

# Island Sites Revisited

## The Gurnard Roman Villa

by C. T. WITHERBY

### GENERAL NOTE

**T**HIS building was discovered in 1864 by Mr Edwin Joseph Smith and it is described by the Rev Edmund Kell, M.A., F.S.A., in the British Archaeological Association Reports for 1866 (p. 351).

This report, which includes a copy of the plan of the building prepared by Mr Smith, shows that parts of three rooms were found, the rooms running east and west. The original of Mr Smith's plan is held by the Cowes Urban District Council at Northwood House, Cowes. The whole of the villa has now been destroyed by the sea.

### EXACT POSITION

This is not easy to determine, because Mr Smith's plan does not show any surface feature other than a hedge and the sea has encroached very greatly since 1866. However, the writer suggests that the most easterly of the three rooms of the villa was about 30 yards west, or north-west, of Marsh Cottage, Gurnard, which is itself about 50 yards north of the bridge over the Gurnard Luck. The site is two miles west of Cowes.

The evidence to support this is as follows:

- (a) In his account, Mr Fell refers to the fact that traces of the villa 'appear to enter the garden of the nearby cottage', and later he mentions that a Mrs Grist lived in the cottage in 1866.
- (b) The writer has been informed by Mr Gladstone Flux, of Rew Street, Gurnard, that his grandfather told him that Marsh Cottage was built by a Mr Grist or Grisk.
- (c) Assuming therefore that the 'nearby cottage' was Marsh Cottage, the 1862 Ordnance Survey Map was consulted and it was seen that Marsh Cottage at that time had a small garden with a hedge on the western side which could be the one shown by Mr Smith in his plan.
- (d) Mr Fell's report states that the site was near Rew Street, a Roman road, and Marsh Cottage stands on Rew Street.

(It should be noted that some local people believe that the Roman villa occupied a site much farther out to sea and that ruins of it are still visible on Gurnard Ledge at low tide. The writer believes that these ruins must be from some other building.)

## HAMPSHIRE FIELD CLUB PROCEEDINGS

### DISCOVERY AND EXCAVATION OF THE VILLA

Mr E. J. Smith lived at Cliff Court, Solent View Road, Gurnard, about half a mile from the site, and while walking along the beach he noticed the remains of the floor of a building at the top of the cliff, then 14 feet in height. This was at a point where the sea was encroaching rapidly. Mr Smith reported the matter to the Ward Estate, of Cowes, the owners of the land, and they arranged for the building to be excavated. It is thus quite clear that but for the observation by Mr Smith and the activity of the Ward Estate, the building would have remained unknown. The excavation revealed three rooms, running east and west. The walls were of stone and two rooms were floored with broken tiles. The most eastern room was not completely traced because it appeared to go into the garden of the nearby cottage, where it could not be examined, but this eastern room contained a hearth (? an unusual feature) and was reached by a step down from the middle room. There was a door on the south side of the western room. The building had continued to the west but already had been destroyed by the sea before 1864, and it had also continued to the east at least as far as the eastern room had extended. Certain objects were found and these will be mentioned later. After the excavation the site was largely destroyed by the erection by the Ward Estate of sea walls at this point, but the writer believes that some of the stones from the villa were dispersed into local houses and may still be traceable. Since 1866 the sea has come in farther, and there is now no trace of the Ward Estate sea walls or of the villa. The western hedge of the garden of Marsh Cottage has also gone.

The excavation was carried out long before modern techniques were known and the report gives few details of the construction of the building, nor does it say if the side walls were standing above the floors or what foundations were seen. Generally, the information is so scanty that few conclusions can be reached but it does appear that the rooms were not part of a range of baths, since no heating system is mentioned.

### SPECULATION AS TO THE NATURE OF THE BUILDING

Since the site cannot be re-examined, some speculation may be permitted. A few coins were found and these range from Hadrian (A.D. 117) to Gratian (A.D. 364) suggesting a lengthy occupation of the site. A quantity of pottery was found, some of it 'samian' and well decorated. Other objects included a much worn chopper, found on the hearth in the eastern room, and a tiny statue of Mercury. The report does not 'place' any of the objects other than the chopper. From the quantities of ashes and broken tiles the excavators concluded that the house was burned.

The two western rooms appear to be of the same size and may be part of a corridor of rooms. One has a door to the south and each has a possible door to the north. There is a door leading into the eastern room, which was reached down a step. This room was broader. The plan of the building shows an unexplained 'platform' of stone outside the south wall of the eastern room and a line of similar stone running north and south a few feet to the north of this eastern room. It will be remembered that the plan suggests that the ruins of this eastern room, as revealed, were incomplete. The hedge of Marsh Cottage was close by and the writer suggests that this eastern room marks the end of the house, and that when Mr Grist built Marsh Cottage he found the remains of the villa and planted his hedge across the end of it, partly destroying the east end of it when he dug the ditch outside his hedge. The

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villa cannot have extended much farther to the east because no traces can be seen in the 'cliff' or bank on the west side of Marsh Cottage now.

The account of 1866 shows that the sea was encroaching rapidly before that time, coming in at the rate of 20 yards in some years. For two or three years before 1864 the beach had been covered with Roman tiles and pottery and other objects. Nothing can be seen now on this beach.

The quantity of Roman remains on the beach in 1864 suggests that a large Roman building had been destroyed quite suddenly, and the writer explains this by suggesting that the house was square or 'L'-shaped and that the greater part of it, namely the west and north sides, fell over the cliff in the course of two or three years just prior to 1864. The ruins were situated in a secluded bay, cut off by the mouth of the Gurnard Luck and few people can have walked on this beach in 1864. The cliff curved sharply at this point in 1864 so that the west and north sides of this possible house would have appeared on the cliff at about the same time.

The few details of construction and plan that have survived, the reference to roofing tiles, the objects found on the site, the door-stones to be mentioned later, all suggest that this was a good quality house. The eastern room, being larger, may have been an entrance, fronting at a distance of about 20 yards on to Rew Street, and 'the line of stone running North and South' may have been part of an outer boundary wall. On this hypothesis, the house may have had some resemblance to House 1 in Insula XXXIII at Silchester, as illustrated in Mr G. C. Boon's *Roman Silchester* at page 143. The fact that the site was occupied for so long, and the absence of signs of reconstruction, suggest that Saxon raids were not occurring in the Isle of Wight.

### THE LOCALITY OF THE VILLA

The villa was situated to the west of the mouth of the little river, the 'Gurnard Luck', two miles west of Cowes. Rew Street, first as a small stone causeway and later as a modern road, runs southwards from the site towards Carisbrooke. The mouth of the Gurnard Luck is still used as a harbour for small boats and from the description of coast erosion in the account of 1866 it is clear that there was once far more land beyond Marsh Cottage than there is now. (Possibly the construction of the tide gate on Gurnard Marsh, by reducing the tidal flow, has hastened or changed the erosion which seems continuous on this coast.)

We do not know what Gurnard was like in Roman times, but the few 'modern' finds on the site in 1866 suggest occupation in the sixteenth century and busy occupation in the first half of the seventeenth century. It is known that King Charles I erected a small fort at Gurnard about the year 1635 (nothing remains of it now), and Sir John Oglander mentions that Gurnard was in use in his day. It seems therefore possible that in Roman times there was a small port at Gurnard and that the Gurnard Villa, standing on Rew Street, was in some way associated with it.

One further matter in the report of 1866 calls for comment. Mr Fell argued at length that a quantity of lead seals found on the site were Roman. There was controversy about this after his report was published. In order to try to settle this doubt, Mr Sheppard S. Frere, M.A., F.S.A., of the University of London Institute of Archaeology, has seen illustrations of these seals and considers that they are certainly not Roman.

## HAMPSHIRE FIELD CLUB PROCEEDINGS

### REW STREET

No Roman roads have been definitely proved in the Isle of Wight, but Rew Street is traditionally such a road. It runs south from Gurnard along a ridge towards Marks Corner in Parkhurst Forest and was presumably designed by the Romans to go to Carisbrooke. At the mouth of the Gurnard Luck the modern tarmac road which follows the line of Rew Street turns east across Gurnard Marsh in the direction of Cowes. However the line of Rew Street continues north for about 50 yards as a stone causeway or terrace about 20 feet wide. This causeway stands about three feet above the ground and runs at one point along the actual bank of the Gurnard Luck. On the surface can be seen a number of round white stones about eight inches in diameter. These are from the beach. At first this causeway runs straight, but near Marsh Cottage it bends slightly to the east. It cannot be seen as a causeway at Marsh Cottage because the river has cut in at this point.

On the beach outside, and to the east of Marsh Cottage, the sea has revealed some layers of stones which may well be a continuation of this causeway. In the summer of 1961 these layers were clearly visible. The outer layer began at a point 10 yards east of Marsh Cottage and this layer seemed to be the lowest layer of the causeway. It consisted of eight-inch-sized beach stones set in sand and resting on sharp yellow or red gravel stones (not beach pebbles) about one inch in size. This layer could be traced north for about 12 yards before it had been destroyed by the sea.

About one foot higher up the beach and about two yards nearer to Marsh Cottage, the remains of a similar layer of white stones was visible.

About eight inches higher and about two yards closer to the cottage was another layer resembling a gravel path. Soil rested on it and a piece of coal was seen on the surface of the road at one point. (Coal was landed at Gurnard up to a century ago.) This layer with white stones under it, but under the soil, could be traced north for about 16 yards. It seemed also to enter the garden of Marsh Cottage, but not very far, because a drainage ditch dug there in 1961 by Mr Snook<sup>1</sup> revealed nothing. The upper layer of this road consisted of beach materials, sand, pebbles and sea shells. The piece of coal on the surface of the road, but under some soil, shows that the road was in use comparatively recently, but not, perhaps, in the last century.

Clearly these layers of stone are part of a road, of which the causeway is part. It is not impossible that they are Roman in date, but no Roman object has been found in them. Alternatively they may be relics of a road built in the seventeenth century to supply the Gurnard Fort and are laid on the remains of Rew Street.

### THE TWO DOOR-STONES

Mr Gladstone Flux, of Rew Street, Gurnard, has in his garden two stones brought by his grandfather from the site of the Roman villa. These stones are rectangular, carefully cut and are made from Bembridge limestone boulders taken from the beach at Gurnard. Underneath they are not shaped but have been left rough. The end of one stone is damaged, but they are of the same width and depth and it may be assumed that they were originally of the same dimensions. The undamaged stone measures 2 ft.  $1\frac{3}{8}$  in. in length and is 1 ft.  $6\frac{7}{8}$  in. in width. Both are 7 in. deep. When taken in the 'normal' Roman foot of 11.6 in. these measurements do not come out exactly, but in the alternative Roman foot of  $12\frac{7}{8}$  in. which, as mentioned in *London in Roman Times* (London Museum, Guide to the

1. The present owner.

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Roman collections) at page 83, was in use in Gaul, these measurements come very nearly at 2 Roman feet in length by  $1\frac{1}{2}$  Roman feet in width. Presumably this was the intended size of each stone.<sup>1</sup> The damaged end of one stone has on it a scrape mark,  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. deep, cut into its surface by a door. Roman doors were pivoted and scrape marks have been seen elsewhere. The width of the door, calculated roughly from the mark was 2 ft. 9 in. About 1 in. beyond the outside of the scrape mark and 3 in. from the edge of the stone there is a groove. It is  $1\frac{1}{2}$  in. deep, about the same width and 1 ft.  $2\frac{3}{4}$  in. in length. The end nearest to the door scrape is rounded, and has a circular scrape mark inside it. The groove itself is not straight, but is curved very slightly. There is no lead in the groove or sign that anything was ever fixed there, but it is stained with iron. In the other stone there is a similar groove and this is quite sharp and fresh, whereas that on the damaged stone is much worn. Opposite the groove and extending across the door-scrape mark is a rough groove caused by wear of some kind. The writer cannot explain the purpose of these curved grooves but suggests that they were either:

- (a) Sockets in which rested hooks used to fasten the door open; and half open; or
- (b) Sockets in which were placed large keys for padlocks fastening the door.<sup>2</sup>

There are no signs of wear on these stones by the feet of those entering the house and so it is not clear if these stones were in an actual doorway or were used for supporting the door-posts. They are not a pair but are duplicates. Little is known about doorways in Roman times and these stones merit further study. Mr Gladstone Flux kindly showed these stones to the writer and he had cleaned them and has preserved them in his garden.

### ORIGINALS OF MAPS REFERRED TO HEREIN

The original file of papers used in preparing this note is in the Newport Public Library.

1. This measurement of  $12\frac{1}{4}$  inches for a Roman foot was also used in the facing and foundation stones of the northern gate house of the Roman fort at Carisbrooke.

2. Another possible explanation that seems likely is that there was a pair of folding doors and that the curved groove held the hinged part of one door. There were folding doors at the Roman villa at Brading, I.O.W.