

Peart Roman Villa, Somerset

Excavations in 2012

Marek Lewcun

The existence of remains in the vicinity of the Peart Roman villa, south of Norton St Philip, Somerset, was first noted by the Rev. Skinner in the first half of the nineteenth century, but the exact spot to which he referred was uncertain. Following a limited fieldwalking exercise in 2003, a geophysical survey using resistivity and magnetometry was carried out between October 2003 and March 2004 (Camertonian number 42, 2004, 21-23). This revealed the outline of a winged villa on a substantial scale, which must have been of some importance in the region, together with what is most probably a bath house to its south-west (see Figure 1). In its elevated position and with an 80m frontage, the villa would have commanded magnificent and extensive views to the south, stretching from the eastern part of the Mendip Hills in the southwest to the northern face of Salisbury Plain in the southeast.

In April 2004, members of the society excavated four trenches in the western half of the north wing of the villa, which stands on slightly higher ground than the remainder of the wing to the east (Camertonian number 43, 2005, 20-22). The large field in which this lies has produced many fragments of mosaic tesserae in its plough soil over the years, and expectations were justifiably high that the finds would reflect those discoveries. The westernmost Trench (C) was in the room at the north-west corner of the villa, where the north wing met the west, and revealed a channel style hypocaust in-filled with many fragments of painted plaster. Two Trenches (A & B) to the east showed that the south wall of the north wing was massively constructed and clearly capable of supporting two storeys, and although no mosaics were found in-situ, evidence of their existence in a corridor along the south side of the ground floor here was quite obvious from the number of tesserae recovered. Trench D, central and attached to the outer wall of the north range, was an apsidal room. Furnished with crude but perfectly adequate paving, it is possible that this contained a staircase to the upper floor.

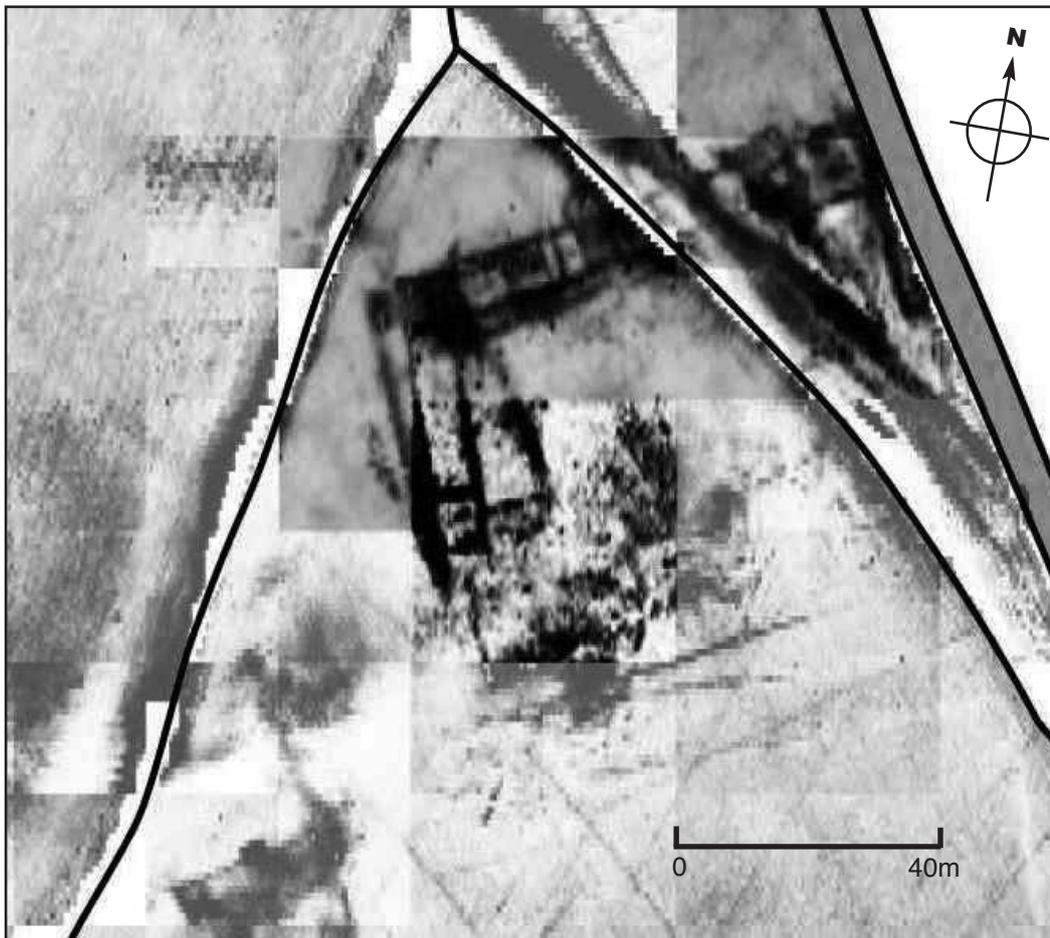


Figure 1
Resistivity survey showing the Peart villa in the wider landscape, with a bath house a short distance to the south-west.

In May 2012, members of BACAS excavated four trenches, each broadly 2m x 4m in size, in the lower-lying eastern half of the villa in a triangular field adjacent to the B3110 road between Norton St Philip and Woolverton. The intention of this was to further characterise the villa, identify the function, date of construction, period of use and the size and layout of the rooms. Two trenches were excavated within the north wing (1 & 2), one at the corner with the east wing (3), and one within the east wing (4) (see Figure 2). The excavations were directed by the author and Robin Holley.

Results

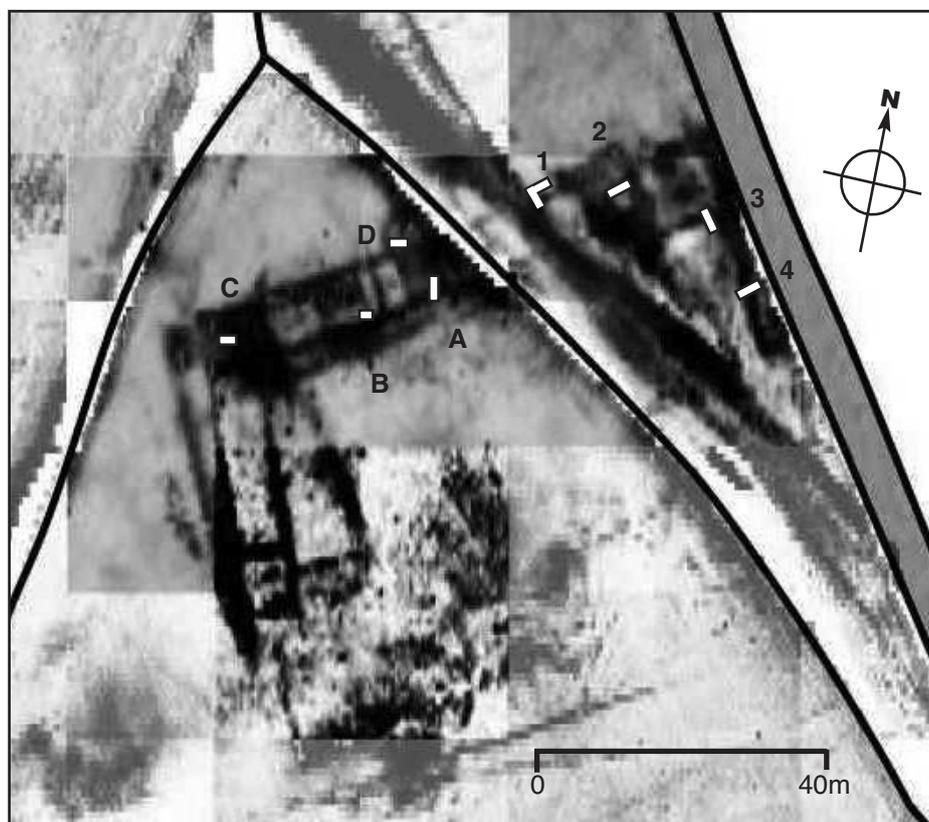


Figure 2
Detail of the villa, showing the 2004 trenches (A-D) and 2012 trenches (1-4).

Trench 1

Trench 1 was the westernmost of the trenches, and although it did not have quite the same depth of stratification as that found in the other trenches, it was equally informative. Located on the east side of the medieval road, it showed that the structure of the villa had been severely truncated by it, with deep rutting extending through the footings of the north wall. The westward deviation of the road here, away from the broadly straight lines to the north and south, might have been a response to the lower ground on the east either being too damp in the first place or having become boggy and unmanageable. Any standing remains of the villa through which the medieval road passed would almost certainly have first been dismantled and used either for road-building or in houses in the area. The footings of the excavated wall (see Figure 3) were not particularly deep, but set in firm clay - they were probably more than adequate to support a second storey. On the very edge of the trench, what appeared to be a well-constructed pathway approached the villa at an angle from the north-west, and might have been associated with a garden, although this would need further investigation to confirm it. Internal to the villa, south of the wall, was a thin surface of crushed stone, while to the north a thin deposit of demolition debris overlaid the gritty external ground surface.

Trench 2

Trench 2 (see Figure 4) illustrated an example of the many changes the villa must have gone through during its lifetime, and was a complicated area to unpick, involving careful examination of the stratigraphy in order to understand it. The earliest structure consisted of a wall on an east-west alignment, of which just the lowest course survived, and was probably contemporary with a wall approaching from

the south. The east-west wall might have served as the south side of a service corridor linking the rooms in the north wing of the villa (the corridor shown along the south side of this wing on the geophysical survey is more probably a colonnaded walkway), the north-south wall being a division between two of those rooms. To the north of the east-west wall was a surface of small stones on a bedding of angular pieces which had been tightly packed and rammed into the underlying natural ground surface. These had been reddened through subjection to extreme or extended heat, the lack of reddening on the face of the wall suggesting that it was still standing when the event or process which caused this took place. To the south was a similar surface, but was here overlaid by a later floor of well-worn pieces of thin limestone laid in a crazy-paving formation.

At some point soon afterwards, this particular component of the villa was remodelled. The east-west wall was taken down and the room to the south extended northwards over it, and the new space was provided with what became a surface of heavily burnt and reddened clay. Two platforms were subsequently constructed on the surface, consisting of compact stones and clay contained within a thin wall of upright edging stones kept in place by the application of a hard, lime-rich mortar applied to the outer faces. Each platform was 20cm high and provided with a thin surface, which had been subject to heat in both cases. The eastern platform had been resurfaced during its lifetime, while the western platform had only one surface and a small patch of worn opus signinum. Evidence of burning at the north end of the north-south wall, which had been left standing, showed that the western platform had been wrapped around it, although to what advantage or purpose is unclear.



Figure 3
The remains of the north wall of the north wing in Trench 1.

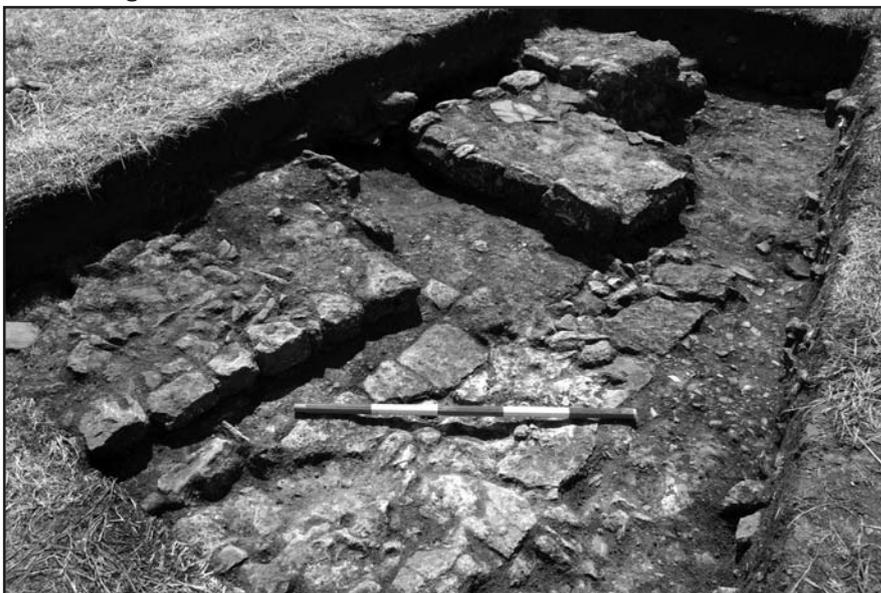


Figure 4
The oven platforms in Trench 2, with earlier corridor wall to right and north-south wall beyond.

Trench 3

Trench 3 (See Figure 5) was located in the room at the north-east corner of the villa and, as in Trench 1 and Trench 2, demonstrated that the walls of the villa still stood to several courses and only a short distance below the surface. The trench encountered the south wall of the room, which included an offset foundation and traces of pale ochre-brown wall plaster. The remainder of the trench, below topsoil and subsoil, contained a dense layer of pennant roof tiles in a fragmentary state but with some almost complete, supportive of the likelihood that the floor would have remained intact. Below the roof debris was a compact layer of wall plaster, presumably derived from the demolition of the room.

Despite the clear attention that had been paid to the furnishing of the walls here, the floor did not reflect such an elevated stature and instead comprised a crude though adequate surface of small stones, worn but with no pattern to suggest the way in which the room had been used. Incorporated in the surface, on the west side of the trench and probably close to the west wall of the room, was a substantial block of oolitic limestone, presumably from the Bath area, measuring 0.5m wide, at least 0.7m long and approximately 0.3m deep. Set within the underlying clay which had been used to level the ground prior to laying the floor, and parallel with the south wall, it must have provided the support to a feature within the southern half of the room, but exactly what type of feature will remain unknown unless there is evidence beyond the limit of excavation.



Figure 5
The crude surface in Trench 3, emerging (right) from below the wall plaster alongside the wall, showing the large stone block incorporated within it

Trench 4

Trench 4 (see Figure 6) was excavated on the west side of one of the rooms towards the north end of the east wing, a short distance south of Trench 3. The trench was dug immediately adjacent to the hedge which forms the boundary between the field and the main road, and where the surface of the land drops away to meet the road itself. Below the topsoil, there was a greater accumulation of 'dark earth' material which post-dated the abandonment of the villa, and this produced more finds than in the other trenches. The finds included a fragment of mortar with 32 tesserae still in place, forming two parallel bands of dark grey and white colours, which is likely to have come from the border of a mosaic floor. Below these deposits was further evidence of the removal of stonework from the villa for use elsewhere in the locality, but the scale of the structure at this point was of particular interest. In the western half of the trench was the basal course of a wall of similar proportions to those in the other trenches, capable of supporting an upper storey, and forming the west wall of the east range. To the east, and added to it at a later date to form a thickening, were the pitched footings of a substantial structure over 2m wide -

certainly not any form of buttress to the original wall of which the remains were quite stable, and too wide to have formed any sort of revetting on the gently inclined slope. Moreover, these footings are within the building itself. One possibility is that they supported the base of a tower towards the north-east corner of the villa. Had this been the case, and it extended to a third storey, then it would have afforded a view over the low brow of land to the east, a view probably not available from first floor level.

The absence of any obvious floor levels in Trench 4 is puzzling. To the east of the pitched footings there was no evidence of surfacing on a similar scale to that found in Trench 2 or Trench 3 (although it could be argued that it might have been eroded), nor was there any clear ground surface in what would have been the courtyard to the west, where mortar spilt during the construction of the wall formed a crust on the natural ground surface as it continued to rise up the slope, and this was directly overlaid by the dark earth. One possibility is that a wooden walkway existed along the west side of this wing to tie in with the slightly higher ground to the west and avoiding the need for deep infilling. A slot cut through the structures revealed that the pitched footings had partially settled into the fill of a shallow ditch, which produced a large number of loose tesserae presumably derived from the higher part of the villa. Given that this would have been within the room, and of uncertain function, this is somewhat unusual.



Figure 6
Trench 4, showing the original wall (orange mortar, right) and the massive stone footings added to it at a later date.

Finds

The excavation produced a not insubstantial quantity of finds. The pottery awaits more detailed analysis, but nineteen fragments of Samian ware clearly indicate occupation by the end of the second century. Most interesting amongst the assemblage was an almost complete New Forest indented beaker from Trench 4, missing only a small part of one of the panels. Glass was almost completely absent save only for a few small fragments, though of note from Trench 3 was a fragment of crucible with glass coating very similar to those examples recorded in greater quantity at the St Algar's excavations at West Woodlands (Camertonia No. 49, 2011, 18-19). Four incomplete bone pins and a bone tool of indeterminate function were also found, together perhaps supportive of the use of this part of the villa as a service wing. Twelve coins were recovered, eight of them in Trench 4, and were all of third and fourth century date, the earliest being of Claudius II (268-270) and the latest of a type datable to 348-361. Other copper alloy objects included two rings, three bracelet fragments (there were also fragments of jet and shale examples), a pair of tweezers and a pin. By far the most interesting copper alloy object was a strap end of the devolved Tortworth style (*See Figure 7*), datable to c.375/380-420+ with ring and dot decoration and showing



Figure 7
The Tortworth style strap end found amongst the demolition rubble in trench 3.

similarities to related types such as the 'lancet' and 'amphora' forms. Found amongst the roof collapse in Trench 3, the strap end might indicate the presence of late Roman officials, either military or para-military civil servants, engaged in the collection of taxes either in cash or in kind.

Conclusions

The excavations of 2012 were particularly informative, and succeeded in showing a profound difference between the way in which the western and eastern parts of the villa were used. To the west were well appointed rooms, some provided with under-floor heating, with an elevated position affording the best views to the south. In the eastern part of the villa, in 2012, a service area of the lower part of the north wing was revealed. There was what was probably a bakery in one room, while a room of indeterminate function to the east was provided with crude flooring and yet a plastered and painted wall. The immense footing in the excavation within the east wing is of particular interest, and merits a search for parallels elsewhere in Roman Britain. One question is how the floor levels of the villa were arranged given its position on a slope: was the western part on the flatter higher ground single storey, with an upper floor riding eastwards as a second storey above the eastern part of the villa in order to maintain a single roofline and present symmetry to the visitor, or was there a step-down between the two and a split roof level? This might be answered by excavation on the western edge of the lower field, where although the geophysical survey shows no dark responses to suggest floors, the wall faces might indicate at what level those floors were laid. Despite excavation into the deposits below the surviving floors, no artefacts were recovered to indicate the exact period when the villa was constructed, but it appears to be a safe assumption from the pottery that it was in existence from the second century, a date which will hopefully be tied down following further analysis of the finds.

The villa must have survived as a standing structure and a bold feature in the landscape well into the sub-Roman period, becoming ruinous with time through neglect. Serving as a free quarry, the building materials of both the villa and its bath house would have been gradually dismantled for use elsewhere, although exactly where those materials were re-used is debatable, nor is the period of time during which this process took place. Although our excavation in 2012 has helped clarify and expand our knowledge of several aspects of the building's construction and possible uses, there are obviously still some unanswered questions, and future visits to the site would be clearly beneficial.

Acknowledgements

The excavations of 2012 were made possible by the generous support and permission of the landowners, Melanie and Roger Everard, and the Society is extremely grateful to them for providing it with this opportunity. Additional geophysics were undertaken by John Oswin, logistics were managed by Les Hayes, and off-site parking was kindly provided by Woody's Farm Shop, while the project received continual encouragement from the chairman of the society, Bob Whitaker. In addition to giving supervisory support during the dig, a great deal of post-excavation work and support was undertaken by Clive Green, and for this the author is extremely grateful. We are grateful to Jane Bircher for first recognising the importance of the strap end, and Mark Corney for subsequently providing us the detailed information relating to it.

Last but by no means least, the success of the project owes much to the efforts of the 26 members of the society who gave freely of their time and took part in the excavation.