

A ROMAN SETTLEMENT AND IRON WORKING SITE AT ST DENYS, SOUTHAMPTON (SOU 981)

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ABSTRACT

An excavation in advance of housing development uncovered a Roman settlement of the mid/late 1st century AD, across the River Itchen from the 'small town' at Bitterne Manor (Clausentum). Large quantities of iron slag suggest iron working was a significant activity at the site, probably the manufacture of blooms for use elsewhere. A road line, flanked by ditches, was also found. The site may have been given over to agriculture in the 2nd century AD.

INTRODUCTION

The Archaeology Unit of Southampton City Council carried out an archaeological excavation (site code SOU 981) at land adjacent to 20 Eastfield Road, St Denys, Southampton in the summer of 1999 (Fig. 1). The site is centred on NGR SU 434#138. There had previously been an evaluation excavation (SOU 960) that had shown that Roman remains were present on site (Cottrell 1999a). The new excavation was carried out in advance of the construction of four houses by Roxan Construction Ltd on behalf of the Western Challenge Housing Association.

The footings of the four houses were excavated (Fig. 2) as trenches 1–9. The modern overburden and the plough soil were removed by mechanical excavator to the top of the natural subsoil, a depth of about 850mm, in trenches 1m wide. All features cutting into the natural were hand excavated.

SITE LOCATION AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site is located in the St Denys area of Southampton, on the east side of Eastfield Road

just to the north of its junction with South Road. The western shore of the River Itchen lies about 200m to the east. The river flows generally from north to south, but forms a loop around the Bitterne Manor promontory to the east of the site.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The site lies on the west bank of the River Itchen, across the river from the known Roman defended settlement at Bitterne Manor, which is possibly identified with the place name *Clausentum* mentioned in *Iter VII* of the *Antonine Itinerary* (Cotton and Gathercole 1958, 6; Rivet and Smith 1979, 166, 308–9). Recent archaeological investigations in the St Denys area have shown that Roman occupation was also present on the west bank. They include two sites in Dundee Road (SOU 794, SAS 1997; SOU 807, Kavanagh 1997), where a few Roman finds were recovered about 250m to the north of SOU 981. More substantial Roman remains of the 1st to 4th centuries were also found at 154 – 172 Priory Road (SOU 822, Cottrell 1999b) 100m to the south-west, where large masonry elements, and much pottery and coins were recovered. Investigations in the inter-tidal mud close to SOU 822 have also found the remains of three Roman timber jetties (SOU 881, Russel *pers com*), one of them dating to 201 AD.

RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATION

The archaeological evidence has been divided into a number of phases, but the exact sequence, which perhaps only lasted 50 years, is unclear.

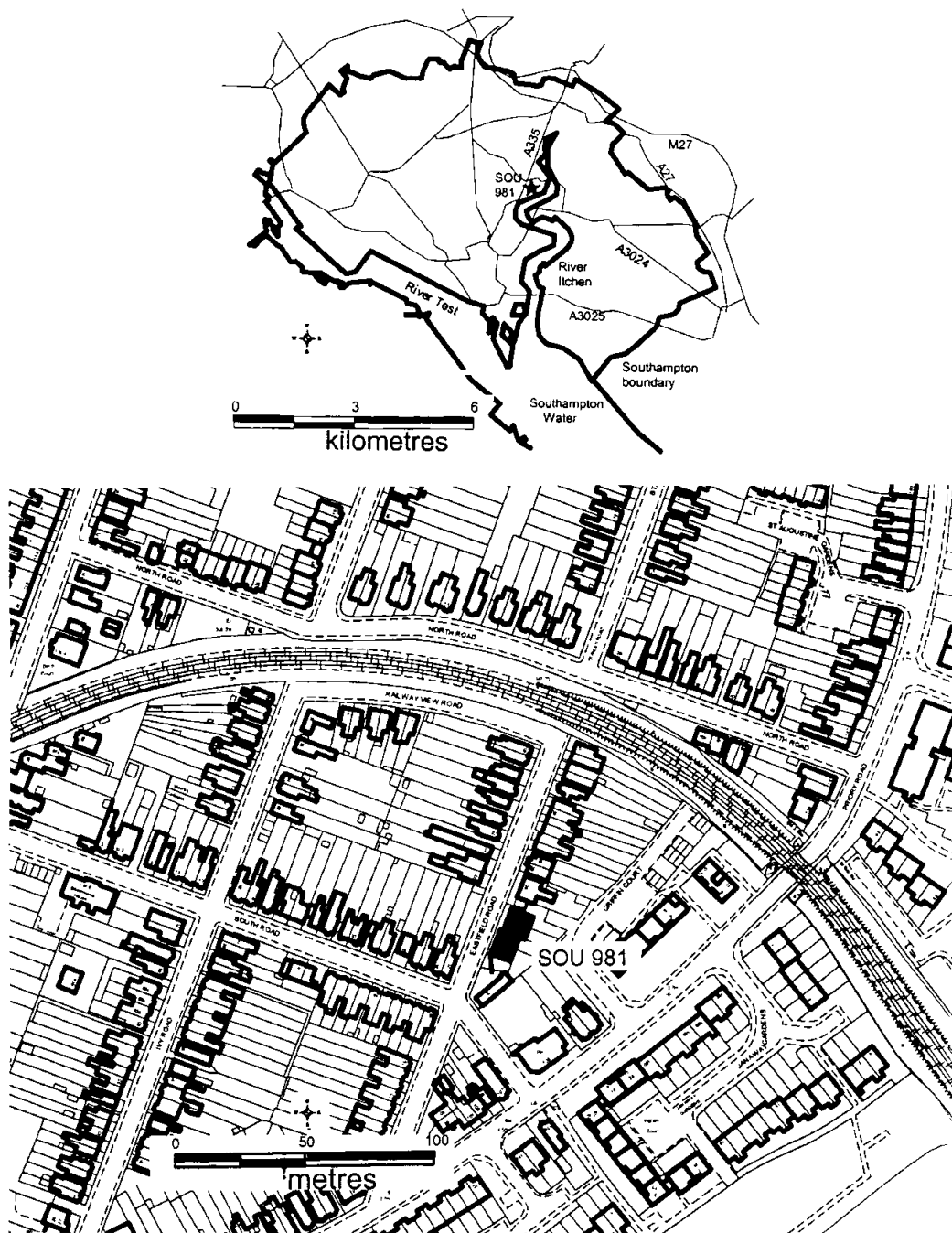


Fig. 1 Site location plan (based on Ordnance Survey's 2001 map with the permission of the Controller of her Majesty's Stationery Office, Crown Copyright Reserved. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown Copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings. Southampton City Council License 079340).

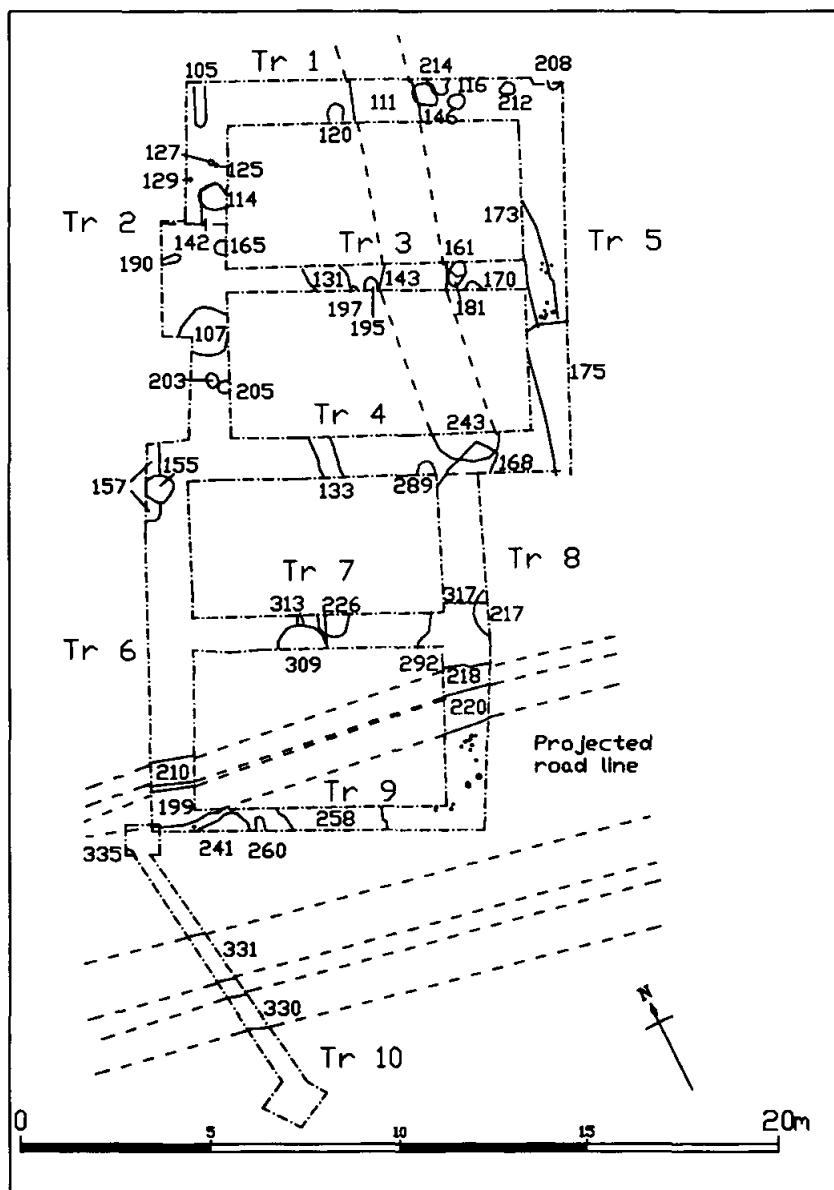


Fig. 2 Plan of excavated features. Context numbers have been omitted for stake-holes. Dashed lines show the projected lines of the road side ditches, and the probable boundary ditch.

Phase 1. Natural deposits.

The natural gravels were overlain by brickearth, the upper part of which was weathered. The natural surface lay at 3.48m OD at the north end of the site, and 3.26m OD at the south.

Phase 2. Road

An east–west road surface was found at the southern end of the site. The road surface was formed by a gravel spread (layers 192 and 333) up to 130mm thick and 4m wide. Eight burnt flints, seven fragments of slag, and a brick fragment were recovered from the metalling. Three shallow features (241, 258, and 260) cut the brickearth beneath the road. They may have been caused by wear on an initial, unmetalled, road line. Side ditches flanked the road. The north ditch (feature 199/220) was 1m wide and 250mm deep, and had a rounded profile. It had filled with soil (200 and 221) that included burnt flint, an iron nail, four fragments of slag, and a large assemblage of early-Roman pottery. The south ditch, 330, was 1.4m wide but was not threatened by the development and was not excavated. Early Roman pottery was collected from the exposed fills.

Phase 3. Repair of road

The road surface had been repaired at a later date with gravel layers 180, 186, and 189. The lowest of these (186) extended over the fill of the original northern roadside ditch. Four burnt flints were recovered from layer 186. The repaired road was provided with new ditches. The north ditch was 0.9m wide and some 250mm deep (feature 210/218), and cut the fills of the early ditch. The fills of this later ditch included slag, brick or tile, and three sherds of pottery, including a white flagon, probably an import. The southern ditch, 331, 1.4m wide, was located outside the area to be excavated, but a fragment of Roman roof tile was recovered from its fill.

Phase 4. Property boundary

To the north of the road a north–south-aligned ditch was found (111/143/243). It had a V-shaped

profile at the base, but had steps cut into either side near the top, and a rounded southern terminal. It was 1.7m to 1.8m wide, and approximately 500mm deep. The bottom of the 'V' in feature 143 was flattened, perhaps suggesting that it had been cleaned out. The lowest part of the ditch bottom was at 2.93m OD. The ditch terminated about 5.5m north of the road. It may well have been a property boundary.

The lowest fills within the ditch appeared to be silting deposits (fills 167 and 163) that included iron slag and burnt flint. The upper fills were a mixture of loamy soils and gravels (111 = 112, 113, 153, 154, 159, 160, 172; 143 = 144, 149, 152; and 243 = 244), and may have been deliberate dumpings of rubbish to fill in the ditch. The finds included burnt flint, burnt brickearth, iron nails, decayed limestone blocks from fill 152, iron slag and pottery. Most of the fills produced moderate quantities of slag (between 100g and 640g), though three fills produced substantially more (fill 144 giving 3.3kg; fill 160 2.4kg and fill 244 3kg), including 'hearth bottoms', and masses of slag that had formed in smithing hearths. The pottery dated to the 1st or early 2nd centuries. It consisted mostly of local bead rim jars and copies of Gallo-Belgic forms, but included Terra Nigra platters dated AD 50–70, samian dated AD 50–85, Spanish olive oil amphora fragments, and sherds of French wine amphorae. The ditch terminal produced the most finds, including an unusual deposit consisting of a number of near complete pots found lying rim downwards.

Phase 5. Post and stake structures

Twelve probable postholes were found in the northern end of the site. They were sub-circular to oval in plan, and with bowl-shaped or flat bottomed profiles. All but one of them ranged in size from 320mm to 500mm across, and from 150mm to 900mm deep. Feature 114 was substantially larger in plan. It measured 640mm by 470mm. The difference in depths perhaps represents differential in survival, rather than original proportions.

To the east of the ditch were six postholes. Three (116, 208 and 212) formed a line at right angles to the ditch. The postholes were some 1.3m apart. Their fills included early Roman pottery,

nails and slag. Three other postholes (161, 181, and 170) were found in a group 5m further south. They perhaps formed part of another building. The fills included slag and ash.

Also to the east of the property boundary was a complex of 14 stakeholes (features 262, 264, 266, 268, 270, 272, 274, 281, 283, 285, 287, 294, 296, and 298). They were between 50mm and 130mm across, and between 40mm and 120mm deep. No pattern could be discerned in their arrangement.

To the west of the ditch were six features 114, 120, 165, 203, 205, and 289. They were probably all postholes but there was no discernible pattern. Two of the postholes, 114 and 205, showed evidence of where the posts had rotted in-situ. Two of the postholes, 114 and 165, produced no finds, suggesting they might have been early features, the others yielded early Roman pottery.

Phase 6. Possible beam-slot structures

A number of linear features interpreted as foundation trenches for wooden beams were found to both east and west of the property boundary, and in some cases they had cut through remains of the earlier postholes.

To the east of the property boundary was trench 173. It was 700mm wide and 150mm deep, and aligned north-west to south-east. It had gently slopping concave sides, and a flat bottom. Some 3.2m of the feature was seen in plan. Finds included 100g of slag, and two fragments of burnt brickearth. Seven stakeholes (230, 232, 301, 303, 305, 307, and 311), forming a rough line running down its length, were cut into its base.

To the west of the phase 4 property boundary were five possible beam trenches (105, 133, 142, 157, and 190). Four were aligned roughly north to south, though feature 190 was aligned roughly east to west. They had steep edges and flat bases, except for 190, which had a U-shaped profile. They all had single fills. A small quantity of finds was recovered from them, including early-Roman pottery and small quantities of slag. It is possible that feature 105, 142, and 190 formed the south-east corner of a building.

Similar discontinuous trenches excavated at other Roman sites (e.g. Neatham, Hants: Millett and Graham 1986) have been interpreted as being

the bedding trenches for sill beams of timber-framed structures. It is possible that these possible sill beam structures replaced the earlier post-hole structures. Feature 142 certainly cut the phase 6 post-hole 114. A similar sequence has been noted at Cirencester where post-built structures were replaced by buildings with 'intermittent foundation trenches' (Wacher and McWhirr 1982, 39).

Phase 7. Pits and other features

A sequence of at least four intercutting features (168, 277, 292, and 317) was found near the south-east corner of the excavation in trenches 4, 7, and 8. The north end of feature 168 cut the south end of the phase 4 ditch feature 243. It may have been a linear feature with a V-shaped profile. A dump of 34 sherds of Roman pottery (228) was found at the base of the feature.

Feature 292 was overlain by a 70mm thick layer of gravelly clay loam with iron staining (225). It was only found in trench 7, and may have been a local area of hard standing. Its top was at 3.32m OD. An iron nail, two burnt flints, 350g of slag, and six sherds of 1st century pottery were recovered from it.

Four small pit-like features (155, 214, 309, and 313) were found. Feature 313 was a shallow feature of uncertain form, which cut layer 225. Features 155 and 309 were sub-circular in plan. Feature 155 cut the phase 6 feature 157 and had fairly steep edges and a fairly flat base. Feature 309 had a bowl-shaped profile, and cut the south end of feature 313. Feature 214 was an irregularly shaped feature at the north end of the excavation.

A sub-circular pit with an inverted bell-shaped profile (107) was found on the western edge of the site. It was a maximum of 1.4m across at the top, but reduced to 0.85m at 60mm below the top. It was 1.1m deep. It had nine fills (108, 109, 136, 137, 138, 145, 164, 184, and 185). The bottom two (184 and 185) were clays, which were overlain by a 500mm thick deposit of yellowish brown sandy clay (145). 145 included lenses of ash-like material. A mixed dump of burnt material (138) lay above it, with a burnt lens on its surface. There was no scorching of the surrounding deposits, so it is likely to represent the deposition of burnt material from elsewhere. It was overlain

by a sequence of varied deposits (108, 109, 136, 137, and 164). No domestic rubbish, such as bone, was recovered from any fill. Indeed, only 40g of slag and 17 sherds of 1st century Roman pottery were recovered from the lowest three fills. Fill 138 produced 420g of slag and 13 sherds of 1st century pottery. The uppermost fills also produced a limited range of finds. Fill 109 produced 90g of slag and an iron nail with abundant charcoal and ash-like lenses, whilst 108 was a gravelly fill which produced 1kg of slag. A total of thirty-five sherds of 1st century pottery was recovered from these fills.

Feature 107 was almost certainly an industrial rubbish pit. No domestic remains other than pottery were found, and the ash-like material was probably an industrial by-product, as was the burnt material of fill 138. It may have been associated with the iron working, though little slag was found apart from in fill 108, the top fill.

Phase 8. Pit possibly associated with iron working

The south end of the phase 6 feature 173 was cut by a large, rectangular feature with fairly steep sides and a flat base (175). Only its north-west corner was found within the excavation. It was at least 4m long and 1.1m wide, and was 450mm deep. The lowest fill was a 150mm thick, black silt loam with very common iron staining (193). It produced a large finds assemblage that included 9.2kg of slag, a piece of Roman brick, 117 sherds of pottery, and a fragment from a 1st/2nd century glass bottle. Fill 193 was overlain by a black silty clay loam with abundant iron staining (176). A large finds assemblage was recovered that included 36.9kg of slag, brick/tile fragments (including a sherd possibly from a flue tile), 125 sherds of pottery including imported pulley-wheel-mouth flagons, a copy of a Gallo-Belgic butt beaker, Flavian samian and sherds of a roughcast beaker. Fifteen small flint flakes and debitage, and 15 iron objects were also recovered.

This feature seems to have been used for the disposal of waste from iron working. The large quantity of slag (46.1kg) recovered from a relatively small area (about 2m³), together with the 1.7kg from the phase 6 feature 173, suggests that the iron working site was very close to this fea-

ture. The quantity of slag recovered from other deposits declined rapidly to the west and south.

Phase 9. Agricultural soil

A layer of agricultural soil, up to 500mm thick, (104, 179, 216, 323, 326, and 334) overlay the Roman deposits. It included 3rd to 4th century New Forest wares.

SUMMARY FINDS REPORTS

Iron working residues by P Andrews

A significant amount of evidence for iron working on or in the immediate vicinity of the site can be assigned to the early Romano-British period, and all appears to be associated with iron smithing. No evidence for iron smelting was recovered, or for other metalworking activities. Approximately 70.3kg of certain or probable smithing slag was collected from a variety of features. This included about a dozen complete hearth bottoms and a quantity of probable hearth bottom fragments. Some of the rest of the material might be classified as fuel-ash slag which may not necessarily have derived from iron working, though it is likely here. One fragment (from feature 175), with hearth lining attached, shows clear evidence of part of a tuyère hole. None of the material exhibits the 'platey' nature with surface runs and dribbles which is characteristic of tap slag derived from iron smelting. Some plate hammer scale was recovered from sieving, but not in the large quantities often found on smithing sites. It remains uncertain whether the slag was derived from primary (bloom) smithing, or secondary smithing (i.e. the production of artefacts), but the substantial quantity recovered from a restricted area suggests that the former is more likely.

Animal bone by S Hamilton-Dyer

A total of 68 individual bones was recovered from Roman contexts. The taxa identified were horse, cattle, sheep/goat and pig. Dog bones were not identified but indirect evidence for their presence is attested by gnaw marks on six bones. Pig

remains were the most frequent of the identified bones, but most of the unidentified fragments were cattle/horse-sized. Three of the four sheep/goat remains were loose teeth, the most resistant parts of the skeleton, reflecting the condition of the material.

The pottery by A D Russel

The pottery mostly dates to the second half of the 1st century AD. Where 2nd century types are present, such as Dorset Black Burnished ware, it is found in the upper layers of features. Late Roman pottery, that is of the 3rd and 4th centuries, was only found in the soil levels that overlay the site, suggesting the focus of settlement moved away from this area, probably by AD 150.

A number of coarseware pottery types were present on this site that do not seem to be found at the main settlement across the river, in particular the most common coarseware, a well made sandy fabric, used for jars and bowls. At the same time, flint-tempered bead rim jars, a common native 1st century pottery type at the main settlement, is almost absent at the Eastfield Road site. This raises questions in terms of the relative dates of the settlements and the status of the people who used and deposited the pottery.

The standard imports of the second half of the 1st century were well represented at SOU 981, and samian bowls and cups, Terra Nigra platters, whiteware flagons, North Gaulish mortaria and Spanish olive oil jars show that the inhabitants of this settlement had access to traded goods. The high numbers of local copies of Gallo-Belgic and early Roman forms suggests that there was a demand for certain imports that could not be met.

Of the samian forms present some usually occur in pre-Flavian deposits in this country, in particular the Ritterling 8, and the cups of Form 24/25. A stamped Ritterling 8 cup is by the potter Primus and examples are known from Boudiccan fire deposits in Colchester.

CONCLUSIONS

The site has shown that there was a metalled, ditched road running at an approximate right an-

gle from the river. It was in use for a long enough period for the side ditches to have silted up, and the road to be metalled and redefined.

To the north of the road, a north-south linear feature may have formed a boundary between two properties. Remains of timber structures were found. There is some stratigraphic evidence to suggest that post-built structures may have been replaced by beam-slot structures. However, no certain building plans were identified.

Associated rubbish pits were found, some of which may have been used for industrial waste. A pit used for disposal of iron working residues was found on the eastern edge of the site. The concentration of iron working residues in its vicinity might indicate that the actual iron working was centred on an area to the east of the excavated trenches, closer towards the river Itchen.

The present site was almost certainly an iron-working site during the late 1st century AD. The distinctive smithing slag suggests that the site produced iron in bulk, probably from the re-working of blooms brought from a smelting site, rather than finished artefacts. It may have been supplying a need for raw materials during the establishment of the settlement at Bitterne Manor in the mid 1st century. If so, the smithing was perhaps sited outside the settlement because of the fire risk, and to avoid polluting the area. There was no evidence to suggest whether the customers for the raw iron were military or civil, or a combination of the two, but all other major early Roman iron working sites in southern England seem to be associated with the Classis Britannica, which supplied the military. The fact that iron slag was found in nearly every feature of Roman date suggests that the iron-working was integral with the beginning of the settlement on the west bank.

The focus of Roman settlement on the west bank seems to have shifted to the southwest in the later Roman period, as SOU 960 produced much late Roman material. By contrast this is absent at the Eastfield Road site, which was probably given over to agriculture.

The Eastfield Road site, together with others excavated in the last few years, show that the St Denys area of Southampton was occupied throughout the Roman period. To find an undiscovered Roman settlement in the midst of a major

city is unexpected, and its relationship to the main settlement on the opposite bank of the River Itchen, is as yet unclear. The presence of driven piles in the Itchen at this point between the two settlements suggests a ferry, possibly linking the

Winchester route with the Chichester route. Although the dated piles were cut down in spring AD201, the presence of the 1st century iron working on the west bank suggests the ferry point may have been present much earlier.

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