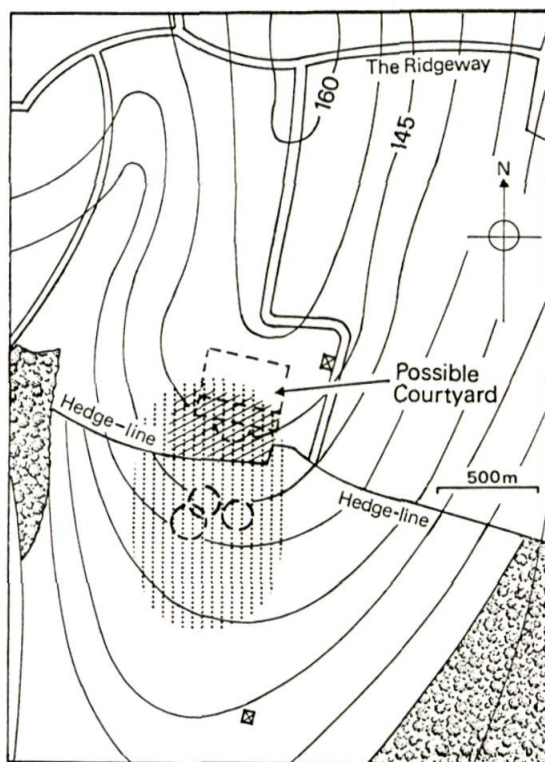


FIELDWORK ON THE ROMAN VILLA SITE AT WOLVER BROW, BURITON, HAMPSHIRE

Abstract

Field survey in 1987-8 has resulted in the discovery of a Roman villa site on the South Downs, south of Petersfield. A large quantity of pottery and other finds indicates that the site was in occupation from the Iron Age until the late Roman period, starting life as an agricultural settlement, and being developed as a villa probably in the 2nd century AD.







-  Area of tile scatter
-  Area of pottery scatter
-  Conjectural situation of buildings taken from aerial photographs of 1963 and 1977
-  Possible situation of Roman agricultural buildings.

Fig 3. Wolver Brow, Buriton: Roman villa site.

The Site (Fig 3)

Wolver Brow (NGR SU 743 191) is situated 145m above sea level on the dip slope of the South Downs escarpment between Head Down and Downley Hanger. The Roman site is located on Middle Chalk at the south end of the brow in a prominent position facing south with an extensive view to the south across Chalton Downs. It is approximately 400m south of the South Downs Ridgeway. Directly between the Ridgeway and the site there is a trackway, now overgrown. The site is protected from the north wind by the rising ground to the Ridgeway, but is very exposed to south winds. There is no water source at present within less than 2km.

In 1841, the area as indicated on the Tithe Map of that year, was divided into small arable fields. Three of the hedges of these fields have survived, surrounding the site on three sides. The hedge to the east takes an abrupt turn south then westwards, apparently avoiding the villa site, but encompassing it. This hedge is responsible for preventing the erosion of soil southwards.

The land within which the site lies is known to have been bought by Edward Gibbon, grandfather of the famous historian, in 1724, and inherited by Edward Gibbon the historian in 1770 on the death of his father, also Edward, being retained by the historian until 1789. It was eventually sold into the Bonham-Carter family in 1798, where it remained until 1957. During the latter part of the Bonham-Carter ownership the area was used for grazing. It is now arable fields, the ploughing of which led to the site's discovery in July 1987 and subsequent field-work.

The scatter of building material on the Roman site stretches for more than 180m west to east and approximately 90m from north to south. It consists of fragments of tegulae, imbrices, coarse tesserae, combed tiles of varying thickness, stone tiles, flints from the base or foundation walls, nails and daub – although finds of daub continue northwards.

The Tiles

Numerous fragments of clay tiles are scattered in the area indicated in Fig 3. Many pieces are combed and vary in thickness from 2 to 4cm. None have yet been assigned to box-flue function but possible broken, combed *bessales* from *pilae* appear to indicate the presence of a hypocaust, while 7cm thick fragments suggest a *suspensura*. Several pieces of 3cm thickness have finger-made designs that could have been used as flooring.

Of clear identity are fragments of *tegulae* and *imbrices* evidently used to roof the main villa building, since they are most apparent directly on the villa site. The *tegulae* flanges show a great diversity of form, possibly indicating successive batches used during different stages in the building's development. Characteristic of *tegulae* from here and many other sites in Britain is the appearance of 'signatures' – usually semi-circles drawn at the centre of the narrow end. Examples of three types of signature include the simple finger-drawn semi-circle and, less usual, 5 examples of combed signatures creating concentric half-rings and an S-shaped mark. An uncommon feature of the *imbrices* is the presence of a combed end found on some 25 examples. The prevalence of this feature implies that it was standard practice to comb one end of the tile either for mortar-keying or decoration.

Additional buildings, both on the villa site and to the immediate south (see Fig 3) were roofed with lozenge-shaped slabs of Purbeck limestone from the Swanage area of Dorset. The lower ends are sharply triangular, the tops rounded, carrying a single centrally-placed nail hole. Of the 3 sizes of stone tile so far found, several almost entire examples of the larger size have survived ploughing and measure 38.5cm long by 26.5cm wide. Fragments of medium sized (28cm × 19cm) and small tiles (11.5cm wide) also occur. It is believed that separate roofs were constructed with one size only – the extreme weight of the roof (a single large tile weighs 8kg) required a masonry wall of flint or Upper Greensand (also in evidence) up to the eaves. The association of large numbers of quern-stone fragments and coarse pottery, together with Purbeck tile, in the area south of the villa indicated on Fig 3, suggests agricultural activity that may indicate the use of stone tiles to roof a granary or farm building.

Pottery

Distribution

A decorated sherd of Peterborough ware, Mortlake style, Late Neolithic pottery, found to the south-

east of the villa, provides the earliest evidence for occupation of the site.

A total of 2676 pot rims have been recovered from ploughsoil in the area indicated on Fig 3 spanning a period from the Late Bronze Age (c 800 BC) to the end of the Roman period (c 400 AD), when there is an abrupt cut-off. The absence of post-Roman pottery (except for a few sherds of 18th-century and later date) suggests that the site was abandoned at the end of the Roman occupation, and possibly grazed until the 18th century. There is a bias towards the later Roman period, possibly due to earlier material lying in deeper deposits.

Fabrics

The early Iron Age sherds are finely flint-gritted and brown to black – the latter showing evidence of burnishing. During the 1st century AD, the native pottery adopts Roman forms, becoming wheel-turned, red-brown and coarsely flint-gritted. From this sequence emerge several massive storage jar rims.

The Roman assemblage is dominated by the Alice Holt/Farnham kilns which account for some 60% of the total from the 1st century to the beginning of the 5th century. The majority of these vessels were coarse wares; storage jars, cooking pots, dishes and flanged bowls, and among the less common forms, a double-handled lagena, sherds of possible beehives and 21 strainers used for honey, whey or wine. The Rowlands Castle kilns also contributed possible beehives to the site along with a quarter of the coarse wares used – mainly grey storage and cooking pots. Almost 5% of the Roman rims are of black-burnished ware, including BB1 and BB2, the most frequent forms being cooking pots, flanged bowls and 'dog dishes'. More than 20 mortaria with varying flanges in a hard creamy-buff fabric have been found, provenance so far undetermined.

Of the fine Roman ware, there are a number of samian vessels from the 1st and 2nd centuries (Dragendorff forms 30, 33, 34, 36 and 38), while the period from AD 260 to the mid-4th century is reflected in ornamented colour-coated table wares from the New Forest, including a flanged-neck flagon, poppy-head beakers and indented beakers. Also from this period appear flanged bowls and mortaria from the Oxford colour-coated industry.

The end of the Roman period is characterised by gritty pale buff and black vessels with angular rims from the Surrey Buff Ware industry (Portchester Fabric D) and a noticeable amount of Wessex grog-tempered pottery.

Rotary Quern Stones and other finds

Of the large quantity of rotary quern stone segments and fragments that have been found, 5 specimens have been analysed by Robin Sanderson of the Geological Museum, who writes:

Quern Stone 1. This is a hard, dark reddish brown, iron cemented sandstone of the type known as 'carstone'. It is quite a common rock type which forms in the sandier rocks of the western Weald, and elsewhere. It is especially common in the Folkestone Beds, and is almost certainly of local origin.

Quern Stone 2. A darkly speckled, grey, cherty sandstone. I have been unable to find a sample which matches this in our collections, but I believe that it is one of the sandstone types from the Hythe Beds.

Quern Stone 3. A pale glauconitic sandstone, with small fragments of chert. Hythe Beds. This appears to me to be more like the west Kent/Surrey type than those from west Sussex.

Quern Stone 4. Pale glauconitic chert with a few sponge spicules. This is probably a silicified version of quern 3.

Quern Stone 5. A spicular chert sandstone with powdery red ferruginous material. A Hythe Beds stone, of uncertain origin.

In quantity, there is a preponderance of quern stones manufactured from Wealden sandstone. The next most usual finds are the quern stones made from dark grey ferruginous sandstone and then those made of chert.

There are five large pieces of rotary quern stone – all of the top halves – one of which shows the spindle hole, another the handle groove. These are of particularly durable stone from the Lodsworth quarry near Midhurst, West Sussex. One of the pieces of stone is part of a stone mortarium of a substantial size, from the same quarry. These pieces of Lodsworth quern stone can be dated between the 1st century BC through Early Roman to post 2nd century AD. Also in the same stone, north of the villa building, half a saddle quern stone was found. This could be dated not later than the 2nd century BC but could be in use as early as 800 BC.

The quern stone fragments occur in the plough-soil on the southern half of the site below the hedge-line marked on Fig 3, possibly in the vicinity of a granary. Eleven fragments of quartzite hones have been found in a similar situation. There is also one piece of red sandstone from the Forest of Dean or the Wye Valley,

purpose unknown, probably part of a quern stone.

There is firm evidence of iron smelting with iron slag and highly magnetic fragments possibly from the furnace bottom and one piece of haematite, possibly used as an ore. These occur widely spread over the whole area.

The other finds include about 40 iron square-shanked nails of varying sizes, found on the villa site itself. The very small quantity of nails would indicate a flint or stone building, rather than a wooden one using a large quantity of nails. In addition there were three iron tacks, sandal studs, parts of possible door hinges and window fittings, a possible flat end of a stylus for correcting mistakes, and a fastening loop with splayed arms, all of iron. In bronze, finds include the spring and pin of a 1st century Roman brooch, the front fragment of a second brooch and a stud, 1.5cm diameter.

Half a Late Bronze Age pottery loom-weight, of dark brown flint-gritted fabric, 3.5cm in diameter, was found on the surface south of the villa.

A sarsen stone, measuring 52 × 35 × 32cms, identified by Robin Sanderson of the Geological Museum, was found lying north of the villa in the same vicinity as the saddle quern stone. The distribution of sarsen stones in this particular area of the South Downs is very sparse. There is a probability that this stone is associated in some way with either the prehistoric or Roman occupation of the site.

Discussion

To the west and north between the villa and the Ridgeway, aerial photographs reveal traces of Celtic field systems. This evidence, together with the quantity of pottery of Iron Age fabrics, suggests a substantial Iron Age settlement previous to the Roman occupation. However, there appears from the Roman pottery to be an early Romanisation of the site, suggesting that the villa was built perhaps in the 2nd century and survived until the end of the Roman period, probably with many alterations and modifications.

Acknowledgements

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The finds are at present in the possession of the authors.

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