

Andrew Simmonds, Edward Biddulph and Ken Welsh,  
*In the Shadow of Corinium: prehistoric and Roman occupation at Kingshill South, Cirencester, Gloucestershire* Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph 41  
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The title of this report is interesting. Since the site excavated is on ground higher than Corinium the shadow cannot be physical it must be metaphorical. It would have been good, considering the years of excavation and publication of the Cirencester Excavation Committee, now happily defunct, if the authors could have referred their finds to the pottery, bones and other materials found in the Roman town. Sadly the present authors' references are usually of regret that such reports do not exist, and it is time to admit that by the 1970's the work of that committee was behind the times. I write as a culpable member of that committee who did not make enough fuss, and this explains my completely personal interpretation of the title.

A second general point concerns the surroundings of the site now completely separated from the town by the ring road. This is acknowledged in the report, mainly to say that if the ring-road had not been constructed, or if adequate observation of its construction had taken place, many features found incomplete on the site would be more intelligible. A similar obstacle, present at times in the Roman period, the outer course of the river Churn, though mentioned briefly in the introduction then disappears from view. In this the authors are in perfect company because no one, so far as I know, has ever taken this artificial water course into archaeological consideration. This is a point I will return to.

Perhaps it is best at the outset to divide this report into observations, which may be archaeological facts, and discussion - what is interpreted from those observations. I approve of most of the observations and the way that they are presented, but I beg to differ on much of their interpretation; a good productive tension.

There are five chapters: Introduction (1-9), the archaeological sequence (11-58), the finds (59-122), environmental evidence (123-189) and discussion (191-213). In the introduction the situation of the site is set out in its relationship to the surrounding contours, the modern housing estates, the ring road, other nearby archaeological interventions and the Roman town. The excellent clear plan fig 1.6 gives the reader a very good idea of the archaeology that is to follow. It is interesting that virtually all the archaeology is found on about one quarter of the area examined and the rest has only the occasional pit or gully.

The move from the introduction to the sequence provides an omission which is most untypical of the rest of the factual report. On the overall site plan (1.6) there is a rather obvious ditch running directly north-south in the middle of the area. To learn more about this readers have to find on which of the period plans given in the sequence this ditch is numbered so that they may read in the text its date and purpose. In fact the ditch is numbered on the period 1 plan as feature 3024 which means the excavators thought it was prehistoric, but sadly it is not further noted in the text either here or elsewhere, presumably because there is little more to say about it than that it is probably prehistoric. I must emphasize that quibbles such as this are extremely rare in this volume. The early prehistory consists mainly of flints and a possible pit. The later prehistory involves pits and postholes of the early Iron Age, and the transition

from Iron Age to Roman may show the first boundaries of fields and enclosures which develop later.

The Roman period is divided into early (late 1st to early 2nd cent.), middle (2nd cent.) and late (3rd - 4th cent.). Early Roman includes two metalled areas with a number of ditches and post holes though no complete plans. Suddenly, perhaps soon after AD 100, a whole series of rectangular enclosures were surrounded by ditches and between the two intensively ditched areas a rectangular dry-stone building (building 1) was erected. Building 1 (see fig 2.19 for full detail) as a fact, is formed of a rectangle within a rectangle, or a rectangular building with a symmetric rectangle surrounding it. Since this must be frustrating to read without a plan to look at let us call it a large single room with a corridor running all round it -but interpretation has now reared its head. Within it there are pits and four areas of burning at least two which may be hearths. The site also has building 2, again with dry-stone walls, with a curved end on the site and the other end vanishing into the ring-road.

Moving into the later Roman period, the last on the site, buildings 1 and 2 have gone but the western part of the site is full of intersecting enclosure ditches and, to the north, a strange set of short stone sleeper walls which may be building 3, perhaps the basis for a building needing to be lifted up above the ground surface. Interpretation again might suggest a granary. But what are all those enclosure ditches and a granary doing in otherwise empty space? The possible granary is at the extreme edge of the site beside an area of modern occupation, in the development of which no remains were noticed or recorded. It is therefore difficult to accept the authors' suggestion in the discussion that the latest focus of the settlement, with higher status, moved to this area.

It is time to move on to the finds which include the pottery (prehistoric 502 sherds, and Roman 17,000). This is described, quantified and listed by a system so that only the samian pottery and less than 30 other sherds are illustrated. There is a good discussion and comparisons are made with other nearby sites though there is some difference of opinion between the writers Biddulph (pottery) and Booth (coins) as to the position of the nearest useful point of comparison in the houses excavated near The Beeches. Biddulph places those houses to the east and north of the site outside the Roman walls of Corinium (77) while Booth places the same houses (86) inside the walls but to the north-west which is correct. One further point about the Beeches Houses report needs to be inserted here for that site included a very late Roman rubbish layer some 12 inches thick covering the floor of a large ?deserted building. The contents of that layer were kept separate and if they had been properly published would have been a superb point of comparison for other late Roman deposits inside and outside the town.

Pottery gives way to coins, in the very capable hands of Paul Booth, though it is strange when luxurious detail is given of seeds, bones and charcoal, that a moderate coin list is banished to an appendix at the end of the volume. 20 of the coins were struck before 260, 32 from 260 to 296, and 118 in the fourth century. This is a reasonable distribution for a rural site in Britain, but it does not fit easily with the lifetimes of the buildings. Then follow ceramic building materials - mainly roof tiles, worked and structural stone, metal and other small finds. These include a remarkable series of brooches all but one of which are early, and the one possible later example is not complete. Here the brooches agree with the periods of use of the buildings while the coins are less closely related. Then follow metal working debris, worked flint, fired clay and mortar and glass.

Since the ditched enclosures form a major part of the structures found the environmental evidence provides vital evidence on what was actually going on the site. Animal bones, singly and in groups are fully listed and discussed and provide evidence for stock rearing of some sort and cows, sheep and horses are well represented with pigs lower down the list. Some of the bone groups are associated with shaped objects such as pins and it seems that animal bone may have been imported into the site to provide raw material for occasional craft activity. Plant remains, seeds and charcoals are fully documented and it is interesting that the wood species mainly represented are those of hedgerows, though without the more exotic species which in hedges of the present day might be taken to indicate substantial age. In other words, the possible charcoal from several species suggests hedges which might not have been growing for more than a century or two before the fourth century.

Human remains take their place after animals and plants which is quite right, since they have less to say about the environment and use of the site. Four adult inhumations, six juvenile inhumations belong to the Roman period in general and one cremation is undated. These burials were scattered over the site in shallow graves or depressions, were more often on their sides or flexed, with fewer prone or supine, and so form a very different picture from that of the more or less organised burials just outside the Roman town in cemeteries of deep cut graves. All radio carbon dates from the skeletons fit in the Roman period.

So what does it all mean? Here we come to the 'productive tension' promised. My main concern is the repetition of the emotive term villa. The authors do not call building 1 a villa but they seem constantly to be apologizing to the structure for not giving it this status and dignity. Matters might have been clearer cut if they had attempted a reconstruction. Mention is occasionally made of the walls which would have to be dry-stone walls because there is no evidence of widespread mortar or even clay packing in the destruction or demolition levels. It presumably had a roof, and the balance of comment seems to be in favour of the inner rectangle with a high roof with possibly clerestory windows, but very little glass found, and the 'corridor' roofed at a lower level. What did the roofs consist of? Mention has been made of ceramic tiles, but the quantity found could not cover the whole building. And whatever the roof it would have been heavy so how was it constructed and supported? Wooden posts within the dry-stone walls supporting roof timbers? No evidence. A line of central posts supporting the ridge of the roof? No. Timber sleeper beams on low dry-stone walls? Could this building have stood out on the hillside as an impressive sight for travellers approaching Corinium on the road from Silchester as suggested?

These buildings were so close to the villa-like houses at the Beeches House site only a few hundred yards away so perhaps their status was linked? The few hundred yards is agreed but there are two obstacles to be cleared for contact. The city wall and bank has to be surmounted without any postern gate in the area that we know about, so a trek along to the London gate. But before that the stream or river has to be crossed with no known bridge nearer than that for the London gate. The diversion of the stream into an artificial course several feet higher than its natural course inside the town must have been a major task, presumably of the first century AD, involving a course nearly a mile long and often six feet deep. This must have had a major impact on the people of the area and for miles around. And could the authors possibly be hinting in the title that the inhabitants of the site would have preferred to go on with their free

Dobunnic life rather than being under the imposed Roman shadow? Perhaps, but that is another story.

It sounds as if I am tearing this report to shreds but emphatically I am not. It is an excellent factual statement of what was found during excavations with excellent detailed reports on all the different classes of find. All I am doing is questioning the authors' interpretations and suggesting alternatives. The fact that I can do this is a certificate of excellence for the factual reports. Neither they nor I am right - just different. Read the book and make up your own mind.

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