

# Roman settlement patterns in the Letchworth Garden City area

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# The Romans in Letchworth?

- ◆ Julius Caesar invaded in 55 and 54 BC
  - Established client kingdoms
- ◆ Claudius invaded in AD 43
  - After a coup in one of the kingdoms
- ◆ Britain was not overrun by toga wearing Latin speakers
  - And North Hertfordshire had no military presence ever
- ◆ Incomers account for under 5% of the population of Roman Britain
  - Military personnel, imperial government, traders and exiles
- ◆ Huge continuity from the Late Iron Age
  - So no men in metal frocks here!



# So what do I mean by “Roman Letchworth”?

- ◆ “Roman” is the term I use for a period
  - From the annexation of Britain as a province in AD 43
  - To its abandonment by the imperial government in 411
- ◆ It’s a chronological, not ethnic designation
  - Like “Norman” or “Tudor”



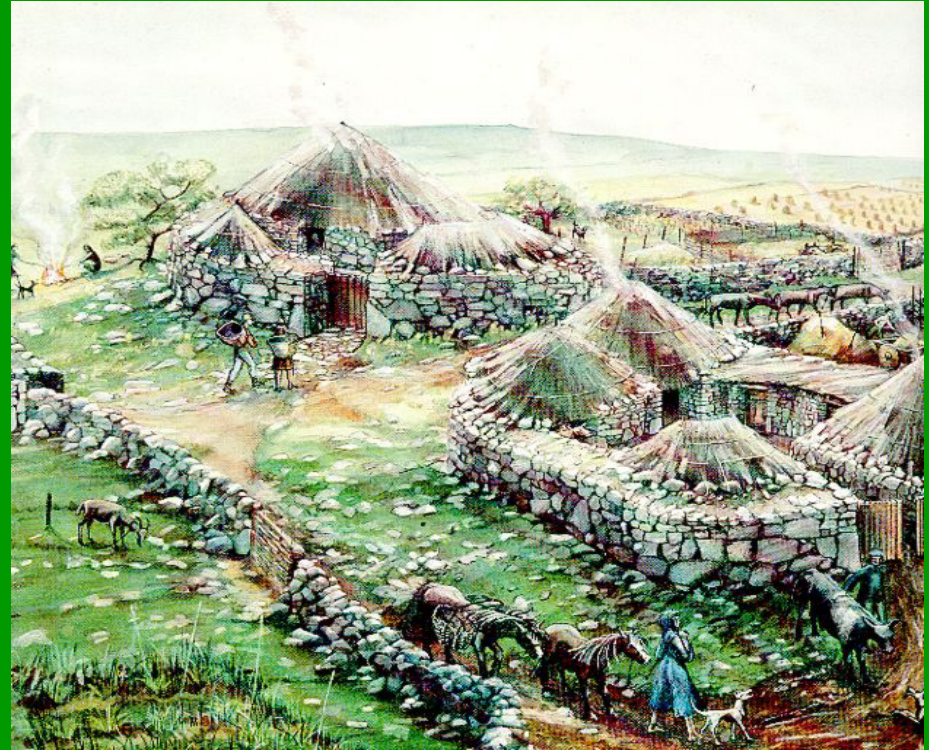
# Historical background

- ◆ From c 750 BC
  - Era of agricultural improvement
    - ◆ Woodland clearance
    - ◆ Heavy plough
    - ◆ *Triticum aestivocompactum* (bread wheat)
    - ◆ Stock improvements
  - Settlement entirely rural
    - ◆ Individual farmsteads



# Settlement types

- ◆ Enclosed farmsteads
  - Oval and subrectangular
    - ◆ Ditches and banks
    - ◆ Sometimes massive
- ◆ Open farmsteads
- ◆ Relationship to fields
  - Tracks
  - Coaxial ('Celtic') field systems



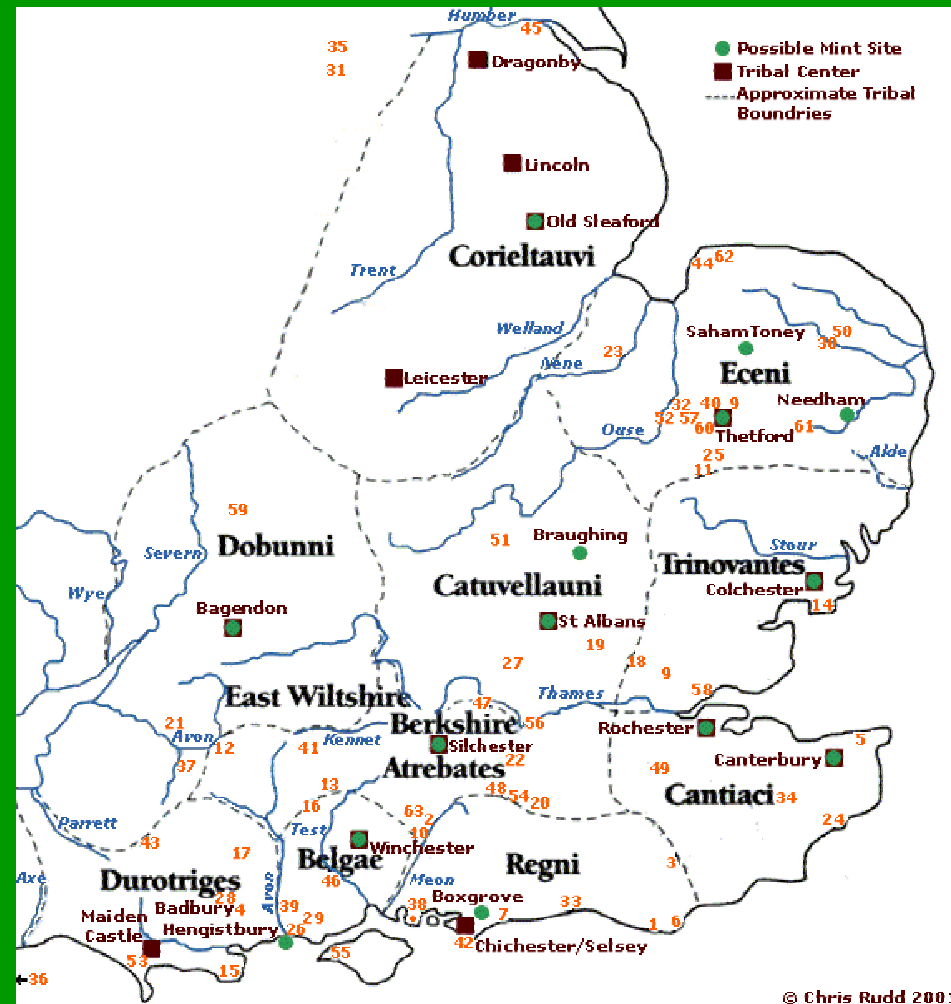
# Buildings

- ◆ The roundhouse
  - NEVER call them huts!
  - Basic type since the Bronze Age (from c 2500 BC)
    - ◆ Become smaller in south after c 400 BC
  - Double-ring and single-ring forms
- ◆ A few late rectangular buildings



# Politics

- ◆ 'Tribes' and 'kings'
  - Power bloc in south-east under Cunobelinos
    - ◆ Romanising policy
    - ◆ Growth of urbanisation
  - Peripheral areas using coins
    - ◆ Not kings but dual magistracy?
  - The north and west
    - ◆ Economic decline following change in trade routes
    - ◆ Probably more centralised than usually thought



# The crisis of the early 40s

- ◆ Verica
  - Expelled from kingdom
  - Sought Roman aid
  - Reinstated
- ◆ Romans decide to do something about the heirs of Cunobelinus
  - Siege and capture of *Camulodunon*
  - Establishment of provincial administration





# Roman Britain

- ◆ Roman invasion AD 43
  - Little impact on the peasant economy
  - Impact on élites
- ◆ No technological innovation
  - Depends on Iron Age subsistence techniques
  - Britain already exporting grain before the conquest



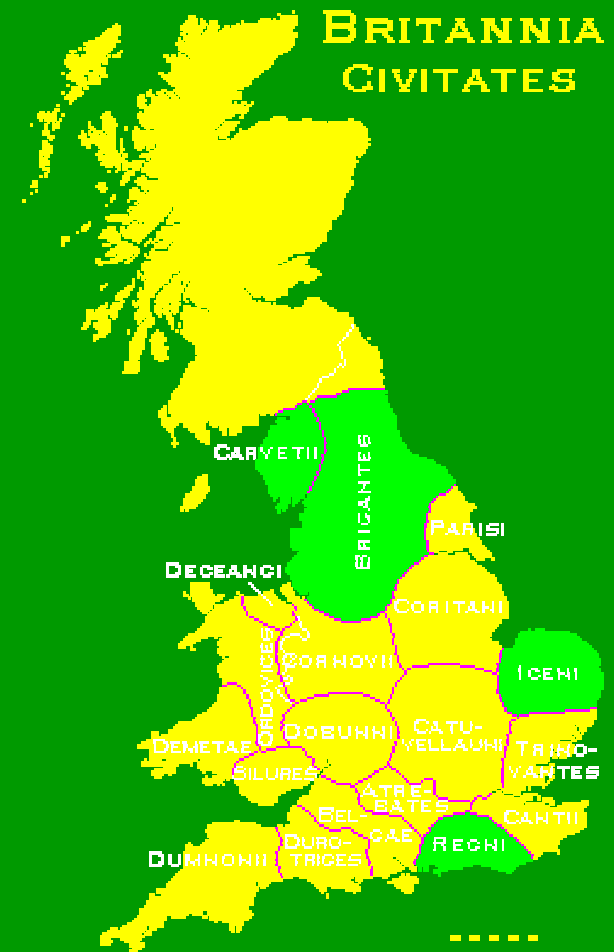
# The conquest of Britain

- ◆ South and east conquered within five years
  - Revolt of Boudica AD 60
  - Northern England 71-4
  - Scotland 77-84
- ◆ Consolidation
  - Establishment of *civitates*
  - Establishment of *limes* and permanent garrisons



# Britain within the Empire

- ◆ The establishment of *civitates*
  - Based on tribal system
  - Towns as centres of local government
- ◆ The establishment of defence
  - Fortresses and forts
  - Road network



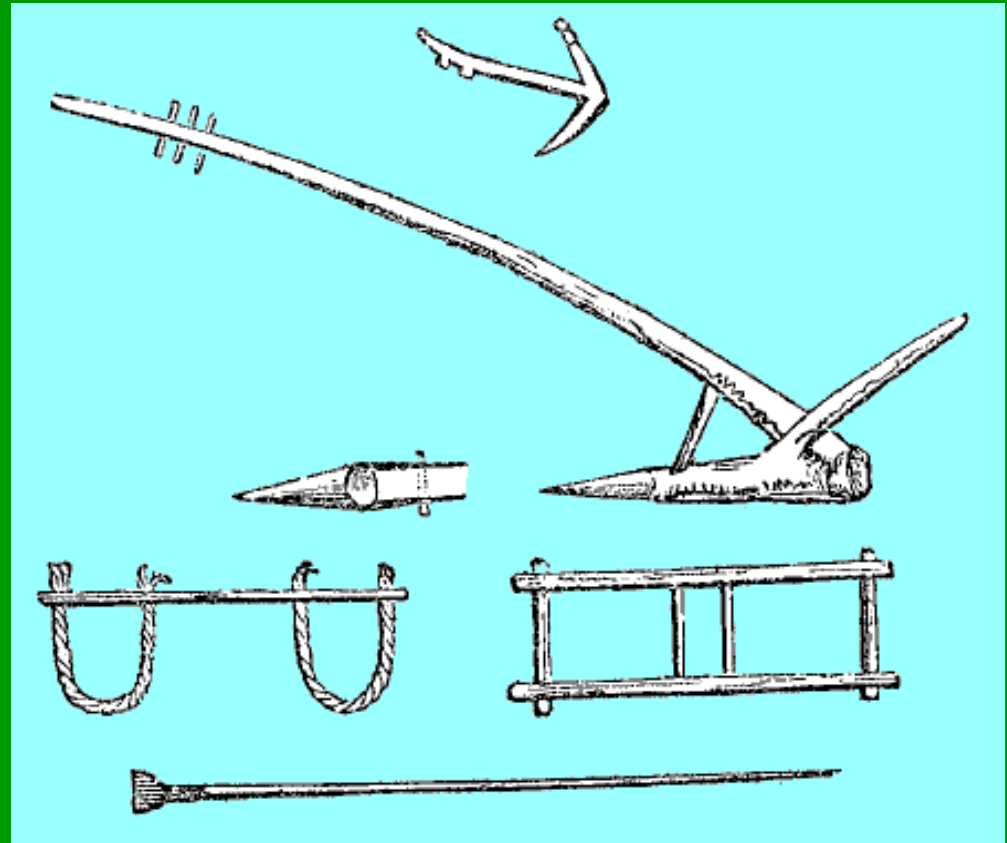
# Structure of government

- ◆ Emperor as military leader
  - Theoretically rules through the Senate
  - Controls provinces through Governors
  - Procurator responsible for finance
- ◆ Increasing bureaucracy
  - Third century reorganisation



# The economy 1

- ◆ Money and taxation
  - Roman Empire as parasitic system
  - Coins as propaganda
- ◆ Agriculture
  - Mixed farming
  - Export of grain
  - Private land ownership
  - Fourth-century *coloni*



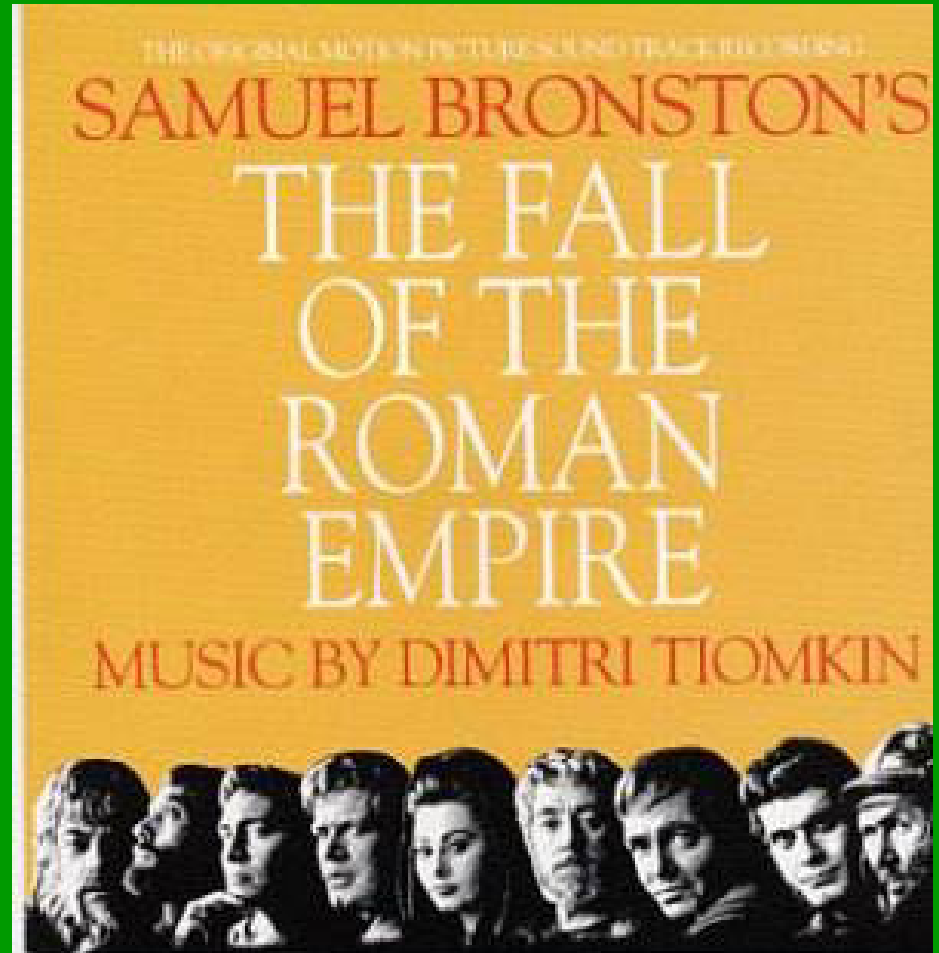
# The economy 2

- ◆ Manufacturing
  - Explosion in quantity and variety of finds
  - Craft specialisation
  - Regional distribution
- ◆ Trade
  - Luxuries from Mediterranean
- ◆ A consumer-led economy?
  - Certainly consumerist!



# The 'End of Roman Britain'

- ◆ Traditional date 410
  - Poor authority
- ◆ Part of general breakdown in the West
  - 'Dominoes' scenario
- ◆ How much did it mean to the Britons?
  - Reputation for being independent-minded



# The rural landscape

- ◆ Roads
  - Military in origin
    - ◆ Sometimes ignore field systems
  - Local roads not straight and not embanked
- ◆ Hierarchy of settlement
  - 'Cities', towns, villages, hamlets, villas and farmsteads





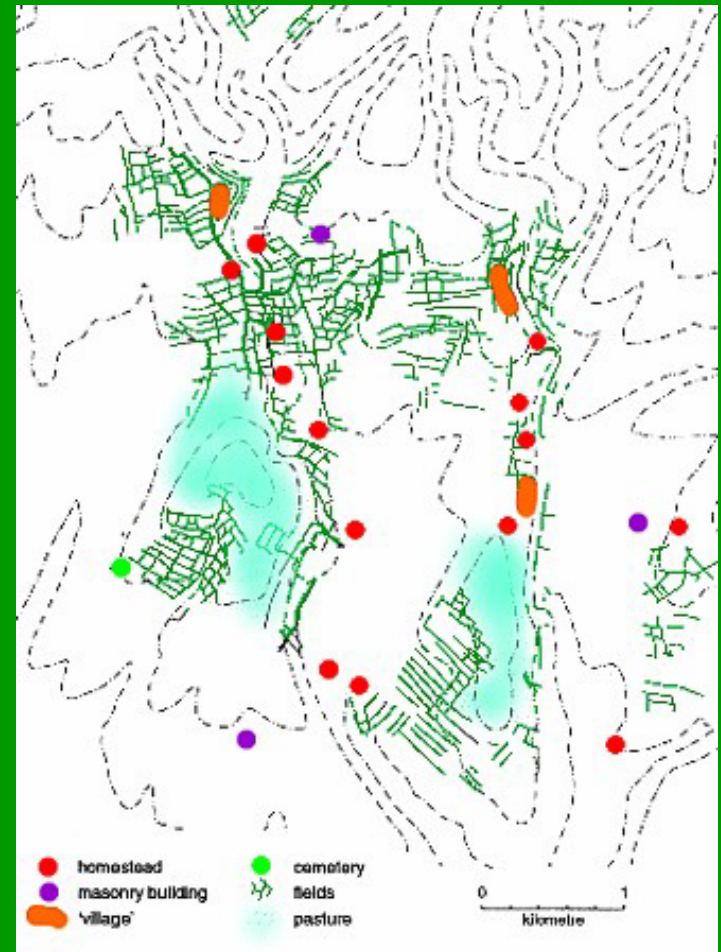
# Villages and hamlets

- ◆ Once thought not to exist
  - Relatively commonplace
  - Agriculture and small-scale industry
- ◆ Little sense of organisation
  - Catsgore (Somerset)
  - Chisenbury Warren (Wilts)
  - Crosby Ravensworth (Cumb)



# Farmsteads

- ◆ Early farms resemble Iron Age precursors
  - Some develop into romanised farms (villas)
  - Others remain little changed
- ◆ Often stigmatised as 'native settlements'
  - Actually dominant settlement type of Roman Britain



# Villas

- ◆ Huge range of types
  - Prosperous farmhouses
    - ◆ Little Wymondley bypass
  - Estate centres
    - ◆ Gorhambury
  - Stately Homes
    - ◆ Radwell
  - Palaces
    - ◆ Wallington?



# The collapse of the Romano-British system

- ◆ Towns apparently deserted during the fifth century
  - Last buildings often date from 390-400
    - ◆ With some well-known exceptions
      - *Verulamium*
  - Collapse of economy
    - ◆ Infrastructure on which towns depend vanishes
- ◆ Other Romanised forms disappear
  - No new villas after c 400



# So what are we looking at?

- ◆ The local evidence
  - Mostly consists of finds without context
    - ◆ Archaeology not appreciated when the Garden City was founded
  - Some more recent excavations
    - ◆ Blackhorse Road 1957-74
    - ◆ High Avenue 1997-9
- ◆ But difficult to synthesise
  - Because it is so disparate



# The later Iron Age

- ◆ In the first century BC, there are several occupation sites
  - Wilbury Hill
    - ◆ Houses built over demolished defences
  - Blackhorse Road
    - ◆ An enclosed farmstead
  - St Nicholas's School, Norton
    - ◆ Difficult to characterise



# The Iron Age at Blackhorse Road

- ◆ Icknield Way established
  - Substantial ditches mark its course
  - Gap leads through to enclosures to the north
- ◆ Four enclosures were constructed
  - They represent separate farmsteads
    - ◆ Not all in use at the same time
  - Date from the 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> century BC to the Roman conquest



# Roman settlements

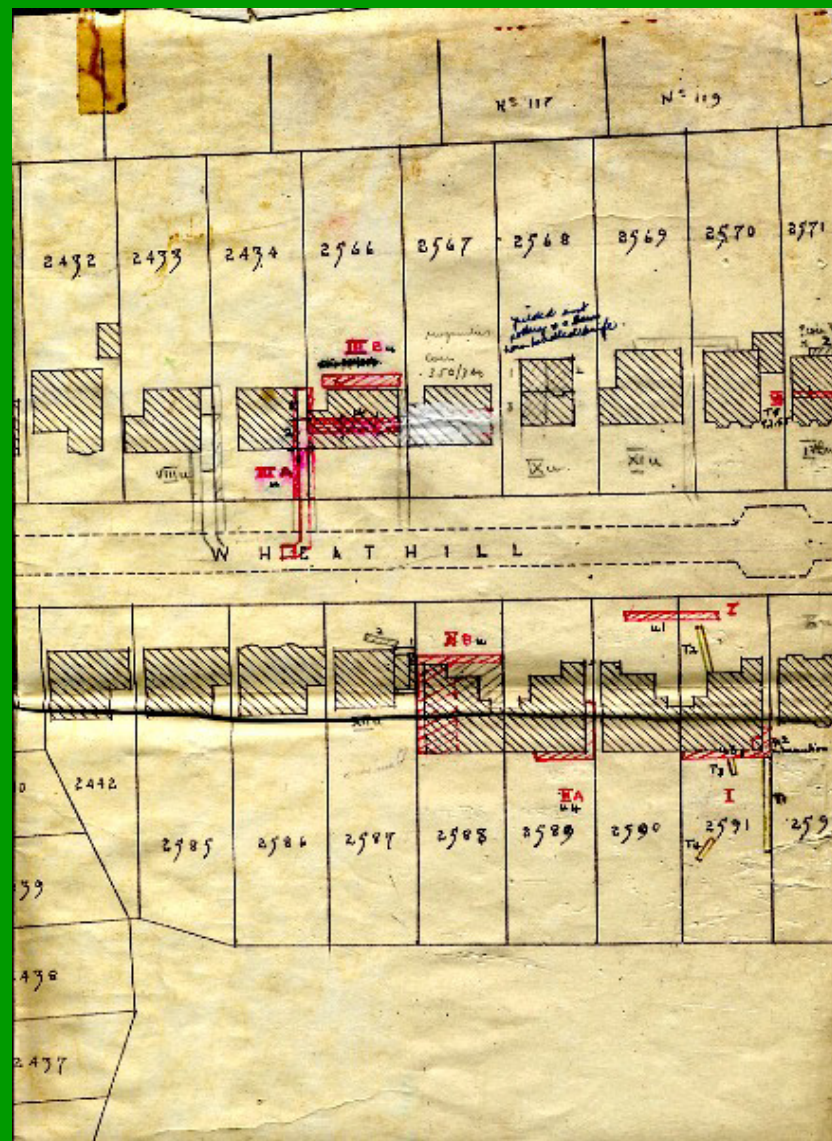
- ◆ Blackhorse Road
  - Iron Age site abandoned
  - Activity shifted to the east
- ◆ St Nicholas's School and Church Lane, Norton
  - Pottery, glass and a fourth-century coin found in 1907
- ◆ High Avenue/Sollershott West
  - Finds reported since the 1930s
  - Small scale excavation in 1955
  - Settlement excavated on old Grammar School playing field in 1990s





# Roman finds

- ◆ Hawthorn Hill, Norton
  - Discovered by Percival Westell
  - Poorly dug and recorded
  - We will be returning there in March!
- ◆ 43 Archers Way
  - Reported during construction work in 1935
    - ◆ "Rectangular occupation site"
- ◆ Haselfoot
  - Pottery and animal bone
- ◆ Two Chimneys
  - Discoveries made in a sand pit and during the construction of the public house
- ◆ Spring Road
  - Iron horseshoe and first century pottery



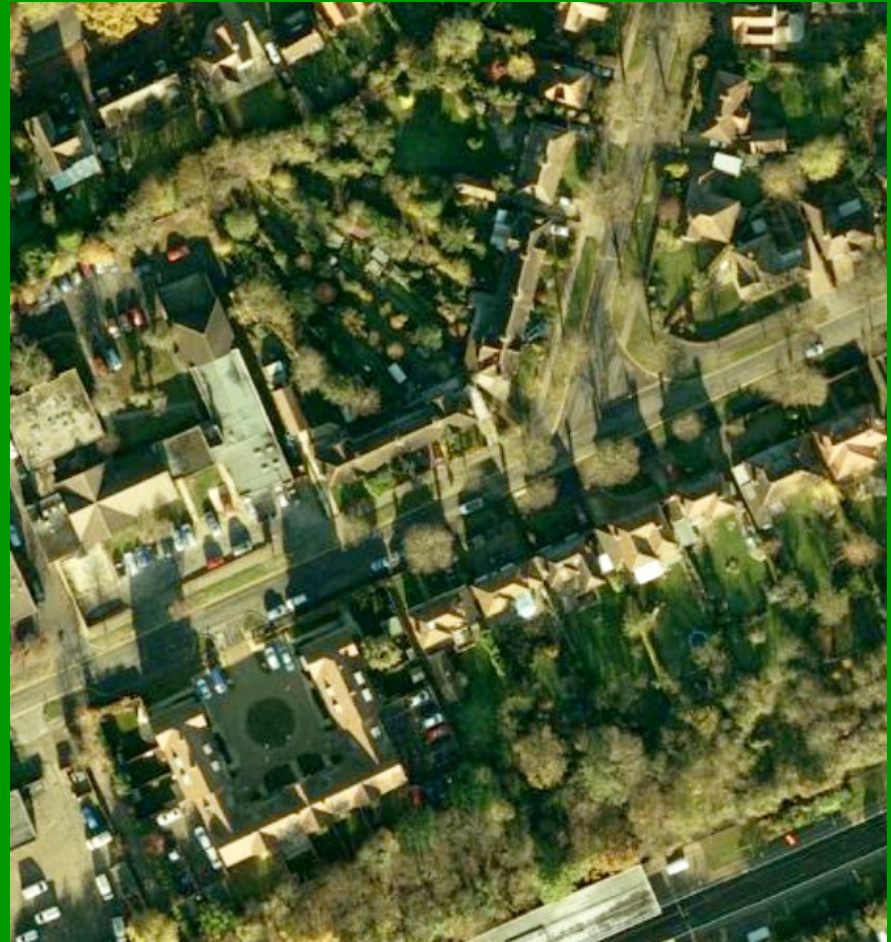






# Pottery from Nevell's Road

- ★ Roman finds made in 1906
  - Included “evidence for open sewers”
    - ★ These are probably drainage ditches
- ★ There is a small collection of finds
  - Roman pottery including samian ware
  - Animal bones





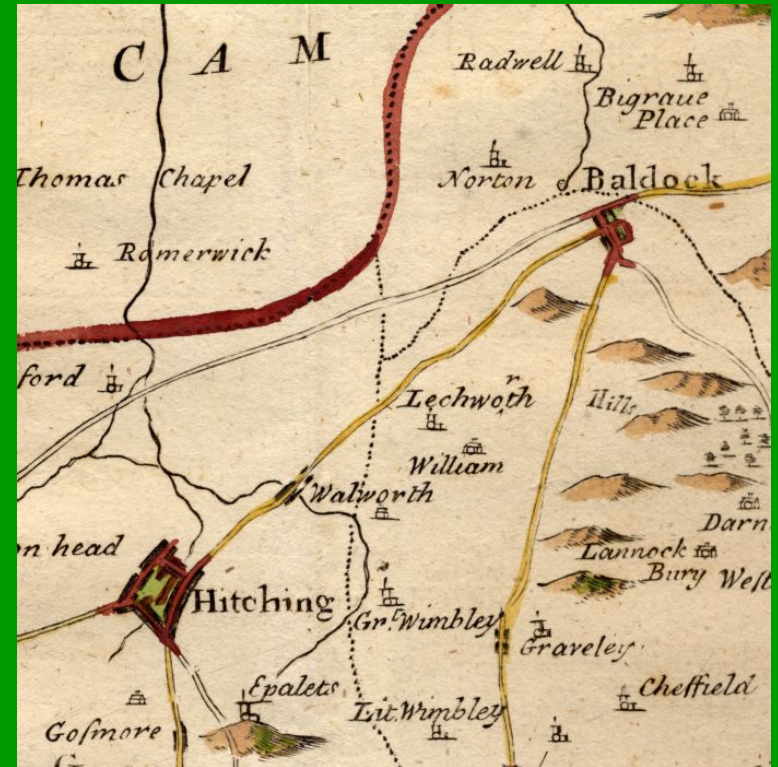
# Willian

- ◆ Burial discovered by William Ransom
  - No further information!
- ◆ Finds made in 1961
  - Rear of Puncharden Hall
  - Consist of cattle and deer bone with Roman pottery
    - ◆ Found at a depth of six feet
    - ◆ Roman quarry or pit?



# The Ickniel Way

- ★ Supposed to be the oldest trackway in Britain
  - Seen as a major route from East Anglia to the Thames Valley
  - Used in the distribution of flint from Grimes Graves
- ★ But there is no real evidence from before the Late Iron Age
  - It is seen at Baldock and Blackhorse Road





# What does it all mean?

- ◆ The material is widespread
  - There are coins from almost every street
  - There is pottery over much of the town
    - ◆ Often associated with animal bone
- ◆ Few features have been observed
  - Those at Hawthorn Hill, High Avenue and Nevells Road are the exceptions
  - But they give us an idea of what's going on



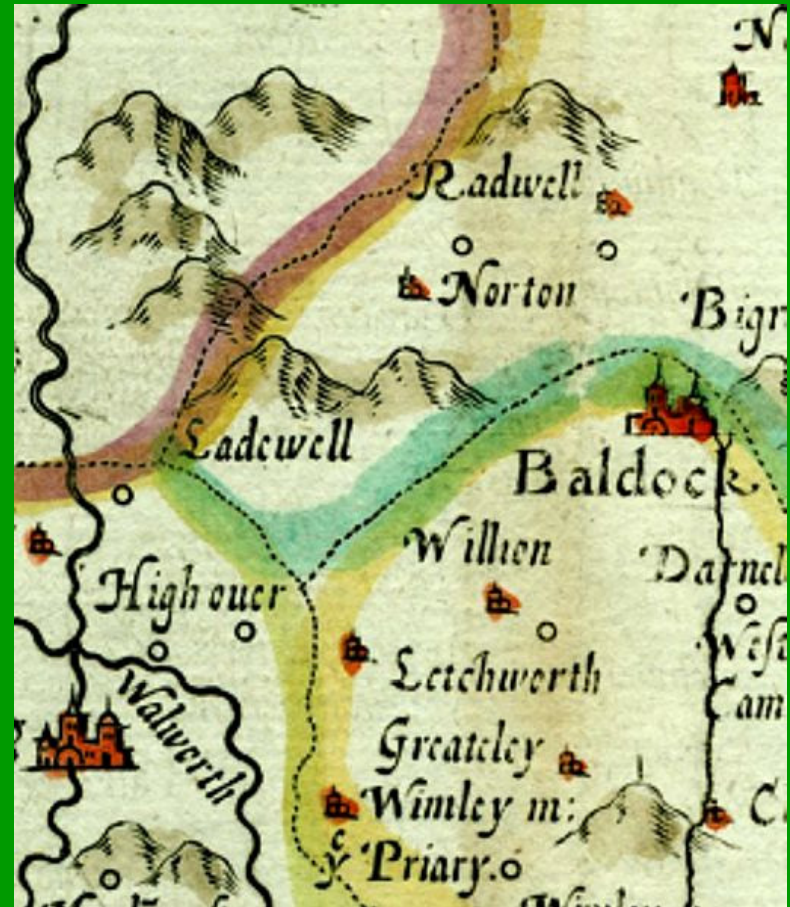
# Settlement patterns

- ◆ Areas with features and/or Roman finds
  - Tend to be close to the tops of low hills
    - ◆ This seems to be a real pattern
  - Unusual location for Roman sites
- ◆ The features suggest small areas of habitation
  - Perhaps groups of farmsteads
    - ◆ Hamlets



# Intervisibility

- ◆ The location of the sites makes them intervisible
  - Which means we can predict where others ought to be
    - ◆ Eastholm Green, Leisure Centre, Jackman's Estate
- ◆ Why are they intervisible?
  - Suggests a network and some sort of control
    - ◆ A single estate?
    - ◆ To feed Baldock?



# The challenge

- ◆ This looks like an estate run by bailiffs
  - They were usually based in villas
    - ◆ So where are they?
- ◆ Most of the *territorium* of Baldock has a villa in each medieval parish
  - So there should be three in Letchworth Garden City.
    - ◆ Can we find them?

