

PART ONE

The Here and Now

The past is all around us. If we look closely at familiar landscapes and buildings, we can delight in tracing their development and learning of the human ingenuity that has contributed to the unique evolution of our parish.

Similarly, by reviewing what has been previously written, we can consolidate accumulated knowledge and, importantly, pay tribute to those who preserved it.

1.1 The Parish in 2023

Silchester Parish is one of the northernmost parishes in the County of Hampshire. A largely rural area, it sits at an altitude of 90m (300ft) above sea level on a broadly level plateau with escarpments sloping down to the east and south. The total area of the parish is 1,945 acres, just over 3 square miles.

In the 21st century the landscape, apart from a sizeable residential area, consists mainly of arable and grazing farmland. Towards the parish's western boundary can be found a large area of mixed woodland and heathland totalling 685 acres(a) or 278 hectares(h). This consists of three areas which merge together:

Woodland

Upper and Lower Inhams Copse	479a (194h)
Lordswood	41a (17h)

Heathland

Silchester Common	165a (67h)
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Silchester Common merges with Pamber Forest, 454a (184h), in the adjoining parish to create an extensive area of natural vegetation offering both a habitat for wildlife and a network of recreational trails.

The village centre is situated in the north-west of the parish adjacent to an area of broad open playing fields. A public house, a village hall and a multi-functional sports pavilion, all important community amenities, overlook this area. Various buildings dating from the 19th century and earlier are clearly visible nearby.

In contrast, the residential road of Dukes Ride leads to housing estates constructed in the late 1960s and mid-1970s.

A notable feature of the parish is the Roman Wall which once surrounded the Roman town of Calleva Atrebatum. The settlement itself has



View over Calleva fields 2022



Silchester Village sign

long since disappeared, yielding its secrets only to archaeologists.

Unusually, the parish church of St Mary the Virgin is situated over a mile away from the modern village centre. Its location is a reminder of a significant change in the parish over the last millennium.

There are several farms within the largely rural 1,945 acres although many no longer serve an agricultural purpose. There are also clusters of dwellings, including several very substantial houses, in various locations throughout the parish.

St Mary the Virgin church



In the early 21st century the population, including children, numbers approximately 1,000. Many people of working age commute to nearby towns or further afield to London. Within Silchester itself there are no commercial buildings and only one light industry enterprise.

In 1992 two parts of the parish were designated as conservation areas: the village centre itself and also the location known as The Pound near the junction of Bramley Road and Ash Lane. The Pound takes its name from an enclosure for holding stray animals which actually existed in this area prior to the 1880s. Its disappearance over a century ago is mentioned in 2.13.

The parish boasts a number of popular footpaths. The Silchester Trail is clearly signposted as is the route of the Brenda Parker Way. In total the parish council is responsible for 19 designated maintained footpaths.

Over the years Silchester has grown to become a pleasant modern village, taking pride in its heritage. Nowhere is this heritage reflected better than in the attractive village sign which stands outside the Village Hall.

Thoughtfully composed, the sign consists of the following:

- The Kestrel: A permanent inhabitant of the Common representing a diversity of wildlife.
- Ears of Wheat: A reminder of our agriculture connection, both ancient and modern.
- Flowers: The poppy and the orchid, found on the Common, a Site of Special Scientific Interest.
- The Church: Dating from the 12th century, and a constant presence in our story.
- The Yew Tree: Four hundred years old, a feature found in many churchyards.
- The Wall: An imposing legacy from our Roman past.

Not only does Silchester celebrate and preserve its past, the parish also has easy access both to the countryside and larger conurbations. Sitting in an intriguing corner of North Hampshire, it is an ideal place in which to live.

1.2 Silchester Common

As one of the few remaining areas of low-level heathland in the south of England, Silchester Common together with Pamber Forest, was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1951, within two years of Royal Assent to The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, which introduced this classification.

A feature of heathland is that the soil is acidic and of poor quality, providing an environment in which only a limited number of plant species can thrive. Vegetation is typically a mixture of heather, bell heather and gorse. In the autumn there is often a proliferation of fungi.

By contrast, the easterly facing slopes of Silchester Common drain into a sizeable stream known as the Silchester Brook. It flows through the marshy lower ground of a wooded area then turns north and continues along the eastern side of the parish into the adjoining parish of Stratfield Mortimer where it takes the name Foudry Brook. By now well established, the broad stream continues northward until it joins the River Kennet near Reading, which in turn, a few miles later, is in confluence with the Thames.

The heathland flora provides an ideal habitat for comparatively rare bird species. Silchester Common is one of the few locations visited by the elusive Dartford warbler, more frequently heard than seen. It is also home to stonechats, woodlarks and nightjars. The latter are ground nesting summer visitors, noticeable for their distinctive call, making a curious sound described as a 'churr', which can frequently be heard at dusk during June and July.

Besides birds, the Common is also home to

numerous insects. Most notably, in early July a night-time display of tiny lights can be seen. These are the glowing bodies of female glow-worms. Despite their name, they are actually a species of beetle capable of producing a chemical reaction known as bioluminescence, attractive to male glow-worms who lack this facility.

Other insects include several species of butterfly, moth and damsel fly. The many ancient ponds on the Common are especially attractive to dragonflies.

Among the reptiles which enjoy cover provided by the Common's vegetation are slow worms, grass snakes and adders. The latter, the UK's only venomous snakes, should be treated with respect and observed only from

Silchester Common





Dexter Cattle on the Common.

a safe distance, although their bites are rarely fatal for humans. They can often be seen in early spring basking on south facing slopes.

This diversity of flora and fauna makes Silchester Common a very special place. Its SSSI status offers protection and will ensure its preservation for centuries to come.

1.3 Previous Histories of Silchester

For the last 200 years various different writers have chronicled Silchester's past, directing their attention substantially to the Roman era.

One of the earliest works was *The History and Antiquities of Silchester, in Hampshire*, published by Sam Chandler of Basingstoke in 1821. This slim volume is more of a lengthy pamphlet than a book. It was evidently popular as it ran into several editions. In it Chandler described the crumbling Roman walls and the deserted site. However, as the Roman town was largely unexcavated and reliable scholarship in the early 19th century was still scanty, his narrative was more conjecture than history.

Later, throughout the Victorian era, various publications appeared, all focusing on antiquity. These included the slim volume written in 1879 by J Plummer (the first headmaster of Silchester School) and G N Godwin, entitled *Silchester or the Pompeii of Hampshire: how to get there and what to see*.

A wider ranging manuscript entitled *History of Silchester* was written by Miss Florence A Davidson in about 1910, but never commercially published. More details follow in 1.4.

Just two or three years after Florence Davidson's work, James Thomson commenced research for *The Book of Silchester*. He had largely completed his preparation by 1915 but was interrupted by the First World War and did not publish until 1924.

We know little about the life of this author. He was born in 1853 and died, aged 90, in 1944. At the time he wrote *The Book of Silchester* he was living in East Finchley, London and remained there until his death. It must be assumed he was Scottish by birth as he was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. He would undoubtedly have been aware of the Silchester excavations undertaken by the Society of Antiquaries based in London and accordingly inspired to write a comprehensive account of the early 20th century discoveries.

James Thomson's book is an ambitious and somewhat arcane piece of work. Only 175 copies were printed in two bound volumes, the second volume consisting entirely of descriptions of Roman remains and artefacts. The first volume, written in florid language, includes large tracts of general history and speculation. However, it also contains contemporary observations and details of how to reach Silchester. In that respect it provides a useful snapshot of the village at the beginning of the 20th century.

A formidable work of scholarship appeared in 1957 with the publication by George C Boon of *Roman Silchester*. He revised and updated this book which became *Silchester: The Roman Town of Calleva* in 1974. In their day these volumes were widely accepted as comprehensive and authoritative commentaries on the Roman past. Boon, having also made some contemporary observations, has perhaps unintentionally furnished us with some vignettes about much later eras.

A slim publication entitled *Silchester: A Village History* was written by G Timmins

in 2001. Consisting of only 32 pages, this is little more than a pamphlet. It contains various lists and a limited amount of text apparently taken from *The Victoria County History of Hampshire* and the St Mary the Virgin church guide. Around the time of the millennium, the author prepared similar pamphlets covering all Hampshire parishes.

The latest book on Iron Age and Roman Silchester, entitled *Silchester Revealed* was written by Professor Michael Fulford in 2021. This is an excellent volume, highly readable and well-illustrated, which provides a satisfying account of Iron Age and Roman times in our parish.

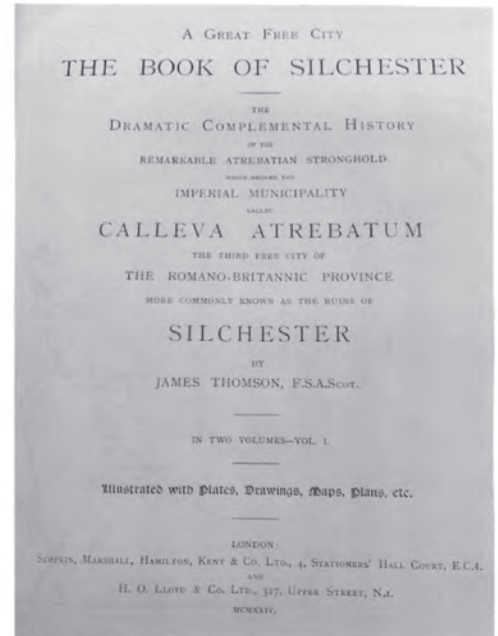
In contrast, *The Silchester Story* is the first publication to chart the evolution of this corner of north Hampshire over two millennia and tell the stories of many intriguing characters who lived or worked here.

1.4 Florence A Davidson (1857–1955)

Florence Davidson was an amateur historian writing in the first two decades of the 20th century.

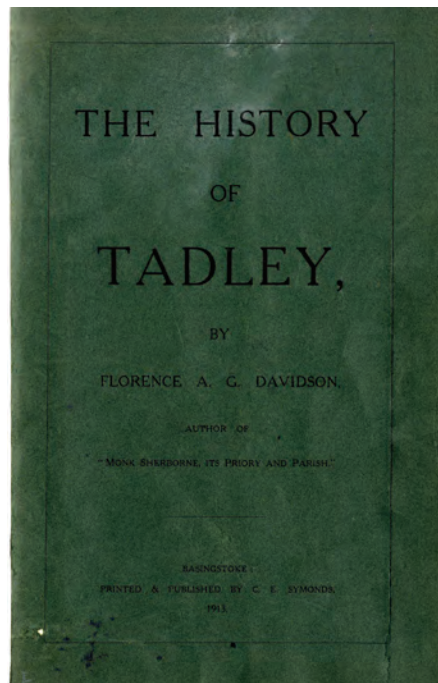
In the year 1913 she completed *The History of Tadley* published as a booklet by C E Symonds of Basingstoke. Ninety-five years later, in 2008, Florence Davidson's slim volume was republished by Tadley and District History Society (TADS). This edition included notes prepared by TADS and also a biography of the author.

From the TADS publication we learn that Florence Alexandrina Grieg Davidson was one of six daughters of a wealthy family from America, all of whom moved to England in the late 1860s. Like her sisters she spent the early years of her life in Brooklyn, New York. Following the death of Mr Davidson, in 1876 his widow and unmarried daughters settled in the Southsea area of Portsmouth where they lived for many years. The sisters all remained very close for the rest of their lives.



In the year 1907 one sister, Lillias, four years older than Florence, came to north Hampshire, purchasing the house Cole Byron on Pamber Road, opposite Silchester Common. Lillias, besides enjoying a private income, had become a successful author. The British Library records 19 titles (some fiction, some non-fiction) under her name.

The Book of Silchester



The History of Tadley

Over the years 1907 to 1915 Florence was a frequent visitor to Cole Byron which was occupied sporadically as a country residence. Perhaps inspired by her sister, Florence also developed a passion for research and writing. Her first book *King Alfred's Winchester, the Ancient Capital of England* was published by Warren and Son of Winchester in 1899. Subsequently she became fascinated by the history of north Hampshire. Indeed, on the cover of the 1913 edition of *The History of Tadley* she is credited as the author of *Monk Sherborne, Its Priory And Parish*.

Five of the Davidson sisters continued living in Hampshire well into the third and fourth decades of the 20th century. Lillias died in 1934 aged 80, but by then it is known that Florence had moved away and was living in Exeter. She continued to reside there for many more years, eventually dying in a nursing home on 13 April 1955, aged 98.

It is evident that while researching the histories of Tadley and Monk Sherborne, Florence also delved into Silchester's past. She visited the British Museum, studied historical documents, pored over parish registers and

consulted learned tomes such as *The Victoria County History*. Although her Silchester work did not result in publication, she wrote many thousands of words and kept numerous notes and photographs recording both her findings and her observations.

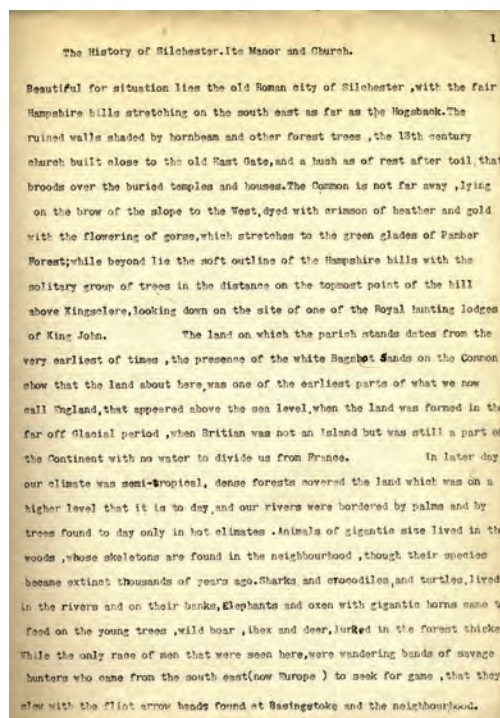
Later in life Florence disposed of her Silchester papers to those she thought might be interested in preserving her material. Reading Library holds a hard-bound volume entitled *History of Silchester* written by her. As this bears no printer's or publisher's imprints it is evident that the binding was undertaken by the library at the date of acquisition, which is noted as being in 1954, one year before Florence died. At approximately the same time two other manuscripts written by her came back to the parish which inspired them.

The Reading Library volume consists of some 200 typed pages, many with annotations in pen and ink made by the author. It also contains photographs and sketches. On one page Florence, making an update to a piece of information writes 'now' with '1930' in brackets. It therefore seems likely that she was continuing to revise her work until at least that date.

The opening words on the first page are charmingly lyrical:

Beautiful for situation lies the old Roman city of Silchester, with the fair Hampshire hills stretching on the south east as far as the Hogsback. The ruined walls shaded by hornbeam and other forest trees, the 13th century church built close to the old East gate, and a hush as of rest after toil, that broods over the buried temples and houses. (sic)

Unfortunately, this style is not maintained. The succeeding pages tend to be rather rambling with general comments about Roman and Anglo-Saxon times and intricate detail about the extended families of the early Lords of the Manor. Towards the end of this volume the somewhat disjointed narrative becomes more contemporary. There are numerous comments about what Florence sees around her in the years



Opening page of
History of Silchester

prior to the First World War. She reports what she has learnt from villagers about 19th century Silchester and refers to people such as Lt Col Karslake and Mr Challoner Smith, a noted antiquary, who lived in the newly constructed dwelling Calleva, later named Heathercote House. (See 4.16)

The manuscripts which came to Silchester are both typewritten. The first is entitled *The History of Silchester Parish* and dated 1914. The second, entitled *History of Silchester* opens with these words: *Originally written about 1910 by Miss Florence Agnes Davidson of Cole Byron, Silchester. Lent by the Rev William Alder to Jean Gowring of Silchester House, January 1981.* (Rev Alder was Rector of Silchester from 1948 until 1982. Jean Gowring was Clerk to the Parish Council. Agnes was an erroneous transcription of Alexandrina.)

Both documents then passed into the possession of Isobel Hibberd of Silchester, who in turn handed them to Robina Rand.

History of Silchester includes notes and corrections made by others together with a guide to people and places written by Nancy Goddard in February 1981. The nature of this document, considerably shorter than *The History of Silchester Parish*, suggests that originally it might have been the text for a talk to a local organisation.

Shortly after these histories arrived back in Silchester *The History of Silchester Parish* was

serialised in the parish magazine. It appeared section by section over the years 1954–55. Florence may never have been aware of this as she died well before the serialisation was complete.

We have drawn on all three manuscripts in compiling this book, mentioning many of the intriguing details they contain. Florence consulted numerous sources, travelling to places such as the British Museum for access to historic documents. It is evident that one of her sources was the earlier work of Sam Chandler. (See 1.3)

Florence Davidson also made the acquaintance of numerous Silchester residents, both those possessing an academic interest in the Roman site and those possessing a wealth of local knowledge. She drew on what she had gleaned from conversations within the village, often recording what she had learned as accepted fact. Although her unpublished work was a formidable achievement, occasionally her observations based on local knowledge appear questionable. With this in mind, we have cited her as our source when we have included a detail which cannot be corroborated.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the research undertaken by Florence Davidson was remarkable. We remain in her debt for providing material which has undoubtedly added colour to *The Silchester Story*.

