

The Roman Countryside of Leicestershire and Rutland

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INTRODUCTION

In 1976 our view of the Roman countryside was seriously distorted. Almost no systematic survey, with the honourable exception of Rod Branson's work around Illston on the Hill, had been undertaken. We were heavily reliant on chance discoveries and this biased the sample towards buildings with distinctive features such as stonewalls and tessellated pavements. Even where lower status sites were found they tended to be discounted because of an implicit model that "rural settlement = villa". The countryside was, therefore, seen as sparsely populated and a preserve of the rich. Rod Branson's work was, however, telling a different story. The area around Illston was shown to be densely populated. Some of the sites were recognisable as villas from the scatters of stone, tile, tesserae and wall plaster in addition to the pottery but most presented purely as scatters of pottery. The even spread of these sites clearly suggested that they were not simply rubbish dumps but that they were also occupation sites – but sites where the buildings were made of biodegradable materials such as timber, wattle and daub, cob and thatch. These were likely to be the sites of the early Roman period – before the introduction of stone building to the countryside – and of the peasantry throughout the period. As the new local fieldwork groups, notably Mick Harding's Newbold Verdon Group and Bob Jarrett's Huncote Group – began to survey their areas this pattern was confirmed as the normal one in Leicestershire, although now an additional factor in the rural mix was revealed – rural industry. In the area around Huncote the sites of Roman pottery kilns were found and at Newbold Verdon a tile kiln was located.

The last 20 years of fieldwork has allowed us to define this basic mix of sites: "villas", "peasant sites" and "rural industry" rather better, and is suggesting differences across the two counties. It has also seen the beginnings of excavation of sites other than the villas – although they remain massively over represented among excavated sites. We have no examples identified (as yet at least) of the Roman villages known in other counties. The large sites at Lockington and Hamilton appear to be entirely Iron Age in date. It may be that some of the sites tentatively identified as small towns may fall into this category but several are not well enough understood for any certainty on this.

Comparison of countywide distribution maps (Fig. 1) for 1907 (based on Page 1907), 1972 (based on Peek and McWhirr 1972) and 2001 show the slow progress made until the mid-1970s and the incredible advances in our knowledge since then.

Excavated Sites

Nineteen villa sites have had excavations out of 62 sites that are recorded on the Leicestershire and Rutland Sites and Monuments Record. If all these had been fully excavated and published we would have an extremely useful corpus of data. Unfortunately we have no complete plans and few full publications. Norfolk Street, Leicester and Thistleton are neither fully published but represent the most complete plans. Drayton II and Whitwell have a main block excavated, which may - or may not - represent the full complex, and the two Empinghams, recently published, may also be fairly complete. Saddlers Cottage Medbourne has now also revealed part of its plan and Great Casterton has a phased plan of part of the complex. Several other sites – Rothley, Tixover, Clipsham, Sapcote, Lockington, Oadby and Narborough – produce fragments, but at least they can be planned, while Hamilton, Glooston, Market Bosworth and West Langton do not even provide coherent plans (although something may yet be wrung out of West Langton).

If we endeavour to sort the plans that we have, Norfolk Street Leicester (Fig. 2) stands out for its complexity and sophistication. It appears to have a double courtyard plan. The outer courtyard is flanked on the north by a bath suite and on its east by a road in front of a wall replacing an earlier ditch. This road is presumably a spur from the Roman road, which lies under King Richards Road. Most of the east and none of the south wall have been seen. The inner courtyard is surrounded by buildings on three sides and is defined to the east by a wall. This has evidence for a central gate structure and continues the east wall of a major aisled barn to the south and a domestic block to the north.

The west side of the courtyard has the main block of the villa. In the centre is the main hall with an apsidal projection to the west. On the main axis between hall and gate a block of masonry found in 1851 may be a garden feature such as a statue. The site is notable for its tessellated pavements and, particularly the exceptionally well-preserved wall plaster recovered from a cellar in the north domestic range. Second century activity is clearly demonstrated but the villa was not built until the 3rd century with most of the pavements being added in the late 3rd/early 4th centuries (Mellor and Lucas 1975; Mellor and Lucas 1979; Lucas 1980).

Thistleton (Figs. 3 & 4) can also be thought of as a double courtyard villa – at least in its later phases, but its discovery in a quarry face during ironstone working – and lack of full publication - precludes a full understanding. The earliest stone building at the southern end of the site produced 6 column drums – 5 plain and one moulded. It was these falling out of the

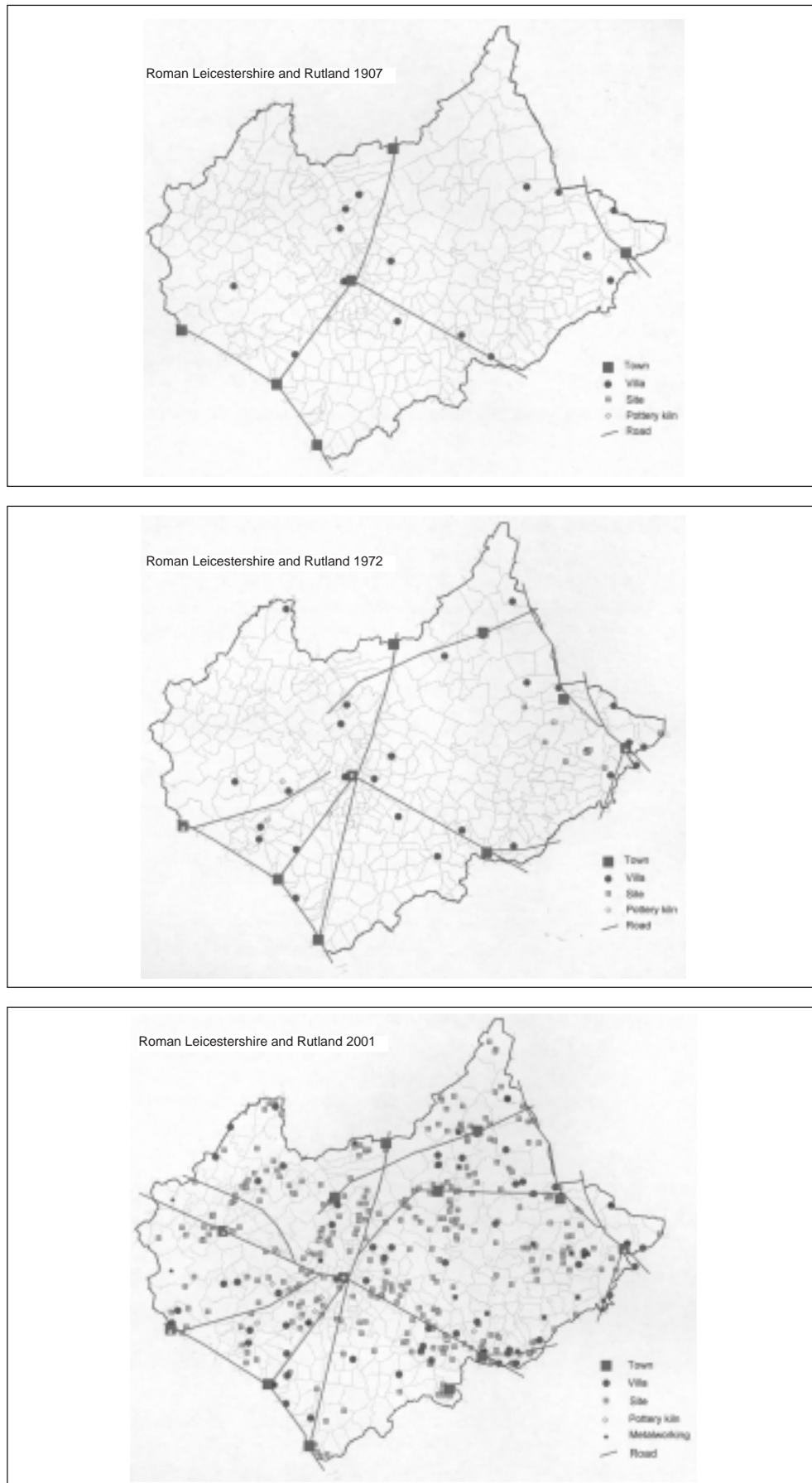


Fig. 1. Distributions of Roman sites known in 1907, 1972 and 2001

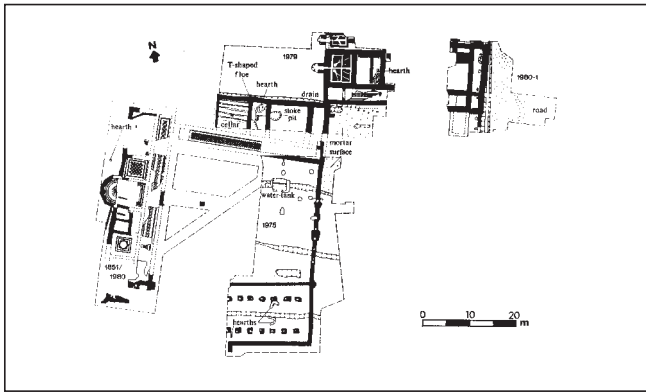


Fig. 2. Plan of Norfolk Street Villa, Leicester

face that attracted interest in the site along with “pottery, mortar and fragments of roof-tiles, flue-tiles and pila-bricks” showing that this was an architecturally pretensions building with central heating. This was 3rd century (although 2nd century and even Iron Age activity is noted). Early in the 4th century a bath house was built to the west and to the north, on the other side of a courtyard or garden, a new house with hypocausts, mosaics, wall plaster and columns flanking the central entrance. To the east a large range of, presumably, agricultural buildings seem to form the north side of an outer courtyard (Greenfield 1958, 1960, 1961).

Great Casterton is frustrating. Corder’s work (Corder 1951, 1954, 1961) reveals in some detail the development of part of what seems to be the largest villa complex yet known in the two counties (Fig. 5). There are two excavated elements – the first is an aisled barn, which developed into a house with tessellated pavements and heating systems and the second is a barn that has a corridor (later with tessellated pavements) and a bath house added to the west and a possible large aisled barn to the north. Walls run to north and east beyond the excavated area, possibly defining a large courtyard and further stone buildings are noted 85 metres away to the north.

At Medbourne a succession of small excavations and watching briefs show that the villa had, at least, two blocks with corridors which lie at right angles to one another with a bath suite projecting to the north (Pollard

Fig. 3. Plan of Thistleton Villa

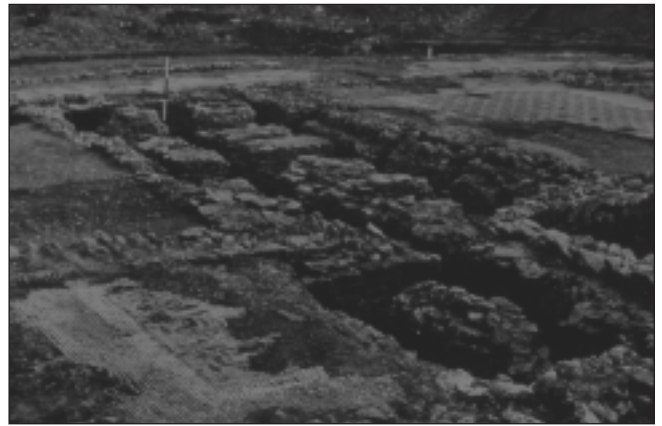
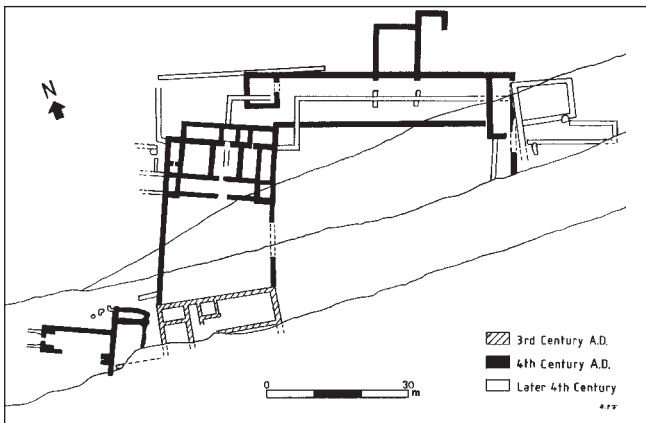
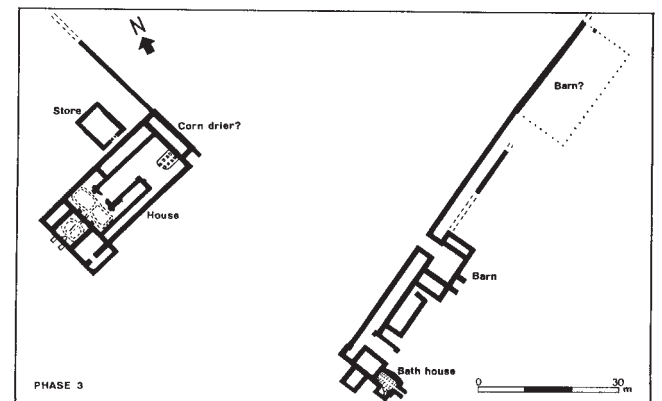
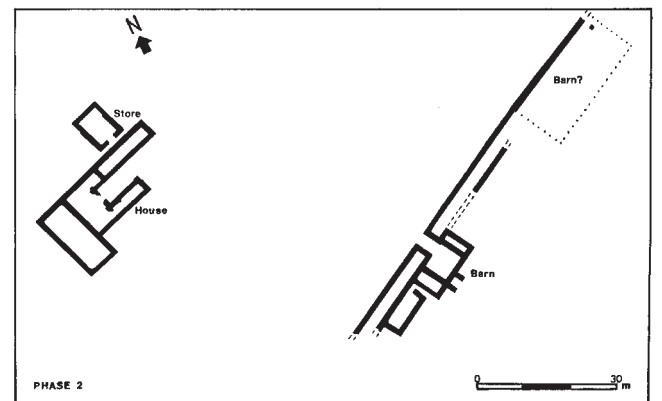
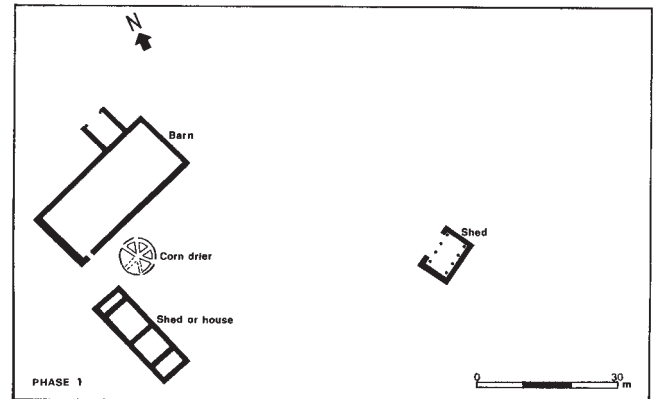


Fig. 4. Photograph of Thistleton Villa under excavation (Greenfield)

Fig. 5. Plan of Great Casterton Villa by phase



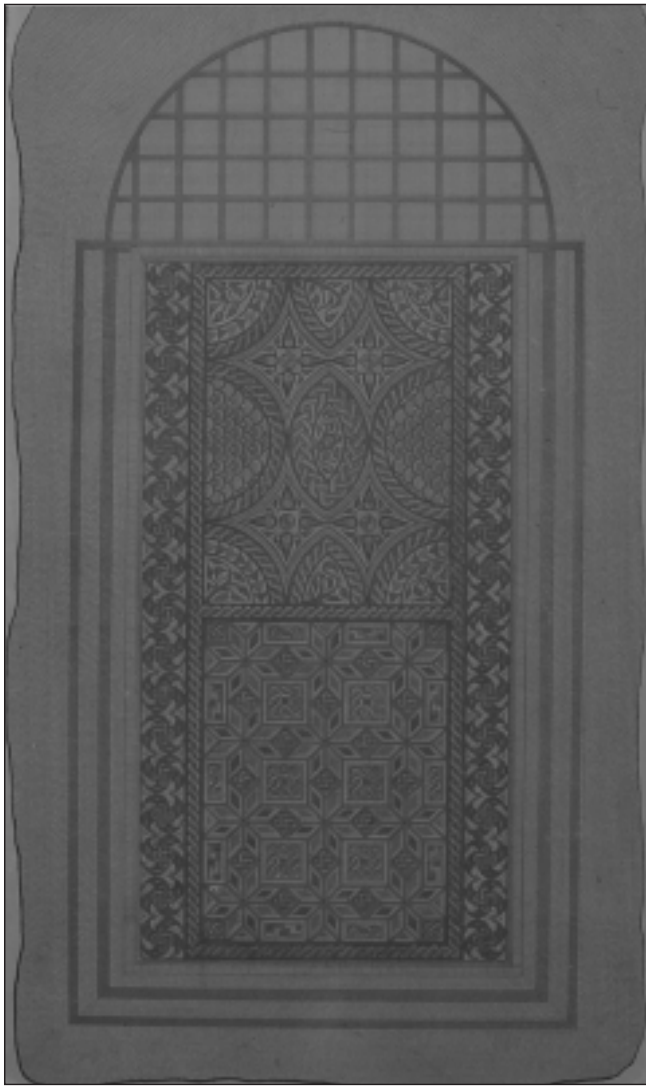
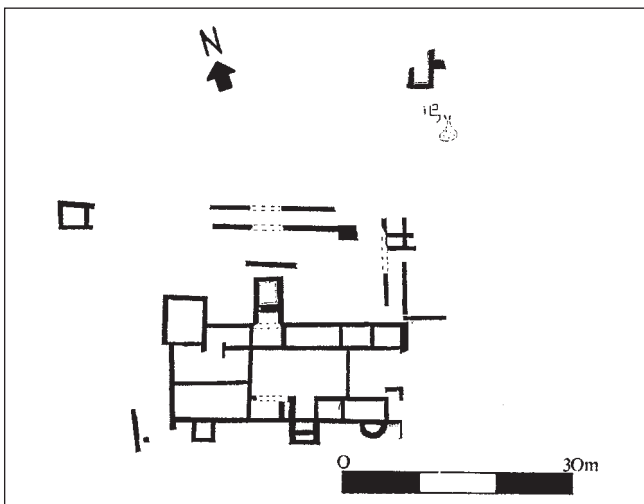


Fig. 6. A mosaic pavement from Medbourne Villa.

1996 and 1998). Enough is known to be sure that this was a relatively complex site, which included the very large mosaic pavement (Fig. 6) with an apsidal northern end excavated in the 19th century (Dibbin and Hill

Fig. 7. Plan of Drayton Villa



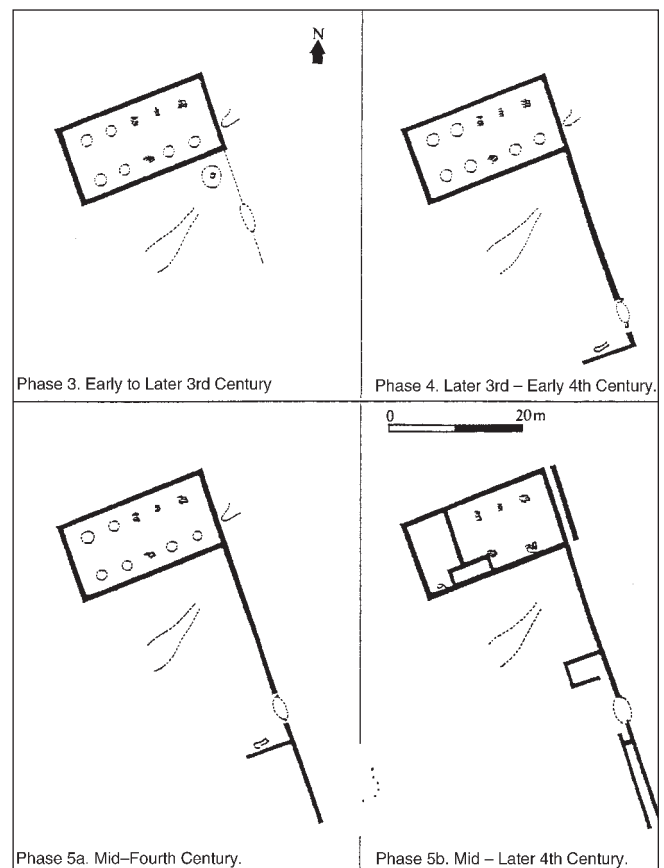
1887). It seems entirely likely that the site will prove to be a large courtyard villa.

It may be no coincidence that the four sites described are all in close proximity to urban sites.

The second type of 'villa' that can be distinguished is the more or less simple rectangular block, which often seems to develop from earlier aisled buildings. Into this category fall Drayton II (Fig. 7) (Cooper, Beavitt, O'Sullivan and Young 1989; Pollard 1991, 1992; Connor 1993 and 1994), Empingham I (Fig. 8) and II (Fig. 9) (Cooper 2000), Whitwell (Fig. 10) (Todd 1981), and Lockington (Fig 11). The last is known from the air with some trial excavations in 1962. The aerial photographs show the site within an enclosure with double walls, which to both north and south link up to what appear to be large barns, perhaps aisled. A third lies to the south. Detailed fieldwalking by the Burleigh Group added useful information to the understanding of this site (Clay 1985).

Another site that may fall into this group is highly unusual in that it survives as an earthwork. This is at Cold Newton (Fig. 12). It was found from the air in 1977 by Jim Pickering but was classified as a 'poorly preserved moated enclosure with building platform', possibly a monastic grange. Its true nature was revealed when the late Vaughan Williams watched field drains being laid. The 'building platform' turned out to be a collapsed Roman stone building and the 'moat' was actually an enclosure defined by a metre-wide stonewall. Vaughan's subsequent resistivity survey added useful

Fig. 8. Plan of Empingham I Villa



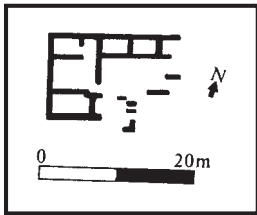


Fig. 9. Plan of Empingham II Villa by phase

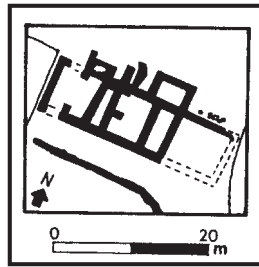


Fig. 10. Plan of Whitwell Villa

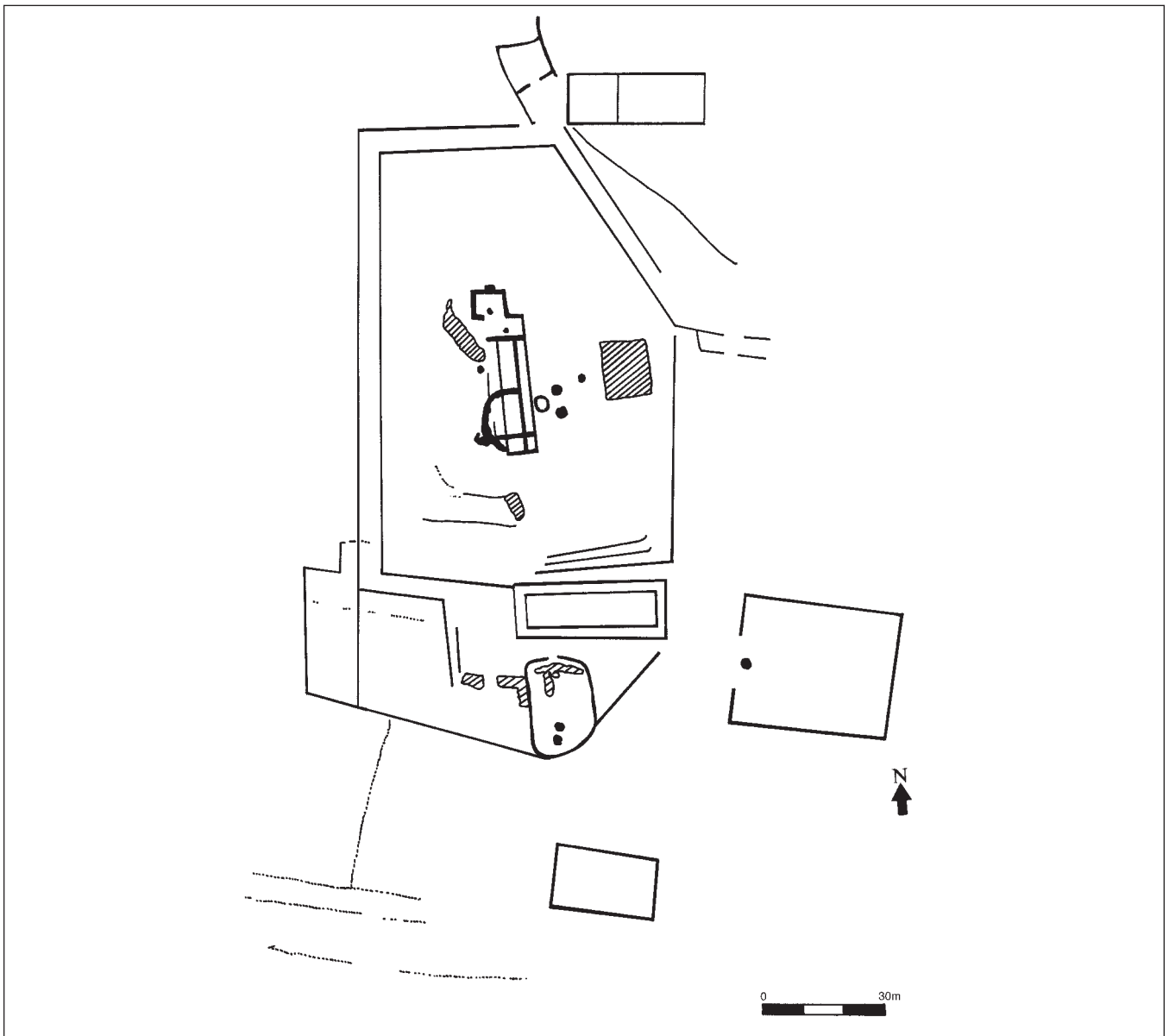
detail, as did Fred Hartley's earthwork survey (Williams 1980).

It is, at present, impossible to classify the other plans. Tixover (Fig. 13), Sapcote (Fig. 14), and Rothley (Fig. 15) seem all to be bath houses, but the type of building to which they belong is unknown. Rothley may well have been large and complex. Clipsham (Fig. 16),

Narborough (Fig. 17) and Oadby (Fig.18) all represent parts of plans that are presently unclassifiable. The circular foundation at Oadby remains highly unusual (if not unique) in the county's rural sites.

Until well into the 1980s no significant excavation work was undertaken on sites not producing evidence of substantial stone buildings. This is beginning to be redressed. However, of the 366 sites known on the Sites and Monuments Record only a handful have yet been examined. Humberstone Farm Leicester (Lucas 1986 and 1988) was a pioneer, but Scalford Brook Melton Mowbray (Liddle 1990; Beamish 1991) and Normanton le Heath (Trimble 1992) have revealed plans of enclosures with more or less rectangular buildings within. Appleby Magna raises the intriguing prospect of Roman sunken-featured buildings as well as ditches, timber structures and corn processing (Clarke 2000).

Fig. 11. Plan of Lockington Villa from aerial photographs



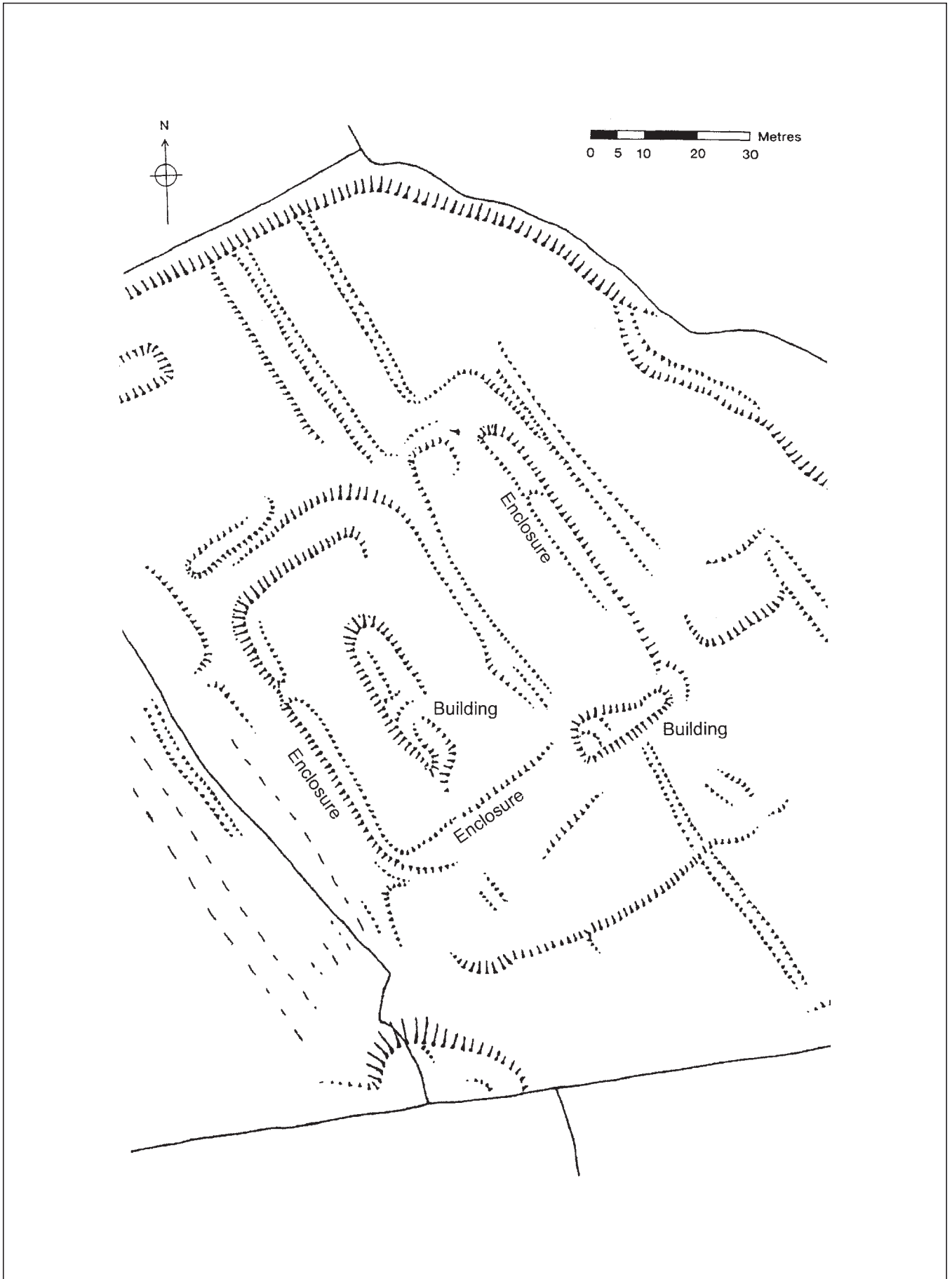


Fig. 12. Plan of the earthworks of Cold Newton Villa

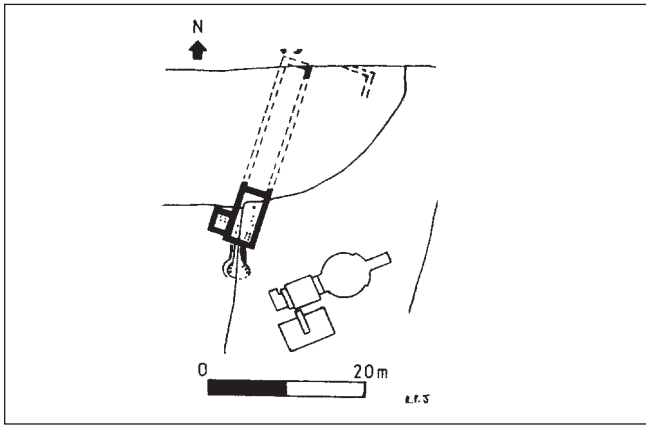


Fig. 13. Plan of Tixover Villa

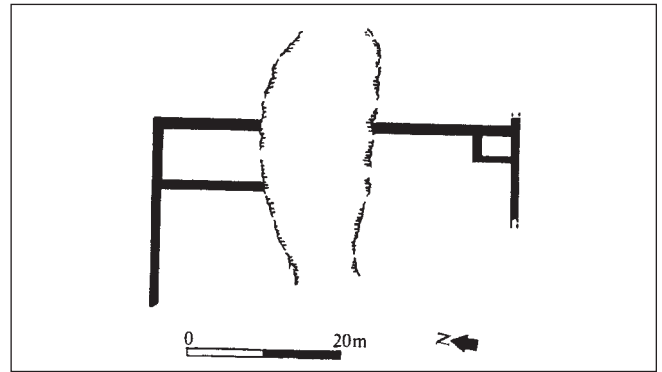


Fig. 16. Plan of Clipsham Villa

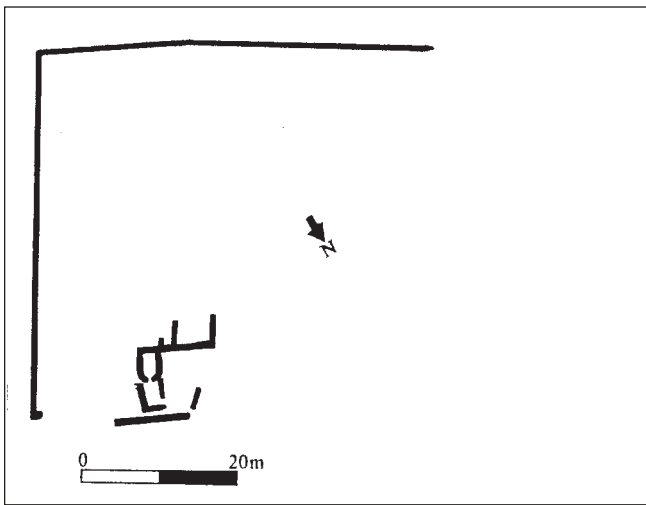
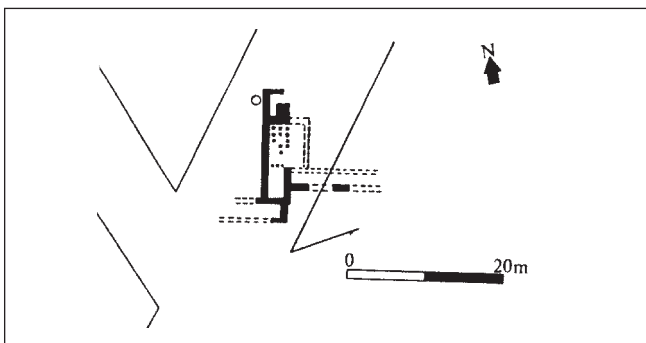


Fig. 14. Plan of Sapcote Villa

Recent work at Coventry Road Hinckley, Ashby de la Zouch and Great Glen has also added to our knowledge of peasant sites. The fact remains that they are still massively under-represented in the excavation record and even where they have been excavated building plans are often difficult to obtain because of damage by both medieval and modern ploughing (unlike the villas which can – to an extent – look after themselves).

Fig. 15. Plan of Rothley Villa



Landscapes

Fieldwalking is the major technique for reconstructing landscapes (Liddle 1985). Remarkable progress has been achieved since 1976, as we have seen, but this has by no means been evenly distributed. Ideally all fields in a given area should be systematically walked and, to achieve a viable sample to reconstruct settlement patterns, this area should be a large one.

In the southeast of the county we are nearest to achieving this ideal (Fig. 19). A high proportion of some 17 contiguous parishes have been walked – Great Easton, Bringham, Drayton and the Holyoaks area of Stockerston by the Great Easton Group; Medbourne, Blaston, Nevill Holt, other parts of Drayton, and Stonton Wyville by the Museums Survey Team; Slawston by the Slawston Group and Survey Team; Cranoe and Glooston by Training for Work; Shangton, Tur Langton, East Langton, West Langton, Thorpe Langton and Foxton by Paul and Tina Bowman; Illston and surrounding parishes by Rod Branson. New work in Hallaton, Burton Overy and the Loddington area is extending this surveyed area. Full analysis of results has yet to be achieved but one small town, ten villas, thirty-three farmsteads and eleven more possible sites are known. These are scattered across the area studied fairly evenly, suggesting a developed agricultural landscape. In the Medbourne survey area, more analytical work has been completed (Liddle 1994). Villas cluster in the Welland Valley with farmsteads on the higher land behind: Settlement seems to concentrate on the villa sites in the later Roman period. Several farmstead sites appear to be abandoned in the 3rd and early 4th centuries and it

Fig. 17. Plan of Narborough Villa

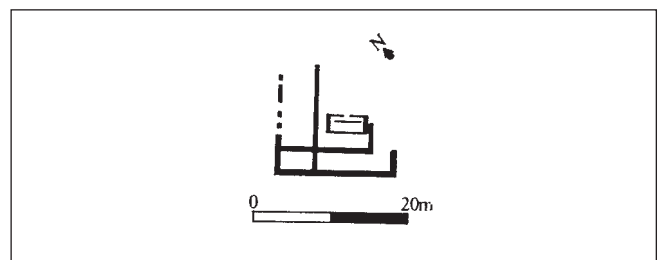




Fig. 18. Photograph of Oadby Villa under excavation

would appear that their arable fields go out of use. A similar pattern appears to be found in the 'Langtons' and Shangton area (Bowman 1996, 126). Is this a switch towards pastoral farming or has the land been abandoned to woodland? It is much too early to say if local factors are operating here or if this is a more widespread phenomenon.

Another 'window' is the Gwash Valley around Rutland Water. Fieldwalking, excavation and watching briefs when the reservoir was built revealed a great deal, supplemented by more recent fieldwalking led by Nick Cooper for the University of Leicester. Four "villas" were found in the reservoir construction, with 3 extensively excavated and one badly damaged during construction work. Nick Cooper's work and that of Rutland Local History Society Archaeological Group to the west has added to the picture of the development of the valley. This suggests valley-based settlement including both villas and farmsteads. The watching briefs showed a scatter of burials and furnaces between the sites - a useful corrective to any idea of a tidy Roman landscape. In the apparently unoccupied limestone uplands there was some evidence of iron smelting (Cooper 2000, 146-9).

Elsewhere in the two counties there has been extensive work by both fieldwalkers and detectorists adding large numbers of sites to our County map, but often not intensive enough to fully reveal patterning in the landscape. Most gaps in our County map reveal lack of

fieldwork rather than lack of settlement. A good example of this is in the southwest of Leicestershire. Until 2000 nothing was recorded in the parishes of Sheepy, Witherley and Twycross. Fieldwalking by the Shepshed Group and detecting by Roy Chester have produced around seven new Roman sites in early 2002. However, the Lutterworth area (as we have heard from Brian Burningham, this volume) has, despite extensive work, revealed relatively sparse Roman activity. This is despite extensive crop mark evidence of Iron Age activity and constitutes a mystery. Is this an area of over-use in the Iron Age leading to abandonment of land in the Roman period or does Roman pottery not survive well in this area (as has been noted in parts of North-West Leicestershire)? The clear impression, though, is that in most parts of Leicestershire and Rutland evidence of Roman occupation is there when fieldwork is undertaken. This accords well with the available environmental evidence. Though good pollen evidence is, so far, lacking, there is abundant evidence of cereal production and processing (Monckton, this volume). This does not mean that all the area of the two counties was agricultural. Medieval Leicestershire and Rutland contained 3 extensive areas of woodland - Leicester Forest, Charnwood Forest and Leighfield Forest (see Squires, this volume). Fieldwork around each of these suggests that they may well have already existed in some form in the Roman period. Some 20 years ago attention was drawn to the pattern of Roman pottery kilns in relation to the edge of medieval Leicester Forest (Liddle 1982, 42-3). It was suggested that as these kilns needed timber for fuel their location might reveal the Roman woodland margin. Kilns were then known at Enderby, Narborough, Earl Shilton, Newbold Verdon (tile kilns) and Desford (x 2 + 1?). Subsequent work has added kilns at Western Park Leicester, Enderby, Lubbesthorpe, Kirby Muxloe and, perhaps, Glenfield, strengthening the pattern considerably. Admittedly sites have been found inside the forest boundaries but as a major Roman road cuts through the area this is hardly surprising and even if the area was generally wooded clearings would not be a surprise.

Recent work on the southern edges of Charnwood suggests a similar pattern, with kilns at Cropston, Groby and Markfield - but more work is needed to establish how far this pattern is real. More kilns are known around Ravenstone, at Normanton le Heath and, perhaps, at Shenton but whether they fit into a forest-edge pattern and how far there is a general West Leicestershire rural industry is not yet clear. Charnwood was also exploited for hard rock used as building materials. Slate was quarried at Swithland and Groby (McWhirr 1988) and 'granites' at Groby, Enderby, Croft and Mountsorrel. Stone from all these sites has been identified in Leicester.

In East Leicestershire and Rutland there are also suitable clays for pottery production. Kilns are known from a wide sweep of the eastern part of Rutland from Ketton in the south in the north. In Leighfield itself a site producing wasters has recently been identified near

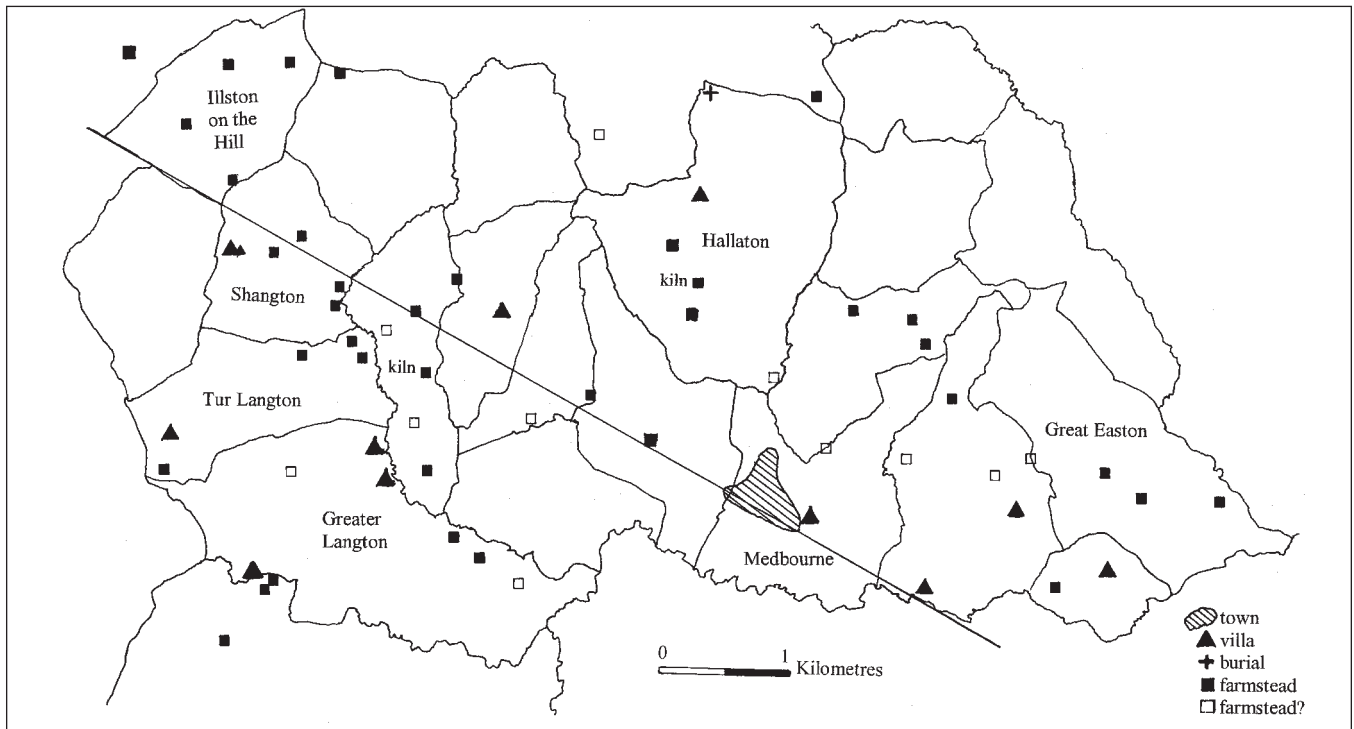


Fig. 19. Distribution of Roman sites known in South-East Leicestershire

Launde, and recent work by the Rutland Local History Society Archaeological Group and ULAS has shown Roman iron working around Ridlington (Cowgill and Jones 1996) and Martinthorpe (Beamish 1997). More work is needed but it would seem that there might well have been an extensive woodland industry here. One of the major problems here is that iron slag is not intrinsically datable and distinguishing Iron Age from Roman from Anglo-Saxon working is not going to be easy. On the southern edges of the medieval extent of the forest pottery kilns have been found at Stanton Wyville and Hallaton.

Summary

The Roman countryside of Leicestershire and Rutland seems, where we have looked, to have been largely a well developed agricultural landscape. For every 'villa' (even if most were developed aisled buildings) there were at least 4 timber farmsteads, although the mix is not even across the 2 counties. Several predominantly wooded areas can be tentatively identified and in and around these rural industry as well as farming is important. The main element missing from this account is development through time. It is very easy to forget that we are looking at nearly 400 years. Excavation has not yet revealed stone buildings in the countryside earlier than the 3rd century although most of the 'villas' reveal earlier occupation. Very many Roman sites overlie Iron Age sites and many produce Anglo-Saxon material. More analysis of pottery - and indeed coinage and metalwork - from these sites will reveal the elements of continuity and discontinuity within and between periods and how (or if) the market economy penetrates the countryside.

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