

# Roman Industry in Normangate Field, Castor

*By Geoffrey Dannell*

The Roman remains in Normangate Field lie within an area of some 28 hectares (69 acres), immediately north of the Nene. Ignoring the modern intrusions of the railway and Station Road, Castor, the site is bounded by three principal roads: to the west, by Ermine Street, and the King Street branch (fig 2:1) ; to the east, by a branch road (2) to the Fen Causeway, which meets Ermine Street at the bridge-head (3); to the north, by a by-road some 400 metres north of the river (4). Within this crude triangle, internal drove-ways serve the various nuclei of occupation (5), and the wide feeder-road to the Roman house in Castor village strikes out to the north (6).

This skeleton of roads, so clearly visible from the pioneer air photographs of Major G. W. G. Allen, is certainly not of one period. Artis ((1828), pl. XXXIX) shows an earlier, flat and supposedly "military" version of Ermine Street, diverging from the line of the huge *agger* still visible in the field. Recent excavations failed to find it, but suggested a Hadrianic date for the principal road embankment. The other main roads certainly existed by this period, but the drove-ways may be later.

Wherever excavation has taken place recently, the first substantial Roman activity is represented by large areas of burnt natural sand, covered by friable clay and wood-ash. Pits associated with this work contain fine grey-wares of the mid-second century, but no kilns are known and we must begin to think seriously of the problems involved in firing vessels in bonfires and in clamps in which the leather-hard pots were covered by turves.

While the pits contain domestic rubbish, neither stone nor wooden buildings have been located. Perhaps the potters were throwing their vessels within the town at this period, and using the scrub-lands by the river only for firing. If this is right, Normangate Field remained fairly open ground until towards the end of the second century.

By this time, however, a major technical revolution had swept the area. The art of colour-coating was introduced to the indigenous workers and the Castor potteries emerged to send their beakers throughout the Roman provinces.

Exactly where the first kilns were built is as yet uncertain; but Brian Hartley excavated a small and seemingly experimental kiln in Normangate Field (7). Pits containing the earliest vessel-forms are also present in the general area north of the railway embankment. The new

prosperity affected the whole social and economic life of the lower Nene Valley, and its market town of Durobrivae. As imports of samian ware from Gaul continued to decline, sales of colour-coated wares boomed, and it is not coincidental that this period saw an abrupt development of stone and half-timbered buildings (8).

Ore roasting and smelting was carried out to the west, near Wansford, from ore mined in Bedford Purlieus. The workshops in Normangate Field dealt with the smelted product, and both further refined and fabricated it. The buildings appear to be set in pairs, so that they are separated by a narrow alley on the one side, while on the other wide doors allowed carts to discharge their loads under cover.

In the back yards of the buildings kitchen gardening doubtless supplied the workers' families; but soon the pressure on available land forced further industry into the free space. Artis records furnaces and clay dumps in the back yards, while recent excavations have revealed more kilns.

Along the drove-way parallel to Ermine Street a series of unexpected structures came to light. The frontage of Ermine Street was apparently too valuable to be used for the burial and religious monuments often found close to towns. Against the drove-way was found a small mausoleum containing three burials and belonging to the fourth century (9). A woman buried there with gold and silver ear-rings, silver brooch, bronze bangles, and jet spindle-whorl is a reminder of the affluence of this provincial society. A large number of weights probably from goldsmith's balances have come from Durobrivae, showing that there was sufficient demand for such craftsmen to settle there.

The other buildings in the immediate vicinity of the drove-way are open to various interpretations, but the circular structures are strongly suggestive of religious use. Circular shrines are known locally at Collyweston and Brigstock in the third century. The most northerly of the Normangate Field series (10) has a broad entrance to the South, and a support for a bench along the inside of the northern half; the southern building (11) had a tessellated floor. The simple barn adjoining it (12) had a portico added, together with an apse, and then it, too, received a tessellated floor. The way in which the apse faces the wide entrance suggests that perhaps there was a cult statue which could be seen immediately on entering the building.

Land pressures allowed the erection of an aisled barn over the northern circular building in the late third or early fourth century as the industrial activity continued to expand. Dr Graham Webster has confirmed the intensity of industrial settlement in the eastern sector of Normangate Field where he investigated buildings along the roads, and a mass of ditched plots can be seen in the area of the drove-way to Castor village (13).

Occupation clearly lasted until the end of the fourth century; for the framework of local organisation maintained the drove-way drainage ditches. Near the mausoleum the final rapidly deposited filling contained coins of the House of Valentinian (after 370), but nothing of Theodosius. Late forms of colour-coated wares were present, together with new, heavy, grey-wares from still unidentified sources.

Future work should prove rewarding. A recent air-photograph by Mr S. G. Upex records the outline of what may be a theatre in the eastern sector, together with a series of substantial stone buildings (14). To the west, the junction of Ermine Street and King Street must rank as a major site of historical interest, while the winding drove-ways suggest heavy occupation on the building plots to the north.

We must remember the vast extent of the northern suburbs of Durobrivae. Professor St. Joseph has recorded closely packed buildings from the town to the river. These almost certainly equal the area of Normangate Field which we have surveyed. Moreover, stone building debris and kiln waste has been found as far north as the A47.

So it is likely that by the beginning of the fourth century many more people were living immediately outside the town than within it. It seems probable, on present evidence, that the larger towns do not boast suburbs on this scale, and Durobrivae may one day be seen to rank with its "twin" at the other end of the limestone ridge at Corinium Dobunorum (Cirencester).

Finally, we must ask what those industrial suburbs looked like. Today's green fields and quiet river, which we are striving to preserve, are probably deceptive. Then the smoke hung like a pall on the prevailing south-west wind. Sparks flew from the kilns and furnaces, while the noise and activity betokened Birmingham rather than John Clare's Northamptonshire. Disraeli described the industrial squalor of Bromwich and Cradley; the master craftsmen labouring over their hearths; the families and apprentices hammering and filing away; the noise; the dirt; the drinking.

"On Sunday the masters begin to drink; for the apprentices there is dog-fighting without any stint. On Monday and Tuesday the whole population of Woodgate is drunk."

For what else were all those beakers used?

## Bibliography

Artis (1828)

E. T. Artis, *The Durobrivae of Antoninus Identified and Illustrated*, 1828.