

New light on Roman Kent

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Introduction

Kent, the nearest point to mainland Europe of Rome's most northwesterly province, plays a key rôle in helping us to understand the evolution of Roman Britain (fig. 1). In recent years the county has come under intense development pressure, following the construction of the Channel Tunnel and the consequent opening up of southeast England to European markets, and this has resulted in major programmes of development-led archaeology. This paper considers this work and the major impact it is having on our understanding of Roman Kent. The contributions of the various individuals and organisations are listed and gratefully acknowledged on p. 236.

Kent forms a peninsula jutting out towards the continent which is only c.30 km away. Its S and E coasts face the English Channel; its N coast follows the S shore of the Thames estuary, which leads to London and has been, since early prehistory, an important artery to the heart of England. Kent is a county rich in archaeology of all periods from the Palaeolithic onwards; for the Roman period one can note the cantonal capital of Canterbury, the walled town of Rochester, Saxon Shore forts at Reculver, Richborough, Dover and Lympne, and villas at Darenth, Eccles and Lullingstone.¹

In geological terms Kent is a county of contrasts, which relates to its present landform, an eroded anticline. In places along the coast are marshland and wetland, now largely reclaimed. There are the well-drained chalk Downs and the greensand vale of Holmesdale; in the Weald proper, at the heart of the county, a mixture of heavy clays and sands supported an afforested landscape until the Middle Ages and acted as a barrier and hindrance to early settlement growth.

In 1994 the Channel Tunnel was opened. In order to take advantage of the tunnel, the rail and road infrastructure in Kent both required considerable investment. This resulted in the construction of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL) and substantial upgrading of the major road network. This work has been accompanied by systematic large-scale archaeological investigations. Indeed, the programme of survey and excavation undertaken in connection with the rail link has almost certainly been the largest single archaeological project seen in England. With the improvements to the transport infrastructure have come industrial, commercial and housing growth, and here again development is being accompanied by large-scale archaeological work provided for through the planning process.²

Since this article has been written for international readers who are not necessarily familiar with the organisation of archaeology in England, it is perhaps worth commenting briefly on how the academic requirements of archaeology in Kent are being integrated within the spatial planning process. In the English system of planning, archaeological remains constitute a constraint which needs to be taken account of in the planning process. Most planning proposals are dealt with by local authorities. Kent County Council has an archaeological team (led by the writer) which provides, as "curator" of the archaeological resource in the ground, planning advice to all of Kent's districts apart from Canterbury (covered by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust) and the unitary authority of Medway. A primary objective is to safeguard archaeological remains *in situ*; where this is not possible or appropriate, mitigation (normally excavation and recording) may be required as a condition of any planning consent given.³ The responsibility for securing funding for this archaeological work falls to the developer; investigations are undertaken by archaeological units or trusts (frequently after a commercial tendering process) working to a specification agreed with the planning authority. Planning conditions must satisfy the test of "reasonableness". It is therefore important that planning authorities, advised by their archaeological "curators", seek to ensure that the work undertaken is both value for money and contributes to an increased understanding of the past. Some major projects (such as the CTRL,

1 J. H. Williams (ed.), *The archaeology of Kent to AD 800* (Kent History Project, forthcoming).

2 *Current Archaeology* 168 (2000).

3 Cf. *Planning Policy Guidance 16* (Department of the Environment, London 1990).