

LES VILLES DE LA GAULE BELGIQUE AU HAUT-EMPIRE

Actes du Colloque
tenu à Saint-Riquier (Somme)
les 22 - 23 - 24 octobre 1982



REVUE ARCHEOLOGIQUE
DE PICARDIE

N° 3 - 4 / 1984 - 140 Frs

THE CITIES OF BRITAIN IN THE CRISIS OF THE THIRD CENTURY

by S.S. FRERE *

There is a great difference between the history of cities in Britain in the third century and that of cities in Gaul. The basic reason for this is that third-century Britain suffered no serious barbarian invasions. It is true that from towards the end of the second century there had begun sea-raids by Saxons from Germany or by Picts from the North ; but the gradual development of Saxon Shore defences to their full extent by 290 suggests that this danger was contained. There was certainly no widespread destruction of cities at enemy hands in Britain ; and although at one period scholars used to think that the cities of Britain had suffered serious decline during the economic crisis of the later third century, we now realize that even that view was greatly exaggerated.

There are two great contrasts between Gaul and Britain. The first is that most British cities received defences at the end of the *second* century, and these defences accordingly surrounded living communities, excluding only suburbs ; they were not, as so often in Gaul, defending merely the core of the cities but enclose 45 ha or more ⁽¹⁾. The second difference is that these late second-century defences were in *earthwork* — consisting of a bank and ditches ; masonry walls are almost always third-century additions to the late second-century earth banks. So, in order to understand British cities in the third century, we must look at the history of fortification.

Before the end of the second century only few British cities had received defences ; and with only two exceptions these were cities of colonial or probable municipal status. The *coloniae* had second-century walls. At Colchester the original legionary defences had been dismantled, with disastrous results in A.D. 61 ; early in the second century a city wall was built. At Lincoln and Gloucester, late Flavian *coloniae*, the legionary defences were retained, but were soon faced in stone. *Verulamium*, the probable *municipium*, had a first-century *earthwork* defence ; and in the middle of the second century a larger area was taken in and a second line of bank and ditch was begun (fig. 1). The earlier defence enclosed 48 ha — the second 93, almost twice the area.

The only other first-century urban defences known, at Silchester and Winchester, can be explained by their lying within a client kingdom, where normal rules controlling the creation of defences did not apply.

* Institute of Archaeology
36 Beaumont Street
OXFORD

(1) The walls of London enclose 133 ha, those of *Verulamium* 80 ha ; most other cities were about 40—50 ha within their walls.

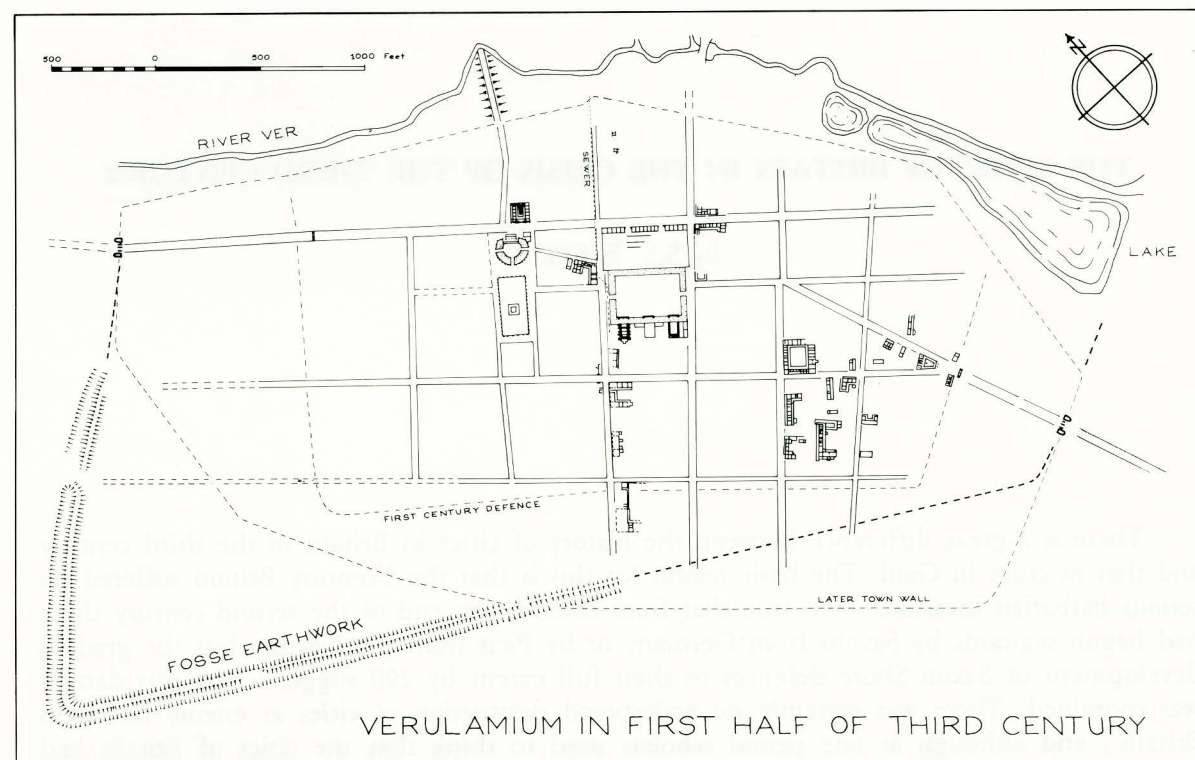


Fig. 1. *Verulamium* in the first half of the third century.

But probably in the last decade of the second century the vast majority of Romano-British towns were given earthwork defences. The *exact* date is of course uncertain, and the excavated evidence naturally varies from site to site ; but the phenomenon of urban defences in pure earthwork is so unusual in the western provinces that it must be assumed to have been a single programme caused by some crisis : and in that case the latest archaeological date for any of them can be applied to all ; and this date is *c.* 190. The sole advantage of earthwork over masonry is that it can be rapidly put up by large gangs of unskilled labour ; whereas towns walls require skilled masons, of whom there were not enough to wall all towns simultaneously. The best explanation for the earthwork programme, if it was not caused by the threat of barbarian raiding (for which there is very little evidence), is that the programme was undertaken by *D. Clodius Albinus* in preparation for his continental expedition against *Septimius Severus* in 196.

Sometimes we have evidence, as at Winchester, for wooden gateways ⁽²⁾ ; but in most places later masonry gates have destroyed the evidence. For during the third century these great ramparts were gradually and progressively faced with walls, that being the best solution to the problem of maintaining them in a defensible condition. The few cities which had not been given earthworks in the earlier programme were also now walled : London for instance had a wall built about 210-220. But these walls too were backed with earthwork, presumably partly to dispose of material dug from the ditches, but also because a wall backed by a rampart did not need to be so thick as a free-standing wall. In archaeological terms the result is that excavation will show one of two phenomena : either the wall is later than the bank,

(2) For the plan of the Winchester timber South Gate see BIDDLE M., *The Antiquaries Journal*, LV, 1975, 110 with fig. 6.

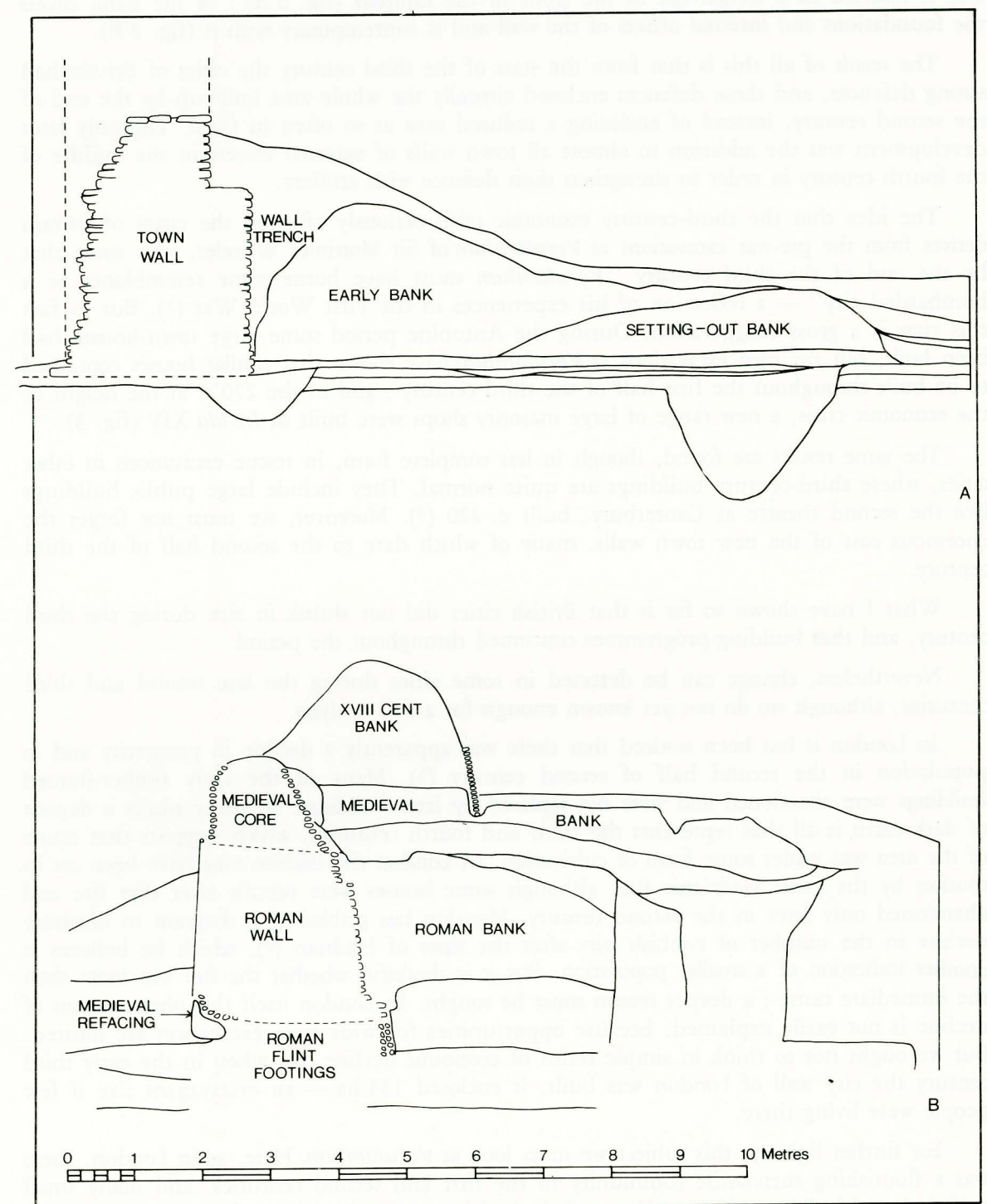


Fig. 2. Diagram to illustrate (*top*) a city wall inserted in the front of an earlier rampart, and (*bottom*) a city wall with contemporary rampart (A. Silchester, after Cotton M.A. *Archaeologia* XCII (1947), 126, fig. 2. B. Canterbury, after Frere S.S. in *The Archaeology of Canterbury* vol. II [Frere S.S., Stow S. and Bennett P., *Excavations on the Roman and Medieval Defences of Canterbury*, Maidstone 1982], fig. 12).

and is inserted in a trench cut in the front of the rampart (fig. 2 A) ; or the bank covers the foundations and internal offsets of the wall and is contemporary with it (fig. 2 B).

The result of all this is that from the start of the third century the cities of Britain had strong defences, and these defences enclosed virtually the whole area built up by the end of the second century, instead of enclosing a reduced area as so often in Gaul. The only later development was the addition to almost all town walls of external towers in the middle of the fourth century in order to strengthen their defence with artillery.

The idea that the third-century economic crisis seriously affected the cities of Britain derives from the pre-war excavations at *Verulamium* of Sir Mortimer Wheeler, who wrote that by the end of the third century "*Verulamium* must have borne some resemblance to a bombarded city" — a reflection of his experiences in the First World War (3). But in fact this view is a gross exaggeration. During the Antonine period some large town-houses had been built, but my own excavations at *Verulamium* have shown that similar houses continued to be built throughout the first half of the third century ; and in the 270's, at the height of the economic crisis, a new range of large masonry shops were built in *Insula XIV* (fig. 3).

The same results are found, though in less complete form, in rescue excavations in other cities, where third-century buildings are quite normal. They include large public buildings like the second theatre at Canterbury, built c. 220 (4). Moreover, we must not forget the enormous cost of the new town walls, many of which date to the second half of the third century.

What I have shown so far is that British cities did not shrink in size during the third century, and that building-programmes continued throughout the period.

Nevertheless, change can be detected in some cities during the late second and third centuries, although we do not yet know enough for a full analysis.

In London it has been noticed that there was apparently a decline in prosperity and in population in the second half of second century (5). Many of the early timber-framed buildings were abandoned and were not replaced by later buildings. In many places a deposit of dark earth is all that represents the third and fourth centuries, which suggests that much of the area was under some form of cultivation. In London the decline may have been set in motion by the great Hadrianic fire, although some houses were rebuilt after that fire and abandoned only later in the second century. Marsden has published a diagram to illustrate decline in the number of rubbish pits after the time of Hadrian (6), which he believes is another indication of a smaller population. But it is doubtful whether the fire was more than the immediate cause ; a deeper reason must be sought. In London itself this phenomenon of decline is not easily explained, because opportunities for wide-scale excavation are limited. But we ought not to think in simple terms of economic decline, for when in the early third century the city wall of London was built, it enclosed 133 ha — an extravagant size if few people were living there.

For further light on this subject we must look at *Verulamium*. Here, as in London, there was a flourishing mercantile community in the first and second centuries, and many small half-timbered buildings frequently renewed. And just as the Hadrianic fire marked a turning

(3) WHEELER R.E.M. and T.V., *Verulamium, a Belgic and two Roman Cities*, Oxford, 1936, 28.

(4) For the Canterbury Roman Theatre see FRERE S.S., *Britannia*, I, 1969, 83-113.

(5) On this see MARSDEN P., *Roman London*, London, 1980.

(6) *Ibid.*, 148.

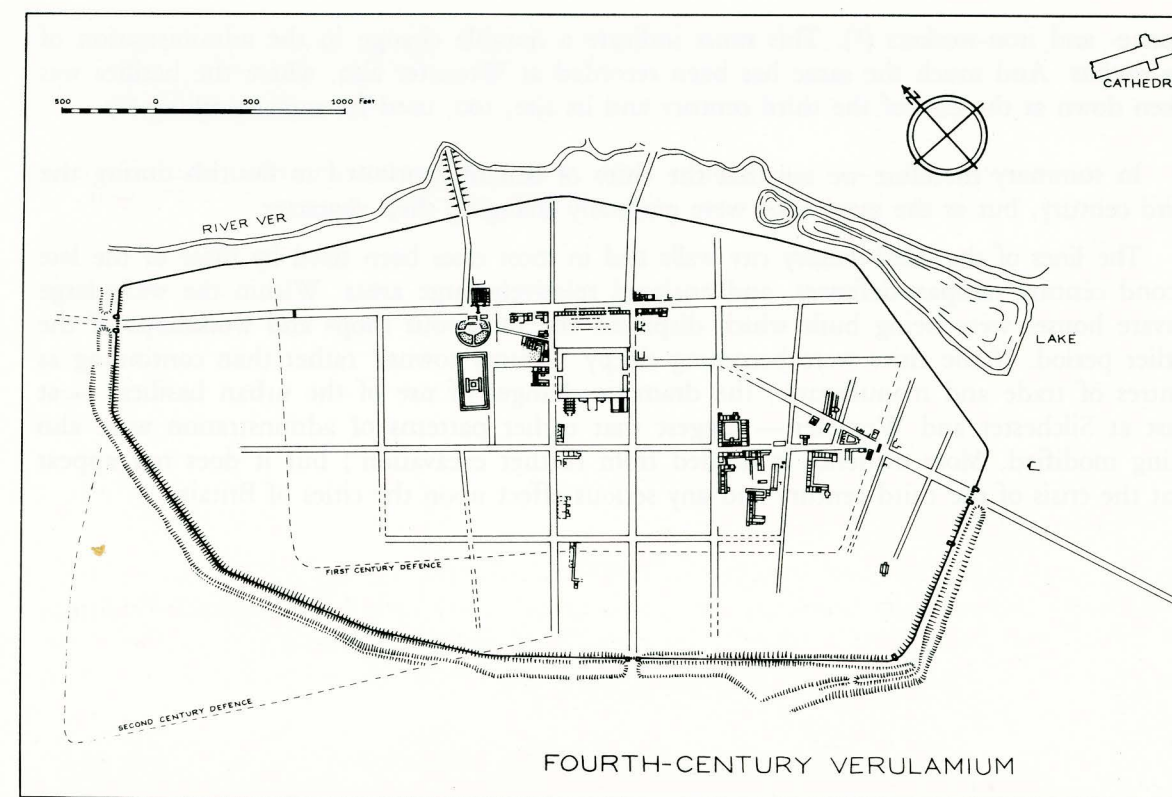


Fig. 3. *Verulamium*, c. A.D. 300.

point in London, so at *Verulamium* the great fire of c. 155 marked a change in the density and character of occupation. In the later second and third centuries instead of many small half-timbered buildings and rows of shops, we see for the first time construction of really large town-houses in masonry (7). their appearance is spread over 70-80 years, from c. A.D. 170 to 250, and it resulted in a striking transformation. No really large town houses are known at *Verulamium* before the Antonine fire ; but the new houses cover up to eight times the area of the earlier dwellings and often contain up to three times as many rooms. There has clearly been a great social change. The wealthy tribal aristocrats were now moving into the town, and the early mercantile and manufacturing activity was disappearing. Even in *Insula XIV* there were now only six large masonry shops in the space where previously 12 tightly-packed half-timbered shops had stood in the early Antonine period. The city was becoming a residential and administrative centre instead of a commercial and administrative one ; the Mediterranean-inspired commercial character of the beginning was being replaced by the country town more natural to the north-western provinces. I believe that the evolution of London can be explained in the same way.

Towards the end of the third century there occurred one further noteworthy change, though its extent and meaning are not yet understood. At Silchester recent excavations have shown that the floor of the *forum's* basilica was removed and the interior was given over to

(7) On the development of *Verulamium* see FRERE S.S., *Verulamium Excavations*, II, London, 1983, *Introduction* ; also FRERE S.S. in King A. and Henig M. (editors), *The Roman West in the Third Century*, British Archaeological Reports, International Series, n° 109, Part 2, Oxford, 1981, 383-392.

bronze- and iron-workers⁽⁸⁾. This must indicate a notable change in the administration of the *civitas*. And much the same has been recorded at Wroxeter also, where the basilica was taken down at the end of the third century and its site, too, used for metal-working⁽⁹⁾.

In summary therefore we see that the cities of Britain continued to flourish during the third century, but at the same time were gradually changing their character.

The lines of the third-century city walls had in most cases been fixed by those of the late second century rampart-defences, and enclosed relatively large areas. Within the walls large private houses were being built which displaced the numerous shops and workshops of the earlier period. If the cities were becoming sleepy "county towns" rather than continuing as centres of trade and manufacture, the dramatic changes of use of the urban basilicas — at least at Silchester and Wroxeter — suggest that earlier patterns of administration were also being modified. More evidence is needed from further excavation; but it does not appear that the crisis of the third century had any serious effect upon the cities of Britain.

(8) The excavations are reported in *Britannia*, XII, 1981, 362; XIII, 1982, 389-391.

(9) ATKINSON D., *Report on Excavations at Wroxeter 1923-27*, Oxford, 1942. WACHER J., *The Towns of Roman Britain*, London, 1975, 373-374.