The rural settlement of Roman Britain

Newsletter | January 2014 | Issue number 3

Realising the Research Potential of Developer-Funded Roman Archaeology in England

Welcome to our third project newsletter. The project has been running for over 18 months now, and this newsletter provides you with an update on progress and information on upcoming events. We welcome feedback and contact addresses can be found at the end. Background information on the project is available on the following websites.

- http://www.cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk/discover-the-past/
- www.reading.ac.uk/archaeology/research/roman-rural-settlement/

The project has two principal strands: The Roman Rural Settlement Project and the Romano-British Towns Project.

The Roman Rural Settlement Project

Data Collection from local Historic Environment Records (HERs) is being carried out by Cotswold Archaeology with funding from English Heritage. The interpretation and analysis of the data is undertaken by a team from the University of Reading (Dr Alex Smith, Dr Martyn Allen and Dr Tom Brindle) under the direction of Professor Michael Fulford, with funding from the Leverhulme Trust. The creation of a database and web-based GIS interface is being led by Tim Evans of the Archaeology Data Service at the University of York.

Progress on Data Collection

Data collection has continued unabated throughout autumn 2013 and the early winter. Progress has been steady, data collection of the grey literature resource is now completed for the West Midlands (joining the South East, East Midlands and East Regions previously completed) and is close to completion for the large South West region with consultation ongoing in North Somerset and Dorset only.

Currently the team are collecting the resource for Yorkshire and the Humber region and have been making early inroads into the North West and North East. Enthusiastic, helpful responses to the project team from local HER’s are commonplace, even in areas under resource stress (which has often impacted upon the maintenance of HERs). The project team are extremely grateful for the support provided and so far over 2,100 grey literature reports have been collected.

Excitingly, the resource in the Yorkshire and Humber region is proving to be larger than expected and should lead to some interesting research conclusions. Data collection in the Yorkshire and Humber region is expected to be finished by the end of February 2014. Data collection for the North West and North East regions is scheduled for completion in the Spring of 2014.

Perhaps the biggest success of the data collection element of the project so far has been the extensive production of high quality PDF/A OCR documents of formerly paper-only reports. Of the grey literature reports collected so far, well over 750 have been digitised from paper-only copies (typically these comprise older reports that were only provided to HERs in paper format). The digitisation programme has resulted in the increased interactivity of the grey literature resource (with the capacity for internal searching) as well as significant HER enhancement benefits. The majority of HERs consulted during

Huge area excavation of Romano-British rural settlement in North-West Cambridge © Cambridge Archaeological Unit (photo by Paul Bailey/Skyhigh & David Webb)
this project submitted reports to the project team for digitisation, or scanned the reports in-house as part of the project. The project is working closely with the HERs and entries in the project database will link directly to the original HER records to ensure ready compatibility between the different data sources. The reports collected as part of this project (including existing digital copies of grey literature reports obtained direct from the HERs) will be accessible through the project website which will go live in 2015.

The project has also led to the enhancement of a number of HERs. Throughout the course of the project the research team have identified reports that were never deposited in the HERs (or were subsequently lost) and have acquired these from the archaeological contractors that originally conducted the fieldwork. These reports have been provided to the relevant HERs, helping to remove omissions in their public archive and enhance their database.

**Progress on Data Analysis**

At 18 months in, the University of Reading team are well over half way in terms of collection and analysis of the regional data, with a total of almost 2,500 records of Roman rural sites in the database. Preliminary data synthesis has been achieved for the East of England, the East Midlands and the South East, with exciting results continuing to emerge. In particular the incredible regional and local diversity in matters such as settlement and landscape form and development, material culture, agriculture and burial practice is becoming readily apparent. As we progress through the regions, we are building up a more nuanced picture of Romano-British rural society, largely through using a combination of both published archaeological sites and unpublished ‘grey literature’, which continues to provide up to half of all records within the database.

At present we are about to undertake the analysis of the West Midlands data before presenting our preliminary results at the seminar in Birmingham in March. It is immediately apparent that the nature of Roman rural settlement in this region is strikingly different to the other regions we have analysed, both in terms of fewer numbers of records, and in the scarcity of material culture and environmental evidence. Conversely we are also continuing with our data collection for the South West which is — unsurprisingly — proving to be amongst the richest source of data for the entire country, with Gloucestershire alone containing almost as many records as the whole of the West Midlands! The remainder of the South West will be complete by May in time for the Exeter seminar in June, whilst a start has also been made on collecting the data from Yorkshire. We are slowly breaking the back of the data collection and preliminary analysis, and then the most challenging task of all awaits, as we attempt to make sense of it all!

**Engagement and Dissemination**

A crucial element of this project continues to be concerned with disseminating emerging results to a wide constituency of interested people, whilst capturing local knowledge and views. We also want to open a debate on the methodologies currently adopted to investigate Romano-British rural sites, and the ways in which these sites are published. Meetings are being held in each region of England, as well as presentations at a variety of other events.

So far we have held regional meetings in Cambridge (East of England), Leicester (East Midlands) and London (Greater London and the South East). The presentations delivered by the University of Reading team can be viewed at the Cotswold Archaeology and University of Reading project web pages. Attendance has been high at all of the seminars with between 60 and 100 delegates. The high level of interest has resulted in a good mix of heritage professionals and other interested parties attending, spawning an atmosphere of open debate and constructive discussion. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive with some good constructive criticism that has been utilised to inform and improve our future sessions. The next meeting will discuss the results of the West Midlands analysis and will be held on 5th March 2014 in Birmingham. Please see the project website for further details, or contact Nathan Blick to book a place.

---

**Romano-British Towns Project**

A successful day conference was held in Reading in November 2013 with over 120 delegates. The conference was concerned with assessing the contribution that developer archaeology has made over the last 25 years to understanding of the Roman archaeology of the major historic towns of England. The list of speakers and some images taken on the day can be viewed at


Publication of the conference papers in the Britannia monograph series is scheduled for the end of 2014.
Events

**Wednesday 5th March 2014**

Roman Rural Settlement: West Midlands Regional Seminar. The Birmingham and Midland Institute, Birmingham.

**Saturday 29th March 2014**

New Approaches to the Romano-British Countryside.

Double session at the Roman Society’s biennial Roman Archaeology Conference, University of Reading, featuring presentations by various members of the project team. For further details visit [http://www.romansociety.org/events/rac-2014.html](http://www.romansociety.org/events/rac-2014.html)

**Saturday 10th May 2014**

How Roman was Roman Britain?

Talk by Alex Smith at Surrey Roman Studies Group’s Conference at Chertsey Hall, Surrey

**Thursday 19th June 2014**

Roman Rural Settlement: South-West Regional Seminar. University of Exeter.

Further details will be posted on the website nearer the time.

**Wednesday 15th October 2014**


Further details will be posted on the website nearer the time.

Contacts

Nathan Blick, Project Manager for Cotswold Archaeology.
Email: Nathan.blick@cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk

Alex Smith, Senior Research Fellow, University of Reading.
Email: a.t.smith@reading.ac.uk