

## Roman Merseyside: Twenty five years on

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### *Romano-British Merseyside since 1986*

At the time of the last Merseyside Archaeological Society conference in 1986 an attempt to consider some fundamental questions concerning the Romano-British period in Merseyside was hampered by an almost complete lack of hard evidence from the area (Philpott 1991). Almost nothing was known, for example, of the nature and distribution of rural settlements in the area, or of the types of buildings in which people lived and worked. The economy was virtually an unknown quantity although the limited number of chance or metal-detector finds suggested a low level of coin use and a restricted use of durable metal artefacts such as brooches. As for the types of crops grown or animals kept there was no information. Whilst we could make reasonable inferences based on the evidence from neighbouring regions, there was very little direct evidence from within Merseyside against which they could be tested. Although within the wider north west region, a number of military forts and civil settlements were known, with the possible exception of the harbour at Meols, Merseyside had neither major settlements nor known forts in the Roman period.

Such evidence as there was consisted largely of a thin spread of chance finds and metal-detector finds, with a small but growing number of pottery scatters produced by systematic fieldwalking in the county by Ron Cowell, and an even smaller body of sites revealed by aerial reconnaissance. No settlement had been excavated within the county, with the possible exception of some ill-defined features associated with a small amount of Roman pottery in trenches on Hilbre Island dug by Professor Robert Newstead in 1926 (Newstead 1927). The only substantial settlement appeared to be indicated by the discovery in the 19th century of a large number of finds, including 70 brooches and 120 coins, on the north Wirral coast at Meols (Hume 1863; Watkin 1886; Thompson 1965, 97-9) but the site was thought to have been lost through the very erosion which brought the objects to light, and the nature of the settlement was far from certain. Two Roman roads had been examined. The first, at Willaston in mid-Wirral, formed part of a road leading from the north gate of Chester and probably with Meols as its destination. The second, at Newton-le-Willows, lay on the well known road between Middlewich and Lancaster (Jermy 1960; Dunlop and Fairclough 1935; Philpott 2000a). Although the sections confirmed the location and construction of the roads, they told us nothing of the landscape through which they marched nor of the communities which made use of them. The only potential rural settlement site was an enclosure revealed by aerial reconnaissance as a cropmark in Irby but it remained uninvestigated and undated. We had scarcely moved on at all from F. Walbank's assertion of

half a century ago, that 'in general, south west Lancashire west of the road north from Warrington – an area of thick wood and marshland – is still a blank space on the map of Roman Britain' (1953, 219). This view has remained remarkably persistent. Three decades later an authority on place-names could write of south west Lancashire 'the Romans would seem to have ignored the area' (Fellows-Jensen 1985, 363). In Cheshire too the countryside, characterised by Thompson as thickly wooded and sparsely inhabited at the time of the Roman conquest, was thought to have had a population largely confined to the 'more open country of the Central Ridge' (Thompson 1965, 4). Merseyside could fairly be described at the time as an archaeological backwater.

### *Recent Advances*

The conference held by Merseyside Archaeological Society in 1986 coincided with the start of a long-term research programme by the Field Archaeology Unit of Liverpool Museum into the Romano-British countryside of the lowland north west of England. For the purposes of the programme the post-1974 county boundaries were set aside, and a more coherent geographical unit broadly corresponding to Cheshire, Merseyside and West Lancashire was adopted, though for historical and practical reasons the emphasis of the work has been in Merseyside and its immediate margins. The aims of the programme were to examine the basic questions of rural settlement chronology, site type and economy which had been matters of inference, or pure speculation, in 1986, and to test the validity of the assumption that the area was unattractive to settlement and was thinly populated during the Roman period.

Up until then rural settlement had been little explored in the region as a whole. Not only did the sites suffer from the perception that they were unrewarding in terms of artefacts and structures but, more pertinently, few rural sites were actually known and the techniques which have now proved to have had some success in recognising them had rarely been systematically applied to the countryside of the region as a whole. In his survey of Roman Cheshire, for example, Dennis Petch (1987) was able to refer to only a handful of known Romano-British rural sites in that county. These included a small number which had been investigated archaeologically. Amongst them was the only certain villa in Cheshire, at Eaton-by-Tarporley, still unfortunately unpublished (Mason 1982; 1983). At Saltney near Chester the remains of what were probably two distinct small farming settlements were located in the 1930s, and included structures with stone footings, pottery and other finds (Thompson 1965, 16). Close to the Mersey the interior of a quadrilateral enclosure at Halton Brow near Runcorn produced no structures though a small amount of Roman pottery was recovered, dating from the 2nd to 4th century AD (Newstead and Droop 1937; Brown *et al.* 1975).

At the outset of the current research, therefore, the

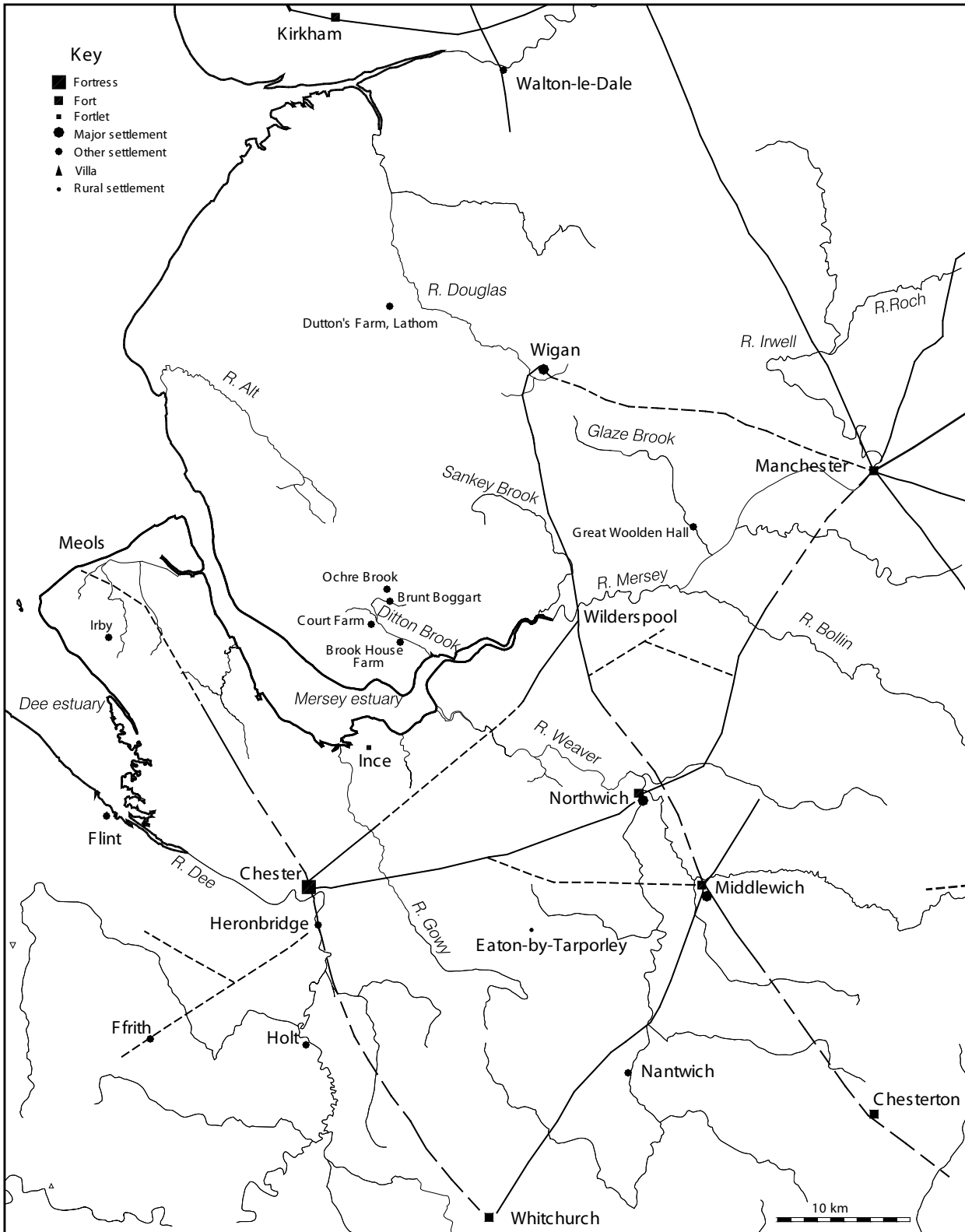


Fig.1. Map of the Roman north west

first priority was to confront the seemingly intractable problem of site location. Chance circumstances led to a great increase in understanding of the period (fig. 1). The first site to contribute was the excavation of a Romano-British settlement at Mill Hill Road, Irby, Wirral (fig. 2). The site had been recognised in 1987 when a Roman ditch was cut by a builder's trench in a back garden and small-scale work up till 1992 confirmed the presence of intact Roman deposits there. From 1992 to 1996 a major series of excavations over several neighbouring gardens revealed not only a Romano-British phase but also a much longer sequence of activity. The earliest phase was mesolithic, followed by occupation and construction of at least one round house in the mid-Bronze Age, an ill-defined Iron Age phase with middle Iron Age finds and radiocarbon dates, the Romano-British phase which appeared to continue in occupation in the post-Roman period, a series of probable early medieval structures, and finally a later medieval settlement. At much the same time a site at Great Woolden Hall, Salford which had been revealed by aerial reconnaissance was excavated by the Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit. The double-ditched enclosure cut off a small promontory overlooking the Glaze Brook, and produced a series of late Iron Age round houses followed by a poorly defined Romano-British occupation (Nevell 1999a).

Undoubtedly the most important breakthrough in Merseyside was the work in advance of construction of the A5300 in Knowsley district in 1993. A 4 km-long road corridor cutting through Tarbock and Halewood revealed no fewer than three sites which had been occupied in the Roman period. Furthermore each site demonstrated what was becoming an increasingly common pattern of multi-period occupation (Cowell and Philpott 2000). Together these sites suggested a far higher density of rural Romano-British sites in the region than had previously been realised, a point made even more forcefully when the finds of coins and other artefacts from fieldwalking were added to newly derived evidence from aerial reconnaissance. Significantly, this density was shown to be greater still when a further previously unsuspected site was discovered at Court Farm in Halewood only 2.5 km from the A5300 road corridor (fig 3.). Located through fieldwalking, the site was excavated in 1996-7 in advance of housing development (Adams and Philpott forthcoming).

Although the foregoing sites had been discovered by a variety of techniques, it is aerial reconnaissance that has without doubt made the greatest single contribution to the recognition of settlements within the wider study area of the lowland North West. Twenty years ago, Cheshire appeared to have a much lower settlement density than the Cornovian tribal heartland of Shropshire. Aerial photography in Cheshire by Rhys Williams and Nick Higham in northern and western Cheshire had produced a scatter of sites (Williams 1997; Nevell 1988). However, a concerted programme of reconnaissance since 1987 by the writer and Dr Jill Collens of Cheshire

County Council has contributed at least 80 new sites in Cheshire, Merseyside and West Lancashire which at least in form appear to be late prehistoric or Roman in date (Collens 1999). In almost all cases the sites consist of enclosures of a type which when excavated produce late prehistoric or Romano-British material, though in many cases the dating is based on analogy from dated sites rather than internal site evidence. Although not yet approaching the relatively high density of sites in some areas of the Shropshire landscape (cf. Whimster 1989), nonetheless the new evidence began to dispel the impression of the countryside of the lowland North West as almost unpopulated during the later prehistoric and Roman periods.

Aerial reconnaissance has also produced new insights into the military use of the landscape in the lowland North West which suggests that the existing picture of fort and temporary camp dispositions may not necessarily be complete. Around Chester a series of temporary camps has been discovered (Philpott 1998), while limited excavation on one example at Upton-by-Chester, together with examination of the post-medieval field-name and map evidence, suggested that these had been located on heath land in the Roman period. Another temporary camp has also been found at Manley (Philpott 1998) although how it fits into Roman military campaigns is uncertain. A possible military site has been identified on the Mersey at Warburton, and the presence of a republican *denarius* may indicate legionary activity (D. Shotter pers. comm.) but its form, dating and character are as yet not well defined (Burnham *et al.* 2002, 302-3). The discovery at Ince of a small fortlet on a prominent hill overlooking the river Mersey, which produced a small quantity of Roman pottery in trial trenching (Philpott 1998), suggests there is some scope for undiscovered military sites guarding or overlooking the Mersey. Wallasey or Liscard might be a candidate for such a site. Here, the existence of a small number of Roman finds along with the British place-name Liscard and a reference to the Welsh of *Wealas* in the neighbouring place-name of Wallasey, suggest a British enclave retaining the British language, and therefore a sub-Roman population, after the remainder of Wirral had adopted the Anglo-Saxon language by the 7th century (Thacker 1987, 242).

In normal circumstances aerial reconnaissance within the region will detect only sites surrounded by ditches since this is usually the only feature deep enough to produce a recognisable cropmark 'signature'. Some sites which have been discovered by other means have not shown up as cropmarks, owing to a variety of factors such as land use or the particular characteristics of the soils, drift geology or drainage. Rural sites often prove difficult to detect by direct means such as fieldwalking – the pottery scatters tend to be very thin, even when the settlement nucleus is known from other sources. Thus, the 12 hectare field at Southworth Hall which contained a Romano-British enclosure produced a dispersed scatter of six certain and eight probable Roman sherds of pottery,

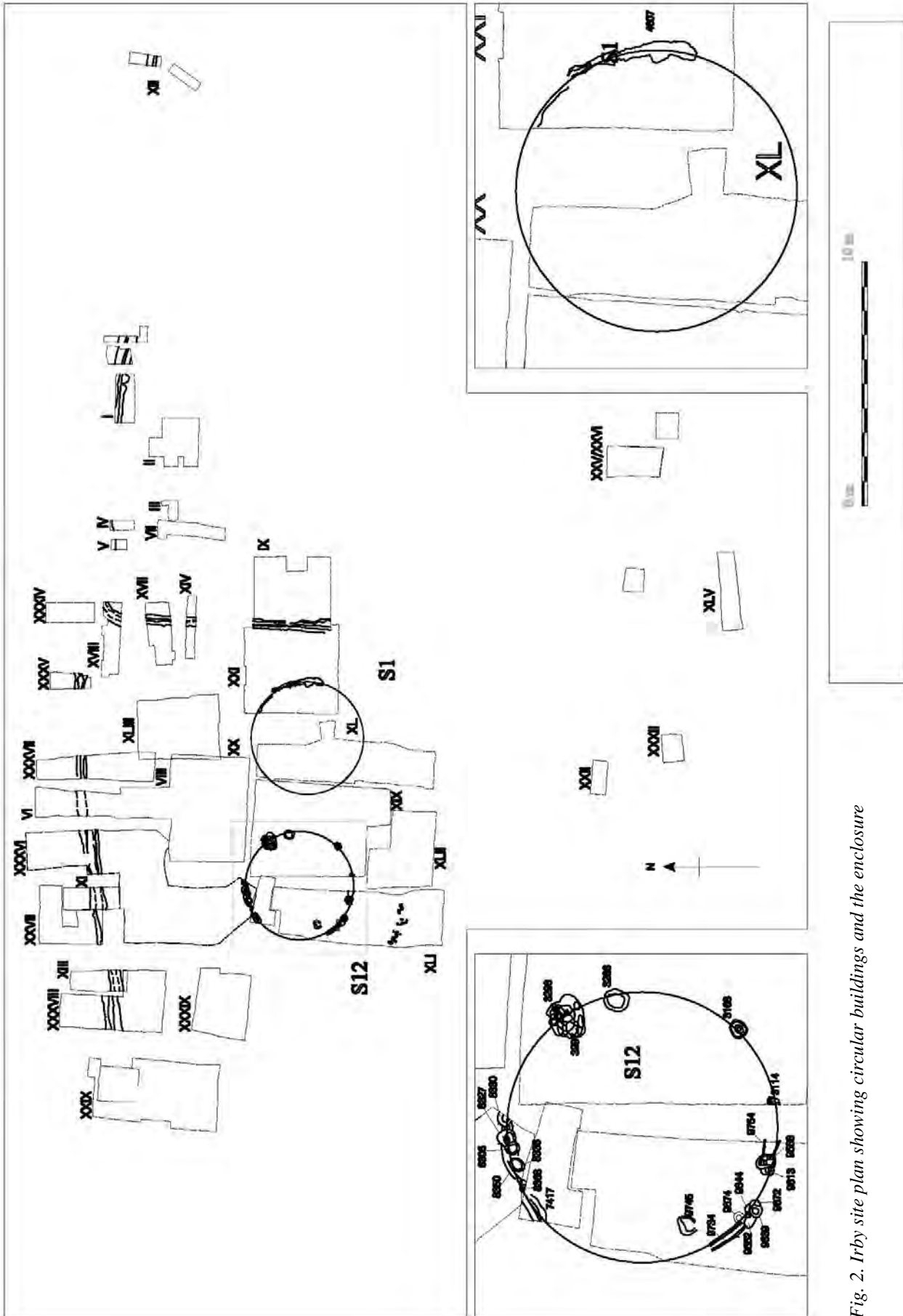


Fig. 2. Irby site plan showing circular buildings and the enclosure

none of which was found over the enclosure itself. The field adjacent to the Romano-British enclosure at Irby has produced about 10 sherds of Roman pottery in three episodes of fieldwalking. Enclosures at two other sites in west Cheshire have each produced minute quantities of pottery from the fields. The unenclosed site at Court Farm, which on excavation revealed more than a hectare of Roman structures and deposits, produced as few as six Romano-British sherds in fieldwalking. Thus the surface indications for Romano-British sites are often so slight that they would be dismissed as background scatter in other regions where pottery was in widespread use in rural contexts. On sites which have been excavated the scarcity of pottery from within intact occupation deposits or fills of features suggests that not all sites saw high volumes of pottery use. The rate of recovery of ceramics from the ploughsoil is not helped by the poor survival of supposedly indestructible pottery in the ground. Soft-fired Roman fabrics prove vulnerable to acidic soils and frost damage which destroys the surface and renders them vulnerable to abrasion, loss of diagnostic characteristics, and eventual obliteration in ploughsoil.

Archaeological monitoring of linear developments such as road schemes and pipelines has also played an important role in revealing Iron Age and Romano-British rural sites across the lowland North West. The A5300 corridor sites at Tarbock and Halewood have already been mentioned, but in West Lancashire a Transco gas pipeline revealed an Iron Age and Romano-British settlement at Dutton's Farm, Lathom, West Lancashire. The significance of the site here was recognised not by the archaeologist responsible for monitoring the pipeline scheme who was unfamiliar with the local archaeology, but by a dedicated group of interested local people from the Lathom and District Archaeological Society who found a quern and other material during topsoil stripping. The site was subsequently excavated by Ron Cowell from 1998 onwards (Cowell 2000; 2002). In 2001 a pipeline south of Chester cut through two sites, one of Iron Age date at Bruen Stapleford, the other Romano-British at Birch Heath, Tarporley, both recognised in a more successful demonstration of archaeological monitoring. The subsequent excavations have been published with admirable speed (Fairburn 2002a; 2002b). A further pipeline has revealed a Roman ditch and pit at Great Budworth, possibly from an enclosed farmstead, while a small group of Roman pottery and metal finds was also recovered (Tindall 1999, 5).

Another important source of new information has been the Portable Antiquities Recording Scheme. Since 1997 this has done much to put the recording of metal-detector finds on a systematic basis and the valuable co-operation between metal-detector users and archaeologists is continuing to provide new data to contribute to a deeper understanding of the period. Between September 1997 and December 2003 no fewer than five counties in the north west (Merseyside, Cheshire, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Cumbria) were covered by one Finds

Liaison Officer based at Liverpool Museum. By far the majority of finds have been recorded from Cheshire (75%), which produced 476 of 639 Roman finds in the North West to May 2004, while only 19 finds (3%) were recorded from Merseyside, albeit a much smaller and more built up area. One factor that may account for this situation is that a larger percentage of the land in Cheshire is arable and therefore is more suitable to metal detecting (N. Herepath pers. comm.). The distribution of finds from the Romano-British countryside is changing significantly through the recording scheme. Not only do clusters of finds from fieldwalking or metal-detecting point to the location of settlements, but the extensive nature of the discoveries is filling in areas which were previously blank.

More recently portions of Romano-British rural sites have been excavated or identified in archaeological evaluations in Cheshire. Sites are now known at Wrenbury, Tilston (Waddelove and Waddelove 1984), Manchester Airport (Thompson 1998), and Beeston Castle in the shadow of the hillfort (Ellis *et al.* 1993). At Poulton in Cheshire, the presence of a concentration of Roman finds, including tile and pottery, has not so far been associated with archaeological features (Emery *et al.* 1997, 125).

Finally, new information has come from a re-examination of one important antiquarian assemblage. Amongst several thousand objects recovered from the shore at Meols in north Wirral during coastal erosion in the 19th century was an important group of Roman finds (Hume 1863; Watkin 1886). A research project begun in 1999 to re-examine the surviving artefacts in five museum collections has produced valuable new insights into the nature, chronology and location of the port during the Roman period (Griffiths *et al.* 2007). The site will be considered in more detail below.

### ***Iron Age Background***

A major advance in the last decade or so has been the progress in our understanding of the late Iron Age settlement pattern which forms the context against which the Romano-British rural settlement should be considered. It is generally stated that the hillforts had fallen out of use by the late Iron Age (e.g. Matthews 2002, 8), but the evidence is largely based on old excavations which were generally limited in extent and unsophisticated by modern standards (e.g. Varley 1950). During the later Iron Age the settlement pattern as currently visible to archaeological techniques is one of discrete enclosed settlements. Few certain Iron Age examples have been identified and dated but their location so far ranges from river valleys to hilltops, the latter exemplified by the lesser enclosures such as Kelsborrow and the newly discovered site at Mellor near Stockport (Mellor Archaeological Trust 2003; Redhead and Roberts 2003). Promontories on the coast, such as the undated site at Burton, Wirral (Longley 1987, 109-11), or overlooking river valleys as

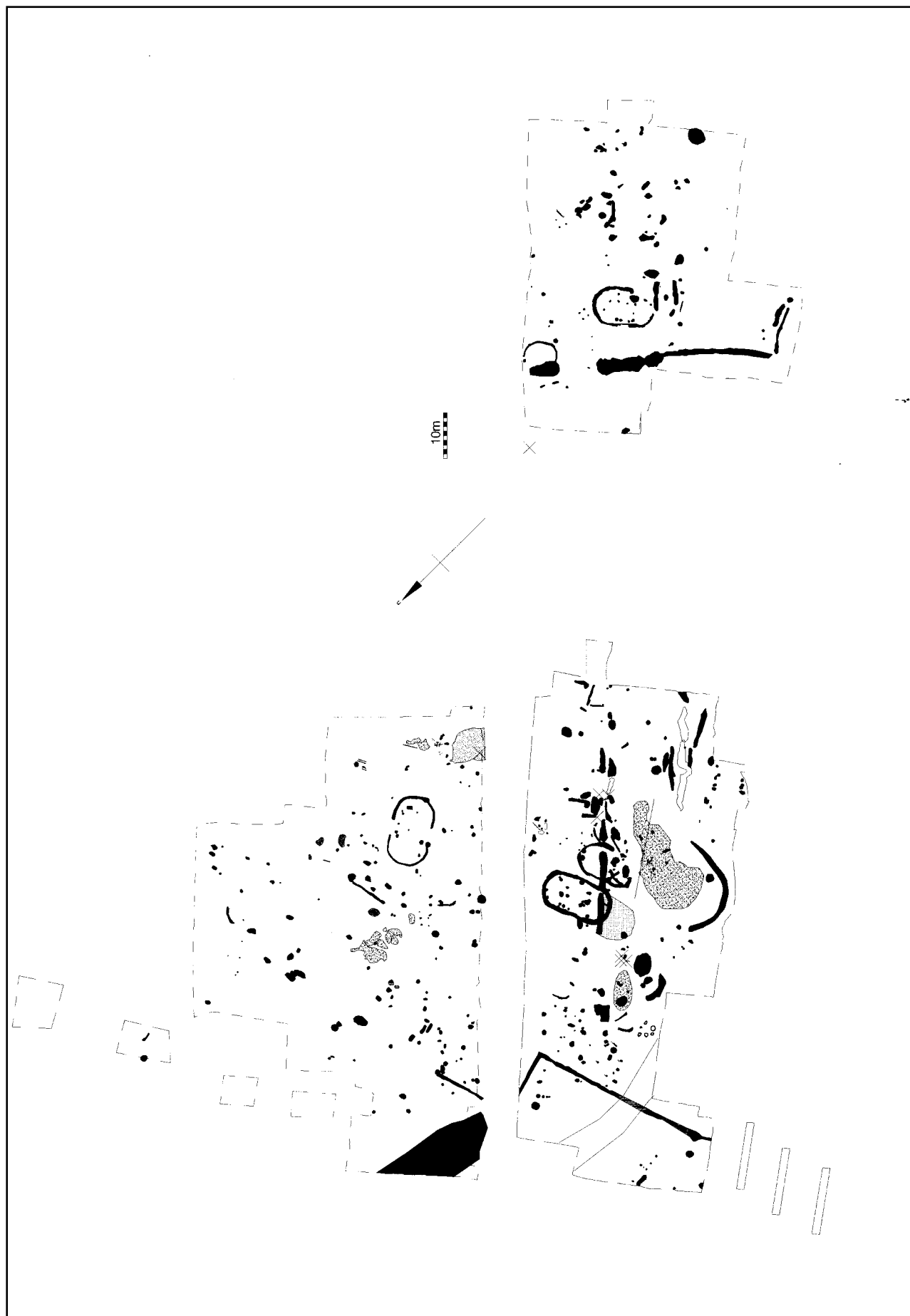


Fig. 3. Court Farm, Halewood site plan

at Great Woolden Hall or Castlesteads near Bury appear in some cases to show occupation in the late Iron Age (Nevell 1999a; Fletcher 1986), while a large enclosure at Brook House Farm, Halewood appears to have been situated on clay-land more suited to pasture rather than arable, a view perhaps reinforced by the widely spaced double ditches which appear to have been suitable for corralling livestock (Cowell and Philpott 2000). Other examples from Cheshire are undated but typologically they may fit the same chronological range. During the Iron Age, pottery appears to have been used very sparingly other than distinctive Cheshire Stony VCP (Very Coarse Pottery) salt containers used for evaporating and transporting salt. Inevitably the preference for traditional organic materials such as wood, leather, wool and other natural fibres leaves little or no trace on dryland sites. Several settlements which saw Roman occupation were established in the Iron Age, or in one or two cases earlier.

### *The Roman Conquest and Occupation*

Much has been written on the Roman conquest and occupation of the north west, the construction of Roman military sites and the network of roads which linked them and it is not intended to repeat these discussions in detail here (e.g. Jones 1971b; Carrington 1985; Petch 1987; Rogers 1996; Shotter 2004; Wild 2002). Suffice it to say, the county of Merseyside straddles the boundary between two tribal groups in the Roman period. To the south of the Mersey were the Cornovii, probably extending through Cheshire to their heartland in Shropshire with their tribal (civitas) capital at *Viroconium Cornoviorum* (Wroxeter, near Shrewsbury). North of the river may have lain within the territory of the Brigantes, whose tribal capital in the Roman period had been established east of the Pennines at Aldborough (*Isurium Brigantum*), though the presence of several tribal names such as the Carvetii in northern England suggests that this extensive region was divided between various groups, whether tribes or clans, standing in an uncertain relationship. One contender for a tribal group within south west Lancashire is the *Setantii*, the name being cognate with the Mersey *Seteia*, (Rivet and Smith 1979, 456-7), although some have placed the territory of the *Setantii* further north in the southern Lakes (e.g. Shotter 2004, 6-7). Merseyside therefore lies remote from the heartland and administrative centre of either of the major tribal grouping of the Brigantes or Cornovii.

Recent work on the finds assemblage from the eroding coastal site at Meols in north Wirral has suggested the harbour played an important role in the early post-conquest period (Griffiths *et al.* 2007). The origin and later use of the port are discussed in more detail below but amongst the Roman finds are a group of pre-Flavian (i.e. pre-AD 68) finds which include two Aucissa brooches, a wheel brooch, a mid 1st century military belt buckle and a Ritterling 12 samian rim sherd certainly of pre-Flavian date and possibly Claudian, as well as coins of Augustus (four copper *asses* which had long since fallen

out of circulation by the Flavian period), Claudius and Nero (Watkin 1886; Bean 2007). In view of the scarcity of such material in the North West the group is too large to be dismissed as the survival in use of old artefacts. A military component of the assemblage, the belt buckle and arguably the coins, provide an explanation for the pre-Flavian finds as a whole. It is usually considered that the Cornovii were one of the British tribes that surrendered early to the Romans and entered a treaty relationship soon after the invasion of Britain by Claudius in AD 43 (e.g. Petch 1987, 117; White and Barker 1998, 38). The harbour at Meols offered to the Roman army the important strategic advantage of a harbour on friendly Cornovian territory during the early post-invasion period. This would have its greatest value in the period before the foundation of the auxiliary fort at Chester (cf. Shotter 2004, 18), in the AD 60s, which has been postulated on the basis of coin and other evidence (Mason 2001; Shotter 2000a, 39-43). As a port known to have been in use during the late Iron Age, Meols was an obvious candidate to serve in the campaign of Ostorius Scapula recorded by Tacitus against the Deceangli of AD 48, towards 'the sea facing Ireland' as well as during the campaigns against the Ordovices or Deceangli by Suetonius Paullinus which culminated in the short-lived capture of Anglesey in AD 60 (Nash-Williams 1969, 5; Mason 2003). The presence of hostile tribes and difficult terrain along the northern coast of Wales suggests that the majority of the supplies were transported by sea while it is argued the majority of the men went overland (e.g. Petch 1987, 117). Some have speculated that the flat-bottomed boats referred to by Tacitus, were built on the Dee, but in the apparent absence of a fort at Chester, the use of an existing port at Meols might be more compelling. The harbour would have provided a springing off point for troops in friendly territory, for raids into the intermittently hostile territory of the Brigantes further north, in the military interventions by the Romans in their dealings with the fractious Brigantes during the AD 50s and 60s at a time of strife between a pro-Roman faction under Cartimandua and a hostile one led by her former husband, Venutius. Military activity in the lowland North West may have been associated with the simultaneous movement of troops by sea and land along the north west coast of England, recorded by Tacitus as a tactic of Agricola and evidence of which has been suggested from finds of pre-Neronian *aes*-coins in the estuaries of the Mersey, Ribble and Lune as well as the coastal region beyond (Shotter 2004, 18-20 and fig. 2.1).

The instability of the north under the Brigantes, which had on more than one occasion demanded intervention by Roman troops, finally forced decisive action in AD 69 when the Romans rescued Cartimandua from Venutius. In the following years the Roman army consolidated its hold over their tribal territory and that of their southern neighbours. A series of forts was constructed to secure the northern Cornovian territory of

Cheshire. These were located at Whitchurch, just across the county boundary in north Shropshire (Jones and Webster 1968), and at Northwich and Middlewich (Petch 1987; Strickland 2001). Middlewich was postulated as having pre-Flavian or very early Flavian activity, perhaps under the governor Cerealis on the basis of coin finds (Shotter 2000b, 53-6), while Strickland suggests a foundation of the early AD 70s, with samian from the neighbouring civilian settlement suggesting a start there in the early AD 80s and perhaps reoccupation after the Roman military withdrawal from Scotland in *c.* AD 87 (Shotter 2000b; Strickland 2001). Northwich was probably established about AD 70 and the fort rebuilt soon after AD 100 following a short abandonment (Jones 1971a; Petch 1987). A fort has been postulated, though not yet proven, at an important crossing point of the Mersey at Wilderspool where a Roman industrial settlement developed by the AD 90s (Strickland 1995), and the possibility of an as yet undiscovered military site at Nantwich remains a priority for future research. Thus by the late 1st century the northern Cornovian territory in Cheshire was garrisoned by the legionary fortress and a series of forts.

Cheshire formed an important bridge between the land of the Brigantes in the north and the tribes of north Wales to the east. There is growing evidence for the establishment of an auxiliary fort at Chester in the AD 60s in part to police that route (Shotter 2000a) but there was no permanent garrison until the legionary fortress of *Deva* was founded in the mid AD 70s (Carrington 2002). The fortress remained pre-eminent in terms of its administrative, military and population importance. The civil settlement at Chester also grew and may in time have acquired an elected council and a degree of self-government.

The forts at Northwich and Middlewich were abandoned by the early 2nd century AD but not before both places had developed into industrial manufacturing centres, producing pottery and salt, and engaged in working iron and copper alloy. The industrial activity at Northwich may not have outlasted by long the two phases of military occupation, the latest ending *c.* AD 140, with few finds dating to after AD 150 (Jones 1971a, 76; Petch 1987, 201-2); however, at Middlewich it certainly did, starting in the early AD 80s and continuing into the 4th century, though with reduced activity by the 3rd century. At Wilderspool the settlement began *c.* AD 85-90 and undertook iron working, pottery manufacture, bronze and glass making into the late 2nd century with a decline into the 3rd century.

Industrial manufacturing and production of salt, pottery, iron, copper-alloy and glass is a consistent feature of the Cheshire Plain sites. In the same category should be included the legionary tileworks at Holt on the Welsh bank of the river Dee, established to provide tile and pottery for the legionary fortress downstream at Chester. Closer to Chester a small roadside settlement at Heronbridge was established *c.* AD 90 and continued in

operation until the early 4th century. A bronze-working hearth with moulds and waste was discovered, and the mouth of a small stream where it met the Dee had been converted to a rock-cut dock (Mason 2002a). Excavations in Kingsley Fields, Nantwich, in 2002 have produced evidence of salt production from the late 1st to early 3rd century. The site included areas for metalworking and leather working beside a road, an open-sided building, brine storage tanks and a small cremation cemetery (Burnham *et al.* 2003, 318-9).

North of the Mersey, Wigan produced Roman burials, coins and other material in the 19th century but the location of the Roman settlement, probably the location of *Coccium* recorded in the Antonine Itinerary, was finally confirmed through excavations at the Wiend in 1982-4 (cf. Rivet and Smith 1979, 172, 310; Jones and Price 1985; Tindall 1985). Four phases of Roman occupation were identified; the earliest dating no more closely than AD 70-120 and lasting apparently till the mid 2nd century (Jones and Price 1985). In 2005 excavations at Millgate by Oxford Archaeology North revealed a large Roman building with probable attached bath-suite and a series of pits containing copious pottery, but identification of the function and dating of the structure are not yet available (Ian Miller pers. comm.). Significantly located on a coal outcrop beside the river Douglas, Wigan should perhaps be classed in the same category of industrial settlements as the Cheshire towns, although there is as yet insufficient evidence to determine the full range of activities and chronology of occupation. Walton-le-Dale on the Ribble may be another industrial settlement (Buxton and Shotter 1996, 78-81; Burnham *et al.* 1998, 388-90), with a series of long narrow timber buildings along a road frontage and evidence of iron working and other industrial processes, possibly including tanning. Jeremy Evans has pointed out that the apparent shortage of living accommodation within the industrial centres may indicate a servile population, though the high value silver coins and use of samian and amphorae may argue for military supervision of industrial production (Evans forthcoming).

The strong emphasis on specialised industrial production was a characteristic not only of the independent nucleated settlements such as Middlewich but also of the military *vicus* at Manchester where over 30 ironworking hearths have been discovered (Jones 1974, 67-75; Bryant *et al.* 1986), and it has been suggested that the clustering of hearths may indicate some zoning of activity within the *vicus* (D. Shotter pers. comm.). The total production from the various centres in the region is in excess of what would have been required for local consumption and the economic basis of the industrial manufacturing is supply to the Roman military from a region with access to most of the raw materials needed and positioned strategically between the civilian and military zones (Burnham and Wachter 1990, 12). The market for the products of the Wilderspool potteries, for example, are likely to have been not only the Lancashire-Cheshire Plain, as more

specialised vessels such as the easily traceable stamped mortaria were traded as far as Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall (Hartley and Webster 1973, 89-103).

A common feature of the Cheshire industrial sites is their major surge in activity in the 2nd century, notably in the Antonine period, followed by a marked decline in the 3rd century. Such is the pattern at Middlewich and Wilderspool (Evans forthcoming; Hinchliffe and Williams 1992; Strickland 1995). Although both sites continued in occupation, the intensity of production appears to have been reduced. The changing nature of the military garrisons to the north which they supplied has reasonably been adduced as the reason for the marked decline in activity at these sites as the army increasingly exploited local resources closer to the northern forts. A decline in size of the garrisons with the stabilisation of the northern frontier will have had the effect of reducing demand for manufactured products hence a reduction in the scale of production in the industrial settlements.

In addition to the more visible production of manufactured goods, the region may also have contributed agricultural produce such as cereals, hides, wool, meat and milk. It has been suggested for example that Cheshire was prime territory for the supply of bulk military meat contracts, with the availability of brine for production of salt meat, supported by the animal bone evidence of increased cattle production at Whitchurch on the Shropshire/Cheshire border (Jones and Mattingly 1990, 231-2).

### **Meols**

One of the most important sites active in the lowland North West during the latter part of the Iron Age and early Roman period was the port at Meols on the north Wirral coast. The site first came to light in 1846 when Revd Abraham Hume noticed that metal objects were being found by local people on the shore as a result of erosion of the old occupation surfaces near the coast (fig 4). By the end of the century well over five thousand objects had been found on the shore, of which about three thousand survive in five museums, the Grosvenor Museum, Liverpool Museum, the Williamson Art Gallery and Museum at Birkenhead, Warrington Museum and Art Gallery, and the British Museum. The finds range from Iron Age to post-medieval in date, and although the majority of surviving finds are medieval in date there is a small but significant group of Roman finds. By 1886 over 70 Roman brooches and over 100 coins had been found (Watkin 1886, 277-85).

In 1999 a project began to study the whole finds assemblage from Meols, co-ordinated by the writer with Dr David Griffiths at Oxford University and Dr Geoff Egan of the Museum of London Specialist Services (Griffiths *et al.* 2007). The Roman element of the project has several aims. First, it has attempted to identify and record all surviving Romano-British finds from the site, including the coins which have been studied by Dr

Simon Bean of National Museums Liverpool. Secondly, it has sought to analyse the composition of the finds to shed light on the chronology and nature of the settlement. Thirdly, it has used the surviving antiquarian accounts, maps and other hints of evidence to locate the findspots of Roman material in order to identify nuclei and to assess the potential for deposits to survive behind the present sea wall. Many of the findspots are not closely located but some recent finds, allied with the most precise statements of the Victorian antiquarians enable two main concentrations to be located. The first of these lay at Dove Point, which was subject in the 18th and 19th centuries to rapid erosion, so much so that the coast has receded by at least 400 metres from the late 18th century to the early 19th century when the process began to be arrested by construction of embankments. The other main concentration has been at Leasowe east of Dove Point, where work by Ray Kenna has identified two slightly raised areas within a generally very low lying coastal landscape which may have been sufficiently high to make them attractive dry points for settlement and other activity (Kenna 1978, fig. 1).

The long-lived attraction of the site was its natural harbour, a deep tidal pool called the Hoyle Lake (which gave its name to the developing town of Hoyle in the later 19th century), protected by an offshore sandbank which provided an anchorage on the north west coast. Its position on the end of a peninsula which lay between two major river estuaries, Dee and Mersey, was well situated for access inland to Cheshire, Merseyside and Greater Manchester along their tributaries.

Examination of the finds shows that the port was in operation from the middle Iron Age onwards. Finds begin in the 5th century BC with swan-neck pins, a ring-headed pin, and a La Tène I brooch; later activity is indicated by three Carthaginian coins of the late 3rd century BC, followed by Coriosolites tetradrachms, and an uncertain Celtic gold coin. Most recent is a coin of Tigranes II of Armenia dated 83-69 BC minted in Syria, though doubt has recently been cast on its authenticity (Liverpool Museum Accession No. 1991.37).

Some indication of the Iron Age settlement may be given by the discovery in the late 19th century of several circular buildings constructed with timber uprights. The absence of datable finds in direct association argues perhaps for a late prehistoric date rather than Roman as the Roman finds were rare at this period. Three swan-neck pins were all found in 1893 soon after the structures were observed eroding out from under the sand-dunes, providing circumstantial evidence for an Iron Age date.

The presence of Meols on the coast with its harbour is indicative of the long-lived operation of a coastal trade route which linked the continent, at least as far as western Gaul/Brittany but in contact either directly or indirectly with the Mediterranean, from the late 3rd century BC onwards. The coins do not represent part of a money economy but probably represent the minute visible component of a long-lived trading pattern in goods that

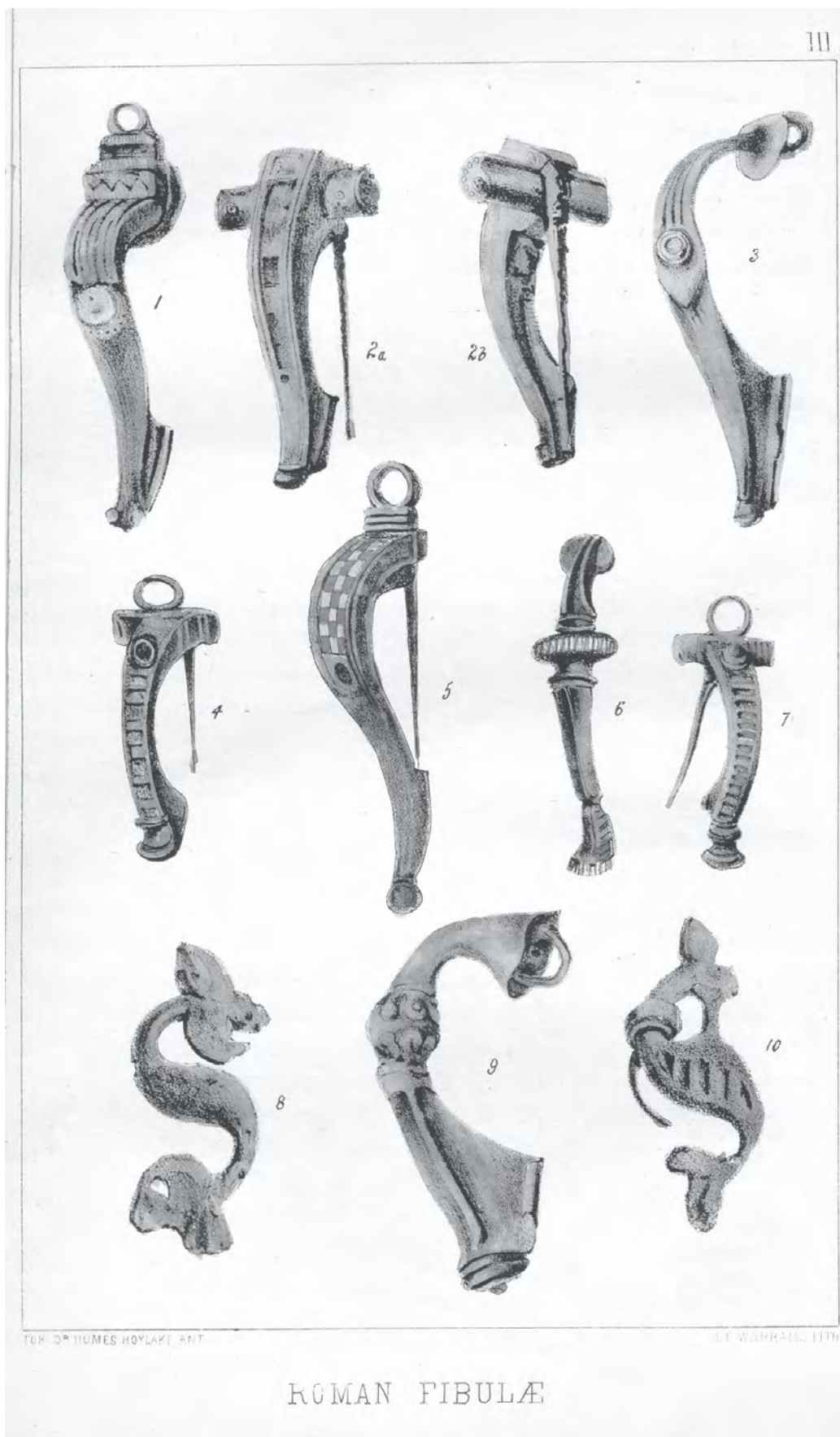


Fig. 4. Hume 1863: plate showing Roman brooches

are less archaeologically visible. The site may have been an emporium or coastal port. One commodity which does appear to have been exported through Meols in the Iron Age is salt. The source of the material was accessible via navigation inland along the Weaver. The distribution of Cheshire VCP in the later Iron Age along the North Wales coast and even into the Severn estuary indicates a coastal pattern of distribution of this valuable commodity. Elaine Morris (1985) has mapped the occurrence of VCP in Wales, the Midlands and NW England. Morris distinguishes two distinct phases of distribution of the material, with a marked change from a 'core' distribution area no further than 50 kilometres from its source at the brine springs of the Nantwich-Middlewich area in the early Iron Age, after about 500 BC, and an 'extended' pattern in the later Iron Age where the material travels up to 140 kilometres from source (Morris 1985, 367-70, figs 10-12). In the later Iron Age the distribution network expanded to embrace the north Wales coast, but also via the Severn estuary into the south west Midlands. Nick Higham (1993, 27) and Keith Matthews (1999) have suggested that Meols was the port through which the salt was traded. Furthermore, Matthews (1999) has argued convincingly of the importance of a western coastal trade route in the Iron Age, drawing attention to other sites along the coast which may have formed part of the same network.

#### *Meols in the Roman period*

Meols provides a rare thread of continuity in the North West from Iron Age to Roman Britain. Meols has perhaps the strongest evidence of a continuous occupation, or at least activity, through the mid 1st century AD, pre-dating the establishment of permanent military installations and occupation in the lowland North West. As has been seen above, in the early Roman period Meols may have served initially for troops, whilst possibly continuing its exportation of salt transhipped from the Nantwich/Middlewich area of Cheshire. In the light of the potential for military activity from Meols it might be postulated that some kind of temporary camp or a more permanent fort existed at the site. However, the loss of at least 400 metres of coastline to erosion since the late 18th century seriously limits the prospects of finding direct evidence for such a construction. As the port was the likely destination of the Roman road from the North Gate of the legionary fortress at Chester supports its early prominence.

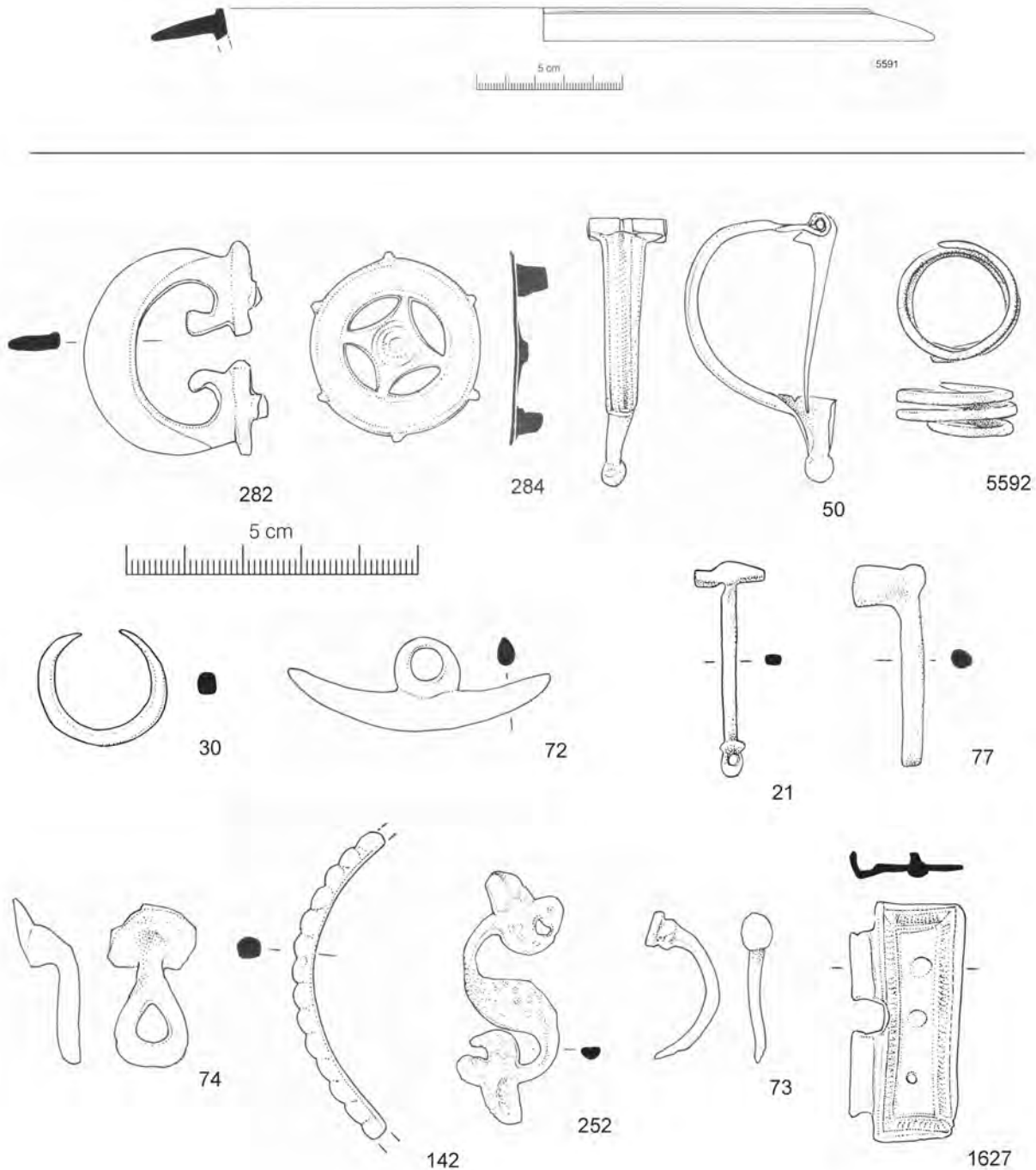
After the foundation of the legionary fortress at Chester the emphasis of Meols may have changed. Soon after the Roman conquest the export of salt may have been joined by minerals such as lead from north Wales, though the identification of a trade which no longer used briquetage containers as a signature becomes considerably more difficult. The early date of the exploitation of the Flintshire lead mines on Halkyn Mountain on the Welsh side of the Dee estuary, with the stamp dated to AD 74, suggests not only that the Romans

were aware from early on of the existence of the minerals (Laing and Laing 1983; Jones and Mattingly 1990, 10-11) but also of the early existence of a port through which the worked objects or raw material could be shipped – probably before the foundation of a permanent military installation at Chester. It could be argued that it was only the contact with the neighbouring tribe just across the peninsula in north Wirral that permitted the Roman military and entrepreneurs to exploit these deposits so early, before the formal conquest of the region. The early exploitation of the Flint lead/silver deposits become more readily explicable if the door was already open for prospecting through the presence of the military and potentially merchants with Mediterranean connections in the immediate post-Roman conquest period.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the continued role of Meols as a Roman port is its geographical location on the west coast, as well as its position in the Roman administrative framework. Trade across tribal and possibly across provincial boundaries was subject to customs dues (*portoria*) (Millett 1990, 173-4). Millett argues that the control of trade by tribal elites persisted into the late Roman period in Britain and trade was determined by social and political structures rather than the operation of a free market (1990, 174). The location of successful pottery industries for example in the later Roman period on tribal boundaries gave them access to the marketing networks of more than one *civitas*. The position of the port at Meols similarly provided access not only to the northern Cornovian territory but also to those of the Deceangli and Ordovices of North Wales and the Brigantes north of the Mersey.

After an initial phase when the Roman military made use of the existing port, Meols may have served primarily as a sheltered harbour for the transhipment of cargoes between sea going vessels plying the west coast trade route and river barges serving the Dee and Mersey estuaries and their navigable tributaries. The importance of waterborne supply in the military transport system is indicated by the decision to locate the fortress at Chester on a navigable river. The development of industrial centres of Cheshire and Lancashire in the last decade or so of the 1st century AD will have provided a regular flow of manufactured goods and agricultural produce to the northern frontier via the Mersey. The passage of goods led not only to the continuation of the trading port of Meols during the Roman period but probably also to the establishment of a market and perhaps associated manufacturing, in common with much of its hinterland.

The Romano-British finds assemblage at Meols has some interesting features (fig. 5). By 1886 about 70 Roman brooches were known (Watkin 1886, 278). It is instructive to compare the levels of recovery of brooches from the known manufacturing site at Wilderspool. Thomas May records twelve individually in his excavations to 1904 (1904, *passim*) while in extensive excavations of 1966-69 and 1976, only eight more were found (Hinchliffe and Williams 1992). The number of



**Early Roman finds from Meols (pre-70 AD)**

- 5591 Samian ware rim, found 1955, Ritterling 12 form
- 282 Military belt buckle
- 284 Wheel brooch
- 50 Aucissa brooch
- 5592 Spiral finger-ring of late Iron Age-early Romano-British type

**Other Romano-British finds from Meols**

- 30 Roman ear-ring, one of nearly 40 from the site

- 72 Pendant from 'cosmetic grinder, 1st to 2nd century AD
- 21 Model hammer
- 77 Model axe
- 74 Button and loop fastener
- 142 Fragment of bracelet
- 252 Unenamelled dragonesque brooch, a northern type probably of late 1st –early 2nd century date
- 73 Fragment of penannular brooch
- 1627 Late Roman military belt plate

Fig. 5. Roman finds from Meols



Fig. 6. Late 4th early 5th-century belt plate from Meols

brooches at Meols is exceptionally high for a site in the region and may reflect manufacture at the port rather than simply casual loss. With its 35 ear-rings, Meols had the largest assemblage of copper-alloy ear-rings known from Roman Britain at the time of Lindsay Allason-Jones's survey in 1989 (Allason-Jones 1989), and demonstrates a female element to a civilian population. In addition, Watkin draws attention to about 120 coins, including illegible pieces, with the statement that 'large numbers of coins found here have been sold by the finders, dispersed through the country' and their provenance lost (1886, 284). Of the 120 or so recorded coins, Simon Bean has been able to trace in detail about 90 (Bean 2007; Shotter 2000c, 100-1) which compares with 182 from the intensively excavated site at Wilderspool (Shotter 2000c, 26) and is no less than 10% of the size of that from the legionary fortress at Chester. The coin series at Meols continues until the late 4th century, with a pattern of loss in broad terms resembling that of Chester, though with a strong early showing which is not present in Chester (Bean 2007). Pottery at Meols by contrast is conspicuous by its scarcity, with only 16 fragments surviving in modern collections. Amongst this are hints of traded wares including several BB1 sherds, samian and a North Kentish mortarium. That this is neither an artefact of 19th century collecting policies nor a subsequent accident of survival of their collections is indicated by the fact that the dearth of pottery was considered worthy of comment from the antiquarians of the day who were familiar with the considerable quantities produced at Roman sites such as Chester. Apart from coins and brooches, other classes of Roman find diminish after the 2nd century and there is little that is certainly 3rd or 4th century AD in date. Small numbers of items such as a button-and-loop fastener, a model axe and a hammer, box fittings, and finger-rings

are examples of objects in fairly common circulation within Roman Britain. The finds assemblage supports the view that Meols developed into a local market centre for the exchange and redistribution of goods with the implication of a resident community as well as a transient merchant population. The coin assemblage points not only to the long duration of occupation, from the pre-Flavian to late 4th century, but also a money-using economy appropriate to a market and port. The size and composition of the assemblage have some odd features. The number of brooches and ear-rings, for instance, are exceptional, and may reflect the peculiar circumstances of the recovery of the assemblage. Effectively the occupation deposits appear to have been scoured and removed by a combination of strong wind and high tides, the soil component being washed away, depositing the metal finds on harder, more resistant surfaces below. As Hume himself observed in the mid 19th century, the high proportion of metal artefacts as opposed to pottery is a result of the higher density of metal, the less dense pottery presumably being washed away. Thus even small metal items such as fragile ear-rings were preserved to be deposited.

The possibility of a connection with Ireland also deserves consideration. The Roman author Tacitus, writing of the fifth year of Agricola's campaigning in northern Britain, refers to knowledge of the approaches and harbours of Ireland from the activities of merchants and trade (Rivet and Smith 1979, 95). Finds of Roman material on the east coast of Ireland, including two groups of burials and the enigmatic site of Drumanagh in Co. Dublin which has been suggested as an important element in the trading networks of the Roman period, along with Roman material from Lambay Island, 6 kilometres south-east of Drumanagh, indicate contact with native communities in Britain, who may have acted as intermediaries in the transmission of Roman goods (Waddell 2000, 374). Furthermore it has been suggested that a Roman invasion of Ireland took place under Agricola, or in support of an exiled Irish king (Warner 1996; Robinson 2000). 'There may well have been Romano-British traders in Ireland and some Irish people may have travelled to late Roman Britain' (Waddell 2000, 375-7). It is hoped that the 2007 publication of the Meols material will stimulate a consideration of the Irish material in the light of a potential trade across the Irish Sea from the port.

Late Roman occupation at Meols is signified by coins which run as late as Magnus Maximus (AD 383-88) as well as a Hawkes and Dunning Type IIIA belt plate, probably of late 4th or early 5th century date (fig. 6). This class of late Roman military belt fitting is rare in northern and western Roman Britain (cf. Jones and Mattingly 1990, Map. 9.2). The belt plate by itself may of course be a casual loss, but recent finds of a Hawkes Type 1B belt buckle and plate from a hillfort at Pen y Corddyn, Abergele, Denbighshire (Burnham *et al.* 1993, 271, fig. 4), and a triangular buckle from Caerwent (Arnold and

Davies 2000, 33-4, fig. 2.14) do indicate that the general type is not wholly absent from western Roman Britain. In particular, the Pen y Corddyn and Meols finds do fit into a late Roman military context for which other evidence is beginning to emerge. David Shotter and others have argued that the Irish Sea coast of Britain saw the development of coastal defences against a sea borne enemy, the Picts, in the 4th century (Shotter 2004, 161-4). Alongside a fort at Cardiff similar to the Saxon Shore forts of south eastern England, were defensive sites at Caer Gybi, Segontium and Holyhead. That the defences extended as far as Lancaster, is indicated by the 9 acre fort on Castle Hill with polygonal corner bastions of which the surviving Wery Wall formed part. Forts on the Cumbrian coast were also occupied in the 4th century. Although Shotter is reluctant to use the term 'defence system', nonetheless David Mason has developed the idea further, suggesting that the obvious place for a separate naval command for the Irish Sea during the 4th century was Chester, and there is evidence of renewed activity in the fortress at this period (Mason 2001, 209; 2002b, 65; 2003). To return to Meols, while too much should not be built on the back of a single buckle plate and a coin, the presence of these finds is consistent with a wider pattern of military activity in the coastal region in the 4th century. Meols may have regained a military role in the later 4th century by virtue of its harbour and its pivotal position along the western coast.

## **Rural Settlement**

### *Settlement Enclosures*

#### Enclosure Distribution

Progress in understanding the rural settlement of the North West has been rapid over the last two decades. During the Roman period, just as in late Iron Age, enclosed settlements form the most visible type of rural settlement in the region. Most sites of this type have been discovered through aerial reconnaissance, the surrounding ditches forming distinctive cropmarks, and over 80 probable or certain examples are now recorded from Cheshire, Merseyside and West Lancashire (fig. 7). Some characteristics of the distribution, such as a thinning in the eastern part of Cheshire by comparison with the river valleys of the west and Wirral, may reflect historic realities. Particular concentrations are evident in the Mersey valley around Warrington and Winwick (Cowell and Philpott 2000, 178-9). Similarly the river valleys of Cheshire, notably the Dee and Weaver, have produced clusters of enclosures. The known distribution pattern of enclosures is to a large extent a creation of several factors, including the extensive controlled air space which restricts aerial reconnaissance, the urban development which obscures large swathes of the landscape, and patterns of modern cultivation which restrict the area of land with the potential to produce

suitable cropmarks. Thus the extensive pasture of mid Cheshire produces clear cropmarks only in exceptional circumstances of drought. Nonetheless the distribution has some value in pointing to river valleys as significant topographical factors in determining settlement location even if for every site in such a 'good' location, there is another in a place which is far less advantageous in terms of soils, drift geology and natural drainage. Their location was not simply a matter of choice of the best land within an empty landscape; new settlements had to pay due regard to existing patterns of ownership and land use. Whilst the presence of one or more enclosures might point to a particular area having been occupied in the late prehistoric or Romano-British period, the absence of visible enclosures can certainly not be taken to prove that the area was devoid of settlement.

Within the county boundaries of Merseyside, at least 10 enclosures have now been observed as cropmarks. They include sites in Wirral at Brimstage, Irby and Greasby and a possible example at Arrowe Park, as well as north of the Mersey at Ashton in Makerfield, Tarbock (two), Cronton, Rainhill and Ince Blundell. Still others are now known over the county boundary in Cheshire, especially in the Winwick area, and in West Lancashire. The enclosures together with sites known or suspected on other grounds, whether from fieldwalking, metal detector discoveries or chance finds, suggest that at least some of Walbank's 'blank space on the map' did in fact contain a network of discrete sites. Each settlement nucleus will without doubt have been accompanied by field systems, trackways and areas of pasture and managed woodland, though such types of land use may be either difficult to identify or invisible to current archaeological techniques. Not that all areas were likely to be equally densely settled. The North West Wetlands Survey which saw an extensive fieldwalking programme in the vicinity of the wetlands produced very low yields of Romano-British pottery and other artefacts, suggesting, unsurprisingly, that the extensive mosses and their margins did not present good settlement sites. However, the hinterland of Meols has produced a series of finds from the fringes of the wetland which backs the coastal site. These include several sherds of pottery in an evaluation at Church Farm, Bidston, a Roman coin from the nearby parish church at Bidston, hints of Roman activity at Moreton with a late 1st century coin, a 4th century coin and sherd of Roman pottery from Hoyle Road, the last two from an excavated site, and recently recovered metal detector finds from Newton. Together these finds suggest that the port may have had a role in stimulating and supporting settlement on some of the nearest dry land in the vicinity.

Enclosures vary considerably in form and preliminary work suggests in part that there may be a chronological dimension with a change in form from the late Iron Age to the Roman period (fig.8). The known large double-ditched enclosures of certain Iron Age date, such as Brook House Farm and Great Woollen Hall, have counterparts in the valleys of the Dee and Weaver

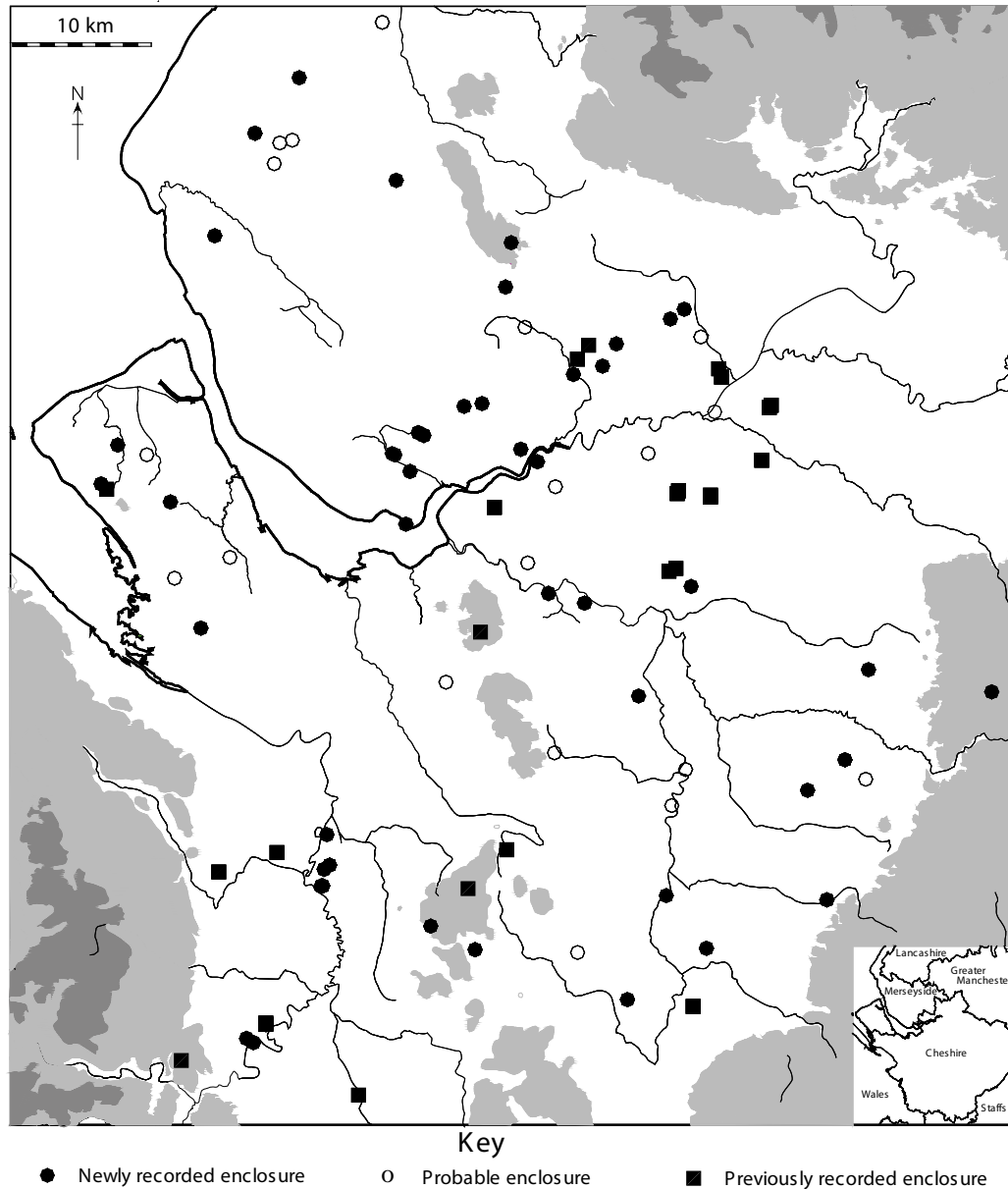


Fig. 7. Map of enclosures

in Cheshire which by analogy are probably Iron Age in date though no detailed fieldwork has been carried out to confirm this. Small oval enclosures are less common but one at Telegraph Road Irby, which appeared as a cropmark, has been fieldwalked, producing both Iron Age and Romano-British pottery, with an uncertain relationship between the enclosure and the occupation material, while another of similar shape near Hale has produced Romano-British pottery. Square or subrectangular enclosures include examples at Winwick near Newton-le-Willows and one at Greasby, Wirral both with Romano-British pottery from fieldwalking. Another neat square enclosure at Southworth, Cheshire was subject to a limited evaluation in 1993 and produced Romano-British pottery in a number of negative features (Philpott *et al.* 1993), while further work funded through

the Aggregates Levy in 2003 produced as yet undated features in the vicinity of the enclosure. Two other excavated sites at Mill Hill Road, Irby and Ochre Brook, Tarbock each have rectilinear enclosures in the Roman period.

Too few sites have been excavated, however, to be sure that this simple chronological scheme tells the whole story. Neighbouring areas such as Shropshire urge caution in accepting this too readily as a general rule; as there, square enclosures are in some cases clearly Iron Age in origin (Whimster 1989). The shape of enclosures is probably determined by a number of factors, not simply chronology. At Greasby a subdivided enclosure noted as a cropmark provides a possible hint of partition of an enclosure with each part perhaps performing separate functions, or possibly representing fission of a family

group. Roman pottery found in fieldwalking indicated that at least part of its occupation occurred in the Roman period. In addition, how the settlement fitted into the existing landscape is important. Jones and Higham have argued that the primary settlements within a landscape are likely to be curvilinear in form, being the most economical shape in terms of ditch and bank construction to enclose the largest area, and will be particularly suited to pastoral farming. An arable farming regime, however, which to make the most efficient use of the plough tends to create rectilinear field systems, will tend to see new settlements of broadly rectilinear form (Higham and Jones 1985, 78-9). Function too may determine the area enclosed and the form of the enclosure, so that a site intended to accommodate overwintering cattle may enclose a far larger area than one primarily for human dwelling and domestic activities. There appear to be some differences between regions in the dating of, for example, rectilinear enclosures. Although in the Mersey-Dee basin, which includes the area north of the Mersey and thus probably Brigantian/Setantian territory, there is a tendency for the rectangular enclosures to be Roman in date. In the North East of England and southern Cornovian territory in Shropshire, such enclosures are frequently found to begin in the Iron Age. Morphology by itself cannot be used as an absolute indicator of date but may have some value as a relative pointer as part of the process of settlement development within a landscape setting. This requires testing by examination of a substantial sample of sites in the North West before its validity can be demonstrated. It should be stressed however that the date of most of these is not certain.

At the few excavated Iron Age sites in the Mersey Basin - Great Woollen Hall, Irby, Brook House Farm, Halewood and now Dutton's Farm, Lathom - the Iron Age phase is succeeded by Roman occupation, though it is not always clear whether this was continuous or represented a reoccupation of an abandoned site. Lathom has produced the strongest evidence yet of a continuous sequence of re-building of a house on the same site from the late Iron Age to the early Romano-British period (Cowell 2002). Here, radiocarbon dates in the 1st century BC for a roundhouse are followed on the same site by a small Roman pottery assemblage which includes samian and orange ware as well as an early 2nd century AD coin hoard in the infill of a silted trackway. In the other cases there is no certain continuity from the later Iron Age to the Roman period but this is in any case very difficult to identify, since it requires either a clearly defined stratigraphic sequence with well dated deposits spanning the period or a series of artefacts or a tight sequence of radiocarbon dates which refine the chronology to identify occupation throughout the 1st century AD at a time when artefacts are notoriously scarce. At Brook House Farm, Halewood, a large double-ditched enclosure in Merseyside, a standstill phase of accumulation of deposits in the ditch may indicate an episode of abandonment in the mid 1st century AD; Roman buildings and activity

are indicated by a tiny pottery assemblage including three sherds of late 1st century samian. At Irby, in Wirral, late 1st century AD pottery, including samian, occurs on a site which has two radiocarbon dates and at least one structure dated 410-200 cal BC (2275±40: OxA-8485; 2270±40: OxA-8486); with no diagnostic finds to bridge the elusive two hundred year gap (Philpott and Adams forthcoming).

The change in enclosure form may also be accompanied by a change in the scale of the earthworks surrounding them. Gone are the massive earthworks of the Iron Age to be replaced by much less substantial features during the Romano-British period. The social system which required displays of massive earthworks as an element of prestige and standing seems no longer to operate. It could be argued that the change in the social composition of the countryside was in part responsible for this and it was no longer seen as appropriate or necessary to indulge in construction of substantial earthworks. The dilution or breakdown of traditional society values and norms through the imposition of Roman administrative structures as well as immigration into the area may have ensured that prestige and status were derived in new ways, and displayed through new sets of symbols. Thus the enclosures were no longer massive ostentatious 'defensive' features, but instead defined the core homestead with its domestic functions as opposed to the fields and pastures.

#### Enclosure Interiors

The emphasis on the typology of enclosures stems from a lack of detailed information regarding the structures and layout of the interior, information which only excavation can produce. Aerial photography sometimes reveals general information on enclosure interiors. An oval enclosure at Telegraph Road, Irby contains circular buildings, evenly spaced within the interior (fig. 2). Fieldwalking has revealed both Roman and, very unusually, late prehistoric pottery in the field; so the date of the features could fit into either period. Although they may be contemporary in use, only excavation can determine the duration and chronology of occupation or function. A subrectangular enclosure at Aughton, West Lancashire, contains a centrally placed penannular ditch, which shows up with unusual clarity as a cropmark. Although this had been previously interpreted as a henge monument, its deliberate positioning at the centre of the enclosure suggests it is more likely to be a roundhouse of late prehistoric or Romano-British date. The interior of a large curvilinear enclosure at Brimstage in Wirral contains faint marks but no clear structural form can be discerned.

In order to recover detailed evidence for the chronology, layout and economy of rural settlements we have to turn to excavation. The few enclosures which have been investigated through excavation not surprisingly turn out to have individual site histories. The open area excavation of a ditched enclosure, on a promontory at

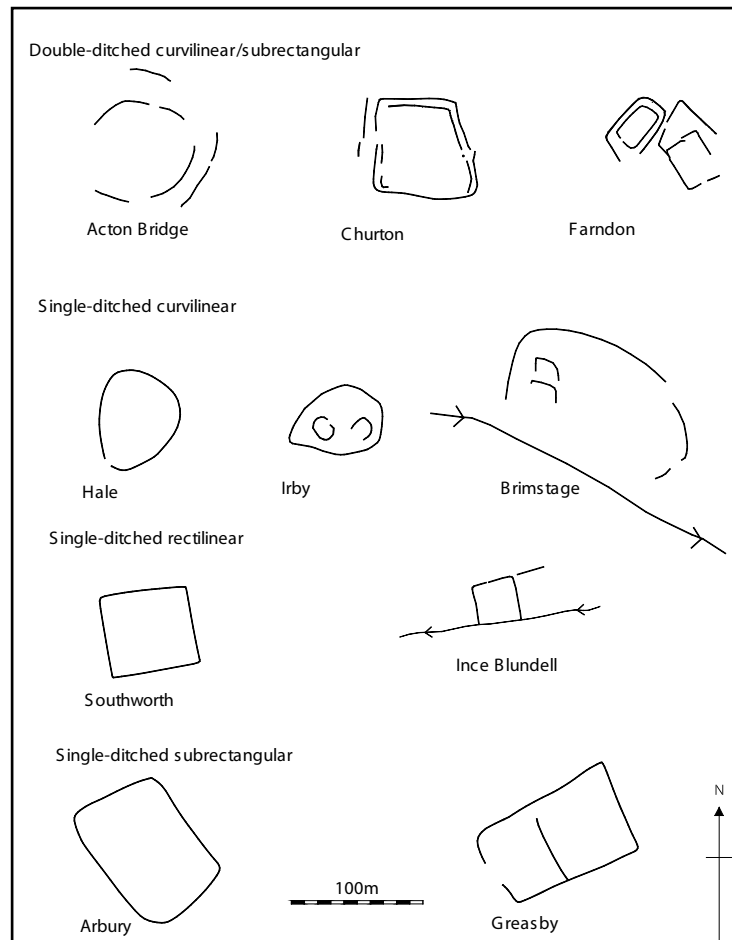


Fig. 8. Enclosure forms

Great Woolden north of Cadishead in Salford district overlooking the River Glazebrook, was undertaken by the Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit in 1986-7. The excavation revealed three main phases. The first had a near-complete plan of a double-ring house, radiocarbon dated to 65-15 BC. It consisted of an outer circular post-trench nearly 13 metres in diameter, with an entrance indicated by a gap of 1.8 metres width and two large post pits which once held entrance posts of 0.6 metres in diameter. A line of small, circular post-holes c. 0.2-0.25 metres in diameter formed the inner ring. A large rotary quern fragment and sherds of VCP provided evidence for material culture. The second phase saw construction of an oval palisaded enclosure and a roundhouse which produced a date of 120 BC-AD 80 and a final, Romano-British, phase indicated by Romano-British pottery from the fill of the inner ditch and the ploughsoil though no excavated structures could be assigned to the Roman period. A hiatus was postulated between the late Iron Age and Romano-British activity (Neve 1999a).

At Mill Hill Road, Irby, the Iron Age buildings are not well understood having been disturbed by intensive later activity and it is not known whether the site at that period was enclosed at all. The poorly defined Iron Age occupation was followed perhaps in the late 1st or

early 2nd century AD by a double-ditched enclosure, replacing a palisaded enclosure, probably of earlier Roman date. The ditched enclosure itself appears to have been appended to an existing enclosure, possibly of subrectangular plan. During the early Roman period at Irby, in the 2nd century, two buildings were constructed; one was circular and measured c. 11 metres in diameter, the other was incomplete but probably circular too. The first was subsequently replaced on the same spot by a building which is strictly polygonal rather than circular, and perhaps implying a construction of straight panels, set in gullies (Philpott and Adams forthcoming). Following this there is apparently a phase of rectangular structures, two of which are no earlier than the mid 4th century AD. Structure 9 had a sherd of mid-late 4th-century pottery in the wall gully, and may be late Roman or possibly later in date; it measured about 6.5 metres wide internally but neither end was securely identified amid heavily disturbed ground and the length is at least 11.5 metres but uncertain. Another foundation gully (S29) contained a *Constantinopolis* coin, issued AD 337-340 (SF7991), along with two radiocarbon dates from barley, of 350-600 cal AD and 230-440 cal AD; together these suggest either a late Roman or an early post-Roman date. They appear to have been followed in turn by a phase

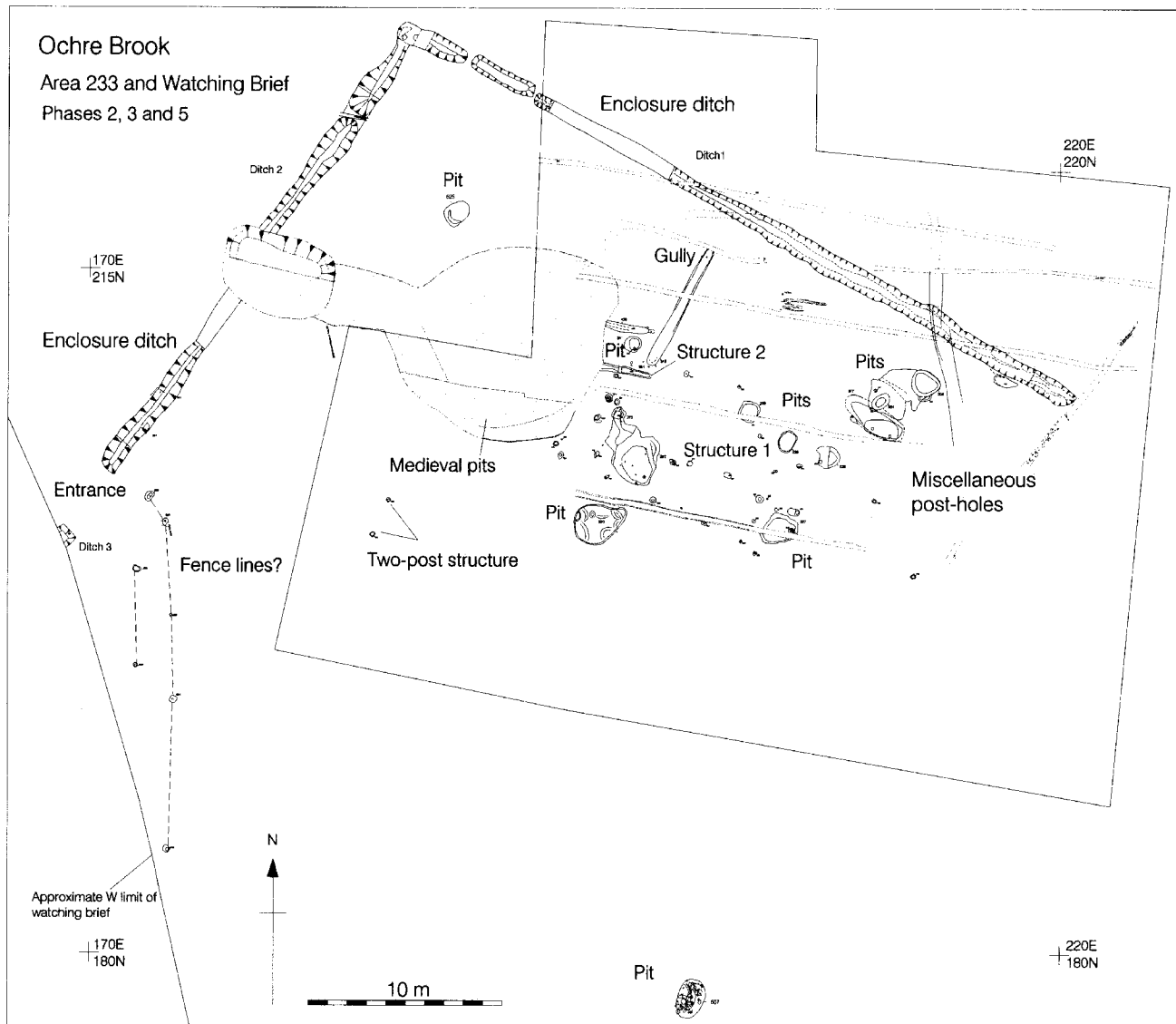


Fig 9. Ochre Brook, Tarbock site plan

of bow-sided structures, probably 12-15 metres long, which can be seen to cut 4th century deposits and have tentatively been reinterpreted as Norse structures, though no single complete ground plan was identified (Philpott and Adams forthcoming; see Philpott this volume). The main structures identified as part of the Romano-British occupation at Irby, however, are far from the whole picture. Other Romano-British structures whose plans could not be recognised are undoubtedly hidden amongst a dense concentration of post-holes.

Circular buildings were also found at Dutton's Farm, Lathom, in West Lancashire. Here, as at Irby, repeated rebuilding on the same spot is a feature of the site, where each successive structure is displaced by a short distance from its predecessor, much of the interior floor space being preserved in both. The sequence of several

overlapping roundhouses runs from the late Iron Age into the Romano-British period (Cowell 2002). Roundhouses are also seen in early phases at the industrial settlements of Wilderspool and Walton-le-Dale, where they represent the continuation of a native tradition but the settlements are dominated by Romanised rectangular structures from the beginning (Hinchliffe and Williams 1992; Burnham *et al.* 1998, 388). The roundhouse is the characteristic building form of the Iron Age, not only in the north west but much more widely in Britain (Cunliffe 1991, 242-6), and this type of structure persists on a number of excavated sites well into the Romano-British period. Iron Age examples can be seen at Bruen Stapleford in Cheshire (Fairburn 2002a).

One innovation which appears to be a peculiar local development is a form of elongated curvilinear building.

This distinctive type of subrectangular structure has been found at Court Farm Halewood, probably of 2nd-3rd century date, and in one case contains two rows of internal posts, and a possible baffled entrance (fig. 3). A hipped roof with ridge pole is suggested by the post arrangements. Examples are known from Wilderspool, dated to the late 2nd-early 3rd century (Structure 2956: Hinchliffe and Williams 1992, 108-10) and Brunt Boggart, Tarbock (Cowell and Philpott 2000, 198-200, fig. 8.4). This appears to be a regional development in the Mersey-Dee basin north of the Mersey which does not appear to be closely paralleled outside the region and suggests a native style of construction, adapting and expanding the roundhouse.

Rectangular buildings of Roman date are less common on the rural sites excavated so far. At Brook House Farm, Halewood, the interior of a double-ditched enclosure contained three phases of probable post-Iron Age rectilinear structures; a radiocarbon date from the earliest (Phase 3) structure, which came out at Iron Age, is likely to represent residual material. Pottery on the site strongly suggests that at least one building, if not more, is Roman in date, though a post-Roman date cannot be ruled out (Cowell and Philpott 2000). Court Farm, Halewood also produced several rectangular post-built structures (Adams and Philpott forthcoming).

At Ochre Brook, Tarbock a single substantial post-built rectilinear building was found within a rectangular enclosure (Cowell and Philpott 2000), which appeared to have an industrial function of a type which had not been expected in the region. The building was probably central to the enclosure, but the site was not long-lived, lasting for perhaps a century at the most. During its life it was associated with a tile manufacturing site indicating a more Romanised milieu than that of other rural sites (fig. 9).

#### *Open settlements*

The discovery of an unenclosed settlement at Court Farm, Halewood in 1996 extends the range of rural settlement types from the region. The site was found through the recovery of six sherds of pottery in the ploughsoil during fieldwalking. One of the most significant elements of the site is the exiguous surface traces. A search of existing aerial photographic coverage revealed no sign of the site. Evaluation and subsequent excavation showed that the surface scatter corresponded with a substantial unenclosed settlement extending over 1.5 hectares and consisting of nearly 20 buildings (including the oval structures noted above, and four-poster structures which were possibly granaries), pits, field ditches and other features, dating from 2nd to 4th century AD. There appears to be progressive expansion of the settlement from west to east, though a shift in the nucleus is possible, while the chronology of building construction and occupation is not closely refined owing to scarcity of datable pottery or other finds in

relevant contexts (Adams and Philpott forthcoming).

The pottery assemblage consisted of 3476 sherds and suggested that the occupation lasted from the 2nd to the 4th century, with only a hint of possible earlier material in the form of a few possible briquetage sherds. While the latter could be Iron Age in date, there are suggestions from elsewhere that the use of Cheshire VCP salt containers may have persisted into the early Roman period, as at Bryn Eryr on Anglesey, for example (Longley *et al.* 1998, 192). Sealed plough furrows showed that the settlement had been constructed in part over earlier arable land. The site appears to have been an unenclosed agricultural settlement and conceivably a minor hamlet of a type difficult to parallel in the region. Querns of sandstone and millstone grit were found, although copper-alloy working is attested by crucibles and coal present on site.

Another possible open site is that at Brunt Boggart Tarbock, where the narrow strip excavated did not establish a certain enclosure ditch (Cowell and Philpott 2000). The majority of the Roman material was derived from the upper fills of a Bronze Age ditch, which remained a visible feature in the landscape into the medieval period, and could have served as an enclosure ditch in the Roman period. A probable Romano-British oval building was identified of the same form as the Court Farm and Wilderspool examples, although it lacked datable material. Roman finds were not prolific on the site but included a Colchester Type IV brooch of the mid-late 1st century AD and 108 sherds of pottery, dating from the 2nd to 4th century AD.

#### *Field Systems*

At a number of locations in the North West hints of field systems surrounding individual farms have begun to come to light. At Brereton a pair of enclosures, probably set either side of a trackway, may be associated with a fragment of an irregular but broadly rectilinear field system. At Farndon, two enclosures of rather different form appear to be attached to either side of a trackway. Elsewhere fragments of field systems occur, in association with one or more enclosure. At Winwick north of the Mersey are three superimposed field systems, the earliest of which may be associated with an enclosure which has produced Romano-British pottery in fieldwalking. Traces of the field system attached to an enclosure have been found at Glazebury, Cheshire, while other undated examples of so-called 'Celtic' fields have been seen in Kelsall (Bu'Lock 1954) and elsewhere. An Iron Age ditch at Brook House Farm, Halewood closed off the space between the two enclosure ditches, leaving a narrow entrance, supporting the idea that the space was used to corral livestock. The fill of the ditch contained a sherd of samian suggesting it remained open into the Roman period (Cowell and Philpott 2000). A probable field ditch at Court Farm was identified on the edge of the settlement but cannot be certainly associated

chronologically with the Romano-British phase.

At present these rural examples suggest no more than that individual farms are surrounded by their own arable fields and do not necessarily represent visible fragments of extensive areas of organised landscape. However, newly recognised field systems around the Cheshire industrial settlements of Middlewich and Northwich, and possibly outside the *canabae* at Chester, suggest that the landscape around these settlements was formally partitioned and organised. It is tempting to ascribe this to the establishment of field systems to demarcate and control areas of arable, pasture and perhaps horticultural land and there seems little doubt that the newly laid out systems belong with the nucleated settlements in the Roman period (Mark Leah pers. comm.; *Cheshire Archaeology News* 2002). In Cornovian territory field systems have been recognised from aerial photography in a few exceptional areas, including north of the *civitas* capital at Wroxeter, where a series of lanes radiating from the town forms the framework for a network of ditched fields and paddocks (Whimster 1989, 60, fig. 37). However, the region appears so far to lack the widespread integrated field systems which are found in densely occupied parts of the country such as the Trent valley in Nottinghamshire (Riley 1980; Whimster 1989, 66-87), where farming settlements are integrated within complex and extensive systems of fields, paddocks, droveways and lanes. In some upland areas of Cumbria, settlements are linked one to another by extensive dyke systems which demonstrate the extensive partition of the landscape (Higham and Jones 1975).

The requirement to delimit formally the landscape and define mutual boundaries between holdings or estates becomes pressing only when the pressure on land creates competition for space. In the Mersey-Dee basin north of the Mersey minor excavations, evaluation and fieldwalking have suggested that the landscape was

underpopulated, probably at well below capacity. Certain areas appear to have been favoured for settlement, but whether this is an artefact of archaeological research or a feature of the original settlement distribution is difficult to tell at present.

#### *Status and Economy of Rural Settlements*

There is little evidence within the Romano-British countryside of obvious status differences such as are evident in the hierarchy of rural settlement in the south and east of England from the opulent villas of the tribal aristocracies, with mosaics and wall paintings to the modest farms of the rural peasants. Only one certain villa has been found in Cheshire, and that of modest proportions, at Eaton-by-Tarporley (Petch 1987, 211), although others have been claimed at Kelsall, for example, largely based on 19th-century accounts. However, without modern corroborative evidence these remain speculative (e.g. Petch 1987, 188, 212-3; Matthews 1994, fig. 8.3). Such differences in enclosure dimensions may reflect function rather than status, as discussed above.

However, some differences are beginning to emerge in the nature of finds assemblages which may have implications for the status or economy of settlements. Some sites produce some quantities of personal ornaments (especially brooches) while others are relatively rich in coins as against others which produce few or none. To some extent this may reflect the chronology of occupation as most brooches – the most common individual Roman metal find in the region – were fashionable in the later 1st and 2nd centuries, and coin use became common only in the late 3rd century.

Too few sites have been excavated to provide statistically useful assemblages of artefacts other than pottery, yet here too we can see some interesting differences in the volume of pottery used, the chronology

	Brunt Boggart, Tarbock	Ochre Brook, Tarbock	Mill Hill Road, Irby	Court Farm, Halewood	Birch Heath, Tarporley	Dutton's Farm, Lathom
Orange ware	58	700	1140	2615	576	49
BB1	18	95	871	539	299	27
Grey ware	24	120	230	27	6	5
Colour-coated ware	7	10	83	15	0	0
Amphora	0	12	23	35	30	0
Samian	1	10	57	104	11	5
Hartshill-Mancetter mortarium	0	1	73	109	2	0
White ware	0	1	47	11	33	4
Oxidised mortaria	0	10	16	21	0	4
Calcite-gritted ware	0	0	31	0	0	0
Shell-tempered ware	0	0	20	0	0	0

Table 1. Types of pottery from excavated rural sites in Merseyside, Cheshire and West Lancashire; numbers of sherds by type

of pottery use and the source of the material. The size of the pottery assemblage recovered from a site is affected by several factors, including the area of excavation, the volume of surviving occupation deposits, the shape and thickness of vessels, and the amount of post-deposition activity leading to further fragmentation. There is a tendency for different types of vessel to fragment to different extents so a simple comparison of totals is somewhat misleading. However it does serve as a very crude index of the general level of pottery use as shown in Table 1. Sites in the Mersey Basin tend to have relatively large pottery assemblages by comparison with rural sites in neighbouring regions such as North Wales, Lancashire or Cumbria (Evans forthcoming). Irby had 2592 sherds and there were 3476 sherds at Court Farm, Halewood, the latter in use for perhaps 250 years while the former somewhat longer. Brunt Boggart is one of the smallest with only 108 sherds of Roman pottery (one samian, and a single metal find), while at Dutton's Farm, Lathom the pottery assemblage so far recovered from excavations up to 2003 is equally small at 94 sherds, although the sources are diverse, including samian, black-burnished ware, orange ware and mortaria of probable Wilderspool or related origin, and mortaria from Oxfordshire. The assemblage begins in the late 1st century and may continue to the early 4th, but no later (J. Evans unpublished). The Roman phase of Brook House Farm, Halewood has produced the smallest assemblage, at only 21 sherds, three of which were samian, the remainder oxidised ware, probably from the Cheshire/Lancashire Plain.

Few farmstead sites have been excavated in Cheshire. The only fully reported site, at Birch Heath, Tarporley, had 960 sherds of Roman pottery, with roughly half the sherds represented by Cheshire Plains orange wares, and a quarter by black-burnished ware (Dunn 2002). The remainder consisted of small quantities of samian, white ware from Oxfordshire and Hartshill-Mancetter, Dressel 20 amphorae from southern Spain, and grey wares. Analysis of the forms identified a group of cheese presses, bowls with holes for pressing out the liquid whey, suggesting that conversion of a milk surplus to more durable cheese was an element in the site economy. This type of vessel, identified as colanders or cheese presses, have been found at various sites including pottery production centres such as Wilderspool (Hinchliffe and Williams 1992, 132, no 462) and Holt (Grimes 1930, 168, fig. 72). The proximity of the site to the salt-producing area of Cheshire may indicate that in the Roman period, just as in the post-medieval era, an important component of the rural economy was dairy and cheese production.

Jeremy Evans has examined the forms of pottery in use in rural communities, and concluded that there are significant differences between rural and military or urban pottery assemblage in terms of the types of vessels in use; rural pottery consumption is low and is marked by a preponderance of jar/cooking pot forms, with low levels of samian and imported table vessels. In addition

there are clear differences across the north west region in the volume of pottery use. Rural sites show a higher use of jars, but oddly too of a highly Romanised form, the mortarium. He suggests that some specialised function for these vessels may have made them desirable in native contexts (Evans forthcoming).

Fieldwalking at Lathom has also revealed two possible clusters of Romano-British activity which have not yet been examined. The extent to which the topsoil scatters will correlate with settlement evidence is an interesting question. Although the coincidence of settlement and topsoil finds scatter proved close at Court Farm, a site close to Speke Hall which had yielded a scatter of Romano-British pottery in fieldwalking failed to produce any identifiable Romano-British features in an extensive evaluation. Either the site had been completely ploughed out or the material was intrusive, perhaps amongst soil dumped from elsewhere.

### *The Adoption of Roman Material Culture*

After the conquest of the North West, Roman cultural material seems to have arrived on rural sites only slowly. Although Roman metalwork, coins and perhaps pottery were in use at the harbour at Meols from the mid 1st century, they appear to have circulated within a limited, largely military, milieu. Thus although the port is only six kilometres away from Irby Roman pottery filters through to the rural site only in the Flavian period, the datable pottery beginning with a little South Gaulish samian, dated AD 70-110. The bulk of the assemblage at Irby consists of oxidised ware of Cheshire Plains origins or black-burnished ware from Dorset (BB1), the latter predominantly of 3rd-mid 4th-century date. Small amounts of imported samian continues in the 2nd century, with mortaria of Wilderspool, then Hartshill-Mancetter origin, figuring in small but significant quantities. Also present are Dressel 20 amphorae, which are present in rural sites in small quantities, possibly due to reuse as containers rather than present for their olive oil contents. In the later period small quantities of colour-coated wares including beakers and bowls suggest a more Romanised attitude to the ostentatious display of fine wares. At the end of the Roman period the site receives small quantities of shell-tempered and calcite-gritted wares from the South Midlands and Yorkshire respectively.

The slow rate at which settlements adopted the use of pottery may have a social dimension. The occupants of these settlements had no existing tradition of pottery use. This may have no more significance than a preference for continuation of traditional forms of food preparation and consumption, 'table' manners. The delay in the adoption of pottery was more a question of cultural conservatism than of availability. Not only was the habit of pottery use slow to start, the types of vessel chosen were suited more to food preparation and storage than display at the table. Pottery did not figure in traditional Iron Age methods

of food preparation and consumption in the region, and during the Roman period flagons remain scarce in rural contexts by contrast with jars, which are often sooted and appear to have been used as cooking pots, which become the most common form in rural sites. Heat-shattered stones seem to be characteristic of the Iron Age sites, but are absent from sites where occupation does not begin until the Roman period. This is consistent with their interpretation as a prehistoric form of cooking by dropping heated stones into organic containers such as leather bags to cook food by boiling, though once again the chronology is not completely resolved, owing to the problem of dating deposits and the probability of stones occurring as residuals in later contexts. A degree of conservatism is evident amongst the native population in responding to new forms of material culture, although whether this should be viewed in terms of active resistance or mere indifference is uncertain. Roman styles of pottery were adopted relatively slowly. Roman forms required a change in table manners and methods of food preparation to move away from traditional vessels.

In attempting to explain the different levels of pottery use at rural sites, the acceptance of Roman pottery by the native population is only one side of the coin - the other side being the availability of supplies of pottery to the market. Initially, production at Holt for example was established to supply the military though site finds indicate that it was acquired by the civil population too. Local pottery production was established in the region by c. AD 80-90, before which pottery supply was organised by the army. Wilderspool is the only known major civilian production centre in the north west, operating from c. AD 90-180 (Webster 1991, 11). The opportunities for the material to become widely available for use in rural communities were low, even if in the early phases of Roman occupation it were felt to be desirable.

#### Coin Use

The absence of a native tradition of coin use among the pre-Roman Cornovii and Brigantes led to slow adoption of coinage in the rural communities, while the high relative value of coins militated against their use for minor everyday transactions which were probably conducted through barter. To modern eyes this may seem an unwieldy system but it should be remembered that even sophisticated modern economies such as Italy in the 1970s or Russia in the 1990s were able to function with a high level of transactions conducted through barter. Nonetheless, such a system of exchange resulted in the inflow of traded pottery and other manufactured items to the rural sites, not in large quantities by comparison with the towns and military sites, but a steady low level of supply.

Coin finds from the region have been exhaustively listed and extensively discussed by David Shotton (1990; 1995; 2000c) so only a few comments are offered here. North of the Mersey only Lathom of four excavated sites in Merseyside and West Lancashire has produced

coins, and in that case the finds may have been a lost purse dispersed in the mud of a trackway (Cowell 2002). South of the Mersey, in Wirral the incidence of coin finds on excavated sites and as chance or metal detector finds appears to be higher than to the north, suggesting differences in the level of coin in circulation amongst the rural population either side of the major tribal and provincial boundary. Between individual sites, too, coin use (or rather loss) displays different patterns. Coins do not make their appearance onto the site at Irby until the 2nd half of the 3rd century, despite the appearance of Roman coins in the mid 1st century AD at the port and market at Meols only a few kilometres to the north. Two other sites in Wirral, each with a substantial group of metal finds, have more than ten brooches against a total in each case of only three coins. Excavations at Bruen Stapleford, Cheshire, produced only a single, illegible, coin. Furthermore there is a distinct tailing off in coin use before the 4th century rather than the expected rise in late 3rd or 4th century coin use which is seen elsewhere in Roman Britain as a result of inflation and a drop in the purchasing power of individual coins. The decline in the activity at the industrial centres, and the decline in garrison level at Chester by the 4th century (Mason 2001, 195), suggests that the region's coin supply was reduced.

The level of coins found through metal detecting, both at known sites and across the broader countryside, is not high, even allowing for a degree of underreporting. On the evidence of coin finds, the use of coinage appears to have been largely restricted to military sites with their associated *vici* and the nucleated industrial settlements with relatively little outflow of coins into the countryside. It has even been questioned whether the levying of taxes in silver and compulsory purchase of supplies by the government which is assumed to have occurred elsewhere, for example in Wales (Arnold and Davies 2000, 114-5), will have introduced native communities of the North West to the practicalities of coin usage. It has been suggested that the low level of economic development of the North West may have meant that taxes were paid in kind; David Shotton has noted the substitution of hides for money taxes amongst the Frisii (Tacitus *Annals* 4.72). The low level of material culture in the countryside may be a function of the preference for wealth measured in land or livestock (Buxton and Shotton 1996, 77; Evans forthcoming).

A word of caution should be introduced, however, in assuming a very low level of coin use in the rural population. It may be unwise to assume that the rate of loss of coins was constant in both rural and urban or military communities. A number of factors determine the volume of coin loss; the number of transactions and degree to which coins are handled, the value of the coins, and their size and visibility when dropped. The infrequency of transactions at farms presented fewer opportunities for loss, by contrast with market places or busy urban settings where coins are frequently carried

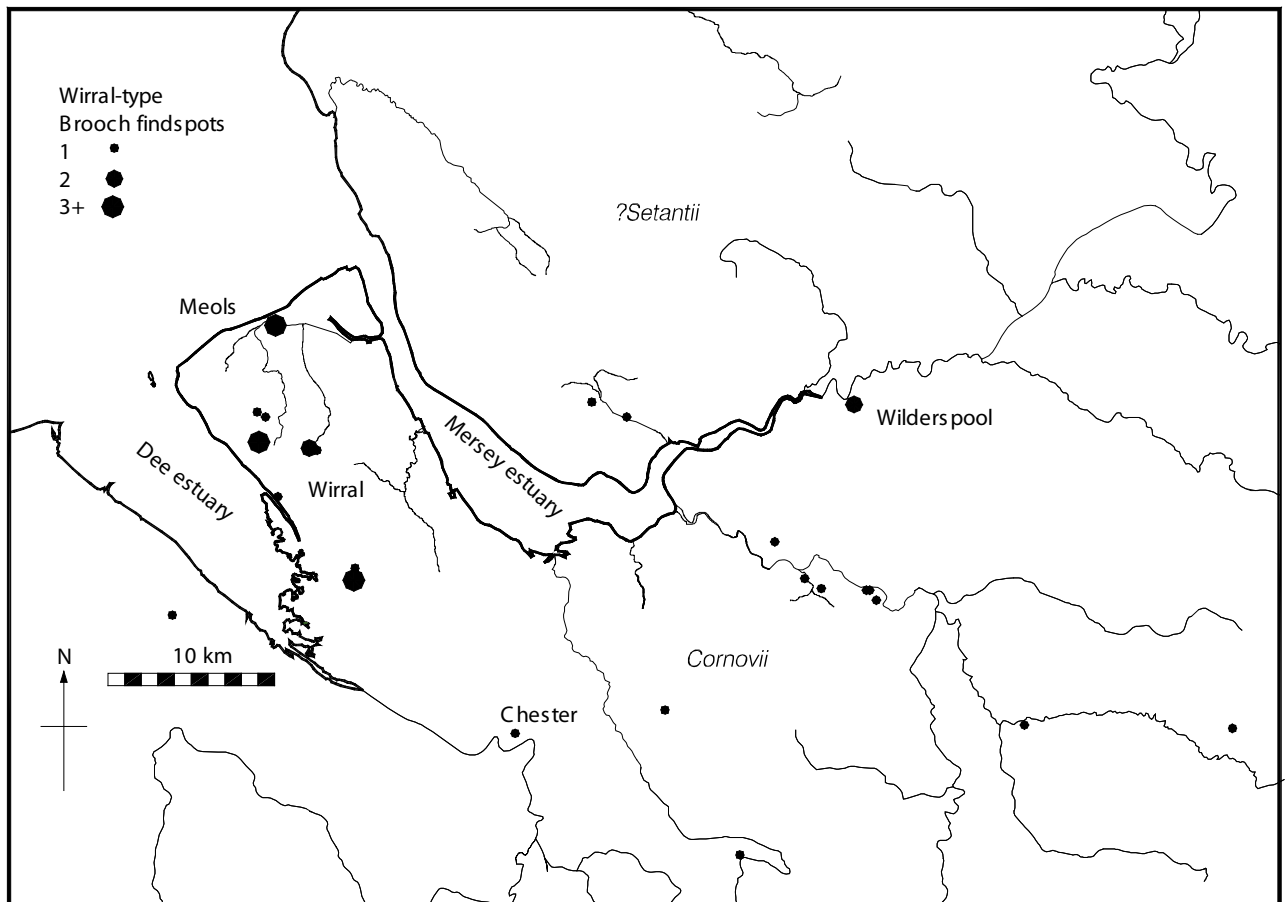


Fig. 10. Distribution of Wirral brooches (update of Philpott 1999a, figs 3 and 4)

and constantly handled by larger numbers of people. We may also anticipate a higher volume of small change transactions in a market. Coins at rural sites may have been less prone to loss. This may suggest that rural coin loss was at a lower level than urban, and the low figures for rural sites may perhaps lead to underestimation of the volume of coin use. This receives some support from hoards. David Shotter has pointed out that the number of coin hoards from the countryside of the North West indicates that the rural population was capable of accumulating wealth (2000c, 189), even if this is not necessarily reflected at the few sites excavated so far.

#### Agricultural and Industrial Activities on Rural Sites

The basis of the Romano-British rural economy in the lowland North West was undoubtedly rooted in agriculture and animal husbandry. Pollen analysis tends to support a pattern of broad landscape changes as a result of human activity in the late Iron Age and Roman period. In the Iron Age immediately after the first millennium BC a recurrence surface dated to the period 795-420 BC, indicating a major phase of woodland clearance accompanied by an increase in pastoral pollen, has been identified through pollen analysis within mosslands (Nevell 1999b, 16-22). This was followed in the late first millennium BC by a second

phase of woodland clearance, this time accompanied by high levels of weed pollen and the appearance of cereal pollen in high quantities. Although identified in only a small number of sample sites, the pattern is consistent across the lowland of south west Lancashire.

Analysis of plant remains at individual sites gives a highly specific history of plant and cereal use at particular settlements. Analysis of charred plant remains from Court Farm revealed cereal grains including one certain identification of emmer (*Triticum dicoccon*) but others which could not be distinguished between emmer and spelt wheat (*T. spelta*) (Hradil *et al.* 1997). Wild oats and rye grains were also found, but surprisingly none of barley. Several agricultural weeds were noted: black bindweed, common knotgrass, corn spurrey, beet and bush vetch. At Irby the plant macrofossils indicate a wider range of cereals, with associated weeds. 'Barley, spelt wheat, bread wheat, oats and possibly rye were all recorded. Barley, oat and spelt chaff fragments were clearly present. None of the samples was dominated by chaff' (Huntley forthcoming). At both Court Farm and Irby stone rotary querns denote the processing of grain. At Ochre Brook an early pit of Roman date contained largely grassland taxa with a little hulled barley, suggesting burning of local vegetation before the construction of the buildings (Huntley 2000). Another series of rubbish pits near Structure 1 contained a wider

OB35 Context 635  
SF431 tile stamp



Fig. 11. An Ochre Brook tile stamp: *Viducus*

selection of cereal and arable weed remains, as well as rush (*Juncus*) seeds, possibly from flooring material. A single post-hole contained much evidence of grassland and wet ground taxa. Cereals consisted mostly of hulled barley and a little spelt.

Animal bone assemblages are very poorly preserved in the region due to prevailing soil conditions. The assemblage from Ochre Brook contained only five small fragments of calcined bone, of which only one fragment of domestic chicken was identifiable (Fisher 2000, 104). At Irby small fragments indicate the presence of sheep-sized vertebrates and cattle. A mixed economy is suggested. Cheese presses at Bruen Stapleford may argue for a pastoral component to the economy of the settlement, and the location of the site on heavy clay land would be more suited to pasture than arable. At Court Farm, several samples contained crab claw and carapace, indicating the exploitation of marine resources, which probably include deliberate harvesting of the coastal plant beet (Hradil *et al.* 1997).

Most significant perhaps is the environmental evidence for the low level of integration of the Roman military supply network as they continued to grow their own traditional crops such as spelt wheat, barley and emmer rather than bread wheat. This is one element in the argument against north Wirral being in the military *prata legionis* as suggested by David Mason (Mason 1988, 180).

Alongside agriculture, rural communities engaged in a range of industrial activities. Iron smithing was present at Irby and Court Farm, as large amounts of industrial waste, including slag and hearth bottoms testify, and there is also slight evidence of smithing in the form of hammer scale at Ochre Brook, Tarbock. At Irby, the site produced a range of iron craftsmen's tools including a saw, a chisel, knives and possible punches and an awl; it was suggested that a barb-spring padlock may have

served to hold slave shackles (H. Cool in Philpott and Adams forthcoming), while iron nails and hobnails were also present. These may indicate leatherworking as well as woodworking.

Copper-alloy working appears to have been a feature of some rural sites, with metal-working crucibles present at both Court Farm and Irby, and mould fragments at Irby. In addition, both sites have produced polished lumps of haematite, a naturally occurring soft iron ore, which was used for finishing metal work or as a colouring agent. Metal detecting in Wirral has produced lumps of melted copper-alloy from two sites which have also produced Roman finds, suggesting metalworking was practised there too. This may be linked to the production of brooches and other artefacts, since there is a strong concentration of one type, the Wirral brooch, centred on the peninsula, and manufacture in the rural communities seems a distinct possibility (fig. 10, Philpott 1999a). Whether this was organised by itinerant specialist craftsmen or by the occupants of the farms themselves is difficult to determine. Equally the route by which the raw materials were obtained for bronze working, whether through recycling, networks of exchange through local markets or through existing social or kinship groups is equally uncertain. The production of metalwork in the farms may indicate the transfer of metalworking skills from the industrial settlements to the rural population during the Roman period and perhaps a degree of integration with the industrial economy of the region, supplying manufactured goods to that end, alongside a range of agricultural products such as grain and hides.

Exploitation of copper at Alderley Edge dates from the Bronze Age. The discovery of a late Roman coin hoard deposited *c.* 340 in the partially backfilled Pot Shaft (Sugden and Nevell 1995), on clearance revealed the first Roman mine-shaft in England, dated to the 1st century AD (Nevell 1996; J. Prag pers. comm.). Lead

mining with associated silver extraction is well attested in north east Wales. Extraction of the raw materials such as iron ore, coal, copper and lead, the last two at Alderley Edge or North Wales, was followed by transportation, at varying distances, to the Cheshire and Lancashire industrial centres. To some extent exploitation of minerals, particularly those of high value such as lead/silver and salt, will have been carried out under official control. However, the extensive deposits of coal and widespread occurrence of brine springs are likely to have attracted the attention of local inhabitants. To some extent there may have been opportunistic use of the raw materials and mineral resources close by the farms, but also perhaps there was some trading of these commodities further afield, or extraction on 'common' or unoccupied land. Was this within the control of the tribal elite, on tribal lands, or small-scale extraction for local use or was it controlled by the Roman authorities?

While there is some evidence of importation of millstone grit querns to sites such as Court Farm, Halewood, querns probably of more local origin in the Permo-Triassic sandstone are also found. At Lathom, outcrops of coarse-grained sandstone occur close to the excavated Dutton's Farm site, providing a potential local source for the Hunsbury type quern found there. Three other locations near Lathom have produced querns suggesting they were in use amongst the local population, and in this case probably pointing to the location of distinct farmsteads. The existence of rural production is suggested by an unfinished quern at Irby, where a rough-out in local sandstone was found and a large quarry close to the site was operative in the 19th century. Storeton in Wirral was considered to be the source of some stone used in Roman inscriptions at Chester, indicating quarrying in the Roman period (Petch 1987, 226).

The rural communities may also have been engaged in small-scale extractive industries. Roman exploitation of coal for use as a fuel in industrial processes, notably iron smithing, is well attested (Dearne and Branigan 1995) and was initially prospected by the Roman army. Within the North West there are several coalfields, at St Helens extending from Prescott in the west as far as Colne to the north east and Whaley Bridge to the south-east. Coal from Court Farm, Halewood was extracted from the nearby Crombourke seam at Cronton, and the same area of the extensive south Lancashire coal deposits of eastern Knowsley and St Helens may have been the source of the single fragment of coal identified in excavation at Ochre Brook. Palynological analysis of coal from Irby concluded that it came from a restricted outcrop of the North Wales coalfield at Neston in south west Wirral where a colliery existed until 1928 (Hebblethwaite 1987, 7). Coal was also found in fieldwalking on the surface of an undated enclosure at Garswood, Ashton in Makerfield. Morphologically the enclosure could fit into the Roman period, though it is uncertain whether the coal is a product of the early occupation or a residue of more recent disturbance of underlying coal deposits.

The ease with which coal was won from bell pits in the late medieval and later period at Prescott and St Helens coalfield makes it highly unlikely this resource remained unused in the Roman period at Wigan which stood on the coal deposits. Extraction might be anticipated from surface outcrops of the extensive coal, and its occurrence on rural sites suggests local private enterprise more than official distribution.

Lead, with its low melting point, was easily worked and was used locally for, amongst others, weights, spindle-whorls, rivets for mending pottery and net-sinkers. A single lump of galena (lead ore) from Irby hints at connections across the Dee estuary with North Wales, where the ore was mined in Flintshire during the Roman period. Clusters of lead objects and melted waste from sites producing Roman metal finds indicate the manufacture of these relatively unsophisticated objects.

The presence of spindle whorls, of lead, stone and pottery, indicates spinning of fibres for textile production. Spindle whorls have been found at two sites in South Wirral, and at Meols, where undiagnostic specimens may include some Romano-British examples. At Irby textile manufacture is indicated by spindle whorls in all three materials, while a possible needle suggests production of clothing or other cloth goods. In the absence of good organic preservation from the Romano-British sites, leather working cannot be attested directly but an awl at Irby may have been used in the process. Hobnails were also found at Irby, indicating the adoption of Romanised leather footwear.

Ochre Brook at Tarbock appears to have seen manufacturing on an industrial scale. The excavation produced examples of two unusual legionary tile stamps. The first reads 'LXXXVVV' while the second (fig. 11) is the only consular-dated tile stamp recorded in Britain. Expanded to read *Tegularia Auli Viduci fecit Vero III Consule Legioni XX*: 'the tiling of Aulus Viducus made this for the XX legion in the third consulship of Verus', it appears to represent date stamping as a control for audit purposes (Swan and Philpott 2000; Cowell and Philpott 2000). The location of the kilns at Tarbock was not established, though the quantity of waste suggests they were very close by, but a major road now runs through the site. Most of the tile, including some wasters, was recovered from pits and the rectilinear enclosure ditch. The destination of the stamped tiles, and the only other place where they have been found, is Chester. The year of manufacture, AD 167, is significant, suggesting a connection between the episode of tile manufacture and the return of the 20th legion from Scotland. The discovery of stamped tiles all in four areas of barracks suggests an episode of reroofing in readiness for return of detachments to Chester after AD 160. It was concluded that Aulus Viducus was a civilian contractor meeting a short-term demand for roof tiles. The location of production, 22 kilometres north of Chester, inland with access to the tidal Ditton Brook for transport by water, appears somewhat awkward. The apparent inconvenience of the

location suggests Viducus may have sited production either on his own estates, or that he leased land for the purpose. However, the presence of the site illustrates that industrial production was not confined to the small towns or military *vici* but could take place in the countryside at some distance from urban centres.

As David Shotter points out, there remains much doubt over the relationship between the farmers and the occupants of the *vici* and forts. The presence of the Roman army with dependent populations, or in the southern part of the region with the occupants of the industrial settlements, must, as Shotter argues, have created opportunities for farmers to supply a range of commodities such as the provision of livestock, food and drink, hides and so on (2004, 139). The evidence of a strong economic link between local rural populations and the Roman militarised centres is indicated in the northern frontier zone by the Vindolanda tablets, which enumerate lists of commodities bought locally. They are likely not only to have produced a surplus in grain above what was required for taxation, but also 'their animal husbandry was to an extent organised to take account of the Roman market for meat' (Shotter 2004, 139). However, proximity to the market must have played a fundamental role in the frequency and intensity of contacts, with remoter farms less tied into such market relationships.

The degree of interaction between people of the rural communities and those based in the industrial centres is difficult to determine. We need not assume a hermetic seal between the two; indeed, the small 'towns' may have been dependent to a degree upon the farmsteads of their rural hinterland for food and produce such as hides and wool. These industrial centres presumably acted as local markets too, where exchange of items manufactured in the 'towns' for agricultural produce of the hinterland farms took place. The presence of traded pottery on farms indicates some exchange of agricultural produce for manufactured items. The relatively high number of pottery sherds from the rural sites of the Mersey Basin is due in part to the fact that they participated in the market economy to a greater extent than the rural sites of regions such as North Wales, mid Wales or Cumbria where sherd counts are often low. Individual farms may have been largely self-sufficient. However, the small-scale industrial activities practised at farms, such as the production of iron tools and textiles at household level, might have exceeded the immediately local requirements and created a surplus of manufactured goods for exchange or sale. The prevalence of bronze-working and iron-smithing on those rural sites investigated so far is an indication of the transfer of industrial skills from the industrial settlements to the farms. Another potential source of cash for rural population may have been the small-scale exploitation of minerals and other resources.

#### *Social Networks: Population*

Despite the problems of site chronology, there is a

suggestion that enclosures become more numerous in the Romano-British period than they were in the Iron Age. In part this may result from endogenous population growth, a phenomenon which is associated with relatively stable political circumstances. Those late Iron Age native sites which also show occupation in the Roman period may represent the continued occupation of ancestral settlement sites, or in some cases as a return to them after a break. However, it is by no means easy to demonstrate continuous occupation from the finds and occupation sequences. There is some slight support for observable changes at individual farms reflecting the growth of particular families. At Irby, the appending of an additional enclosure to the main enclosure may have resulted from division of the farm between siblings, although in the absence of detailed excavation within that enclosure it is not possible to demonstrate the existence of contemporary dwellings within each. A functional change – expanding the area to create a livestock enclosure – is conceivable. Nearby at Greasby a subdivided enclosure, as yet uninvestigated, could point to a similar process.

In part too the greater number of identifiable Romano-British sites over Iron Age sites may represent the plantation of a range of new farm sites within a landscape which Nick Higham has characterised as under-exploited and operating at far from full capacity. The environmental evidence for a clearance phase in the Romano-British period appears to support this view of the expansion of cultivated and pastoral land through woodland clearance. The broader region comprising Cheshire and Greater Manchester has industrial sites such as Middlewich, Northwich, Wilderspool and Wigan which function as manufacturing centres where raw materials from their hinterland are processed and converted to manufactured items, such as glass, iron, pottery and salt, which leave visible remains, and probably also less visible organic produce such as leather and timber. Organisation of the industrial activity to exploit this landscape may have stimulated the growth of rural settlements, some of which at least were also engaged in small scale production of iron, bronze-working (Irby, Court Farm), and exploitation of mineral resources such as coal digging or quern manufacture at Irby.

It is probable that while a component of the new, growing nucleated settlements was probably drawn from the local indigenous population, a good proportion must have been incomers from other regions in Britain or further afield. In turn the developing settlements may have stimulated the development and growth of rural settlements in their hinterlands, so that the produce of the hinterland farms supported a class of merchants, traders, specialist artisans and craftsmen in the towns. Occasionally the movement of craftsmen can be detected through artefacts. The pottery stamps attest the move of potters specialising in mortaria manufacture from the Wroxeter area to Wilderspool, and later the same class of manufacturers then moved further north from Wilderspool once again following the markets. Elsewhere

in the Empire it was deliberate state policy to settle under-exploited areas and to encourage (or coerce) settlers. The legionary fortress at Chester, founded in the AD 70s, was garrisoned initially by an immigrant military population, though the *canabae* or civil settlement developed in time into a civilian town of some size (Mason 2002b). The retirement of soldiers from the legion with their grant of land, some of whom would have stayed near their base, would create a steady source of relatively affluent Romanised rural landowners, for whom Roman mores and language would have been familiar. We can perhaps glimpse this process with the discovery of the Malpas diploma found in a rural location near the town, perhaps on the estate of a veteran, and further north at Bolton-le-Sands of an altar erected by a retired decurion, probably from the fort at Lancaster. The presence of veterans is directly attested by the place-name *Bremetennacum Veteranorum* at Ribchester. Thus the composition of the population in the countryside in the decades after the initial Roman occupation of the region is likely to have consisted of a combination of indigenous people of local origin, incomers from elsewhere in Britain, and immigrants from other provinces, including an increasing proportion of veterans and their descendants, settled on land granted for their military service (Mann 2002). In time these categories would have become less clear-cut as intermarriage and military service by local men became more common. Similarly as outsiders became assimilated into local society, ties of kinship and tribal allegiance may have been weakened during the Roman period by the influx of population from elsewhere.

### Trade

The two major river estuaries of the Dee and Mersey are very likely to have formed tribal boundaries by the early Roman period, if not before, and it is generally assumed that administrative divisions followed tribal boundaries. Thus the division of the province into *Britannia Superior* in the south and *Britannia Inferior*, in the early 3rd century, probably had its frontier along the Mersey, while in the early 4th century a further subdivision of the provinces of Britain into four left Chester in the western province of *Britannia Prima* while *Britannia Secunda* lay to the north (Higham 1993, 61; Jones and Mattingly 1990, 145). The administrative framework of the region may to some extent have played a part in shaping the economic and trading networks within the region.

However, at the same time as marking major administrative and tribal boundaries the two major rivers and estuaries, together with tributaries such as the Weaver provided important transportation routes within the region and beyond. The Dee was a critical factor in the location of the legionary fortress enabling the importation of supplies. In the early years of the permanent Roman occupation, before local supply networks were established, this would have secured the food supply. The quantities of South and Central Gaulish samian,

Southern Spanish amphorae and Dorset Black burnished ware in the fortress, and at other major settlements, are imports which form the visible durable components of a trade which is likely to have seen the exportation not only of 'invisible' goods, such as raw materials - minerals, coal, timber, agricultural produce, leather and hides - but also the durable manufactured goods found elsewhere which cannot yet be sourced to the region. Military supply played an important role in the development and maintenance of coastal and riverine trade routes within the region. The location of the legionary tileworks at Holt depended upon the river for shipping bulk ceramic tile downstream to Chester. From the late 1st century the Mersey provided Wilderspool with its main export route for pottery and other manufactured goods, much to the northern frontier region, though using the road for overland movement. Within this network Meols served as a transshipment point and as a haven for the traffic using the Irish Sea trade route along the coast of North West England and North Wales.

Despite their key role in the transport networks, at the same time the two rivers may have acted as a boundary between distinct social networks and allegiances, and perhaps as a barrier to social and economic interaction. Such social distinctions are difficult to identify archaeologically but one possible material expression of such a division is the observation that brooches of the distinctive Wirral type did not tend to cross the Mersey. The great majority of the nearly 50 known examples occur in Wirral and West Cheshire, although the distribution of the type in small numbers in the northern frontier and even in Scotland suggests the movement of individual examples from Wirral along the Irish Sea coastal trade route, perhaps via Meols. The distribution might be attributed to the practical circumstances of the production area of one itinerant craftsman producing highly distinctive brooches, so the findspots might reflect no more than the restricted zone within which he worked. Brooches generally within Cheshire appear to fall into a restricted range of types, with a strong emphasis on trumpet forms, and as a whole appear to be more common south of the Mersey than to the north (Herepath 2004). While the brooches clearly had a practical function, as clothes fasteners, their highly decorative form, which is consistent with an emphasis on bright enamelled types in the region, suggests they also had a symbolic significance to the wearers, perhaps denoting membership of a particular social or kinship group. Such patterns are amenable to more than one explanation, but the identification of potential indicators of social identity deserve further study.

The scope for detailed studies of artefact distributions to identify patterns of movement of goods and trade routes has been demonstrated for ceramics by Jeremy Evans (forthcoming) but there is a growing recognition of the distinctive regional character of other artefact types in metal and leather. The extension of this kind of study to other artefact types, in particular those which can be

shown to have been manufactured within the region, may assist in identifying not only the patterns of movement of manufactured items but also the differing levels of trade, from local and regional to provincial. They may also provide a key to understanding social identity and it is hoped ultimately, as the data accumulate, in defining the various social groupings that comprised the population of the North West.

#### *Prata Legionis*

In one respect the Roman administration of the region is likely to have had an impact on the rural settlement pattern and potentially on land use. The *prata legionis*, or 'legionary pastures', of the fortress at Chester consisted of land reserved for the use of the legion and administered by the legionary legate. Although theoretically pasture, as the land was set aside for grazing for the legion's animals, it is likely to have included an element of arable land. In a discussion of the location of the *prata* attached to the legionary fortress at Chester, David Mason has argued that the legionary lands may have encompassed all or part of the Wirral peninsula, with a boundary to the south between Chester and Heronbridge, and to the east in the central Cheshire ridge, or perhaps the river Gowy, leaving the mineral-rich land of north east Wales as a *territorium metallorum* under the administration of a civil procurator (Mason 1988, 176-80).

Though Mason's arguments set out the possibilities and likely limitations of the extent of the *prata* of *Deva*, there is at present insufficient information on the kinds of differences to expect between farms within and outside the *prata*, and too few sites have been excavated to enable such differences to be detected. Essentially it involves plotting a tenurial system from artefacts, environmental assemblages and archaeological remains. At present it is uncertain whether the status of the *prata* had any archaeologically detectable impact on the farms within it and the archaeological criteria for determining their extent are unclear. There is no need to have overtly military finds assemblages, including such items as weaponry or military fittings or equipment, since the farm occupants were tenants of the military. There may have been some specialised agricultural production to meet military requirements but whether this has a visible archaeological component is uncertain. There is interesting evidence from Irby that the legionary influence on the rural farmsteads did not appear to extend the full length of the Wirral peninsula. In her analysis of the environmental evidence from the site Jacqui Huntley has suggested that cereal production there showed no sign of an accommodation to military requirements. On the continent such factors as the distribution of legionary stamped tiles have been used to define legionary lands, but these are perhaps less relevant to a traditional society which continued to use roundhouses with thatched roofs. The adoption of Romanised types of building, using rectangular rather than circular structures, could indicate

the Romanisation of native farmers, or the granting of land to legionary veterans. A pattern of newly established farms with a narrow date range in the later 1st century in the vicinity of the fortress, perhaps with regularly planned, or re-organised, field systems, might be taken to indicate the effect of the establishment of the fortress, but here again proving the tenurial link is far harder than postulating the stimulus to the hinterland economy of the economic demands of the garrison. Sites within the *prata* may have had a closer integration into the market economy, and perhaps will produce higher levels of Romanised material than those outside. However, these may be concomitants of proximity to the fortress rather than consequences of the particular administrative status of the region. The problem requires detailed investigation of a sizeable sample of sites, artefact and environmental assemblages to be able to frame appropriate questions about the sites and their assemblages. It may prove difficult to disentangle the effects of processes of increasing Romanisation from those inherent in the tenurial status of the land.

#### *Conclusions and Further Research*

Archaeological advances over the past two decades have elicited a far more detailed picture of Romano-British rural society and economy in Merseyside and its neighbouring areas than was possible at the last Merseyside Archaeological Society conference in 1986. A hidden Iron Age population is now beginning to emerge from excavations over the last two decades. Increasingly, too, there is an emerging trend for Iron Age sites to see occupation during the Romano-British period, whether through descendants appropriating land and rights, or newcomers asserting them.

Several Romano-British rural sites within Merseyside and surrounding areas have been excavated, and a much larger number of new sites has now been located even if no fieldwork has been done to confirm their late prehistoric or Romano-British date. Rather than a blank space on the map, the countryside in the Romano-British period can be seen to have supported an extensive pattern of settlements, not yet densely occupied, but with some visible concentrations in certain areas where the fieldwork has been intense. The complexity of the composition of the rural population and its relationships with the military and industrial settlements are just beginning to be revealed. Investigation of a much larger sample of sites in some detail is essential to an understanding of the range of activities practised, the economy of sites, and the chronology of their occupation. The swamping effect of Roman pottery, especially of the prolific 2nd century, tends to distort the dating of later deposits and disguises deposits formed in aceramic periods, a problem exemplified most graphically at Irby. The difficult problems of the origin and abandonment of individual sites can to some extent be addressed through programmes of radiocarbon sampling allied to

good stratification which might establish how closely the duration of the occupation of settlements corresponds to the date range of their datable diagnostic artefacts.

A further important step is the recognition of the deep time-frame within which the settlements operated. Excavations suggest that for a good proportion of rural sites the Roman period is simply the most visible phase of the occupation of a settlement due to the durable and diagnostic material culture, and that sites had their origins in the earlier past (e.g. Brook House Farm with its Bronze Age wooden 'pedestal') and may have continued in use into the early medieval period or even beyond in some cases. The long-term continuity of use of particular locations within the landscape is a consistent pattern in the region with intriguing implications for the stability of settlement patterns over many centuries.

Far too little is known of the character of rural settlements. Many important research questions still hang over the agricultural units of which settlements represent just the visible core. Can we trace Romano-British field systems and even the extent of estates around these settlements? Field systems and the landscapes around the settlements are also of considerable interest. The odd field ditch which adjoins a settlement enclosure provides a starting point to attempt to identify more extensive field systems, and to determine the extent to which the core settlements were surrounded by defined systems of fields. One interesting site type, of some antiquity, is the large oval enclosures at Brunt Boggart, Tarbock, and Dutton's Farm, Lathom which survive to the post-medieval period but which have the potential to represent the survival of primary agricultural areas for settlement (Cowell and Philpott 2000, 208).

Studies of artefact assemblages have started to shed light on questions such as the chronology and intensity of Romanisation, the economic patterns within the region and the source and direction of traded items. The manufacture of objects such as metal items, the use of local stone and other mineral resources, as well as the trade and consumption of artefacts also provide a potentially rich field for the study of economic and social patterns both within the region and with its neighbours.

One profitable source of enquiry for the future is the definition of regional patterns of artefact manufacture and use. The most obvious place to start is with highly distinctive brooch types which display distinct regional distributions, but there is considerable potential for other artefacts to display such regional patterns. Detailed publication of material assembled through the Portable Antiquities Scheme would represent a valuable contribution to the material available for study.

One disturbing aspect of our increasing knowledge has been the extent to which chance has played a major part in the discovery and recording of Romano-British sites. Nonetheless the application of improved techniques of site detection together with staff experienced in the conditions of the local region will undoubtedly improve the ability to recognise the often slight traces of rural sites

for what they are. Systematic fieldwork, allying a range of techniques such as fieldwalking, aerial reconnaissance and study of existing aerial coverage, the use of improved geophysical techniques and development of predictive techniques, needs to be combined with an appreciation of the subtle and ephemeral traces which tend to characterise rural sites in the North West.

The accumulation of data has enabled new and more refined questions to be asked of the period in the lowland North West. Many questions still remain unanswered about the social and economic networks across the region. To what extent did the northern Cornovii look to Chester and its *canabae*, and across the Mersey to neighbours on the other side of the tribal divide? How significant was the tribal, and provincial, boundary through the Roman period? How far does the Mersey-Dee Basin represent a unified area with common currency of cultural elements such as house styles across the divide? Future research may confirm or refute the model of an underdeveloped landscape which steadily filled in during the Roman period with new settlements, veterans from fortresses, incomers from elsewhere in Britain, and a population rising during a time of relative peace and order, under improving climatic conditions. What was the relationship between the industrial and rural settlements and how did it change through the Roman period?

The current English Heritage-sponsored ALGAO initiative on research frameworks for the North West of England provides an opportunity to formalise the research agenda and a strategy to deal with the issues raised in it.

### Abbreviations

ALGAO Association of Local Government  
Archaeological Officers

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