# Ancient Britons and Romans

Hook Norton as a defined entity did not exist in the days of the Ancient Britons and the Roman Empire, nor did Oxfordshire. Nor is there any literary evidence to tell us what did exist, or happened, anywhere in this region in those days. And yet it is clear that people did live in this neighbourhood at that time and left permanent marks on our terrain. In March 2015 *Archaeology UK* reported two Bronze Age sites, eleven Iron Age sites, nineteen Roman sites, and three unclassified ancient sites within three kilometres of St. Peter's Parish Church. Within ten kilometres there were 240 ancient sites, 26 of them Bronze Age, 64 Iron Age and 126 Roman. Each of them represents human endeavour within or close to this parish in the two thousand years before 410 A.D., when Rome was gradually shuffling off its responsibility for this far-flung province of its harassed empire.
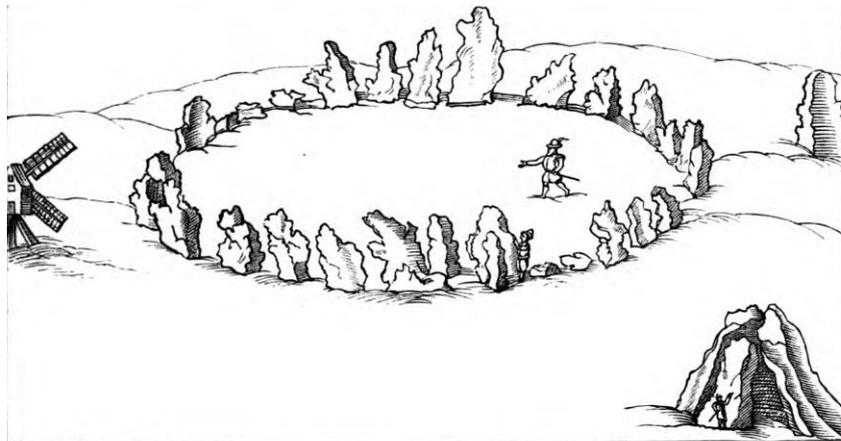
The Rollright Stones as sketched in Camden's Britannia *(1607).*

The King's Stone and the Whispering Knights are shown as much closer to the Stone Circle that they are in reality.
From Beesley's *History of Banbury* (1841).

The most striking relics of human occupation in the vicinity date from an even earlier period. The Rollright Stones stand roughly four miles west of Hook Norton, high on the ridge marking the Oxfordshire boundary with Warwickshire. The chief monument of the group is a late Neolithic ceremonial Stone Circle dating from 2,500-

2,000 B.C., the same millennium as Stonehenge. It currently consists of 77 stones known as the "King's Men", but originally it had over a hundred close-set stones with an astronomically aligned entrance. Already in the early eighteenth century they were seen as "corroded like worm-eaten wood by the jaws of time".[1] Across the road, overlooking the Vale of Warwickshire, stands the "King's Stone", which is believed to be of middle Bronze Age origin, a thousand years later. Some authorities suggest that it might have been constructed as an outlier to the Stone Circle.

Four hundred yards away toward the east lies the oldest group of stones, ancient even when the stone circle was built. Consisting of five upright stones, it is thought to be a 5,000-year old burial chamber and part of a Neolithic long barrow. The stones are known as the "Whispering Knights" because of the conspiratorial way in which they lean inwards towards each other as if they are plotting against their king. Their prior existence is probably one reason why the later monuments were built nearby, just as later settlements and burial sites were attracted to the vicinity by the existence of this spiritual site. (For more information, go to http://www.rollrightstones.co.uk/)

The main contribution of Neolithic or early Bronze Age man to the later Hook Norton was the establishment of a well-used trackway or pack-trail on the line of the modern road from Stow-on-the-Wold to Banbury, passing close by the Rollright Stones, then skipping past modern Great Rollright and Hook Norton by following the height of land north to the top of Oatley Hill, and then swinging right to go past the site of "The Gate Hangs High" public house and on towards Milcombe, Bloxham and Banbury. Like the better-known Ridgeway in the south of the county, it followed the high land and so kept the traveller or trader above the streams and marshes. Called by one historian the "Jurassic Way" but more often locally the "Banbury Way", this ridgeway would become the main road through the parish and for centuries, down to George III's reign, the inhabitants of Hook Norton going to Banbury would travel north from the village to the "Gate" in order to pick up the recognised and passable trackway. As a result much of the earliest development in this area took place close to the ridgeway.

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[1] William Stuckeley, quoted in Beesley, *History of Banbury*, page 5.

The Bronze and Iron Ages

The terms Bronze and Iron seem to have little relevance as descriptions of periods in Hook Norton's past. Although Britain was an important source of tin and copper ores in the Bronze Age, few Bronze Age artefacts have been found in this immediate area; however, there was undoubtedly human activity here at that time, as the presence of some nearby Bronze Age barrows demonstrates. That period of evolution came to an end around 800 B.C., when it appears that climatic change made previously habitable uplands more difficult to survive on and the population declined, both locally as people moved to lower-lying land and perhaps more generally. The shift to iron production about that time has left little evidence locally, partly because iron does not survive well in the archaeological record; even so, surprisingly little evidence has been found of any processing of local ironstone at this time. Yet once more there is no doubt of continuing human activity in this locality.

The most prominent development was the building near here, just beyond the north-east corner of the future parish, of Tadmarton Camp, a major hill fort. It is about 165 metres in diameter, surrounded by two high, almost circular earth walls, now about six feet (1.8 metres) high from the outside, and probably originally surmounted with timber palisades. With its walls still visible almost all the way round, the camp lies on Tadmarton Heath, just north of the ridgeway, with the road from Lower Tadmarton to Wigginton now cutting through the middle of it. This hill fort is one of several constructed in north-western Oxfordshire between 1,000 and 800 B.C., all of them on or close to hill tops. The others included Chastleton Barrow (seven miles away, just off the A436) and, most dramatically, Madmarston Hill, two miles north of Tadmarton Camp and just south of Shutford. Iron currency bars of the second century B.C. have been found at Madmarston, together with other iron implements: an axe head, a sickle, a poker, and two pairs of bridle bits. The reason for the construction of these hill forts at this time is not clear, but it came at an unsettled time of economic and probably social disruption. These hill forts were abandoned by the mid-Iron Age – before, say, 400 B.C. – and only occupied again as refuges in time of trouble. They may have had sacred purposes but there is little evidence of burials, or indeed of religion, there before the late Iron Age.

Next to Tadmarton Camp, and just within the parish boundary, lie traces of an earthwork that bemused earlier antiquarians. In 1841 Alfred Beesley, vicar of Banbury, called it Hook Norton Camp and compared it with its neighbour on
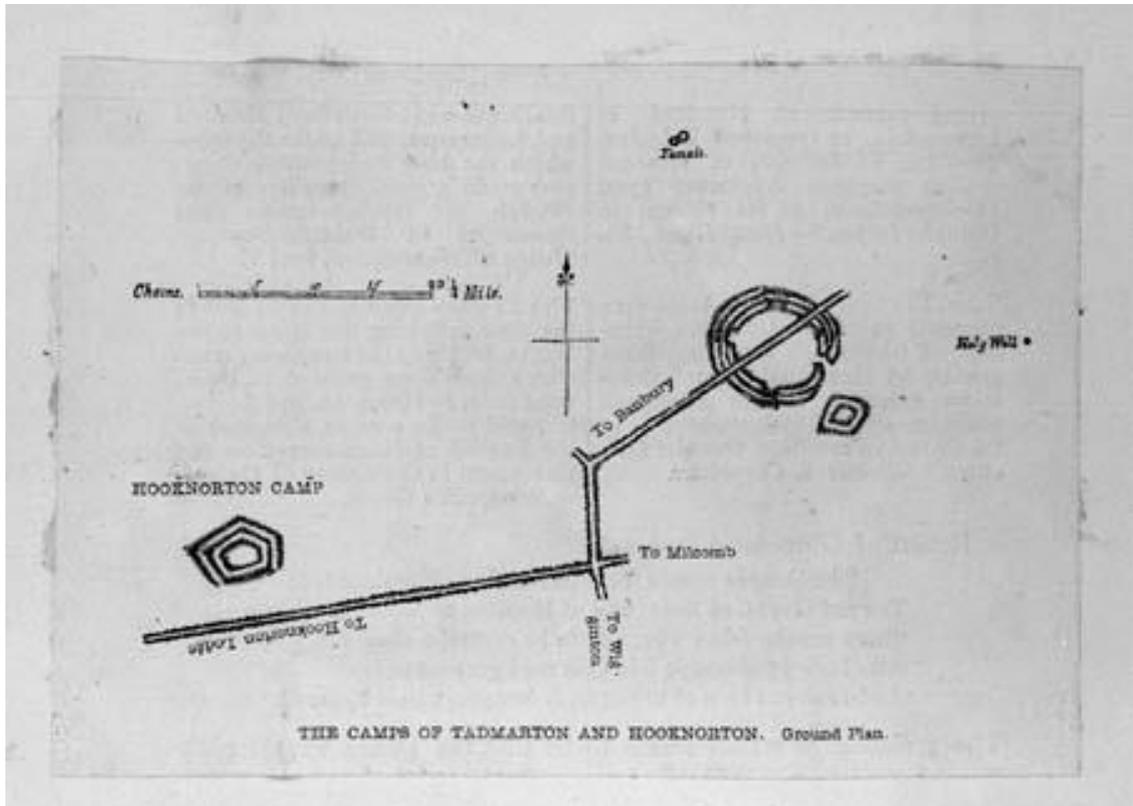
Map drawn in 1840, showing Tadmarton Camp on the right, split by the road from the ridgeway to Lower Tadmarton and Banbury.
To the left, just off the road towards "The Gate Hangs High" public house, is the site of the Bronze Age settlement that gave its name to the field later known as Campfield.

Beesley, History of Banbury *(extra illustrated edition, 1841), vol. 2, page 16.*

Tadmarton Heath. Already, however, ploughing had reduced the original walls "almost to the level of the soil,"[2] but modern aerial photography has revealed the irregular pentagonal outline of the Camp. Then in the 1970s extramural students in Hook Norton studying under Kate Tiller discovered that it lay in a field traditionally called Campfield, and within the traces of its double walls they found 34 prehistoric worked flints. While one flint was Neolithic, eighteen came from every period of the Bronze Age (2,000–800 B.C.), "probably indicating use of the site by a small group, possibly seasonally, but over a long period." The other sixteen flints came from the

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[2] Beesley, *History of Banbury*,

later Iron Age, suggesting an evacuation and then a reoccupation of the camp in the last centuries before the Roman invasions.[3]

Otherwise, the surviving evidence of early agricultural settlement in or near to the modern parish lies across the valley, on the southern edge of the parish, and represents a much later settlement. A few Iron Age agricultural enclosures lie at the top of South Hill close to the junction with the ridge road coming through from Swerford, also along the road dipping down from there toward Chipping Norton, and at Rollright, where more excavations have been undertaken and some evidence of Bronze Age settlement found. These settlements did not have surrounding ditches or enclosures until after 400 B.C., which some experts argue were designed to keep out animals. Farming was mixed, with much grazing and clothing made in the households. As a result, settlements were small and self-sufficient, and probably based on kinship groups. On the whole, the evidence for such upland areas is sparse and the pattern of settlement not well understood, though recent DNA evidence has destroyed the old belief that there were mass migrations from the continent (for example, by "Celts") during the Iron Age.

Experts nowadays play down the need for defensive works in the late Iron Age. Yet the building of enclosures after 400 B.C., the signs that the nearby strategically-grouped hill forts were occasionally reoccupied during that period, and the building of the mysterious Grim's Ditch - an earthwork now visible in Ditchley Park that was built towards the end of the Iron Age but its interior not occupied until the Romans arrived - could be taken to suggest otherwise. By that period the kinship groups in our sparse local settlements gave their allegiance to a large British tribe named the Dobunni, who dominated this part of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire from their power base in Cirencester. This area was, however, an outlying corner of their territory: the eastern boundary of their control lay seven miles away, along the line of the River Cherwell. The rival tribes to the east were the Belgic Catuvallauni operating from St Alban's, and it has been suggested that the south-eastern tribes were increasingly trading with the Romans across the Channel and may have been looking west to capture slaves to sell to them. If so, this would

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[3] Kate Tiller, "Hook Norton, Oxfordshire: An Open Village," in Joan Thirsk, ed., *The English Rural Landscape* (Oxford University Press, 2000), page 285; Percy Hackling, Notes, Village Archive.

help to explain the evidence of insecurity found in North Oxfordshire, and the speed with which the Dobunni sought the protection of the Roman invaders in 43 A.D.
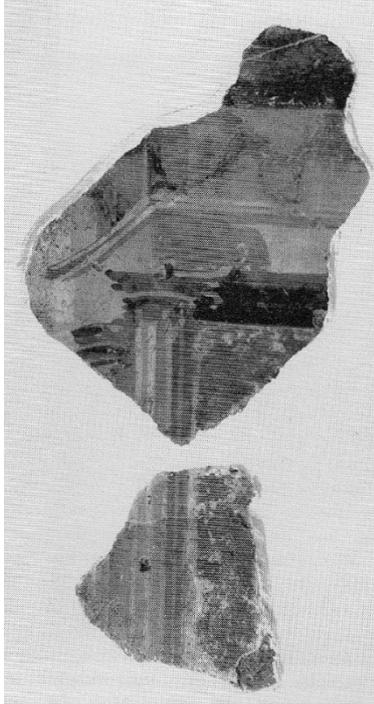

Roman Imperium

Immediately following the invasion, the dominant Dobunni chieftains submitted to Roman rule and were allowed to remain in charge of local government and tax collecting. As a consequence Oxfordshire was saved from a heavy military presence, and the conquerors' main early activity locally was the building (though not yet paving) of Akeman Street, which ran from their fortified camp at Alchester (near Bicester) to Cirencester. Possibly following an older trackway, this road crossed the present A44 just north of Woodstock and roughly marked the northern boundary of the Romans' effective peaceful control in the early years. In time another Roman road would be constructed north of us near Swalcliffe, running westward from King's Sutton in the Cherwell valley toward the Fosse Way travelling north from Cirencester. Local historians have found suggestions of other, more local roads running through the parish in this period, though without firm archaeological evidence.

The local elite quickly adopted Roman practices and already before 100 A.D. villas were being built close to the line of Akeman Street, notably at North Leigh and Ditchley. These villas were mainly farms, continuing Iron Age farming traditions and possibly even built on existing sites, but now in stone rather than wood. The farms' productivity and prosperity increased in response to the demand generated by the military bases and cash economy introduced by the Romans. In time some of these villas grew to become comparable to eighteenth-century country houses, supporting self-sufficient villages and generating surplus crops. These larger,
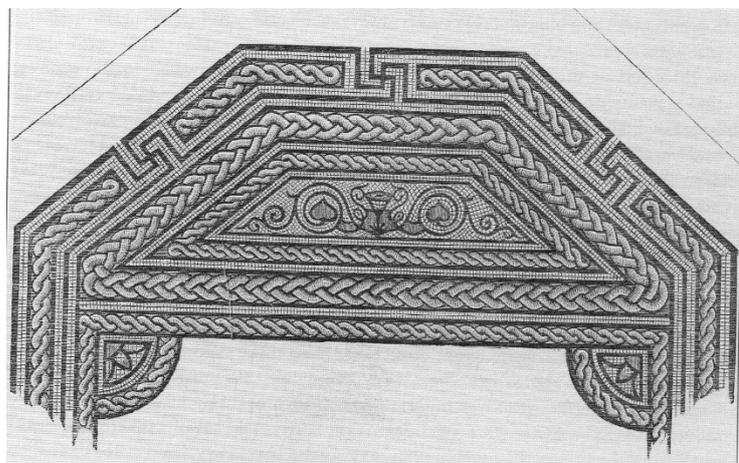
Mosaic floor at Wigginton Villa

Beesely, *History of Banbury*
(extra illustrated ed.)

stone-built villas were constructed mainly in the Cotswold region of the north-western part of modern Oxfordshire. It appears that around 300 A.D. men well-established in the provincial government operating from the old Dobunni capital of Cirencester developed these substantial rural estates as retreats from their town houses. Here they enjoyed the comforts of Roman life, in palatial villas that were often adorned with mosaic floors, probably designed in Cirencester. Yet these men were almost certainly not themselves Romans or immigrants from other parts of the empire, but "native Britons whose forebears had long ago enthusiastically adopted Roman ways".[4]

Fresco with architectural perspective in Wigginton villa.
© Oxfordshire Museums

The finest example of such a villa stood at North Leigh, one of the largest villas in the country. Close by lay a villa at Stonesfield that had a marvellous geometric mosaic floor known as the "Stonesfield Carpet", discovered in the eighteenth century only to disappear in the nineteenth! Both these estates were situated close to Akeman Street, but a third example stood on the eastern bounds of our parish: the impressive Wigginton villa, discovered in 1824 and illustrated here, had not only mosaics but also impressive paintings including a fresco displaying architectural perspective. Recent digs at a villa at Swalcliffe Lea have discovered Roman mosaics and coins, as well as coins of Dubonni (40 B.C.-30 A.D.) manufacture.

Villas account for only a relatively small proportion of the Romano-British population; most people probably still lived in Iron Age roundhouses. There were some areas of concentrated settlement in the region: in the area close to Madmarston Camp, the area of habitation under the Romans covered fifty acres, while there are also signs of intensive settlement at Bloxham and Chipping Norton. The presence of varied settlements in the vicinity ensured that this parish too continued to be inhabited and farmed during these centuries. Certainly enclosed settlements existed on or close to the same sites as in the Iron Age, but there was

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[4] Henig and Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire*, page 148.

probably more settlement in the valley where the village now stands: Roman coins have been found at the modern Manor House and in an old well discovered at Talbot House (on Queen Street), together with some pottery sherds.

Many archaeological finds make it clear that some residents were adopting Roman ways. The most important was that of a Roman fibula or brooch dated between 100 and 150 A.D., found in the field just west of the Sibford Road opposite Redlands Farm. Ingeniously designed with a floral pattern that the other way up suggests an animal's head, it demonstrates that Celtic-style running scrolls were fashionable in Roman Britain. It might be part of a cremation burial, since it was found with some ironware and pottery together with "a skeleton in a jar". A later account speaks of the latter as the skull fragments of two individuals, found in line in a trench, suggesting a burial.[5]
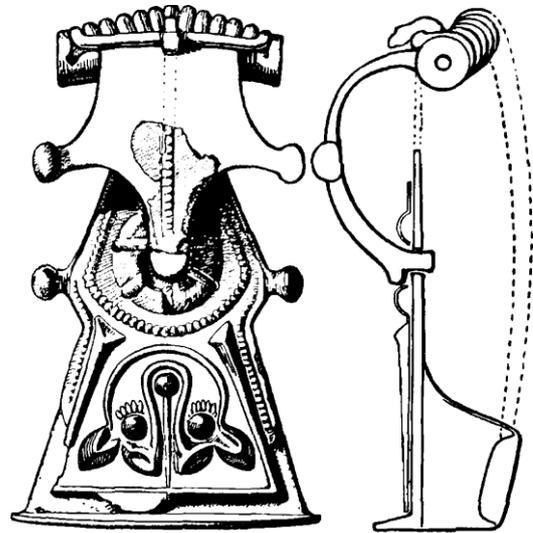
Roman brooch found in Hook Norton

From the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*, vol. 23 (1911), page 406.*

Further finds have been made outside the present village: a hoard of about thirty coins, including one of Julian the Apostate (361-363 A.D.), was found at Duckpool Farm in the 1930s, while the late Percy Hackling believed there may have been two villas west of the village because clusters of pottery had been found there, dated respectively 100-300 and 200-400 A.D. One included hypocaust tiles, suggesting underfloor heating. More recently, a local metal detectorist has found at an unrevealed site in the parish innumerable objects that have been professionally identified as Romano-British. However, we must await a proper archaeological investigation before we can claim a Hooky villa.[6]

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[5] E. Thurlow Leeds, ["A Romano-Celtic brooch of the second century found at Hook Norton,"] *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, second series, vol. 23 (March 1911), pages 406-407; Hackling, Notes, Village Archive.

[6] According to Leeds, page 406, the brooch was found "in the course of one of the numerous excavations for iron-stone round the village" in a field named "Goosacre". Eric Tonks, *The Iron Stone Quarries of the Midlands: History, Operation and Railways,* 9 vols. (Cheltenham: Runpast Publishing, 1988), Part 2, page 82, places "Goosacre Pit" across the Sibford Road from Redlands Farm. See also Hackling, Notes, Village Archive.

Local farming was probably still mixed in character and subsistence in purpose, but the need to raise cash for taxes prompted a need to produce a surplus for market, probably in the form of cereal crops. There was no particular emphasis on wool production, and the only evidence of iron working comes from outside the parish, at the nucleated settlement around Swalcliffe. Druidical religious traditions probably continued alongside the worship of new Roman deities, though the introduction of Christianity in the fourth century had probably made it the dominant religion by 400 A.D. However, the lack of written sources relating to Roman Oxfordshire means we cannot make confident statements about local culture and religion.

Withdrawal and Survival

As the empire came under attack from outside in the late fourth century, the British economy began to decline. In 402 A.D. the Romans stopped importing coin into Britain and in 409 the local authorities were told they would have to look after their own defence. Rather than a full-scale military withdrawal in 410 A.D., it is likely that Roman control faded away as unpaid soldiers took up new occupations. For several decades, however, life continued to follow the Romano-British pattern and local authority remained with those who had ruled under the Romans, even as the economy crashed and the villas as economic units collapsed.

When Anglo-Saxons began to settle in England after 450 A.D., often after being invited in to provide protection, they did not immediately disturb the political *status quo*. In general, there were too few of them to carry out a military conquest, and there is no evidence in this area (unlike the South-West) that the Romano-British brought hill forts into use again. There was no campaign of fire and destruction in Oxfordshire nor a decline in native British numbers. The newcomers from Denmark and northern Germany coexisted more or less peacefully with their immediate neighbours, who increasingly appreciated the immigrants' ways and values as the political unity imposed by the Romans was replaced by the chaos of competing regional war lords.

Basically, the British blood-stock remained much as it had since the islands were first settled about 10,000 B.C. - the western parts probably settled from the

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south-west and the eastern parts by Germanic tribes.   The various waves of later invaders had only a superficial impact on the genetic make-up of the population, though it is now thought the Anglo-Saxons contributed, presumably through intermarriage, at least twenty per cent of the genetic make-up of the population, a far greater proportion than the Romans and their imperial citizenry had earlier or the Vikings would later.[7] In each case the invaders provided a governing class and introduced new cultural and political standards that the locals in time adopted. Just as they had previously accepted Roman ways, so in the late fifth and sixth centuries the British found the ways of their new Anglo-Saxon neighbours more appropriate to a world that had reverted to the situation of Iron Age Britain, a world of "small fearful clans under powerful overlords". This was a return to the earlier troubled political situation from which, according to two recent historians, "the coming of Roman literacy, organisation and law had delivered three and a half centuries of welcome relief."[8]

Modern Remains

To see the surviving evidence of these centuries requires some travelling, often on foot, and the use of an Ordnance Survey map, either Landranger 151 or, better, Explorer 191. The Rollright Stones, on the road from Hook Norton to Stowe (grid reference SP 297309), are managed and owned by a local trust under the supervision of English Heritage, and open all year between sunrise and sunset on payment of a token fee. The south-eastern portion of Tadmarton Camp (386357) is now part of Tadmarton Golf Club, but a public right-of-way passes next to the north-western portion, which is now farmed; the path leads north across the plateau towards an excellent view of Madmarston and other summits. Campfield is difficult to identify and is now farmland. Madmarston Hill (386388) is best seen from the footpaths running south from Shutford or, better still, from the Roman road that runs just south of the hill. It may be approached by the minor road from Swalcliffe that runs north through Swalcliffe Lea. Chastleton Barrow (252283) is easily accessible from the main road to Stow and the side road to Chastleton House, together with the

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[7] This is the conclusion of a study of British DNA published in *Nature* in March 2015, modified by Simon Jenkins's comments: *The Guardian*, March 19, 25, 2015.
[8] Henig and Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire*, page 47.

mysterious tumulus slightly down hill overlooking Adelstrop and the Evenlode valley. The mysterious Grim's Ditch can be found at its nearest point ten miles away from Hook Norton in Ditchley Park (416206 and 384209).

Nearby Roman villas are more elusive. The villa at Swalcliffe Lea offers little to see except during excavations, but a good description is provided and artefacts (including Roman coins and pottery) displayed at Swalcliffe Tithe Barn (377379), which opens free of charge between Easter and the end of November, on Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays only, 2-5p.m. Nothing is to be seen of the villas near Ditchley (399202) and Great Tew (406276) beyond their site. The Wigginton villa lay one eighth of a mile southeast of the church, in a field sloping down to the stream (about 393332); nothing remains but there is a promising terrace just above the flood plain. The mosaic pavement hasn't been seen since 1853.

The best surviving villa in the county, complete with fine mosaic floor, is at North Leigh (397154), which can be approached only on foot: either from the village of that name (near Hanborough) or from Stonesfield parish church, walking due south over the bridge across the Evenlode and its flood plain. Managed by English Heritage, it is open during "reasonable daylight hours". The best example of all is Chedworth Roman Villa in Gloucestershire, a National Trust property at Yanworth near Cheltenham (open from February 14 till the end of November, every day 10am till 4 or 5pm). Otherwise, visit our fine museums: the Ashmolean in Oxford (open Tuesday to Sunday, 10am-5pm, free) exhibits some Iron Age linch pins found at Wigginton and provides a good display of the finds at Shakenoak, a small working villa just west of East Leigh, while the splendid Corinium Museum in Cirencester (Monday to Saturday, 10am-4pm, Sunday 2-4pm, £4.95, concessions) explains the centrality of that Roman city even to Hook Norton.

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For Further Reading

Martin Henig and Paul Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire* (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 2000), which includes a chapter on "The Iron Age Background" by Tim Allen.

Other References:

Alfred Beesley, *History of Banbury* (Banbury, 1841), pages 4-46.

Victoria County History, *A History of the County of Oxford*, ed. L.F. Saltzman (London, 1939), vol. 1, pages 238-345.

E. Thurlow Leeds, ["A Romano-Celtic brooch of the second century found at Hook Norton,"] *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, second series, vol. 23 (March 1911), pages 406-407.

Percy Hackling, Notes in the Village Museum.

Kate Tiller, "Hook Norton, Oxfordshire: An Open Village," in Joan Thirsk, ed., *The English Rural Landscape* (Oxford University Press, 2000), pages 281-285.

Kate Tiller and Darkes, eds., *An Historical Atlas of Oxfordshire,* Oxfordshire Record Society, vol. 67 (2010), pages 10-15.