

# The Roman Villa at Sparsholt

## (First Season's Excavation—Provisional Report)

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THE SITE, in West Wood, Sparsholt (N.G.R. 168/415301) has been marked on the O.S. maps as a 'Roman Building' since an inconclusive excavation by the Hampshire Field Club in 1895.<sup>1</sup> It was replanted five years ago by the Forestry Commission, who now propose to drive a forest ride through it. The first season's excavation, from 26 July to 20 August 1965, employed four men and twenty volunteers, and was undertaken by the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works, directed by myself.

The villa lies on a slight spur of chalk with a light capping of clay with flints, which could have carried woodland in Roman times; on the destruction of the villa it probably reverted to scrub, and the excavation suggested that it has never been cultivated since, though it has been partly plundered for stone. The site was first planted by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners.

THE VILLA was a large courtyard villa. Trial cuttings in the dense undergrowth have traced some 450 ft. of a well built perimeter wall in flint, of which we have excavated two corners so far. The three known sides form a parallelogram, the western side measuring 252 ft. the others—to judge from surface indications—some 200 ft. in the other direction. Trial trenches across this suggested that it had been an open farmyard, rather than cultivated gardens.

We have located three ranges of buildings by excavation so far, all of them outside the perimeter wall, which forms the inside wall in each case. Two at least were dwellings, which turned their backs on the farmyard in this way.

One building was centrally placed at the western end of the site, and seems to be a single range of rooms with tessellated floors and a corridor to the east, over 90 ft. long. We found flue tiles, but no hypocaust; there are signs that a stokehole lay at the northern end of the range. One room contained a fine mosaic pavement in perfect condition, showing an eight-pointed star in circular borders of wave pattern double key-pattern and single guilloche, the whole set in a square panel of triple guilloche. Two of the spandrels contained a simple fan, with a bright blue centre. In the others was an interesting and rare hybrid motif—a half-open bud of conventional type with tendrils, but with its lower half unmistakably that of a cup, having a band of jewels across it and a solid triangular foot. The innermost tendrils, moreover, have spurs. These features, and the fact that it is fairly closely paralleled at Woodchester, suggest that we have here the influence, if not the actual workmanship, of the mosaicists of the Corinthian School. The corridor had a double key-pattern in coarse red and grey tesserae. The wall plaster was of panels in Indian red, wine-red, apple-green, saffron, salmon pink and turquoise.

The northern range may well prove to be a tripartite building, running east-west, with two series of rooms and a corridor to the north. A small decorative mosaic here has been destroyed (apparently in antiquity, as it was sealed by the destruction material). To the

1. *Proc. Hants F.C.* iii, (1894–1897), p. 201.

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east, a room with two superimposed chalk floors contained a squared base of a statue or altar. To the east of this, and apparently lying across the line of the perimeter wall, is another building (or wing of the same) in which a small cutting located a set of three fine concrete steps leading down from a plastered wall—perhaps the stepped edge of a bath. This is the only clue to the position of the bath house. The plaster here seems to show human figures, drapery and water.

The southern range, also lying east-west, was a simple building, perhaps a barn with other out-buildings. Roofing material and a mortar spread in the south-west corner of the courtyard might indicate a simple penthouse in the angle of the perimeter wall. There appear to be two more buildings at the north-east and south-east corners of the site, but they lie in dense undergrowth and were not trenched. A ring of stones is reported in the centre of the courtyard, which should be a well. We hope to find this next season.

Flint is used for the exterior, and chalk for the interior, walls. The large quantities of rubble in places suggest that in parts the walls were of stone to full height, while others were timber-framed on a stone sill. The roofs were covered with stone slates and brick tiles, the ridge carrying decorated semicircular tiles of an unusual form.

This year only trial trenching was possible, and no sequence of phases has emerged. The pottery and coins suggest that the villa was occupied during the third and fourth centuries. The only hint of anything earlier was a small burnt area cut by the foundation trench of the villa, associated with pottery that included a pedestal foot of Belgic type.