

## The Fields of Britannia

Stephen Rippon, Chris Smart, Ben Pears, and Fiona Fleming

The 5<sup>th</sup> century is one of the most important, yet ill-understood, periods in British history. One group of scholars – Romanists – have tended to study the fate of late Roman Britain, while another – early medievalists – have focused upon Anglo-Saxon sites and artefacts that characterise the archaeological record of eastern England in the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. There has also been a considerable body of scholarship into the origins and development of the later medieval landscape, and in particular when and why villages and open fields were created. It is now widely recognized that although there was some Anglo-Saxon immigration into eastern England in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Saxon expansion in the west consisted of political conquest not mass folk migration, and that the landscape continued to be settled by the native British population. Even in the east of England, Anglo-Saxon immigrants and their descendants were probably in the minority. This native British population is, however, barely visible in an archaeological record that is dominated by burials and settlement sites whose character is distinctively Germanic (furnished pagan burials and settlements with *Grubenhäuser* etc).

The Fields of Britannia Project, funded by a major grant from the Leverhulme Trust, aims to redress several of the imbalances in the archaeology of this period by focusing on the whole landscape, as opposed to individual settlement and burial sites, and as a result will look at areas settled by both native British communities and Anglo-Saxon immigrants. There are three main areas of research:

1. Field systems: studying the extent of possible continuity or discontinuity in the physical fabric of the countryside by examining the relationship between late Romano-British landscapes and their medieval successor.
2. Land-use: an analysis of palaeoenvironmental evidence in order to determine patterns of continuity or discontinuity in land management practices.
3. Settlement patterns: to what extent there was continuity or discontinuity in settlement patterns in different regions of Britain.

The project study area is the whole of late Roman Britain (ie south of Hadrian's Wall).

### The development of field systems

There will be two strands of research into the development of field systems in this period: an examination of the relationship between dated late Roman features and the historic landscape, and a review of the dating evidence of co-axial field systems in areas such as East Anglia. Work on the first of these is now underway with published and unpublished excavation reports having been collected for a pilot area covering Gloucestershire and Somerset. This early work has revealed some significant evidence for the continuity of field systems. In the clay vales of Gloucestershire, for example, 65% of excavated Romano-British field ditches are aligned with, or share the same orientation as, boundaries within the historic landscape, while the figure for the Cotswolds is 71%: a key question to address as the research progresses is whether this strong degree of correlation is found elsewhere across Roman Britain.

### Palaeoenvironmental research

The study of palaeoenvironmental sequences has traditionally been focused on prehistory, with the historic period being neglected due to a perceived lack of suitable deposits and problems with accurately dating sediments that were prone to mixing, erosion, and degradation. In recent years, however, the refinement of radiocarbon dating and the development of multidisciplinary approaches towards specific archaeological sites and broader landscapes have provided a wealth of data that can be usefully deployed to examine local, regional and national variations in land-use and the natural environment. Early palaeoenvironmental analysis focused upon upland environments due to the better preservation of organic components including pollen, plant macrofossils and charcoal. This imbalance in palaeoenvironmental research has also started to be redressed through the identification and sampling of discrete lowland mires that allow the complementary study of broad 'off site' sequences with 'on site' assemblages of animal bones and charred/waterlogged plant remains. The aim of the palaeoenvironmental research component of the Fields

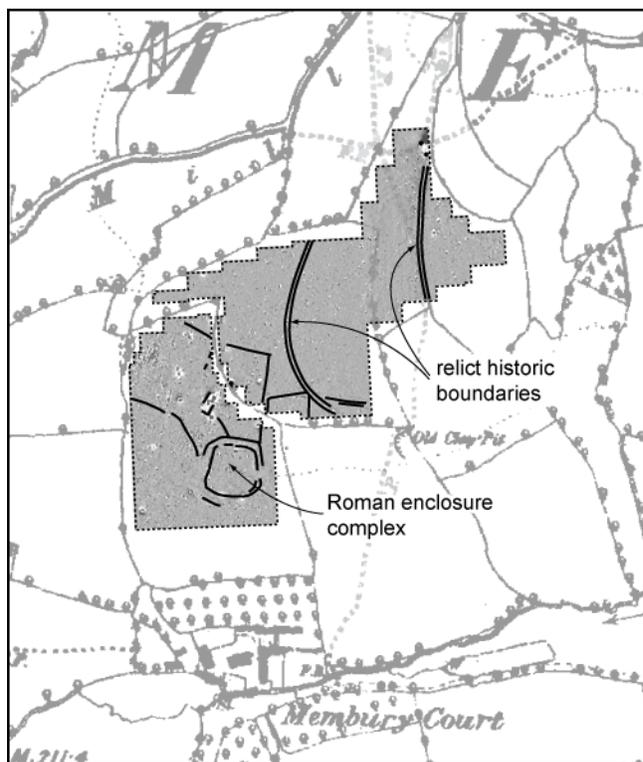
of Britannia Project is therefore to reconstruct patterns of land-use within the various regions of late Roman Britain, and then to see whether or not these changed in the early medieval period.

### Settlement patterns

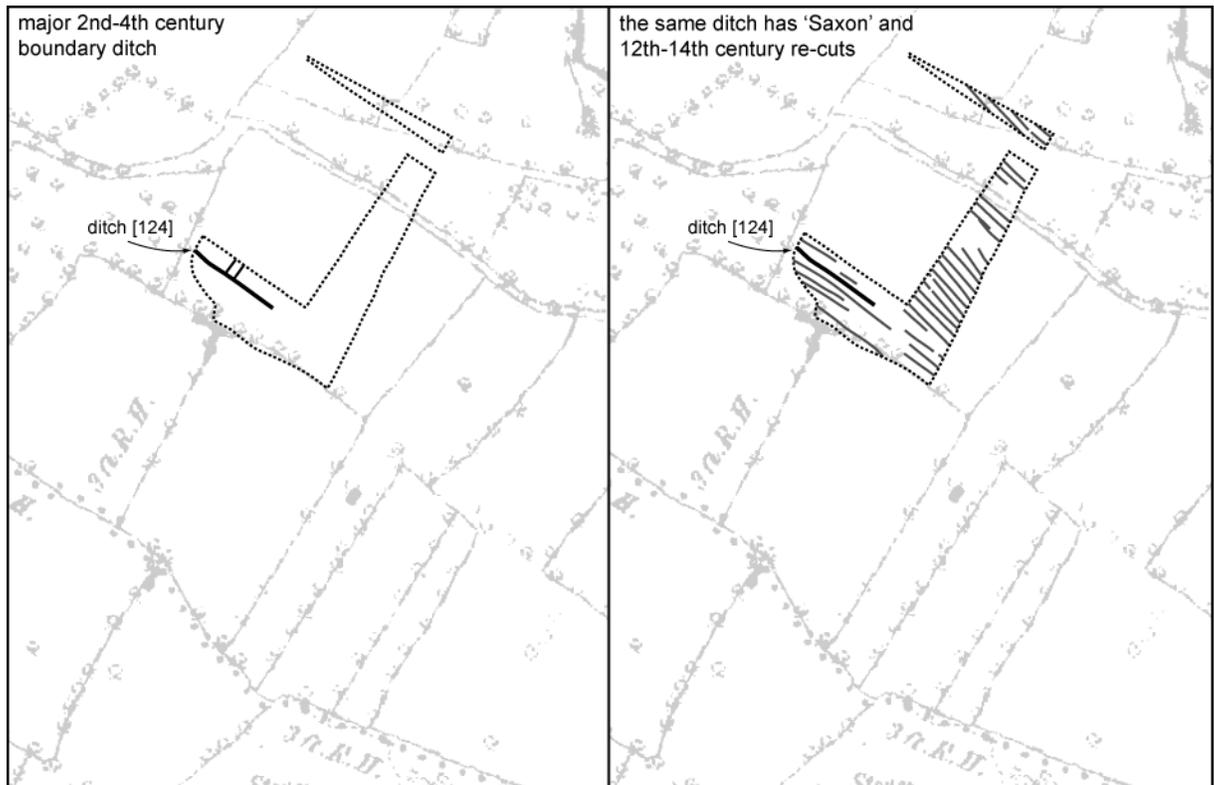
The research into settlement patterns will be carried out as part of a studentship included in the Leverhulme Trust grant. In the past there has been much discussion of the possible evidence for continuity of occupation on individual Romano-British settlements, but the focus here will be very different in taking a more landscape-based approach and examining settlement patterns as a whole. A number of case study areas spread across Roman Britain will be examined using a comprehensive assessment of excavation and field-walking reports alongside other data in Historic Environment Records.

### Two case studies

On and offsite palaeoenvironmental data from two sites in Gloucestershire and Devon can be used to demonstrate distinct variation in the landscape and land-use during the Roman to medieval transition period. Based on a pollen sequence from Aller Farm in Stockland, on the Blackdown Hills in Devon, the late Roman landscape appears to have been characterized by managed woodland on the steeper slopes and agricultural land on the valley sides. In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries we might expect to see an expansion of woodland in the upland fringe landscape, but in fact there appears to have been some clearance reflected in an increase in grass, dock, and ribwort plantain. The landscape was therefore predominantly open with a trend towards pastoral husbandry and areas of arable cultivation alongside patches of woodland. The post 7<sup>th</sup> century sequence at Aller Farm is not securely dated but the valley bottoms became dominated by damp scrub species including willow and sedges, while on the valley sides there was very little woodland, which consisted of a little alder scrub and hazel, while evidence of both pastoral and arable agriculture increased (Hatton and Caseldine, 1992). The Romano-British settlement at Membury Court, which the project team has recently mapped using a fluxgate gradiometer (below), lies nearby in the same valley. It may have been during this late 1<sup>st</sup> millennium change in land-use that the medieval/present field systems around Membury Court were laid out, which is reflected in the way that the historic landscape of today is on a different orientation to the Romano-British enclosure system.



At Brockworth, in the Vale of Gloucester, the dominance of grassland herbaceous plant species suggests that the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century landscape was predominantly open and supported a mixed agricultural economy with a preference towards cattle rearing. One of the late Roman ditches (feature 124) was re-cut in the early medieval period (this re-cut containing 'Saxon' pottery), and was re-cut again in the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Ridge and furrow was oriented with this boundary ditch, and the persistence of this feature suggests there may not have been a significant period of abandonment of the landscape (below; Hickling 2007).



These two sites show examples of discontinuity and possible continuity between the Roman and historic landscapes. As the *Fields of Britannia* project progresses we will hopefully find out what the story was across the different regions of Roman Britain.

Hatton, J. and Caseldine, C. 1992, 'Vegetation change and Land use history during the first millennium AD at Aller Farm, East Devon as indicated by pollen analysis', *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society*, 49: 115-21.

Hickling, S. 2007, 'Land to the West and South of Gloucester Business Park, Brockworth, Gloucestershire'. Unpublished report, Gloucestershire County Council Archaeology Service Report.

<http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/archaeology/research/britannia.shtml>

Stephen Rippon (project director) [s.j.rippon@ex.ac.uk](mailto:s.j.rippon@ex.ac.uk)  
Chris Smart (landscape archaeology) [c.j.smart@ex.ac.uk](mailto:c.j.smart@ex.ac.uk)  
Ben Pears (palaeoenvironmental research) [b.r.pears@ex.ac.uk](mailto:b.r.pears@ex.ac.uk)  
Fiona Fleming (settlement patterns) [fjf201@ex.ac.uk](mailto:fjf201@ex.ac.uk)