Fonthill Recovered

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The early history of Fonthill

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The extraordinary personalities and fascinating architecture of the Fonthill estate continue to draw considerable academic and public attention. These houses and those who lived and worked in them are, however, only the latest and most famous in a lengthy succession of settlements and inhabitants of the Fonthill landscape. As with the majority of the post-medieval houses at Fonthill, these earlier places now lie hidden beneath the rolling fields, woods and parkland of the estate. Relatively little archaeology has been conducted on the estate until the last decade, when two projects have undertaken work on the southern parts of the estate.1 This first chapter will discuss the prehistory and early history of Fonthill with the aim of providing some context for the later history of the estate, with particular emphasis on the Roman period, as this has seen the bulk of archaeological research.

The key to understanding the long-term history of the Fonthill area is its location adjacent to the Jurassic inlier that intervenes in the mass of Wessex chalk from the west, running from Blackmoor Vale towards Wilton (see Figure 2.1). Most of the estate itself sits on Cretaceous chalk, but Jurassic limestone, sandstone and mudstone immediately to the south and west provide geological and ecological variation, allowing a more diverse set of agricultural and economic opportunities than across much of the county.2 The Jurassic inlier provides the area with seams of high-quality building stone,3 areas of iron ore and heavier, richer soils than the chalk, which are excellent for woodland growth. A similar diversity of activity can still be seen in land use on the estate today.

Prehistoric Fonthill

The Fonthill area is unlikely to have been ice-bound in the last glaciation, but its first Holocene inhabitants would have entered a very different landscape to the well-managed parks and woodlands of the present day. These Mesolithic communities would have moved around the landscape in small groups, travelling between
the probably heavily wooded area of the Nadder valley, and more open woodland covering much of the chalk. While there are only three finds of Mesolithic date from the Fonthill estate (all flint tools, reported to the Portable Antiquities Scheme), people would certainly have used the area at this time; just 6 km to the east at Teffont Evias, a fieldwalking survey discovered a late Mesolithic flint industry that had left behind hundreds of carefully knapped blades. The population of the Fonthill area at this time would have been highly mobile, exploiting wild plant and animal resources. Little is known of the social or ritual aspects of life in Mesolithic south Wiltshire, but it is clear that certain places held great significance. A spring at Blick Mead, near Amesbury, has recently produced evidence of Mesolithic communities apparently returning to the site over several thousand years, leaving behind enormous quantities of tools and consumption debris.

In the fourth millennium BC, communities began to adopt farming, adjusting their mobile lifestyles to include the production of crops providing storable...
surpluses of food; the light soils of the chalk provided ideal conditions for these innovations. Perhaps even more importantly, it was in this period that domesticated animals were introduced, providing a range of resources and new lifeways. Around the end of the fourth millennium BC, however, communities in Wiltshire appear to have abandoned arable cultivation, and focused on a pastoral lifestyle, using a combination of domesticated animals and wild resources. These lifeways allowed time and labour to be invested in the building of substantial monuments such as Stonehenge, Avebury and Silbury Hill to mark important places in the landscape and provide places for gatherings and ceremonies of social and ritual importance. One of these major monuments, Tisbury Henge, was close to Fonthill – although its precise location remains elusive, and the subject of ongoing research – and is known to have stood at least in part until 1782, when it was fully dismantled and several of the megaliths reused in an ornamental grotto at Old Wardour Castle.

Finds of Neolithic flint tools have been made across the Fonthill area, but no monuments of this date are known on the estate. This may be because the area is likely to have still been forested; clearance for agriculture is unlikely to have been prioritised due to the unsuitability of heavier soils for the ploughing technology available at the time, although this remains an assumption until the palaeoenvironmental dataset for the Nadder valley is developed from its current lamentably minimal state.

In the later third millennium BC, metalworking technologies began to reach different parts of Britain from Europe, becoming widespread by ca. 2150 BC. As the technologies spread, alongside improvements and intensifications of agriculture (including the resumption of arable cultivation in areas where this had ceased in the Middle Neolithic) and population growth, more stratified social hierarchies developed. Wealth was displayed through weapons, jewellery and other prestige metalwork, and through the construction of numerous round barrows as funerary monuments; there are three such mounds in Fonthill Bishop, and one in Fonthill Gifford. As the Bronze Age continued through the second millennium BC, the Wessex landscape was divided through the digging of linear boundary ditches and laying out of field systems such as that still visible as earthworks above the southeastern part of Fonthill Lake. These appear to have affected the layout of the later landscape, as do the probably prehistoric terraces in woodland to the west of the lake. A circular enclosure in Fonthill Clump associated with worked flint may be a settlement of this date, although further investigation is necessary.

Clearance of woodland continued, although evidence for the Fonthill area is lacking and so analogies are drawn from the Stonehenge landscape and Wylve valley.

In the first half of the first millennium BC, bronze and copper technologies rapidly gave way to iron in most practical aspects of metalworking, although the older technologies were still used for some prestigious items. The first noticeably wealthy residents of the Fonthill area begin to emerge at this time. The Hindon hoard (see Figure 2.2), found just beyond the northern edge of the estate, contains artefacts dating from the transition between the Bronze Age and the Iron Age. The
hoard contained 82 objects, including 33 copper alloy axes characteristic of the Late Bronze Age. Alongside these were iron spearheads and an iron sickle, practical objects of significance beyond their utility due to being crafted in the new metal and deposited with a collection of valuable objects made with older technology. We do not know what kind of person or group deposited the hoard, or why, but their ability to collate so many valuable metal objects demonstrates considerable economic power. Agricultural intensification continued in the Iron Age, and it was likely that by this time much of the area’s lighter soils were nearly completely cleared of tree cover, with woodland probably being maintained in some valleys and areas of heavy clay soil. It is in the centuries before and between the Roman invasions in 55 BC and AD 43 that the Fonthill area demonstrates its first unambiguous evidence for permanent settlement.

During these final centuries of the Iron Age, Fonthill’s location was towards the northern edge of the region controlled by a large group centred on Dorset. The Romans called this group the Durotriges, although it is uncertain whether this was a colonial imposition or the group’s original name. Their land was densely occupied, and high status groups among the community became wealthy through trade of the agricultural surpluses derived from intensive mixed farming. Earlier field systems were extended or replaced, and elaborated with complex enclosures for corralling large herds of sheep, cattle and pigs. Small farmsteads formed the backbone of the economy, with people coming together at hillforts such as Maiden Castle, Hod Hill and later lowland sites to trade, for seasonal gatherings
and in times of war.\textsuperscript{21} The centre of life on the Fonthill estate was a large enclosure recently discovered through geophysical survey on a high, flat area of land in the south-west of the modern estate.\textsuperscript{22} The enclosure is subdivided by ditches into areas likely to be compounds of individual dwellings and areas for agricultural and industrial activities.

The settlement is on an area of the estate where high-quality iron ore occurs in the topsoil and subsoil, and this is likely to be part of the rationale for its location. Geophysical results present several areas of very high magnetic responses around the enclosure, and excavation of similar anomalies elsewhere in the field suggests these may be furnaces.\textsuperscript{23} A large hoard of Durotrigian silver staters (coins) was found at the edge of the settlement, which together with its characteristically late Iron Age morphology strongly supports the proposed dating of the site. A small outlying enclosure of similar date, probably for livestock, has been excavated 0.5 km to the east of the site.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{Roman Fonthill}

During the Roman period the archaeological record shows a strong and gradual increase in activity in the Fonthill area. During the building of Little Ridge (later re-named Fonthill House) in 1902–4 in Withy Beds field, Little Ridge, Roman occupation was discovered in the form of a series of pits and ditches which were interpreted by the excavator as a village, although more likely represent a small farmstead.\textsuperscript{25} An interment of a skeleton in a stone-lined grave was found just to the west of the site in 1914, probably indicating the location of an associated cemetery.\textsuperscript{26} Roman material culture was also discovered in the ditches of an enclosure south of Ashley Wood, interpreted by the excavator as a Roman cattle enclosure, although evidence is extremely limited, and the large rectangular earthwork enclosure appears more likely to be a domestic settlement.\textsuperscript{27}

As well as these domestic settlements, numerous finds of Roman coins across the estate and surrounding area demonstrate that the landscape was quite intensively occupied. Occupation at the main Iron Age settlement appears to have ceased in the early Roman period, as few finds of Roman date have been made in this area and another series of enclosures slightly downhill in the same field have produced coins of early to mid-Roman date. In the later Roman period, occupation of the southern part of the estate becomes considerably more intense, with a large-scale industrial operation extracting iron ore to smelt and work on site. A settlement developed around a coombe below the furnaces to support this work, and a temple was built in a circular enclosure at the head of the coombe. Finds of a grain dryer, querns and numerous animal bones at the settlement demonstrate that it drew in agricultural produce from the surrounding area to process and consume.\textsuperscript{28}

The most significant part of the settlement is the temple, a rectangular building measuring ca. 18 m x 9 m. It was floored with large limestone flagstones (see
and had a limestone tiled roof; clear traces remained of differential wear on floor slabs of a massive timber frame supporting the roof. The floor was very worn, and had been repeatedly repaired and modified through slab repairs, the cutting of post supports and the insertion of a floor in the central room, suggesting that use of the building was relatively long-term.

Dating evidence suggests that the temple, like the settlement in the coombe below it, was active from sometime in the third century AD until the very late fourth century AD, and probably somewhat later. A group of significant artefacts including an assemblage of miniature iron objects (hammers, axes, spears and other items) and curse tablets were found deposited in a central pit, now fully excavated. These, together with other aspects of the assemblage, confirm that this was a pagan temple, and one used by literate and wealthy individuals and groups.

Metal-detectorists have also discovered Roman artefacts on other parts of the estate, and on neighbouring land. It appears that the Fonthill area was a key part of a considerable network of agricultural and industrial trade, controlled by a high-status group with the resources to build an elaborate temple and deposit objects there in demonstration of their religious beliefs. It is very likely given the diversity of the finds and focus on metalworking in the miniature object assemblage that these pagan beliefs were shared by those working and living in the immediate vicinity of the temple. Through this group of sites Fonthill provides an important window into late Roman Britain, showing the resilience of older belief systems in rural areas despite Christianity being the empire’s official religion for much of the fourth century, and its adoption elsewhere in the region.
Fonthill after the Romans

After the end of Roman imperial control over Britain around AD 410 there were many complex changes in social and economic life and individual and group identities.\(^{31}\) Academic opinion differs quite dramatically on the nature of the post-Roman period across Britain, but it is generally accepted that south-west and western Britain underwent quite different changes compared with eastern Britain in the fifth century AD. The eastern regions saw much more immediate impact from Germanic groups, whereas south-western Britain saw more continuity, with power remaining in the hands of aristocratic elites, who became more militarised, probably maintaining groups of warriors. White posits that much of the south-west region was controlled for approximately 150 years by a post-Roman successor state based on the late Roman province of Britannia Prima, with its capital at Corinium (Cirencester),\(^{32}\) although most others envisage rather looser political arrangements between powerful local warlords.\(^{33}\) Large-scale production of pottery ceased relatively quickly, trade networks shrank and large urban centres dwindled or were abandoned, yet the successors of the Romano-British aristocracy maintained sufficient power to counter inroads made by groups of Saxon migrants or invaders until the mid-sixth century in western parts of Wiltshire such as Fonthill.\(^{34}\)

Indeed, Fonthill’s very name fossilises this Britonnic influence, being composed of two British elements, *funta* and *ial*, and was recorded as *Funtial* in AD 901.\(^{35}\) *Funta* (from Latin *fontana*) indicates a stream, or spring, and *ial* denotes a ‘fertile upland’, suggesting the presence of post-Roman farming settlements under British control until relatively late, likely into the late sixth century AD.\(^{36}\) The *funta* element has also been suggested to be quasi-habitative, i.e. suggestive not only of the presence of a water source, but also of settlement, and specifically associated with Roman stone structures, usually shrines or temples.\(^{37}\) The presence of a notable Roman temple on the estate certainly bears out this pattern, perhaps also demonstrating continuing awareness of the ruined temple quite late into the first millennium AD.

In Fonthill, as in most of southern Wiltshire, it was likely sometime between the sixth and eighth centuries that settlement shifted away from the major downland villages and smaller farmsteads of the Roman period, with their roots in the Iron Age or earlier, and down to their modern locations in the valley bottoms.\(^{38}\) This process was not uniform, or simultaneous, but it was widespread, with the likely central cause being the final failure of the light downland soils to bear the nutritional burden of almost two and a half millennia of increasingly intensive farming, together with a reduction in demand for grain caused by the collapse of any remaining export market to the Continent, and apparent population decline in Britain. Settlement moved and shrank, continuing a mixed agricultural economy, with other resources such as iron, stone and woodland being exploited as part of the yearly cycle. By this time places such as Fonthill were controlled by those owing
loyalty to a Saxon king of Wessex, with all trace of the Romano-British aristocracy gone from the landscape.

As only a small number of Saxon artefacts have been found in either Fonthill Bishop or Fonthill Gifford (seven have been reported to the Portable Antiquities Scheme), we must turn to documentary history to illuminate the late Saxon period. A letter from around AD 900 informs us that an estate of five hides held by Helmstan at Fonthill was under dispute, having previously been held by Athelfryth, who sold it to Oswulf, at some point after which it was acquired by Helmstan. Helmstan’s right to the estate was disputed by Athelstan when Helmstan was accused of the theft of a belt. Helmstan proved his right, but in doing so required oath-help from Ordlaf, to whom he transferred his right in exchange for a life-lease on the estate. In turn, Ordlaf exchanged the estate for other lands with Denewulf, Bishop of Winchester, whose successors retained it for several centuries beyond the Norman conquest. This convoluted series of exchanges appears to be the only documentary evidence of Fonthill prior to 1066, and provides little insight into the lives of the inhabitants of the estate.

We know that nearby settlements were flourishing in the late Saxon period, with Tisbury having an abbot, and thus an abbey, by the early eighth century, and probably being the location for one of the Alfredian fortified burghs in the ninth century. Tisbury would thus have provided a local centre for inhabitants of late Saxon Fonthill.

As with much of western Wiltshire, we can discuss the later prehistory and Roman occupation of the Fonthill landscape with some confidence, drawing on a wide range of evidence. This consideration of these periods has demonstrated how the inhabitants of the region shaped their landscape, and how their activities were shaped by the opportunities it provided through its location at the junction of geologies. These early millennia provided Fonthill with the outlines of its later landscape through the influence of prehistoric field systems on later settlement, the presence of enduring landscape features such as round barrows, a Roman temple and even the parish name.