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**Roman Dymock: Archaeological Investigations 1995-2002,  
Dymock: its origins and function**

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*Archive*

The archive will be deposited at Dean Heritage Centre, Soudley, under accession number SOYDH 2002.75.

## Dymock: its origins and function

By TOBY CATCHPOLE, ANDREW SIMMONDS and TIM COPELAND

Recent excavations at the Rectory site, at Dymock Sewage Treatment Works and at Rose Cottage and Winserdine (Tavener 2001) have all failed to uncover evidence for either Iron-Age occupation or military activity at Dymock. This leads to the conclusion that the settlement founded in the Roman period, probably during the second half of the 1st century AD, was from the outset civilian in nature. Dymock certainly comes within the category of 'roadside settlements' described by Roger Finch Smith (1987) as there is evidence of buildings within 50 metres of the road. Its description as a large rural settlement (McWhirr 1981, 59) is probably based on the spread of finds reported by Gethyn-Jones. The function of this type of settlement is much more difficult to establish. On the evidence of the archaeological interventions that are the subject of these papers, we can now postulate a primarily agricultural settlement with a significant industrial component stretching along a metalled road from at least the Rose Cottage to the cricket pitch sites in the late 1st century. It may well be that official travellers were being housed in the settlement.

Black (1995) suggests that roadside settlements were deliberately founded by the Roman administration to provide a workforce and lodgings to aid the functioning of the transport system. Dymock was either deliberately founded or developed due to market availability but as the same evidence could be used to make a case for either scenario it is extremely difficult to determine if one or both applied here. The settlements at Kenchester, Stretton Grandison, Dymock and Worcester (and possibly Gloucester if the postulated southern road from Dymock did exist) are equidistant from each other and this may indicate that these settlements were planted as an act of deliberate policy, perhaps associated with the functioning of the imperial transport and postal system.

### Economy

The animal bones from the sewage works and Rectory sites, along with the charred plant remains indicate that mixed farming was practised during the occupation of the site, with spelt wheat the main crop and cattle the main source of meat. Such a predominantly agricultural economy is typical for a roadside village of this date (Rivet 1975).

Iron smelting is now known to have been carried out over a distance of more than 700 m from the Rose Cottage site to the cricket pitch in the 1st and early 2nd century AD. Any attempt to estimate the significance of this industry should bear in mind that only a representative sample of slag was collected at the sewage works site. A recurring aspect of the evidence from the three recent excavations at Dymock is the lack of physical remains of shaft furnaces, leading to a suggestion that smelting was carried out 'near by'. It is, of course, possible that this is the case, although if similar results are obtained in the future it may well be decided that the furnaces were constructed in such a way as to leave little physical trace. Romano-British shaft furnaces need have been no more than c.0.5 m in diameter. They were always protected from the weather in ventilated structures of some kind and they would usually have been associated with tapping pits that could be cleared out (Hoyle *et al.* 2004, 103). The casting of copper-alloy objects required a bowl hearth, with or without a superstructure, to hold a charcoal fire and the crucible in which the metal was melted. Fire hardens the clay in a casting hearth to a depth of only 10–20 mm (Hammer 2003, 16–20) and therefore significant quantities of burnt clay are not to be expected. The unburnt bulk of the superstructure of casting hearths and furnaces may therefore disintegrate and be archaeologically invisible. The shallow bowl-shaped pits and smaller timber structures recorded at the sewage works and Rectory sites and the unexcavated stone structures from the evaluation at Rose Cottage therefore remain as candidates for metal-working locations.

The iron-ore sources used at Dymock are uncertain. Ore samples examined from the sewage works were identifiable only as having probably originated from the Forest of Dean area (Dungworth, above). Gethyn-Jones noted a claim (Bick 1978) that iron ore was mined from under Castle Tump, 2 km to the south-east of Dymock, adjacent to the modern road to Newent, where two undated 'levels' had been driven into the bank. Other evidence for iron ore in the district has recently been summarised by Hoyle *et al.* (2004). It is assumed that copper-alloy ingots were imported to Gloucestershire; two Roman brass ingots have been recovered from Gloucester (Justine Bayley pers. comm.).

The evidence currently is that extensive metal working ceased at Dymock in the mid 2nd century. We can only speculate as to the reasons for this. It may have been that the military market went elsewhere, although there was presumably still a need for great quantities of iron at Gloucester and the other emerging towns and is it perhaps more likely that local ore sources were exhausted.

### The Later Settlement

The absence of material, particularly forms of ceramic evidence, dating to the later part of the Roman period is a recurring feature of the archaeology of Dymock. Remains dating to the later 3rd and 4th century have not been encountered in recent excavations and are scarce among the reports of casual finds made throughout the 20th century.

Occupation at the site at Rose Cottage and Winserdine (Tavener 2001) came to an end early in the 2nd century while at both the Rectory and at the sewage works the latest activities date to the late 2nd or early 3rd century. By the mid 2nd century, however, the adult dead were being buried roughly in the centre of this strip at the sewage works site and also at its western end at Rose Cottage. This argues that these areas were not considered part of the settlement at that time

and that the settlement was shrinking to a focus outside the areas so far investigated. Occurring during a time of relative peace and security, such a decline is most likely explained as the result of economic or political factors that have left no archaeological trace.

The excavations reported above have little to tell us about the later settlement except that it was not focused on any of the sites. That there was a settlement at Dymock throughout the 3rd and 4th centuries is proven by, amongst other things, the coin finds, both those published and those posted on the Portable Antiquities Scheme website, which indicate on-going coin loss through at least to the house of Valentinian. Local place-name evidence suggests that the Dymock area kept its British identity and language longer than most of Gloucestershire (Smith 1965, 29).

Current evidence therefore does not indicate that Roman Dymock was totally abandoned but that it shrank or changed its character and moved, or both. The sewage works site is located on the edge of a low river bluff overlooking the river Leadon. It is sited on a not inconsiderable slope with higher and more level ground to the west at the location of the medieval church and level ground to the east at the cricket pitch. These topographically more favourable sites may or may not have continued in use. The location of a post-medieval 'stoneberrow' field to the south-west (Fig. 12; Gwatkin 1992) may suggest a further area worth investigating for signs of the later settlement. The character of the later settlement is not known. Whether it shrank to a smaller village, became a scatter of farms, or developed into the estate centre of a local aristocrat remains to be seen. No indication of a late Roman villa has so far been discovered within the immediate area, the little-understood site at Donnington mentioned in to the introduction to these combined reports being, so far, the only nearby candidate.

## Regional Context

By TOBY CATCHPOLE

The picture of Romano-British rural settlement in the Severn Vale has become fairly well established. Recent publication of the excavations at Bishop's Cleeve (Parry 1999; Enright and Watts 2002), Tewkesbury (Walker *et al.* 2004), Cheltenham (Catchpole 2002) and Brockworth (Thomas *et al.* 2003) suggest a pattern more indicative of the continuation of late Iron-Age traditions than of major changes after the Roman conquest. This information has recently been summarised by Neil Holbrook in papers to the 25 years of Gloucestershire Archaeology Conference and the Birmingham Roman Archaeology Conference (2006, 108–14). Following Millett (1990, fig 16), late Iron-Age Dymock was within the tribal area recognised by the Romans as Dobunnic, an area of centralised control where the Romans supported existing power structures rather than imposed their own, an argument which is consistent with the available Dymock evidence. A different pattern is suggested by Peter Guest's recent work at a 1st-century site at Lyonshall, Herefordshire, 45 km to the north-west of Dymock, where Iron-Age farming traditions continue similarly but with virtually no evidence of Romanised material culture to indicate changes after the Roman conquest (Peter Guest pers. comm.).

The major difference between Dymock and the recently published sites in the Severn Vale is the evidence for metal working. A recent summary of the Forest of Dean iron industry in the Roman period suggested that a group of centralised production centres could be identified in the