

Bignor Roman Villa and the Institute of Archaeology David Rudling

The large Roman villa at Bignor is one of the most elaborate in Britain. The Director of the Institute's Field Archaeology Unit describes the history and current stage of its archaeological investigation.

The Roman villa at Bignor, which is one of the largest and most elaborate in Britain, was occupied from the first to the fourth century AD. It is situated on the geological outcrop of the Upper Greensand just north of the South Downs in West Sussex (National Grid reference SU 987146) (Fig. 1), and in Roman times was within the tribal area (civitas) of the Regni. The villa – a house and associated buildings that reflect the Roman rural style of life – would have been the centre of a farm that was well located to exploit the very fertile Greensand for arable cultivation, as well as the nearby chalk downs for grazing and more marginal arable, and the woodlands of the Wealden clays to the north. The site is very close to Stane Street, the Roman road that linked Chichester (the civitas capital) with London, and was thus well placed for good communications with the markets at Noviomagus Regnentium (Chichester) and a minor urban settlement in the Hardham–Pulborough area.¹ By the mid-fourth century the villa at Bignor had become a large courtyard complex, with luxurious mosaics, such as the Head of “Venus” (Fig. 2), a dining room with a waterbasin (piscina) containing a fountain, a reception room with a underfloor heating (hypocaust), and a large suite of baths. At this time the villa also had an adjacent outer enclosure that may have functioned as a farmyard or stockyard.

Archaeological investigations, 1811–1985

The site was discovered in 1811 by a farmer, George Tupper, while ploughing. Soon after its discovery, a local resident, John Hawkins of Bignor Park, took responsibility for the excavation of the villa and he invited Samuel Lysons, a leading antiquary of the day, to supervise the work. Lysons lived in London and could spend only a limited amount of time in Sussex, but he and Hawkins corresponded regularly, and many of their letters survive in the West Sussex Record Office at Chichester. These letters throw considerable light on the way in which the site was explored and on the problems faced by the excavators.² In 1818 Samuel Lysons read the last of three papers to the Society of Antiquaries and produced an overall plan of the villa, but before this he had drawn and begun to publish a series of engravings of the villa, which were later combined as the third volume of his *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae*, published in 1819.³ After the death of Samuel Lysons in 1819, excavations continued for a short while under the direction of his brother, Daniel, and John Hawkins, but these appear to have been confined to the south-western corner of the courtyard villa, which is shown incomplete on Samuel Lysons' plan. Excavations seem to have ceased later in 1819, and thereafter much of the site, including all of the outer enclosure (the so-called stockyard or farmyard), was returned to arable cultivation. From as early

as June 1812, cover buildings were erected over the principal mosaics and the site became a popular tourist attraction.

No further excavation was undertaken until 1925, when S. E. Winbolt, a local archaeologist, re-excavated and repaired the cold plunge bath, which had been left open, and in 1929 the “Venus” mosaic was re-laid. Between 1956 and 1962 Professor Sheppard Frere, who was then a member of staff of the Institute of Archaeology, undertook limited excavations in parts of the west, north and south wings, and established for the first time a chronology for the constructional phases of the west wing. Soon after this a site museum was built on the north side of the villa and the plan of the west wing was marked on the surface using modern materials. In 1973 the Winter and Medusa mosaics were re-laid, and in 1975–76 excavations were undertaken in the north corridor prior to the re-laying of the mosaic and the erection of a covering building. During the winter of 1984–85 a West Sussex County Council scheme, under the supervision of Fred Aldworth, the County Archaeologist, refurbished the site museum and began the programme of assessment excavations which involved the Institute's Field Archaeology Unit (FAU).⁴

Excavations 1985–97

The FAU's involvement with Bignor Villa goes back to 1985, when, in conjunction with West Sussex County Council, a programme of excavations was begun, designed to locate and assess the condition of parts of the villa that had previously been exposed during the early nineteenth century and subsequently reburied. As well as achieving these primary aims, excavations undertaken between 1985 and 1988 added considerably to our knowledge of the development of the site. In addition, as a direct result of these excavations the trustees of the villa removed from arable cultivation the entire area of the courtyard and its adjoining enclosure.

Figure 1 Location of Bignor Roman Villa and other principal Roman sites in Sussex.





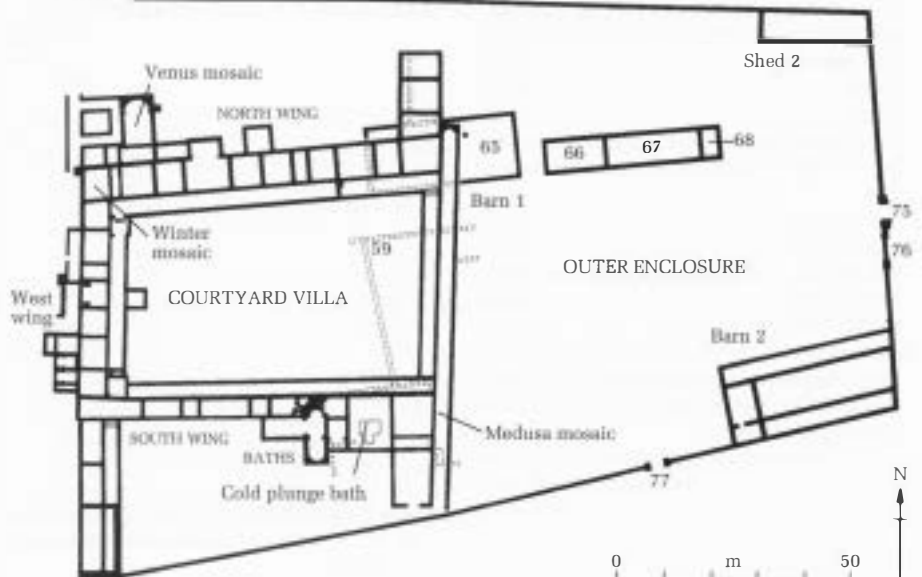
Figure 2 Part of the "Venus" mosaic at Bignor.

In 1990 the FAU returned to undertake various minor excavations, and in the same year the trustees moved the carpark from its old position inside the courtyard to a new site outside the enclosure wall to the south of the main baths. As a result, for the first time this century, there was an opportunity to examine the whole courtyard area archaeologically with the aim of increasing our knowledge of the history and development of the villa. Thus, at the invitation of the trustees, the FAU ran a programme of research and training excavations between 1991 and 1993 in order to investigate parts of the south corridor, the corridor connecting the north and south wings (porticus), the walkway (ambulatory), the southeastern area of the courtyard, and two early-phase oblique walls (Fig. 3: 59) recorded by Sam-

uel Lysons in the nineteenth century. The 1991–93 (and also the 1994–97) excavations formed the basis of the annual Institute of Archaeology field training courses for undergraduate students. In 1992 the FAU also carried out assessment excavations on the proposed site of a classroom block 10m north of the middle of the north wing. At a depth of over 50cm the excavations revealed *in situ* tesserae (floor cubes).⁵

In 1993 on behalf of the FAU the late Dr Anthony Clark, who pioneered the application of geophysical techniques in archaeology, began a geophysical survey of the outer enclosure of the villa. Ten 20×20m squares at the western end of the enclosure were subjected to a soil resistivity survey. It revealed anomalies that correspond to the northern and southern boundary walls of the enclosure, and to parts of the rooms designated 65 and 66 by Lysons (Fig. 3). Survey squares in the middle of the enclosure produced some unexpected discoveries, including what Dr Clark interpreted as a north–south orientated range of rooms comparable in size to the nearby east–west orientated building formed by rooms 66–68. The southern wall of the new range of rooms appears to continue to the east and was interpreted as a possible courtyard wall. To the north of this wall, and thus within the postulated new courtyard, is an anomaly that may represent a well; if so, it is the first to be found at Bignor Villa. The new rooms and courtyard wall appear to be on roughly the same alignment as Lysons' early-phase walls (59) and also the southern wall of the enclosure. Thus, many of the anomalies discovered by the geophysical survey appear to represent a poorly understood earlier phase of the villa's development.

Figure 3 Bignor Roman Villa: modified from the revised plan by F. G. Aldsworth, 1983 (most of the room numbers marked on his original have been omitted).



In an attempt to improve understanding of the results of the 1993 geophysical survey, the FAU designed a four-season programme of research and training excavations. In 1994 the main excavation, Trench A, examined an area of approximately 15m² (Fig. 4). It included the southeastern corner of room 65 and part of the western wall of room 66.

The area revealed inside room 65 contained two square aisle post bases. Because a similar post base was found in 1985 to the south of the northern wall of the same room, it is now possible to confirm the interpretation of room 65 as part of a large free-standing building with a nave flanked by side aisles, an idea first suggested by Ernest Black (now an Honorary Research Fellow at the Institute of Archaeology) in 1983. Four metres south of the south wall of room 65, the northern side and north-eastern corner of an enclosure ditch was found. This enclosure is presumed to be the same as that represented by stretches of ditch found in 1986 and 1958 respectively to the west and north of the Period IIA cottage (or row) type of villa, which later formed part of the west wing of the courtyard villa. The lower fills of the ditch sections excavated in 1994 contained pottery dating to the late first to early second century AD. The upper fills yielded large quantities of Antonine and Severan pottery (identified by Malcolm Lyne, a freelance pottery specialist). The enclosure ditch is assumed to be the cause of some of the geophysical anomalies detected by Dr Clark. Inside the area of the enclosure exposed in 1994, and running parallel to the edge of the enclosure ditch, are post holes that may represent fencelines or revetments for an enclosure bank. The excavation of Trench A in 1994 also revealed post holes, pits and two small ovens.

Other excavations in 1994 involved the re-exposure and recording of the three gateways of the outer enclosure, i.e. Lysons' numbers 75–77 (Fig. 3). Part of a prehistoric feature (a pit?) was discovered to the northwest of gateway 75. During 1994 Dr Clark completed the resistivity survey of the outer enclosure, but his additional work did not reveal any significant new anomalies.

In 1995 and 1996 Trench A was continued southwards. The excavations traced further the eastern side of the enclosure ditch. In addition, in 1995 they revealed an earlier northern boundary of the ditched enclosure; this ditch having passed out of use when the enclosure was extended northwards. Other discoveries in 1995 included a stone lintel drain.

In 1996 the most important discoveries were two ditches just to the north of, and roughly parallel with, the masonry southern wall of the fourth-century outer enclosure. The larger of these ditches, which

replaced the smaller version, is partly overlain by the masonry wall. Unfortunately, the 1996 excavation trench was not large enough to expose the presumed intersection of the two southern boundary ditches with the southern end of the eastern enclosure ditch first discovered in 1994. This investigation was therefore a high priority for the excavations in 1997. Other discoveries in 1996 included an east–west orientated ditch that cuts the eastern boundary ditch of the early enclosure; two north–south orientated gullies; and a human infant burial – the first to be discovered at Bignor.

In 1997, Trench A was extended eastwards along the southern boundary of the site in order to investigate both the southeastern corner of the early Roman ditched enclosure and the southern gateway into the fourth-century masonry enclosure (Fig. 4). The southeastern corner of the ditched enclosure proved different from the north-eastern corner excavated in 1994. Thus, instead of the north–south and east–west ditches joining at the southeastern corner, the eastern enclosure ditch ended in a terminal some 3 m to the north of both phases of ditch bordering the southern boundary of the outer enclosure. Perhaps this gap

represents an entrance. Alternatively, it could be a result of chronological differences, with the southern ditches, which both continue eastwards, being of earlier date and the 3 m gap being the location of a bank created from the upcast of the adjacent ditches.

The re-exposure of the southern entrance into the outer enclosure demonstrated that the masonry gateway and flanking walls overlie part of the flint-metalled road or track that lies just outside the southern boundary of this enclosure. A surprise discovery in the vicinity of the entrance was a pair of large post holes, approximately 3 m to the north of the gateway. They may represent an earlier phase of entrance, perhaps associated with the first of the two southern boundary ditches.

Another important discovery in Trench A in 1997 was an Iron Age coin, the first to be discovered at Bignor (Fig. 5). It is an uninscribed bronze coin of the Chichester Cock type, a "Southern" issue found in Sussex and Hampshire and thought to date to the mid- to late first century BC.⁶

A small trench excavated in 1997 to the northeast of the Medusa room was designed to investigate the eastern end of one



Figure 4 Bignor Roman Villa: plan of trenches excavated by the Field Archaeology Unit, 1985–97. Also shown are the modern cover buildings (bold) and surface markings of buried features.



Figure 5 The Iron Age bronze coin of Chichester Cock type found at Bignor in 1997 (obverse: head facing right; reverse: cock holding snake in beak).

of Lysons' early-phase oblique walls (59), which was partially re-exposed during the excavations of 1991–93 (Fig. 4). This wall could be traced as far east as the eastern wall of the ambulatory, which overlies it, but unfortunately it was not possible to establish in which direction the wall turns. A ditch or trench on roughly the same alignment as the oblique wall, and previously revealed in Trench A in 1995, was located to the east of the ambulatory wall. The purpose of this linear feature is uncertain.

In 1998 it is intended to locate and record the southwestern and northwestern corners of the early ditched enclosure, to study the approaches to the two eastern gateways into the outer enclosure, and to investigate more fully the metalled road or trackway that lies along the southern boundary of this fourth-century outer enclosure.

Conclusion

The recent excavations and the earlier discoveries at Bignor Villa are helping to document the early stages of occupation at a site that in the fourth century developed from a fairly humble winged-corridor villa into a very large and luxurious courtyard villa. The boundaries of the early Roman ditched enclosure are important for several reasons. First, the late second-century timber villa and the overlying third-century masonry buildings are positioned in one corner of the enclosure and partly overlie it. Secondly, if the northern boundary of the enclosure was originally farther to the south, this would locate the early phase oblique masonry walls in a central position within the enclosure. Finally, the fact that one or both of the ditches found adjacent to the southern wall of the outer enclosure is part of the enclosure suggests that the boundary alignment at this location was

probably in use throughout the occupation of the site.

Unfortunately, our understanding of the early phases of the villa is very limited. What, for instance, was the function and date (second/third century?) of the early masonry buildings beneath the large baths? Why was the ditched enclosure extended, and why was the late second-century timber villa built where it was? Thus, although the main sequence of Bignor Villa's dramatic development in the fourth century is now fairly well understood, the reasons for it are not, and our knowledge of the initial history of occupation at the site is very incomplete. Perhaps even more uncertain is the fate of the villa. Did it suffer a period of decline, and when, why and how was it abandoned or destroyed? It is hoped that future investigations by the FAU will throw further light on the beginning, development and end of what was, at its apogee, one of the most splendid villas of Roman Britain.

Notes

1. B. Cunliffe, pp. 69–71 in *The Regni* (London: Duckworth, 1973).
2. F. W. Steer (ed.), *The letters of John Hawkins and Samuel and Daniel Lysons 1812–1839* (Chichester: West Sussex County Council, 1966).
3. See also papers by Lysons in volumes 18 (1817) and 19 (1821) of *Archaeologia*.
4. The history of the development of the villa has been examined in detail by S. Frere in *Britannia* 13, 135–95, 1982; by E. W. Black in the *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 2, 93–107, 1983; and by F. G. Aldsworth & D. Rudling in *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 133, 103–188, 1995. A further paper by D. Rudling, on the development of Bignor and other Roman villas in Sussex, will appear in 1998 in *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 136.

5. A full report on the 1991–93 excavations is currently being prepared for publication, but annual interim reports have been published in *The archaeology of Chichester and District* (Chichester: the District Council).
6. See R. Hobbs, references on pp. 15–16 and 81 (catalogue numbers 657–9) in *British Iron Age coins in the British Museum* (London, British Museum, 1996).