

# WROXETER

ASHES UNDER URICON

A CULTURAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY  
OF THE ROMAN CITY

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## Preface

### My Wroxeter

I first visited Wroxeter in the long, hot summer of 1976. I had always wanted to be an archaeologist and, believing that you needed training first, I paid to enroll on a training excavation. This one was run by the University of Birmingham's Extra-Mural department, which organised two-week long courses of vocational training for people who weren't studying for degrees, or simply were interested in the subject. I thoroughly enjoyed myself and wanted to come back the next year, but this time as a digger. As it happened, no excavation was running there in 1977 so I returned in 1978, along with my cousin from Canada who had asked me to arrange a dig for him as he was about to study for Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. I picked Wroxeter as a known quantity, and in the sure and certain knowledge that we would find things, which I thought he might appreciate.

Early on in my involvement in the excavations at Wroxeter, I was struck by how little research appeared to have been carried out on the site. Occasionally there had been excavations, which would get written up eventually, but if you wanted to find out more about Wroxeter, the most recent work was a book published more than a century before, in 1872. There was a summary of the known information that had been published in a textbook written by John Wachter<sup>1</sup> but there was no real active research beyond the annual excavation. While both Graham Webster and Philip Barker worked on the site, these were not the only

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<sup>1</sup> Wachter 1975



Figure 1: The author, photographed in the office at Wroxeter by Graham Webster's wife, Diana Bonakis Webster, in 1987 at the start of the writing up process.

excavations that they did. Indeed, for Philip, his main excavation was the castle site at Hen Domen at Montgomery. It thus seemed to me that there was an opening at Wroxeter and that it would be a good idea to continue to be a part of this dig and hope that I could be involved in its writing up. I returned every year until the end of the excavation in 1990, this summer activity latterly coincided with my university studies at Liverpool where I was first an undergraduate (from 1979) and then immediately after that, a doctoral student. Handing in my thesis at the very end of January 1987, I started work at Wroxeter full time the week after as I had hoped, writing up the excavations I had taken part in as a digger and a supervisor (Figure 1).

At first, I lodged in Wroxeter at the large house on the river cliff called The Cottage. At that time, it was owned by Sue Overall, two of whose daughters, Chris and Anne, had worked on the baths basilica site as volunteer diggers. Every morning, from January to October, when I finally found somewhere I could afford to buy in nearby Shrewsbury, I would leave the Cottage, climb over the fence, walk across the field, dodging the sheep and their droppings, and arrive at 1 & 2 The Ruins where I shared the upstairs workplace with Heather Bird, senior draftsman. Our shared task was to write up the Baths Basilica excavation, advised by our colleagues Phil Barker, Kate Pretty and Mike Corbishley, a task that took five years.

My station was on the east side of the house, looking over the road that separated our workplace from the baths basilica and its last relic, the Old Work, which dominated the view. Beyond was the Wrekin on the skyline. Sitting there, I would see the visitors come and go on the site, the four workmen Ray, Reg, Mal, and George, directly employed by English Heritage in those days to





Figure 2: A visit by Eaton Constantine school to Wroxeter in July 1959. The custodian, Alf Crow, is explaining the site. For most of these children, this may well have been their first, and last, experience of the site. Image © Shropshire Archives (SA) 3181/311 Leighton Village Hall slide collection.

maintain the site, and the villagers who would descend at the crossroads from the bus travelling along the Shrewsbury to Ironbridge road to walk the half mile down to the village. Children returning from school were dropped at the same location and might divert into the site shop for some ice cream, as we did too on occasion.

As I sat there in the site house which had been converted in the mid-1970s by its new owners, the Department of the Environment, to become the headquarters of what was initially envisioned as a permanent base for the archaeological exploration of the Roman city,<sup>2</sup> I became more and more aware not just of the Roman city and its archaeology but of the community and the farmland that it had become. Since the starting point of any conversation with someone from the village, or any other locality nearby, was my job as an archaeologist at Wroxeter, I would get to hear what they thought of the site, and its history, and how they had seen it change over the years. I rapidly discovered that most had only visited the site once – as school children – and had rarely felt moved to visit again (Figure 2). The majority, like some of the visitors, would just

<sup>2</sup> Everill and White 2011

peer over the fence at the site as they walked by, there not being very much to engage the mind or imagination other than a confusing jumble of low walls set in coloured gravel and grass. More impressive was the enigmatic fragment of wall, known since time immemorial as the Old Work, but seen every day, this too became unremarkable. Consciousness of the wider city was minimal. People were amazed when told that the site was the fourth largest town in Roman Britain. Their surprise often came from thinking that the visible ruins *were* the complete town, a misapprehension abetted by the English Heritage label and title of the site guide for the monument: Wroxeter Roman City. I would point out to them the ramparts, whose full circuit is three miles, visible from a number of locations (the best section being behind the Wroxeter Hotel). They would nod an understanding yet, as their gaze passed over the unbroken expanse of grass and sheep, I could see that they were not entirely convinced of the former town's existence. The question I could see forming in their minds, and sometimes hear expressed directly, was how could a town vanish so completely? While I could explain that there were natural agencies – wind, plants, worms – that could in our climate quite rapidly bury ruins, this doesn't mean that at other times people didn't think of more imaginative and exciting ways to account for the vanished city of *Uricon*. This book aims to tell some of their stories, but also explores how the Old Work and the landscape in which it is set have inspired poets, artists, and writers over the centuries, all of whom were no doubt struck by the singular survival of an enigmatic slab of wall rearing from the bucolic fields of Shropshire.

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I first became aware of the work of artists in relation to Wroxeter when I was asked to contribute an archaeological perspective to a series of summer guided tours in 1996 entitled *Three Poets at Wroxeter*. These talks were jointly hosted and organised by the Housman Society, the Mary Webb Society and the Wilfred Owen Society and brought me a whole new way of thinking about the site. I used this knowledge to inform a paper I offered at the European Association of Archaeologists conference at Pilzen in 2013 on the literary and artistic aspects of the site and this was revived and revised for a talk I contributed to the Church Stretton Arts Festival in 2019. The bulk of the book was written in June 2020 during the first Covid 19 lockdown and reorganised and revised during the second, in August 2020. The text was finalised in February 2022.

The sources used in the text are the fruits of a lifetime of collecting material relating to Wroxeter, but I have also been the beneficiary of donations made by executors of the archaeological estates of Donald Mackreth and Charles Daniels, alongside generous gifts made by Arnold Baker, Frank and Nancy

Ball, and Philip Barker in their lifetimes and by Vivian Wyatt in respect of his parent's materials. I discovered more material from on-line searches in the British Library holdings of Newspapers and in the Shropshire Archives both of which provided some unexpected nuggets of detail and characters.

I am grateful for the funding provided by the University of Birmingham to attend the Pilzen conference, and for the helpful advice of colleagues there over the years, including Henriette van der Blom, Elena Theodorakopoulos, and Gareth Sears. I would especially like to thank Simon Esmonde Cleary whose encouraging words, and perceptive corrections, have saved me from many mistakes and errors. For advice on the painters Tom Prytherch and Alf Hulme, I am grateful to Marjorie Downward and Peter Pryce, their respective descendants, who were generous with the images and information. I am extremely grateful for the generous permission granted by Lord Barnard of the Raby Estate for permission to use the watercolours by Thomas Prytherch on display in Raby Castle. For the poets, I am indebted once again to the Housman Society, Yvonne Morris of the Wilfred Owen Society and Gladys Mary Coles of the Mary Webb society for both answering my queries and correcting the errors or misunderstandings that I had inadvertently introduced when writing about them. For information on Attingham Park and its estate, I am grateful for the insightful comments on my draft by Saraid Jones and Sarah Kay. Any remaining faults must be laid at my door rather than theirs.

Emma-Kate Lanyon of the Shrewsbury Museum Service and the staff of Shropshire Archives were, as ever, a tremendous help and support in supplying illustrations and permissions, as were the staff of Historic England Archives, and Cameron Moffatt and Rachel Kitcherside of English Heritage Trust. Matt Thompson of EHT set me very firmly on a much better track in terms of how to write this study following his initial reading of the text. Equally, at the end of the process, David Breeze offered his friendly advice and astute corrections to the nearly finalised text. Hans van Lemmen and Mike Ashworth gave permission for the use of their images, for which I am extremely grateful. I have attempted to identify all images and copyrights but would be grateful if I have made an error to be contacted so I might correct the mistake in future.

Of my many former contacts in the village and those associated with the site, Chris Everall and Anne Hardy (née Everall), stand out as friends whose perspective as inhabitants of Wroxeter while they were growing up, was invaluable. I am extremely grateful for their help, friendship and support, including access to materials they hold. I am indebted to the custodians of the site for providing information and support for my work on the site. Without their help and access, I would have missed many snippets of information and

contacts, and I am eternally grateful for their supplies of ginger beer and ice cream after long days as a tour guide.

My wife and family have been an unfailing support throughout my working life and during the writing of this during the testing times of the Covid lockdowns. Our own little family legend about Wroxeter, used by my wife to enlighten our infant children, was that Wroxeter was so called because it was full of rocks. They have suffered the site enough I feel. Above all I would like to thank all those with whom I worked or met at Wroxeter, and those I have encountered who lived there. The list is too long to give here, and far too many of them have now died, but it is to all them that I would like to dedicate this book in love and remembrance.

## Introduction

The purpose of this book is to explore the everyday understanding of the Roman site at Wroxeter, in Shropshire (Figure 3). How has people's perception and understanding of the site changed over time, and how has their experience of the site been expressed in writing, poetry, oral tradition, folklore, and art? As an archaeologist, it has been my life's work to explore this abandoned Roman city, to try and understand through the opaque medium of the soil and artefacts contained within that soil, how the city was founded, grew, developed, and died. To do so takes time and patience, the teasing out of strands of evidence, or the application of new and evolving technologies which allow us to see further, understand more and continue to build a picture of one settlement within Roman Britain. From the many public talks, and books (both popular and aimed more squarely at an academic audience) that I have delivered, written, or contributed to over the years it has been my purpose, like any well-trained archaeologist, to use the evidence to construct a 'truth' about the past in a particular place and time. I also believe that we must make that story live through the people whose lives we uncover, however imperfectly we know or understand them. In the abstraction of talking about people's lives through pits, pots, or brooches it is easy to lose sight of the fact that these were real people living real lives. That a day was as long for them as it is for us, and that the years and decades that we casually talk about when we research Roman Britain covers a four-hundred-year span equal to that from the deaths of Edward the Confessor in 1066 to Richard III in 1485, or that from the union of Scotland and England in the person of James VI/I in 1603 to the Scottish referendum of 2014. There was undeniably enormous change in that society over such a long span of years, but we struggle to both comprehend and convey it to our audiences.



Figure 3: Wroxeter and its landscape viewed by air from the north. The arc of the northern rampart is apparent, as are the consolidated ruins at the centre of the site. The village is centre right. The River Sever is prominent, and the now demolished pink cooling towers of Ironbridge B power station are in the left background. Author's photo 26th July 2013.

All the while that I attempt to do this, I have been aware that there are other narratives and stories about the same site. Some are based upon looking at the same evidence that I do but reaching different conclusions. I certainly have no monopoly on truth, and everyone is entitled to their view and understanding of the evidence. I never have, and never will, profess to know what actually happened at Wroxeter at any given moment in history. All we can do is try to make sense of the evidence as it currently exists. Earlier archaeologists looking at the site viewed its history differently. Sometimes they misinterpreted what they saw or failed to understand it at all. Mostly, their understanding of the context of the site, their perception of the realities of Roman Britain, were established on relatively narrow foundations because we simply hadn't dug, or published, enough sites. Since 1945 there has been an exponential growth in our understanding of Roman Britain simply from the sheer number of excavations and the development of new technologies that enable us to explore sites without digging them. These developments have had an undeniable impact on how we now understand that period. Similarly, the society in which we exist as practicing archaeologists is very different. The Britain that I grew up in during the 1960s and '70s is very different from the society that I experience today

and someone of my generation, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and race will have biases and opinions that others who differ in any and all of these characteristics are unlikely to share. In the end though we owe it to the past to try and understand what happened and to present our version of the truth, in full awareness that while the result is neither definitive nor accurate, it is constructed honestly on the basis of what evidence we have at the moment.

The aim of this book is thus to try and see how people have understood and represented Wroxeter over time. It recognises above all that the story of Wroxeter is not just an archaeological one. I want to explore how the site impinged on the society of any particular era, and how it provided inspiration for artistic work. No study could ever hope to be comprehensive and there are many voices that are permanently lost to us: the ordinary inhabitants of Wroxeter village, for instance whose voices we seldom hear and whose opinions have in the past sadly counted for very little. But speaking as an archaeologist, this is entirely normal. As a profession, we never expect to hear the voices from the past. It seldom happens since it is vanishingly rare to be able to identify the people we encounter from the past, even in the intimacy of excavating someone's mortal remains. However, that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to listen for the echoes of these people and their views.

In striving to understand how people engaged with Roman Wroxeter I have focused on how they engaged with it through three categories that stand out in reviewing the available material: poetry, art, and literature. These three elements form the main chapters of the study. They are prefaced by a study of how archaeologists have told their own stories of the site, focusing on three individuals and their interpretations based upon the discoveries that they made. Poetry is self-explanatory as a category, but I have contextualised each of the poems discussed giving a brief biography of the poet where possible and how and why these poets were associated with the site. Art encompasses a variety of media: watercolours, engravings, paintings and some photographs. The discussion is not exhaustive but focuses on three sub-themes, the first being how the Old Work has been depicted over time, and what this tells us of how the monument was perceived. The second theme focuses on the key artist of Wroxeter and its region, Tom Prytherch, who happened to live in the village from around 1890-1926, and the last theme is on how artists have reconstructed the site for the benefit of visitors' appreciation of the ruins and wider monument using information supplied by archaeologists, and their own imaginations and talents. The chapter on literature draws again on three elements. The first is the obvious category of stories based directly or indirectly on Wroxeter as a place. Second are writings that use Wroxeter as a subject of study, for example in science or more commonly in travel- or site-guides, with a cut-off point at

roughly the outbreak of war in 1939. Third is a study of the presentation of the site itself, of how it appeared to those visiting and how those responsible for running the site before the Second World War strived to make visiting an enjoyable and worthwhile experience. While not a literary theme directly, it provides important evidence for how poets, artists and writers experienced the site and thus were inspired to express their feelings.

The changes wrought over the half century following the Second World War saw a profound shift in how Wroxeter was perceived and presented and has thus been set into a chapter of its own. Its focus is at first on how the acquisition of the site from its county archaeological curators by Ministers and Government radically affected the appearance of the monument. The sometimes overwhelming level of top-down decision-making was muted by the contribution of the extraordinary generation who fought and lived through the war and their occasionally idiosyncratic work is highlighted for fostering a huge growth in understanding of the deep history of Wroxeter. Mid-way through this period saw the apogee of state engagement with the site, developments that have been fundamental to the survival and protection of the whole buried town, but which could also be characterised as a missed opportunity to make Wroxeter one of the premier archaeological sites in the country. A final coda to this chapter looks at how University-led research took on the impetus of engagement with the site to re-engage with Wroxeter and its hinterland. A short chapter then offers a vision of how the site might be presented in the future and once again become an inspiration for artists and visitors.