

THE ARRIVAL OF THE ROMANS: THE CHANGING FACE OF WESSEX

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The extensive excavations undertaken by Prof. Sir Barry Cunliffe at the Danebury Hill Fort and environs contribute hugely to our knowledge of the archaeology of the region. Objects from these excavations are held at Chilcomb House, where they are constantly used for research and some are exhibited at constituent museums around the county.

The earliest defensive settlements were built on hill tops, which were supplied from farms on the lowlands which grew cereal crops and raised animals. Some hillforts appear to have had different purposes. At Bury Hill quantities of horse bones and ornaments were discovered. Horses were important to the elite Iron Age society and were depicted on coins and ornaments. Religion and ritual also played a significant part in Iron Age life. Excavations yielded evidence of ritual killings. Caesar describes the Wicker Man, and the cult of heads was known in the Celtic world, with carvings of severed heads and skulls being discovered. Kay had visited caves in Cividale del Friuli, in Italy which contained extensive carvings of heads in the rocks and was believed to be a Celtic shrine.

Some Iron Age Chiefs were very wealthy. Large quantities of gold jewellery have been discovered which attest to this. Their wealth probably came from defeating other tribal kingdoms and selling slaves and surplus crops. The Snettisham torcs are a good example of how wealthy they were. The Winchester Hoard, dated to 50BC, was made in Syria. Could this have been a gift from Caesar to a local chief?

Hengistbury Head, excavated by Barry Cunliffe, was an important trading port for the import of goods from the Mediterranean – oil, wine etc., and the export of slaves and metal. It even had its own Mint.

Danebury Hill Fort was attacked around 100BC and this signalled the start of the decline of hill forts and the growth of lowland settlements.

As Caesar attacked the Gauls, the chiefs moved over the Channel and settled in the South of England. Comminus founded Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester) on the site of an Iron Age settlement. In 55BC, Caesar used this as one of the reasons to launch an attack on Britain.

Once the army had defeated the resisting tribes the "Romanisation" of the rest of the country began. Towns such as Colchester, Chichester and Winchester were founded and a network of roads linking them to smaller settlements was established. The network of Roman roads and supply routes was essential to the spread of Roman influence. Smaller towns such as Neatham and Fareham grew up, together with settlements, farmsteads and numerous villas. The villas ranged from the modest to the palatial residence at Fishbourne.

Industries flourished in the region with potteries established in the New Forest, Wickham, Poole and Alice Holt. Iron production was widespread.

Houghton Down, which shows evidence of 1200 years of occupation, provides an interesting example of the adaptation of Iron Age sites by the Romans. The site flourished from 800 – 270 BC. In the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC the occupants disappeared. However, in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD the site was developed as a modest farm, producing cereal crops and malting. By the late 2nd and in the 3rd century masonry structures were built on the site, including a huge aisled hall and two strip houses.

By the 3rd century trouble loomed. Walls were built around Roman towns, frontiers were under pressure and the area of the Roman Empire was reducing. In an attempt to halt the decline the Channel was cleared of pirates and forts built along the coast. A key fort on the Solent shore was at Portchester.

It is from this period that a number of coin hoards can be dated. The elite classes abandoned the towns and retreated to their villas, so the towns declined.

In 409 the Emperor Honorius notified the British cities that they could not rely on Rome for reinforcements against tribal incursions. This signalled the end of Roman rule in Britain.

Britain had changed greatly during the Roman period compared with the Iron Age; it was to change yet again in the 5th century with the arrival of the new rulers, the Anglo-Saxons.

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