

# Roman Small Towns in Leicestershire and Rutland

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In this paper the evidence for Roman small towns in the modern counties of Leicestershire and Rutland – or, in Roman terms, in the area around the Roman city of *Ratae Corieltavorum* – are examined. This is a revised version of a paper originally presented to a conference at Knuston Hall in 1992 and published in Brown (1995).

There is no really objective definition of a Roman small town. There are no useful Roman documentary sources and relatively little systematic modern work at many of the potential sites. In the end, the major criterion for consideration must be the large size of the site, but this should be supported by evidence of industry and trade, and social or administrative functions.

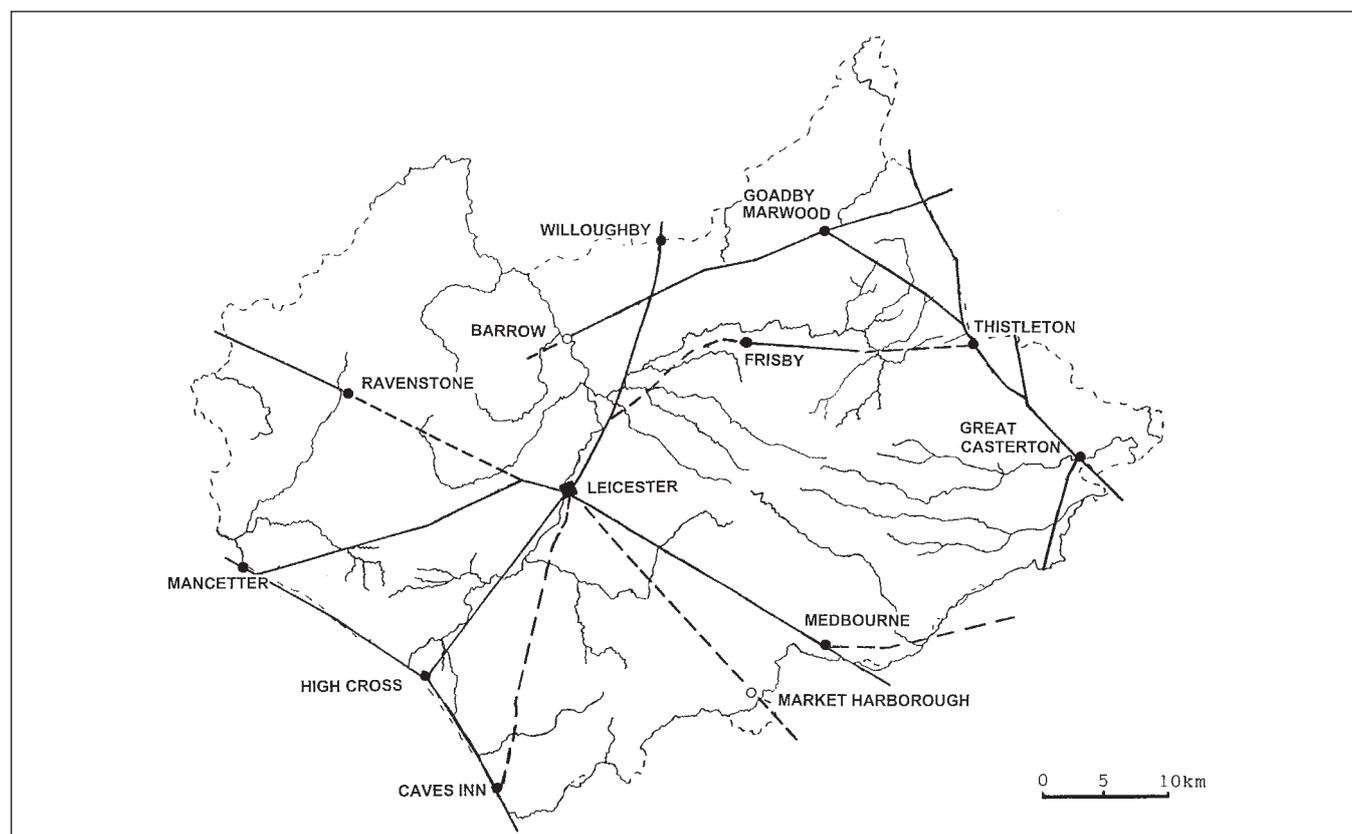
The evidence for each of the potential small towns (Fig. 1) will be examined before looking at the group as a whole. It should be emphasised that these sites are very different from the Roman cities (*civitas* capitals), such as Leicester (*Ratae Corieltavorum*). This had the characteristic rectilinear street grid, public buildings and large number of elaborate townhouses that would be expected, as well as the defences enclosing a large area (some 42 hectares). None of these are found at the small towns.

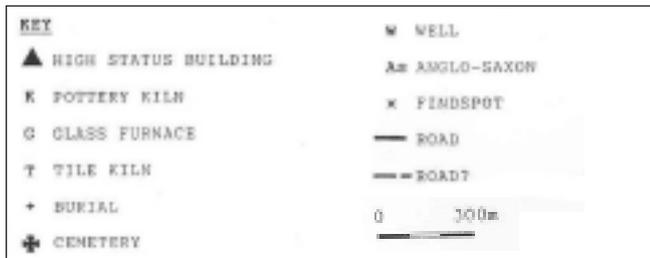
## The probable small towns

**Witherley/Mancetter** (Roman name: *Manduessedum*) (Fig. 2)

This settlement has been described in some detail by Burnham & Wachter (1990, 225-260). A small earthwork enclosure bisected by Watling Street has long been known and identified as the *Manduessedum* named in the Antonine Itinerary. Small excavations in 1927, in the 1950s (Oswald & Gathercole 1958) and in 1964 (Mahany 1971), showed that this probably dated to the late 3rd century (although the circuit partially coincided with an earlier ditch). Traces of 4th century buildings were noted within the defences. Subsequent excavations by Kay Hartley (1973) revealed part of the large surrounding settlement with an irregular street system and many kilns, specialising in mortaria, with others at nearby Hartshill. Keith Scott (1981) has revealed a large military establishment, probably an early legionary half fortress, under Mancetter village across the River Anker. A substantial stone building complex within the town, possibly a *mansio* (an official inn) was partially excavated in 1997. This was overlain by Early Anglo-Saxon burials. Little work has been done on the northern, Leicestershire, side of Watling Street and there

Fig. 1. Roman small towns in Leicestershire and Rutland





Key for all site plans

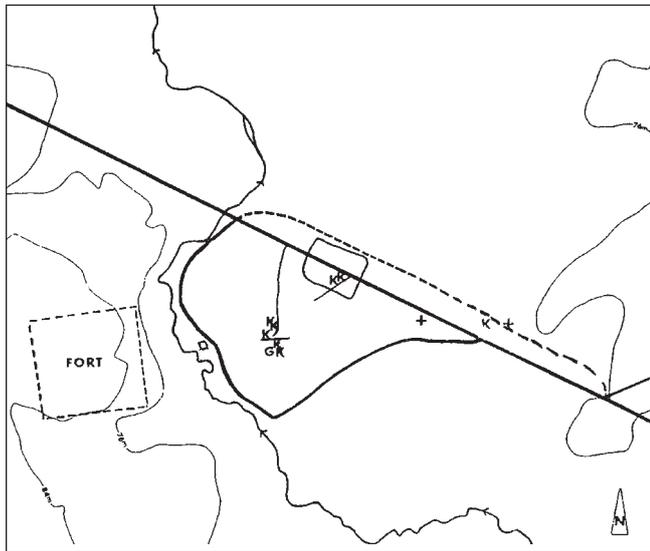


Fig. 2. Witherley/Mancetter

are some indications that the settlement may extend some distance on this side as well. This is supported by small-scale work by the late Keith Scott in 1993, which appears to show a side street running north from Watling Street (K Scott, *pers. comm.*). Malcolm Lockett of Hinckley Fieldwork Group has noted Roman pottery scatters stretching along the north side of Watling Street as far as the junction with Fen Lane.

**High Cross** (Roman name: *Venonae*) (Fig. 3)

The site was well known as early as the 17th century. All the early writers mention prolific finds of Roman coins.

Fig. 3. High Cross

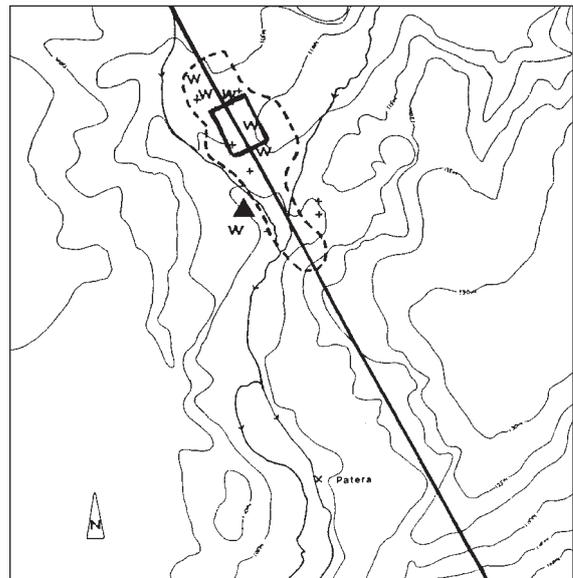
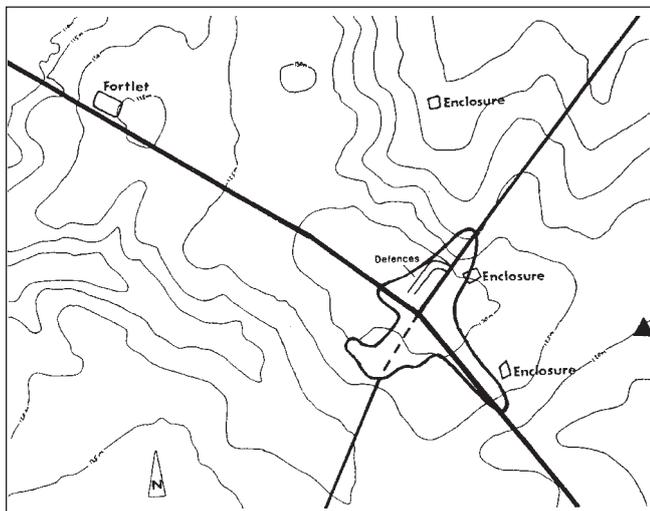


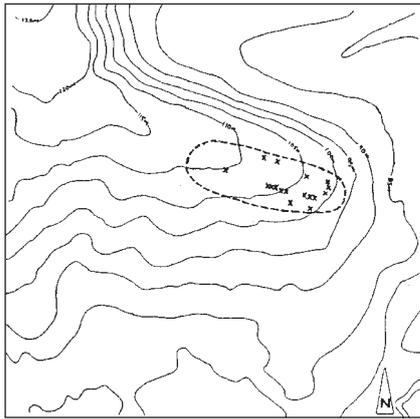
Fig. 4. Caves Inn Farm

The county historian Burton (who lived near the site) says ‘on both sides of the way have been ploughed and dug up many ancient Romayne coynes, great square stones and bricks and other rubble of that ancient Roman building’. Ashmole, in 1657 added ‘At High Cross ... is the foundation (as I guess) of a Roman temple about six yards long, and four yards broad; and where they say, not long since, was a thing like a silver mace dug up’. Dugdale notes that ovens and wells had also been found and states (in a reference very worrying for fieldwalkers) ‘the earth ... being of a darker colour and of such rankness that much of it hath been carried by the husbandmen to further distances, like dung, to make the ground more fertile’. Early work is summarised by Pickering (1935). Widening of the A5 (Watling Street) led to excavations by Ernest Greenfield and Graham Webster (1965) and a watching brief by Jack Lucas, which produced evidence of timber buildings fronting the main roads. A tessellated pavement was, apparently seen in situ, as were burials, but no records of their exact locations can be traced.

A recent campaign of fieldwalking by the Lutterworth Archaeological Fieldwork Group has defined the shape of the scatter around the road junction. As yet, the only evidence of industry is in the form of iron slag. A new survey, combining fieldwalking and metal detecting, is now being conducted by Nigel Clamp with the permission of English Heritage. Jim Pickering has photographed probable defences from the air. There appears to be a relatively small double ditched enclosure around the road junction but the full circuit is not known. A villa - at least a stone building producing *tesserae* - has been found by the Sapcote Fieldwork Group some 450 metres away to the east.

**Caves Inn Farm** (Roman name: *Tripontium*) (Fig. 4)

Roman finds have been known in the vicinity of Caves Inn since the 17th century and considerable amounts of material were collected from gravel pits in the 19th and

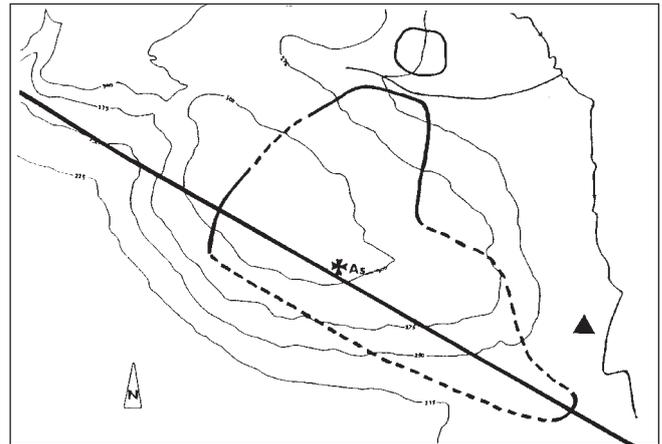


**Fig. 5. Market Harborough**

early 20th centuries (early finds summarised by Pickering 1935,71-80). Long-running excavations by the Rugby Archaeological Society led by Jack Lucas, have produced a wealth of knowledge about this site that would otherwise have disappeared without record (Lucas 1997). They excavated a small (c.0.8 ha) rectangular defended area defined by a ditch 4.3m wide and 2.5m deep. This was bisected by Watling Street and dated to the 4th century. It lies within a considerable area on each side of the road, which has produced wells, gullies, pits, timber buildings, burials and some iron slag and furnaces (Cameron & Lucas 1972). The rescue nature of the excavations has meant that, all too often, only fragmentary structures were revealed. Also, the area fronting Watling Street, where most buildings would be expected, was not threatened and, therefore, not excavated. The area has been heavily quarried so the limits of the settlement, particularly on the Leicestershire side, can probably not now be established. There is no indication of pre-Flavian occupation, although by the early 2nd century the site was intensely settled. A military skillet comes from quarries southeast of the known settlement and has been seen as evidence of a fort (Webster 1966). A stone building complex arranged around a courtyard lies on the southern fringes of the settlement and has been identified – very plausibly – as a *mansio* (Lucas 1981). A bathhouse attached to this complex is currently being excavated (Lucas 1997).

**Market Harborough** (Roman name unknown) (Fig. 5)

The best candidate so far known is at The Ridgeway, Market Harborough. Querns and a few sherds of Iron Age pottery were found here in the 1930s, but it was not until houses were built in the 1950s that Roman material was found. Since then fourteen gardens have produced material including four hundred sherds and coins (mostly from an appeal to residents in the early 1980s). The coins are late 3rd and 4th century, but the pottery sequence runs from the late Iron Age to the late Roman period. Fieldwalking is impossible because the area behind the houses is permanent pasture with prominent ridge and furrow, but several sherds have been picked up there. At least seven hectares of material is indicated. The topography – on a flat topped ridge



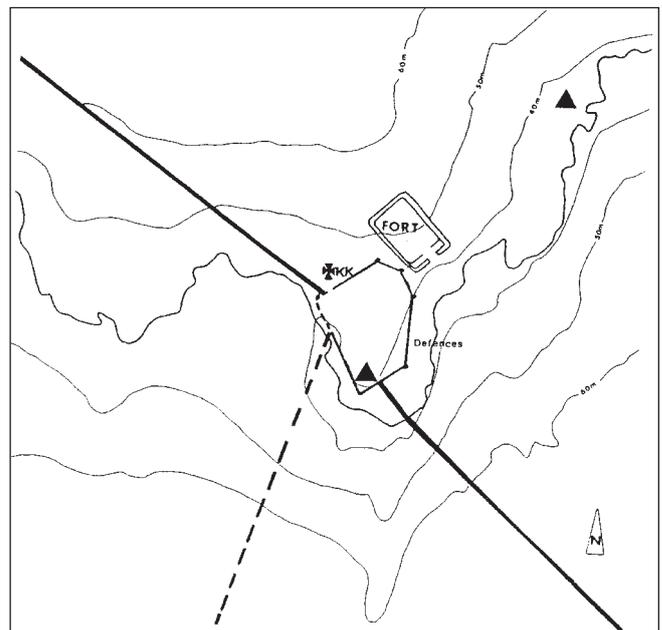
**Fig. 6. Medbourne**

close to a river crossing with some (admittedly tenuous) indications of a Roman road – is reminiscent of the other small town sites.

**Medbourne** (Roman name unknown) (Fig. 6)

Around 1800 work by John Tailby of Slawston (mobilising ‘rude ploughboys and illiterate shepherds’ to do the actual fieldwork) partly defined a large scatter of Roman material on Mill Hill, which produced many hundreds of coins (Nichols 1798, 717 and 1800, 540). Despite the large numbers of coins recovered, a coin list is now difficult to compile, as most of the coins have been lost without record. The few that can be identified range from Republican to Honorius. A fieldwalking survey has produced a very large pottery scatter defining a settlement mostly along the Gartree Road, with a substantial northern extension, presumably indicating an otherwise unknown road running out to the north. Sample excavation has produced evidence of one relatively large stone building, a number of other stone and timber structures (none complete, but probably low status), wells, ditches, gullies, iron working hearths and inhumation burials of

**Fig. 7. Great Casterton**



Anglo-Saxon date (Pollard 1992 and 1996). Iron Age and early Anglo-Saxon material has also been recorded. Rather poorly defined cropmarks suggest a pattern of ditched enclosures over (at least) part of the site. A high status building lies, detached from the town, in the valley of the Medbourne Brook under the modern village. A large mosaic was found in the 18th and drawn in the 19th century (Dibden & Hill 1862). Recent work is beginning to piece together some details of the complex. A possible bathhouse and a suite of rooms linked by a corridor have been recorded. Both Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon pottery are known from the site.

#### Great Casterton (Roman name unknown) (Fig. 7)

Great Casterton is the other Leicestershire site considered by Burnham and Wachter (1990, 130-5). Roman defences and finds have long been known but the first modern work was carried out at University of Nottingham Summer Schools in the 1950s led by Philip Corder (1951, 1954, 1961). The earliest phase of settlement appears to be a Roman fort, immediately east of the later town (although a recent evaluation found a small amount of Iron Age pottery within the town defences). The fort was occupied from the 40s to the 80s AD (Todd 1968). The town defences enclose some 7.3 ha and were built in the late 2nd century. Corder trenched extensively within the defences but did not find any streets and he described the density of occupation as 'rather sparse'. However, only 1-2% of the interior was examined and six stone structures were revealed, while the Ermine Street frontage - where most structures would be expected - was hardly touched. Much slag was found as well as two pottery kilns producing colour-coated wares of the second half of the 2nd century to the north of the defences. A recent evaluation has produced evidence of bronze working. A cemetery also lay north of the defences and this also produced early Anglo-Saxon burials (Mahany and Grainger, unpublished).

The reason for the provision of defences enclosing a large proportion of this settlement in contrast to all the other Leicestershire small town sites is quite unknown. It

may be because it had a higher status, perhaps as a *pagus* centre (a subdivision of a *civitas*), or because a strategic decision had been made to defend settlements along Ermine Street. Substantial stone buildings, including a bathhouse, are known just inside the south gate, perhaps associated with a *mansio*. A large villa complex is known some 800m to the northeast. Fieldwork is currently being undertaken by the Framland Group (FLAG) in the area between town and villa. This should shed some light on the relationship between the two.

#### Thistleton/Market Overton (Roman name unknown) (Fig. 8)

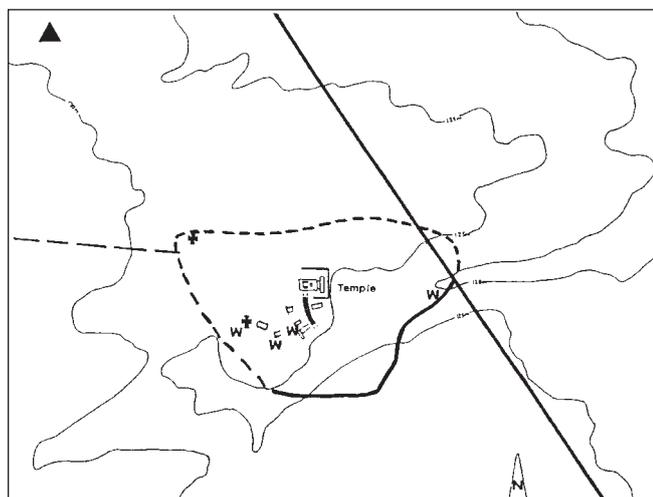
The site was noted by early antiquaries, particularly Stukeley, who visited in 1733. Huge numbers of coins ranging from late Iron Age to late Roman have been recovered over the years (certainly several thousand). Early sources refer to 'a wall that enclosed a kind of court' said to be *c.* 100 feet square and in 1910 'the foundations of a wall quite 4 feet wide showing several openings, evidently gateways, and enclosing about 4 acres' is mentioned (Philips 1910). Neither of these structures (if indeed they are different) can now be identified, unless one is the *temenos* of the temple complex. An enclosure of 4 acres could be like the ones at Mancetter and *Tripontium*. Pottery kilns are known within a kilometre to the west.

In the 1950s Ernest Greenfield, in advance of iron-stone quarrying, excavated a strip across the site. Although this has been written up, it remains unpublished and I am indebted to David Jennings for a copy of the plan of this work. Greenfield's interim report notes that he found seven stone buildings, postholes, three wells, a series of gullies, twenty three circular hearths, seventy five pits, sixty two much-used oven bases, twenty six small stone quarries and a cemetery. Clearly, this is a slice across a busy settlement where iron smelting was a major activity (Greenfield 1958).

Immediately north of this J K St Joseph photographed from the air a temple complex within an enclosure, presumably a *temenos*, which was also excavated by Greenfield, although it was never quarried. The sequence apparently starts with a circular Iron Age timber building. The second phase was also circular with limestone walls and was *c.* 13.5m in diameter with a crushed stone floor. A tessellated floor in a red and white checkerboard pattern was laid before it was rebuilt as a basilican temple, some 20m x 14m with thick limestone walls. A votive object is dedicated to *Veteris*. Within the *temenos* a long subsidiary building with a corridor on its west side lay at right angles to the basilica (Greenfield 1962; Lewis 1966, 84 & 93-5). Iron Age pottery and 13 Corieltauvian coins were associated with the early phase. From the town as a whole twenty-nine Iron Age coins, mostly Corieltauvian silver units and half units (*pers. comm.* J May) are known - by far the most from any of the small towns in Leicestershire and Rutland, but in line with a number of those in Lincolnshire (May 1984).

A fieldwalking survey by the local fieldwork group, led

Fig. 8. Thistleton/Market Overton



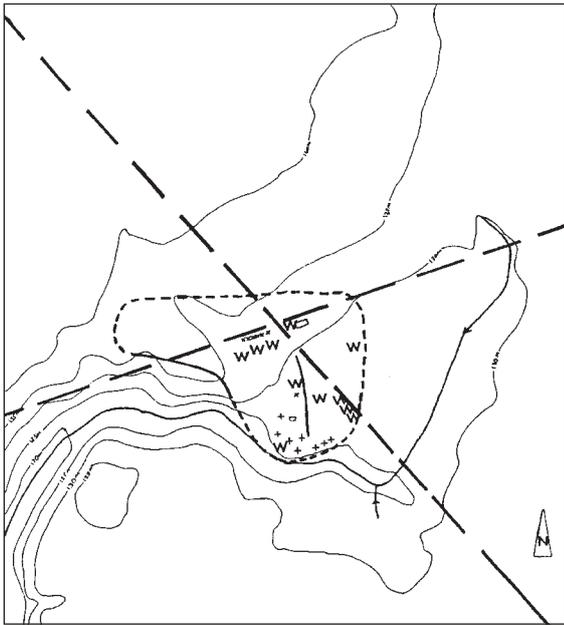


Fig. 9. Goadby Marwood

by Kate Don, is currently under way. This should help us to more fully understand this site.

**Goadby Marwood (Eaton parish)** (Roman name unknown) (Fig. 9)

This site was first noted in 1952 during ironstone quarrying. It was partly recorded by Mr Eli Coy, the quarry manager who noted 'signs of buildings' (mostly stones), a 'plaster floor ... similar to concrete' presumably *opus signinum*, a north-south cobbled road, an old quarry and twelve stone-lined wells. Four of these are in a southwest to northeast line and six in a southeast to northwest line and they almost certainly relate to buildings fronting the main roads through the site. 'Numerous shallow pits, roughly oval in shape [which] contained calcined stone and slag from the smelting of ironstone' were found in topsoil clearing and are clearly Roman bowl furnaces. Many skeletons were noted in the southern part of the site (partly published in Abbott 1956).

Since 1982 metal detecting over the back-filled quarry has produced hundreds of Roman coins (of which well over a hundred have been identified at the Jewry Wall Museum), one *Corieltauvian* stater, over sixty brooches and many small finds. These include finger rings, belt fittings, dice, leather working stamps, spoons, keys, knives, bracelets, seal boxes, pendants, pins, weights etc. There is also a figurine of Mercury and a votive axe hinting at a religious dimension. Recent fieldwork has shown that the site extends to the northwest and that an 'island' of surviving archaeology exists between old quarries.

The next hamlet to the south of Goadby is called Wycomb making this one of a group of small towns associated with the *wicham* names noted by Margaret Gelling (1967).

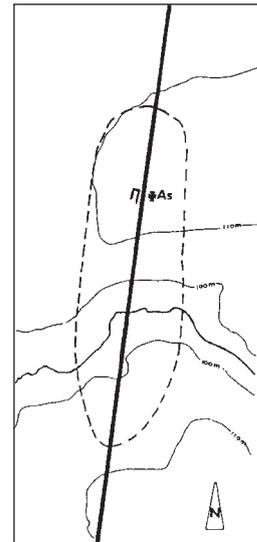


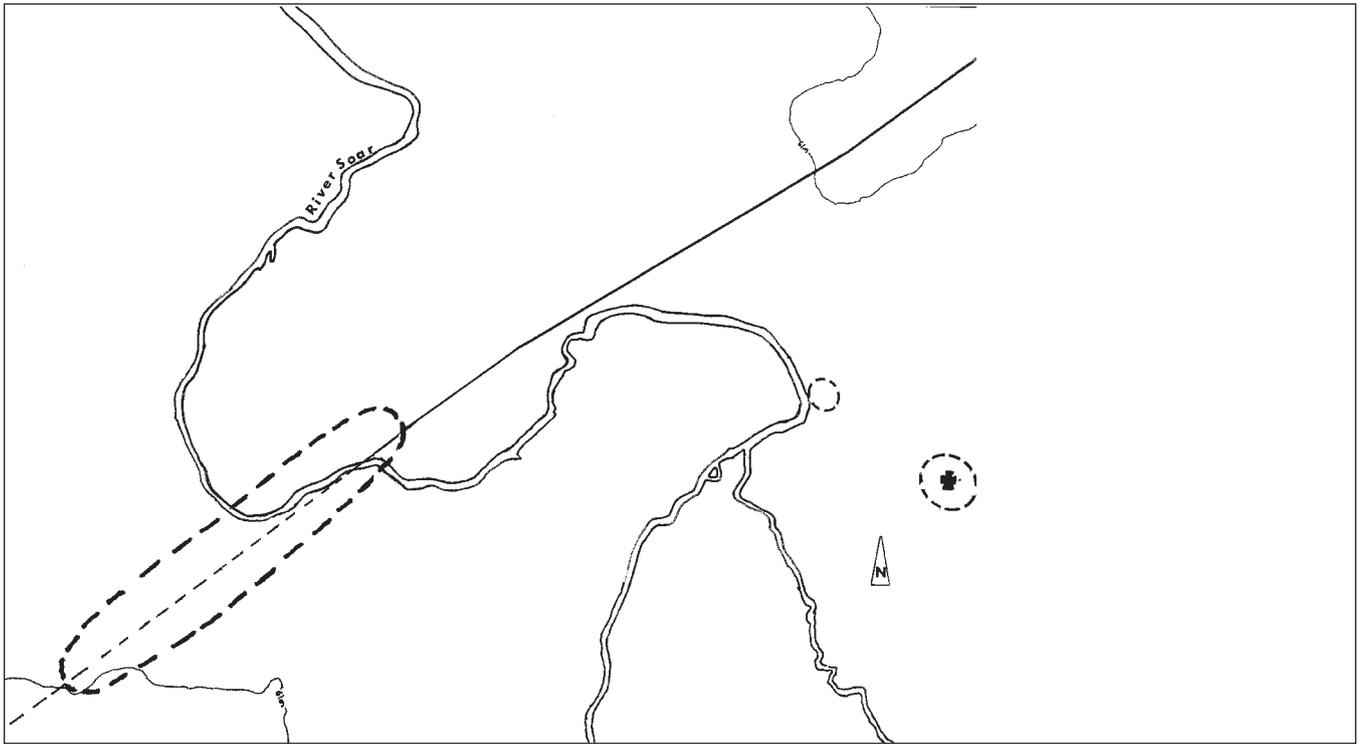
Fig. 10. Willoughby on the Wolds/Wymeswold

**Frisby/Kirby Bellars** (Roman name unknown)

Little work has yet been done on this site, which was found by members of the East Leicestershire Detecting Group. However, it is clear that a dense scatter of Roman pottery, coins, brooches and small finds runs along the line of the Roman road from Thistleton to Leicester. The size of the scatter is uncertain as it disappears under permanent pasture, but it is clearly a large site and is very likely to be a town.

**Willoughby on the Wolds/Wymeswold** (Roman name: *Vernemetum*) (Fig. 10)

Stukeley visited the site in 1722 when the area was under open field agriculture, and his observations are still the basis for our understanding of it. An area of dark soil associated with Roman material was visible on the northern (Nottinghamshire) side of the valley of the Willoughby Brook and similar evidence was visible on the south side of the valley in an area called 'Wells'. Rescue excavations by Malcolm Dean have been published by Gavin Kinsley (1993). These confirmed the line of the Fosse Way some way to the west of the modern A46 and produced one unequivocal rectangular timber building, and a spread of stone which may represent a robbed out stone building. Fragments of other timber buildings were also seen and a stone column fragment of 3rd-4th century date was recovered which clearly indicates a sophisticated stone building in the vicinity. A series of enclosures defined by ditches was recorded near the road. Recent metal detecting in the southern (Leics) area has produced many Roman coins, brooches (mostly 1st-2nd century in date) and other small finds, including rings, pins, bracelets and strap-ends (as well as Middle/Late Anglo-Saxon material). Stukeley spoke to a farmer who had ploughed up tessellated pavements but whether these were in the settlement or belong to a villa lying close by is not known (Nichols 1795, 120-1). The Roman name, *Vernemetum*, means Great Sacred Grove. The location of



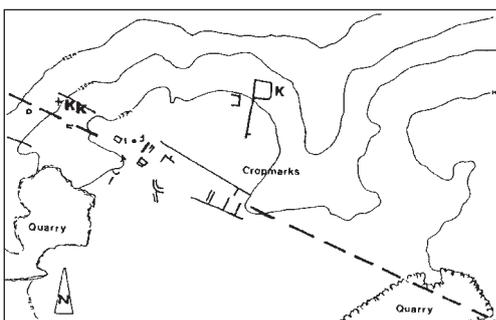
**Fig. 11. Barrow-on-Soar/Quorndon**

this *nemeton* is unknown but the 'Wells' area where there are springs on the hilltop is an appropriate location. Systematic fieldwork would help, but already both Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon pottery has been recovered, while a large Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemetery of over 120 burials was excavated in the 1960s (Kinsley 1993).

**Barrow-on-Soar/Quorndon** (Roman name unknown) (Fig. 11)

This site lies north of Leicester where the Salt Way crosses the River Soar. The area alongside the river crossing is permanent pasture on each side. Much Roman pottery (over 1,600 sherds) and a few coins with some building material were recovered during gravel quarrying in the 1950s. Recently a considerable number of Roman coins and small finds has been produced by metal-detecting on a site nearby on the west bank of the River Soar in Quorndon parish. Other finds have been found in and around Barrow-on-Soar. It is still unclear whether these finds represent a large settlement or a series of small sites. It is hoped to launch a fieldwork group in Barrow and this will be a major problem to be tackled.

**Fig. 12. Ravenstone/Ibstock**



**Ravenstone/Ibstock** (Roman name unknown) (Fig. 12)

This site was discovered in 1976. Local fieldworker, Arthur Hurst, found a single pit during the construction of a power line and 400m to the southeast Jim Pickering photographed a series of cropmarks. It took eight years of fieldwork by Arthur Hurst and the North-West Leicestershire Archaeological Fieldwork Group to fill the gap. Pottery survived poorly because of the acid nature of the soil and the site was under-estimated, leading to partial destruction by opencast mining and an associated treatment works. In 1981 three pottery kilns, producing grey ware probably of 3rd century date, a later tile kiln, a cemetery, a circular stone building, 10.5m in diameter, and an Anglo-Saxon post-built rectangular building some 4m x 6m, were excavated at the west end of the site (Lucas 1981). In 1984 eight Roman buildings – all simple stone strip buildings – were noted in a watching brief in the central sector. A v-shaped ditch with a square-cut cleaning channel forming the rounded corner of an enclosure was also noted, strongly suggesting a Roman fort. Only the eastern sector of the site remains substantially undamaged. The site is clearly aligned on a Roman road running west-north-west to east-south-east (although this was not seen in the watching brief). This has recently been traced for some 25km to join Ryknield Street and, in the other direction, must run to Leicester (Liddle & Hartley 1994). A rectangular cropmark north of the site coincides with a Roman pottery scatter and seems to include 3 other pottery kilns. The records of the late Arthur Hurst's work have been lodged with Leicestershire Museums and it is hoped to publish them with the results of the 1981 excavations.

## Other possible sites

The spacing of the sites is in general remarkably even except in the east of Leicestershire, where there is a prominent gap, although this has been reduced by the discovery of the site at Frisby/Kirby Bellars. Certainly the area supported an Iron Age centre at Burrough Hill—where small-scale excavation has revealed occupation well into the 4th century AD. Not enough is known to assess its Roman status. Some 10km south of Burrough a large cropmark enclosure has been recorded at Skeffington. It is almost of hill fort proportions. Metal detecting has produced over 200 coins, over 40 brooches, steelyard weights etc. More work is required to properly assess the site (C Dawson, *pers. comm.*), but details of the finds are held in the Leicestershire Sites and Monuments Record and it is clear that the material spans the entire period from the late Iron Age to the late Roman period.

There are other small town sites that must have served parts of Leicestershire that lie just across the boundaries in neighbouring counties. These include Red Hill in Ratcliffe-on-Soar parish, Notts, where a large site is associated with a temple site and Ashton in Northants, where there was a substantial iron industry. These help to fill some of the apparent gaps, but a site between Market Harborough and *Tripontium* may be expected, although this could lie in either Leicestershire or Northants.

## The small towns as a group

### General

The definition of what constitutes a small town is somewhat subjective. By no means all scholars would include all the sites noted above. There is enough evidence to say that they are all likely to be nucleated settlements. Some of these sites could be alternatively characterised as villages. While this cannot be entirely ruled out it is striking that this class of settlement is remarkably evenly spaced. This suggests that they perform a function for a surrounding region. The distribution is very similar to that of medieval market towns. Although never coinciding, there is a close correspondence between the two groups of sites. A similar function might be suspected. Markets are difficult to find archaeologically, although the large number of low value coins that are normally found on these sites surely argues for some form of regular commercial activity. Administrative and social activities can be equally difficult. Even industrial activity may not be entirely straightforward. Archaeologists tend to look for evidence of metal-working and pottery production to suggest an industrial element at our small towns, but it should be noted that the documentary evidence from medieval towns indicates that agricultural processing, such as leather working, brewing and baking were predominant, but are less easy to find.

### Siting

All the definite sites are on known Roman roads and most (and perhaps all) are at or near road junctions. Most are close to river or stream crossings where communications would be channelled.

### Origin

The origin of the settlements is generally uncertain because of the lack of excavation at most of the sites. Although not yet fully published, the interims strongly suggest that Thistleton had an Iron Age origin and the temple and coin finds argue for a high status, perhaps a Corieltavian royal centre. Elsewhere, small excavations have produced Iron Age material underlying the small towns at Medbourne and High Cross. Many writers have seen Roman military activity as the origin of a large proportion of small town sites – with Great Casterton as a classic example and Mancetter/Witherley, and perhaps Ibstock/Ravenstone in the same category. It would be foolish to deny that this must sometimes have been the case, but it should be remembered that military establishments were sometimes placed to police existing Iron Age settlements (as at Leicester) and the discovery of some Iron Age material at Great Casterton raises some doubt even here.

### Character

Our present estimates of size may well be in need of considerable revision. Recent work at Medbourne and Goadby Marwood, for example, has shown them to be bigger than previously known, while at High Cross the site has proved to be smaller. More work is clearly needed.

Defences indicate official interest in some of the settlements. The large investment in town defences at Leicester is not surprising but why Great Casterton should be singled out for town walls is more problematic. The small enclosures on Watling Street are quite different in character, defending only a tiny area within the settlement. These have been termed *burgi* by Graham Webster (1974) but resemble nothing more than secure lorry parks for traffic along the Watling Street. It may be that the series of sites along Ermine Street is an earlier, and more ambitious, version of the same thing or was designed to act as a backstop to the coastal defences.

### Industry, coins and buildings

Bearing in mind the relatively small amount of work undertaken at many of these sites, it is remarkable that virtually all produce evidence of industry, mostly pottery making and iron working, but also glass making (Mancetter), tile making (Ravenstone), bronze working (Great Casterton) and leather working, indicated by metal punches (Goadby Marwood). Commercial activity is surely indicated by the huge numbers of coins produced by these sites (literally thousands are known from some of the better documented ones). The strip buildings known at many of the sites probably fall into the same sort of context, being best interpreted as, for

the most part, craft workshops. Only Thistleton, so far, has produced a temple although others will probably come to light (the site at Red Hill, Ratcliffe-on-Soar, just over the border in Nottinghamshire seems to be a small town around a temple complex). Willoughby's Roman name, *Vernemetum* (meaning Great Sacred Grove) clearly implies a religious dimension at this site.

There are few high status buildings within the settlements. Only Great Casterton has a well documented example – what sounds like a bath-house immediately inside the south gate – but a tessellated floor was seen in road building at High Cross in 1957 while Stukeley's tessellated pavements at Willoughby/Wymeswold could also be relevant. A stone building within the Medbourne town site may be another example. Each could be related to a *mansio*, although the most convincing example is the building on the edge of Cave's Inn excavated by Jack Lucas. The building at Saddlers Cottage, Medbourne, which is close to, but outside, the town, seems to be a genuinely high status ('villa-type') complex. Malcolm Todd (1973, 69) has noted the close relationship between villas and many of these settlements and has suggested that they may be peasant agricultural villages for workers on the villa estate. As indicated above I do not accept the conclusion and yet a relationship does appear to exist with many 'villas' within a few hundred metres. An alternative explanation is widely accepted to explain the creation of markets in the Middle Saxon period, which was also a period of transition between an economy embedded in social relations and a (partial) money economy. It is argued that markets were created close to estate centres where renders in kind (ale, bread, grain etc) which were originally consumed by peripatetic royal/noble households, could be sold off as a centralising society made their original function redundant. In this model the 'villas' would be the estate centres and the 'small towns' the markets. A market of this sort could then attract craftsmen. I would not put this forward as a complete explanation for the creation of small towns in the 1st century AD, but it is a model worth considering for at least some of these sites. Clearly, if this model were correct, the 'villas' would need to be earlier than the 'towns'. Only a very few have had even limited excavation. The Medbourne and Thistleton villas both have evidence of Iron Age occupation, although at neither has excavation been extensive enough to suggest whether this is likely to have been high status. At Great Casterton all the excavated buildings were late 3rd/early 4th century or later. However, there are indications that the excavated area lies on the southern fringe of a larger complex and the northern area produced significantly earlier material. No other site produces even this limited information.

Clearly, more work is needed at most of the sites mentioned here. Work at Medbourne, where the town site is being sampled and a large slice of the surrounding landscape is being fieldwalked, offers the best chance in Leicestershire of understanding a small town in the context of its surrounding landscape.

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