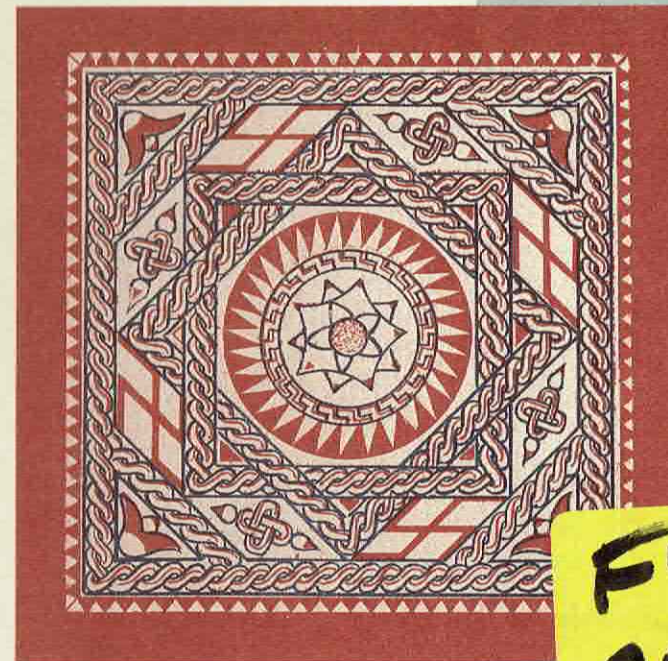
Royal County of
BERKSHIRE

ROMAN BERKSHIRE

Roman Berkshire is the second of a series of publications exploring the rich heritage of the county. The first of the series, **Prehistoric Berkshire**, is still available; other titles will include **Medieval Berkshire** and the **Industrial Revolution in Berkshire**.

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PREFACE

For the last decade Berkshire County Council has been caring actively for the county's rich archaeological heritage. During this time the County Council has had a crucial role in advising others about the importance of archaeology, especially in the fields of mineral extraction and development control, working in partnership with the Borough and District Councils. To enable the best possible advice to be given, the County Council has also developed and maintained a computerised database record of all sites and monuments in the county.

Technological advances have allowed the non-destructive investigation of archaeological remains below ground level, although archaeological excavations still have to be mounted when development and archaeology prove to be mutually incompatible.

As a result of this and other influences, new ideas about how our forebears lived their lives and how their cultures operated have emerged. In particular, evidence of continual changes in the countryside has emerged from multi-disciplinary studies about man's influence on past environments and, in turn, the environment's direct effect on man; lessons which we could all heed today.

Great changes have also taken place in public information about archaeology and the preservation of our heritage. Berkshire County Council has been a leading advocate of site and monument management coupled with increased access and understanding through information and on-site interpretation. This involves partnerships with district councils, landowners and English Heritage, and the County Council is grateful to many people for their willing cooperation.

*Front Cover: Tessellated pavement from Basildon
Centre Spread: Romano-Celtic Temple at Weycock Hill, Waltham St. Lawrence - artists impression (MC)*

ROMAN BERKSHIRE

INTRODUCTION

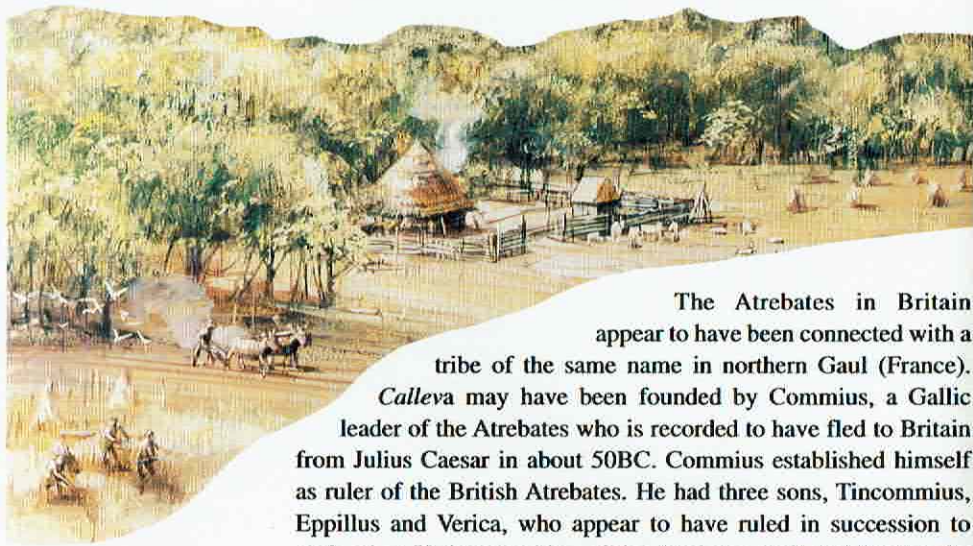
Much of the interest in the county's environment is understandably focused on the protection and enhancement of the existing environment. This includes, for example, the preparation and promotion by the County Council of planning policies which seek sustainable forms of development, as well as its support for a wide range of specific initiatives within the 'Greening Beautiful Berkshire' campaign. However, there is a historic dimension to the modern environment of the county which archaeology can illuminate by studying man's impact on the landscape in the past.

To help explain Berkshire's archaeological heritage the County Council has launched a series of publications on defensive and military sites in the county entitled *Bastions of Berkshire*. The Council has also decided to produce four booklets on the prehistoric, Roman, medieval and industrial archaeology of the county. *Roman Berkshire* is the second of the series of these booklets. It is based on records held in the County Sites and Monuments Record, the numerous investigations in the last decade and on a rich tradition of archaeological fieldwork going back to the end of the last century. *Roman Berkshire* begins with the first contacts between late Iron Age Britain and the Roman empire. It outlines aspects of life in Berkshire following the Roman conquest, which have left traces in the archaeological record of the county. It concludes with the coming of the Saxons in the fifth century AD.

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First Contacts

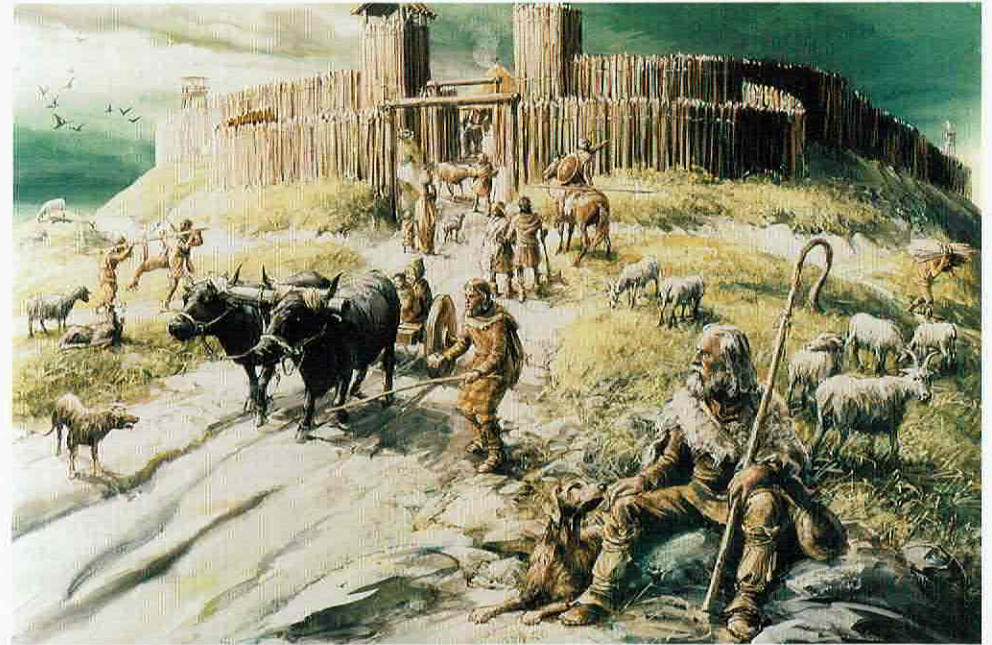
Before the Roman invasion, late Iron Age Britain was inhabited by a number of Celtic tribes. Berkshire lay in the territory of the Atrebates tribe. The river valleys were occupied with a structured system of small settlements, often in rectangular or round enclosures surrounded by fields and approached by trackways. The higher plateau gravels and the chalk downs were also settled. The settlements relied on a mixed farming economy. In the west of the county hillforts were important centres. The main centre of the Atrebates was *Calleva* (Silchester) on the Berkshire/Hampshire border, where an *oppidum* - a large, town-like settlement or trading centre existed.



Small enclosed Iron Age settlement: artist's impression (MC).

The Atrebates in Britain appear to have been connected with a tribe of the same name in northern Gaul (France). *Calleva* may have been founded by Commius, a Gallic leader of the Atrebates who is recorded to have fled to Britain from Julius Caesar in about 50BC. Commius established himself as ruler of the British Atrebates. He had three sons, Tincommius, Eppillus and Verica, who appear to have ruled in succession to each other. Verica was king of the Atrebates until 43AD when he was ousted, possibly by the ruler of a neighbouring tribe.

Links between the Atrebates and Rome are implied by the introduction of coins showing Roman influence, issued by Tincommius, Eppillus and Verica. Some of these coins bear the Latin word *rex* (king), implying perhaps that a treaty had been made with Rome. The Atrebates may therefore have become a client kingdom of Rome. Some of these coins have been found in a hoard at Waltham St Lawrence.



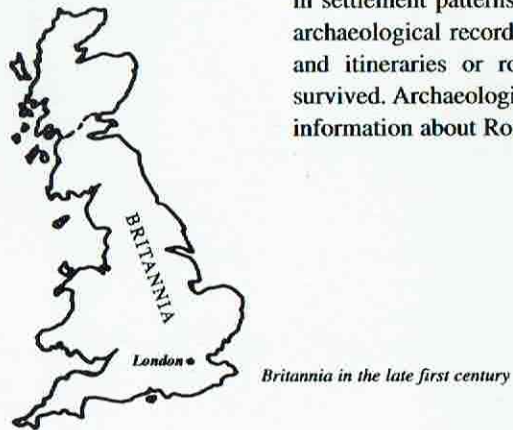
Walbury Hillfort: artist's impression (MC)

By the end of the Iron Age, coinage had begun to be used. Coins and fragments of pottery imported from continental Europe indicate the relative status of the sites on which they are found. The presence or absence of such finds hints at a developing hierarchy within later Iron Age society, and the development of an extensive trade network with the Roman world, principally Gaul (France). In 55 BC, and again in 54 BC, Julius Caesar launched abortive invasions of Britain. These expeditions apparently resulted in the establishment of several client kingdoms in the south-east of England, with local rulers allying themselves with Rome in return for Roman support and protection against rival kingdoms. Trading links between Britain and the Roman world strengthened as a result.



Coins of Verica (MF)

In 43AD, the Emperor Claudius launched a full-scale invasion of Britain on the pretext of assisting the deposed Atrebatian king, Verica. In reality, Claudius was probably seeking military glory to counter political problems in Rome.

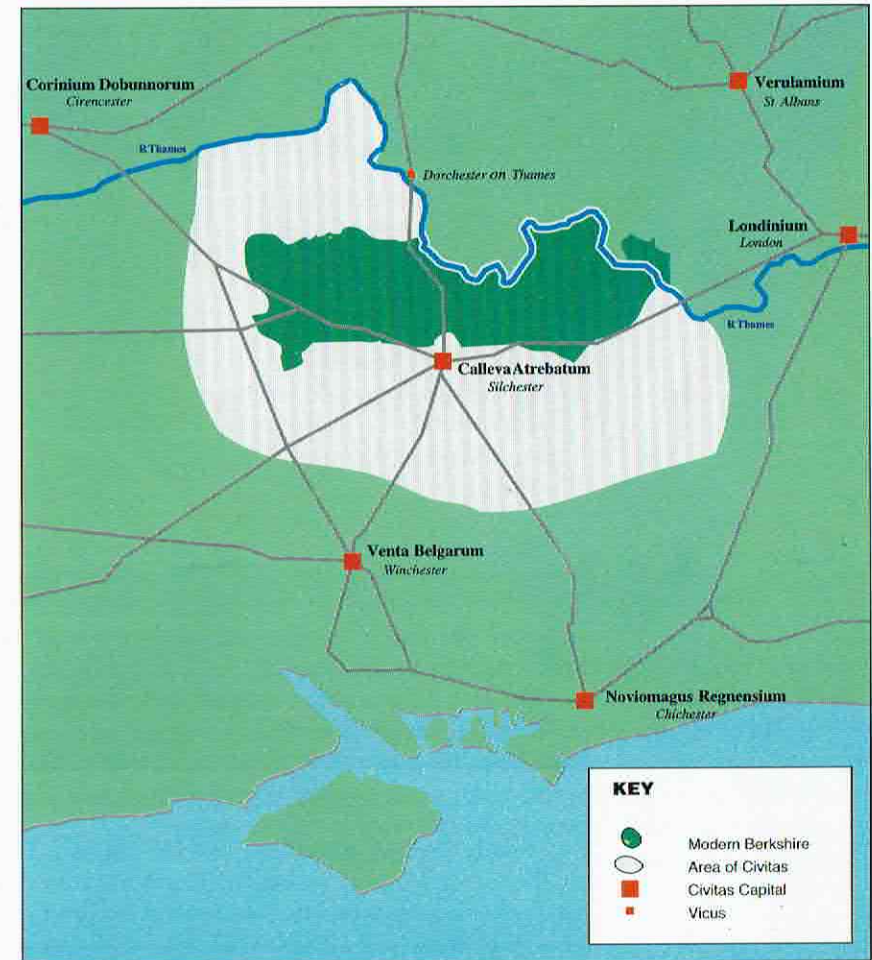


Some tribes which did not oppose the Romans were permitted to retain varying levels of independence as client kingdoms within the new province, which was called *Britannia*. Other tribes were subject to direct Roman rule. There was little resistance to the invasion in the territory of the Atrebates, and Berkshire became part of a larger client kingdom incorporating several other tribes under a ruler called Cogidubnus who, it is thought, had his headquarters at Chichester. By the end of the first century, however, the client kingdoms had been dispensed with, and Britannia was administered as a single province.

Immediately following the conquest, a process of Romanisation began with the development of towns, the road network and the importation of the Roman administrative system. This, and associated economic changes, brought about alterations in settlement patterns and lifestyles which have left traces in the archaeological record in Berkshire. Apart from some inscriptions and itineraries or route lists, few documentary sources have survived. Archaeological discoveries have been the main source of information about Roman Berkshire.

Structure and Organisation - Roads and Towns

Britannia was administered as a group of districts called *civitates*, based on local tribal divisions. Each *civitas* had a town as its administrative centre; these towns were often located on the sites of existing Iron Age centres. The *civitates* were run to varying degrees by local leaders under the authority of the Roman governor. By giving local elders power in the province in this way, the Roman conqueror encouraged Romanisation and made it easier to run the province.



Plan showing modern Berkshire in relation to the *Civitas Atrebatum*

The development of towns was an important aspect of Romanisation as they exemplified the urbanised Roman way of life. Iron Age Britain had no towns in the Roman sense. A few larger settlements such as the *oppidum* at Silchester are known, but these primarily had a trading function, and were very different from the planned civic administration and market centres of the Mediterranean world. The introduction of such towns by the Romans and the involvement of the ruling classes of the indigenous population in civic administration was designed to encourage the latter to accept and embrace Roman rule. In addition to planned towns built at selected locations, other, smaller, unplanned centres grew up in between. These were known as *vici*.

The *oppidum* at **Silchester** appears to have been the principal centre in the northern part of the Atrebatian kingdom. Following the Roman conquest, Silchester developed as a new, planned town in Cogidubnus' client kingdom. Other towns in the kingdom developed at Winchester and Chichester.

Following the dismantling of the system of client kingdoms in the late first century, Silchester became the *civitas* capital of the Atrebates, known as *Calleva Atrebatum*. As the *civitas* capital, *Calleva Atrebatum* would have been the centre of taxation and legal administration in the region. As in the Iron Age, its wealth would have been based on agricultural production, and Berkshire would have been an important part of the town's hinterland. The wealthy landowners of the Atrebates would probably have lived in *Calleva*; this is reflected in the town houses which have been excavated.

Early Roman Silchester was defended by an earthwork enclosure, dating to the period when the region was still a client kingdom. The earthwork soon became obsolete as the town expanded. The earliest public building in the town may be the bath house, dating perhaps to the 60's AD. A second earthwork was erected around the expanded town. Late in the first century the forum and basilica - the administrative and public centre of the town - were constructed. The town by now was laid out on a grid-type street plan, the main street of which ran east-west.

The *forum* at Silchester was built around a *piazza*, with porticoes on three sides giving access to a range of rooms. The *basilica* was a large hall on the fourth side of the *piazza*. The forum would have formed the political and social focus of the town which would have been governed by an *ordo* (council) elected from certain classes of free citizens. This council would have met in the *basilica*. The law courts would also have operated here.

Silchester grew to have all the public buildings associated with Roman towns in Britain. In addition to the bath-house and *forum*, an amphitheatre was built close to the north-eastern corner of the outer earthwork, probably in the late first or early second centuries. A *mansio*, or hostelry for official travellers passing through Silchester, may also have existed. Several temples are known from Silchester, including a sixteen-sided structure.



Calleva Atrebatum: artist's impression of the Roman town of Silchester (HCC)

Silchester stood at the centre of a network of main routes leading to other major centres, with smaller towns along the way. All these neighbouring towns fall just outside the borders of present day Berkshire. The area occupied by the county must have served mainly as a rural hinterland to Silchester and towns to the west, north and east. Roads, important arteries of communication, were obvious foci for settlement particularly where there were road junctions or river crossings.

While many new roads were built by the Romans, some may have had their origins in the Iron Age. Near Silchester, for example, many late Iron Age sites are close to roads and tracks which were in use in the Roman period. River transport remained important, especially for the bulk transport of commodities.

The main road from London to the west passed through Silchester, crossing the Thames at Staines where civilian settlement flourished in the 1st and 2nd centuries. Several smaller settlements are known to have grown up along this important route. At **Wickham Buses** near Bracknell, a substantial Roman settlement grew up on the London to Silchester road, at a point where a track may have led north to the nearby Iron Age hillfort of Caesar's Camp. Limited investigations have shown that the site dates from the mid first century AD, shortly after the Claudian

conquest. Masonry structures have been located dating to the fourth century, indicating that the settlement remained prosperous in the later Roman period.

Further west, at **Finchampstead**, a Roman milestone was found in 1841, and several rectangular buildings have been revealed by air photographs on either side of the London to Silchester road. The settlement may have provided services to travellers.

The Antonine Itinerary - a route-list compiled in the late third century to aid administration - refers to a roadside station at *Spinis*. Although its exact location has yet to be found, the distances recorded in the Antonine Itinerary, and the many Roman finds made in the area, suggest that it was situated at Woodspeen, north of Newbury.

Around **Newbury**, modern development has obscured the course of the Roman road, but it would seem to have crossed the Kennet near Thatcham where there is evidence of a late Roman settlement with small industries and shops. The road may have forded the Lambourn at Speen. Newbury itself, located as it is on a crossing point of the Kennet, may also have been the site of Roman occupation, and many finds have been made there. There is evidence for a large settlement along the road to Enborne, south of the river, including a cremation cemetery and a possible villa.

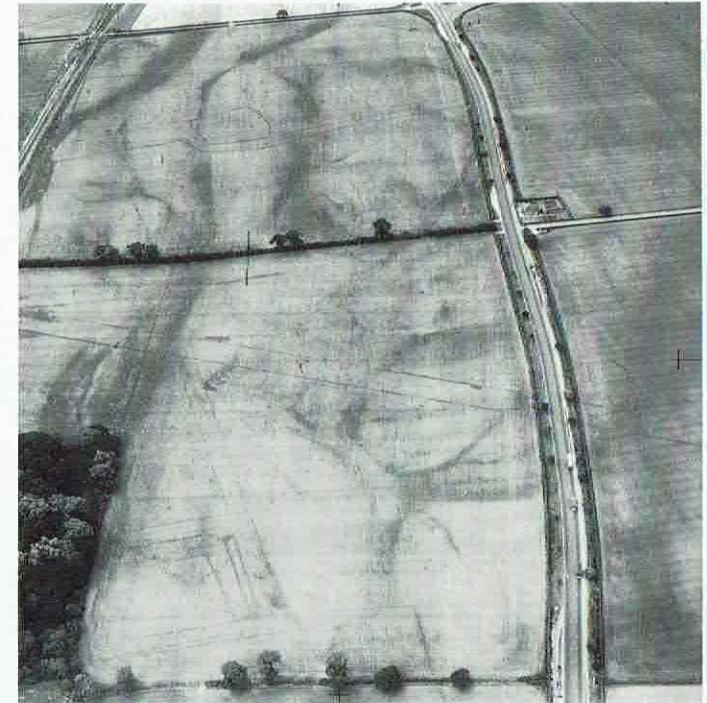
Further west again, near where the road splits to go to *Aquae Sulis* (Bath) and *Glevum* (Gloucester), there was a small settlement at Wickham. The road to Bath continued on out of the county to *Cunetio* (Mildenhall), while the other branch went via *Durocornovium* (Wanborough) to *Corinium* (Cirencester) and Gloucester.

The main north-south route through Silchester comes up from *Venta Belgarum* (Winchester) and continues northwards into the Midlands via Dorchester on Thames, where a *vicus* developed at what was probably the site of a Roman fort built to control the river crossings of the Thames and Thame. The road may have forded the Kennet near **Ufton Nervet** where cropmark enclosures, possibly a small farm, cluster around the junction of a road and a minor trackway. The road certainly passed through **Streatley**, which is generally supposed to have derived its name from it. There is likely to have been a fording point near Streatley, where an east-west trackway, the Icknield Way, crossed the Thames. Two milestones

(*millaria*) were reportedly found near here, but the exact findspot is uncertain and they have subsequently been moved.



Britannia in the third century



Roman road and trackway visible as cropmarks at Ufton Nervet (CUCAP)



Britannia in the fourth century

Fragments of another road have been identified heading northwards from Silchester towards the crossing of the Thames at Caversham. A further road, the Camlet Way, has been supposed to link Silchester to *Verulamium* (St Albans). This can be traced from the north as far as the Thames crossing near Cookham, though no trace has been found on the Berkshire side. It would seem probable however that a main road linked the area of dense settlement around the Weycock Hill temple near White Waltham to larger urban centres.

At the beginning of the third century, the province was divided into two - *Britannia Inferior* (Northern Britain), with its capital at York, and *Britannia Superior* (Southern Britain) with its capital at London. In the later third century, tribes from outside the Roman empire invaded the Roman provinces of Western Europe. Britain became cut off from Rome for a while and formed part of a breakaway empire. Reunited with the rest of the empire, Britain was divided into four provinces, with Berkshire occupying the western fringes of *Maxima Caesariensis*, which had its capital at London.

Rural Settlement and Economy

Incorporation into the Roman empire brought about major changes in agriculture. Population expansion and urban growth led to an increased demand for grain. The large standing army of some 40,000 to 60,000 men also had a wide-reaching economic effect, with industries such as pottery manufacture developing to supply the military. These changes in society led to an intensification of agricultural production. This is reflected in the common presence of corn-drying kilns on Romano British rural settlement sites. Corn drying kilns were oven-like structures in which cereals could be dried for storage or charred to aid threshing. The majority are found on chalk areas such as the Berkshire Downs, suggesting that this was an important area for the production of spelt wheat, since this type of wheat needs charring before threshing.



Corn drying kiln at Hampstead Marshall (NDM)

Many of the so-called "Celtic" fields on the Berkshire chalk, previously thought to be a survival of an Iron Age pattern may have been laid out between the first and third centuries AD. The formation of lynchets, or terraces on the Downs, in the early Roman period is further evidence of the intensification of arable agriculture in comparison to the Iron Age, when the Downs appear to have been used primarily for pasture. However, there is also evidence for considerable continuity of the rural landscape from Iron Age to Roman times.

These changes are also reflected in rural settlement patterns in Berkshire. Three main types of settlement can be distinguished: villas or villa estates; substantial farms; and small rural dwellings, the latter usually indicated only by finds of pottery and tile.



Celtic field system visible on the Berkshire Downs (RCHME)

In the west of the county on the Berkshire Downs settlement evidence is sparse. Here an estate density of 1 per 16 square kilometres has been suggested. What settlement there was seems to have favoured the southern fringes of the Downs and the valleys of the Kennet, Lambourn and Pang. Throughout the Roman period, the downland acted as an agricultural hinterland to Silchester.

In east Berkshire, a wide range of settlement types from villages to isolated farmsteads are known. There was dense settlement on the chalk with some nucleation, for example around the religious complex at Weycock Hill, near Waltham St Lawrence. Villas and villa estates were concentrated on the higher, well-drained chalk or the sands and gravels of the Reading Beds, with fewer known on the gravel terraces of the Thames Valley. No villas are known on the London Clay, possibly because the settlement pattern was different, with small holdings rather than larger estates, or perhaps because these areas generated insufficient profit. Wetter areas to the south, such as the Ruscombe Lakes, near Twyford appear to have seen little occupation but were probably linked to the villa estate economy, being used as summer pasture by settlements located on adjacent arable land.

Some Romano-British rural settlements developed from existing Iron Age sites. Excavations at the **Thames Valley Business Park, Reading**, located a small Iron Age settlement, enclosed by a ditch and bank, on slightly higher ground on the edge of the Thames floodplain. An Iron Age round-house within the enclosure was replaced by a rectangular structure with stone footings during early Roman times. The settlement expanded beyond the Iron Age enclosure in this period. The presence of imported pottery shows that the site was relatively prosperous. The site apparently declined during the third and fourth centuries AD.

Many Roman rural settlements had Iron Age precursors. Although life on a small rural dwelling probably changed little from the Iron Age to Roman periods, the increasing profitability of agriculture led to the development of wealthy agricultural estates, known as villas.



Painted wall plaster from Kintbury

The term villa covers a wide range of buildings from simple farmhouses to elaborate and grandiose buildings like that at Fishbourne near Chichester, thought to have been Cogidubnus' palace. The simplest and most common form of villa is the corridor type, in which a corridor gives access to a series of rooms arranged in a line. These would have been little more than farmhouses, and would probably have been half-timbered structures with stone footings. Villas were often extended and upgraded as a result of economic prosperity. A later form is the

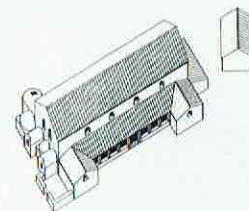
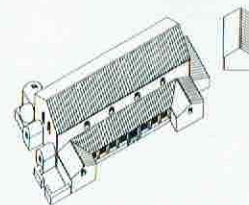
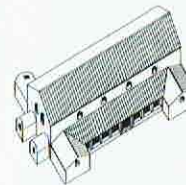
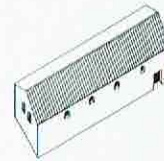
winged corridor house, where additional wings were constructed at either end of an existing corridor villa, often perpendicular to the corridor, allowing the allocation of public and private space.



Fragment of mosaic from Kintbury

From the late third century there was a widespread expansion of villa construction, presumably reflecting a period of prosperity and stability. In Berkshire few grandiose villas are known, but even simple farmhouses appear to have had tessellated mosaic floors and underfloor heating at this time. Many villas had bath houses and it is these structures which most commonly survive as they were probably the only buildings to be made entirely of stone. Some, such as that at Castle Hill, Maidenhead, also had painted walls and mosaic floors. In many cases, mosaics have often been destroyed by agriculture in the last few centuries, but are known from records made by antiquarians.

Maddale Farm on the Berkshire Downs, is a villa estate which has been the subject of much research. Constructed between the later second and mid third centuries the villa at Maddale Farm



Reconstruction of the villa at Cox Green showing the four main phases of development (AU)

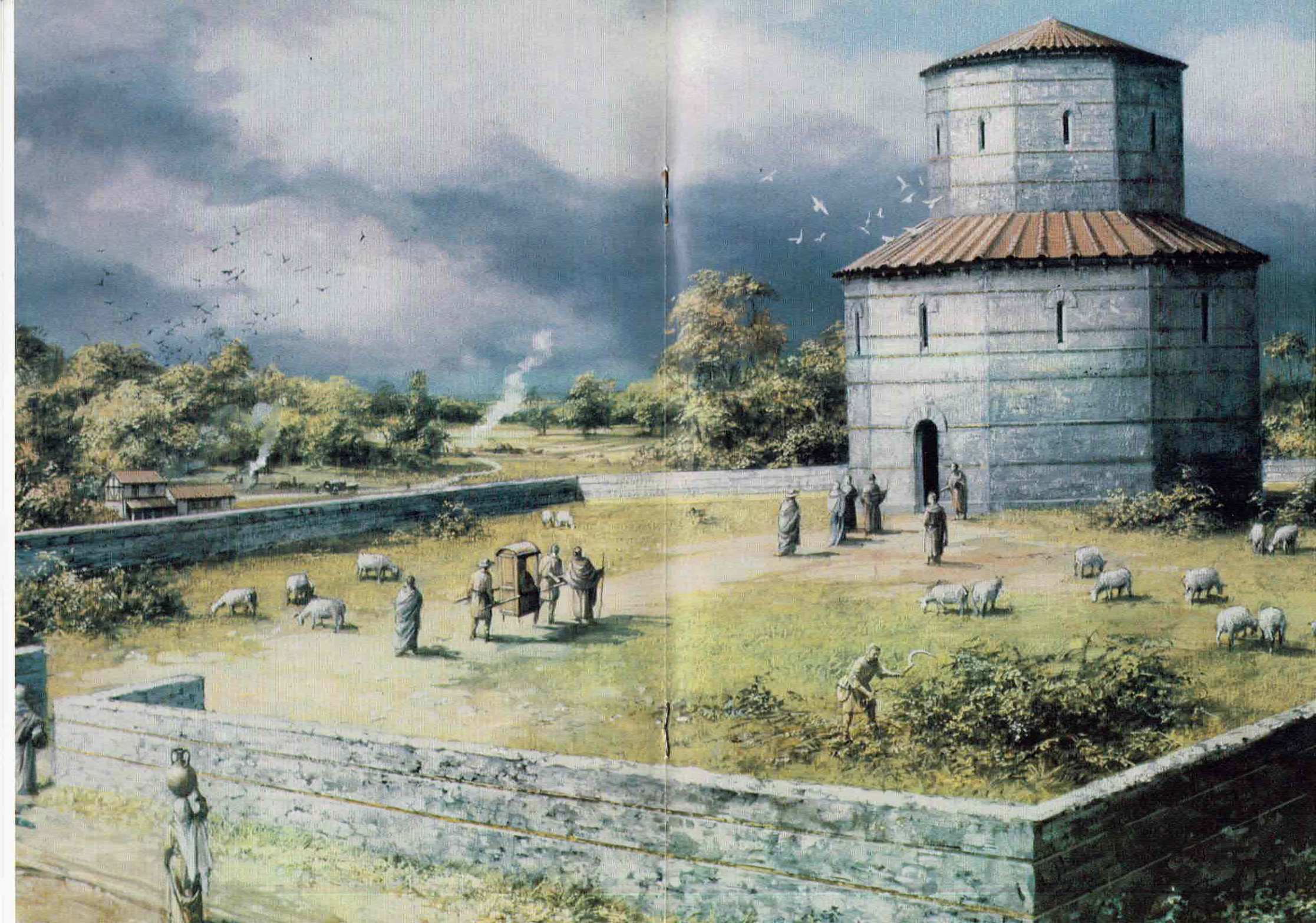
consisted of a building with a stone tiled roof, tessellated pavements and painted wall plaster. The estate consisted of this villa and an associated village-type settlement at Knighton Bushes, set among long narrow fields.

A reconstruction of the economy of the Maddale Farm estate suggests that it consisted of about 47 ha of arable land, and 850 ha of pasture. It has been estimated that this could support a population of between forty and eighty individuals, including a workforce of twenty to forty people. The estate might have kept 350-700 sheep, and an estimated 32 cattle. In addition to wool, meat and milk, the animals would have provided a source of manure, essential to maintain the fertility of the arable land. Such an estate might generate sufficient surplus produce to feed 50-120 people. The villa continued in use until the early fifth century.

At **Aldermaston** in the Kennet Valley, a bath house complex, which is all that survived of a late Roman villa, has been excavated. It was heated by means of a *hypocaust* (heating chamber) and was probably divided into two with a vestibule or changing room and *frigidarium* (cold bath) adjacent. It was built between the late third and mid fourth centuries. An array of non-local building materials in the bath house suggests that the villa was a fairly high-status site. The adjacent dwelling was probably of timber construction. The site was probably part of a larger farming settlement, the main focus of which lay to the west. The entire area has now been destroyed by gravel extraction.

Aerial photography suggested the presence of a building with a small outhouse and boundary ditches on three sides at **Cox Green** near Maidenhead. Excavation showed this to have started as a simple hall of mid second century date with a living room at its north-western end, and the rest of the building housing a kitchen and animal byres. The building was subsequently altered to create a winged corridor villa.

The villa was elaborated still further during the third century, and continued in use well into the fourth century. Several new rooms were added and the bath wing was altered and expanded. A new stoke hole and furnace were constructed and an apsed room was added, probably for the *labrum* where the bather could wash his hands or face prior to immersion in the plunge bath. A *laconicum*, for dry heat, may also have been built. After the mid fourth century the bath wing was simplified.

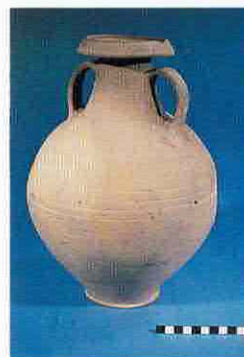


The winged corridor villa had a *hypocaust* heating system and a bath wing with *frigidarium* (cold room), *tepidarium* (warm room), *caldarium* (hot room), and *alveus* (hot plunge bath). A *piscina* (swimming pool) was also added with the *frigidarium*.



The bath suite at Cox Green villa under excavation (MF)

Trade and Industry



Globular amphora from Newbury (TG/NM)



Wooden barrel re-used as well lining, found at Silchester (TG/RM)

In late Iron Age Britain, internal trade between tribes in metals and other valuable commodities had begun to be supplemented by trade with the Roman empire. Luxury goods such as wine, oil and wheel-thrown pottery from the empire were exchanged for corn, cattle, hides and iron from Britain. Much of this trade, however, must have only benefited the ruling elite of Iron Age tribal society. Stability in the province and the development of a coin-based market economy provided the stimulus for a dramatic expansion in industry and trade under Roman rule. Improved communications facilitated and encouraged trade, both in goods produced in the Province and imports from the empire.

Initially, trade was principally for military supply and followed the Rhone/Rhine river route through the Roman provinces of western Europe. Water transport was probably preferred to overland routes and the Thames was navigable by small boat beyond Dorchester in Oxfordshire. Later, trade in luxury items imported by merchants for sale to the well-off in the province increased. Finds of these luxury goods at villa sites indicate the status, prestige and wealth of the owners.

Evidence for the trade in olive oil and wine is found in the widespread presence of *amphorae*, the ceramic vessels in which these commodities were transported. In Berkshire, fragments of *amphorae* have been recovered from Newbury. Two types of *amphorae* were common: an elongated form with a pointed base for storage in a rack and twin handles at the neck, used to transport wine; and a shorter, globular or fat-bellied form (such as that from Newbury) used to transport olive oil. The vessels would probably have been corked and sealed with wax. As in the Iron Age, luxury commodities would have been expensive, and therefore confined to the new elite of wealthy landowners. Another commodity which was probably transported in *amphorae* or similar vessels was a type of fish-sauce called *garum*, produced in north-west Gaul (France) and Spain.

Wine was also transported in large wooden barrels. Examples of these were found at Silchester where they had been re-used as well-linings.

The coming of the Romans saw the advent of large-scale commercial potteries trading their products throughout the country. The army was one of the main markets for such potteries. As the market economy of Roman Britain became more established, many regional pottery industries developed to supply the civilian markets. Some pottery forms produced in these regional potteries were influenced by Iron Age forms. High-quality pottery continued to be imported from other provinces in the Roman empire. The British potteries concentrated on producing more everyday



Coarse-ware pottery found at Silchester (TG/RM)

domestic wares for cooking and the transportation of commodities; attempts to produce quality pottery in imitation of continental forms failed. However, several British potteries successfully produced their own finewares.

Modern Berkshire lies between two major Roman pottery-producing regions, Oxfordshire and Hampshire. The Oxfordshire potteries, with kilns located in and to the east of Oxford, were active from the late first to early second century, and third century to the end of the Roman period, producing fine red coated wares similar in appearance to continental forms, *mortaria* (a type of

large domestic vessel) and colour coated wares. River transport may have been an important factor in the widespread distribution of this pottery in central southern Britain. In Hampshire, the potteries at Alice Holt near Farnham began production in the first century and flourished in the third and fourth centuries as major producers. Pottery from both these regions is common in Berkshire. Some smaller scale industries were rurally based, and pottery



Fineware pottery found at Silchester (TG/RM)

manufacture was generally carried out on a seasonal basis in the summer. A number of kilns have been found at **Hamstead**

Marshall, near Newbury, perhaps part of such a small rural industry. Another example may have been at Bradfield where large grey-ware storage jars were produced.

One of the most important of the finewares imported from the empire was samian-ware. This was a fine tableware which was mass-produced in factories in southern and central Gaul in the first and second century AD. Made of a fine grained, reddish fabric, the type is famous for its glossy red slip finish: many examples also feature moulded ornamentation applied to the outside of the vessels.



Imported samian ware found at Newbury (TG/NM)

The pottery was exported throughout the western empire. Samian ware has been found in well-dated archaeological deposits, and also shows frequent changes in style. Its presence on British sites can help archaeologists determine the date of occupation of the sites.

Glass was mostly imported, although a small amount was produced in the Province. Examples of Roman glass have been recovered from **Tileplace Farm, Old Windsor** and the Roman cemetery at **Newbury station**.



Glass Vessel from Newbury (TG/NM)

Metal smelting in Roman Britain, as in the Iron Age, would have been carried out close to the source of the metal ore. In the Iron Age, metals such as iron were often traded in 'pig' form (ie. as a smelted mass), and there is some evidence that blacksmiths based at larger settlements such as *oppida* or hillforts produced artefacts at the site of use. Similarly, the manufacture of metal artefacts is known to have taken place in some Roman towns. At **Silchester**, for example, pewter moulds have been found.

Following the Roman conquest, Britain's iron ore resources were exploited both by official, government ironworks, and civilian

operations. It has been estimated that this large scale production was such that a substantial surplus over the immediate requirements of the province would have been available for export to the rest of the empire.

In east Berkshire, there is evidence of local iron working on a modest scale, exploiting local iron ore sources. A number of undated iron slag heaps have been located in the vicinity of the London-Silchester road near **Wickham Bushes** and Finchampstead. At **Thames Valley Business Park**, a number of industrial pits were excavated on an area of higher ground within the Thames floodplain, associated with a small settlement. The pits contained quantities of burnt soil and slag, suggesting that they were quenching pits - for cooling hot metal artefacts in cold water - and were associated with small-scale metalworking. Such localised, small-scale metalworking seems to have become more common in later Roman times. This may reflect a reduced export market resulting from difficulties elsewhere in the empire.



Iron tools from Silchester (TG/RM)



Metalworking tools from Silchester (TG/RM)

In addition to what must have been a prized and valuable iron industry in Roman Britain, the provincial government was also involved in the mining of lead, tin, silver and gold. The latter two metals were important because of their intrinsic value and their use in Roman coinage. Imperial coinage was predominantly silver-based, and coins contained a high percentage of the metal. However, as the empire became more politically unstable during the third and fourth centuries AD, the silver content of the coinage fell dramatically. As a result, the value of the coinage became debased: when a new coin was issued, its silver content - and hence its value in the eyes of the populace - was often lower than that of the coin it was supposed to replace, and existing coins were often not withdrawn from circulation.



Group of coins from Silchester (TG/RM)

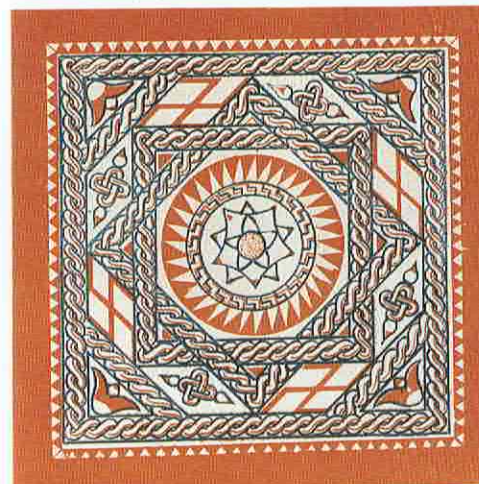
In late Roman Britain, people often 'clipped' coins of high silver content - literally by trimming pieces off the edge - and forgeries abounded. As the economic situation deteriorated, these forgeries became effectively accepted as legitimate currency in Britain. Debased coinage, of little face or intrinsic value, was frequently buried in hoards as it was effectively worthless.

In late Roman Britain, people often 'clipped' coins of high silver content - literally by trimming pieces off the edge - and forgeries abounded. As the economic



Clipped siliqua compared to an intact example (TG/NM)

Tessellated pavement discovered at Basildon, 1839 (SA)



Coins are important archaeologically because it is known when they were made and how long they were in circulation for. This provides good dating evidence for sites where they are found. The quantities and types of coins found on sites can give an indication of the wealth and status of the occupants, but also reflect the volume of coinage in circulation at any one time. Coin hoards, however, are frequently indices of economic uncertainty. Examples of hoards known from Berkshire include those from **Aldworth**, **Waltham St Lawrence** and **Thatcham Newtown**.

Mosaics were a popular form of interior decoration in villas and town houses in later Roman times, and their production must have been a profitable industry. It is thought that there were four or five 'schools' of mosaicists in Britain. Each school probably consisted of a group of craftsmen working in a common style and using common designs. The Central Southern School covered the area around Chichester, Winchester and Silchester; examples of mosaics of the Cirencester-based school are also known from Silchester, suggesting that Berkshire was perhaps peripheral to the areas covered by these two schools.



Coin Hoard found at Aldworth (TG/NM)

The mosaic industry was probably urban-based, with craftsmen visiting rural villas to install the pavements. It is thought that complicated sections of mosaics may have been constructed in town workshops and transported to the villas for installation. Over thirty mosaic floors have been recorded at **Silchester**, indicating the wealth of the town in later Roman times. During railway construction in 1839, two tessellated pavements were discovered in the parish of **Basildon**. Cropmarks visible on aerial photographs suggest that the discoveries are part of a larger complex, probably including a villa: other pavements and a wall were found nearby.

Religion

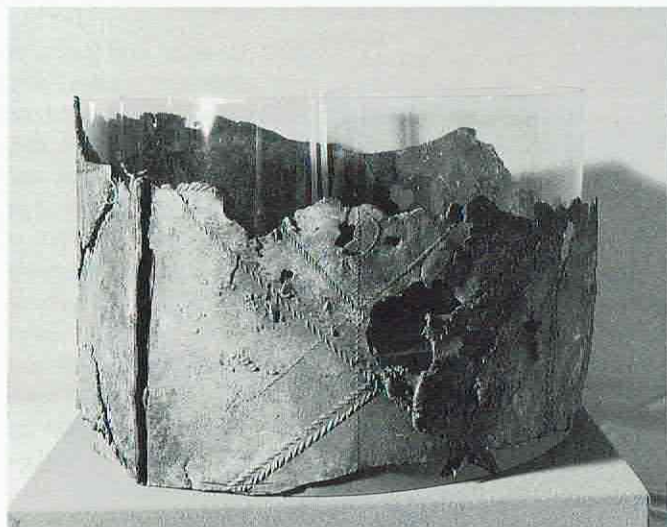
Although Roman gods were introduced to Britain as a result of the conquest, Celtic pagan deities and traditions continued to be observed in the Roman period in a Romanised form. Celtic gods were associated with natural features such as rivers, and tended to be given human form by the Romans. In some cases, Roman counterparts were adopted to represent native deities. This Romanisation of Celtic beliefs and traditions contributed to the spread of Roman ideals and administration. Evidence for the worship of particular gods is derived largely from inscriptions.

Temples developed in a similar way, amalgamating Roman and Celtic traditions. They commonly consisted of a central *cella* or room, either square or polygonal in plan, surrounded by a concentric portico. Following on Iron Age Celtic tradition, the *cella* was often built within a sacred enclosure surrounded by a *temenos* or wall.

Christianity reached Britain in the late third century when it was still outlawed. At **Silchester**, a building believed to have been a church has been excavated. At **Caversham**, a well discovered during gravel extraction was found to contain part of a circular lead tank originally about 0.7m in diameter and 0.55m high. The tank was decorated with four rectangular panels, each with a saltire cross in herringbone relief and a frieze of S-shapes above. One panel also

bore the Christian Chi-Rho symbol - Greek letters spelling the first part of Christ's name. More than a dozen Christian lead tanks are known in Britain. The tanks may have been used for ritual ablution rather than actual baptism. The tanks have been dated to the fourth century on stylistic grounds, but appear to have gone out of use in the late fourth century.

Lead tank discovered at Caversham, showing early Christian symbols (RM)



Bronze Brooch or fibula found near Lambourne (TG/NM)



Bronze head of Venus found near Chieveley (TG/NM)

Chi-Rho symbol



Gold ring found near Chieveley (TG/NM)

Pagan deities continued to be worshipped in late Roman Britain. At **Weycock Hill**, Waltham St Lawrence, an octagonal temple probably associated with a Romano-Celtic deity is known. Finds of Roman material on the hilltop site northwest of Waltham St Lawrence gave rise to the local name of Castle Field. Excavations in 1847 exposed the foundations of the building and revealed it to be octagonal in plan, consisting of two concentric walls of flint with ironstone coursing. Other polygonal temples are known from Silchester and Chelmsford. Recent air survey has revealed a striking cropmark pattern which clearly shows the concentric octagonal walls, together with a previously unknown *temenos*. The site stands in an area of dense settlement on the chalk in a loop of the Thames and may have been a religious focus throughout the period. There are several villas in the area and evidence suggesting a settlement close to the temple site itself.

During the first two centuries of Roman occupation, cremation and urn burial was a more common form of **funeral practice** than inhumation burial, which became more common in the later period. In towns, burial took place in official cemeteries beyond the boundaries of the settlement, as it was illegal for adults to be buried within the town itself. In the countryside, however, individual graves or small groups of burials were more common. The dead were buried in shrouds, wooden or lead coffins, or sometimes, in the case of the wealthy, in elaborate tombs or mausolea. Grave goods such as pottery, or personal ornaments such as bronze brooches, were commonly interred with the deceased, depending on the wealth and social status of the individual.

The spread of Christianity saw an alteration of burial practices. Christian inhumations were buried in neat rows, usually oriented east-west, in contrast to the previous, less ordered traditions. Grave goods were not part of the Christian burial tradition: however, many Christian burials incorporating grave goods are known, presumably reflecting the transitional change associated with the new religion and perhaps also a reluctance on the part of the populace to wholeheartedly abandon their former practices.

Two areas of an extensive cemetery were excavated in 1970 and 1972 at **Down Place, Bray**. The majority of the burials were inhumations, though some cremations in pottery vessels were also recorded. Grave goods associated with the burials date them to the 4th and 5th centuries AD.

The Decline of Roman Britain

By the early fifth century AD, the Roman Empire had become fragmented and unstable. Internal political divisions and factionalism within the army had resulted in the splitting of the empire into two. The imperial succession had long been decided by the military, and it was not uncommon for several emperors - usually military men from the provincial armies - to be contesting the thrones of the two empires. Political turmoil was accompanied by economic problems and persistent assaults by tribes from beyond the eastern frontiers of the empire. These tribal attacks were the result of a large scale population migration from the east. In order to defend the empire from these attacks, Rome attempted through diplomacy to secure support from rival tribes. Mercenaries were hired from such tribes to bolster provincial defences.

The situation on the continent meant that Rome was unable to provide assistance to the province in defending itself against the growing number of barbarian raids which reached British shores. The army in Britain, together with civil leaders, found itself effectively running an independent state from about 410 AD.

The end of Roman rule in Britain was therefore one of gradual decline. It is not known how long the country continued to be governed as a unit. There is evidence for the continued occupation of Roman towns into the later fifth century, although it is unclear how long civic administration survived. It is probable that life changed relatively little for the majority of the population, although the end of direct Roman rule meant the demise of the coin-based market economy: lifestyles may have reverted to something closer to that of the Iron Age rather than Roman civilisation. A gradual break-up of the province into self-governing local communities was the probable result.

In the immediate post-Roman period, evidence for continued occupation within the walled towns such as Silchester may reflect a further increase in raiding across the Channel and North Sea. The presence in Britain of Germanic mercenaries who had become established in some numbers in the early fifth century may have encouraged others from this part of Europe to view Britain as a potential new homeland as they came under pressure from migrants to the east. By the middle of the fifth century, the

barbarian raiders had begun to settle in Britain. Anglo-Saxon Britain developed as this settlement increased and the incomers gradually became more dominant. Small kingdoms grew up as the Anglo-Saxons established themselves over the native population of post-Roman Britain. These changes are reflected in Berkshire's archaeological record, and are discussed in the next booklet in this series, *Medieval Berkshire*.

Where to see Roman remains

Although an important town in Roman times, Silchester today is a small village set in farmland. Much of the town defences survive as a bank faced with a stone wall. Public rights of way allow access around the perimeter of the walls, and also cross the centre of the Roman town, now pasture.

Many parts of Silchester have been excavated, and many of the finds made can be seen at **Reading Museum** together with other Roman finds from east Berkshire. At **Newbury Museum**, Roman finds from west Berkshire are displayed. Many of the objects illustrated in this publication are on public display or housed in these two local authority museums.



Berkshire County Council runs a campaign to conserve and enhance the county's environment and to encourage others to do the same, under the banner of "*Greening Beautiful Berkshire*".

The campaign promotes a range of initiatives concerned with:

Reducing pollution, including litter.

*

Helping to conserve global resources.

*

Promoting environmental understanding

*

Making Berkshire's environment safe, diverse and attractive.

For further information about the "Greening Beautiful Berkshire" campaign please contact County Environment at Berkshire County Council, Shire Hall, Shinfield Park, Reading, RG2 9XA (Tel. 01734 234158)

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