

## AQUAE SULIS. THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF A ROMAN TOWN

Peter Davenport

Ideas about Roman Bath – *Aquae Sulis* – based on excavation work in the town in the early 1990s were briefly summarised in part of the article I wrote in *Bath History* Vol.V, in 1994: ‘Roman Bath and its Hinterland’. Further studies and excavations in Walcot and the centre of town have since largely confirmed what was said then, but have also added details and raised some interesting new questions. Recent discoveries in other parts of the town have also contributed their portion. In what follows I want to expand my study of the evidence from recent excavations and the implications arising from them.

The basic theme of this paper is the site and character of the settlement at *Aquae Sulis* and its origins. It has always been assumed that the hot springs have been the main and constant factor in the origins of Bath and the development of the town around them. While it would be foolish to deny this completely, the creation of the town seems to be a more complex process and to owe much to other factors. Before considering this we ought to ask, in more general terms, how might a town begin?

With certain exceptions, there was nothing in Britain before the Roman conquest of AD43 that we, or perhaps the Romans, would recognise as a town. Celtic Britain was a deeply rural society. The status of hill forts, considered as towns or not as academic fashion changes, is highly debatable, but they probably acted as central places, where trade and social relationships were articulated or carried on in an organized way. Some sort of town equivalent was certainly forming at Silchester<sup>1</sup> and one or two other tribal centres, but only in the few decades before the Roman advent. These few centres, perhaps significantly, were in areas where strong Roman influence before the conquest is evident, and most of them became Roman towns later.

It seems that in Britain, Roman influence or interest was necessary before a town developed, and it must have had a function or value. For example, it might provide services such as shopping, entertainment, administration, manufacture, exchange, safety, accommodation, religious activity and so on, for which there must be a need, i.e. a market. There must also be communications so that people can reach the town, and

these communications themselves might have a defining effect on urban development. How might these factors apply to *Aquae Sulis*?

We know that the Baths and Temple complex was built in the 60s AD, towards the end of Nero's reign. They may well have been completed under Vespasian (AD69-79),<sup>2</sup> only twenty years or so after the conquest, and in the aftermath of the horrors of Boudica's revolt. This implies a high priority given to the use and reverence of the hot springs, which may have been a sufficient impetus to the growth of a town, based, in effect, on a tourist economy. Nonetheless, there are some difficulties with this view. Not least is the fact that there is no evidence for any significant urban activity in the vicinity of the baths and temple until at least the middle of the second century.<sup>3</sup> If a town grew up because of the baths, it either took nearly a hundred years to start, or it was located somewhere else.

Martin Henig's recent views on the patronage of the baths and temple,<sup>4</sup> might explain the creation of a great monument seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Henig believes that the baths and temple were built at the command of the important provincial figure, Tiberius Claudius Togidubnus, client king of the Atrebatas and of the area, including *Aquae Sulis*, later called the *Civitas Belgarum*. They were built, according to this interpretation, as a monument to the conquest of Britain, in which Togidubnus played, or liked to think he played, an important role as a Roman ally. It would certainly have become a good political move after AD69 to celebrate what was a major part of the earlier career of Vespasian, who became emperor in that year. Henig sees the complex primarily as a monument making a political statement in a typically Roman fashion and only incidentally as a facility for practical use. The arguments are complex and I refer the interested reader to the references.

Despite the absence of settlement in the immediate area, the baths were not constructed in isolation, as we shall see later.

When the Roman army arrived in the area, probably in late AD43, they are likely to have recognised the site of the later town as a key strategic and tactical one. It controlled the crossing point of the Avon by well-established north-south routes, and the natural route through the southern end of the Cotswolds provided by the Avon valley, itself a gateway to the Severn crossing. This strategic importance is underlined by the fact that four major Roman roads join or cross here: the Fosse Way, the strategic *limes* or frontier road joining the garrison fortresses of Exeter and Lincoln and providing lateral communication behind the temporary frontier of the Severn and Trent rivers; the road to Poole, an important legionary supply depot; the road from London to the Severn Crossing and its

military garrison; and the road north to Gloucester.

It is highly significant that these roads converge, from some distance away, not on the central walled area, but on a spot adjacent to the present Cleveland Bridge, a natural crossing point of the Avon. The earliest evidence for occupation in Bath actually comes from this area, in the Claudian and Neronian periods - AD43 to 68. Why should this be?

A market for goods and services would have attracted people, probably traders, entrepreneurs and chancers of all sorts. While passers-by on the roads improved and re-engineered by the Romans might have contributed to the sustainability of urban investment in the area, the only really substantial market is likely to have been a detachment of troops garrisoned in the vicinity to guard the important route node here in the post-conquest period. Until recently, there has been little direct evidence of such a detachment, although some people, for example the antiquarian Skinner in 1820, have postulated a fort at Bath, often at Bathwick.<sup>5</sup> There is still no direct evidence for such a fort, but there is now a growing body of evidence for a military presence in the early period at Bath. It is a very reasonable assumption that this could have been at Bathwick, which has both a strategic and a tactical significance, guarding the entrance to the narrow part of the Avon valley here. Such a military presence would also make sense in the earliest period of Roman occupation, and until well after the crushing of the Boudican revolt.

So we have communications, a nodal position and a probable market for goods and services to support the growth of a small settlement, all this before the construction of the Roman baths and temple. The springs, whatever form they took in the late prehistoric and early Roman periods, must have been an important factor in attracting yet more visitors. We simply have little evidence of their appearance before the decision was made to monumentalise the springs in c.AD60. In this early period visitors probably continued to come to see the hot springs in their pre-Roman condition, when they were apparently largely open air and semi-natural.

### The site of urban occupation in *Aquae Sulis*

Since the early nineteenth century, evidence of Roman settlement has been noticed from time to time along Walcot Street/London Street, several hundred metres north of the hot springs. Funerary evidence has also been recovered in the same areas. Little attempt has been made to explain this except the assumption that this occupation represents the growth of a suburb of the town along the road to *Londinium*. Since 1989, enough

archaeological investigations have been possible, to make more sense of the evidence of Roman activity both in this area and in the immediate vicinity of the baths and temple, and to frame convincing hypotheses explaining the urban shape and development of Roman Bath. These hypotheses require that we have a reasonably good idea of what was going on in the Roman period in the central, later walled, area around the baths and temple, and also outside it.

South of the walled area, on the Ham and the Ambry (in modern terms the area between Henry Street and Lower Borough Walls and the river) no Roman remains or finds have ever been reported. Recent limited investigations in advance of the proposed redevelopment of the Southgate Shopping Centre (1997-99) have, as far as they go, confirmed this picture, although one potsherd of Roman date was found in a shallow scoop cut into the natural subsoil.<sup>6</sup> As this was below several metres of eighteenth and nineteenth-century dumped soil that contained much recycled and redeposited Roman pottery, it has no significance archaeologically. Similarly, investigations at Avon Street, prior to redevelopment of the Bath College of Further Education in 1998, demonstrated that post-medieval deposits directly overlay natural alluvium without any intervening Roman horizons.<sup>7</sup> Although, future discoveries may prove us wrong, it is unlikely that Roman Bath ever spread on to the Ham. The area south of the river is little known, but discoveries that have been made appear to relate to somewhat separate rural activities. The recently discovered villa, for example, is discussed below.

Similarly, no evidence has ever been reported for Roman occupation to the west of the enclosed area. Excavations just outside the medieval west gate in 1990 indicated some activity, but this seemed to relate to a track or small road running just outside and parallel to the line of the medieval and possibly Roman city walls.<sup>8</sup> No other evidence is known until as far west as Norfolk Crescent and Marlborough Lane, where two probable Roman villas have been identified, about 600m away. These will be returned to below.

Despite its development by an archaeologically interested, not to say obsessed, architect, John Wood I, the region north of the walled area (Queen Square, the Circus, and the surrounding land) has provided little evidence of Roman occupation. A presumably early group of cremation burials was noted on the north-west corner of Queen Square, and inhumation burials have been recorded along the south side of Julian Road between the Crescent and Guinea Lane. A possible shrine has been suggested at the bottom of Northampton Street,<sup>9</sup> along with high status burials. The question of burials will be discussed further, but here we can

just note that Roman remains along Julian Road and Guinea Lane appear to be largely funerary, and represent one of the cemeteries of *Aquae Sulis*. While little or no modern work has been carried out around Milsom Street and Broad Street, there are equally no records of any remains found in these areas in the past.

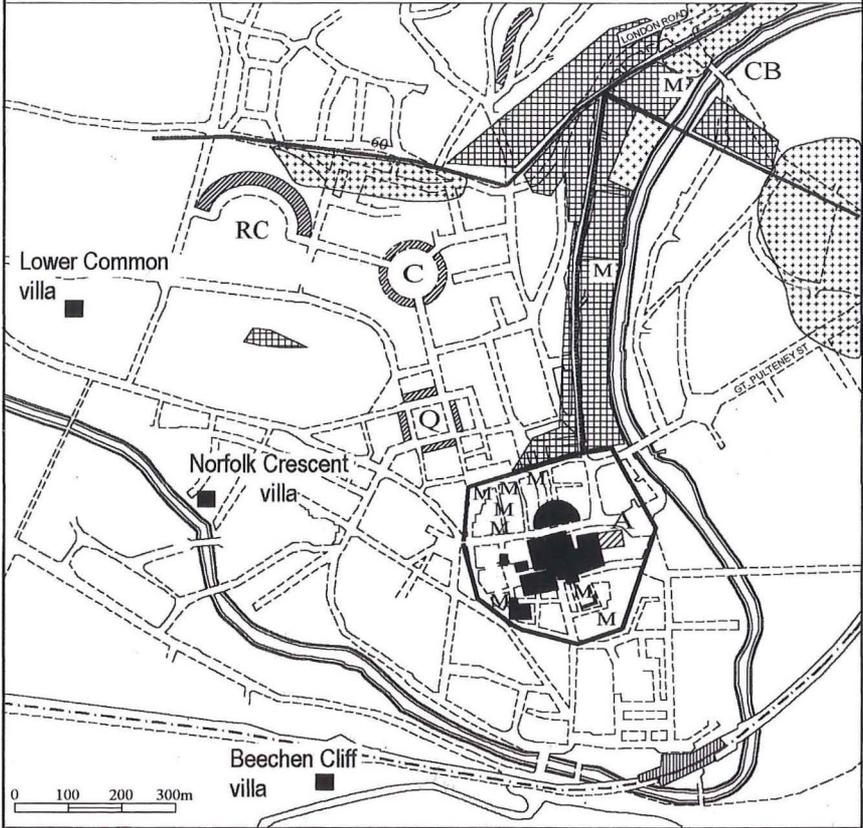
In the search for evidence of Roman settlement, only the strip along the River Avon, running north from the central area, and the central area itself are left. Fortunately for our enquiry, there is ample evidence for it here.

### The character of Roman remains in the central area

The first Roman remains recovered in the eighteenth century were grand public monuments and finds related to them: the head of *Sulis Minerva*, probably the cult statue in the great temple in 1727, and the Roman baths themselves in 1754.<sup>10</sup> Earlier references, such as Leland's in the sixteenth century,<sup>11</sup> were mainly concentrated on the walls, the only visible Roman antiquities at the time. Work since then has continued to confirm that initial picture. The central area, in modern terms enclosed within Lower and Upper Borough Walls, Westgate Buildings, Terrace Walk and the Grand Parade was defined, fairly certainly, by an earthen bank or rampart. This was in existence by the second century (and possibly earlier). A stone wall was added to the front of the rampart in the third or fourth century. This area is tiny, only 24 acres (10ha), and is dominated by large public monuments: the baths and Temple of *Minerva*; a public building recently confirmed by the Spa excavations of 1998-99; a second bath complex under the old Royal United Hospital, currently the Bath College Annexe in Beau Street;<sup>12</sup> some sort of major structure, probably another temple, under the Abbey; and a massively-built structure north of the precinct of the Temple of *Minerva* and west of the present High Street (a small part of this structure was found in 1997 near the corner of Union Street). Just how much of the enclosed central area these public buildings occupied can be seen in fig. 1. In addition, a number of high status buildings, indicated by finds of mosaics, may be private houses, or more public buildings.<sup>13</sup>

Where they can be dated, these buildings (apart from the baths complex) post-date the mid-second century and continue into the fourth or even early fifth. Prior to this, the area around the baths and temple appears to have been largely open, consisting of gravelled yards and workshop areas, drains and lanes and tracks probably linking wooden buildings used in the maintenance of the baths and temple. There is no clear evidence of more workaday occupation until the fourth century when a pewter

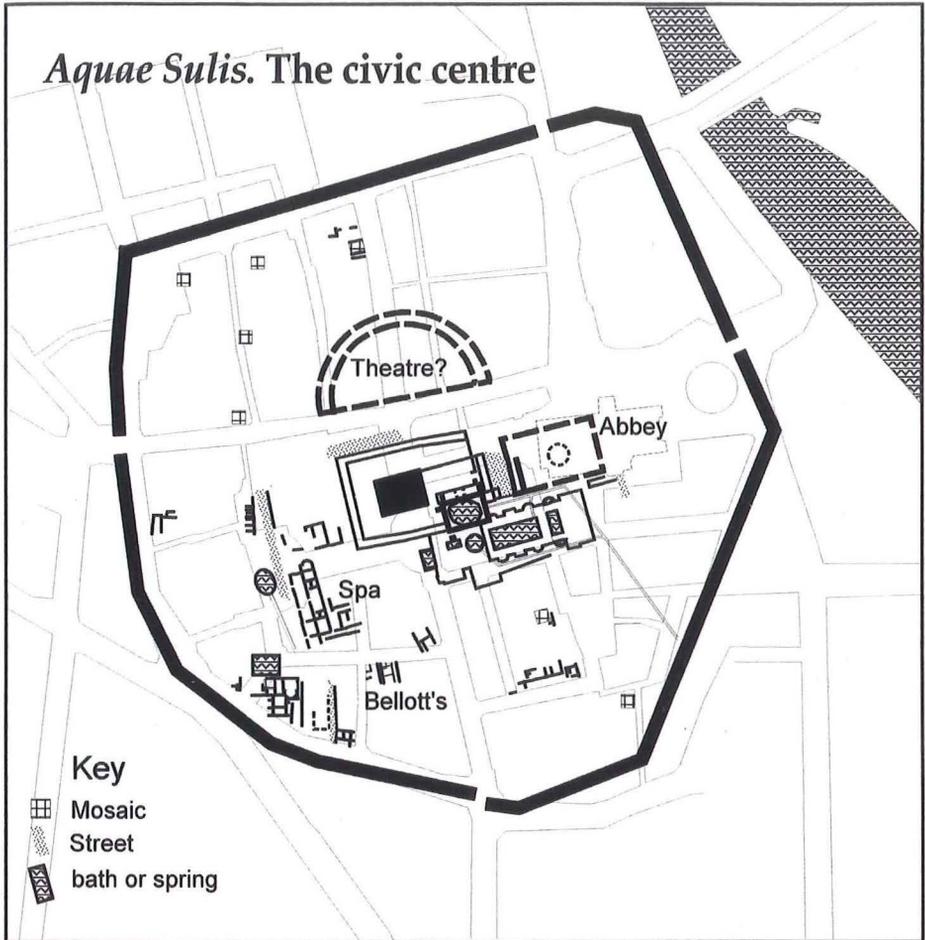
## The position of *Aquae Sulis* and the modern town



1. The hatched areas show the latest ideas for the location of settlement in *Aquae Sulis*. The cross-marked areas are the cemeteries. The walled monumental area is based on the medieval town walls which are known in places to be Roman. Public buildings in the centre are blocked in black.

A = the Abbey, C = the Circus, RC = the Royal Crescent, CB = Cleveland Bridge, M = Mosaics

workshop probably flourished adjacent to the eastern boundary wall of the main baths complex,<sup>14</sup> and a blacksmith's workshop occupied a stone-built house on the site of Bellot's Hospital.<sup>15</sup> This is at a time when major changes were anyway afoot: the temple precinct was partly built over in



2. This map shows very broadly what we know or can surmise about the central part of Roman Bath. None of the known buildings was clearly a house, although some of the mosaics may represent houses of the temple officials.

the mid to late fourth century, suggesting major changes in the way this central area was used in late Roman times.

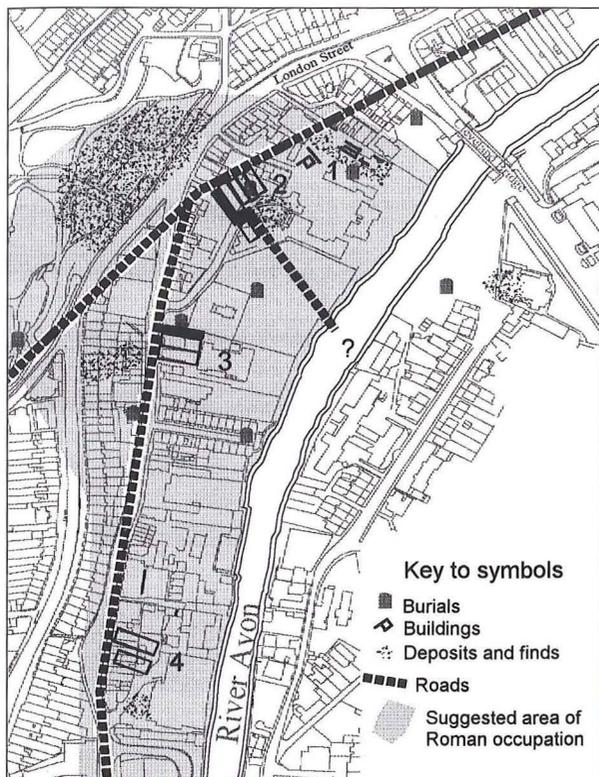
This picture of a lack of domestic occupation is reinforced by the pattern of finds. From the centre, finds are relatively sparse compared to what one expects from Roman urban deposits, and coins, apart from the massive deposit in the King's Bath, are particularly scarce. In contrast to this, a much more typical distribution can be found along Walcot Street.

So we can imagine a complex of very substantial public buildings, possibly within some sort of enclosure, from c.AD60 to c.AD150, but without other major buildings; the development of more public buildings from then until the fourth century; and finally, evidence of workshops and shops and grand buildings, possibly officials' houses, built next to, and indeed within, the formerly monumental areas. While the evidence tends to become less well preserved and fugitive, there are strong indications that in the very late or sub-Roman period, timber buildings were erected over the site of the temple precinct<sup>16</sup> and over the public building found on the spa excavations of 1998-99.<sup>17</sup> This is not, in total, a typically urban story, although all towns will have elements of these developments. The results of the work along Walcot Street provide an instructive contrast.

## The character of Roman remains along Walcot Street

The earliest recorded Roman find here was of a tombstone to the lady Vibia Secunda, found on the site of the *Bell Inn* before 1658.<sup>18</sup> Funerary evidence is what is most emphasised, until recently, in reports from this area, giving the impression that a cemetery had grown up along the road out of central Bath to London. Indeed a thin straggle of graves has been recorded all the way to Lambridge, nearly 3km from the town centre, although it is open to debate whether or not this is one continuous cemetery.

While some of the finds of tombstones could have been of recycled stone in later contexts (and earlier reports rarely give details of the discoveries), it is clear that reports of cremated bone in red pottery bowls on the site of the Walcot Burial Ground refer to actual interments. Two very clear inhumation burials were recovered in recent work at the old Aldridge's Auction Rooms, 130-132 Walcot Street (now called St Swithin's Yard). While interesting, such burials would merely confirm the older picture were it not that substantial evidence of domestic occupation and craft activity have been found in the same places. The first major finds of this nature, from Hedgemoor Park, Walcot Methodist Church and the area behind it, made in 1815 during redevelopment, were substantial and numerous. They included coffins and cremations, but also provided large quantities of coins, pottery and metalwork, as well as a tessellated floor.<sup>19</sup> The exact positions were not plotted (but see fig.3). These finds, together with observations in 1988 during the clearing of the Burial Ground behind the Walcot Methodist Church and excavations along London Street and Walcot Street since 1989, have revealed intense and long-lived urban occupation, both residential and industrial,



3. Roman buildings and burials along Walcot Street and the likely area of settlement.

- 1 = the Methodist burial ground;
- 2 = the Hat and Feather Yard site;
- 3 = Aldridge's;
- 4 = Tramsheds or Beehive Yard

in the area between the street frontage and the river. These include substantial masonry buildings (including at least one with a tessellated floor) super-seding earlier timber and slighter masonry ones. These appear to be good quality houses intermingled with and sometimes replaced by workshops and probably shops, blacksmiths' forges and potters' kilns, all dating from earliest Roman times until the latest. In at least one part of the street there was a gravelled and covered pavement in front of the buildings.

This is worth comment. While infant burials and the occasional illicit burial are found in Roman towns, the dead and the living were strictly separated under Roman law. So what was happening here, in *Aquae Sulis*? A simple solution, attested in other Roman towns in the empire, would be that the burials either predated or post-dated the urban development. However, the burials, while not for the most part closely dated, do seem to be typologically of all possible Roman dates – as does the dated occupation evidence. So this is not the answer to the conflict. Another

way of explaining the difficulty is more attractive, if slightly more complex and it depends on viewing the origins and growth of the central area and the Walcot nucleus as quasi-independent processes.

### A model for the origins and development of *Aquae Sulis*

The earliest archaeological layers in central Bath, outside the baths, date from the Flavian period, no earlier than AD69. We have seen that the baths and temple were probably being erected in the decade ending then, and the presence of builders and their clients probably accounts for the small amount of Neronian (AD54-68) and even smaller amount of Claudian (AD43-54) material that has been found. Most of the earliest material is, in fact, high quality imported pottery that was probably lost in Flavian times, being twenty or thirty years old when finally discarded.<sup>20</sup>

Substantial development of masonry buildings seems only to occur in the mid-second century in connection with an apparent re-planning of the central area, evidenced in new buildings with a totally changed alignment along newly-laid-out streets. This is also when the first major changes to the baths and temple complex took place.<sup>21</sup>

It seems most likely then, that despite the creation of the baths and temple complex in the seventh decade of the first century, perhaps as a great public monument to the conquest of Britain, significant development around it did not take place until the second century. Even then we are not sure just how this development functioned. Was it to service the cult centre and the needs of its visitors and not to provide accommodation for a resident population? Did it change character over the ensuing centuries? There are hints that it did both, but to consider these takes us away from considerations of origins.

Excavations behind the *Hat and Feather* public house and at Nelson Place, both in London Street, have revealed that a settlement was coming into being here from Claudian times, probably by AD50. It is clear that considerable energies were being put into terracing the steep slope to make use of land that must have been rapidly increasing in value. This settlement seems to have developed around the junction of the main roads mentioned above, and the route down to a river crossing just downstream of Cleveland Bridge, which must have existed to allow the Poole Road to meet the other roads. The road heading southwards to the hot springs (Walcot Street) must have been laid out early on and formed an important axis between the new settlement and the springs. By the time the monumental buildings around the spring were complete, houses and

shops were probably creeping down the road toward them, as indicated by finds from limited excavations in Beehive Yard.<sup>22</sup>

It has always been suspected that the army must have been involved in this growth somehow, and while we still have no direct evidence for a fort, the circumstantial evidence from recent work for a military presence has become more persuasive. It has been noted since 1969 that the earliest pottery, particularly Samian, is to be found in the Walcot and Bathwick areas. Large quantities have turned up at the *Hat and Feather* and Nelson Place in the excavations of the last decade. At Nelson Place, quantities of high quality imported coloured glass tableware of a similar early date have been unearthed in slightly later rubbish dumps. Such a collection of material implies the presence of the army as the only likely, large-scale Romanised consumer in this early period. In particular, the recognition of quantities of *Terra Nigra* pottery strongly implies the presence of the army in the Claudio-Neronian period.<sup>23</sup> Three items of personal military equipment (a buckle, a small piece of armour fitting from a *lorica segmentata* and a strap end, all datable to pre-Flavian times) have also been found in the excavations at the Hat and Feather Yard, suggesting the presence of individual soldiers at an early period, and the coin list from this site matches the pattern of early coins from military sites.<sup>24</sup>

So the small settlement, as suggested earlier, probably grew up on a busy crossroads across the river from where a Roman fort may have been sited. The settlement was in existence by about AD50 and grew along the road towards the springs, especially after c.AD60. By c.AD100 we might visualise a thriving but probably quite small settlement at the top of Walcot Street, and down by the river; with a thin ribbon of development along Walcot Street linked at its southern end to the monumental baths and temple complex, perhaps already enclosed with an earthen bank and ditch, to form what might be described as a dumb-bell plan. The administrative status of such a site might at most be a *vicus*, not more than a village. Burials, at this period most likely to be cremations, could quite legally and sensibly have been placed in the open space behind the roadside development between the two ends of the dumb-bell. Our modern observations show that such a space does appear to have existed in the old Walcot Anglican Burial Ground, where such cremations were found in the early nineteenth century. Later inhumations are also attested in this area, at Chatham Row for example, which seems to have remained undeveloped. Substantial Roman buildings such as those found during excavations at the old Aldridge's Auction Rooms could, if necessary, be explained as later encroachments on the edge of the burial zone. Other burials seem to have

been north and west of the centre of the Walcot settlement nucleus, in a place that could be seen as outside the settlement boundaries. Thus, there may always have been uncertainties as to the exact boundaries of the 'town', allowing a slight irregularity in burial positioning at times.

There are, however, two burials recently discovered at the Aldridge's site, both in wooden coffins and one with a lead inner coffin, which are definitely and awkwardly in the settlement zone, but these can best be explained as part of the end of Roman Bath and are discussed below.

To summarise: the earliest settlement occurs around a route junction and possible river crossing, just south of Cleveland Bridge, probably guarded by a detachment of troops in a fort. The attraction of the hot springs would always form part of the equation but development did not occur there at all until about AD60 and residential occupation is not well attested at any period. Further development there does not get underway until the second century and although there may be houses going up then and more likely in the later third and fourth centuries, the predominant picture is of a monumental or civic centre. However, residential and craft and industrial development continues without a break at the Walcot Street/London Street area from the early beginnings until the early fifth century at least, and spreads down towards the baths at an early date. By the second and third century, the space between the river and Walcot Street is packed with buildings at Beehive Yard, Aldridge's, and Hat and Feather Yard, and we have evidence of blacksmiths, potters, painters and other unidentified crafts. By this date the army are likely to have moved on, but the settlement had acquired a social and economic impetus of its own. We would love to know what was happening just north of the enclosed civic centre, but much of this area was destroyed without record in 1970, when the underground car park was constructed.

### *Aquae Sulis*: the Town

I will now attempt to paint some sort of picture of what we believe the town of *Aquae Sulis* to have been like, perhaps some time in the mid to late third century, and in passing, describe in a little more detail the discoveries along Walcot Street, in the centre of town, and elsewhere that have been made in the last decade or so.

Visitors, riding or walking along the London Road from *Londinium* or *Corinium* or, closer at hand, from *Cunetio*, near Chippenham, would first notice the graveyard stretching along either side of the road, as far out as Lambridge. As they approached the site of Cleveland Bridge they would be

closer to the river than a modern traveller, and would see graves as close in as Cleveland Place (discovered in building work in 1867). They would also see the first houses: those on the street, narrow, with shop fronts jostling each other for space on the lucrative main road frontage, and at least two storeys high. Glancing down the narrow alleys and side streets that occasionally opened towards the river our visitors might be surprised to see grand houses behind the workshops and shops along and just behind the frontage. They might also see the remains of the fort across the river, with burials again lining the road to Poole running across Bathwick.<sup>25</sup>

Observations in 1988 have shown the remains of a house with a hypocaust near the river behind the Methodist Chapel, and substantial terraces, probably the foundations of hillside houses, closer to it. In 1815, a tessellated pavement was found near here, perhaps from the same building. Pottery, coins and other Roman objects were also found then during building work on what is now Hedgemoad Park.<sup>26</sup> Excavations in 1989-92 revealed evidence of the Roman road itself, *behind* the *Hat and Feather* pub, with four 'strip buildings' (narrow terraced buildings) sharing a covered pavement and running back down the steep hill slope like modern houses in Bath, adding floors as they go. These four buildings were framed on either side by lanes running towards the river and further streets and houses. They were built in the second century on the site of earlier timber buildings, and stayed in use until the late fourth or early fifth centuries. One of them was a blacksmith's workshop and another probably the workshop of a painter. At least one of the houses had a piped water supply. An earlier house on the site had an interesting aspect. Under the floor of one room, beneath what appeared to be the base of an altar, were two burials: one a young lamb, the other a new-born child (figs.4&5). The finding of a small stone bust of a woman nearby supports its interpretation as a house shrine, and these burials may have been foundation deposits. The young child was likely to have been stillborn, rather than killed (although infanticide in the first days of a child's life was not a crime) and the lamb an offering to help its way in the afterlife.<sup>27</sup> The Roman road comes back on the line of modern Walcot Street by the site of St Swithin's church, and our visitors would be passing well-built masonry houses of some architectural pretension with decorated painted plaster on the internal walls, and inner courtyards with water tanks and possibly piped water. Again, side streets would give glimpses of buildings down towards the river and across to Bathwick. We know little of the west side of the street, but finds opposite here in 1951 (kept secret by builders until recently) suggest more occupation of this kind.



4. Hat and Feather Yard. The room under the floor of which the new-born child in fig.5 was buried. It was not as long and narrow as might appear. It has been truncated by the wall of the later blacksmith's workshop to the right. The room is probably early second-century, the later building is later second-century and was in use as a workshop in the fourth.

By the time of our imagined visit, it is possible that the houses were socially in decline, as excavations here in 1998-2000 showed that the conversion to workshops took place by AD350. Finds in 1902 and 1999<sup>28</sup> show that the picture we have drawn continues in like fashion until the site of the modern Cattlemarket. Just south of here our visitors could have passed a cobbler's workshop: 80 worn-out shoes were found in a rubbish pit here in 1970.<sup>29</sup> Up to this point, the high ground to the right would tend to hide the baths and temple, but after this the great monuments of the central zone would be visible towering over the earthen enclosure bank, presumably punctuated by timber or stone gates. Work might already have started on adding a stone wall fronting the earthen bank.

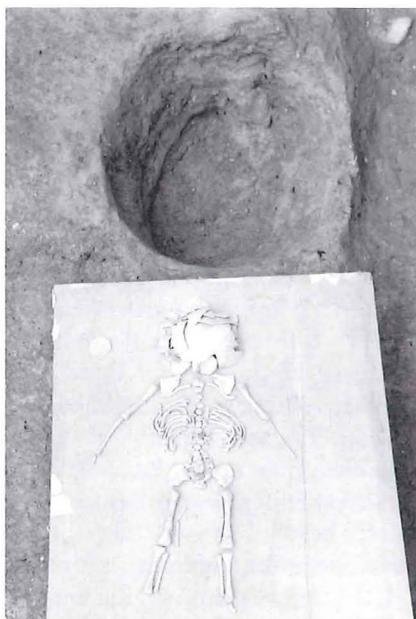
Entering through the north gate, perhaps where the medieval gate was subsequently located, just south of the present main Post Office, we do not have a detailed picture of what would be found on each side of the street, but ahead,

where the Abbey now stands, would be a circular temple, probably dedicated to Diana, in a precinct on a raised podium. To its right, the baths and temple might be hidden behind a large public building, perhaps a theatre, fronting on to the Roman precursor of Cheap Street and Westgate Street, and taking up much of the northern half of the monumental centre. What might be the foundations of the west end of this building were found in 1998 under Clark's Shoe Shop in Union Street, and fragments of huge architectural mouldings were found nearby in 1867.<sup>30</sup>

Immediately south of this great building stood the enclosed courtyard containing the temple of Sulis Minerva and the sacred spring. Before

entering, perhaps our visitors purchased a pewter vessel from the workshop at the east end of the baths, discovered in 1993.<sup>31</sup> The spring, enclosed within a building with a vaulted roof, would be the centre of the cult and the goal of most visitors. Here communication with the goddess was most direct, as people threw in coins, prized possessions and, particularly, 'letters' to the goddess inscribed on pewter sheets, asking for favours and calling down curses on enemies.<sup>32</sup> It is likely that most visitors also made a sacrifice to the goddess in her temple courtyard, at either the central altar or one of the many subsidiary ones that lined the precinct. After this the pleasure of the bath awaited. This could be repeated at the other set of baths southwest of the main establishment, south of Beau Street. This is likely to have been associated with the cult of the healing god Aesculapius, who seems to have presided over the Cross Bath and Hot Bath springs nearby. We have little evidence of healing being a prime activity at the main spring, but it is possible that it had a more important role at the site of the other springs. A building to the north of the Cross Bath, discovered in 1986, and divided into several small rooms, just might be an inn<sup>33</sup>, if our visitor was looking for somewhere to stay.

The Temple of Minerva and its associated baths was the dominant complex in the town and, as currently known, covered about 10% of the walled area. However, excavations in 1998-9 on the site of the proposed new spa between Beau and Bath Streets have revealed one end of a very large public building on the same axis and alignment as the baths, strongly suggesting that it represents more of the baths complex itself which may, therefore, be nearly twice as big as previously thought. If so, our visitors would have seen this huge set of buildings linking or encompassing all of the hot springs in one inclusive spa centre. Unfortunately the preservation of these

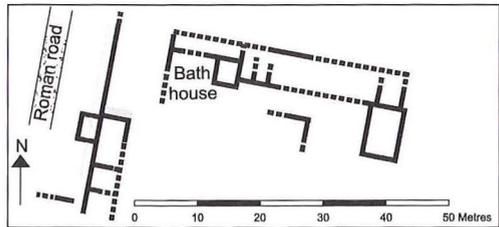


5. Skeleton of a new-born child and the pit it was buried in under a house floor at Hat and Feather Yard (see fig.4).

remains is not good enough to give a clear idea of their function. Hypocaust systems do show that more bathing suites could have existed here.

Skirting these huge buildings, our visitors have now travelled to the southern side of the central walled area, beyond which there was just an open space, perhaps meadows, leading down to the river. We do not know if there was a crossing point nearby, as the main road, bypassing the central area, probably crossed the river near the Victoria Bridge, further west. However, our visitors would have been curious about the huge new building on the slopes west of Beechen Cliff, just below the modern Wells Road. They might have been told that it was one of several villas that had recently been erected in the countryside close to Bath, at Lower Common, north of Upper Bristol Road; at Bathwick, and at Norfolk Crescent, although it might be quite the largest (figs.1 and 6). Because of the way it rose up the steep hillside, our visitors might have been able to see that it had been built around a courtyard. Smoke rising from the corner would indicate the private bathhouse (fig.6), also a feature of the Lower Common villa. These villas were all within a stone's throw of the town and might have been suburban retreats for the more successful of the town's residents.

The Lower Common villa was discovered in 1983 and partly excavated in 1986-88. The wing or block excavated represents a typical middle-sized villa, although with ancillary buildings, a stone-built gatehouse opening into a substantial stone walled enclosure, and private bathhouse, it may have been grander than we think. Architectural and sculptural fragments attest a high degree of Romanised sophistication. The Wells Road villa was discovered in 1997 and partly excavated in 1998 and 1999. It was poorly preserved, having suffered serious plough damage in the middle ages, but was of ambitious plan, over 120 feet across. There were probably three ranges around a courtyard, perhaps closed by a covered way or *porticus* on the fourth. It had at least one large, tessellated floor, and a bathhouse on one corner (fig.6). Terraced into the north-facing slope, it had wonderful views over the monumental city. This recalls



6. The Roman villa at Prospect Place, below the Wells Road, Bath. The large room at the right end contained a tessellated floor. The bath suite has been identified from the spread of specialised building materials. We do not know whether the two ranges were connected. As can be seen, much remains unknown about this building.

the fact that the Lower Common villa had a porch seemingly aligned on the Hot Spring, giving a view towards the centre of town. Perhaps all these suburban villas looked towards the Sacred Spring in some way.

Our mythical tourists would by now have seen most of the small but famous city. They might have heard Latin, British, and Gaulish spoken, perhaps even Iberian and Greek, judging by known visitors mentioned on memorial stores. There is evidence of visitors from much of the western Empire. In this busy, vibrant city there would be no inkling of the major changes that would be seen in the next hundred years.

## Final Things

I do not intend to discuss theories about the end of *Aquae Sulis* in general, but to mention some of the evidence for changes in the decades around the formal collapse of Roman rule, say AD370-420, and to focus on some interesting possibilities that might have been happening in the northern, Walcot Street part of the town.

It has been known for some time that the Temple of Sulis Minerva entered a serious decline in maintenance in the late fourth century and that what appear to be rather grand houses were built over parts of the Temple Precinct.<sup>34</sup> At the same time substantial masonry buildings were still being erected in the walled area, and the baths were being maintained, so these changes, important and significant though they must be, need not be seen as a decline, any more than the destruction of the monastic precinct following the Dissolution in 1539 represented in any way a decline in Bath's post-medieval fortunes. However, sometime in the fifth century the baths and other public buildings did cease to be maintained and visiting must have declined. The town seems to have become workaday, its tourist economy vanishing under the stresses of the administrative and economic collapse of the period after AD400. The bathhouse of the villa at Lower Common became a glass workshop, and the grand house at the former Aldridge's Auction Rooms was a shell, perhaps roofless, with a kiln working away inside its convenient shelter. The newly-discovered public building on the site of the proposed new spa was demolished in late or early post-Roman times and a timber building erected on its walls. Some sorts of timber structures were erected also on the Temple courtyard at this time. What happened in the central area between this collapse and the emergence first of the abbey and then the town, during the period 690-880 is obscure, but we can perhaps tell a story about the Walcot Street/London Street area.



7. The two burials cut into the street alongside the ruinous building at Aldridge's, Walcot Street. The nearer burial is of a young woman (with a badly broken left leg). The squashed lead coffin, which contained the remains of a middle-aged man, can be seen at top right. The diversion of alignment from the wall is very obvious.

other, perhaps slightly later, contained an adult male in a lead inner coffin in a wooden coffin. The lead coffin, although plain, unlike decorated ones such as the famous Spitalfields burial found in 1999 in London, still bespeaks a certain wealth (not to say an active lead industry). Yet the burials were both plain, and unaccompanied by any grave goods. Lack of grave goods is characteristic of Christian burial practice, but does not prove it. However, great care has been taken to align the graves east west, another Christian characteristic. This is particularly noticeable since the graves have been made alongside a very large and conspicuous wall (fig.7). However, instead of being aligned on it, as would have been natural, they were slightly offset to follow the correct orientation.

The area around St. Swithin's church was the village of Walcot until the late eighteenth century, when once again it merged with the urban sprawl of Georgian Bath. It was the centre of the parish of Walcot, and the parish and church can be traced back to the twelfth century. It seems a reasonable hypothesis that the village and church are the survivors of the community that thrived for so long in Roman times on this exact spot. We might imagine the church to have grown from a Roman house church or other property (as is known often to have happened on the continent), which could easily have been established here in late Roman times. Is there any evidence for this? Not directly, and this is why I call this a story, but this is where we return to our two late inhumation burials so oddly placed in the settlement area.

These burials were both properly fitted out and normal late Roman interments. One, of a young woman, was placed in a wooden coffin, the

Christian burial is of great interest given the importance of Christianity in preserving at least some aspects of the ancient world into the post-Roman one. We might expect it to be fairly common in late Roman graveyards. However, it is very difficult to prove conclusively. The positioning of these examples is strange, and seems to indicate an importance attached to orientation. The graves were cut through the uppermost surface of a side street that had been deliberately raised over 1.5 metres between c.AD325 and c.AD400. It must have gone completely out of use before these burials were inserted. Likewise the house whose wall provided a backdrop was a workshop by this time and possibly roofless. This may be the key to at least some of the seemingly illegally placed burials in the settlement area. While not yet closely dated, it is clear that these burials are very late Roman, if not sub-Roman, that is to say post 400 and possibly well into the fifth century. Are they, perhaps, not the last Roman burials of *Aquae Sulis*, but the first of the sub-Roman and Christian village of Walcot?

## Notes

- 1 M. Fulford & J. Timby, *Late Iron Age and Roman Silchester. Excavation on the site of the Forum-Basilica 1977, 1980-86* (Britannia monograph series, 15, 2000).
- 2 B. Cunliffe and P. Davenport, *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath* (Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, monograph 7, 1985), pp.178-179.
- 3 P. Davenport, *Archaeology in Bath. Excavations 1984-1989* (British Archaeological Reports 284, Oxford, 1999), pp. 41-44. Confirmed by further work on the spa project, Cynthia Poole, personal communication.
- 4 M. Henig, 'From Classical Greece to Roman Britain: some Hellenic themes in provincial art and glyptics' in G.R. Tsetschkladze et al, *Periplous: to Sir John Boardman from his pupils and friends* (1999), and 'A new star shining over Bath', *Oxford Archaeological Journal*, 18:4 (1999).
- 5 H.H. Winwood, 'Report on Excavations at Lansdown and discoveries in Bath and vicinity', *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society (Bath and District Branch)*, vol. 2 (1912), pp.176-177.
- 6 R.D. Bell, *Southgate Development. Archaeological Field Evaluation*, unpublished evaluation report, Bath & North East Somerset Sites and Monuments Register (B&NES SMR) (1997).
- 7 L. Brown, *Archaeological Evaluation at Avon Street, Bath*, unpublished report in B&NES SMR (1998).
- 8 M. Beaton, personal communication.
- 9 P. Davenport, *op. cit.*, pp.150-151.
- 10 B. Cunliffe, *Roman Bath* (Society of Antiquaries of London Research Report no XXIV, 1969), p.132.
- 11 L. Toulmin-Smith ed., *The Itinerary of John Leland* (1907-10).
- 12 B. Cunliffe, *op. cit.*, pp.151-154.

- 13 K. Dark, 'Town or temenos: A reinterpretation of the walled area of Aquae Sulis', *Britannia*, 24 (1993), pp.254-255. The author suggests that the houses here might be those of officials or priests of the temple(s).
- 14 R.D. Bell, 'Bath Abbey: some new perspectives' *Bath History*, Vol. VI (Bath, 1996), p.8.
- 15 M. Lewcun, personal communication.
- 16 B. Cunliffe and P. Davenport, *op. cit.*, p.72.
- 17 Cynthia Poole, personal communication.
- 18 A.B. Norton, in B. Cunliffe, *op. cit.*, pp.212-218.
- 19 B&NES Urban Archaeological Database (UAD) entries 8, 9 and 10.
- 20 P. Bidwell, in P. Davenport, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
- 21 P. Davenport, *op. cit.*, p.13.
- 22 A. Crutchley and M. Leverett, *Archaeological Evaluation at the Tramsheds, Walcot Street, Bath*, unpublished evaluation report, B&NES SMR (1999).
- 23 P. Bidwell, personal communication.
- 24 J. Bircher and M. Corney, personal communication. In addition a group of military tombstones of probably early date cluster in Walcot.
- 25 A.B. Norton, *op. cit.*
- 26 B&NES UAD entries 8, 9 and 10.
- 27 All this information comes from recent unpublished excavations by Bath Archaeological Trust.
- 28 In 1902 a colonnade was discovered under the Red House Bakery, now the Cadillac Club, and in 1999, excavations to the south by BAT have revealed more strip buildings and another house grand enough to have a tessellated floor.
- 29 T. Ambrose, in *Excavations in Bath 1950-1975* (1979), pp.115-122.
- 30 M. Heaton unpublished planning report on 1 and 2 Union Street, Bath. B&NES SMR (1979). B. Cunliffe, *op.cit.*, pp.149-150.
- 31 R.D. Bell, *op.cit.*, pp.7-24.
- 32 R. Tomlin, 'Voices from the Sacred Spring', *Bath History*, Vol.IV (Bath, 1992), pp.7-24.
- 33 P. Davenport, *op. cit.*, p.16.
- 34 B. Cunliffe and P. Davenport, *op. cit.*, p.184.

## Acknowledgements

Apart from published sources, this work is based on the results of excavations carried out under the auspices of the Bath Archaeological Trust, and I wish to record here my indebtedness to the staff who have allowed me access to their work. Excavations at Nelson Place and Hat and Feather Yard were directed by Mark Beaton; at Aldridge's Auction Rooms, by Mark Beaton and Marek Lewcun; at the Tramsheds, by Robert Bell and Andrew Crutchley, and at the Beau Street site of the Spa Project, by Mike Heaton and Cynthia Poole. Mark Beaton and Derek Cater ran the Oldfield Boys Schools site at Prospect Place, and Robert Bell at Southgate. I have also relied on studies of the finds by Jane Bircher, Mark Corney and John Clarke.