Roman settlement patterns in the Letchworth Garden City area

Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews
NHDC Archaeology Officer
The Romans in Letchworth?

- Julius Caesar invaded in 55 and 54 BC
  - Established client kingdoms
- Claudius invaded in AD 43
  - After a coup in one of the kingdoms
- Britain was not overrun by toga wearing Latin speakers
  - And North Hertfordshire had no military presence ever
- Incomers account for under 5% of the population of Roman Britain
  - Military personnel, imperial government, traders and exiles
- Huge continuity from the Late Iron Age
  - So no men in metal frocks here!
So what do I mean by “Roman Letchworth”?

- “Roman” is the term I use for a period
  - From the annexation of Britain as a province in AD 43
  - To its abandonment by the imperial government in 411
- It’s a chronological, not ethnic designation
  - Like “Norman” or “Tudor”
Historical background

- From c 750 BC
  - Era of agricultural improvement
    - Woodland clearance
    - Heavy plough
    - *Triticum aestivocompactum* (bread wheat)
  - Stock improvements
  - Settlement entirely rural
    - Individual farmsteads
Settlement types

- Enclosed farmsteads
  - Oval and subrectangular
    - Ditches and banks
    - Sometimes massive

- Open farmsteads

- Relationship to fields
  - Tracks
  - Coaxial (‘Celtic’) field systems
Buildings

- The roundhouse
  - NEVER call them huts!
  - Basic type since the Bronze Age (from c 2500 BC)
    - Become smaller in south after c 400 BC
  - Double-ring and single-ring forms

- A few late rectangular buildings
Politics

- ‘Tribes’ and ‘kings’
  - Power bloc in south-east under Cunobelinos
    - Romanising policy
    - Growth of urbanisation
  - Peripheral areas using coins
    - Not kings but dual magistracy?
- The north and west
  - Economic decline following change in trade routes
  - Probably more centralised than usually thought
The crisis of the early 40s

- **Verica**
  - Expelled from kingdom
  - Sought Roman aid
  - Reinstated

- Romans decide to do something about the heirs of Cunobelinos
  - Siege and capture of *Camulodunon*
  - Establishment of provincial administration
Roman Britain

- Roman invasion AD 43
  - Little impact on the peasant economy
  - Impact on élites
- No technological innovation
  - Depends on Iron Age subsistence techniques
  - Britain already exporting grain before the conquest
The conquest of Britain

- South and east conquered within five years
  - Revolt of Boudica AD 60
  - Northern England 71-4
  - Scotland 77-84

- Consolidation
  - Establishment of *civitates*
  - Establishment of *limes* and permanent garrisons
Britain within the Empire

- The establishment of *civitates*
  - Based on tribal system
  - Towns as centres of local government
- The establishment of defence
  - Fortresses and forts
  - Road network
Structure of government

- **Emperor as military leader**
  - Theoretically rules through the Senate
  - Controls provinces through Governors
  - Procurator responsible for finance

- **Increasing bureaucracy**
  - Third century reorganisation
The economy 1

- **Money and taxation**
  - Roman Empire as parasitic system
  - Coins as propaganda

- **Agriculture**
  - Mixed farming
  - Export of grain
  - Private land ownership
  - Fourth-century *coloni*
The economy 2

- Manufacturing
  - Explosion in quantity and variety of finds
  - Craft specialisation
  - Regional distribution

- Trade
  - Luxuries from Mediterranean

- A consumer-led economy?
  - Certainly consumerist!
The ‘End of Roman Britain’

- Traditional date 410
  - Poor authority
- Part of general breakdown in the West
  - ‘Dominoes’ scenario
- How much did it mean to the Britons?
  - Reputation for being independent-minded
The rural landscape

- Roads
  - Military in origin
  - Sometimes ignore field systems
  - Local roads not straight and not embanked

- Hierarchy of settlement
  - ‘Cities’, towns, villages, hamlets, villas and farmsteads
Villages and hamlets

- Once thought not to exist
  - Relatively commonplace
  - Agriculture and small-scale industry
- Little sense of organisation
  - Catsgore (Somerset)
  - Chisenbury Warren (Wilts)
  - Crosby Ravensworth (Cumb)
Farmsteads

- Early farms resemble Iron Age precursors
  - Some develop into romanised farms (villas)
  - Others remain little changed
- Often stigmatised as ‘native settlements’
  - Actually dominant settlement type of Roman Britain
Villas

- Huge range of types
  - Prosperous farmhouses
    - Little Wymondley bypass
  - Estate centres
    - Gorhambury
  - Stately Homes
    - Radwell
  - Palaces
    - Wallington?
The collapse of the Romano-British system

- **Towns apparently deserted during the fifth century**
  - Last buildings often date from 390-400
    - With some well-known exceptions
      - *Verulamium*
  - Collapse of economy
    - Infrastructure on which towns depend vanishes

- **Other Romanised forms disappear**
  - No new villas after c 400
So what are we looking at?

- The local evidence
  - Mostly consists of finds without context
    - Archaeology not appreciated when the Garden City was founded
  - Some more recent excavations
    - Blackhorse Road 1957-74
    - High Avenue 1997-9
- But difficult to synthesise
  - Because it is so disparate
The later Iron Age

- In the first century BC, there are several occupation sites
  - Wilbury Hill
    - Houses built over demolished defences
  - Blackhorse Road
    - An enclosed farmstead
  - St Nicholas’s School, Norton
    - Difficult to characterise
The Iron Age at Blackhorse Road

- Icknield Way established
  - Substantial ditches mark its course
  - Gap leads through to enclosures to the north
- Four enclosures were constructed
  - They represent separate farmsteads
    - Not all in use at the same time
  - Date from the 5\textsuperscript{th}/6\textsuperscript{th} century BC to the Roman conquest
Roman settlements

- Blackhorse Road
  - Iron Age site abandoned
  - Activity shifted to the east
- St Nicholas’s School and Church Lane, Norton
  - Pottery, glass and a fourth-century coin found in 1907
- High Avenue/Sollershott West
  - Finds reported since the 1930s
  - Small scale excavation in 1955
  - Settlement excavated on old Grammar School playing field in 1990s
Roman finds

- **Hawthorn Hill, Norton**
  - Discovered by Percival Westell
  - Poorly dug and recorded
  - We will be returning there in March!

- **43 Archers Way**
  - Reported during construction work in 1935
    - “Rectangular occupation site”

- **Haselfoot**
  - Pottery and animal bone

- **Two Chimneys**
  - Discoveries made in a sand pit and during the construction of the public house

- **Spring Road**
  - Iron horseshoe and first century pottery
Pottery from Nevells Road

- Roman finds made in 1906
  - Included “evidence for open sewers”
    - These are probably drainage ditches
- There is a small collection of finds
  - Roman pottery including samian ware
  - Animal bones
Burial discovered by William Ransom
  * No further information!

Finds made in 1961
  * Rear of Puncharden Hall
  * Consist of cattle and deer bone with Roman pottery
    * Found at a depth of six feet
    * Roman quarry or pit?
The Icknield Way

- Supposed to be the oldest trackway in Britain
  - Seen as a major route from East Anglia to the Thames Valley
  - Used in the distribution of flint from Grimes Graves
- But there is no real evidence from before the Late Iron Age
  - It is seen at Baldock and Blackhorse Road
What does it all mean?

- The material is widespread
  - There are coins from almost every street
  - There is pottery over much of the town
    - Often associated with animal bone
- Few features have been observed
  - Those at Hawthorn Hill, High Avenue and Nevells Road are the exceptions
  - But they give us an idea of what’s going on
Settlement patterns

- **Areas with features and/or Roman finds**
  - Tend to be close to the tops of low hills
    - This seems to be a real pattern
  - Unusual location for Roman sites

- **The features suggest small areas of habitation**
  - Perhaps groups of farmsteads
    - Hamlets
Intervisibility

- The location of the sites makes them intervisible
  - Which means we can predict where others ought to be
    - Eastholm Green, Leisure Centre, Jackman’s Estate

- Why are they intervisible?
  - Suggests a network and some sort of control
    - A single estate?
    - To feed Baldock?
The challenge

- This looks like an estate run by bailiffs
  - They were usually based in villas
    - So where are they?
- Most of the *territorium* of Baldock has a villa in each medieval parish
  - So there should be three in Letchworth Garden City.
    - Can we find them?