



Historic England

Roman Settlements

Introductions to Heritage Assets



Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which have previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to Roman settlements. This broad category covers all types of Roman-period civilian settlements from isolated farmsteads and villas to small and large Roman towns, taking in civilian settlements associated with military establishments. Descriptions of the asset type and its development as well as its associations and a brief chronology are included. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

This document has been prepared by Pete Wilson and edited by Joe Flatman, Pete Herring and Dave Went. It is one of a series of 41 documents. This edition published by Historic England October 2018. All images © Historic England unless otherwise stated.

Please refer to this document as:

Historic England 2018 *Roman Settlements: Introductions to Heritage Assets*.
Swindon. Historic England.

HistoricEngland.org.uk/listing/selection-criteria/scheduling-selection/ihas-archaeology/

Front cover

Chisenbury Warren settlement and fields, Wiltshire.
Romano-British village.

Introduction

This broad category covers all types of Roman-period civilian settlements from isolated farmsteads to the largest Roman towns, taking in civilian settlements associated with military establishments. The latter are broadly divided into two groups: *canabae* associated with fortresses (for example York north-east of the River Ouse), and *vici* associated with forts, such as Housesteads (Northumberland). In the Roman period there may similarly have been accepted legal distinctions between these, and inscriptional and other evidence points to *vicani*, at least, having a recognised legal status and could collectively raise money, administer funds and hold land.

Major towns are a complex grouping, including in the early Roman period *coloniae* (chartered towns), that is towns founded as veteran settlements for retired legionaries (including Colchester, Gloucester and Lincoln). Later in the Roman period further towns were promoted to the status of *colonia*, for example York south-west of the Ouse and possibly London. A further type of chartered town of lesser status was the municipium, Verulamium (St Albans, Hertfordshire) being the only certain example in England.

In some cases major towns developed from settlements associated with fortresses that were given up (for instance Wroxeter, Shropshire), while others developed on sites that had been occupied by forts. However, there is the over-arching issue of what is meant by 'major'. All *civitas* (regional administrative) capitals were administratively important, but were not necessarily large: Caister-St-Edmund, Norfolk (*Venta Icenorum*), was only 14 ha within the walls. In addition, the legal status of towns could change, as in the case of Carlisle (*Luguvalium* (*Carvetiorum*?)) which probably became the *civitas* capital of the Carvetii in the 3rd century AD.

By the late 4th century AD, four towns, generally accepted to be London, Cirencester, Lincoln and York, had all been promoted to the status of provincial capitals. It used to be accepted that there were no 'pre-Roman towns' in Britain, although Late Iron Age *oppida* were often described as 'proto-urban'. However, this has now been shown to be incorrect, and work at Silchester (Hampshire) for example, has revealed elements of an 'urban-type plan' of pre-conquest date. Many Roman towns of all sizes developed out of civil settlements initially associated with forts, but equally many of the minor towns, called by some commentators 'secondary agglomerations', had other origins.

In the countryside the situation is equally complex, both with regard to the range of site types and sizes and in terms of origins. For many years rural research concentrated on villas as they were most visible archaeologically and a popular type of site to research and excavate – in essence a range of sites that are probably mostly upmarket farming estate centres demonstrating wealth and intrusive structural types, although that is not necessarily exclusively the case. Lullingstone is a possible exception, which may not have been primarily a farming establishment.

Generally villas can be classified as either major or minor on the basis of size and embellishment, but there are also what may be termed palatial sites. Fishbourne (West Sussex) is the key early site which can be reasonably regarded as a palace, and there are also very substantial later Roman sites, such as Woodchester (Gloucestershire.) which are readily distinguishable from the usual type of major villa.

Other rural sites come in many forms: polyfocal farmsteads, previously termed 'aggregate villages', often consist of a group of farmsteads; compact villages comprise much more extensive spreads of settlement activity consisting of small rectilinear compounds; linear villages (or 'ladder settlements') such as Chisenbury Warren, Wiltshire (Figure 1) or the Heslerton, North Yorkshire '30 m OD settlement zone', are dominated by a single axis street or trackway; while isolated farmsteads are typified by rectilinear or curvilinear enclosures.

Additionally there are sites that are perhaps best regarded as 'rural' but which display what may be termed 'urban' attributes. That is especially the case with the large number of roadside settlements that focus on major and other Roman roads and display elements of planning that morphologically set them apart from most linear villages. Such sites probably 'face both ways' drawing their existence both from rural activities such as farming, but also acting as local foci for trade and, where possible, exploiting their location on the road.

Other settlement types in the Roman countryside included places with specialist functions, such as

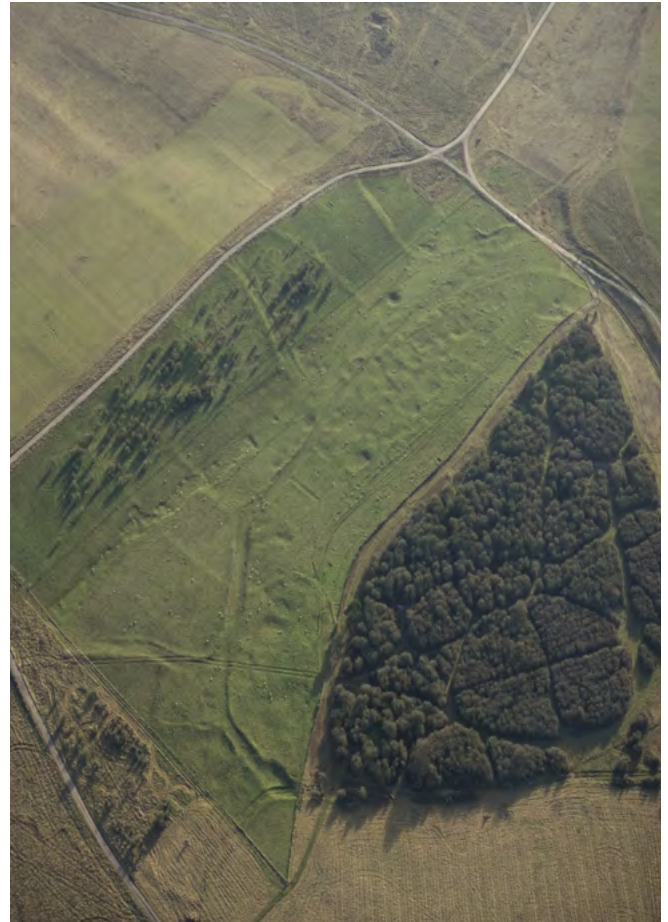


Figure 1
Chisenbury Warren settlement and fields, Wiltshire.
Romano-British village.

temple and mining complexes. Some might aspire to the appellation minor town, Bath as a temple complex possibly being an extreme example. Others were more restricted in extent and some, such as the mining settlement at Charterhouse-on-Mendip (Somerset), which were associated with a fort for at least part of their existence ought be regarded as a specialised form of *vicus*.

1 Description

Both major and minor towns can have complex plans and incorporate a wide variety of specialist buildings such as *mansiones*, *mutationes* (inns and posting houses for officials using the Imperial Post – *cursus publicus*) and temples, but only major towns had public buildings such as the *forum basilica* (loosely the ‘administrative centre’) and public baths. However, administrative status did not necessarily dictate size, and some *civitas* capitals were very small.

Issues of size are complicated by the fact that most towns started as unwalled settlements; those that later acquired walls did not generally see the full extent of the occupied area enclosed and occupation continued outside the walls - and in some places extra-mural settlement expanded post-enclosure.

The internal plans of the major towns and some minor towns incorporated a planned street grid. That was not necessarily a primary feature, as demonstrated at Silchester where some substantial early buildings are aligned without reference to what appears a later street plan. Many minor towns show little evidence of planning, other than in relation to major routes through the settlement; indeed the presence of a river crossing or road junction may be the *raison d'être* of the settlement or at least its continuance after the abandonment of the fort if it originated as a *vicus*. Some minor towns remained undefended throughout their history, while others acquired earth or stone defences often, but not exclusively, later in the Roman period.

Rural settlements of all forms are even more diverse in plan-form than the towns, but again the importance of routeways in their morphology is often key (Figure 2). ‘Ladder systems’ and linear villages especially are extended roadside complexes of settlement enclosures, paddocks

and fields. Here the domestic and subsidiary structures can be of traditional ‘roundhouse type’, or rectilinear structures implying ‘Roman influence’, or combinations of the two.



Figure 2
Grieve's Ash settlement and fields, Northumberland.
Late Iron Age and Romano-British settlements
and fields.

The elements of Polyfocal Farmsteads can be individually enclosed or set within a larger enclosing compound; alternatively they consist of unenclosed clusters of buildings, yards and ancillary structures, set close to one another, again sometimes in association with trackways. Houses may be circular or rectilinear and be accompanied by other structures such as storage barns and corn dryers. Small-scale industrial activity is sometimes present too. At Knook Down East, Wiltshire, at least four compounds are identifiable (Figure 3).

Compact Villages consist of small rectilinear compounds, open components, square and rectilinear structures, densely concentrated, inter-connected via a series of streets and lanes. They can cover enormous areas – Charlton Down, Wiltshire (Figure 4), is at least 25 ha in area. These

sites often incorporate a large open space that is 'village green' like in character. Evidence for complex water management in the form of leats, ponds and reservoirs has been noted.



Figure 3
Settlement, fields and trackway, Knook Down East, Wiltshire. A Romano-British village.



Figure 4
Settlement, fields and trackway, Charlton Down, Wiltshire. A Romano-British village.

Isolated Farmsteads are typified by rectilinear or curvilinear enclosures rarely more than 1 ha in area within which there is evidence for a range of domestic buildings and associated structures. They are normally defined by internal banks and external ditches, usually furnished with one main entrance; however, open farmsteads such as Park Brow, West Sussex, are also known.

Major and minor villas are distinguished from other rural settlements by the degree of adoption of 'Roman' traits, with rectilinear buildings forming the bulk of the structures, although ovoid and circular structures are known at sites such as Beadlam, North Yorkshire. Basic plan forms for the main structures include cottage house, winged corridor, courtyard and aisled houses. The largest sites can incorporate multiple courtyards, often distinguished as 'domestic' and 'agricultural', although apparently domestic structures – often aisled halls, possibly for estate workers and/or a 'bailiff' – can appear in the lesser courtyard. Embellishments of the main house can include mosaics and wall painting, internal bath suites and multiple ranges of rooms (Figure 5). The large sites may be expressions of the wealth of a particular family, but it seems clear on some sites that the domestic complex and buildings were occupied by multiple families, perhaps indicative of sub-division by inheritance. Other structures can include secondary bath suites (for estate workers), shrines or *nymphaea*, and in the case of Lullingstone (Kent) (Figure 6) at least, a house-church. With the exception of Fishbourne, few of the very substantial 'palatial' sites have been extensively explored; nevertheless, at all of these the investment in sumptuous facilities and lavish decoration is clear.



Figure 5
Great Witcombe Roman villa, Gloucestershire. Visible remains of the North-West Range looking east.



Figure 6
Lullingstone Roman villa, Kent. Overall site plan showing all known buildings and the relative lack of agricultural buildings expected of a 'typical' villa.

The nature of construction varies widely, reflecting function, status, and the availability of local building materials. Stone-founded buildings are fairly commonplace, and sometimes a timber superstructure, either timber-framed or post-built, may be assumed. Both urban and rural buildings (for instance, Frocester villa, in Gloucestershire, where this was suggested by massive foundations) could be of more than one storey. Typically locally-quarried stone and locally-manufactured tiles and other materials were employed in buildings; however, the higher the status of structures, or the degree of official involvement

in the settlement or building, the more likely it is that expensive and imported materials would be employed.

2 Chronology

While the first Roman-period towns are largely official creations and created early in the period, lesser settlements in large part reflect the development of the province, again except where official involvement skews the pattern. Those settlements that either start as *vici* associated with forts, or develop as a result of a geographical position, such as road junctions and river crossings, tend to expand and develop through time.

Exceptions may be seen: settlements associated with *mansiones* (official inns) where it is possible that the primary driver for the development of the settlement was the need to service the *mansio*; with industrial activity, such as pottery production (Brampton, Norfolk) or salt extraction (Droitwich, Worcestershire); and with religious sites, such as Bath. Other 'untypical' sites include Fishbourne Palace and, apparently contemporary with that, the early villas on the Sussex coastal plain, such as Angmering, and the early and short lived villa at Holme House, North Yorkshire, near Piercebridge.

General trends in settlement development included changes from primarily timber buildings to ones constructed from more durable materials, and by spatial expansion, although in rural

locations a dislocation in the settlement pattern in the 3rd century AD is common with sites being abandoned and field systems realigned. Similarly, the 3rd century AD has been argued as the beginning of the decline for major Roman towns – in part possibly a consequence of the costs of building defences coupled with serious inflation – although many 'small towns' achieved their maximum prosperity in the 4th century AD.

Regional patterns in settlement types are recognisable: palatial villas appear in the south-west in the 4th century AD, many seemingly as *de novo* creations, but the same period sees an apparent stagnation or decline in villas in the south-east – in Kent only at Lullingstone are new 4th century mosaics known. In contrast to both those areas, the 4th century sees an expansion of villas in the north, but they are generally small and by southern standards poorly appointed. Some show little structural elaboration, such as that at Hazel Rigg Quarry, Hampole, South Yorkshire, where a small L-shaped bath house was probably the only mortared masonry element of an otherwise timber-built complex. Despite the lack of structural sophistication and size, in regional terms such sites provide a contrast with the roundhouses and basic rectangular buildings which are otherwise the norm.

3 Development of the Asset Type

The application of modern techniques, particularly extensive geophysical survey, as at the towns of Wroxeter (Shropshire), Richborough (Kent) and Catterick (North Yorkshire; Figure 7) and on particularly the northern *vici*, such as Maryport, Cumbria and other sites such as Sedgefield, County Durham has transformed our understanding of both settlements and in some cases their hinterlands. At Wroxeter the 'old certainties' of the sparsely built-up town have been challenged and overturned and at Maryport and Sedgefield the sheer scale of the civilian settlement revealed. Similar advances in understanding can also be seen across other settlement types.



Figure 7
Catterick Roman town, North Yorkshire. Plan showing all the evidence from remote sensing and excavations.

4 Associations

Most Roman-period settlement types are intimately associated with the rural landscape. While it is stating the obvious to say that farmsteads and (most) villas will have been integrated into the rural landscape, it is similarly true that towns could also be centres for farming.

Centuriation, the laying out of regular plots of newly conquered land by the state, has been dismissed in Britain by most authorities. However, it is clear that settlements and the routes that link them could have had significant impacts on the pre-existing landscape and presumably its inhabitants; for instance, while earlier routeways continued to function and develop, major new Roman roads often cut through pre-existing landscapes with apparently no regard to what was there before.

Cemeteries are regularly associated with settlements of all sizes, and in the case of towns are normally located on the approach roads in accordance with the Roman legal requirement that burials were made outside settlements; babies and neonates (new-born children) appear to have been exempted from this requirement and are often found buried within settlements. Cemeteries are known in association with smaller settlements, again often separated from

the occupation areas, although the overlaying of cemetery and occupation areas is also known, reflecting the expansion and decline of settlements. Burials, often scattered, are also often found in Roman-period field ditches.

Settlements of most types can be associated with, dependent on, or incorporate, shrines and temples, or industrial activity. Some settlements are associated with military sites (forts) throughout their history, others may produce evidence of military personnel without any evidence for distinctively military structures, perhaps reflecting troops on detached, possibly administrative, duties, while the presence of quantities of military equipment suggests the possibility of troops billeted in towns.

Some, apparently civilian sites, for example Dalton Parlours villa, West Yorkshire, may have military links – possibly as part of the military supply system, or perhaps reflecting military involvement in the trade in, or disposal of, excess materials. Civilian settlements may also be linked to industrial activity and transport functions, including sea and river borne trade, acting as sources and markets for goods, ports and in some cases transshipment points between water and land transport.

5 Further Reading

The starting point for any consideration of major towns is J Wacher, *Towns of Roman Britain* (2nd edn 1995) and in the case of minor towns B Burnham and J Wacher, *The 'Small Towns' of Roman Britain* (1990).

With respect to rural settlement there are no comparable general treatments of the subject from a primarily morphological perspective, but, the *Rural Settlement of Britain Online Resource* (ADS) provides a comprehensive atlas of excavated settlement evidence.

J Taylor, *An Atlas of Roman Rural Settlement in England* (2007) is a key resource, and from different perspectives R Hingley, *Rural Settlement in Roman Britain* (1989) and Chapters 12-15 in D Mattingly's more recent *An Imperial Possession* (2006) provide introductions.

Chapter 8 of M Millett, *The Romanization of Britain* (1990) provides an overview of the Later Roman period.

Roman villas have been the subject of many studies, but J T Smith, *Roman Villas: A Study in Social Structure* (1997) provides a useful overview.

6 Where to Get Advice

If you would like to contact the Listing Team in one of our regional offices, please email: customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk noting the subject of your query, or call or write to the local team at:

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HEAG 231
Publication date: v1.0 May 2011 © English Heritage
Reissue date v1.1 October 2018 © Historic England
Design: Historic England and APS.