

## Late Wroxeter

Civilisations can end with remarkable speed. It is generally accepted that early in the 400s AD the lights went off in Roman Britain. Roman lifestyle and culture - all that bathing and piquant fish sauce - came to a shuddering halt. Plague and recession followed, and England became a chaotic battleground for warring chieftains. It took the German efficiency of the Anglo-Saxons a century later to settle things down again.

Whenever I teach this period I turn off the central-heating and dim the lights. It's time, I tell the students, for the Dark Ages.

Such was the implosion that within a generation or two an anonymous Saxon writer was describing the Roman ruins at Bath as the work of mysterious and ancient giants. The break had been total.

That, at least, is the received wisdom, and given the darkness of the Dark Ages it's not easy to disprove it. One Roman city, however, tells a more complex story.

The city of Wroxeter - what the Romans called Viriconium Cornoviorum - is unusual in many ways. Unlike almost every other Romano-British city, such as York or Chester, London or Colchester, it did not subsequently grow into a medieval and modern town. Most of Wroxeter remains buried under farmland, a quiet retreat in the middle of Shropshire. Even the stretch of Watling Street that ran through the middle of it has not been widened into the A5; it's a little country lane down to the church.

This is ironic in itself, for Wroxeter had an after-life, as a sub-Roman town, long after many of its fellow urban centres had been abandoned. Here, then, undisturbed by the modern world, the archaeologists can begin to fill in what is impossible to unearth elsewhere.

The reality was that, though central England was no longer run from Rome, taxes died up and public buildings became too costly to maintain, the people of Viriconium did not suddenly vanish. They still had a living to make and families to support.

It is in the old baths complex, once a proud symbol of Imperial Rome's dominion, that this after-life is easiest to discern. Well into the 500s the old baths were still in use, not for bathing, but for workshops - including metal-working - and market stalls. If a Roman wall was still standing, why not make use of it ?

The former frigidarium, once a room for disrobing before a sauna, may even have been redeployed as a Christian church. Sub-Roman Wroxeter, as the chief centre of Christianity in the region, probably had its own bishop as well.

What is especially interesting about this is that the new buildings and structures still conformed to imperial measurements. There may no longer have been a Roman emperor in the West, and his coinage had been replaced by barter and exchange, but a sense of being Roman held on.

After living under Roman rule for four centuries, the local Cornovian people would not become de-romanised overnight, and Wroxeter was, until the rise of Shrewsbury, the chief market town in the area.

What archaeology cannot tell us is who made this sub-Roman town tick. What system of government and control was exerted, to stop bartering turn into all-in wrestling ? Perhaps a local potentate or tyrant ruled the roost as a little emperor, now that the real one had quit the scene.

So, you might well ask, if Wroxeter survived as late as 600 as a serviceable town, what happened to turn it into the depopulated fields it is today ?

Here again, archaeology cannot provide the full explanation, so we're reduced to a spot of calculated guessing in the dark. By the 600s the town may well have fallen under the control of the kingdom of Powys, as the Welsh rulers spread their influence across the old border. It took the establishment of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia to stem that tide. Stripped of imperial protection, Wroxeter sat exactly on the divide between the two kingdoms, and was vulnerable to both.

Yet as late as 700 or thereabouts the old town appears to have been hanging on. The "Wreocensaetna" - the people of Wroxeter, or settlers by the Wrekin - appear in the so-called Tribal Hidage, a document listing the peoples who were paying taxes or tribute to the king of Mercia.

But the truth was the centre of power had undoubtedly shifted eastwards. The resurgent kings of Mercia - Penda and Peada and their ilk - chose as their capitals Tamworth and Lichfield, and did not need or want another power base on their borders. The Anglo-Saxon were rather suspicious of old Roman towns, finding them a bit spooky. They preferred to live elsewhere.

A bishop of Wroxeter too was surplus to requirements; they had a perfectly good one in Lichfield, thank you very much.

And so a slow decline became an irreversible one. What was left of the old Roman town was recycled for the church down the lane - a hollowed out column base making a rather nice font - or left to crumble away. Even the Latin lessons stopped.

What had once been the fourth largest town in Roman Britain became a deserted landscape of stone ruins and grazing sheep. What had the Romans ever done for us.