
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

www.trac.org.uk

Paper Information:

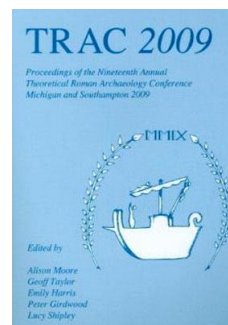
Title: Collapse, Change or Continuity? Exploring the three
Cs in sub-Roman Baldock

Author: Keith J. Fitzpatrick-Matthews

Pages: 132–148

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC2009_132_148

Publication Date: 25 March 2010



Volume Information:

Moore, A., Taylor, G., Harris, E., Girdwood, P., and Shipley, L. (eds.) (2010) *TRAC 2009: Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Michigan and Southampton 2009*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

Copyright and Hardcopy Editions:

The following paper was originally published in print format by Oxbow Books for TRAC. Hard copy editions of this volume may still be available, and can be purchased direct from Oxbow at <http://www.oxbowbooks.com>.

TRAC has now made this paper available as Open Access through an agreement with the publisher. Copyright remains with TRAC and the individual author(s), and all use or quotation of this paper and/or its contents must be acknowledged. This paper was released in digital Open Access format in March 2015.

Collapse, Change or Continuity? Exploring the three Cs in sub-Roman Baldock

Keith J. Fitzpatrick-Matthews

Introduction

The ‘small towns’ of Roman Britain are the under-theorised ‘Cinderellas’ of the province’s archaeology yet, at the same time, they should be regarded as the great success story of Roman rule. They were the dominant class of urban settlement, with a huge variety of forms, presumably reflecting different social, economic and political roles. Yet studies of the fifth-century collapse of urban civilisation in Britain focus almost exclusively on the major cities and ignore the ‘small towns’. However, because of their diversity, they have the potential to offer unique insights into the processes that operated from the early fifth century on, to transform Roman Britain into the early medieval successor states.

The archaeology of one place, the ‘small town’ of Baldock in Hertfordshire (Fig. 1) is unusual in that it has produced unequivocal evidence for sub-Roman activity, extending well into the sixth century, before the site was finally abandoned. Because there are so few sites with which it can be compared, it is impossible to know how typical of the ‘small town’ experience it may have been. If it was atypical, why did it survive the end of imperial control when other places apparently did not? If it was typical, why has the archaeological evidence not been found or recognised for what it is in other places? Is there a general failure of archaeology to deal with data of this type?

This paper will explore these issues by examining the evidence from Baldock, placing it in its local and wider setting. It concludes by proposing models for the way in which ‘small towns’ experienced the fifth century transformation of Roman Britain and by suggesting avenues for further archaeological research.

Baldock

Baldock developed from a Late Iron Age *oppidum* that had its origins in the early first century B.C., if not earlier (Burleigh 1995a: 112; 1995b: 179; Burleigh & Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2010: 21). After a period of steady growth during the first century A.D., it seems to have reached its largest extent in the second century. After the middle of the second century, though, its story has been seen as one of slow, inexorable decline as the inhabited area shrank and ever fewer new features were created. Ian Stead concluded that, by A.D. 400, a civilisation had ended and that Baldock had ceased to exist, with red deer wandering throughout the abandoned town and occasionally tumbling into wells (Stead & Rigby 1986: 87).

However, Stead’s work raised a number of paradoxes that do not fit well with this model and that have not been resolved by later work. The most impressive buildings, with stone foundations and *opus signinum* floors, all date from the fourth century or even later; moreover, there are new buildings that cannot be earlier than A.D. 400. At least one of the late Roman cemeteries has produced hand made sub-Roman pottery. On two sites, there is evidence for the resurfacing of roads during the fifth century. On one of these sites, Jonathan Drake’s unpublished analysis identified a minimum of four phases later than A.D. 400.

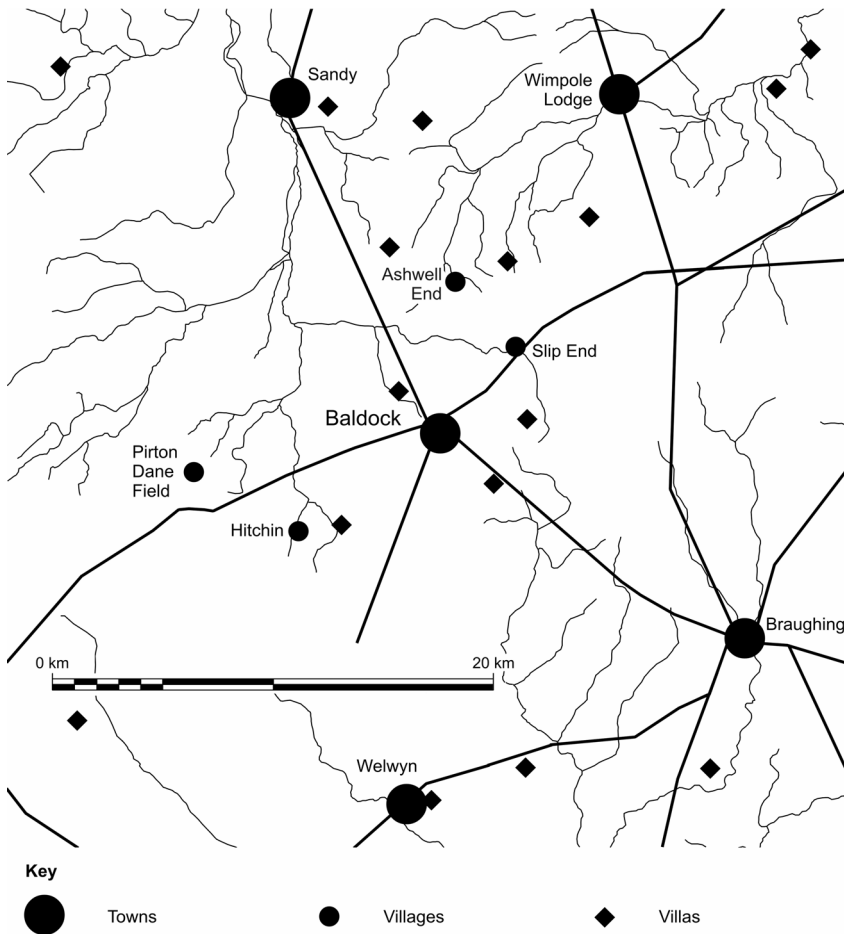


Figure 1: The Baldock area in the fourth century A.D.

These isolated bits of data suggest that Stead's model of fourth-century decline is wrong and that something more complex happened during the fading away of Roman Britain (Burlough & Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2010: 27). To understand what may have been taking place, it is necessary to look in greater detail at some of the sites in question.

Historical background

It is clear that the town contracted during the fourth century. Areas on Upper Walls Common that had first been used for burial were colonised for domestic purposes by the early second century A.D. at the latest; some reverted to cemetery use by the end of the third century. However, this is a peripheral part of the town and, even here, there are new substantial fourth-century buildings (Stead & Rigby 1986: 86), as at Weaver's Way (BAL-18) (Goodwin 1983). On the northern edge of the town, a building with a corridor over 14 m long was built during the fourth century; it has been conjectured that this was the town's *mansio*, evidently a new facility (Richmond *et al.* 1992: 15).

The centre of the town is one of the least explored elements of the settlement and there have been almost no excavations there. However, there is an undeveloped area on its western edge, at Bakers Close, which has remained open since the Roman period, allowing aerial photography and geophysics to give an idea of what lies beneath it (Hillelson 1986; Burleigh 2008: 191). The area is dominated by a Romano-Celtic temple, set back from but apparently facing a main road. Nearby, there are large walled enclosures containing buildings and a winged corridor house, which, it has been argued, are associated with the temple complex (Burleigh & Stevenson 2000: 51). To the south, a number of substantial fourth-century buildings were found during development work in the 1960s.

The pattern of coin loss is striking. Although late fourth-century losses are generally high in Britain, the Valentinianic and Theodosian losses at Baldock are unusually so and can be compared with Cirencester (small sites), Water Newton and Cow Roast (Northchurch), as well as with the temple sites at Chelmsford and Thistleton Dyer (Duncan *et al.* 2009: 155). These last two suggest that there may be a religious aspect to this pattern, which perhaps relates to other aspects of the town's archaeology, not least the temple complex at Bakers Close.

The sites

In the infelicitously-named sub-Roman period, continuing activity can be demonstrated on stratigraphic and artefactual grounds on a few sites; on others there is none. All of the areas examined by Ian Stead between 1968 and 1972 were in parts of the town that were abandoned by A.D. 400 or shortly thereafter, leading him to propose that the settlement was abandoned by that time. However, it is possible that a re-examination of the data from these sites in light of what was discovered in the 1980s may show that there was activity.

At the excavation of a site towards the east-north-eastern periphery of the town between 1980 and 1985 (BAL-1, California), it was possible to demonstrate that some features could not be earlier than A.D. 400. Analysis of the pottery from these features revealed the presence of several pottery fabrics not found in earlier contexts. They fall into two main types: vegetable tempered wares and hand-made sandy wares. One of the fabrics (Fabric 53, a vegetable-tempered ware (Ashworth 1990: 6)) is identical to Fabric A1 from Bedford (Baker & Hassall 1979: 152), where it is dated to A.D. 600 or later. The hand-made sandy wares are found only in association with the vegetable-tempered wares or in stratigraphically very late contexts in the town.

This was also one of the few sites where a stratigraphic sequence had been preserved in a large doline, a periglacial solution hollow in the chalk bedrock. This had begun to silt up during the Middle Iron Age and was finally completely filled by the early medieval period. A lengthy sequence included closely dated activities such as human burial (in the Middle Iron Age, the late first century B.C. and the third century A.D.), metalling the entire bowl-shaped hollow (late first century A.D.), quarrying (late fourth and fifth centuries A.D.) and the construction of a timber-framed hall-type building (sixth century A.D.).

Cemeteries

Baldock is perhaps best known for the number and variety of its burials (Burleigh 1993: 41-9; Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2007: 150), ranging from an exceptionally early Welwyn-type grave to late Roman inhumation cemeteries. A number of these late cemeteries continued to be used throughout the fourth century (one was probably established only in the middle of the century)

and several were clearly still in use well into the fifth century (and in one case, the sixth). Although the numbers of burials known to have been deposited in the fourth century was much lower than at any time since the Roman conquest, it is unclear whether this represents a real drop in population, a change in patterns of burial (it is possible, for instance, that some of those buried in the town's cemeteries during the second century were not urban residents but had been brought in from outside, although this is not likely), or the vagaries of archaeological discovery (none of the cemeteries that presumably existed on the western and north-western sides of the town has ever been located).

Three of the cemeteries with burials later than A.D. 400 lie on the east-north-eastern side of the town, at Icknield Way East (BAL-45), Royston Road (BAL-15) and California (BAL-1), with a fourth on its southern edge, at The Tene (BAL-30, BAL-31 and BAL-48) (Fig. 2). At California, the ceramic evidence shows that burials were made well into the sixth century, while it is unclear when the others fell into disuse, although there are circumstantial reasons for suspecting that, at Icknield Way East and Royston Road, burials were still being deposited in the second half of the fifth century.

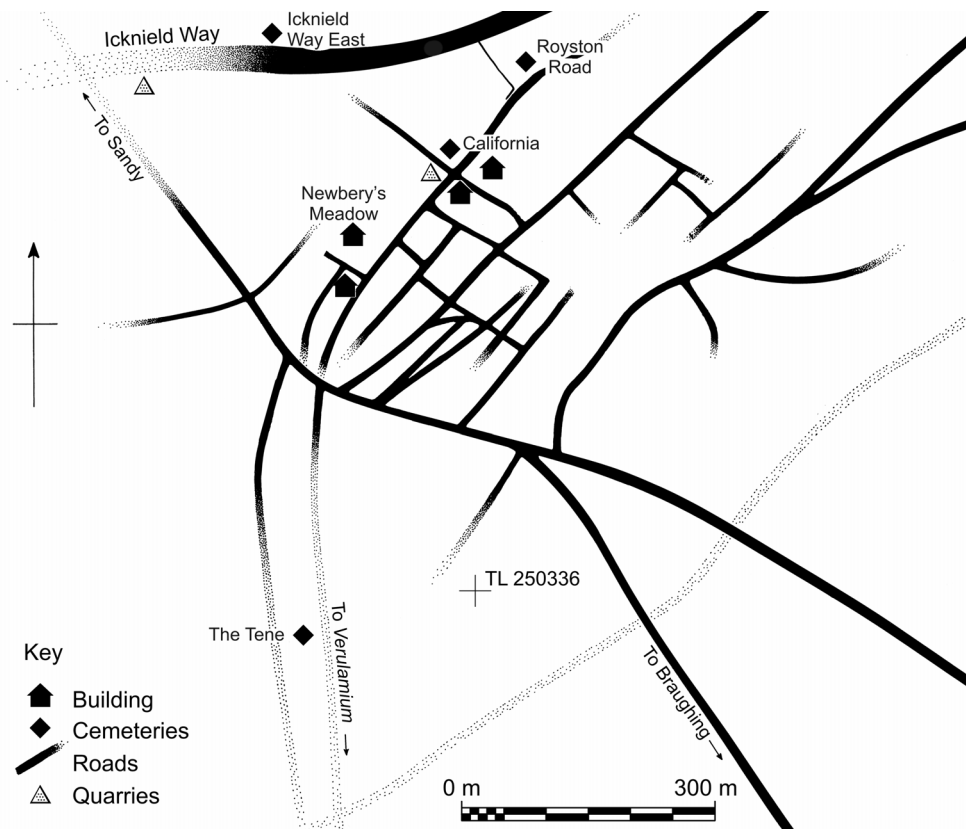


Figure 2: Sites in Baldock with sub-Roman evidence

Although these burial grounds continued to be used, they show a massive decline in the numbers of burials per year. In A.D. 400, the burial rate can be calculated as 1.3 per year,

falling to 0.6 per year by A.D. 500 (Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2007; Fig. 4). If the numbers of burials are proportional to the population of the town – which is a problematical assumption – then this suggests that it dropped by more than a half during the fifth century. Although this is a catastrophic decline, it is nevertheless remarkable in that, apparently uniquely among Romano-British ‘small towns’, people were still living, dying and being buried in organised cemeteries a century after Roman rule had ended. One intriguing feature is that the number of male burials at Calverton almost doubled during the late fifth century.

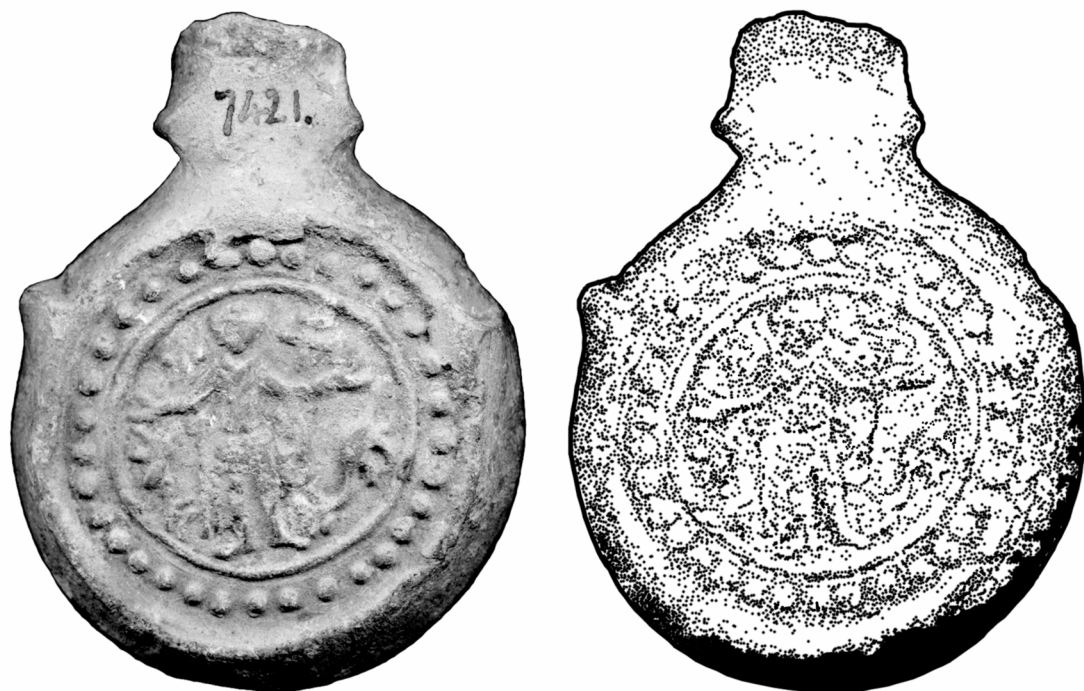


Figure 3: St Menas ampulla (Letchworth Museum Acc. No. 7421), actual size

One of the challenges of curating a museum collection that has grown over more than a century, partly through private donations, is to understand the provenance of items for which virtually no documentation exists. An excellent example of this is a flask from the shrine of St Menas at Abu Mena, 45 km south-west of Alexandria (Egypt), donated to Letchworth Museum on 15 September 1936 by a Mr Lee of 5a Royston Road, Baldock (Fig. 3). According to the accessions register (Number 7421), it is a ‘*small Roman pottery flask from Pompeii*’. However, by the time these flasks were being produced, after c. A.D. 500 (Griffiths & Bangert 2007: 59), Pompeii had lain under many metres of volcanic ash for more than four centuries. Moreover, southern Italy is outside the distribution of such objects, which are found along Anthea Harris’s (2003: 64ff.) ‘second Byzantine-Western trading axis’, operating via northern Italy and the Rhine. It is possible that the provenance was attributed to the object by a museum curator puzzled by the exotic and unfamiliar nature of the flask. More interestingly, it was not the only object donated by Mr Lee: he also deposited a Belgic jar, deriving from a cremation burial found in his garden, on 4 April 1933 (Accession Number 6573) (Applebaum 1932: 257). Mr Lee’s garden was located on the site of the Icknield Way East cemetery, which had developed

over the site of an early first century A.D. burial enclosure. Mr Lee also found part of the enclosure ditch and late Roman inhumation burials. This St Menas flask may well have been found in one of the late burials on his property, in which case it could push use of the cemetery into the early sixth century, at least.

The cemetery at California (BAL-1) has the best stratigraphic and artefactual evidence for continuity after A.D. 400. Established around A.D. 200, it developed at one corner of a crossroads in a previously domestic enclosure. Altogether, 81 graves were identified, although they held 94 individuals as a number of graves had been re-used, with the bones of former occupants being carefully reinterred, sometimes packed around the outsides of the coffins (Frere *et al.* 1986: 401; Burleigh 1993: 46-8; Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2007: 157). There were also numerous intercutting graves, although this had not occurred through lack of space as there were always empty areas within the cemetery. The earliest burials appear to have been made towards the crossroads, moving towards the back of the plot as time went on. The intercutting and re-use of graves in these circumstances appears deliberate and it has been suggested that some were family groups or other close social groupings (Burleigh 1993: 48).

In a number of instances, the earliest grave in a sequence can be dated no earlier than the end of the fourth century and could be considerably later. Some graves contained sub-Roman pottery fabrics and it is possible that some of the few ceramic grave gifts are of fifth-century date rather than earlier. Although only seventeen graves contained gifts of complete or near-complete pots, most graves had 'residual' pottery in their backfills. The presence of types that post-date the start of use of the site for burial is difficult to explain in terms of residuality, as the sherds or the vessels from which they derive must have been introduced to the site in a cemetery context. This suggests that they may be better regarded as deliberate depositions or as the residue from activities taking place within the cemetery.

Although the boundary ditches of the former domestic enclosure that had occupied the site before it became a cemetery were allowed to silt up and were not recut (indeed, several burials were deposited in their soft fills), the roadside ditches were maintained and recut well into the fifth century. The road on the south-eastern side of the plot was resurfaced in the fifth century, its surface surviving beneath the later ploughsoil where the road ran through the north-western edge of the doline. It is therefore possible that the road on the south-western side, the metalling of which had not survived, was also resurfaced at the same time.

By contrast with the California cemetery, which was excavated completely, the cemetery at The Tene is very poorly known, as it is in a part of Baldock partly overlain by the medieval town. Most discoveries have been made during development in this area, and only a few small sites have seen formal excavation. Some of the discoveries made in the 1960s were inadequately published by Ian Stead (Stead & Rigby 1986: 78), but others await full publication (Burleigh 1980: 35-7; Fenton *et al.* 2003: 10*ff.*). Nevertheless, there is much that can be said about this cemetery.

It is the only cemetery so far discovered in the town to display the type of careful organisation evident in large urban cemeteries such as Poundbury, a type that seems to have become prevalent after A.D. 350 (Petts 1998: 115) and where the likelihood of Christian burial is high. All the burials are arranged in rows, with no sign of intercutting; the bodies are laid supine, with heads to the west, and no grave gifts have been recorded. The cemetery is extensive, with outliers known to the north-west of the core and some distance to the south, and, although its plan is not known in detail, it is evident that there were zones within it that were never used for burial. The possibility that these were areas where structures may have stood should not be dismissed, since they are always difficult to detect in Baldock.

Domestic sites

Although the burial evidence remains the best explored aspect of Roman and sub-Roman Baldock, there are a number of domestic sites that also demonstrate the continuity of occupation well into the fifth century and later. Most of these are concentrated around Upper Walls Common, where extensive excavations during the 1980s and 1990s took place in advance of development (Burleigh & Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2010: 14ff.). However, there are hints from other parts of the town that the settlement did not come to a sudden end in the early decades of the fifth century and that survival was not restricted to Upper Walls Common.

The large periglacial hollow, mentioned above as preserving a long stratigraphic sequence, has clearly domestic activity in its upper fills. As well as evidence for quarry pits, roadside ditches and enclosure ditches, a post-built structure has been recognised, cut into the uppermost of the sub-Roman deposits before the development of a ploughsoil above it (Burleigh 1982: 14; Selkirk & Selkirk 1983: 74). A complete plan of the structure was not recovered, although it is evident that it was at least 10 m long and 5 m wide, with an internal partition carried on a ground beam.

This is the only evidently domestic structure in the doline and its location at a crossroads, overlooking a contemporary cemetery, makes it tempting to suggest that this was all that remained of the settlement: a single farmstead and its associated burial ground. However, this is not the complete story on the site, as a sill-beam structure was built over the latest metalling of the road to the south of the doline. Although dated only by stratigraphic association, it is evident that this was also of sub-Roman date (Rankov *et al.* 1982: 369). It demonstrates that, at some point, the west-north-west to east-south-east road had gone out of use, at least to the east of the crossroads. Given the sequence of sub-Roman roadside ditches on the north side of this road, it suggests that its disuse came towards the end of the period rather than earlier on.

Even more intriguing is a ditched enclosure on the south-western side of the crossroads. Only its north-eastern corner lay within the excavation area, but it had been cut through a backfilled quarry of early fifth-century (or later) date. Four massive postholes were found at the entrance, suggesting that there was a potentially defensive gateway. In front of the entrance, and running at an angle of about 40° to the front of the gate, was a line of three further pits or postholes, suggestive of an outwork, allowing the enclosure to be approached only from the south-east. There was no evidence for internal structures or other activity, which probably lay outside the area available for excavation. Unfortunately, when the site immediately to the west was developed in 2001, no archaeological condition was imposed and it is unknown how far in this direction the enclosure extended. The main road running north-north-east to south-south-west was diverted to the east not only by the construction of the enclosure but also by the earlier quarry.

A short distance to the south-west, Shimon Applebaum excavated a substantial house in Newbery's Meadow, now the Grosvenor Road estate, the foundations of which incorporated a coin of Theodosius I (Applebaum 1932: 250). Although not definitely of fifth-century date, Applebaum considered this likely. No other sites in the town have produced definite evidence for such late structures, but it is unclear if sub-Roman activity was confined to this north-eastern part of the settlement or if stratigraphy of this date has not been recognised. Given the probable continuity of use of the cemetery at The Tene into the fifth century, it is possible that there was also domestic activity at the southern end of the town.

Roads

An important element in the sub-Roman sequences in the town is evidence for the continued maintenance of at least elements of the road system. Again, the evidence is restricted to those parts of the town where large-scale excavation has taken place since the first recognition of fifth-century activity by Gil Burleigh in the early 1980s (Fig. 4). Ditches were recut on a number of sites, including on the south side of the road that formed the southern boundary of the cemetery at Royston Road, on both sides of the same road by the cemetery at California and at Hartsfield School. There was also evidence for the resurfacing of the road by the Royston Road cemetery, where it sealed a silted ditch recut containing a slightly worn coin of Arcadius, and by the California cemetery. At a later date, this road was partially blocked by a pair of offset cuts, which would have permitted access by pedestrians but not by wheeled vehicles or large groups of people moving *en masse* (Frere *et al.* 1989: 298).

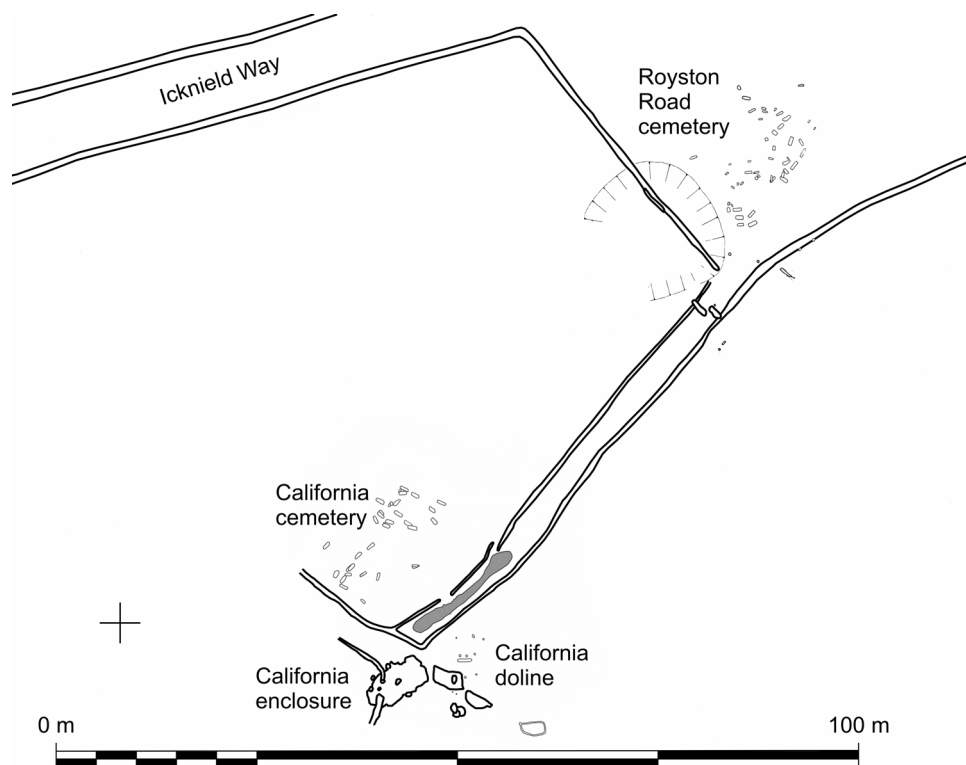


Figure 4: Sub-Roman activity at Clothall Common

To the south, the same road had to be diverted eastwards by the construction of a large quarry pit in the late fourth century (or later) and by a series of similar pits cut into the developing hollow way fills on the slope downhill by Hartsfield School. At some point, the northern ditch of the road running at right angles to this, that formed the crossroads at California, was recut, blocking off the other road.

The urban hinterland

In the *territorium* of Baldock – the edges of which may be defined by a number of important religious sites (Burleigh 2008: 192) – the archaeology of the fifth and sixth centuries is difficult to recognise. Although there are later fifth-century ‘pagan Saxon’ remains in south Bedfordshire and south-west Cambridgeshire (e.g. a late sixth-century inhumation cemetery near Ashwell Station), there are few in the immediate vicinity of Baldock (Fig. 5). Two probable cemeteries were discovered during the construction of Letchworth Garden City in the early twentieth century (Fitzpatrick-Matthews & Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2009, 26), at least one of which was mixed rite, while another was discovered at Dane Field, Pirton, in the 1790s and further explored in 1834 (Went & Burleigh 1990a: 1). There are some metalwork items, including a fifth-century penannular brooch from Arlesey, and a little pottery, including a late sixth-century jar from Ashwell Springs (Went & Colley (1990: 16), where it is wrongly dated to the early seventh century), but this material lacks proper context. Of course, Germanic material style cannot be equated in any simplistic manner with Germanic settlement, and the complexity of the relationship between the two is made all the more difficult by the nature of this material from the Baldock region.

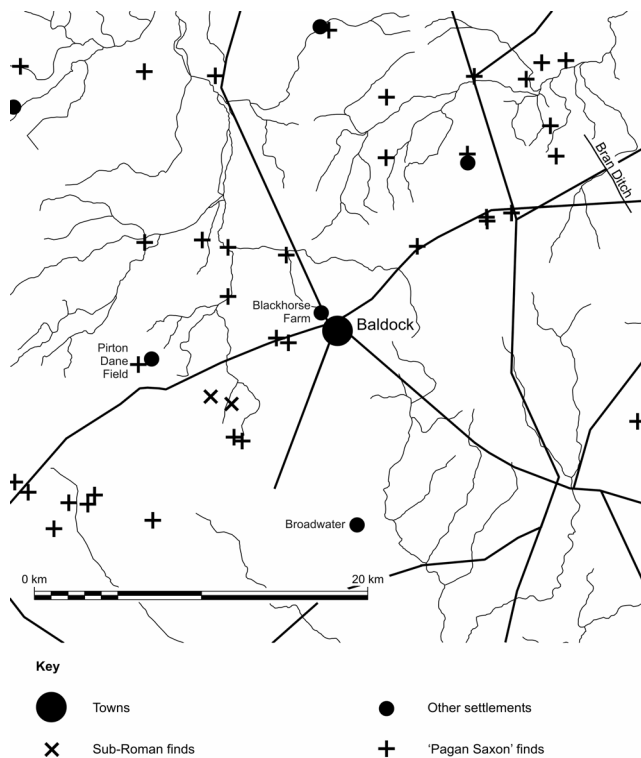


Figure 5: Fifth- to seventh-century sites and finds in the Baldock region

However, there are two sites where small-scale investigation has yielded a few scraps of evidence. The first, at Blackhorse Farm just a kilometre north of Baldock, was evaluated by

trial trenching in 1994 as part of proposals for two routes of a new bypass. The site was designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument in 1975 and trenching was limited to an area south of the main focus of the cropmarks from which the site is best known. In one trench, a *grubenhäus* was identified, 2.4 m wide and 0.13 m deep, with only 1.5 m of its length exposed inside the trench. It had rounded corners and a flat base, with a posthole in the centre of the eastern (short) side and another in the north-eastern corner (Fenton 1994: 15). A posthole a short distance away produced a sherd of early medieval pottery of fifth- or sixth-century date, the only such material from the site. The presence of apparently Germanic settlers a very short distance from what was evidently a still viable sub-Roman settlement raises interesting questions about interaction that cannot be answered with the limited data we currently possess (Phillips & Duncan 2009: 160).

The second site lies some eleven kilometres to the west of Baldock, at Pirton. This is close to the Anglo-Saxon cemetery in Dane Field mentioned previously. In January 1990, preliminary archaeological fieldwork along the proposed route of an oil pipeline from Buncefield to Humberside was followed by larger scale work in May. Although no evidence for the cemetery was found, an extensive and previously unknown Romano-British settlement was located. It was established in the later first century B.C. towards the northern end of Dane Field and expanded through the first and second centuries A.D., reaching its greatest extent during the third century. However, occupation on the site continued into the fifth century, with the formation of an occupation surface and the digging of a pit containing sub-Roman pottery (Went & Burleigh 1990b: 8). Fragments of an unusual sixth- or seventh-century jar, found unstratified on the site, suggest occupation contemporary with the supposed cemetery elsewhere on the field; although the style is reminiscent of Early Saxon pottery, the fabric is one of the sub-Roman sandy wares discussed above (Fig. 6).

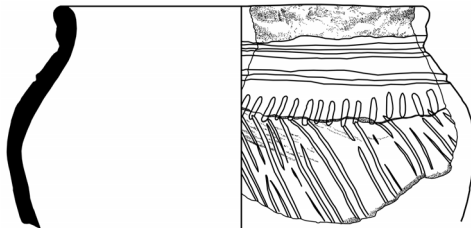


Figure 6: Hybrid sub-Roman/'Pagan Saxon' jar from Dane Field, Pirton (1:4)

As with the settlement at Blackhorse Farm, there are interesting questions of cultural interaction, which in this instance suggest several possible scenarios. Firstly, the sub-Roman settlement may have been abandoned before the development of the nearby cemetery. However, this does not account for the jar of uncertain ceramic tradition. Secondly, a community of Britons may have been taken over, even wiped out, by a group of invading Saxons. Again, this does not explain this discrepancy between the form and fabric of the jar. The third possibility is that the community of Britons slowly became Germanicised through the sixth century, either by intermarriage with settlers or by acculturation. This is the only scenario that accounts for all the archaeological evidence.

Hitchin

A more important early medieval site developed eight kilometres to the south-west of Baldock, becoming the sub-regionally important urban centre at Hitchin. Although nineteenth-century historians sought evidence that it had been a Roman town, archaeology suggests that it was an area of farmsteads and perhaps part of a large villa estate, based at the Ninesprings (or Purwell) Villa just outside the parish boundary (Seebohm 1883: 431). Its name derives from that of a people called *Hicce* in Tribal Hidage, a probably seventh-century list of kingdoms and their subdivisions drawn up as a tax assessment. The name has no plausible Old English etymology and probably derives from Brittonic **siccā*, ‘dry’, referring to the feeble River Hiz that runs through the town (Fitzpatrick-Matthews & Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2008: 15). By the later tenth century, the settlement had been laid out along a planned grid and was surrounded by a massive bank and ditch. Intriguing discoveries in recent years have enabled a model to be constructed of its development from the late Roman period to the foundation of a *burh* in the early tenth century. Most significant of these have been burials excavated at Queen Street, on the eastern periphery of the medieval town. Reports of burials in this area have been made over many years and have generally been regarded a ‘plague victims’ (the Great Plague of 1665 is known to have devastated the population of this part of the town), but separate projects uncovered a series of unaccompanied inhumation burials laid with their heads to the west. Originally thought to be pagan Saxon, radiocarbon dates indicate that they are of late to sub-Roman date (Davis 2005: 62), suggesting that the burials are of Christian Britons. This would go some way to explaining why the name of the town is of Brittonic rather than Old English origin and could also be of relevance to the apparently early origins of the church. Attested as a minster church by *c.* 1000 (Whitelock *et al.* 1968: 31), its origins are clearly much earlier and it has been argued that it was the site of *Clofesho*, the location of a series of important synods between the seventh and ninth centuries (Offer 2002: 75).

The regional context

The *Hicce* of Hitchin occupy part of a well-known gap in the distribution of pagan Anglo-Saxon burials. To the north, the *Giflæ*, whose name is also Brittonic (from **gablā*, ‘forked’) and is preserved in the River Ivel, and to the south-west, the *Cilternsæte*, also with a partly Brittonic name (**celternoi*, ‘high ones’), are neighbouring peoples named in the Tribal Hidage whose territories also lack such burials. It has long been hypothesised that *Verulamium* was the capital of the sub-Roman state (Wheeler & Wheeler 1936: 34) and its fifth-century archaeology has been known since the 1960s, even if it remains controversial (Niblett & Thompson 2005: 164; Faulkner 2000: 175). Here, the archaeological data is backed up by the documentary evidence of the *Vita Sancti Germani* by Constantius of Lyons, written *c.* 480×90 (Koch 2006: 805). At Baldock, there are no such links, but it may be suggested that the *Hicce* were the people of the *territorium* of Baldock and the *Giflæ* of the *territorium* of Sandy and the *Cilternsæte* of *Verulamium* (Fig. 7).

So far, none of the other ‘small towns’ in the vicinity – Sandy, Braughing and Welwyn – has produced definite evidence for sub-Roman activity, although it has been argued for Sandy and Braughing (Baker 2006: 34; 89). However, Braughing became an important royal estate on the western edge of the kingdom of the East Saxons (Short 1987: 14); like Hitchin, the name of the settlement derives from the name of the people, the *Breahingas*, whose name is Old English (‘Breahha’s people’). At both Braughing and Welwyn, there are important early

churches (Williamson 2000: 168), which may suggest some continuity of elite function, while the presence of fifth-century Saxon burials at Sandy suggests disruption (Edgeworth & Steadman 2003: 26).

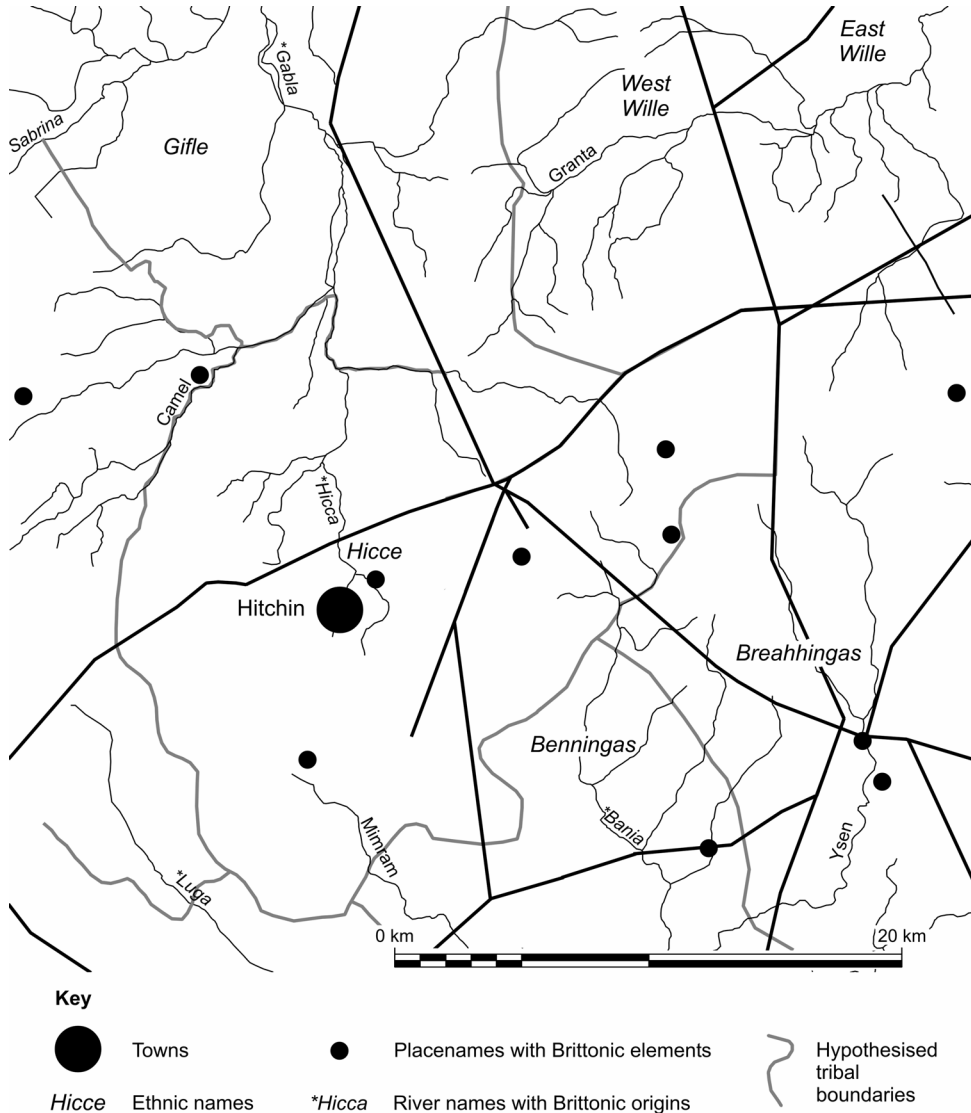


Figure 7: Peoples of the Tribal Hidage in the Baldock region

Modelling the transformation

As already pointed out, there is no such thing as the ‘typical small town’, as the term encompasses a wide variety of forms and functions. Nevertheless, few have produced any

evidence for sub-Roman activity, which may suggest that they were generally unable to survive the economic storms of the early fifth century and were simply abandoned once their *raison d'être* had ceased to exist. If this be the case, then Baldock is atypical and it is important to understand why it should have survived when most other towns did not.

Is there perhaps a clue in the specialised nature of some 'small towns'? Burnham & Wachter (1990: 5) recognised three classes of specialised 'small towns': industrial, religious and administrative. Baldock appears to have been a religious centre, a type which seems to have been relatively uncommon. It may be suggested that ancient cult centres such as Baldock and Bath (Pearce 2004: 126) formed a focal point for devout pagans at a time of increasing Christianisation. After pagan practices were outlawed by Theodosius I in a series of laws enacted after 391 (although their importance may have been exaggerated (Smith 2008: 186), various types of religious observance were effectively proscribed and pagans were increasingly subject to persecution by Christians. It is possible that the inhabitants of places where pagan cults had long been important resisted moves to outlaw their religions, and they may have driven out the politically dominant Christians who threatened their cherished beliefs.

A transformation of this nature may explain the sudden appearance of a sizeable community of evident Christians in Hitchin at the end of the Roman period: finding life in stubbornly pagan Baldock impossible to tolerate, they perhaps found a sympathetic landowner who gave them space to build a church and establish a burial ground. There are hints in the re-use of Roman brick and tile in St Mary's Church, as well as from finds from nearby, that it lies close to the site of a Roman building (Fitzpatrick-Matthews & Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2008: 13). As pagan belief declined over the next century or more, so Baldock was abandoned and forgotten while the Christian community at Hitchin flourished, especially after the conversion of Mercia in the middle of the seventh century. Conversely, a model involving the continuation of Christian worship in contrast to pagan worship has been used to explain the sub-Roman activities at Wroxeter, Chester and Lincoln (White & Barker 2002: 131; Matthews 2003: 24–5; Jones 1993: 25).

It is unlikely that sub-Roman continuity at either Baldock or *Verulamium* was a consequence of the lack of early Germanic settlement; rather, it is more likely that settlement was controlled by the presence of organised administrative machinery in those places. Indeed, the *grubenhaus* at Blackhorse Farm shows that such settlement did take place. Even in areas where Germanic settlement was early and intense, such as Lindsey, there is nevertheless evidence for the continuation of sub-Roman Christianity, which may indicate the controlled nature of that settlement, at least in its early phases.

It is notable that there is no early medieval (Anglo-Saxon) material from the site of Baldock whatsoever. The site appears to have lain deserted and forgotten from 600 until its re-founding five and a half centuries later, during the 1140s. The Knights Templar appear to have selected the site as it lay at the intersection of a number of important routes and had a prosperous rural hinterland. In creating their new town, they provided competition for the nearby Domesday borough of Ashwell, which declined rapidly and whose status was no more than a village by the later Middle Ages.

An agenda for future research

The archaeology of Baldock demonstrates that sub-Roman features – including structures and more surprising elements such as road metalling – can survive in 'small towns'; the identification of pottery fabrics associated with these features demonstrates that there was also

an associated material culture, even if only in small quantities. The survival of this material at Baldock is all the more surprising, given the intensity of medieval ploughing, which has devastated so much of the stratigraphy of the Roman town. This suggests that it ought to be possible to recognise it in other places, if it is there to be recognised.

This can only be achieved through an active research agenda that targets certain aspects of the archaeological record by:

1. analysing the contents of the stratigraphically latest 'Romano-British' features to determine whether or not they are associated with distinctive types of material culture (pottery fabrics, metalwork and so on), which means the excavation of more than small samples from such features and more detailed analysis of the finds than often occurs;
2. targeting areas where there is no early Germanic archaeology but where 'small towns' are present (such as north Essex, northern Hampshire, Dorset and West Sussex) to assess British survival, both in the towns and in the surrounding countryside, by seeking out any distinctive material culture recognised through the work in (1) above;
3. targeting areas where there is early Germanic material and where 'small towns' are also present (such as the Upper Thames valley, Cambridgeshire, north-eastern Leicestershire and Norfolk) to refine the existing models of the interaction between native Britons and incoming Saxons.

In times of economic difficulty, the first step may seem an unnecessary luxury as commercial units pare their costs to a minimum, but without this close analysis, the two remaining questions cannot be attempted. For too long, the study of sub-Roman urban continuity has been dominated by sites of a class that was always a minority in the Roman world – the large administrative city, with defensive walls in the late Roman period – just as they have dominated our study of Roman urbanism. The 'small towns', by contrast, would have been the most familiar urban form to most citizens of the diocese, and their sub-Roman history (or lack of it) holds the most promise for helping to model the nature of the fundamental changes that occurred between A.D. 400 and 600.

North Hertfordshire District Council Museums

Acknowledgements

Much of the detail of sites in Baldock derives from unpublished fieldwork carried out under the direction of Gil Burleigh in the 1980s for North Hertfordshire District Council Museums. His assistance in understanding the sites is gratefully acknowledged, but all errors of interpretation are my own.

Bibliography

- Applebaum, E.S. 1932. Excavations at Baldock in 1932. *Transactions of the St Albans Architectural and Archaeological Society* (1932): 244–58.
- Ashworth, H. 1990. *North Herts Museums pottery fabric series: Iron Age, Roman and sub-Roman*. Unpublished internal document. Letchworth: North Hertfordshire District Council Museums (Reference Series 2). Available at http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/fabric_series_1990.pdf.

- Baker, E. & Hassall, J. 1979. The pottery. *Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal* 13: 147–240.
- Baker, J.T. 2006. *Cultural transition in the Chilterns and Essex region, 350 AD to 650 AD*. Studies in Regional and Local History 4. Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press.
- Burleigh, G.R. 1980. Excavations in Baldock, 1978. *Hertfordshire's Past* (Autumn 1980) 9: 35–37.
- Burleigh, G.R. 1982. Excavations at Baldock 1980–81: an interim report. *Hertfordshire's Past* (Spring 1982) 12: 3–18.
- Burleigh, G.R. 1993. Some aspects of burial types in the cemeteries of the Romano-British settlement at Baldock, Hertfordshire, England. In M. Struck (ed.) *Römerzeitliche Gräber als Quellen zu Religion, Bevölkerungsstruktur und Sozialgeschichte: Internationale Fachkonferenz vom 18-20 Februar 1991 im Institut für Vor- und Frühgeschichte der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz*. Archäologische Schriften 3. Mainz: Institut für Vor- und Frühgeschichte der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz: 41–9.
- Burleigh, G.R. 1995a. A Late Iron Age *oppidum* at Baldock, Hertfordshire. In R. Holgate (ed.) *Chiltern archaeology: recent work. A handbook for the new decade*. Dunstable: The Book Castle: 103–112.
- Burleigh, G.R. 1995b. The plan of Romano-British Baldock, Hertfordshire. In A.E. Brown (ed.) *Roman small towns in eastern England and beyond*. Oxbow Monograph 52. Oxford: Oxbow: 177–82.
- Burleigh, G.R. 2008. Temples, shrines and deities in Iron Age and Romano-British Baldock and its *territorium*, Hertfordshire, England, UK. In J. d'Encarnação (ed.) *Divinidades indígenas em análise: divinities pré-romaines – bilan et perspectives d'une recherche*. Actas do VII Workshop FERCAN, Cascais, 25-27.05.2006. Coimbra & Porto: Centro de Estudos Arqueológicos das Universidades de Coimbra e Porto: 189–219.
- Burleigh, G.R. & Fitzpatrick-Matthews, K.J. 2010. *Excavations at Baldock, Hertfordshire, volume 1: an Iron Age and Romano-British cemetery at Wallington Road*. Letchworth Garden City: North Hertfordshire District Council Museums & North Hertfordshire Archaeological Society.
- Burleigh, G.R. & Stevenson, M.D. 2000. *A decade of archaeological fieldwork in North Hertfordshire*. Archaeological Report 34. Letchworth: North Hertfordshire District Council Museums Service. Available at http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/a_decade_of_fieldwork.pdf.
- Burnham, B.C. & Wachter, J. 1990. *The 'small towns' of Roman Britain*. London: B T Batsford.
- Davis, S. 2005. Late and post-Roman burial to 19th-century brickmaking: excavations at the site of 40 Queen Street, Hitchin, SG4. *Hertfordshire Archaeology & History* 14: 57–74.
- Duncan, H., Rackham, J., Guest, P., McKinley, J. & McPhail, R. 2009. Synthesis. In M. Phillips (ed.) *Four millennia of human activity along the A505 Baldock Bypass, Hertfordshire*. East Anglian Archaeology 128. Bedford: Albion Archaeology: 143–56.
- Edgeworth, M. & Steadman, S. 2003. *Extensive urban survey for Bedfordshire: the Roman town of Sandy archaeological assessment*. Bedford: Albion Archaeology.
- Faulkner, N. 2000. *The decline and fall of Roman Britain*. Stroud: Tempus.
- Fenton, P. 1994. *An archaeological evaluation, A505 Baldock Bypass, Blackhorse Farm site*. Field Archaeology Report 23. Letchworth: North Hertfordshire District Council Museums.
- Fenton, P., Winter, M. & Ashworth, H. 2003. *The former Health Centre, The Tene, Baldock, Herts*. Unpublished Assessment Report (Report 208). Baldock: The Heritage Network.
- Fitzpatrick-Matthews, K.J. 2007. Subculture and small group identity in Iron Age and Roman Baldock. In B. Croxford, N. Ray, R. Roth & N. White (eds.) *TRAC 2006: proceedings of the sixteenth annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference which took place at The University of Cambridge 24-25 March 2006*. Oxford: Oxbow: 150–174.
- Fitzpatrick-Matthews, K.J. & Fitzpatrick-Matthews, T. 2008. *The archaeology of Hitchin from prehistory to the present*. The Archaeology of North Hertfordshire 2. Letchworth Garden City: North Hertfordshire District Council.
- Fitzpatrick-Matthews, K.J. & Fitzpatrick-Matthews, T. 2009. *The archaeology of Letchworth Garden City*. The Archaeology of North Hertfordshire 3. Letchworth Garden City: North Hertfordshire District Council.
- Frere, S. S., Hassall, M.W.C. & Tomlin, R.S.O. 1986. Roman Britain in 1985. *Britannia* 17: 363–454.
- Frere, S. S., Hassall, M.W.C. & Tomlin, R.S.O. 1989. Roman Britain in 1988. *Britannia* 19: 257–345.

- Goodwin, T. 1983. *Baldock 1983 – Wallington Rise Estate*. Unpublished typescript report for the North Hertfordshire Archaeological Service.
- Griffiths, D. & Bangert, S. 2007. Ceramic: the St Menas ampulla. In D. Griffiths, R.A. Philpott & G. Egan (eds.) *Meols: the archaeology of the north Wirral coast. Discoveries and observations in the 19th and 20th centuries, with a catalogue of collections*. Monograph 68. Oxford: Oxford University School of Archaeology: 58–60.
- Harris, A. 2003. *Byzantium, Britain and the West: the archaeology of cultural identity AD 400-650*. Stroud: Tempus.
- Hillelson, D.J. 1986. *Baker's Close, Baldock: resistivity survey interim report*. Unpublished interim report. Letchworth: North Hertfordshire District Council Museums. Available at http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/bal-50_1985.pdf.
- Jones, M.J. 1993 The latter days of Roman Lincoln. In A. Vince (ed.) *Pre-Viking Lindsey*. Lincoln: City of Lincoln Archaeological Unit: 14–28.
- Koch, J.T. (ed.). 2006. *Celtic culture: a historical encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Ltd.
- Matthews, K.J. 2003. Chester's amphitheatre after Rome: a centre of Christian worship? *Cheshire History* 43: 12–27.
- Niblett, R. & Thompson, I. 2005. *Alban's buried towns: an assessment of St Albans' archaeology up to AD 1600*. Oxford: Oxbow with English Heritage.
- Offer, C. 2002. *In search of Clofesho: the case for Hitchin*. Norwich: Tessa.
- Pearce, S. 2004. *South-western Britain in the early middle ages*. Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Petts, D. 1998. Burial and gender in Late- and sub-Roman Britain. In C. Forcey, J. Hawthorne & R. Witcher (eds.) *TRAC 97: proceedings of the seventh annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, which formed part of the second International Roman Archaeology Conference, University of Nottingham, April 1997*. Oxford: Oxbow: 112–24.
- Phillips, M. & Duncan, H. 2009. Blackhorse Farm, Baldock: summary of trial trenching. In M. Phillips (ed.) *Four millennia of human activity along the A505 Baldock Bypass, Hertfordshire*. East Anglian Archaeology 128. Bedford: Albion Archaeology: 157–60.
- Rankov, N.B., Hassall, M.W.C. & Tomlin, R.S.O. 1982. Roman Britain in 1981. *Britannia* 13: 327–425.
- Richmond, A.D.W., Burleigh, G.R. & Went, D. A. 1992. *An archaeological evaluation at The Engine Public House, Baldock, Hertfordshire*. Archaeological Report 17. Letchworth: North Hertfordshire District Council Museums.
- Seebohm, F. 1883. *The English village community examined in its relation to the manorial and tribal systems and to the common or open field system of husbandry: an essay in economic history*. London: Longmans, Green & Co.
- Selkirk, A. & Selkirk W. eds. 1983. Baldock. *Current Archaeology* 8 (3) (No. 86): 70–74.
- Short, D. 1987. Braughing: a possible Saxon estate? *Herts Past* 23: 8–15.
- Smith, A. 2008. The fate of pagan temples in south-east Britain during the late and post-Roman period. In D. Rudling (ed.) *Ritual landscapes of Roman south-east Britain*. Great Dunham & Oxford: Heritage Marketing & Oxbow: 171–190.
- Stead, I.M. & Rigby, V. 1986. *Baldock: the excavation of a Roman and pre-Roman settlement, 1968–72*. Britannia Monograph 7. London: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies.
- Went, D.A. & Burleigh, G.R. 1990a. *Humberside to Buncefield pipeline: preconstruction archaeological survey report, Dane Field, Pirton, Hertfordshire*. Archaeological Report 3. Letchworth: North Hertfordshire District Council Museums. Available at http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/pirton_pipeline_preconstruction.pdf.
- Went, D.A. & Burleigh, G.R. 1990b. *Humberside to Buncefield pipeline: archaeological investigation assessment report, Dane Field, Pirton, Hertfordshire*. Archaeological Report 6. Letchworth: North Hertfordshire District Council Museums. Available at http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/report_6.pdf.
- Went, D.A. & Colley, C. 1990. *A catalogue of the archaeological finds from the garden of 'The Steppes', Springhead, Ashwell, Hertfordshire*. With contributions by F. Pewtress, A. Garwood and T. Offord. Archaeological Report 10. Letchworth: North Hertfordshire District Council Museums. Available at http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/report_10.pdf.

- Wheeler, R.E.M. & Wheeler, T.V. 1936. *Verulamium: a Belgic and two Roman cities*. Society of Antiquaries of London Research Report 11. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- White, R. & Barker, P. 2002. *Wroxeter: life and death of a Roman city*. Stroud: Tempus.
- Whitelock, D., Ker, N. & Rennell Rodd, F.J. 1968. *The will of Æthelgifu: a tenth century Anglo-Saxon manuscript*. Oxford: The Roxburghe Club.
- Williamson, T. 2000. *The origins of Hertfordshire*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.