The Archæologist in the Field
(Part III)

A. Roman Roads
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B. The Hill Forts of Cheshire
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A.

ROMAN roads are justly famous in this country. They have become a byword on account of their straightness, in striking contrast to the tortuous lanes of the countryside which caused Chesterton to begin his famous poem — "The rolling English drunkard made the rolling English road." The Roman road system remains the only major contribution Britain has received directly from that great civilisation, all other living trace of which was blotted out by the Anglo-Saxon conquest and settlement. It would be correct to say that the main road system of today, with London as the nodal point, is for the most part, on the lines laid down by the Roman engineers. There are of course new roads of the Turnpike era and many other diversions, while some considerable lengths of the Roman highways have almost completely vanished.

Although this subject is one of great interest, appealing strongly to popular imagination, it is curious how little field work has been carried out. Only one attempt has been made to bring the whole subject under single review, the book by a civil engineer, T. CODRINGTON, *"Roman Roads in Britain"* published in 1903 and running to three editions, the last of which appeared in 1918. It is very doubtful if anyone will ever repeat this task in detail as our knowledge has grown enormously since Codrington's day. Modern methods of more critical examination and detailed study would make it necessary to devote a complete volume to a stretch of road only 50 to 100 miles long or to a small network such as that of the Cheshire Plain. Even a popular writer, Winbolt, found that he had sufficient material for a book on Stane Street (*With a Spade on Stane Street*), and more recently I. Margery has written the best modern study (*Roman Ways in the Weald, 1948*), covering part of Sussex.

Scattered through the transactions of the county and local societies are hundreds of notes on short sections of roads and the task of collecting these, alone, would be a most unenviable one. Much of this material has already appeared in the Victoria County History series but it is already considerably out of date.

The more one studies Roman roads, the more one realises that, as in similar cases, the subject is an extremely complicated one. Codrington, while recognising considerable variations of construction, appeared to work on the assumption that the whole system was laid out at one time for one single purpose — the rapid deployment of troops. In actual fact, the Roman road system is comparable to that of today where there are:—

(1) Major roads classified under the code letter A.
(2) Secondary roads under the letter B.
(3) Unclassified roads, mostly local lanes and byways.
(4) Private roads and tracks leading to houses, farms or fields etc.

This pattern was complicated in Roman times by the fact that the roads could serve either military or civil needs or be dual in character. In some cases, south of the Fosse Way, they started as military highways and later came under purely civil control. Furthermore, the wandering prehistoric trackways probably continued to be used during the occupation. We thus have Roman roads not only differing in width and method of construction but also in function. Their uses can probably be classed under the following headings:—

(1) Military and Imperial.
(2) Civil, used by Romanised Britons, linking towns and settlements.
(3) Industrial, associated with mining etc.
(4) Agricultural, associated with the so-called villas.
(5) Trackways etc., associated with the native population in the villages, which remained hardly touched by the Roman civilisation.

In any district of Britain, the roads would tend to conform to this complex pattern, increasing in number and diversity with the population and degree of exploitation of the land or its mineral wealth. It is to be expected that the system would have also suited changing needs. As standards declined in the third and fourth centuries, so the maintenance would become less thorough, but as agriculture appeared to prosper at this time, there is little doubt that new roads serving purely local needs would have come into being.

In studying Roman roads, the questions one must ask are, for example, which points does this road join, for what purpose, and at which particular period? The answers might help to elucidate the problems of its structure. The intricate problems ensuing from this should not blind one to the comparatively simpler

questions relating to the main routes. These military or Imperial roads were probably kept at a high level of efficiency. Along them bodies of troops could move at a pace of about twenty miles a day, and the Imperial couriers, using post horses, could travel much faster. In the military zones there was usually a fort situated at every stage along the route i.e. at about every twenty miles. In the civil areas were the *mansiones* or posting stations at about the same distance apart and where the courier and traveller could obtain a change of horses. Around the *mansio*, which probably began life as a fort protecting a river crossing or similar point of strategic importance, would have grown up a small settlement. There are many of these little centres of 15 to 20 acres in Britain and their close study is one of the many tasks facing the serious student of the period.

These main routes were laid out originally as military roads and they have in common the straightness associated with them in the popular mind. This however has been much exaggerated. The roads are usually straight only from point to point. They were aligned from one high point to another and this factor is of considerable use to the student, as once the series of "high points" is found, it is usually possible to make an attempted alignment between them if the Roman road has, for the most part, ceased to be visible on the ground. The Roman engineers were by no means hidebound in this matter of straightness. Where there were natural obstacles to be avoided, the road duly took them into consideration. They were not daunted by marshes or rivers, but boldly crossed them by means of causeways and bridges. Up steep slopes the road was cut into zigzags to avoid an incline which would have been impossible for horse drawn carts.

The materials used in road construction were those available in the district, gravel, broken stone or even slag, spread on the site of the road and rammed down often in several layers, the profile when completed having a pronounced camber to throw off the rainwater. One of the universal characteristics of the first-class Roman road is the *agger* or embankment which was thrown up, in the level stretches, to carry the road. This was formed by digging ditches on each side of the alignment and heaping up the soil in the centre. This provided drainage ditches and raised the road surface above the normal level. In hilly country, which has not been intensively cultivated, one finds traces of Roman road engineering in the form of embankments and cuttings. In agricultural districts however, they have long since been ploughed away. Where the same length of road has been in continuous use, not only has the raised embankment gone, but its site is marked by a hollow way worn out by centuries of traffic. Where no surface indications are visible, in the form of varying levels, one can sometimes trace a road by the scatter of metalling after ploughing.

Field workers on this problem can receive much help from a study of parish boundaries and field names. Most of the former date from Saxon times when Roman roads were much in evidence and quite often the boundary continues to follow the line of the road, although all trace of it has long since disappeared. Field and place names can also be helpful. References to streets, causeways and pavements are not uncommon. The only certain Roman road in the Wirral goes through Street Hey Farm, while Stretton, near Malpas, marks the position of one of the main southern routes. There is a Wetfield pavement between Bunbury and Nantwich but this may refer to a mediaeval track. These names require caution in use. Much has been written about Windy and Cold Harbours, also about Pepper Streets but they are by no means infallible guides. It is indeed sad to recall that there has been much imaginative writing on this subject. The only answer to this is sound field work based primarily on accurate observation and painstaking enquiry supported by excavations at selected points. Students must not expect results from casual half-day excursions as only prolonged and persistent work will bring light to bear on this fascinating problem, but good and fruitful labour brings its own reward. Nor can we expect any startling answers from aerial reconnaissance in this area. The glacial subsoil of the Cheshire Plain is not suitable for the production of cropmarks.

THE ROMAN ROADS OF CHESHIRE.

VERY little study has been given this subject in Cheshire. The only comprehensive survey is that of W. Thompson Watkin in his book *Roman Cheshire* published in 1886. Those sections, which are based on Watkin's own field work are most useful if read carefully, but his book contains much second-hand information, most of which should be subject to critical examination. The significance of this book lies in the fact that many of the surface indications noted by Watkin have, in the eighty or more years since his day, been ploughed out of existence. The road, for example, crossing the fields north of the Abbey Arms between Kelsall and Northwich is described by him as "in embankment form with the *fossae* visible, though the road has been much reduced in height and the *fossae* much filled up, owing to marling and continual ploughing." Whereas today, nothing remains but a mere thin scatter of metalling which one can observe after ploughing.

The Cheshire Plain was never developed by the Romans to any extent. Its proximity to the military zone and its wet climate did not make it very attractive. To what extent the Romans exploited the salt deposits is not clear, but traces of civil settlements are evident at both Northwich (*Condate*) and Middlewich (*Salinis* ?).The well drained, sandy subsoils of the Delamere and other areas, may have continued to support a native population

which has left nothing but a thin scatter of Romano-British material. The main centre of Roman influence was undoubtedly the great legionary depot at Chester (*Deva*) and this point was the focus of the main road system controlling the entry into Wales. The siting of the main roads crossing the county was governed by the river Mersey. The bridgehead was at Wilderspool, near Warrington, and there are probably at least three roads meeting at this point; one for Chester, another for Whitchurch (*Mediolano*) and a third from Northwich (*Condate*) along Kind (or King) street. Of these, the road from Whitchurch remains at present hypothetical. The other nodal point on the Mersey at Manchester (*Mamucium*), an auxiliary fort, must have connected with Northwich (via Stretford) and possibly with the south towards Chesterton.

There must also have been a main cross-route from the east, from Buxton (*Aquae*) towards Northwich but no trace of it has been properly established. Another road entered Cheshire from the south-east via the settlement at Chesterton, coming originally from Littlechester, near Derby, a point of great strategic importance, but this also is difficult to trace. A glance at the small scale map of the county (Fig. 1) shows how pitifully ignorant we are of the main routes, only Watling Street from Chester to Manchester is reasonably well established. The rest still await the patient study of the field worker. Traces, meagre no doubt. must exist here and there waiting the discerning eye.

BOOK LIST.

T. Codrington. *Roman Roads in Britain*, 3rd ed. 1918.
I. D. Margery. *Roman Ways in the Weald*, published by Phoenix House, 1948.
W. Thompson Watkin. *Roman Cheshire*, 1886.
S. E. Winbolt. *With a Spade on Stane Street*, Methuen, 1936.
Ordnance Survey Map of Roman Britain 1928 (a new edition is forthcoming).

NOTES ON THE MAP (FIG. 1).

The information plotted on this map has been taken from the Cheshire set of 6 in. O.S. sheets on which all archaeological discoveries are plotted at the Grosvenor Museum, Chester. It is not meant to be definitive but more indicative of the present state of knowledge. It shows at a glance how little is known about Roman Cheshire and in particular the eastern part of the county. There should be a route from Buxton into Cheshire, possibly using the Valley of the Dane, and one would expect also a north-south route between Manchester and Chesterton, but no positive trace of either of the routes has so far been recorded. Similarly the important link between Whitchurch and Wilderspool, which possibly follows modern roads for the greater part of its length, remains hypothetical.
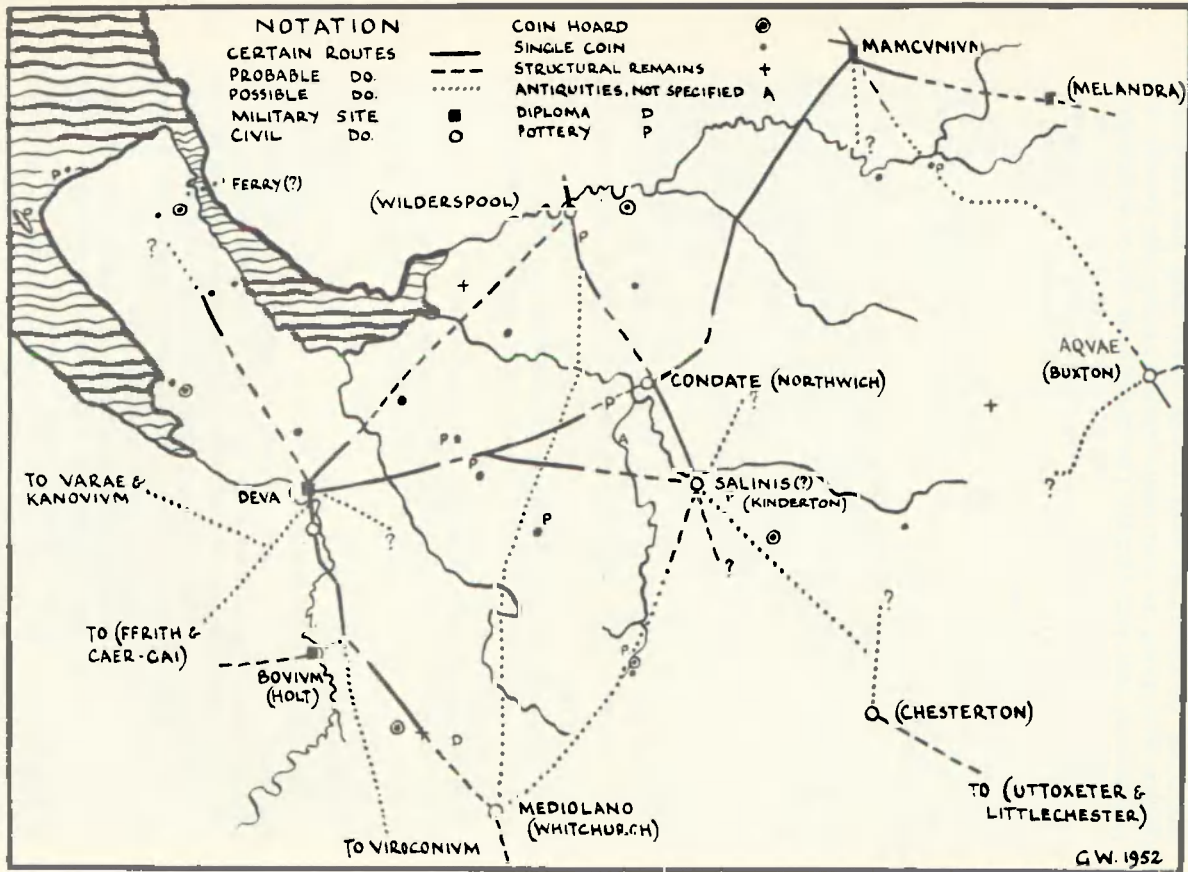
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Fig. 1.

There has been a number of finds of coins in the county, but they do not necessarily signify nearby occupation. Pottery has not been so readily recognised and fragments have probably escaped notice.

The only structural remains, apart from those associated with recognised settlements or military establishments (i.e. at Chester, Wilderspool, Northwich, Kinderton and Heronbridge) are at:—

(1) Halton — ditches and 3rd century pottery (*Annals*, xxiv, 165).

(2) Malpas — "Roman implements, with coins and tessellated pavements." (Watkin, p. 286, quoting Foote Gower, *Addl. MSS., B.M.*, 11,338, *Fo.* 68).

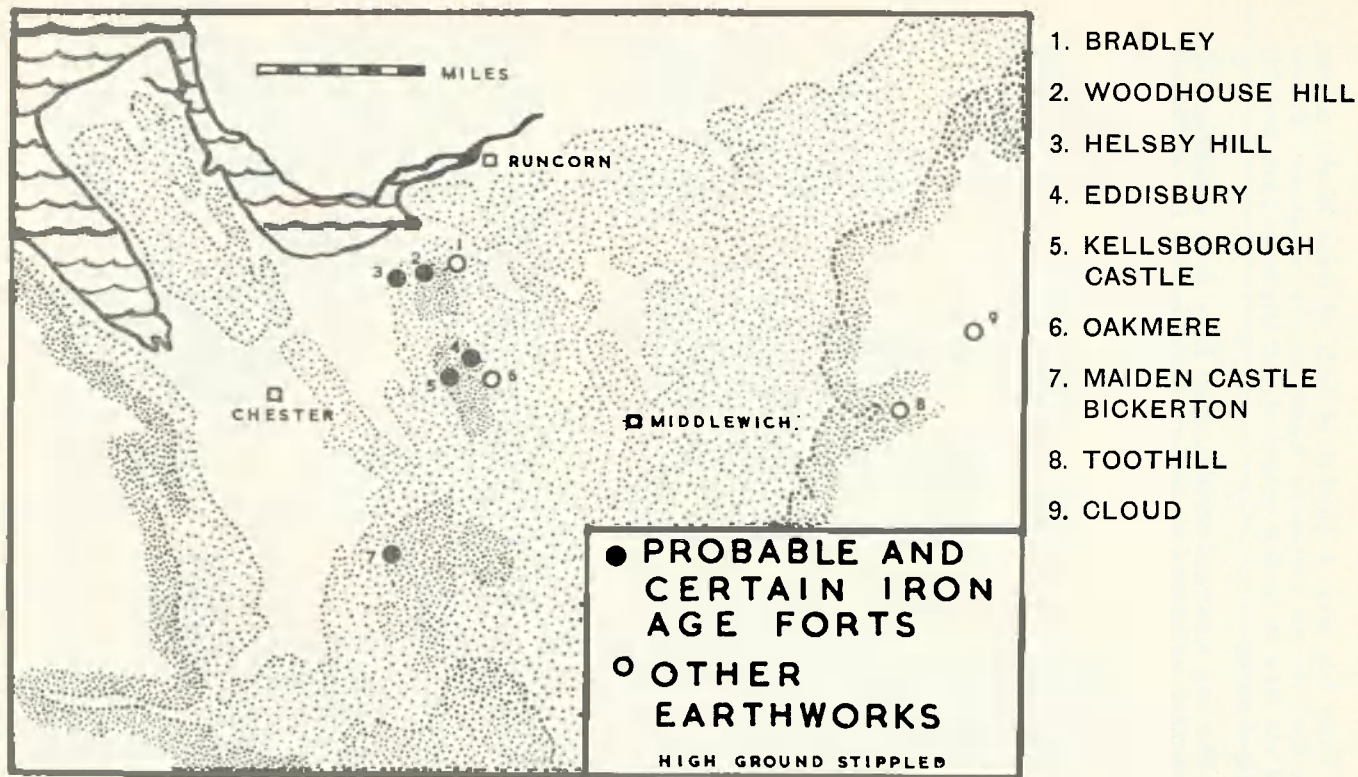(3) Wincle, near Macclesfield, a sepulchral mound (Watkin, p. 303).

Although Wilderspool is marked as a civil settlement it probably began as an auxiliary fort in the first century and may even have been a military works depot like Holt in Denbighshire.

The place names follow the article by Prof. I. A. Richmond on "The British Section of the Ravenna Cosmography" (*Arch.*, 93) except that the writer feels that Kinderton has at present a greater claim to the name SALINIS than Nantwich. Although the latter has been regarded by many antiquaries as a Roman settlement, the only evidence, at present, consists of two finds of coins, one of which was a small hoard.

B.

AN important feature of the archaeological map of Cheshire is the group of defensive earthworks which we call hill forts. A glance at the distribution map (Fig. 2) will show that these forts are built chiefly on the Central Ridge, which commands a good view of the plain on either side. This siting of forts along a ridge of high ground is part of a pattern which is repeated elsewhere — for example, along the Clwyd Valley in North Wales — and the forts themselves form part of a much larger network, which has been the subject of much recent investigation. A large part of this has been done by Professor Varley, who has carried out excavations on two of our Cheshire hill forts — Maiden Castle, Bickerton (7), and Castle Ditch, Eddisbury (4). The report on the latter, which has just appeared in the *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, Vol.* 102, 1950, has materially advanced our knowledge of this type of site.

The story begins in the south of England, in the region we know as Wessex, where some of the earliest forts were built about 250 B.C. These had a single earth rampart with a ditch outside,

Map labels:

RUNCORN

3 2 1

CHESTER

4
5 6

7

MIDDLEWICH

9

8

MILES

N

20

1. BRADLEY
2. WOODHOUSE HILL
3. HELSBY HILL
4. EDDISBURY
5. KELLSBOROUGH CASTLE
6. OAKMERE
7. MAIDEN CASTLE BICKERTON
8. TOOTHILL
9. CLOUD

● PROBABLE AND CERTAIN IRON AGE FORTS
○ OTHER EARTHWORKS

HIGH GROUND STIPPLED

(Fig. 2.) HILL FORTS IN CHESHIRE.
(Based on fig. 29 in Varley and Jackson's *Prehistoric Cheshire*).

and the entrances consisted simply of a gap in the rampart. From the pottery and other material found in them we know something of their occupants, who belonged to the culture group known as "Iron Age A." This type of structure gradually spread north up the Welsh Marches, branching off into North Wales and Cheshire, and it was about this period that the first real hill fort was built at Eddisbury (4) (although, as with some other forts, this was preceded by a still earlier set of palisade defences). This hill fort consisted of a simple rampart, following the contours of the hill but enclosing only part of the area of the top. The rampart was made up of earth, but was faced with stone on the outside.

As yet, Eddisbury was affected only by the first wave of fort building, emanating from the south of England. But soon another influence was felt, although only remotely, in Cheshire. At some time in the early part of the 1st century B.C., a wave of new immigrants reached the south-west of England from the area of Brittany, bringing with them a characteristic culture which we know as "Iron Age B." The most famous type sites of this culture are the lake villages of Meare and Glastonbury. This new immigration also had a pronounced effect on hill fort building, in the form of the multivallate fort. In this, the usual single rampart was superseded by a more complicated structure with two or more ramparts, of which the later phase of Maiden Castle, Dorset, is a well-known example. This increase in the depth of the defences was probably a reaction to the increasing use of the sling in siege warfare. The actual culture of the new invaders did not spread very far inland from the Severn Estuary, apart from isolated examples in the Welsh Marches. Some of its pottery was found in the hill fort at Oswestry, Shropshire, but in Cheshire the results were apparent in the structure of forts rather than the material culture. The fort at Eddisbury was reconstructed during the first century B.C., an outer rampart being added, and the timber guard cell at the south-eastern entrance being rebuilt in stone. It was probably in this period that the fort at Maiden Castle, Bickerton (7) was first built. Unlike Eddisbury, which comes into the class of contour forts, Maiden Castle was a promontory fort, one side of which was protected by a cliff face on the north-west, while a double rampart protected the other sides.

Both Maiden Castle and the reconstructed Eddisbury had a feature common to many hill forts of this period — the ramparts at the entrance were turned inwards to deepen the defences at this vulnerable point. We have already seen how structural changes outpaced the spread of material culture, and the military device of the inturned entrance is another example of this. Its obvious utility caused it to cut across existing cultural divisions and gave it a wide distribution, both in the south of England and the Welsh Marches, and also in another area in the north-east of England.

There are other features of these two forts, however, which raise some difficulties about their date. For the reconstructed entrance at Eddisbury, and the entire rampart at Maiden Castle, which were standing at the time of the Roman conquest and cannot have preceded it by a very long time, were built in a style which is characteristic of a supposedly early group of forts in Scotland. In these, the earth and stone ramparts were strengthened with vertical and horizontal timber beams. This type of fortification is sometimes called *Murus Gallicus* because in some ways it resembles a group of Gaulish forts so described by Julius Caesar. It seems evident that the ramparts of the Cheshire forts must be related in some way to those in Scotland, though it is uncertain at the moment which is earlier. The Abernethy group of forts, the Scottish prototype of this form of rampart building, was usually dated to about 250 B.C., in which case Professor Varley suggests that this form of construction in Cheshire must be a later derivation. Recently however, the early date of the Abernethy complex has been challenged, and the question remains an open one.

Another feature which provides a possible link with the north is the construction of a guard cell of timber or stone on each side of the inner end of the entrance. The original fort at Eddisbury, as well as the similar early fort at Almondbury in Yorkshire, had guard cells of timber, and in the later reconstruction at Eddisbury the cells were built of stone. Similar stone guard cells, built into the inturn of the rampart, are found in some of the neighbouring North Wales forts — Dinorben, Pen-y-Corddyn, and Caer Drewyn — and were once thought to be derived from Roman military architecture. At Eddisbury, however, we have them in a purely prehistoric context. At the fort of Leckhampton in Gloucestershire they appear in an Iron Age B reconstruction of an earlier Iron Age A fort. Generally they seem to be an early feature, and may have some relation to the Scottish brochs, another product of the northward spread of Iron Age B culture from south-west England, which also often had guard cells on each side of the entrance passage.

While the Cheshire forts form part of the same complex as many of the North Wales forts in prehistoric times, excavations have shown that they came to a parting of the ways when the Romans established themselves in the north-west in the third quarter of the 1st century A.D. The Welsh forts, though they may have stood empty for a time, seem to have been extensively reoccupied in the 2nd century and later. In Cheshire, the forts seem to have been deserted after the Roman conquest. Eddisbury, within the area of influence of the legionary base at Chester, and actually overlooking a main Roman road, was put out of action as a fort. The ramparts were reduced and the ditches

filled up. Soon after this, the Yorkshire fort of Almondbury suffered similar treatment. Although no slighting seems to have taken place at Maiden Castle, that too shows no occupation at this period. There was a later Saxon occupation of Eddisbury but the history of the hill forts in this area was now virtually finished.

So much for Eddisbury and Maiden Castle. With the exception of one section dug on Woodhouse Hill (2) the other forts in the county have not been excavated; until more is known about them we can only presume, from their similarity to the excavated examples, that they too date to the pre-Roman Iron Age.

It is not known which tribes built these Cheshire forts. We do know that Almondbury was the stronghold, in Roman times, of the tribe known as the Brigantes, while the multivallate forts of the south-west were occupied by Celtic invaders from the Continent. But in Cheshire, Dr. Varley suggests that the occupants of the forts were the descendants of the native Bronze Age population, who adopted the structures of the new cultures without absorbing much of the pottery. After the Roman invasion the need for tribal forts largely ceased, and the inhabitants were assimilated into the wider culture of the Roman Empire.

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