

Butleigh Roman Villa Investigation 2005-2011

Absolute Archaeology

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In August 2009 Absolute Archaeology carried out Season One of excavations that were to reveal evidence of a Romano-British villa in Butleigh, Somerset. The excavations were tailored to target the results of an extended period of Geophysics carried out from 2005. The initial non intrusive investigation revealed evidence of two large buildings on the site, which were later revealed to represent the remains of a large villa dating to the Romano-British period. Initial investigation suggests that the site dates from the 2nd century AD to the late 4th century AD and potentially on into the 5th century.

Left: The Quoin or cornerstone discovered by Richard Chaddock in Beggars field 2005

Season One

Season one (August 2009) revealed a rectangular building complete with mosaic, in what is appearing to be yet another growing addition to Somerset's SMR catalogue of Romano-British sites. The trench (measuring 19m x 3m) revealed a large area of flagstone floor with accompanying stone bases indicating the location of vertical roofing supports, comparable to those excavated at Atworth in Wiltshire (Erskine, 1975). The general plan of the building could be compared to that of the aisled building at Stroud near Petersfield in Hampshire (Moray-Williams, 1909: Fig 33) where the stone bases were placed at similar distances to those identified on the site.



The Mosaic

A mosaic floor was located at the north corner of the excavation. Disturbance caused by the robbing out of the dividing wall to the WSW has obliterated large areas of the mosaic pavement. A plain border

surrounding the geometric design perhaps suggests that furniture was intended to stand around the edge of the room, thus negating the need for elaborate design in areas that would ultimately be hidden. Alternatively, the mosaic may be a basic example, suggesting that the floor belonged to a lower status building, detached from the main household.



Hearth

A hearth was located along and running beneath the eastern baulk section, belonging to a later phase within the development of the villa. Melted lead found in the upper most fill of the hearth could suggest industrial activity rather than domestic.



Finds

All finds recovered from the site to date are yet to be assessed by the relevant specialists; however an initial appraisal of the collection recovered from the above revealed a high percentage of handmade Poole Harbour BB1 ceramic sherds, along with Spanish Amphorae. In addition, a large number of animal bones were recovered along with a substantial collection of ceramic building material, iron objects (mainly nails), and 860 individual blocks of tesserae making up the main constituents of the assemblage. A number of special finds were also recorded during the excavation, including 14 coins, two loom weights and several shards from glass vessels.



NE view of Wall



First Season

SE view of trench

Season Two



left: Corn Dryer

Season two (August 2010) targeted the second building identified on site. Once again, a rectangular trench was excavated across the mid section of the archaeology. The excavation revealed walls and floor surfaces relating to a multiphase Romano-British villa. A flagstone floor was identified covering a mosaic pavement to the east of the excavation. The mid section of the building showed evidence of late industrial activity highlighted by the removal of mosaic flooring and the establishment of a corn dryer and hearth in the central area. Finds from Season two are still being analysed, although initial interpretation shows that the majority of the pottery is again handmade Poole Harbour BB1 and almost certainly 4th/5th century in date. Other finds consisted of shards of fine glass vessels, 4th century coins, a

large number of animal bones including parts of 2 articulated skeletons (probably young pig), masses of ironwork (mainly nails) suggesting a smithy on site and salt water limpet shells suggesting a connection to the sea, be it dietary or other. Though large numbers of lias roof tile were found there were also several ceramic roof tiles (tegula) discovered. Parts of boxed flue tile were also found in the second season of excavation, almost certainly suggesting hypocaust heating somewhere in the area of the villa.



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Hearth



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Flag floor



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Blue Lias roof tiles



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Trench from the SW



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SW view of wall



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wall elevation



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Mosaic and flag floor



Corn weight

Additional Note – R. C. SENIOR



Several Roman coins were discovered during the excavation and in Season Two a coin of the type shown above left was found under the mosaic pavement. Both the above coins are of the usurper **Emperor Flavius Magnus Magnentius** c. 350 – 353 AD and this coin find helps date the strata both above and below the find spot. The layers of pavement above it indicate a continued occupation of the site for one or more centuries post deposit.

Constantine the Great [272 – 337] had made Christianity the state religion but after his death the Empire was divided between his three sons Constantine II, Constantius II and Constans and the empire's unity began to fall apart.

Magnentius commanded the Imperial Guard units of the Herculians and Iovians and was elected Emperor by the army when they became dissatisfied by the rule of Emperor Constans [337 – 350 son of Constantine] who was killed shortly afterward. Magnentius received most of his support from Spain, Gaul and Britain because he was tolerant to both Pagans and Christians [hence the Christian Chi-rho symbol on the reverse of the left coin]. The coin above right celebrates the Glory of Rome and shows the Emperor defeating his enemies. Magnentius, however, was defeated by Constantius, Constans' brother and duly fell on his sword.

Other Roman villas are known to have existed in this area of Somerset of similar size to ours in Butleigh, one of which is at **Marshall's Elm, Street**. This was noted as early as 1850 and, called Butleigh Bottom, was mentioned in **The Celt, the Roman, and the Saxon** written by Thomas Wright (1852). According to a site report it is "The site of an extensive villa .. in which, on partial examination, were found coins of **Claudius Gothicus** (267-70 AD) and other Emperors."

Below are a gold and a copper medallion of Claudius demonstrating the superior art in coinage that prevailed in the third century AD Roman Empire.

