Chapter 1
The Nene Valley in Prehistoric and Roman Times

Introduction - The Early Archaeologists

To understand the beginnings of human settlement around our villages we must look beyond the five parishes to the wider landscape of the Nene river valley, from the woodlands West of Wansford to where the river joins the edge of the fens East of present-day Peterborough, and from the limestone hills to the North between Upton and Marholm to the lower ground South of the river in the parishes of Water Newton and Chesterton.

This stretch of the lower Nene valley has long been known for its ancient history. Antiquarians such as Camden in the 16th century and Stukeley in the 18th, described Roman remains in the area and were aware of the existence of a Roman town South of the Nene and a Roman settlement under Castor village itself. However it is the local figure, Edmund Tyrell Artis (1789-1847), who has emerged as one of the leading early British archaeologists and who first made a comprehensive study of the landscape around Castor, revealing its true importance. Artis was a talented individual, interested in natural history and geology, an accomplished artist as well as an antiquarian, but his true passion was archaeology. He was steward to Earl Fitzwilliam at Milton and between 1820 and 1828 was able to excavate sites extensively and systematically within Castor and the surrounding area. Unlike many of his contemporaries, whose main interest was in searching for ancient treasures for private collections, he measured and recorded his discoveries carefully. Artis also attempted to place this information within the wider landscape, observing how the various elements, settlements, roads, industry and temples may have related to each other, thus attempting to understand Roman society as a whole.

Artis’s major work was *The Durobrivae of Antoninus* (1828) [1], a volume of beautifully engraved plates of his excavations, illustrating the buildings, mosaic floors and many other artefacts he had discovered.

Fig 1a. A plate from ‘The Durobrivae of Antoninus’ showing ET Artis supervising his labourers excavating a Roman kiln in ‘Normanton Field Castor’
Unfortunately there is no text because Artis died in 1847 before the proposed accompanying volume could appear, and his notebooks did not survive. To this day ‘Durobrivae’ remains an important starting point for any local historian. Artis is buried in Castor churchyard, close to the ‘antiquities’ he worked so hard to uncover.

Our understanding of the Roman period has continued to develop through the work of many archaeologists. In the early 1970s there was much concern that Castor and its environs, including many unrecorded historical sites, would be swallowed up by the development of one of Peterborough’s new townships. The planned township was not built, but the Nene Valley Research Committee was responsible for much useful work at this time, published in its journal *Durobrivae*. There have since been a number of investigations in Castor and beyond, mainly as a result of small scale developments, resulting in some important new finds and very interesting published work, all of which have added to our knowledge. For example, in advance of proposed building work, archaeological investigations involving an electric resistance survey and test pitting, located a hitherto unknown Roman building range beneath Castor School playing fields in 2000 [2]. New and developing techniques, such as geophysical surveys, and well established techniques, such as aerial photography, have revealed new sites and settlements but it is sobering to reflect how little we still know about these early periods of our history and how threatened is much of the remaining evidence by modern agricultural methods and continuing rural and urban development.

**Before the Romans**

There is considerable evidence of early human occupation in the valley from the flint artefacts of the Neolithic period (c.4000 BC to 2200BC) to the Bronze Age (c.2500BC to 700BC) weapons and tools found at Upton and the important Bronze Age site at Flag Fen. This site of national importance has been reconstructed to give an insight into life in the Bronze Age. A significant Bronze Age ‘Beaker’ burial at Barnack included rich grave goods and there have been many finds of early pottery.

The introduction of iron, a stronger and more hard-wearing material than the the copper alloys used in the Bronze Age, brought radical changes. Iron Age people (800 BC to AD43) were able to work the land more intensively because their ploughs could cope with heavier soils. Their settlements were larger and more numerous. Aerial photography shows there were many settlements of timber-built thatched round dwellings all over this area.

---

*Fig 1b. A modern reconstruction of a Bronze or Iron Age roundhouse from Flag Fen typical of many that must have stood in the Nene Valley (Peterborough Museum)*
They were surrounded by small fields and paddocks, often protected by ditches. Such open settlements used mixed farming methods, relying heavily on livestock such as cows and sheep. The gravel terraces of the lower valley provided fertile soils for arable farming. Surplus grain could be stored in large jars or pits for winter consumption or for trade. Such houses and field systems have been excavated at Lynch Farm at Orton [3], but there is further evidence of these round house enclosures in all our parishes, including areas later developed in the Roman period. There are fewer settlements enclosed by protective earthworks, although a large, near-circular, earthwork and two ditch circuits and banks survive at Borough Fen. Notwithstanding this, most local sites seem to have been undefended. The Lynch Farm site sits within a meander of the river on three sides and is protected by a series of straight deep ditches on the other. The major threat may well have been cattle rustling rather than full-scale tribal warfare.

Britain in the late Iron Age was divided into distinct tribal areas or kingdoms. Peterborough lay on the borders of the areas governed by the Catuvellauni to the South, (present day Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire) the Corieltauvi to the North and West (Lincolnshire) and the Iceni to the East (present day East Anglia). There is no evidence of who controlled our immediate area before the Roman invasion but the evidence suggests it formed part of a prosperous and relatively peaceful agricultural landscape.

**Roman Invasion and Settlement**

The coming of the Romans to Britain spelled the end of a dominant native British culture which had lasted for hundreds of years. The four hundred years of Roman rule which followed were not static and the land and its people changed significantly throughout that period. To understand the beginning of the Roman settlement of our area we must understand how the site near Water Newton, just South of the Nene, became the site of a Roman town, later developing important suburbs on both sides of the river.

Julius Caesar first landed in 55 BC on the South coast but did not stay or consolidate his conquest. It was another 98 years before the main Roman invasion of Britain was ordered by the Emperor Claudius in AD 43. He assembled a formidable fighting force of some 40,000 men. The island may have been seen as a rich prize ready to be taken and as an opportunity for Claudius to boost his popularity and prestige by enlarging the Roman Empire. Britain was not unknown to the Romans, who had already established trading links with the Southeast and political links with some of the tribal kingdoms. Thus the Romans could exploit inter-tribal rivalries, so that some tribes accepted the appearance of the conquerors quite readily, while others were bitterly opposed to them. Following a landing on the Kent coast and a major victory over the Britons near the river Medway, the army advanced over the Thames, creating Londinium, and pushed on through present day Essex to Camulodunum, now Colchester, the capital of the Catuvellauni, the dominant tribe of central Southern Britain. Once control had been established the four legions were sent off on divergent paths to conquer the rest of the island. It was Legion IX, named *Hispana*, which pushed Northwards towards present day Lincoln and York, laying down roads and establishing fortified camps as it did so. The main North to South route of Eastern Britain became the Roman road, Ermine Street, and a small fort covering five acres was established on it, South of the River Nene at Water Newton, fortified by a double ditch to defend this important river crossing.

In the early years of the invasion the limits of Roman expansion stretched from the Bristol Channel in the West to the Humber River in the East. Between 1967 and 1971 S Frere and J K St. Joseph excavated the site of a much larger fort covering 27 acres at Longthorpe, now under the golf course [4]. It partly overlaid an earlier native farmstead and included an area outside the defences used for pottery manufacture, presumably to meet the domestic needs of the troops.

The fort itself dated from the early years of

![Fig 1c. An artist’s interpretation of the Roman fortress at Longthorpe, built about AD43 but abandoned about 20 years later (Peterborough Museum)](image)
the invasion (AD 43-65). Evidence of the necessary ditched fortifications, headquarters, barrack buildings and store houses was found. The fort was almost certainly intended to house a substantial garrison, probably four infantry cohorts or half a legion, brigaded with other auxiliary troops, amounting to perhaps two to three thousand men. Their task was to keep watch on the local population and be prepared to move rapidly to quell any trouble that might occur, as it did from the Iceni in the East in AD 48. Tacitus, the Roman historian, describes the major revolt by the Iceni under Queen Boudicca in AD 60 which mounted an enormous challenge to Roman rule. As she besieged Colchester elements of Legion IX advanced Southwards at high speed from their base to relieve the town but were heavily defeated by the Britons, the infantry being slaughtered while the surviving cavalry escaped to their fortified camp. Longthorpe is the most likely site for this camp as it is far closer than the other possible alternatives of Leicester or Lincoln. Evidence from the excavated fort also shows that at some period the perimeter of the fort was substantially reduced. One explanation could be that following his defeat, the commanding officer was taking emergency steps to defend the fort, with a much reduced garrison, against threatened attack. The Iceni rebellion was eventually decisively defeated after a pitched battle in the Midlands. Roman rule was re-established in the region and the fort at Longthorpe seems to have become disused by about AD 65. Its military function was no longer required as the invasion frontier moved North and West.

The Road and River Network

The site of the river crossing near Water Newton continued to grow however, and eventually became the substantial Roman town of Durobrivae. The low mounds that cover the remains of its walls can still be seen, South of the Nene, in a field alongside the busy A1 road. It held a significant strategic position at the junction of Ermine Street and the important route to the Southwest towards Northampton. There may also have been a link with the Fen Causeway, a system of roads, causeways and canals running across the wetlands to the East. Originally this would have had a military purpose, changing over time to a communication and trade route as the fens became an important area for agriculture as well as the extraction of salt. The road network would have been built by the army and then maintained by local officials. Sections across Ermine Street to the South of Ailsworth have shown that it was re-surfaced many times.

A good communication system was essential for economic growth, enabling goods, information and people to travel swiftly by horsedrawn cart or on horseback to and from London, Leicester (then called Ratae Corieltavorum), or Lincoln (Lindum Colonia). At the river crossing at Durobrivae a bridge was built, with stone piers but with timber upper works. The piers survived until the river was dredged in 1925. For a fuller description of the Roman road transport system see Chapter 2.

Fig 1d. A map of the Nene Valley showing the major Roman sites that have been identified.
River transport was also of great importance. It was far cheaper to move heavy freight by river than by road and the Nene and other waterways provided important links with the Wash and the East coast. The river would have been used to bring agricultural produce from the fenlands in addition to raw materials, such as iron ore and wood for fuel, to the town. Water transport would also be the principal means of exporting pottery and other manufactured products. The Car Dyke, an artificial waterway to the East of Peterborough, was constructed along the edge of the fenlands, although its exact purpose is still disputed. It may have carried freight, but the primary characteristic of a canal is that it should have a level bed and be continuous, whilst the Car Dyke is neither of these. It may, more possibly, have been intended to drain the low lying fenland and increase the amount of land available for agriculture. A more detailed account of the important role of the River Nene in our history is given in Chapter 24.

The Town of Durobrivae

Two classical texts, the *Antonine Itinerary* and the *Ravenna Cosmography*, list the towns and cities of the Roman province. Among them is Durobrivae, literally meaning ‘fort by the bridge’. Its identity has been confirmed by the evidence of two pieces of pottery found in this area, a fragment of *mortarium* or mixing bowl stamped with the words *Cunoaros fecit/Vico Durorivis* (made by Cunoaros at the Vicus of Durobrivae) and another signed *Sennianus DurobrivaeVrit* (Sennianus fired this at Durobrivae) thus also naming two of the town’s inhabitants. As the army garrisons were withdrawn to the North and West to continue the conquest of more troublesome areas and tribes, so the settlement outside the fort next to the river crossing grew. A settlement associated with a military fort is called a *vicus* and would usually have sprung up initially to meet the needs of the garrison. It is generally agreed that many of the local British found Roman ways to their liking and readily adopted a Roman lifestyle, which influenced the clothes they wore, the food they ate, the goods they produced and, of course, the language they spoke. Camp followers, commercial traders, shop keepers and craftsmen of all kinds will have been drawn to the area, with shops and houses spreading along Ermine Street and a network of side streets. A civil authority replaced the military and the administration of the town would have been handed over to the new, self-governing community.

The town developed on the slightly higher ground close to the fort and bridge, but away from the immediate floodplain of the river. Because of the work of Don Mackreth of the Nene Valley Research Committee [5] in compiling a plan
based on a remarkable collection of aerial photographs of crop-markings, a considerable amount is known about the
plan of the town and its surrounding area but very little has actually been excavated in modern times, apart from certain
small areas outside the town walls and in the industrial area North of the river. The long line of shops and workshops,
many having frontages onto Ermine Street, developed in an unplanned way and indeed Durobrivae is often cited as an
example of this sort of unplanned growth.

Some time in the 4th century defensive walls were erected around the town centre, backed by a clay bank and protected
by a ditch. The enclosed area is roughly hexagonal in shape due to the need to enclose an area that was already
developed and covers about 44 acres in total. Three gates can be seen, two on Ermine Street and a third on a road
leading towards Northampton to the Southwest. The defences were strengthened by square towers or bastions on at
least two sides of the town, possibly added at a later date. A flood bank on the Northeast side, near the river, may have
been a bypass road. There will also have been wharves and warehouses fronting the river itself. Inside the walls Ermine
Street forms the main axis but narrow lanes leading from it divide the walled area into irregular plots of land. These
plots or insulae may have contained a complex pattern of closely-packed stone and timbered buildings. Many of these
were on narrow frontages with shop fronts on the road and workshops and living quarters behind for the craftsmen and
their families. There is evidence of regular rebuilding of these structures, indicating that the town was a thriving
community over a considerable period. Inside the town there is evidence of a number of courtyard buildings which are
likely to have had specialized functions. A large courtyard building lay at an angle to the main street, its layout
suggesting that it was a mansio, a government staging post or inn for travelling officials and couriers. The other large
building that fronts Ermine Street has a precinct or yard, containing what may be three temple structures. If so, the
building may have served these roadside shrines or have been the headquarters for a local religious cult. Within the
town few of the individual buildings had garden plots behind indicating their occupants were dependent on specialized
trades or farmed lands elsewhere. Craftsmen such as bronze, gold and silver smiths, carpenters and joiners, shoemakers
and leather workers, and many others will have lived in Durobrivae. None of these trades leave much evidence of their
existence unlike the heavy industries of pottery and iron-working outside the town. In the Southeastern corner of the
town there are signs of larger and more substantial dwellings at the end of short side lanes. These are likely to have
been the houses of the town’s wealthier inhabitants. Artis did some excavation here, noting some dwellings with
Alwalton ‘marble’ (a polished limestone) on their walls.

Determining the actual status of the town has always been problematic. It obviously enjoyed some degree of self
government but the sheer size of the town, together with its extensive suburbs and industrial area, sets it apart from
many of the other ‘small towns’ of Roman Britain [6]. A milestone was found nearby in 1785, originally erected in
AD276 and stating that it stood one mile from its original point of measurement. It is usually accepted that such
milestones were measured from Civitas capitals, towns serving as centres of regional tribal government, suggesting the
town had been promoted to this rank towards the end of the 3rd century. This may reflect the town’s growing size and
commercial importance and fits with the apparent evidence of some high status buildings and private dwellings within
the walls. If it was a civitas it would have governed a surrounding area, possibly extending as far Southwards as Sawtry
and Southwest to Thrapston.

**Industry and the Suburbs**

The characteristic which sets Durobrivae apart from other Roman towns is the sheer scale of the industrial area which
surrounds it, both to the West and South, and North over the bridge along Ermine Street in what has been traditionally
known as the Normangate Field. This area now sits on either side of the fields bordering Station Road in Ailsworth,
separated from the site of the enclosed part of Durobrivae by the Nene Valley Railway. Despite its current appearance
as peaceful farmland, this was once one of the largest known industrial areas in the whole of Roman Britain (see colour
plate section). The suburbs seem to have developed extensively prior to the building of the town walls. Early
occupation appears to have been concentrated along Ermine Street and other side roads, suggesting a haphazard,
‘ribbon development’. However the presence of some very regular plots at the North end of Normangate Field, which
have been dated to the early 2nd century, along with similar plots to the South of the town, suggests that land
distribution was regulated and under official control. Those plots on prime sites close to Ermine Street show the
clearest evidence of industrial use, with buildings, workshops, kilns and furnaces becoming more densely crowded as
time went on. The suburbs continued to flourish, reaching furthest in the 4th century when they covered at least 250
acres.

It is clear that the pottery industry was a major factor in this expansion. In the Roman world pottery vessels were
widely used for food storage and preparation as well as tableware. At first the Roman garrisons would have used
locally-produced wares, in the form of calcite-gritted pots and storage jars, along with much finer continental imports. However the excavations of the Longthorpe fort suggest the garrison soon began to manufacture its own tableware and cooking pots of a much better quality, fired in a battery of kilns to the Southeast of the fort. These kilns were in use around AD 50-65 and were probably operated by potters brought specially from the Rhineland. After they fell into disuse it is only in the second quarter of the 2nd century that a new style of local pottery started to appear, fired in kilns to the West of Durobrivae, over two miles from Longthorpe. In places these overlay the old fort next to the river, indicating that it was now disused.

This new pottery was the colour-coated ware which was later found in such quantities locally that Artis called it Castorware. It is now more usually known as Nene Valley ware and is one of the best known types of Romano-British pottery. The skills to make it may again have been imported from the Continent but were quickly mastered by local craftsmen. Numerous kilns have also been found in Normangate Field itself. Several local designs became famous, including ‘Hunt cups’ which were beakers depicting hunting scenes, and others with a scroll design. A wide range of different vessels were produced including dishes, jars, bowls, flagons and jugs. This high-quality tableware has been found throughout the country and was exported further afield to other parts of the Roman Empire [7](see colour plate section). For more local markets, including the fenland area, a coarser greyware was developed, producing cheaper utensils. The industry grew rapidly to meet increasing demand and in the 3rd century the potters introduced an imitation of the high quality Samian ware whose import had ceased. The quality of the local product is, however, very noticeably inferior to the original.

The industry was partially dependent on river transport to bring in the raw materials and fuel (probably charcoal) for the kilns, and to distribute the finished products. Middlemen, known as negotiatores, would have purchased in bulk and taken the wares to more distant markets. In the 3rd century, potteries were also established at Stanground, Sibson and Stibbington, possibly more conveniently located with respect to the markets and raw materials; certainly the number of working kilns in the Normangate area seems to have declined around this time.

It was not only pots that were needed however. Artis discovered evidence of iron ore and iron smelting in the Bedford Purlieus and Old Sulehay forest to the West of Wansford, and there is more recent evidence of intensive metalworking at Sacrewell. In 1969 a large ailed building containing over twenty furnaces was excavated in Normangate Field. The furnaces resembled others found at nearby sites, such as Lady Lodge farm at Orton Longueville, and can be identified as smithing furnaces. The lack of metalworking debris suggests the iron ore was first roasted, then iron was smelted in Bedford Purlieus and Old Sulehay forest and the iron blooms transported to the workshops at Normangate and elsewhere to be forged into the finished tools and implements. Smaller furnaces have been found on the sites of several local farms, suggesting that farm implements and other articles were repaired, and perhaps even manufactured, on site.

Neither was iron the only metal worked. A single crucible with an attached droplet of bronze discovered in Normangate Field indicates the presence of a small bronze industry, and other finds such as a goldsmith’s weighing scales show the precious metals trade may also have been present. One find made by Artis was a coin mould obviously used by a forger, indicating that not all trade was legitimate, even in Roman Britain! It has also been argued, largely on stylistic grounds, that a group of artist-artisans making mosaics was established within the town itself in the latter part of the 4th century. Artis claimed to have found a possible workshop for the mosaicists. Certain common mosaic designs have

---

Fig 1f. Another engraving from Artis’s ‘Durobrivae’ showing the construction of a kiln he had excavated.
been found across the wider region, but the only buildings in the immediate locality with mosaic floors of similar design are the high status villa on Mill Hill and the *praetorium* on Church Hill (see colour plate section).

**Agriculture**

Despite the existence of a thriving market town with its industrial outskirts, the majority of the population will have lived off the land, and the prosperity of the town will have depended on that of the farming community around it. The pattern of agriculture in the Iron Age will still have been common in the early years of Roman rule since the outlines of many small farms and settlements, with ditched fields, farm yards and enclosures for stock can be seen on aerial photographs of much of the Nene valley. The towns drew on the produce of farms from a wide area to feed their populations. Mixed arable and livestock farming would have been needed to supply the demand for meat, dairy products and cereals, as well as hides and wool.

These native-type settlements are much more common in the Welland valley than in that of the Nene, where it is possible that the Roman garrisons may have taken over the land to produce food for themselves, or that large villa estates were established at an early date, replacing the smaller farms. Another theory is that local native farmers could have been evicted from the area and encouraged to settle newly drained land at the fen edge, in which case we might well have expected to see the cropmarks of their abandoned settlements. The possibility cannot be excluded that the more prosperous local tribesmen may themselves have adopted Roman villa building styles and farming practices at an early date. What is certain is that a network of substantial Roman-style stone villas with courtyards and outlying farm buildings was established close to Durobrivae.

There is evidence of five villa locations within two miles of Durobrivae. Artis identified the site of a large courtyard villa on Mill Hill with signs of a tesselated floor and painted walls, both indications of substantial wealth. There are two in Ailsworth parish on the banks of the Nene only 600 metres apart, the more Easterly of which shows evidence of large enclosures which could have been vegetable gardens or stock enclosures. Both of these buildings would have enjoyed fine river frontages and had water meadows. The estates belonging to these villas are likely to have stretched Northwards towards the higher ground above Ailsworth and Sutton where the clay uplands may have been used for pasture. Roman agricultural methods were sophisticated and local farmers would have exploited the natural resources to the full. They are likely to have farmed cattle, sheep and pigs as well as wheat and barley, rotating their crops with beet

![Fig 1g. Artis’s plate showing the remains of a substantial villa at Mill Hill Castor. The engraving shows a view towards the Nene, Durobrivae and Sutton and Normangate fields.](image-url)
to enrich the soil. A stone structure excavated at Hall Farm in Orton Longueville has been shown to be a corn dryer. Grain was roasted on a stone floor, heated from below, so that it could be stored and preserved. At the Lynch Farm site in what is now Ferry Meadows, evidence of fish farming has been found. There are similar villa sites to the West and South of the town, some on the other side of the present A1 road as well as evidence of other Roman sites at Marholm, near Burmer Wood, and at Top Lodge Farm, Upton. More such sites might have been expected, but it is possible that land to the Northwest of the town, around Ailsworth, could have been managed woodland, providing fuel for the town and for the kilns and furnaces on Normangate Field.

The town may also have been supplied with produce from a much wider area. It is known that farmers started to colonize the rich silt soils of the fens in the 1st century and finds of Durobrivae pottery in that area indicate the fenlands were also a market for the town. Boats carrying the pottery downstream could easily have returned laden with agricultural produce. There have been few possible sites of villas found within the fens, despite the area’s obvious importance for food production. One explanation is that the fens were a large imperial estate with small communities of local tenants, but without a wealthy landowning class who would have benefited from the profits from the markets further inland. Extensive settlements and field systems were constructed on the numerous low islands, many perched on the exposed banks of prehistoric rivers no longer existing today. Salt was extracted from the tidal rivers which still ran far inland. The Car Dyke might then also have served as a distinct boundary to this productive area. Durobrivae is the closest substantial Roman town to the edge of the fens, with good road and river links to the East. The town may well have been the economic centre for the fens, providing the necessary administration as well as acting as a depot from which produce could be sent further afield. If the town did serve such a purpose it might explain the anomaly between its size and apparent status, as well as providing a possible explanation for the impressive praetorium building in Castor village as the residence of a local imperial official [8].

Religion

Roman official religious policy, especially before Christianity became the state religion of the Empire, was one of complete tolerance of personal religious belief and practice, subject only to an individual willingness to undertake additionally the formal observances addressed to the state gods representing the guardianship and spirit of the Empire. Any individual could address a particular chosen deity, who might be the guardian of the house or family, the spirit of a particular place, or have certain powers or characteristics needed by the supplicant, or might even simply be favoured by that person. Only Jews, and later Christians, insisted there was only one true god and that all others were false. The classical Roman gods were naturally popular, as was the worship of deceased emperors. However, many gods were rooted in local native traditions, often connected with features such as springs, rivers or lakes, themselves thought to be sacred. Many of these divinities were Celtic in origin and pre-dated the Roman period. It had been the custom in Bronze and Iron Age Britain to make votive offerings to these gods by depositing weapons or jewellery in the water at such places. Evidence of this practice has been found at the site of the Fengate power station and the old river bed at Orton Longueville. Sometimes the names of local deities became linked with Roman ones, suggesting they had common characteristics. The native god, Camulos, for example, is often paired with Mars the Roman god of war, whilst the surviving temple at the hot springs at Bath was dedicated to Sulis-Minerva, a composite of Sulis, a native deity, and Minerva, the classical patron goddess of arts and handicrafts. The capacity of Roman religious beliefs to accommodate existing gods may have been one reason for the acceptance of Roman ways by so many of the native population.

There was a variety of places of worship for these many divinities, sometimes in large temples, often in roadside shrines, in temples within certain precincts within towns, or within private houses and villas in the countryside. The typical Romano-British temple contained a small central shrine or cella surrounded by an ambulatory or walk-way and often facing East or Southeast. There might have been an apse that would contain a statue of the god or goddess, or an altar suggesting offerings or sacrifice. There are local examples of several of these. The excavation at Lynch Farm uncovered what was thought to be a small Romano-Celtic temple within the farm itself [9]. In Normangate Field a potter’s workshop within the industrial area seems to have been converted to religious use with an apse added for a religious statue. Within Durobrivae there seems to have been a precinct attached to one of the major buildings that contains the outline of three possible shrines, one at least having an ambulatory around it. During excavation of a gas pipeline in 1998, two small temples or shrines were found on either side of Ermine Street Southwest of Ailsworth at which must have been the edge of the industrial suburbs. We can easily imagine travellers making offerings as they started a long journey, or giving thanks for the completion of their journey as they approached the town. Artis also records the discovery of two statues in a stone quarry at Sibson, one of Minerva, and the other of Hercules. There is thus ample evidence that a wide range of pagan divinities were worshipped in the locality.
The most remarkable find of religious significance near Durobrivae is neither Celtic nor classical but Christian. It is established that Christianity took root in Britain, probably some time in the 3rd century, even before the emperor Constantine I made it the official religion of the Empire, in around AD 312. Christians had been persecuted intermittently since the 1st century and the martyrdom of St Alban in the 3rd century in Britain is evidence of the conflict and struggle between the pagan adherents of the old gods and the followers of the new religion. It is not surprising that those who upheld the polytheism of the old ways should have felt threatened by Christianity’s rejection of all other gods and its allegiance to a single ultimate divine authority. The Church must have prospered however, at least in some places and for some sections of society, because it is recorded that Christian delegations from the four provinces of Britain, three of them led by bishops, attended the Council of Arles in AD 314.

There is evidence of Christian communities in Colchester, London and York and they must also have existed elsewhere. Mosaics and wall-paintings depicting Christian symbols and figures have been found at several villa sites in Southern Britain. A large lead tank, almost certainly used for baptisms and decorated with Christian symbols, was found at Ashton near Oundle. Few people could have anticipated, however, that a relatively insignificant provincial centre like Durobrivae would be the location for the discovery of a Christian treasure of great value. In 1975 a local metal detectorist produced a pottery vessel said to have been found near the banks of the Nene, close to the Durobrivae site. When unpacked it was found to contain a collection of Roman silverware, nearly thirty items, including a dish, cup, bowl, jug, strainer and a number of triangular plaques (see colour plate section). What made the finds so remarkable was not simply their design or age, but the number and nature of symbols engraved upon the various items, including the Greek Chi-Rho as well as the letters Alpha and Omega. These are undoubtedly Christian symbols, widely used in the early Church before the cross was adopted as the universal Christian emblem. The items could clearly have been used as part of the Christian liturgy, possibly for the mass or baptism. This collection has come to be known as the Water Newton Treasure and its discovery attracted enormous attention. The style of the pieces is Byzantine and they have been dated to the late 3rd or early 4th century [10]. The historian, Guy de Bedoyere, describes them as having ‘the most overtly religious tone of any of the major treasures of Roman Britain ’ [11]. An inscription on one of the bowls confirms this interpretation. The bowl bears the name Publianus and the words ‘Sanctum altare tuum Domine subnixus honoro’ meaning ‘I honour your holy altar, O Lord in the name of Christ’. One of the cups is inscribed with the names Innocentia et Viventia, as well as Christian symbols. Possibly these were all members of a Christian community. Yet although the pieces are undoubtedly Christian, some aspects of their design suggest links with a pagan past. Known pagan rituals sometimes involved the use of a wine strainer similar to that in the collection. The triangular plaques also show echoes of pagan origins, despite their Christian inscriptions, as such plaques were often nailed to the outside of temples as dedications or offerings to a particular god or to fulfil a vow. One plaque bears the words ‘Iaemcilla votum quod promisit complevit’, meaning ‘Iaemcila fulfilled the vow she promised’. The treasure may thus indicate some memory and continuation of elements of earlier religious traditions, or the deliberate adoption of some elements of pagan worship which were later to be assimilated into Christian practice.

It is likely the items came from a church of some kind nearby. The word altare can mean ‘sanctuary’ as well as our understanding of the word ‘altar’, but both meanings imply some sort of building which contained a sanctified area. This could have been a building within the town itself or possibly a sanctified area within the large Roman praetorium building at the top of Church Hill in Castor which lies partly under the foundations of St Kyneburgha’s Church. Publianus, Innocentia and Viventia appear to be the earliest recorded names of members of a Christian congregation in England, and that congregation might even have worshipped on the site of the existing church. As to why the treasure was buried, there are a number of possible explanations. It was obviously hidden for safe keeping, possibly by a thief to collect later, or by a group of marauding Saxons who looted it in the 5th century from a church site. The most likely explanation, however, is that it was buried by a priest or by members of a Christian church during the turbulent times towards the end of Roman rule, or during a period of conflict between pagan and Christian communities. Yet despite all that is unknown about its origin or significance, there can be no doubt that the Water Newton silver is of great historical and religious value, the earliest known collection of Christian church silver from the whole Roman Empire and a source of great pride for our local community.

**Castor**

Less than a mile to the Northeast of Normangate Field lies the village of Castor itself. Fragments of Roman pottery, brick and tile have been found around many of its buildings and there are large quantities of Roman building material in the walls of St Kyneburgha’s church. Once again it was Artis who, over a period of several years in the 1820s, uncovered several Roman buildings around the top of Church Hill and Stocks Hill and immediately below the hill, on
the Peterborough Road.

Substantial mortared ‘herringbone’ coursed limestone foundations of Roman buildings can still be seen protruding from the walls on Stocks Hill and Church Hill. These were not humble dwellings, many of the structures having mosaics and tessellated floors, painted wall plaster and heating systems, indicating substantial wealth. One of Artis’s illustrations shows a bath house with a hypocaust, or under-floor heating, under the lane leading up to the church, beside the present day school field. This was a high status building, with its changing room, cold bath, and various heated chambers. Excavations in the lower churchyard by Charles Green and others in the 1980s [12] revealed another bath house building with a hypocaust a little Westward of the gate leading to Castor School playground. This may have been demolished however prior to the erection of the complex already mentioned.

It is the later structures around the crest of Church Hill, however, that are of the greatest interest. Whilst it was first thought they were separate buildings, more recent work by J P Wild [13] and Donald Mackreth [14] has suggested they were a series of rooms or chambers belonging to one large structure, an imposing building with large rooms and an open courtyard flanked by wings projecting down the slope to the Southwest. The view from the top of this prominent location must have been magnificent, a panorama of the valley below with its green fields, the river, the potteries in the busy

Fig 1h. Plan of Castor village showing the remains of Roman buildings around the church. The structures A-H are those so lettered by Artis in ‘Durobrivae’. Foundations confirmed by modern excavation are outlined in solid black (after Mackreth 1995)

Fig 1i. The bath house excavated by Artis that lies beneath the lane leading up to the church. This building is marked ‘G’ in Fig 1h.
suburbs and the town itself. Careful measurement of the levels of the various rooms proved that the building was terraced in relation to the sloping ground and was truly palatial in size. The overall site measures 902ft by 400ft, the left wing having a single room no less than 79ft long and 30ft wide. The building could have stood as much as 63ft high, including the gable and the terrace it stood on. The main chamber on the central terrace cannot have been much smaller. The complex has been dated to around AD 250 and is clearly far more substantial than an ordinary villa. It has been interpreted as being a *palatium* or *praetorium*, the official residence of a Roman dignitary, as yet unidentified. We can only speculate who this may have been. Possibly this may have been the headquarters of a senior military figure, or perhaps a senior civilian official involved with the administration of the town or of an imperial estate on the fens. Small-scale excavations in 1989 by Ian Meadows [15] in the playing fields of the Woodland Leisure Centre uncovered evidence of further high quality buildings flanking the approach to Castor from the South. It is not hard to imagine an avenue of buildings lining a road leading up to the impressive structure on the hill. Once again we are faced with a tantalising set of unanswered questions about an important aspect of our local history.

**The End of Roman Britain**

A traveller from London to York in the 4th century would have passed through a succession of prosperous small towns on his journey, set in flourishing countryside. This tranquillity may have masked the increasing political instability within the Roman Empire and increasing threats to it from outside. A number of rebellions saw political leaders, supported by the army in Britain and Gaul, set themselves up as rival emperors, leading to civil war with the forces of Rome itself. There were also increasing threats from Saxon pirates on the East and Southern coasts of Britain which led...
to the building of a number of forts and the reorganisation of defences under an official entitled ‘Count of the Saxon Shore’. It is hard to say how these factors affected local communities. There is evidence of a real decline in the pottery industry in the later 4th century, but this may not have been a sign of an overall economic decline. The town walls of Durobrivae were strengthened by the building of bastions to carry artillery, probably around AD 370, but the extent of the threat from raiders at that time is uncertain.

There is more certainty about the political changes. No new Roman coins were minted in Britain after AD 407 which would have progressively paralysed the trading economy. The town councils of Britain were told in about AD 408 that they could no longer rely on the Roman army for their defence. The central administration and the few imperial troops remaining in Britain were withdrawn by AD 410, and Rome itself was sacked that same year. There is much debate about the impact of the political break with Rome. Some have suggested there was a sudden descent into chaos and anarchy as society broke down with the end of centralised authority and waves of invasions by Angles, Jutes and Saxons. It is more likely, however, that Roman ways persisted for some time and that there were gradual changes in British society as it adapted to a more local structure and the influence of incomers from across the North Sea. With the withdrawal of the central administration and the army there would have been nobody to maintain law and order for the protection of travellers and neither the finances nor the specialist manpower to maintain the roads and bridges, so that travel would have become progressively more difficult and dangerous. The consequential impact on trade and the economy generally is illustrated by the complete absence of evidence that the industrial production of pottery continued into the early 5th century. In addition the growing scarcity of coinage would inhibit trade, even between adjacent towns.

There is some evidence that farming continued and that a simple local economy was maintained. At Hall Farm, Longthorpe [16], Saxon pottery has been found as well as Roman, indicating that the farm remained occupied during troubled times. Similar finds of early brooches from Woodston and Peterborough suggest that Anglo Saxon settlements may have begun in the Nene valley before AD 500. Durobrivae itself and the praetorium on Castor Hill were most likely abandoned, the buildings left to decay or robbed for their stone, There is evidence however that some structures were re-used, the archaeological investigation ahead of the building of the Cedar Centre showing that the shells of some of the Roman buildings on the site were occupied in the Saxon period [17].

The first recorded historical event of the new era was the arrival of St Kyneburgha soon after AD 654, to found a monastery among the ruined buildings. Even the remains of the Roman structures must have been impressive as the new inhabitants called their settlement Ceaster, an Old English word meaning ‘fortified place’, from which the modern name of Castor is derived. In time, the memory of what had gone

---

Fig 11. A view looking down Church Hill Castor with the Churchyard wall on the left, of the foundations of part of the Western wing of the Roman building, marked ‘D’ in Fig
before faded as new kingdoms and a new social structure emerged.
Today there are few obvious signs of the importance of our locality in Roman times, the town of Durobrivae with its industries and the great house on Church Hill have all vanished. The Water Newton treasure is safely preserved in the British Museum. We have sought, though, to retain a sense of continuity with our past, for on the walls of the Cedar Centre is mounted the Chi-Rho and the Greek letters Alpha and Omega, the chief emblems of Christianity in Roman Britain.

Andrew Nash
Andrew has lived in Ailsworth with his family for over 25 years. After receiving his MA in English literature from Cambridge University he came to the Peterborough area to pursue his career as a social worker. He now works for Peterborough City Council, developing new services for people with learning disabilities. His interest in history and archaeology has grown over the years and he completed a course in archaeology at Peterborough College of Adult Education in 2000. He hopes to do further research into the history of this area and to produce an account of its Roman past that everyone can read and enjoy.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance I have received from the following archaeologists in writing this chapter - Ben Robinson of Peterborough museum for his considerable help in finding source materials, selecting illustrations and for generously giving help and advice whenever asked, Ian Meadows for providing the original inspiration to study local Roman history in his role as course tutor at Peterborough College of Adult Education and for sharing the results of his excavations at Castor School and the Woodlands site, and Donald Mackreth for allowing me to quote from his valuable written work on Durobrivae and the Castor Praetorium.

Notes
8. D.F. Mackreth, Durobrivae, Chesterton, Cambridgeshire from conference report Small Towns in Roman Britain.
9. R. Jones, ibid.
15. I. Meadows, Splash Lane, Castor from Nene Valley Research Committee Annual Report 1989-1990 para 3.3.4.