SILCHESTER REVEALED

The Iron Age and Roman Town of Calleva

MICHAEL FULFORD

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For

Stephen and Caroline Butt

and

The Calleva Foundation

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Front cover: View across Calleva from the north-west, © Dae Sasitorn

Back cover: Reconstructed view of the town as it might have appeared in the later 3rd century, © Historic England Archive

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Acknowledgements

The possibility of writing this book owes a great deal to very many people, not least the thousands of students and volunteers who, over the years, have carried out the hard and painstaking task of excavating the sites from which all our new knowledge of Silchester stems. But none of this would have happened but for the continuing support of my wife, Charlotte, and my family, and my University, the University of Reading, which appointed me lecturer in archaeology in 1974, the same year when I was first invited to undertake an excavation at Silchester. Right from the beginning, the University has expected grants to be found to support fieldwork, even when it forms a core part of the curriculum, and a great many public and private organisations, as well as private individuals have awarded grants and made donations in support of our work at Silchester. While, historically, these have all been appropriately acknowledged and thanked in connection with their support of individual projects, I wish to single out certain individuals who have made really significant contributions which have ensured the continuity of projects at challenging times: first and foremost, the generosity of Stephen and Caroline Butt and the Calleva Foundation, which has stimulated exciting new research at Silchester, particularly on its Iron Age origins, while at the same time ensuring a lasting legacy through publication of the results of the fieldwork, has been absolutely exceptional. By galvanising a small group of supporters, Dudley Fishburn has played an invaluable role in ensuring the continuity of fieldwork, notably by helping to rescue the huge Insula IX excavation from premature closure in the early 2000s.

Archaeology is all about teamwork and the successful accomplishment of the Insula IX excavation and those that have followed since owes a huge amount to my colleague and co-director, Amanda Clarke. Simply put, without Amanda, none of the work which has taken place since 1997 would have happened. More recently I have been fortunate to have had the support of Jen Eaton, Nick Pankhurst and Dan Wheeler, who have been crucial to the successful completion of projects in and out of the field. I am also very

grateful to them, and to Rob Fry and Sarah Lambert-Gates, for the critical role they have played in illustrating this book. I also wish to thank Nina Crummy for all her help and advice in the preparation of this book. Finally, I return to Silchester to thank the owner of the Roman town, Hampshire County Council, for giving me permission to carry out excavations within the town, to Silchester villagers, and to Biddy and Nick West who, ever since their purchase of The Old Manor House in 1979, have been a constant source of support, year after year, to me and all the students and volunteers who have taken part in the excavations.

Preface

This book is a response to the frequent requests I have received over recent years for a new account of Silchester. My excuse up to now is that I am still in the middle of projects, but, in fact, there is already an enormous of new material to bring together and make more accessible to a wider public, and there is no excuse for not getting on with this now!

Silchester is a special place for me as it is to many. Standing on the bank behind the massive Roman city wall where it survives high above the South Gate gives one an immediate appreciation of the scale and setting of Iron Age and Roman Silchester. The view to the south stretches over field and woodland as far as the Hampshire Downs, emphasising the commanding position of the settlement over the surrounding countryside. Turning to look north, one has an uninterrupted view right across the city to the North Gate almost exactly a kilometre away. From the South Gate, the line of the city wall can be followed almost all the way around to give a vivid sense of the space occupied by one of the major cities of Iron Age and Roman Britain; 107 acres (*c* 43.3 hectares) altogether, smaller than the area of an average English village. The imagination can begin to fill the now empty space within the walls with buildings, perhaps of the Roman city in its heyday in the 2nd century, perhaps of the Iron Age town founded almost 200 years earlier, or of the city in its slow decline after AD 400. And right above you the skylark sings in summer!

Silchester has been a subject of interest and speculation since the time of Leland and Camden, over 400 years ago, but only from the 1860s has there been any systematic attempt to explore the remains within the walls. The work of those early excavators was brought expertly together by George Boon in his classic, richly informed survey, *Silchester: the Roman Town of Calleva*. This was published almost 50 years ago in 1974, the same year I conducted my first excavation at Silchester on the defences close to the South Gate. In the same way that Boon's *Silchester* brought together previous discoveries, especially the results of the Society of Antiquaries of London's 20-year campaign (1890–1909)

to excavate the entirety of the Roman city and some of its external earthworks, this time of Covid-19 and the cancellation of fieldwork in 2020 has given me an opportunity to pull together and reflect on the achievements of the last 46 years of research. Just as the results of each year's work by the Antiquaries were published annually in the Society's specialist journal, *Archaeologia*, much of the work since 1974 has been published at length in academic monographs and journals. Any ambition to synthesise the achievements of the Antiquaries at the conclusion of their excavations and disseminate them to a wider audience was lost with the outbreak of World War I and had to wait almost half a century for Boon's original synthesis, *Roman Silchester*, published in 1957. Happily, this synthesis has been put together before my excavations and their publication are even complete.

Although my own work at Silchester is not yet finished, a great deal has been done and it is time to try and bring together and reflect on the results of what has been achieved so far. Whereas the antiquarian work of the early 20th century was extensive but only – and literally – superficial, revealing insula by insula, plan by plan, the great majority of the masonry-founded buildings within the city walls, the advances of archaeological methodologies through the 20th century were such that vast amounts of information can be derived from much smaller interventions. But, just as methodologies have advanced, so have their associated costs. As we shall see in Chapter 1, the complete excavation and publication of just one block of the city would require an almost unimaginable scale of resources today.

Given the much more limited spatial extent of the excavations undertaken since 1974, what has been achieved? Most important, perhaps, has been the realisation that the Roman city and whatever lies beneath is very well preserved. Contrary to the belief that little remained to be discovered after the conclusion of excavation within the city in 1908, a view reinforced by the disappointing results of the re-excavation of the church in 1961, a small trial investigation in 1977 in the forum basilica, the great public building in the heart of the city, led to a project (1980–1986) which revealed a sequence of early Roman buildings and, deeper still, the Iron Age occupation, all well preserved beneath it. The major excavation which followed in Insula IX (1997–2014) provided further confirmation that both the Roman and the underlying Iron Age archaeology were well preserved despite the Society of Antiquaries' earlier work. Extrapolation from these two excavations, reinforced by subsequent investigations within the city, suggests that at least 80% of the archaeology preserved at the outset of the Society of Antiquaries' excavations in 1890 remains undisturbed to this day.

Between them, those two major excavations within the city, conducted over a period of more than 30 years, have given remarkable insight into its Iron Age origins and the character of the settlement and its inhabitants in those formative years of the settlement. At the same time, thanks to the advances that have been made in the study of both material culture and environmental evidence, we have been able to build up a picture of the changing life of the city and its inhabitants, gaining knowledge of their living conditions, diet, health, occupations, leisure activities, ritual behaviour and so on, over more than 400 years.

Research continues and it is hoped that, like George Boon, whose first *Roman Silchester* was published in 1957, it will be possible to follow this book with a subsequent edition which draws on the current and very recently completed programmes of excavations.

So, since 1974 we can now add a whole new phase, Iron Age Calleva, to the story of Silchester, and to the Roman city we can now bring time-depth and the beginnings of a fleshing-out of the lives of successive generations of its inhabitants.

Michael Fulford
University of Reading
December 2020

CHAPTER ONE

Discovering Calleva

The most significant development in the history of investigations into the Iron Age and Roman town at Silchester was the great, 20-year long, project by the Society of Antiquaries of London to reveal what, at the time, was thought to be the complete plan of the town within its defensive walls. The excavations took place between 1890 and 1909, providing the first glimpse of the entirety of a Roman town in Britain and indeed of any town within the Roman world, even celebrated Pompeii. The town was confirmed to have been divided into regular insulae (Latin = islands), the great majority containing a number of buildings ranging from well-decorated private houses to modest shop or workshop premises, a few also with a temple or possible temple, one with a possible church, and the whole protected by the massive town wall. A few blocks were dominated by the public buildings they contained: the great forum basilica at the centre, dominating the town; the public baths at the lowest point of the town by the springs in the south-east quarter; the trio of temples in their enclosure by the east gate; and the inn with its attached bath house by the South Gate. The influence of the main thoroughfare, the east–west street which carried traffic between London and the west of Britain, can easily be seen in the crowding together, side-by-side, of narrow-fronted shops-cum-workshops competing for business along its length (Figs 1.1–2).

As we will see, there is a background of cumulative discoveries to this revelatory work, but it was a combination of factors which determined that Silchester was the first Roman town to be explored in this way. First and foremost it was a greenfield site only impinged upon by the parish church of St Mary the Virgin and the farm and farm buildings on its eastern side, but it was also in the single ownership of a sympathetic landowner, the

FIGURE 1.1 Aerial view of Silchester taken in 1976 looking towards the east, showing part of the Iron Age defences, the Roman street grid and outlines of some of the buildings (courtesy Chris Stanley)

Duke of Wellington, and the influential antiquarian society, the Society of Antiquaries of London, was keen to sponsor excavation. With large open areas within their walls, other Roman town sites offered similar potential: Aldborough of the Brigantes in Yorkshire, Caistor St Edmunds of the Iceni in Norfolk, Verulamium of the Catuvellauni beside St Albans in Hertfordshire and Wroxeter of the Cornovii, in Shropshire (Fig. 1.3). Across the River Severn in south-east Wales was the site of Caerwent, the chief town of the Silures, which, though the Roman town was partly buried beneath the village which had developed over it, followed Silchester to be the second most explored town of Roman Britain. Most of the other greenfield Roman towns saw substantial area excavations in the first half of the 20th century, but with none revealing more than parts of their whole town plan. Despite its shortcomings, as we shall see, the 'complete' plan of Roman Silchester has been published repeatedly through the 20th and into the present century and, as a consequence, arguably still remains the best-known Roman town in Britain. The background to the decision in 1890 to excavate Silchester can now be explored.

Despite being shrouded in trees and vegetation, the impressive remains

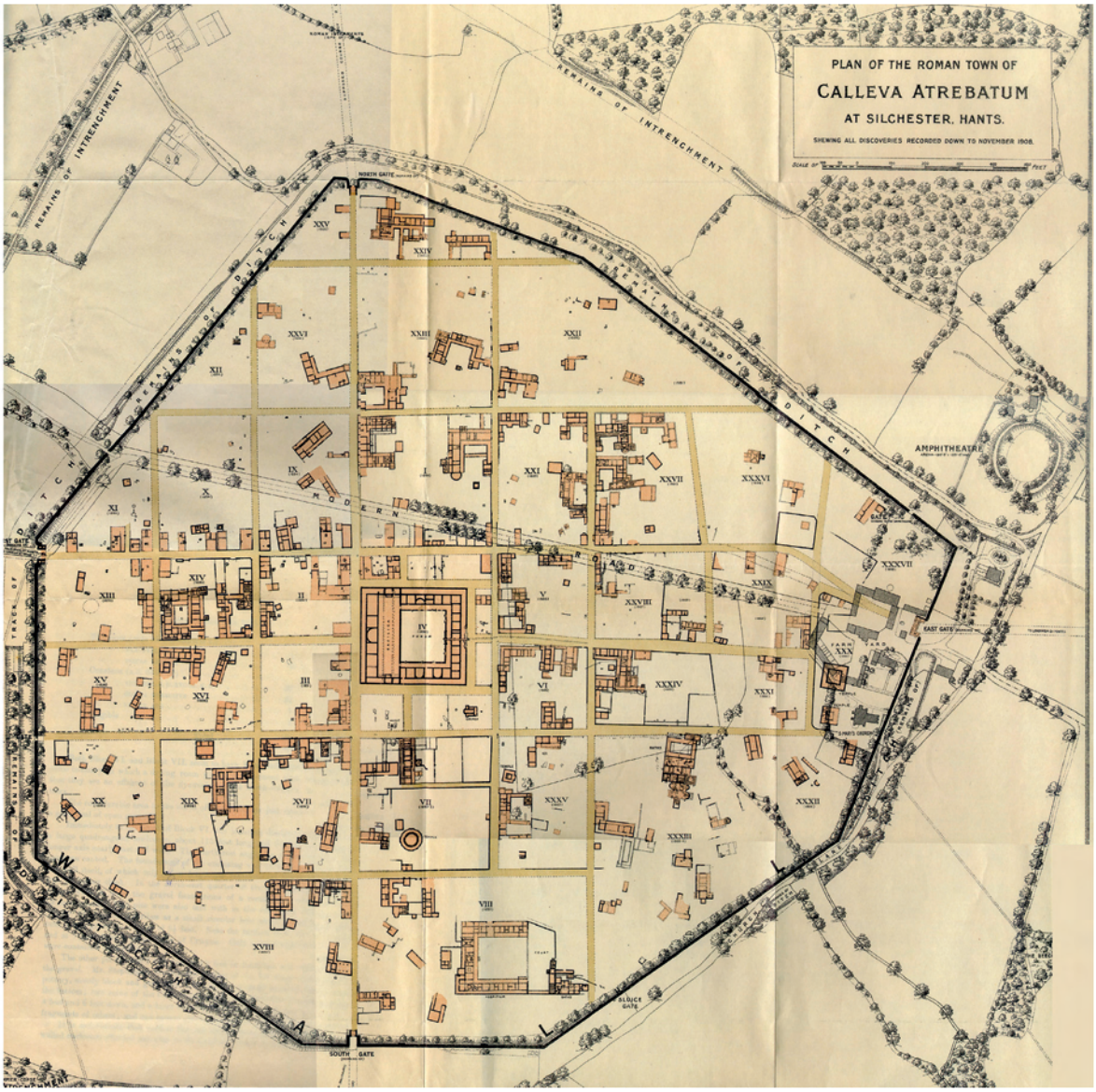

FIGURE 1.2 The plan of Calleva after the completion of excavations by the Society of Antiquaries within the town walls in 1908

of its circuit of town walls, a mile and a half in length and enclosing a little over 100 acres (40+ hectares), had attracted antiquarians' interest in Silchester since the 16th century. Among them was William Stukeley who visited Silchester in 1724 and, while recognising the amphitheatre for what it is, mistakenly depicted the town in the form of a rectangular military fort with its characteristic 'playing card' plan (Fig. 1.4). Although the outline of streets, which became visible each summer as the crop ripened, had been

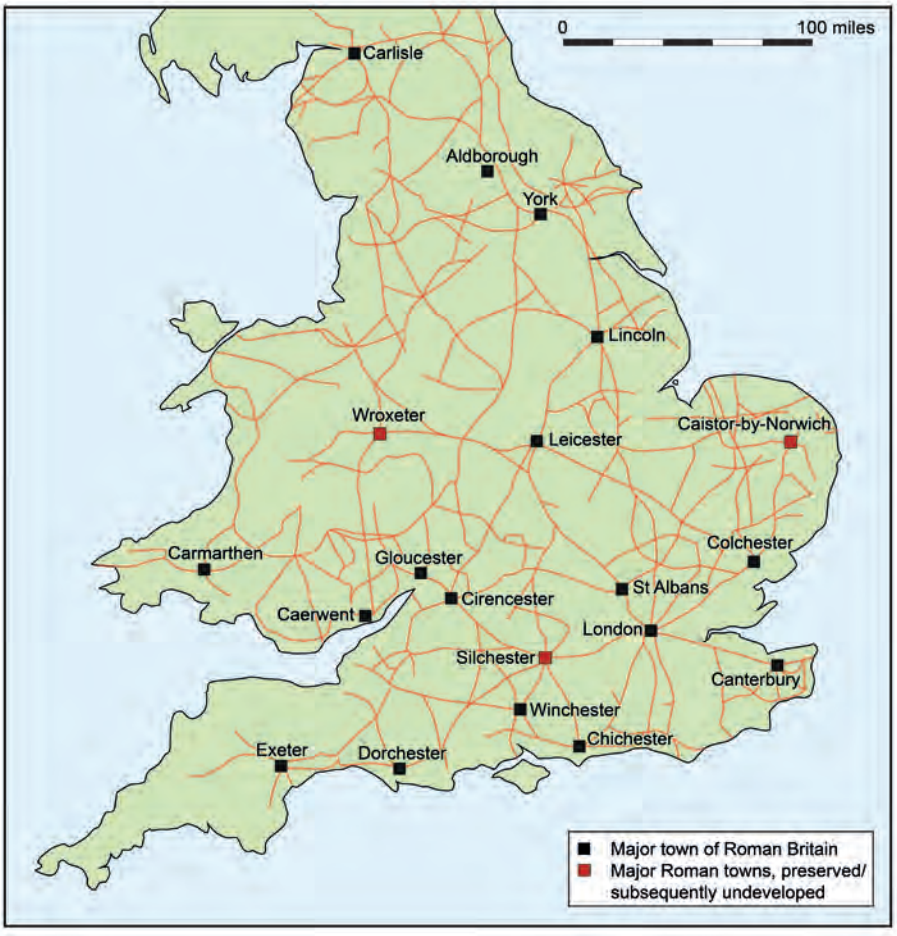

FIGURE 1.3 Map of Britain showing the locations of the major Roman towns

commented on by Camden in his great survey, *Britannia*, first published in English in 1610, it was the surveyor John Wright who was the first to attempt a systematic record of these and the town walls in 1745 (Fig. 1.5).

Various accounts record digging taking place within the walls in the 18th and 19th centuries but with little information as to what was found. It was not until 1864 that excavations took place which were of a more scientific character, being recorded in some detail and eventually published in summary form. This was the work of the Reverend James Joyce, the rector of Stratfield Saye, who was encouraged by the second Duke of Wellington to undertake excavations, the manor of Silchester having been acquired by the first Duke in 1828. Joyce left two beautifully illustrated bound notebooks and a sketchbook, now in Reading Museum, full of information about the individual buildings and structures that his workmen had uncovered as well