

## The Fields of Britannia, update

The 'Fields of Britannia' project (introduced to the Society in Newsletter 45) aims to explore the transition from Roman Britain to medieval England and Wales from a broad landscape perspective, reaching beyond the traditional site-based approach that is biased towards high-status landscapes of Roman Britain and the Germanic culture of early medieval England. One of the most distinctive features of the British landscape today is its intricate pattern of fields. Archaeological and historical research has shown that in many areas the field systems of today were largely in existence by the late medieval period, but when and how these fields came into being is less clear. The 'Fields of Britannia' project is using wide a range of techniques to explore systematically for the first time how far the rural landscape of Roman Britain survived into the medieval period and so shapes the character of our modern countryside. This will form an important and innovative contribution to the current debate over one of the major formative periods in British history: the nature of the transition from Roman Britain to medieval England.

### Regions and pays

Traditional approaches to the subdivision of Roman Britain have been restrained and mainly two-fold, with upland/lowland, native/villa and civilian/military being typical. The definition of medieval landscape character areas has been more comprehensive, considering settlement types, field patterns and physical conditions. The 'Fields of Britannia' project has divided the landscape of Britain into a series of nine regions based on common physical but also cultural characteristics of both the Roman and medieval periods: South East and Central Southern England (south of the chalk escarpment that runs from Dorset, through the Chilterns, to East Anglia); East Anglia; the Central Zone; the South West; the lowlands of South Wales; the lowlands of western England; the lowlands of North East England; upland Wales; and the uplands of northern England. The Central Zone, for example, is characterised by its fertile lowland topography, relatively Romanised landscape, and a reorganisation of the countryside in the late 1st millennium AD that saw the creation of villages and open fields. The South West, in contrast, has a mix of upland and lowland topographies, a relatively un-Romanised landscape, and a medieval countryside characterised by mostly dispersed settlement patterns and predominantly enclosed field systems (with only limited open field). We recognise, however, that there is also variation within regions and, adopting the concept of pays – the complex interplay of cultural and physical facets of landscape character – have further subdivided the countryside within our nine regions to achieve a local understanding of landscape development.

### Environment and economy

Palaeoenvironmental data has been collected through a search of published material and unpublished 'grey literature' in order to reconstruct both broad landscape character and local land-use across the Roman and early medieval periods in each of the nine regions. Previous

attempts to collate environmental data, principally pollen, have been biased towards upland landscapes, but there is now a considerable body of radiocarbon-dated sequences from lowland areas, many resulting from development-led investigations since the introduction of PPG16 in the 1990s.

At the broadest scale, the data suggests widespread continuity of open landscapes across lowland areas, particularly in the 'East Anglia' and 'Central' regions: while there was some decrease in the intensity of agriculture in certain areas, which compliments archaeological evidence for the contraction of individual settlements, the landscape remained open. There was no extensive desertion, and not a single pays shows a significant regeneration of woodland. Areas that in the medieval period were well wooded – such as the Weald, New Forest and Forest of Dean – were also well wooded in the Roman period (these were not post-Roman woodland regenerations). In upland areas, there was a greater degree of discontinuity, suggesting that traditional models of a 'retreat from the margins' still hold true.

### Field systems

Analysis of the juxtaposition between late Romano-British and medieval field systems is ongoing, but data has been fully collected and analysed for the four principal lowland regions: South East and Central Southern England, East Anglia, the Central Zone, and the Western Lowlands. Whilst being judicious in excluding Roman boundary features whose dating may suggest that they were abandoned before the 4th century, over 500 sites have currently been identified. As we are seeking to explore the extent to which Romano-British landscapes survived into the medieval period, those sites that fall within historic countryside characterised by post-medieval Parliamentary enclosure (about 150 of the total of 500), have been excluded from statistical analysis.

Across each of the regions examined so far (all lowland) there is an unexpectedly high degree of potential continuity between Romano-British and medieval field systems. At Saxons Lode Farm, on the Worcester Plain (Western Lowlands region), for example, excavated Roman and 'Anglo-Saxon' boundaries share a common orientation with elements of a common field system now fossilized as field boundaries within the historic landscape as mapped in the 19th century (see Fig 1). In the Western Lowlands region as a whole, at least 57% of Roman boundaries share a common orientation or alignment with the later historic landscape in this way, rising to 66% in the South East and Central Southern regions. Analysis at the pays scale is illuminating, and has revealed the extent of local variation in landscape history. In the Vale of Gloucester pays, for example, 79% of Roman boundaries set within areas of former common field appear to have influenced the general orientation or specific alignment of medieval fields or furlong boundaries, although in the Vale of Evesham – an adjacent pays – this drops to only 40%. Mapped across the regions studied so far, there is a marked decrease on potential continuity from the South East, across the central Zone and into the Western Lowlands (Fig 2).



## Settlement patterns

The relationship between Roman-British and early medieval settlement patterns has been examined in three county-based case-studies (Norfolk, Somerset and Kent), principally through the use of online Historic Environment Records. The major research aim has been to systematically assess the spatial relationship between Romano-British settlements in different pays with the nearest early medieval occupation and Domesday manors and parish churches. Whilst finer analysis of the results is still in progress, a degree of settlement contraction in the early medieval period is evidenced across all pays, although it is far greater in some compared to others. In Norfolk, for example, which has the benefit of a continuous ceramic sequence, on the acid loamy soils of the West Norfolk Lowland 56% of Romano-British settlements have evidence for 5th to 7th century occupation within 500m, whereas on the heavy clay soils of the Boulder Clay Plateau the figure is just 35%. Across the shallow, calcareous, soils of the Chalk Escarpment the figure is lower still, at 31%. Unfortunately, large parts of Roman Britain became aceramic in the early medieval period, and in order to assess the potential degree of settlement continuity in these areas, all that can be done is to compare the distribution of Romano-British settlements with the

location of parish churches and Domesday villas. Once again, however, there are very clear differences emerging between different areas. On the clay soils of the Mid Somerset Lowlands, for example, 27% of Domesday manors and 25% of parish churches have evidence for Romano-British occupation within 500m, whereas on the calcareous soils of the Limestone Scarp the figures are just 23% and 19% respectively.

Once completed, the results of the project will be published by Oxford University Press in a book titled *The Fields of Britannia: regional landscapes in transition AD 400-1000* (to be published in 2013-14).

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[http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/title\\_84580\\_en.html](http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/title_84580_en.html)

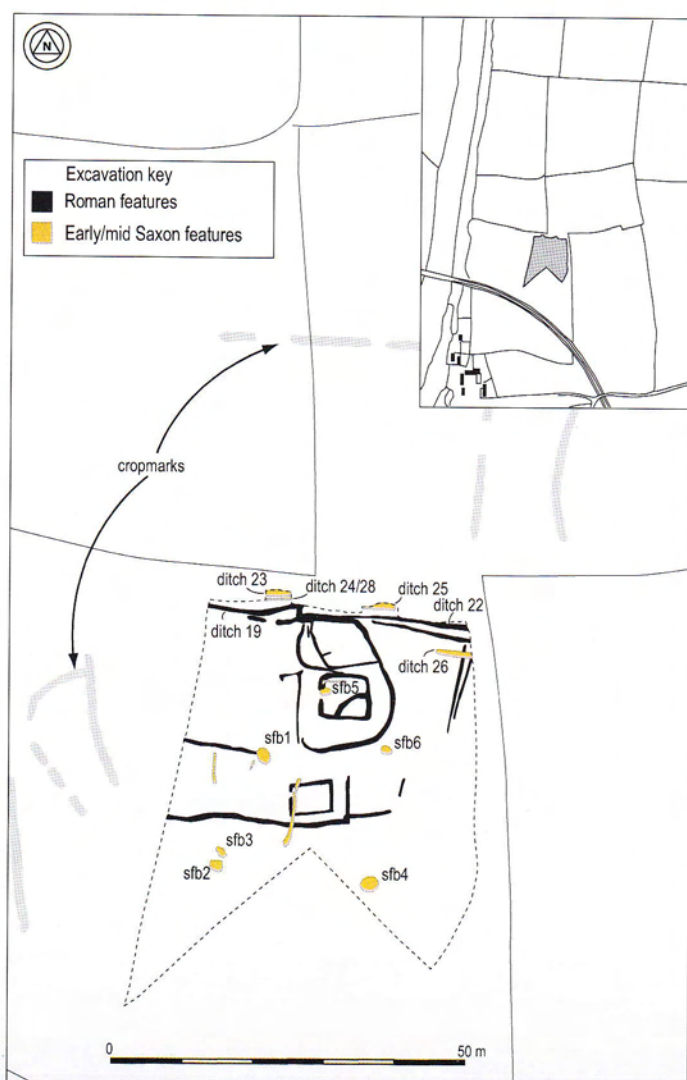


FIG 1. Cropmarks and results of excavation at Saxon's Lode Farm in the Worcester Plain pays of the Western Lowlands region, overlain on First Edition 6" mapping (redrawn). Roman and early/mid Saxon boundary features share a common orientation, which is also fossilised within the pattern of enclosed common field strips in the historic landscape. The presence of sunken-featured buildings suggests that there may be continuity of occupation after the end of the Roman period (after Barber, A and Watts, M 2008, 'Excavations at Saxon's Lode Farm, Ripple, 2001-2: Iron Age, Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon Rural Settlement in the Severn Valley', Trans. Worcestershire Archaeological Society 21: 1-90, figs 3, 13, 19).

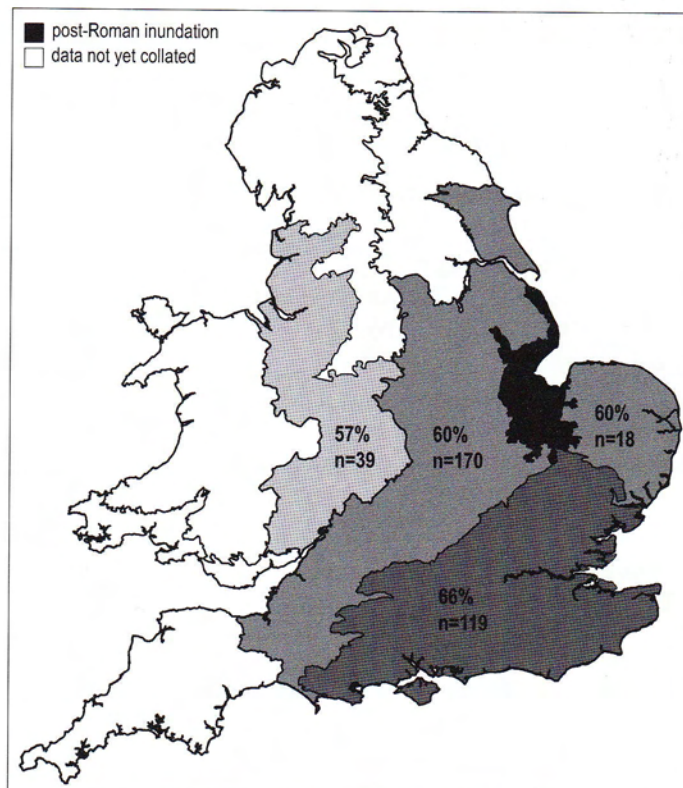


FIG 2. The proportion of excavated late Roman boundaries whose alignment or orientation is reflected in the medieval field pattern across four of the 'Fields of Britannia' regions: Western Lowlands, Central Zone, East Anglia, South-East and Central Southern Britain.