

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

## A REVIEW

### PAPER 2: THE CONTEXTUALIZATION OF RESULTS

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1.1 High quality archaeological fieldwork requires not just the application of techniques such as field survey and excavation, but also a proper understanding and contextualization of the results of this work. Another major 'big data' project – The *Fields of Britannia* (Rippon *et al.* 2015) – carried out a systematic analysis of the relationship between excavated Romano-British field systems and the medieval landscapes that overlie them, and this revealed some significant problems with the interpretation and reporting of archaeological fieldwork in Britain. The central problem has been the way that archaeologists have treated below-ground archaeology as something quite separate to, and more important than, the wider historic landscape that is usually neglected. The 'historic landscape' was a term developed as long ago as the 1990s to try and convey to archaeologists, planners, and countryside managers that our present day, currently functioning settlements, fields, roads, drainage systems, and patterns of land-use can be many hundreds or even thousands of years old, and, as such, are just as important as whatever archaeology lies beneath the surface. The *Fields of Britannia* revealed that across lowland Britain many present-day field systems may have their origins in the Roman period, yet there are remarkably few development-led excavations that have systematically explored extant field boundaries before they are destroyed by a development. A classic example of the value in doing such work was at Buddle Furlong in Shapwick, Somerset, where the trenching of a modern field boundary revealed a sequence of late prehistoric, Roman, and medieval boundaries that preceded it (Gerrard with Aston 2007, 372-7): this currently used field boundary is far older – and so just as important as – the Romano-British and medieval sites that were investigated elsewhere in in the parish.

1.2 Information on the historic landscape is easily available online, the best source being the Ordnance Survey First Edition maps of the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> If planned archaeological excavations were routinely superimposed upon the OS 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. map then some serious blunders in the interpretation of evidence could have been avoided. One example was at Bishop Burton College, in Yorkshire, where several ditches containing a few sherds of Romano-British and medieval pottery were regarded as Romano-British, the medieval sherds being dismissed as intrusive; had the trench plan been superimposed upon the OS 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. map, however, then the excavators would have realised that they had in fact sectioned a medieval park pale (see Rippon *et al.* 2015, 109-10). At Seighford, in Staffordshire, an evaluation trench is shown in the report in relation to the modern landscape, whereas, if it had been contextualised with reference to the OS 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. Map, then the excavators would have realised that the ditch which they ascribed to the Roman period on the basis of a few sherds of pottery was in fact a 19<sup>th</sup> century field boundary (see Rippon *et al.* 2015, 332). These examples actually raise two important methodological issues: firstly,

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. through the National Library of Scotland whose online coverage includes England and Wales:  
<http://maps.nls.uk/os/6inch-england-and-wales/index.html>

the misinterpretation of features due to a failure to locate excavated trenches within the context of the historic landscape, and secondly a tendency in some reports to date features on the basis of a few sherds of pottery that could easily be residual. A third methodological problem that the *Fields of Britannia* revealed is that in narrow evaluation trenches there is a tendency to assume that ditches – only short stretches of which are revealed – are perpendicular to the edge of the excavation. An example of this is High House, in West Thurrock, where initial small-scale evaluation trenches revealed a Romano-British ditch (F.135905) that, based upon an evaluation trench, was thought to be oriented NE-SW, whereas subsequent open-area excavation showed that it was in fact oriented N-S (see Rippon *et al.* 2015, 149-53). A closer examination of the initial evaluation shows that the allegedly NE-SW oriented ditch was drawn as exactly perpendicular to its NW-SE oriented evaluation Trench, whereas in practice it must have cut diagonally across the trench.

1.3 The character of some historic landscapes also includes the earthworks of relict landscapes such as ridge and furrow, and these should also not be neglected. The ridge and furrow covering the Roman site at Weedon Hill, in Buckinghamshire, for example, is not described in the published report, but, because it was mapped on Figure 2 the extremely close relationship between field boundaries within the Romano-British landscape and the strips and furlongs within the overlying medieval open fields is revealed (although it is not discussed in the report: Wakeham and Bradley 2013).

### **Recommendations**

1. At the WSI/design stage the locations of proposed trenches should be plotted against a background of both the modern and the 19<sup>th</sup> century OS 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. mapping (an easily accessible source, and a task that will take a few minutes).
2. All earthworks, including ridge and furrow, must be plotted in advance of machining as this is an integral part of the historic landscape and the archaeological record of a site.
3. Once the results of any archaeological survey work have been added to the picture, a strategy can then be put forward for exploring the origins and development of both the buried archaeology and the historic landscape (remembering that an extant field boundary may be far older than the buried archaeology).
4. At the reporting stage, in addition to a proper location map (which is not always present: e.g. Meckseper 2014), the areas covered by any survey work, and the locations of any excavations, should be mapped against a background of both the modern and the OS 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. mapping.

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