

Warblington Roman Villa – ten years of research

by Trevor Davies

The Chichester and District Archaeology Society (CDAS) has been researching, surveying and excavating the Roman villa site at Warblington since 2008. After ten years, it is timely to take stock and consider what has been achieved and what could still be achieved.

The Warblington villa could be said to be hidden in plain sight. Very few people know of its existence, and fewer still know its exact location. The villa was originally discovered and documented by a Dr Gedge, a GP from Havant with a deep interest in archaeology. He probably found evidence of the villa by field walking just after the field had been ploughed (by agreement with Natural England, the field is no longer ploughed and is used only for silage). A report was published in *The Proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club*, and the location of the villa marked on Ordnance Survey maps. Apart from a test pit dug by a local school

master John Reger in the 1960s, with a group of schoolboys, very little work has been done on the site.

With the support of the farmer, Henry Young, who was one of John Reger's original excavation team, CDAS started to undertake a geophysical survey of the field in 2008. Members had been trained to use geophysical survey equipment by Historic England's outreach programme, and initially CDAS borrowed the equipment from them. As the years went on and with generous help from both the Chichester Harbour Conservancy and Chichester District Council, the society was able to acquire its own survey equipment. In the first year CDAS located the villa itself. Over the following three years volunteers from CDAS spent 150 man-days surveying the remainder of the field. The results show a complete Roman period villa complex (Figure 1). The villa is on the western side of a roughly square

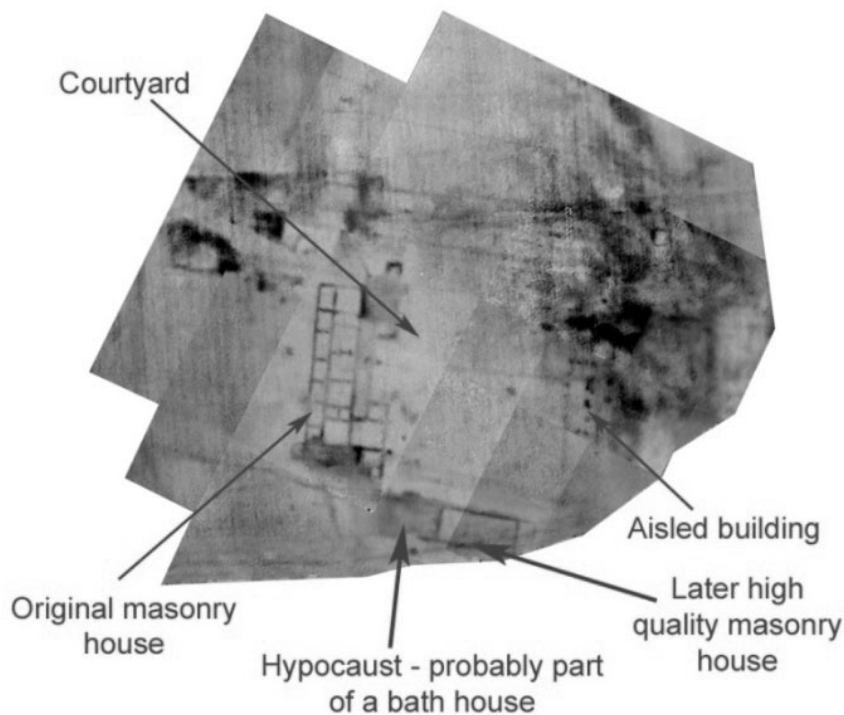


Figure 1 Results for the geophysics survey 2008 – 2011

courtyard, facing a large aisled barn, with what are now known to be a high quality masonry house and a bathhouse on the south side of the courtyard. In the northeast corner are a group of buildings whose purpose is as yet unknown – it is possible that they are industrial and farm buildings. The north side has a ditch to protect it and would have faced the Roman road from Chichester (Noviomagus Reginorum) to Southampton (Clausentum).

In 2010 CDAS started to excavate the villa. It quickly became apparent that the site had been badly damaged by ploughing. The villa floor had disappeared although there were literally thousands of terracotta tesserae in the plough soil. The flint and mortar foundations were substantial and still below ground. The dating evidence indicates that the villa was actively used during the 3rd and 4th centuries CE. While the results of this excavation were of general interest, they added little to the pool of knowledge of the Roman period in this area and so excavation in this part of the site was discontinued.

In 2012 and again in 2013, CDAS returned to the site to examine the aisled building. This is slightly downhill from the villa and it was hoped that the remains would be less damaged. The remains of the foundations of the two walls and two rows of postholes were discovered. The downhill wall was built of flints and other stones, the uphill wall appeared as a beam slot. It was concluded that the flint wall had been used as a retaining wall to create a level platform on which a thatched, wood-framed three aisle building had been erected. Its structure was very similar to others that have been discovered in this area. The length of the barn is not absolutely clear, but it could be one of the longer barns so far discovered.

Underneath the aisled barn a filled ditch containing pottery and amphora sherds dating to the 1st century BCE was discovered. These finds indicated that there had been high status activity on the Warblington site in the Late Iron Age. This conclusion reinforces



Figure 2 Cist with two lead packages as discovered

other local discoveries that point to this area being a vibrant, sophisticated economy before the Romans arrived.

In 2014 and in 2015, the rectangular building to the south of the courtyard was investigated. This was very well built. Walls over a metre thick, some of which had been robbed; in the walls that remained, flints had been carefully selected and placed for maximum strength. The foundations suggested that this structure was better built than the villa itself. The building comprised a gabled central section with additional rooms on the eastern and western ends. It was roofed with Purbeck stone – the furthest east that this stone has been discovered in use as a Roman period roofing material. Some Horsham stone was also used but it is not clear whether this was at the same time, or at another time. The building was in use well into the 4th century CE.

Underneath the floor level in the eastern room a small stone cist (box) containing two lead packages was discovered (Figure 2). This discovery is unique in Roman Britain. After extensive analysis at University College, London, the contents remain a mystery and there are no inscriptions. The stone box was made from Bembridge Limestone, blocks of which have been found elsewhere on site. The lead came from the mines in the Mendip Hills and had been previously used for an unknown application. The exact significance

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of this unique find is sadly unclear. The weight of evidence would seem to indicate that the cist and its contents were deposited to achieve some magical benefit.

Most recently in 2016, 2017 and 2018, another well-constructed building on the south side of the courtyard has been examined. All the evidence points to this structure being a bathhouse, or possibly a heated suite of rooms. The walls are over a metre thick and faced with limestone and lined with painted plaster. The roof was probably vaulted, constructed with voussoir hollow tiles and plastered. It was separated from the adjoining buildings by narrow passageways. There is evidence of a well to the rear of the building. The concrete floor that forms the base of the hypocaust has Roman period wall plaster in its foundations, so this appears to be at least the second hypocaust building constructed in the same location.

In previous years, the dating evidence shows that this building was also in use up to the mid/late 4th century CE. In 2018, rare pottery was discovered that indicated

activity on this site extended into the early 5th century.

At the outset, little was known about Warblington Roman villa. After ten year's work, it is taking its place in our understanding of the prosperous environment in Southeast Britannia immediately before and during the Roman occupation. There are still major questions unanswered. Where did the workers who supported the villa infrastructure live? How did the owners of the villa make their money? What was the purpose of the group of buildings to the north east of the site?

Artefacts from the excavations are now housed in a permanent exhibition at Emsworth Museum, which is open during the summer months from 10.30 am to 4.30 pm on Saturdays and from 2.30 pm to 4.30 pm on Sundays – more details on www.emsworthmuseum.org.uk.

Further information can be found about the Warblington project and others in which the Chichester and District Archaeology Society is involved on their website www.cdas.info.
