

APPROACHES TO THE INVESTIGATION, ANALYSIS AND DISSEMINATION OF WORK ON ROMANO-BRITISH RURAL SETTLEMENTS AND LANDSCAPES

A REVIEW

PAPER 1: INTRODUCTION

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1.1 The amount of archaeological work undertaken in Britain has risen dramatically as a result of the introduction of PPG16 in 1990 and we are now accumulating data at a rate that far outstrips the ability of most individuals (or organisations) to assess and synthesise what has been found. The outputs of much of this work are reported in so-called grey literature (accounts of archaeological investigations which are not published in a recognised journal or book). The need for this grey literature to be synthesised is urgent and pressing. After 25 years it cannot be sustainable to keep acquiring ever increasing quantities of information which is not subject to review, evaluation and dissemination. It was these concerns that led the authors in 2005 to formulate a project concerned with assessing the contribution of developer archaeology to the study of Roman Britain (Fulford and Holbrook 2011), and since 2012 a national survey of Roman rural settlement covering all of England and Wales. The initial project was funded by English Heritage (now Historic England) and the national survey by the Leverhulme Trust and Historic England. The project team for the latter was drawn from academic institutions (the Universities of Reading and York) and an organisation involved in the day-to-day excavation of archaeological sites (Cotswold Archaeology). Summaries of progress on the project over the last couple of years can be found in Fulford and Holbrook 2014 and 2015.

1.2 In April 2015 we launched a freely-accessible online database entitled *The Rural Settlement of Roman Britain*, hosted by the Archaeology Data Service [<http://dx.doi.org/10.5284/1030449>]. This contains data on around 2,500 individual sites in England and Wales. In addition to the database, the University of Reading team will produce a series of three books between 2016 and 2018 under the collective title *New Visions of the Romano-British Countryside*. Drawing on the data gathered during the project these volumes will examine regional and chronological variation in Romano-British rural settlement through analysis of farm layouts, domestic architecture, agricultural practice and burial traditions. This will permit the presentation of a new characterisation of the Romano-British countryside.

1.3 During the course of the project we have become increasingly conscious that the time invested by the Reading researchers (around 10 person years) interrogating c.3,500 grey literature and published reports is likely to be a once in a generation event, and that the project team is now in a unique position to evaluate on a national scale contemporary professional practice in the investigation, analysis and reporting of work on Roman rural settlements. We have therefore produced a set of short review papers which evaluate how the results of past work on rural settlements can be used to optimise data retrieval and analysis in the future. These papers consider the following themes: field investigation and reporting methodologies; contextualisation of results; ceramics; other artefact categories; faunal remains; archaeobotanical evidence and funerary practice/oste archaeology. Where appropriate we also highlight emerging new research directions which could influence the way in which future site investigations are approached. Most of the authors have had a long standing relationship with the project, although Rebecca Gowland and John Pearce have kindly contributed an additional essay on aspects of bioarchaeology and burial practice. The

papers review what we have seen of commercial methodologies since 1990, but focus on contemporary practice (the last five years or thereabouts) rather than methods of the early 1990s which are now no longer used. That said, in a number of cases there appears to have been remarkably little development in investigation techniques, and in many cases reports on work done in the early 1990s do not now look conspicuously old fashioned.

1.4 A particular aim of the papers is to make suggestions and recommendations for improvements in professional practice. We also consider the implications for synthesis/research if investigating organisations do not follow established guidance or best practice. Where changes to current practice are suggested we seek to do this from the evidence base provided by the project. Our hope is that these papers provide an opportunity to communicate how our research can influence future curatorial policy at a local level where policies for conservation management and development-control decisions are made. They should also provoke consideration and debate within the contracting organisations that undertake the investigations, and provide food for thought when new projects are being designed. We are very conscious that archaeological works specified through the planning process need to withstand the tests of reasonableness and proportionality, themes which run through national planning policies, so we have strived to keep our advice realistic and cost effective. We also have no wish to reinvent the wheel: where existing guidance is fit for purpose we have simply considered how it might be tailored and applied to Romano-British rural settlements and landscapes.

1.5 The purpose of these papers is therefore to provoke a dialogue about the ways that Romano-British rural settlements are investigated, although some of the points made have a more general applicability beyond this specific class of settlement or indeed chronological period. We actively encourage and welcome feedback on the ideas presented. This can be done by contacting the individual authors directly or the Project Manager Nathan Blick nathan.blick@cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk We will also convene a professional workshop to discuss these issues at the University of Reading on 14 September 2016. If you wish to attend please contact Nathan before 15 August. All comments received up to 30 September 2016 will be considered by the authors as they revise their papers for publication in a substantial article which will be submitted to *Historic Environment Policy and Practice*. We anticipate that the article will be published in the second half of 2017. We would like one of the principal legacies of the Roman rural settlement project to be that it has helped influence and shape professional practice, and these papers represent a start towards that objective.

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References

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