Peart Roman Villa
Peart
Roman
Villa

This document has been prepared to describe the findings of the geophysical survey and subsequent trial trenching in the fields immediately east of Peart Woods in 2003 and 2004. Formal documents have already been issued.

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The work was carried out by members of the Bath and Camerton Archaeological Society (bacas), principally John Oswin, Jayne Lawes, Keith Turner, Owen Dicker, Les Hayes, Bill Rowe, Margaret Nuth and Marek Lewcun. Thanks are also due to John Prescott for assistance. The landowners were then John Bush and Garry Lindop, and the tenant farmer was Graham Weeks.
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Introduction

The presence of Roman structures in the area between Peart Woods and Chatley was known to the Revd. John Skinner in the 1820’s. Fieldwork by John Prescott in the 1980’s had shown pottery scatters in the area and as a result of this, the Somerset Heritage Environment Record (HER) had records of the area. Members of the Bath and Camerton Archaeological Society (bacas) had superficially investigated the fields here in 2002.

In October 2003, some members of the society decided to try their newly won geophysics skills at Peart in a three-day campaign which started on the prominent platform just near Peart Woods, then moved to a point in the same field (Top Springfield) near the gap into the next-east field (Springfield), and moved finally to the top debris-strewn corner of Springfield (see figure 3 for field names). The first two days produced disappointing results but the third day’s plots were spectacular in both magnetometer and resistance surveys. It was then decided that the area needed a thorough survey and this was conducted from November 2003 to March 2004. Fortunately grid markers had been left in place so that the original grid could be used again. Following the success of the geophysical survey, trial excavations were carried out in April and May 2004.

The work has already been formally reported to Somerset HER and published in the Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeology and Natural History Society (SANHS) and in Britannia, the Journal of Roman Studies. This document provides an informal resume of the findings of the survey and excavations.

The area covered by the survey was approximately 15 acres (7 ha). It covered both Springfield and Top Springfield north from the line of the dutch barn from Peart Woods to the main road, and continued north to close to the main road in Top Springfield. The area included the small triangular grass field, now called Falconer’s Field, between the Springfield fields and the main road. A small survey 20 m by 80 m was also conducted across the line of the ‘Roman Road’ in the far south of the Top Springfield. This supported the main survey but added little new information, so it will not be considered in detail. By the end of the survey, the so-called ‘Roman Road’ was considered more likely to be a mediaeval trackway.

The villa building itself sits atop the ridge, above the dutch barn. There are tremendous views to the south and east, and the site also commands the road northward towards Norton St Philip. However, the site is not exposed, and our long winter there showed us how storms moved either to the north or well to the south. The ridge was well protected from the west.

There are possible earthworks in the fields to the north of the road, but these have not been explored to date. The main road now is on the line of the 1733 turnpike. It truncates the east wing of the villa, and some material may have been destroyed unrecorded when the road was built.

The villa belonged typically to the wealthy ‘late’ period of Roman Britain, the 4th century AD, but was massive and opulent even by that standard.
Geophysical Survey

The two normal geophysics instruments available to bacas at the time were used. The first was the FM36 Fluxgate Gradiometer, a magnetic detector capable of observing minute changes in the earth’s magnetic field caused by the presence of hearths, pits and ditches. This is shown in figure 1. The second was the TR/CIA twin probe electrical resistance meter capable of detecting buried stones, and therefore used for finding walls and foundations. This is shown in figure 2. It is normal now for bacas also to provide a detailed contour survey using an electronic distancing meter (EDM), but bacas did not possess that at the time. A metal detector sweep of the villa precinct was also done during the trial excavations, principally to deter unauthorised detectorists. This did not produce significant finds. Although a few coins were found by this method, they did not add greatly to the story.

Figure 3 shows the combined magnetic and resistance plots using the bacas standard colour code of ‘green for gradi, red for resi’, and annotated with the major features. This plot also shows the small survey to the south. Lines of the road can be seen crossing the grids. Figures 4 and 5 show the magnetic and resistance plots separately.

In figure 3, the villa precinct is clearly visible to the right of the picture. The south corridor and the individual rooms of the main wing are all clearly visible, including lines outside the central room of the wing. The east wing can be seen, but it may have been cut off by the modern road, some 1.5 m below field level. The west wing seems to have gone through several building phases, including a narrow building of separate rooms, and probably before that an ailed barn, possibly with a latrine protruding from the west side (seen best in figure 4), similar to that at Halstock Villa in Dorset. There may be another building to the south, where lines seem to show ditches which marked the south of the villa precinct.

Details can be seen more clearly in the individual instrument plots. Figure 4 shows the precinct and some buildings. The main range can be seen but not clearly. Details of the villa rooms are seen best in figure 5.

The main thing that distinguishes Peart Villa is its size. The main wing is some 80 m long. The whole precinct forms and area about as big as Queen’s Square in Bath, but this is a single residence! The ‘W’ shaped image (best seen in figure 5) beyond the precinct to the south-west is probably the bath house.

The small triangular field, Falconer’s Field, seems to have been formed when the turnpike was made in 1733 on an easier gradient. The old road, probably from Oldford, Lullington via Woolverton follows the west hedge line of the field and smashes straight through the villa’s main wing. We have to assume that very little was left standing of the villa then, probably in early mediaeval times. This old road seems to merge with the road from Lullington which crosses Henham Bridge and continues between the two fields Springfield and Top Springfield and just passes the edge of the villa. As this passes through probable Roman buildings just west of the villa, it is later, probably mediaeval, not the ‘Roman Road’ it is called.
Figure 1. The magnetometer detects buried hearths, pits and ditches.

Figure 2. The resistance meter detects buried stones, walls and footings.
Figure 3. Combined magnetic and resistance geophysics plot.
Figure 4. Magnetometer plot

Figure 5. Resistance plot
Excavations

After the geophysical survey was complete, some trial trenches were excavated during April and May 2004 to link what was in the ground with what the survey had found. In all, four trenches were excavated, all on the main villa building, all in Springfield. The positions of the trenches are shown in figure 6. The basic size of trench was to be 3 m by 2 m, although A and D were larger than this.

Trench A was intended to show the main entrance to the central room and a 5 m by 2 m trench was cut. This turned out to be the least useful of the excavations, although it did yield tesserae, (the small stones used to make mosaic pavements) and fragments of painted plaster.

Trench B was a little further to the west, aimed at cutting the south corridor, an inner room and the wall between them. The wall turned out to be substantial, certainly able to carry more than a single story. The corridor contained wreckage of roof tiles and tesserae, but there was surprisingly little rubble for a building so large.

Trench C was at the far west of the wing, intended to sort the chronology of the stages of the west wing. It turned out to be too small an opening to give any clue on phases of building, but it did show a channel hypocaust (underfloor heating system) which was crammed full of painted plaster debris and tesserae. The floor itself was missing.

Trench D was inserted just beyond the north wall of the central room to elucidate what appeared to be an apse on the geophysics. This trench was extended beyond its 3 m by 2 m size to follow very finely laid high quality stone paving. The paving seemed to be outside the building, like a patio, and had been cracked by falling debris. The south point of the extended trench yielded the sill of an entranceway into the central room, but time did not permit further investigation.

All trenches were planned and photographed. In addition, overhead photographs were taken using a 5 m high tripod. Photographs of the structure are shown in figures 7 to 9. Figures 10 and 11 show painted plaster and tesserae.

A few coins were found. These had dates around 350 AD, typical of large ornate villas in the West Country. In addition, a number of iron styli (writing pens for scratching words into soft surfaces) were found, and a piece of pottery was found which had letters scratched into it. This is illustrated in figure 12. Another intriguing find was part of a tile with a dog’s paw mark in it, shown in figure 13.

As finds were few, floors were missing and the amount of rubble was small, the site gave the impression that it had been deliberately cleared, with all the good building stone and floor flags taken away, only the bits that could not be re-cycled, such as plaster and mosaics, left behind. The fact that a later road smashed through it suggests that there was little left to see on the surface.
Figure 6. Positions of trenches, shown as black rectangles on resistance plot.

Figure 7. Internal wall and corridor at Trench B. Roofing tiles lie in the debris, and under them, tesserae of a broken-up floor.
Figure 8. The hypocaust found in trench C. The channels were crammed with plaster fragments and tesserae.

Figure 9. Trench D, showing the fine paving, and bottom right, the entrance sill to the centre room.
Figure 10. Some of the painted plaster fragments.

Figure 11. Some of the hundreds of tesserae found on site, but none were together to form a mosaic.
Figure 12. Part of a pottery vessel with lettering scratched into it.

Figure 13. Part of a tile with a dog’s paw print in it.
Comment

The villa at Peart must have been a magnificent edifice in its day, both to be in and to be seen from a distance. Even by magnificent 4th century standards, it was huge and opulent. It seems surprising then that it seems to have been deliberately demolished, probably still in Roman times. However, this may be a false view based only on the tiny amount of it excavated. Larger area excavation may have found intact mosaics and more rubble. However, the very clarity of the geophysics plots suggests that all excess stonework had been removed, just leaving the footings.

It may be that the villa was just part of a larger complex. There are signs of earthworks on the northern side of the main road, and these await surveying. Revd John Skinner in the 1820’s noted the presence of a mosaic pavement at Chatley, now lost, and it is possible that it was really connected with this villa. Chatley still remains to be surveyed.

Much more could be learned about this site. It is not a scheduled monument, so there are no restrictions on further excavation, but the effort required for useful results would be large and it would not be easy to provide the resources. The west wing in particular would benefit more study to understand the phases of construction. Nothing is known at present about the nature of the building to the far west, near Peart Woods. Whatever is done or not, a site of this importance and magnificence does need to be preserved.

The main site in Springfield has been subject to ploughing over the years. Some management of the ground is essential to keep the soil in good order and control weed growth, but deep ploughing within the precinct area should be discouraged if possible. The part in Falconer’s Field is probably undisturbed and is best kept that way if possible. Uncontrolled, random metal detecting should not be encouraged. Any further work should be strictly controlled and properly reported.

We hope this site will be cared for, and left for future generations to research and to enjoy. It is important because of its size and apparent demolition. Its role in the local Roman countryside needs to be understood.
The Society

The Bath and Camerton Society (bacas) first came to prominence for its excavations under Bill Wedlake some 50 years ago on the Roman small town at Camerton, near Radstock. After a period of decline, it was revived in the 1990’s, and undertook excavations at Stratton-on-Fosse. Its current principal site is at Blacklands, Upper Row Farm in Hemington parish, some 2 km west of the Peart Villa site. This site has a modest Roman villa, but it is important because it is very early in the Roman period, some 200 years before Peart flourished.

The society also has links with the island of Foula in Shetland, and has become well known there for its recent discovery of a stone ‘circle’ aligned on the winter solstice sunrise.

Its principal work is fieldwork and excavation, but it can also help with churchyard surveys, parish surveys and local history and is working to provide an educational base in archaeology. It has already provided resources for undergraduate and postgraduate studies and is building links with schools in the area.

The society has hosted television programmes, Time Flyers in 2002, and Time Team in 2006 (broadcast January 2007), and members have recorded with a Time Team Special programme.

The Time Team programme created a Roman Garden at Upper Row Farm, and this will be developed further as an educational resource.

Figure 14. The Roman Garden at Upper Row Farm
The society holds regular open days to show its work to the public and has also held a number of local exhibitions. The Blacklands Villa at Upper Row Farm has now been fully excavated, but has been preserved in outline and an interpretation board has been provided so that the public can visit and understand the site.

![Figure 15. BACAS members build the footprint of the Blacklands villa.](image)

The society has gained greatest recognition lately for its geophysics work, in particular its comprehensive coverage of large areas with both magnetometer and resistance techniques. In all, about 200 acres (80 ha) have been covered. This has been centred on the main site at Upper Row Farm, Hemington, but includes a number of other sites ‘twixt Salisbury and Shetland. Peart Villa is important in that it was the first of bacas’ sites subject to such comprehensive coverage to be completed and reported.

Further details of all of the society’s activities can be found on its website, www.bacas.org.uk.