

11 The 'small towns' of Roman Britain - the last fifty years *Barry C Burnham*

In the context of excavation and research, the euphemistically called 'small towns' have lagged well behind their generally larger urban counterparts, which form the principal focus of this volume. Even as late as 1948, the CBA's *A Survey of Policy of Field Research* could record the lamentable state of our knowledge, first on p 64:

The smaller towns which were not cantonal capitals are much less well understood . . . (and) . . . their explanation is one of the outstanding needs of the civil area.

And again on p 102:

The investigation of the smaller townships is an . . . urgent requirement, for the very nature of these is not understood.

This is hardly surprising given the small-scale nature of most 19th and earlier 20th century excavations, while even the Wheelers, whose work at

Verulamium did so much to influence later urban research, seem to have had little recognisable impact. It is the intention of this paper to explore how the position has changed over the last fifty years, and how this has contributed to our understanding of the small towns, by concentrating on three specific aspects:

- (1) the history of exploration at the small towns
- (2) a review of recent research in the field
- (3) the most significant advances in our understanding

1 History of exploration

Figure 1 compiles the number of excavations at small towns recorded in the annual Roman Britain summaries, initially in the *Journal of Roman Studies* (from 1921-1969) and, since 1970, in *Britannia*. It demonstrates very clearly the changing pattern of exploration during the period with which we are

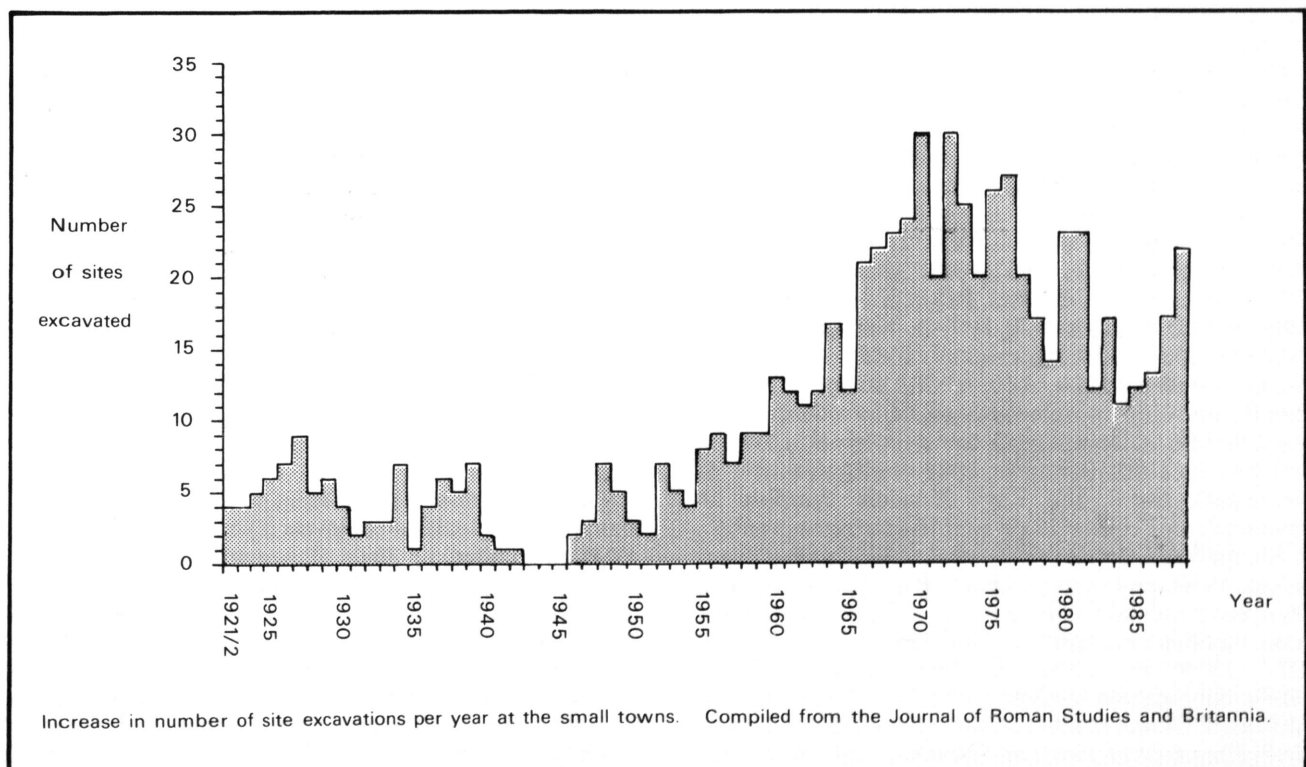


Figure 1

concerned. Before the 1940s only a handful of excavations are noted, all of them on a very small scale. Examples include the sections cut across the defences at Alchester (Hawkes 1927; Iliffe 1929; 1932) and Dorchester-on-Thames (Hogg & Stevens 1937), and the exploration of the internal buildings at Camerton (Wedlake 1958) and *Margidunum* (Oswald 1928; 1941).

Naturally such work was interrupted by the war, but even when activity was resumed in the later 1940s and 1950s, the emphasis remained essentially the same. Trenching continued to be the norm, as for example in the northern part of Great Chesterford (Brinson 1963), while defences continued to attract undue attention, as the excavations at Great Casterton (Corder 1951; 1954; 1961), Kenchester (Webster 1957; Heys & Thomas 1959; 1963) and Mildenhall (Thomas 1956; Annable 1960) make clear. This is the immediate context for the Ordnance Survey's attempt to classify Romano-British towns in 1956, which sought to distinguish the minor towns from lesser settlements by the presence/absence of defences. There were in addition several early attempts to investigate internal features, as for example at Heronbridge (Hartley 1952; 1954; Hartley & Kaine 1954), Holditch (Charlton 1961) and Springhead (Penn 1958; 1959; 1960), while important large-scale excavations were undertaken at Catterick in advance of road construction (Wacher 1971). These latter very much set the scene for what was to follow.

The 1960s saw a significant increase in the number of small towns being excavated, a trend which reached its peak in the early 1970s. This high level of activity has also been accompanied by an important shift away from small-scale trenching (especially on defences) to much larger open area excavations (principally on the internal features). It would be impossible here to mention all the sites in question, but some attempt to review the scope of recent work will help to highlight its variable character and intensity at individual small towns. At some sites, for instance, only limited rescue work has been undertaken, among them Alchester (Young 1975), Ancaster (Todd 1981), Braintree (Drury 1976; Eddy 1984), Irchester (eg Hall & Nickerson 1968; Windell 1984), *Margidunum* (Todd 1969) and Thorpe (Wilson 1964, 159; 1966, 203); at others specific building complexes have been examined in great detail, as for example the temple and bathing facilities at Bath (Cunliffe 1969; 1976; Cunliffe & Davenport 1985), the Bays Meadow complex at Droitwich (cf Freezer 1979) and the temples precinct at Springhead (Penn 1960; 1961; 1963; 1968); elsewhere, at an increasing number of sites, large areas have been examined in advance of redevelopment, most notably at Ashton (Hadman & Upex 1975; 1977; 1979; Dix 1983), Baldock (Stead & Rigby 1986), Hibaldstow (Smith 1987, 188-98), Neatham (Millett & Graham 1986), Towcester (Lambrick *et al* 1980; Brown *et al* 1983) and Wanborough (Anderson & Wacher 1980); and finally, at a variety of sites, longer term rescue work over several years has

sampled a range of different locations in the plan, among them Alchester (Booth 1980; Frere 1986, 393-5), Braughing (eg Partridge 1978; 1980; 1981; Potter & Trow 1988), Carlisle (eg McCarthy 1984; McCarthy *et al* 1982), Godmanchester (Green, 1975; 1977), Ilchester (Leach 1982) and Staines (Crouch 1976; Crouch & Shanks 1984).

This increased scale of exploration has been further enhanced since the 1950s, by regular aerial reconnaissance, most notably by the Cambridge Committee for Aerial Photography (see for example St Joseph 1966; Wilson 1975; Frere & St Joseph 1983, 166-181). This has proved to be a vital source of information, forming a welcome bonus to excavation at some sites (eg Alchester, Corbridge and Mildenhall), while elsewhere it supplies virtually the only evidence (eg Brough-on-Fosse, Chesterton-on-Fosse and Dorn). Its potential is amply demonstrated by D Mackreth's work at Water Newton (Mackreth 1979; Frere, Rivet & Sitwell 1987, plan v).

The result of all this activity has been an immense increase in the quantity and the quality of the data at our disposal over the last twenty-five years or so. Not surprisingly, this had been responsible for stimulating several syntheses of the available evidence and for generating a wide range of approaches to the smaller towns.

2 Recent research in the field

Although the recognition of a broad class of 'small towns' or 'minor urban settlements' has a considerable pedigree in Romano-British studies, the earliest synthesis of any substance did not appear until 1970, right at the height of the intensified activity already described, in the form of an article by M Todd in *Britannia*. This set out 'to outline the state of our knowledge and to define some of the main problems' by summarising the available evidence under a number of headings - viz the sites themselves, size, planning and buildings, the relationship with the countryside, and industry. In one form or another, these headings were to set the agenda for much later research. The article also recognised the considerable level of diversity amongst the sites hitherto included within the umbrella term 'small towns', though it remained somewhat restrictive on the criteria for urban status by emphasising features which would be recognisable by a Roman from another province.

This preliminary synthesis was soon followed by a conference specifically devoted to the small towns, held at Oxford in 1975, the proceedings of which were subsequently published as an edited volume by W Rodwell & T Rowley (1975). This contained various general articles and a series of individual site summaries, which together attempted to address various issues of importance to the debate about the small towns. At the same time it included some new approaches which were to find echoes in the future. In it, A L F Rivet attempted to classify the minor towns and settlements by dividing them into nine

categories, based on a conflation of functional and locational criteria; G Webster drew our attention to the important class of small towns *without* defences, which had largely been neglected in the past at the expense of the defended sites along the main roads of the province; S Frere & I Hodder addressed the specific question of small town origins from very different standpoints; and W Rodwell attempted a regional case study which sought to examine the Trinovantian towns in their wider setting. Lurking behind all these individual contributions, however, lay an unresolved issue concerning the criteria for inclusion as a 'small town', which helps to explain the different stances taken by (for example) Rivet and Rodwell.

The publication of Rodwell & Rowley's volume coincided with that of two other significant books, one on the *Towns of Roman Britain* by J Wachter (1974), the other *Oppida* edited by B Cunliffe & T Rowley (1976). Together they were to provoke a semantic debate on what constituted a 'town', which was to linger on throughout the 1970s. In hindsight it is easy to see that this wasted a lot of time and energy, but it did at least help to focus our attention on the nature of the archaeological evidence at our disposal and the problems of analysing it in terms of recognisable urban indicators, such as settlement morphology and function. Another dimension of this debate which enjoyed a brief, if undistinguished, *floruit* in the 1970s, was the attempt by J Alexander (1975) & M Millett (1975) to identify imposed and indigenous forms of urbanism.

The 1970s also witnessed the popularity of various spatial and locational models in archaeology, especially that of geographical central place theory. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that several attempts were made, most notably by I Hodder (eg Hodder & Hassall 1971; Hodder 1972; 1975), to apply such models to explaining the origins and development of the small towns within the wider urban hierarchy. More sophisticated models were even used in an attempt to equate the distribution of Savernake Ware with the predicated market area around the small town of Mildenhall (Hodder 1974). In general, however, the results did not meet with any widespread acceptance.

This high level of interest in small towns has been maintained into the 1980s, stimulated not so much by continued excavations as by the publication of several important excavation volumes, among them works on Baldock (Stead & Rigby 1986), Bath (Cunliffe & Davenport 1985), Braughing (Partridge 1981; Potter & Trow 1988), Ilchester (Leach 1982), Kelvedon (Rodwell 1987), Little Chester (Dool, Wheeler, *et al* 1986) and Neatham (Millett & Graham 1986). These can be supplemented by various other shorter reports or re-assessments of earlier work published in local journals and elsewhere (eg Ellis 1987; Field & Hurst 1983; Frere 1985; Hingley 1985; Lucas 1981; Petch 1987; Wilmott 1980; and Wilson 1984). There have also been several general works of synthesis on urban issues, which have contributed much to the small town debate. These include: (i) the regional case study of *Urban Settlements in the*

West Midlands by J Crickmore (1984), which concentrated on such themes as classification, origins and development and function; (ii) the gazeteer of *Roadside Settlements in Lowland Roman Britain* by R F Smith (1987), which addressed the issues of origins, growth and decline, land division and economy, and cemeteries; (iii) the survey of *Extra-mural areas of Romano-British towns* by S E Clear-y (1987). More specifically on the small towns, my own research has addressed such themes as origins, settlement morphology, and the range of internal buildings (Burnham 1986; 1988; 1989). This has now been supplemented by the publication of a volume specifically directed at *The Small Towns of Roman Britain* (Burnham & Wachter 1990).

It should be obvious that much of this research has been concerned with small towns or related urban issues in relative isolation, reflecting to some extent the traditional parcelling of Romano-British studies (Burnham & Johnson 1979, 1-8). It is thus important to record that the last decade or so has also witnessed a shift in emphasis with an upsurge of interest in the ancient economy, amongst ancient historians and archaeologists alike (eg Finley 1973; Duncan-Jones 1974; Garnsey, Hopkins & Whittaker 1983; and Greene 1986). As far as towns are concerned, this has raised important issues about their economic role and about the nature of the relationship between town and country, topics which have been addressed by various writers including M Fulford (1982), M Millett (1982) and R F Smith (1987). Most discussion has been concerned with the problem of quantifying the relative importance of agriculture and craft-specialisation within the settlement hierarchy. To this M Todd (1989, 17) has added another dimension, with his suggestion that some rural townships served as estate villages and thus enjoyed a close relationship with nearby villas. This discussion of towns, large and small, within much wider contexts, beyond the more parcelled approach of the 1970s, is one of the important trends of the 1980s, not least because it raises important questions about the nature and definition of 'small towns' as well as the regional distribution of such 'local centres' (cf Hingley 1989).

From this brief review it should be clear that a considerable amount of research has been done in recent years across a wide range of issues. It remains, therefore, to outline some of the most significant advances in our understanding and some of the associated problems.

3 Significant advances in small town research

Only a brief review of the most important is possible:

- (a) The first significant point is that we continue to discover new sites, which underlines the major shortcomings in our understanding of the nature and distribution of small towns. Recent examples include Cowbridge, probably

identifiable with the *Bouium* of the Antonine Itinerary (Parkhouse 1981; 1982), and the new importance attached to Frilford, where a religious complex has long been known (Bradford & Goodchild 1939; Hingley 1985). Regional surveys also have an alarming tendency to 'discover' new sites based largely on a scatter of occupation debris, as for example in Essex (Rodwell 1975), Lincolnshire (May 1976) and Northamptonshire (RCHM 1979, Figs 11 and 12); and before we are tempted to dismiss these as large agricultural villages, we should recall the results of the excavations at Ashton, which have revealed a surprising level of specialised iron-working in connection with the strip buildings in their associated compounds or yards (Hadman & Upex 1975).

- (b) Second, we now possess a better understanding of the class of small towns without defences (cf Webster 1975). In this sphere, significant advances have been made as a result of the excavations at such sites as Ashton (just discussed), Baldock (Stead & Rigby 1986; Burleigh 1982; Selkirk 1983), Hibaldstow (Smith 1987, 18898); Sapper-ton (Simmons 1976; 1985; Oetgen 1986; 1987) and Tiddington (Palmer 1981; 1983). These have helped to demonstrate the complexity of the settlement hierarchy, as well as the wide range of sites hitherto called 'small towns'. The picture remains far from perfect, however, because insufficient work has yet been done at the important class of sites which tend to be located away from the main roads of the province.
- (c) Third, we have a greater awareness of the complexity of urban origins, especially among the small towns of south and east Britain. Particular importance inevitably attaches to those sites which have been shown to develop out of pre-existing later Iron-Age settlements, as was clearly the case at Baldock, where part of the internal street network pre-dated the conquest (Stead & Rigby 1986, 84-5) and at Braughing, with its extensive pre-Roman occupation and evidence for coin production (Partridge 1981). Equally interesting are those sites with evidence for a pre-existing religious function, as the recent excavations at Harlow (Bartlett 1988) and perhaps also Bath (Cunliffe 1988, 1) demonstrate.
- (d) Fourth, we have acquired a much clearer understanding of internal morphology, upon which there is now quite a literature (for a brief review, see Bumham 1988). The following features stand out:
- i) the relative importance of a developed internal street system in contrast to ribbon developments along the road frontages; compare Water Newton (Mackreth 1979, Fig 11) with Braintree (Drury 1976, Fig 49) and Hibaldstow (Smith 1987, Fig 2).
 - ii) the presence at some sites of a developed central core and some degree of zonation in the plan; eg official or public buildings (Water Newton); market places (Godmanchester - Green 1975, Fig 10); temple complexes (Frilford-Hingley 1985, Fig 3).
 - iii) the relative range of building at individual sites beyond the everyday domestic and workshop accommodation, especially the presence of one or more buildings of more sophisticated design and size, with/without mosaic flooring; compare the relative range at Braughing (Partridge 1975, Fig 4) and Cave's Inn (Lucas 1981).
 - iv) the growing evidence for land-division and property boundaries within the sites; eg Ilchester (Leach 1982, Figs 35 and 51) and Hibaldstow (Smith 1987, Figs 2 and 3). These often take the form of compounds with associated buildings (cf Hingley 1989, ch 4).
 - v) the relative importance of these enclosed compounds alongside the narrow-fronted strip buildings found elsewhere along the frontages; cf Dragonby (May 1970, Figs 4 and 6) and Corbridge (Bishop & Dore 1988, Fig 5).
 - vi) the nature of the defended circuit, especially the contrast between defences which enclose only a strategic strongpoint (cf Mancetter and Wall - Webster 1971, Figs 20-21), and those which seem to be designed to protect both the official dimension and a suitable urban core (cf Kenchester - Wilmott 1980, Fig 6).
 - vii) the importance of the extra-mural suburbs once defences were provided (Clear-y 1987).
 - viii) the relative importance of large organised cemeteries around a site (cf Clear-y 1985), in contrast to isolated burials.
- (e) Fifth, we now possess an increasingly clear idea of the functional dimension. This has been an area of considerable debate in recent years, with much of the discussion revolving around the problem of quantifying the level of dependence on agriculture or more specialised activities (cf Fulford 1982). Even so, the increasing evidence has emphasised a number of points:
- i) the importance of agriculture at most sites; this is emphasised by the presence of field systems/enclosures at sites like Braintree (Drury 1976, Fig 49) and Brampton (Edwards 1977, Fig 100), by the recognition of buildings within distinctive farm compounds/cultivation plots (cf Hingley 1989, ch 4) and by the widespread discovery of agricultural implements.