

# Wells and Ramsbury:

## A further look at Urban Origins

by

*Jeremy Haslam*

**W**ARWICK Rodwell's exciting excavation at Wells Cathedral, on which he writes in *CA* 73 (August 1980), is a classic example of how a comparatively small excavation can radically alter previously held views of settlement development. Dr Rodwell will be the first to recognise its wider implications, but his account of the evidence suggests an alternative view to the pattern of development of the site between the Roman and Norman periods.

The remarkable development at Wells from a Roman settlement to one with a minster church by c. 705 AD, and from this to a major ecclesiastical and urban centre in the 10th century, is a pattern which Rodwell explains by suggesting the existence from the 8th to the 10th or 11th century of "a cosmopolitan centre of religious art and learning" (p. 42). There is however a further factor which I would suggest is of greater significance—whether this "centre of learning" existed or not. This is the probable existence at Wells of a royal centre from at least the 7th century onwards, which acted as a focus of economic, administrative and religious activity. This status of Wells as a *villa regalis*, which was presumably the centre of a royal estate, provides the context for the presence of an early minster, the Merovingian glass and the Frisian coin, and ultimately its choice as the seat of a bishopric and the development of the town in the 10th century.

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that this pattern of development can be seen in other places in Wessex. In particular, Ramsbury in East Wiltshire was in all likelihood an early royal centre of

a similar kind to Wells. In an excavation I carried out there in 1974 (published in *Medieval Archaeology* 24, 1980) exotic imports (lava querns) were associated with a large-scale iron smelting industry using innovative techniques in the late 8th-early 9th century. Significantly it lies not far from Roman *Cunetio*, and, like Wells, it became the seat of a bishopric in 909 AD.

### Other royal centres

A similar pattern is repeated in other places in Wiltshire, for instance at Bradford-on-Avon and Warminster. Both were early *villae regales* and late Saxon towns, the former succeeding (possibly by direct continuity) an Iron Age hillfort and a large Roman villa as the centre of a large estate. Bradford, with other royal centres, was given a minster church by Aldhelm by c. 700, and there is inferential evidence that a minster was also founded by Aldhelm at Warminster, as it was at neighbouring Frome. It seems probable in view of this that Wells obtained its minster church on the accession of Aldhelm to the see of Sherborne in 705.

The subsequent development of Wells as a high order ecclesiastical centre in the 10th century can thus be attributed to the presence there of a *villa regalis*. It is, I would like to suggest, the same factors which led to the foundation of the market and town to the west of the new cathedral. Rodwell has suggested (p. 43) that the town was an ecclesiastical foundation, presumably laid out outside the religious precinct in the

manner of St. Albans. But the integral nature of the arrangement of town, market and Saxon cathedral (which Rodwell has emphasised) at least raises the possibility that both town and cathedral are contemporary, and that the town, like the cathedral, is a foundation of Edward the Elder.

Similarly, I would like to suggest that at the same time as he established the bishop's seat at Ramsbury, Edward the Elder founded the town of Marlborough on a new site just a little way to the west. The linear plan of Wells is furthermore characteristic of other towns and burhs whose foundation can in my view also be attributed to Edward the Elder.

The foundation of the town may therefore, as David Hill has recently suggested of other Saxon towns (*BAR* 59 (1978), 222), be an attempt by the king to capitalise on the assets of his property. But in my own view it must rather be the result of a more complex process involving the reorganisation of a settlement which had already been developing for several centuries around a royal residence which was the centre of both production and consumption, the natural centre of routeways, the focus of religious and administrative activity, and lastly (but certainly not least) the focus of trading activity, which had been limited to royal centres probably from the time of king Ine. Before its new layout in c. 909, in other words, Wells may have been a 'town' in all but plan.

*Jeremy Haslam,  
28 Tory,  
Bradford-on-Avon,  
Wilts BA15 1NN.*