

A | B R I E F | H I S T O R Y | O F

ROMAN BRITAIN

CONQUEST AND CIVILIZATION



JOAN P. ALCOCK

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF
ROMAN
BRITAIN**

JOAN P. ALCOCK



For Maureen Walsh, an encourager to greater efforts

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CHRONOLOGY

BC

- 55 First invasion of Britain by Caesar
- 54 Second invasion by Caesar
- 51 Gaul made a province from *mare nostrum* to Oceanus
- 34 Augustus intended to invade Britain, but concentrated on the Rhineland

AD

- 7 Dubnovellanus and Tincommius sought help from Augustus
- 16 Roman soldiers wrecked on British coast get help from Britons
- 39 Cunobelin's son, Adminius, fled to seek help from Emperor Gaius. Gaius made preparations to invade Britain but desisted
- 40 Death of Cunobelin
- 43 Verica fled to Rome for help
- 43 Invasion of Aulus Plautius with Legions II Augusta, IX Hispana, XIV Gemina and XX. Visit of Claudius
- 47–52 Governorship of Ostorius Scapula
- 48 Colchester was founded as a *colonia*
- 49 Romans extracted lead from Mendips
- 52–8 Governorship of Didius Gallius
- 51 Caratacus fought the Romans in North Wales, was defeated and fled to the protection of Cartimandua. Betrayed and taken captive to Rome.
- 55 Exeter founded
- 57–8 Governorship of Quintus Veranius
- 58–61 Governorship of Suetonius Paullinus
- 60 Defeat of the Druids on Anglesey
- 60–61 Rebellion of Boudicca. Legion XIV given title of Gemina Martia Victrix and Legion XX given title Valeria Victrix
- 61 Gaius Julius Alpinus Classicianus arrived as procurator
- 61–3 Governorship of Petronius Turpillius
- 63–9 Governorship of Trebillius Maximus
- 67 Legion XIV withdrawn from Britain and replaced by Legion II Adiutrix Pia Fidelis
- 69 Year of the Four Emperors

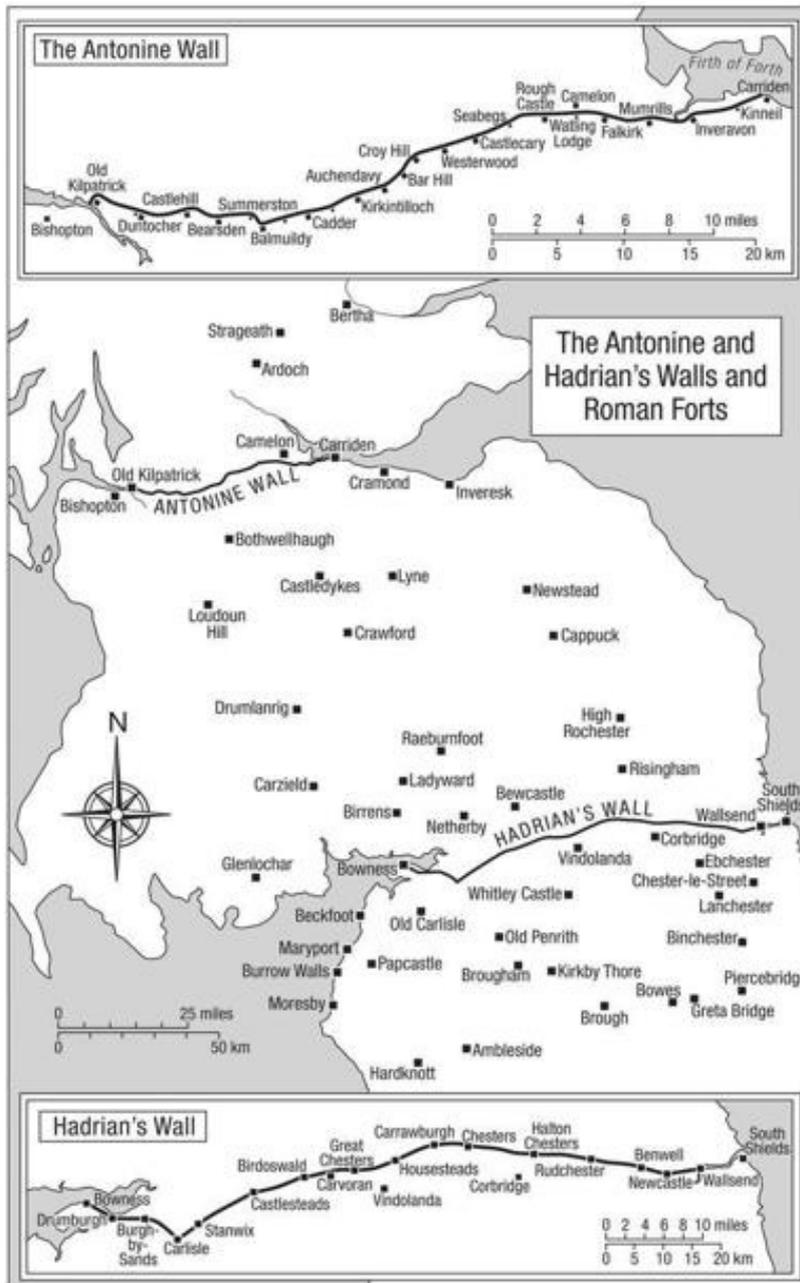
- 69 Problems in the Brigantian territory required help from the army
- 69–71 Governorship of Vettius Bolanus
- 71–4 Governorship of Petillius Cerealis
- 72 Probable date of the fortress at York and the establishment of Aldborough
- 74–7/8 Governorship of Julius Frontinus. Defeat of the Silures and foundation of Caerleon and Chester forts. Development of Bath as a spa and religious centre
- 77/8–83/4 Governorship of Gnaeus Julius Agricola
- 78 Defeat of the Ordovici; policy of Romanization began
- 79 Verulamium became a *municipium*
- 81 Forts laid out along Forth–Clyde Isthmus
- 82 Fort built at Inchtuthil
- 84 Battle of Mons Graupius
- 84 Withdrawal of Legion II Adiutrix Pia Fidelis from Britain
- 90/92 Lincoln founded as a *colonia*
- 96 Gloucester founded as a *colonia*
- 107 Last recording of Legion IX in Britain. Probably withdrawn to the east
- 121–4 Governorship of Aulus Platorius Nepos
- 122 Visit of Hadrian to Britain and commencement of building of Hadrian’s Wall
- 129 Dedication of Wroxeter forum
- 138–42 Governorship of Quintus Lollius Urbicus
- 138 Beginning of building of Antonine Wall
- 154 Revolt of tribal forces in the Scottish lowlands
- 161–5 Governorship of Calpurnius Agricola
- 163 War in the north. Probable abandonment of the Antonine Wall
- 175 5,500 Sarmathian cavalry sent to Britain as reinforcements
- 177–84 Governorship of Ulpius Marcellus
- 184 War in the north. Tribes crossed Hadrian’s Wall and defeated legionary troops. British garrison elected one of their troops, Priscus, as emperor. He refused and 1,500 troops went to Rome as a delegation to Commodus. Pertinax sent to Britain to clear up the problems. This caused a mutiny
- 193 Clodius Albinus put forward a claim to the empire
- 196 Clodius took troops from Britain to Gaul to fight Septimius Severus
- 197 Clodius defeated and killed; forts on Hadrian’s Wall and the Pennines attacked. Verius Lupus sent as governor to restore order

- 198– Restoration and refurbishment of forts
209
- 208 Visit of Septimius Severus to Britain. Inconclusive campaigning in Scotland
- 211 Septimius Severus died in York. Accession of Caracalla
- 212 Britain divided into two provinces: Britannia Superior in the south with London as capital; Britannia Prima in the north with York as capital
- 212 Proclamation giving Roman citizenship to all free inhabitants of the Empire
- 230 Verulamium built its town walls and other towns added defences. Britain remained relatively prosperous for rest of century
- 230 Saxon Shore forts began to be built. Building continued until at least 370
- 259 Britain became part of the Gallic Empire
- 273 Aurelian suppressed the Gallic Empire
- 286 Carausius suppressed piracy and declared himself emperor
- 293 Murder of Carausius by Allectus
- 296 Constantius I attacked Britain. Allectus defeated and killed. Constantius entered London
- 305 Constantius returned to Britain as there were problems in the north
- 306 Constantius died at York
- 312 Edict of Milan guaranteed religious toleration to the empire
- 313 Britain was divided into four provinces: Maxima Caesariensis, Britannia Prima, Britannia Secunda, Flavia Caesariensis
- 314 Report of three bishops from Britain attending the Council of Arles
- 337 Death of Constantine I. Britain comes under the rule of Constantine II
- 340 Murder of Constantine II by his brother Constans
- 342 Visit of Constans to Britain in midwinter. Reorganization of the army. Creation of the *areani*
- 350 Assassination of Constans. Magnentius removed troops from Britain, which resulted in uprising in the north. Risingham, Bewcastle and High Rochester were burned
- 353 Magnentius defeated and reprisals taken against those who supported him. Visit of Paulus to Britain
- 359 Britain sent 800 ships laden with grain to support Julian's campaign in the Rhineland
- 367 Barbarian Conspiracy overran Britain. Theodosius was sent to restore order
- 368 Revolt of Valentinius, who had been exiled to Britain, suppressed
- 369 Restoration of towns and forts in Britain. Fifth province Valencia created
- 383 Death of Gratian. Magnus Maximus proclaimed emperor in Britain and invaded Gaul, taking with him part of the garrison. Raids of Picts and Scots into the north. Burning of villas in south-west
- 388 Magnus Maximus defeated and killed

- 401 More troops withdrawn from Britain to stop advance of Alaric on Rome
- 402 Probable cessation of coinage being sent from Rome
- 407 Constantine III proclaimed emperor in Britain. He moved to Gaul taking with him much of the remaining garrison
- 410 The Britons appealed to Honorius for help. Honorius told them to fend for themselves
- 411 Defeat and death of Constantine III
- 429 Visit of St Germanus to Britain to counter the Pelagian heresy
- 437 Second visit of St Germanus
- 446 The 'groans of the Britons': appeal sent to Agitius
- 449 Traditional date of the arrival of the first Saxons in Britain

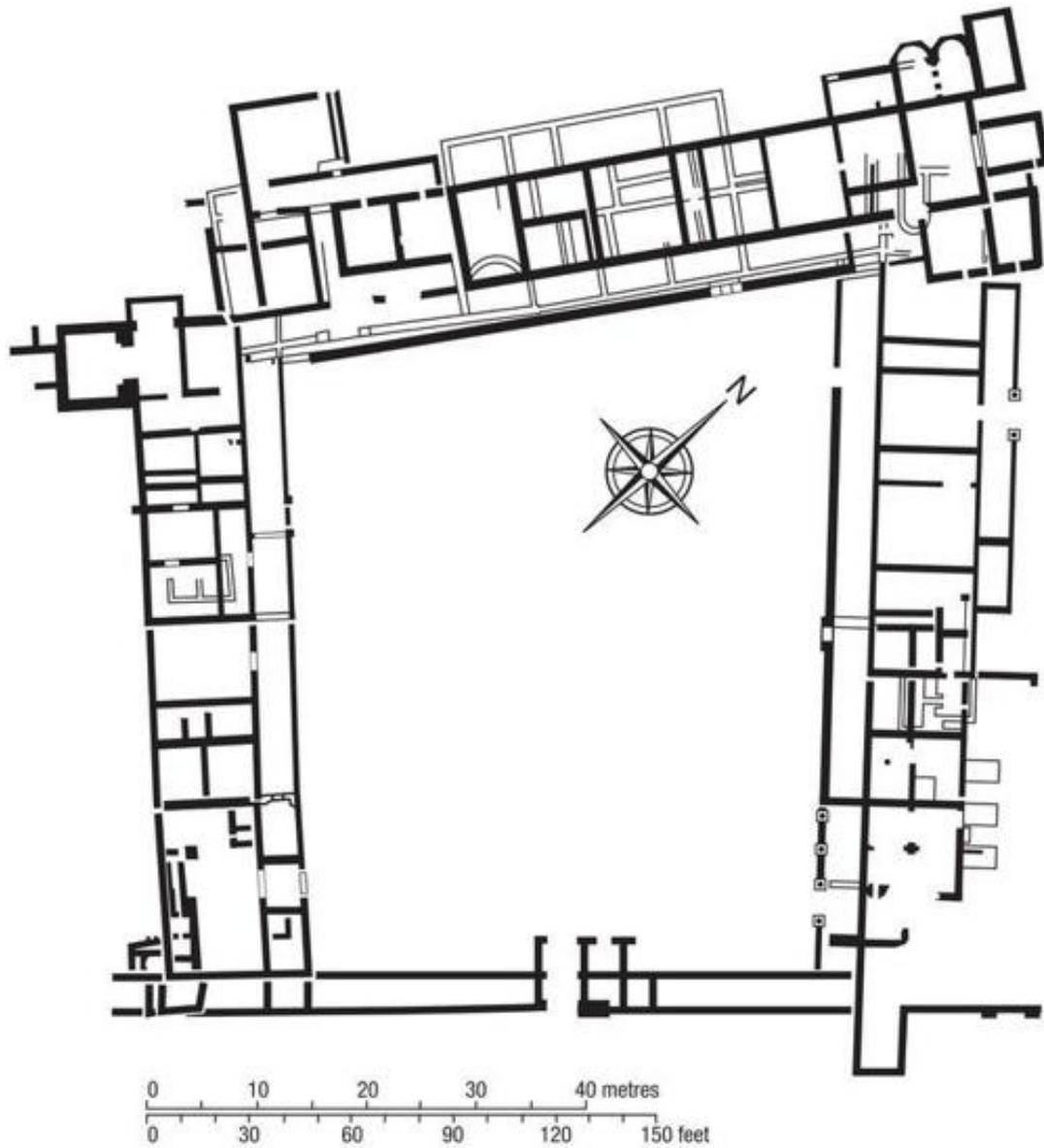








Plan of North Leigh Villa



PRE-ROMAN BRITAIN

Britain prior to the Roman conquest was a country peopled by Celtic tribes, often at war with each other but following a civilized way of life on their own terms. Much of the evidence for their areas of control comes from the second-century Greek geographer Ptolemy, whose literary data has often been supported by archaeological excavations. The Cantiaci covered the area of modern Kent and part of Sussex as far as the Pevensey district and may even have stretched beyond the Thames as far as the Chiltern Ridge. Caesar mentioned four kings who probably ruled different regions and who were hostile to Rome. The Stour, the Medway and the Darent divided three of these regions; the fourth was probably in the Weald. There were three major *oppida* (or hillforts) in Kent – Bigbury, the precursor of Canterbury, which was almost certainly destroyed by Caesar, Quarry Hill, the precursor of Rochester, and Oldbury, which controlled the Darent Valley. All these hillforts date to the early first century BC.

Most of the area was covered by isolated settlements and farmsteads usually surrounded by enclosures, many lying in the Medway and Stour valleys. The proximity of the area to the English Channel suggests commercial and possible tribal links with Gaul, and Caesar mentioned that the chief of the Suessiones, a tribe in north-east Gaul, had some control in Britain. Coinage found in Kent includes both locally struck and Gallo-Belgic coins indicating commercial contacts. As the Cantiaci were hostile to Caesar this may have affected subsequent relations with Rome. There are few deposits indicating rich imports and only the Aylesbury and Swarling cemeteries have shown any sign of wealthy burials. Towards the end of the first century BC coinage stops, which may have been due to expansion of the Atrebates into the area. Later coins of the Catuvellauni take their place as the area came under the control of that tribe, which also may have deliberately controlled their trading links.

Ptolemy located the tribe of the Regni to the west of the Cantiaci. They were mainly centred on west and east Sussex as far as the Pevensey area. Their most important lands stretched from the edge of the Hampshire uplands to the cliffs of Beachy Head. Although the scarp slopes were uninhabitable they provided pasture for livestock. Settlements varied from large villages to isolated farmsteads, growing mainly wheat and barley and herding cattle, sheep and pigs. By the end of the first century BC much of the land suitable for cultivation had been colonized.

There were some *oppida*, which may have been founded in the Neolithic period, for example the Trundle near to Chichester. Formidable *oppida* in Sussex existed at Selsey, Chanctonbury Rings and Cissbury, but smaller ones were added so that by the first century BC most of the prominent chalk hilltops had some protective structure with ramparts and ditches. These could have been used as tribal groupings for defence against hostile tribes or as stock enclosures. The fertile region attracted immigrants from the continent and there was an almost continual arrival of the tribe of the Belgae from Gaul, probably as a result of Caesar's activities. This increased in the 60s and 50s BC, which links with Caesar's comments that the chieftains of the Bellovaci, a Belgic tribe, fled to Britain to escape his advance into their territory. These incomers seemed

to have settled in the area of the Thames Valley. The Belgae soon formed a well-defined group west of the Regni. Their main territory included an *oppidum* near the future town of Winchester and was extended later as far as Calleva. They had political and cultural links with both the Regni and the Atrebates as indicated by finds of pottery and coinage.

Caesar mentioned that Commius, who had helped him on his second reconnaissance of Britain in 54 BC, ruled the tribe of the Atrebates in Gaul. Later Commius supported the Gallic chieftain Vercingetorix, and, when the latter was defeated, Commius fled to Britain together with his tribe. They settled in eastern Berkshire, Hampshire and Wiltshire, making a base at Calleva, the pre-Roman centre of Silchester. A large number of Celtic coins and evidence of settlement was found under the Roman town and also at Winchester. The territory may have extended as far as Dorchester-on-Thames but the Catuvellauni later absorbed this area. Hillforts include Bury Hill (Hampshire) and, in Wiltshire, Boscombe Down and West Yarnbury, which were probably defensive sites in times of trouble.

The Catuvellaunian tribe occupied a large area covering parts of Hertfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire, and stretching into the Nene Valley and the Fenlands. Archaeological evidence is ambiguous about their origins, and the distribution of their coinage may represent trade and exchange rather than tribal immigration. Individuals probably drifted into the area before forming tribal communities. Yet their origins may lie in Caesar's comments that a group of the Belgae had raided Britain and settled in the southern area.

Caesar never mentioned the tribe by name but gives details of Cassivellaunus whose power lay north of the Thames and who founded a dynasty that became a major political force in pre-Roman Britain. Caesar implies that Cassivellaunus had been continually at war with other tribes but his influence was such that when the Romans arrived in 54 BC he united the tribes in resistance to a common enemy. He seems therefore to have been a king or a powerful tribal chieftain, who may have had a fortress at Wheathampstead. His power did not last long as nothing more is heard of him after his defeat by Caesar, which probably led to demise in his authority. Later, another leader, Tasciovanus, emerged with a centre at Verulamium but with territory covering Northamptonshire and central and south Berkshire. Roman goods found in cemeteries seem to indicate excellent contacts with Rome, which were continued by Tasciovanus' successor Cunobelin who established a capital at Camulodunum.

Ptolemy placed the tribe of the Trinovantes to the east by the Thames estuary with land stretching from at least Camulodunum to the mouth of the river. Caesar mentioned them, and implied that they were the most powerful tribe in Britain. Immigrants from the continent, who began to exploit the iron ore areas, probably joined native groups, and scattered groups of ironworking people are noted from the seventh to sixth centuries BC at West Harling (Norfolk) and Sheepen (Essex). Sherds of handmade pottery, based on continental metal prototypes, are common, in styles brought by newcomers from north-west France such as a dark fabric with a burnished exterior. A few hillforts were constructed in south and west Essex – Leighton Camp, Ambresbury Bank and Wallbury Camp – all defended by ramparts and ditches.

In the late second century the Belgae began to move into the area, bringing with

them gold coins in the Gallo-Belgic style, but the main wave of immigration did not appear until about 100 BC. In 54 BC Caesar relied on the Trinovantes as his ally as they were the traditional enemy of the Catuvellauni, especially as Cassivellaunus had defeated a Trinovantian king, whose son, Mandubracius, had fled to Caesar for protection.

After Caesar's departure in 55 BC the Trinovantes enjoyed a good relationship with Rome, honouring treaty obligations and establishing trading relations. Graves excavated at Welwyn (Hertfordshire), Welwyn Garden City (Hertfordshire) and Mount Bures have produced amphorae once holding imported wine and other goods imported from Rome. Later the Trinovantes joined the Catuvellauni to form a federation and seemingly established a joint capital at Camulodunum under Cunobelin, which developed into a thriving industrial, religious and cultural site. Much of their wealth came from salt. At least 1,000 saltern sites have been found which operated for different lengths of time between 400 BC and AD 450, most of these being active in about 100 BC.

Although given a tribal name, the Durotriges or the Durotrages appear to have been composed of smaller groupings and their name is found later on inscriptions on Hadrian's Wall where some of the tribe helped in rebuilding the Wall. The tribal area was Dorset and part of Somerset, giving an outlet to the Bristol Channel, but may have stretched as far as the New Forest. Hillforts in Dorset at Maiden Castle, Hod Hill, Hambledon Hill and Badbury Castle contained nucleated settlements of small huts set alongside streets. These also provided defensive places in time of tribal warfare and were to play a major role against the Roman advance along the southern coast.

The tribe seems to have established trading links with Armorica and Brittany and this gave them access to the Atlantic and Mediterranean areas with major trading posts at Hengistbury Head and at Poole Harbour. Imports included large quantities of amphorae from Italy. Exports included iron ore, probably obtained from the Mendips on the border with the Dobunni tribe, copper and tin. Shale, suitable for jewellery and furniture, was obtained from the Kimmeridge area, grain from the Wessex hinterland and salt from the seashore. A pottery industry produced black burnished ware; pottery imports of north-west French cordoned ware were reproduced especially around Poole Harbour. In the second half of the first century BC, however, probably because of Caesar's advances into Armorica, trade declined leading to the collapse of the lucrative Channel trade. As well as trade, farming played a major role. Grain, grown on small farms, and large numbers of animal bones suggest that cattle not only supplied food but also provided excess meat and leather for trade.

The Dobunni, according to Ptolemy, lay to the north of the Durotriges, which would place them in the Worcestershire, North Somerset and Gloucestershire regions, but they seem also to have stretched along the Upper Thames valley, probably making contact with the Atrebates in the west. Atrebatian coins, stamped with their ruling kings, Bodvoc and Comux, are found in their territory and later Catuvellaunian coins appear. The Dobunni began to copy their coins about 35 BC.

Major hillforts were sited at Worlebury (Somerset), Worcester, Bredon Hill (Worcestershire) and Wappenbury (Warwickshire), which may have been important meeting points for the Dobunni and their northern neighbours the Cornovii. Their territory also included the sacred springs at Bath dedicated to the goddess Sul that

were later to be exploited by the Romans. This was also an important crossing point on the River Avon. Iron was extracted in the Forest of Dean and there was possibly some rivalry with the Durotriges for control of the lead mines in the Mendips.

The Dumnonii, according to Ptolemy, were situated west of the Durotriges, seemingly in the south-west peninsula of Cornwall and Devon and therefore making them relatively isolated. This isolation possibly kept them from being a menace to neighbouring tribes and there is little evidence of Roman occupation in the region, apart from forts at Nanstallon and St Austell. They developed no coinage of their own and seem to have used those of the Durotriges and the Dobunni. Their main defensive structures were cliff castles and storage took place in *fogous* (underground rooms) similar to those found in Armorica. A cross-Channel and Atlantic trade had been established, mainly based on the export of tin and some lead obtained from trade with the Dumnonii. Isolated settlements in Devon were composed of huts set within multiple ditched enclosures for defence. In Cornwall, courtyard houses were surrounded by massive stonewalls. Some were placed together, as at Chysauster and Carn Euny, to form villages.

Ptolemy placed the tribe of the Coritani (or Corieltauni) throughout Leicestershire and Lincolnshire and probably Rutland and most of Warwickshire. Their principal sites seem to have been in Leicestershire where Iron Age pottery was discovered in large quantities. Other sites with similar pottery included Ancaster and Old Sleaford in Lincolnshire. Old Sleaford was the site of an Iron Age mint where over 3,000 broken clay moulds testified to Coritanian coins being cast there. Large settlements with circular houses and ditched enclosures were the norm, one being excavated at Dragonby near Scunthorpe. Smaller settlements are found throughout the region, most consisting of small huts surrounded by a bank and ditch. One at South Ferriby on the south side of the Humber could have been a trading post as well as commanding this part of the Humber. There also seems to have been a strong cultural connection between the Coritani and the Belgae in the south but this must have been through trade, as there was no hint of invasion.

There are few hillforts, some of the most important being in Leicestershire at Breedon Hill and Burrough Hill. None of the larger sites was surrounded by elaborate defences so it would appear that they did not fear threats from any neighbouring tribes; slight defences were to keep out animals and isolated intruders. Mixed farming took place on the light soils of the river valleys and on the limestone of the Jurassic ridge. Ironworking may have determined the site of some settlements, notably in south-west Lincolnshire, Rutland and Leicestershire, and good quality iron would have had a ready market, especially for exchange with neighbouring tribes.

The tribe of the Cornovii was north of the Dobunni in the Shropshire–Cheshire area. Much of this area, especially in the south-west, was hill country with volcanic intrusions such as the Wrekin and the Clee Hills. The tribe had no distinguishing characteristics and seemingly had no distinctive metalwork or pottery except for that produced by small groups of potters working in the Malvern Hills region. There is little or no evidence of continental connections.

There was a major hillfort on the Wrekin and a group of hillforts on the Welsh Marches – the Berth, Breiddin, Credenhill and Caer Caradoc being the main ones. Titterstone Clee commanded the Clee Hills and the approach to the Severn Valley

from the south-east. In the north there were fewer hillforts. Old Oswestry (Shropshire) was one of the largest and Maiden Castle, Bickerton (Cheshire), was placed on the ridge of hill dominating the central part of the Cheshire Plain.

There is some evidence of pre-Roman salt extraction in Cheshire and some lead extraction activity at Linley, but, as much of the land was hilly, pastoral activities dominated. Few traces of extensive cultivation have been found, one of the most intensive being on the south of the Long Mynd in Shropshire. There are examples of large enclosures, in which were rectangular or circular huts, but no large townships until the Romans occupied the area and moved the tribespeople from the Wrekin. They grouped round the Roman fort of Wroxeter, which later became Viroconium or *civitas Cornoviorum*, thus identifying the name of the tribe.

Parisian culture, in the north-east, is defined by cemeteries of the so-called Arras culture, which began in the mid fifth century BC in the east Yorkshire region. A series of small long barrows, some surrounded by ditches, conceal burials, some with a person buried with a chariot or a cart; sometimes the chariots were upright and some had the wheels removed. These graves, as at Dane's Graves, Eastburn and Wetwang Slack, ceased in the Late Iron Age, but were richly furnished, often having a joint of meat or a pot that had contained drink. At North Grimston, Bugthorpe and Grimthorpe there are single warriors buried with only their weapons, which may indicate a change of fashion, thus cutting down on the ritual. Barrows are scarce elsewhere in the region.

These burial sites are comparable to those found in eastern France, especially Burgundy, and must refer to an influx of people from a tribe called the Parisii in the Paris region. One burial at Cowlam contained bracelets, necklaces and other jewellery in similar style to that found in Burgundy. This suggested immigration on a large scale similar to that of the Atrebates and the Belgae. Gallo-Belgic pottery found at North Ferriby on the north bank of the Humber suggests this was a trading post linked to Romanized Gaul and this might explain why the Parisii did not resist the Roman advance. Farming was mainly arable with evidence of grain being stored in granaries. Pasturing took place on the Wolds, where driveways often led from a central area to funnel into an enclosure where cattle could be kept away from crop-bearing areas. Major dike systems across the Wolds, which are not high enough to form defensive structures, may be ranch boundaries or form land divisions with separate areas for settlements, cemeteries, arable land and pasture. Late Iron Age settlements at Langton and Rudston were gradually replaced by Roman houses, which developed into villas, giving an impression of gradual change.

The most important tribe in the north was almost certainly that of the Brigantes. Ptolemy said that their territory stretched from ocean to ocean. Certainly the Brigantes occupied a large tribal area with a possible southern boundary at the River Mersey, then stretching through the Peak District to beyond the Tyne–Solway line, which meant that later Hadrian's Wall would form a barrier across their territory. Their name is Celtic for 'the high hill dwellers' and the Brigantes probably encompassed smaller groups under different names – the Carvetii in the Eden Valley (who later became a separate *civitas*), the Setantii of the Fylde area, the Textoverdi and Lopocares of Northumberland and the Gabrantovices of east Yorkshire, who would have come into contact with the Parisii. There were probably other similar groupings, all coming together in one large confederation possibly organized by an ancestor of Cartimandua.

Tacitus called her *pollens nobilitate* (powerful in lineage). That such smaller groupings were possible is indicated by the physical geography of the area with its mountainous ranges and deep valleys. Their tutelary deity was the goddess Brigantia and dedications to her have been found in the region of Hadrian's Wall, in the west Yorkshire area and especially at Birrens, where a relief has been found depicting the goddess in warrior guise. The tribal roots go back to the Bronze Age with incomers from Hallstatt and La Tène traditions as a result of trading connections.

Surprisingly, given the mountainous area that the tribe covered, there were few hillforts; these were small but with substantial defences. They include Mam Tor (Derbyshire) and, in Yorkshire, Almondbury, which has origins in the Bronze Age, and Ingleborough where the defences surrounded Iron Age hut circles. There was a major promontory fort at Sutton Bank (Yorkshire). Most of these forts were not in use by the Late Iron Age and Stanwick (Yorkshire), laid out about the time of the Roman conquest, resulted from a matrimonial quarrel between Cartimandua and her husband. This fort also seems to have operated as a centre of tribal power and, judging by the pottery and the metalwork, as a distribution centre for long distance and local trade. On the whole it would seem that the Brigantes were not given to serious tribal warfare but were powerful enough to keep other tribes out of their area.

Settlements ranged from groups of huts to isolated farms, many sited on hill slopes where sheep farming and cattle rearing would be normal practice. Mixed farming took place in lowland and valley areas as indicated by field systems. Sub-rectangular plots at Ledston (Yorkshire), for example, suggest grain cultivation and more evidence of this is provided by beehive querns, hand-powered mills for grinding grain, found throughout the Pennines. Native wealth probably lay in wool and hides with a side industry in keeping pigs. Pottery was produced in isolated settlements and use was made of wooden and leather vessels. Ironworking was carried out and bronze-working produced decorative metalwork for horses, cattle and weapons.

To the west was the area of Wales with three main tribes. The two strongest were the Silures and the Ordovici. The Silures occupied the coastal plain and areas of Glamorgan and Monmouth and the valleys of the Black Mountains. There were a series of hillforts in the east of the territory but mainly the people, like those at Mynydd Bychan (Glamorgan), occupied small ditched settlements of timber circular huts, later replaced by stone ones, set within walled enclosures. Another settlement, excavated at Whitton (Glamorgan), showed round timber houses surrounded by rectangular ditched enclosures. Later, rectangular houses replaced the round houses, either due to a change of ownership or to a change of lifestyle.

The Ordovici, situated to the north of the Silures, covered an area as far as the Cheshire border. They had hillforts but followed a mainly pastoral existence, with settlements consisting of enclosed farmsteads, and traded in lead and some gold. In the far south-west were the Demetae, again living in small enclosed settlements of circular huts. Their defensive structures were cliff castles similar to those found in America. They were possibly the most peaceable of the Welsh tribes as later there was little Roman activity in their area. A smaller tribe, the Gangani, who may possibly have originated in Ireland, occupied the Lleyn Peninsula.

Tribes in Scotland occupied the wildest part of Britain and the Romans never subdued those in the farthest north. The Romans came mainly into contact with the