

## **Historical and archaeological background by Alan Graham**

At the time of the Roman Invasion and Conquest of Britain in AD 43, the modern counties of Dorset and much of Somerset were the lands of the tribe of the Durotriges. These were a powerful and well established people, their wealth and strength based in the fertility of the lands they farmed and the varied mineral wealth it contained. Their defended hilltop settlements still dominate the modern landscape of the counties; South Cadbury, Ham Hill, and Maiden Castle to name some of the largest, and their small, farming hamlets populated the fertile valleys. Though now invisible beneath modern agriculture, many of these are known from archaeological excavation, survey and aerial photography and many probably remain to be discovered. Into this 'full and well-tended land' the Legions of Imperial Rome burst in AD 43.

Unlike some of the tribes of Southern England, the Durotriges showed fierce resistance to the imposition of Roman rule in their lands. Nonetheless, by the end of AD 43, much of the Durotrigian territory was taken and an initial military boundary established along the line of the Fosse Way, the major Roman highway running from Exeter in the South-west to Lincoln and then York in the North-East. Within a decade, most of what is now England and Wales was under Imperial control. Britain had abruptly been made a province of the Roman Empire, and would remain so until AD410, when it was left to fend for itself against the background of the continental Roman Empire under direct attack.

The three hundred and fifty years of Roman provincial Britain (in AD410 the conquest period was as far removed in time as the English Civil War is from today) saw many enduring changes. By the end of the First Century AD, the Province had many newly established towns, laid out and built to a Roman style, and linked by the characteristically straight roads of the Empire. The hillforts now lay empty, evidence of at least some population shift in the years following the conquest. Architecturally and socially, the new towns would have had many aspects recognisable across the whole Roman Empire; politically and economically they were a means of controlling and unifying the new province.

In the countryside, where the overwhelming majority of the population lived (a situation that remained unchanged until the massive demographic movements that followed industrialisation in the later 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) the process of Romanisation was much slower and its degree and extent probably varied regionally. Continuity of population and land-use is probable as farming and food production was essential for the success of the new province. Romanisation did, however, come to the countryside, with the adoption of Romanised building styles and the use of recognisably Roman provincial pottery and other objects. The degree and speed of Romanisation may to some extent have depended upon proximity to the new towns and the connecting roads.

In both Somerset and Dorset change seems to have been most dramatic in the later third and fourth centuries AD, from which period a number of very large and lavishly appointed buildings are known. Generally defined as villas, these structures include the dwelling of a very wealthy family with all the trappings of provincial Rome; mosaic pavements, wall paintings, heated rooms and bath houses as well as the

working buildings of a farm. In South Somerset at least, this wealth is likely to have been based in land, and these buildings are likely to form the centres of large, farming estates. Whether their development, and the obvious wealth of their owners reflects changing patterns of land ownership or use is however, uncertain. Though these buildings reflect a high point of Roman Provincial culture in the rural areas of Britain, and the building at Lopen is one example of many, their owners, though probably British, were a small and elite proportion of the rural population. These grand buildings need to be set against the background of a vast, enduring and probably much less Romanised rural landscape and native peasant population. With the break-up of the Roman provincial system and authority in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD they do not seem to have lasted for long, though the actual process of their abandonment and decay is obscure. Several centuries later, the ruins of these collapsed buildings, were frequently used as quarries for building stone, probably by the descendants of the peasants who had once worked on the estates during the heyday of the villa.