

## BARCOMBE ROMAN VILLA

*Excavations and survey at Barcombe, East Sussex have concentrated on two Roman sites, a villa and a bath house, but additional investigations are beginning to help place these discoveries into their wider estate and landscape settings. David Rudling, Chris Butler and Rob Wallace report on eleven seasons of fieldwork.*

### **The villa site**

Although Roman finds from the sites of both the villa and the bath house had been discovered and reported in the mid 1990s by two metal detectorists, Rob Martin and Geoff Wicks, it was not until 1999 that the first archaeological investigations were undertaken at either site. At this time the Mid Sussex Field Archaeological Team (led by Chris Butler) was invited by the farmer to investigate an area containing many large flints in Dunstall's Field. The area containing the flints was subjected to systematic fieldwalking and metal detecting, and also a geophysical soil resistivity survey which revealed various wall-footings, including those of a typical Romano-British winged corridor house. Subsequently, in 2000, MSFAT excavated some test-pits in order to establish the depth and quality of the Roman-period remains.

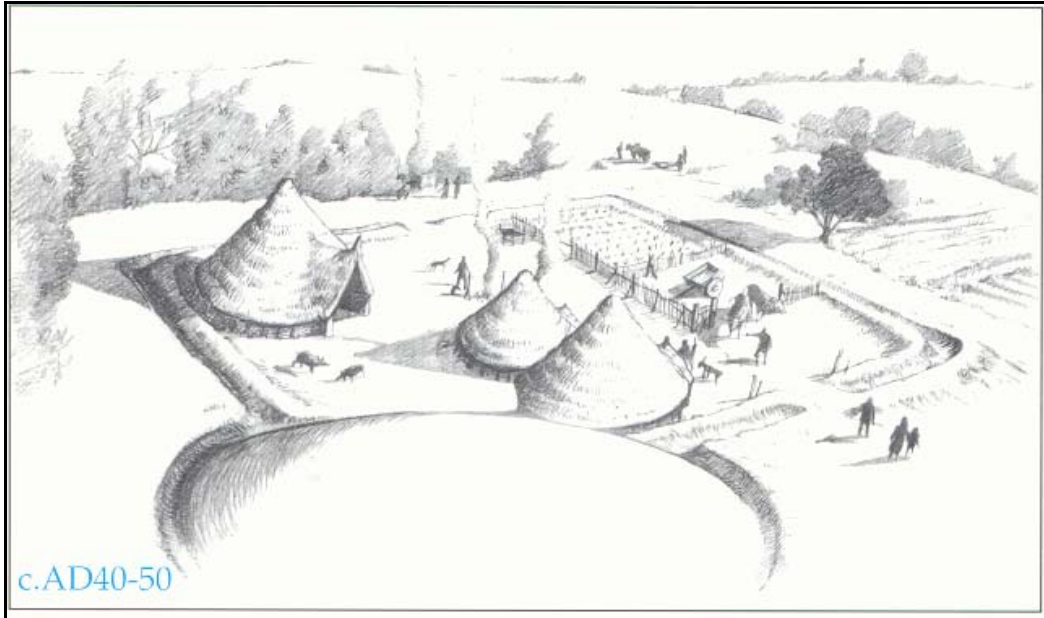
In the following year (2001), MSFAT joined forces with the University College London Field Archaeology Unit (then under the direction of David Rudling) in order to undertake a programme of larger scale research and training investigations at this plough-damaged site. This programme of research was to last seven seasons of summer fieldwork and revealed approximately 90% of the villa complex (see plan). At the end of the 2005 season of excavations the UCL involvement in the project ended; its place being taken up by the University of Sussex which had by then recruited David Rudling to run its archaeology programmes.

### **Prehistoric finds**

Whilst the earliest archaeological finds from the site are worked flints (including a well-preserved Palaeolithic Acheulian pointed biface and a Mesolithic trachet adze), the earliest feature discovered was an Early Bronze Age ring ditch. The mound inside the ditch, now ploughed flat, was probably still largely intact in Roman times and may even have been one of the reasons why a settlement was established at the site during the first century AD. Other prehistoric features found in the area of the villa complex include various stretches of ditches which formed parts of field systems.

### **Timber roundhouses**

Dating to the first and early second centuries AD are traces of Iron Age type timber roundhouses which were located in a ditched enclosure adjacent to the Bronze Age barrow. One of the roundhouses (RH 1) was sealed in places by a layer of burnt clay, which was itself covered by a deposit of flints. This burnt layer was archaeomagnetic dated by Paul Lindford of English Heritage to AD 140-200 at 95% confidence. Such dating indicates that the underlying roundhouse may have survived to the mid/late second century, thus making it one of the youngest known from Sussex. It also suggests that this indigenous building tradition continued in this area for a long period after the Roman Conquest of AD 43.



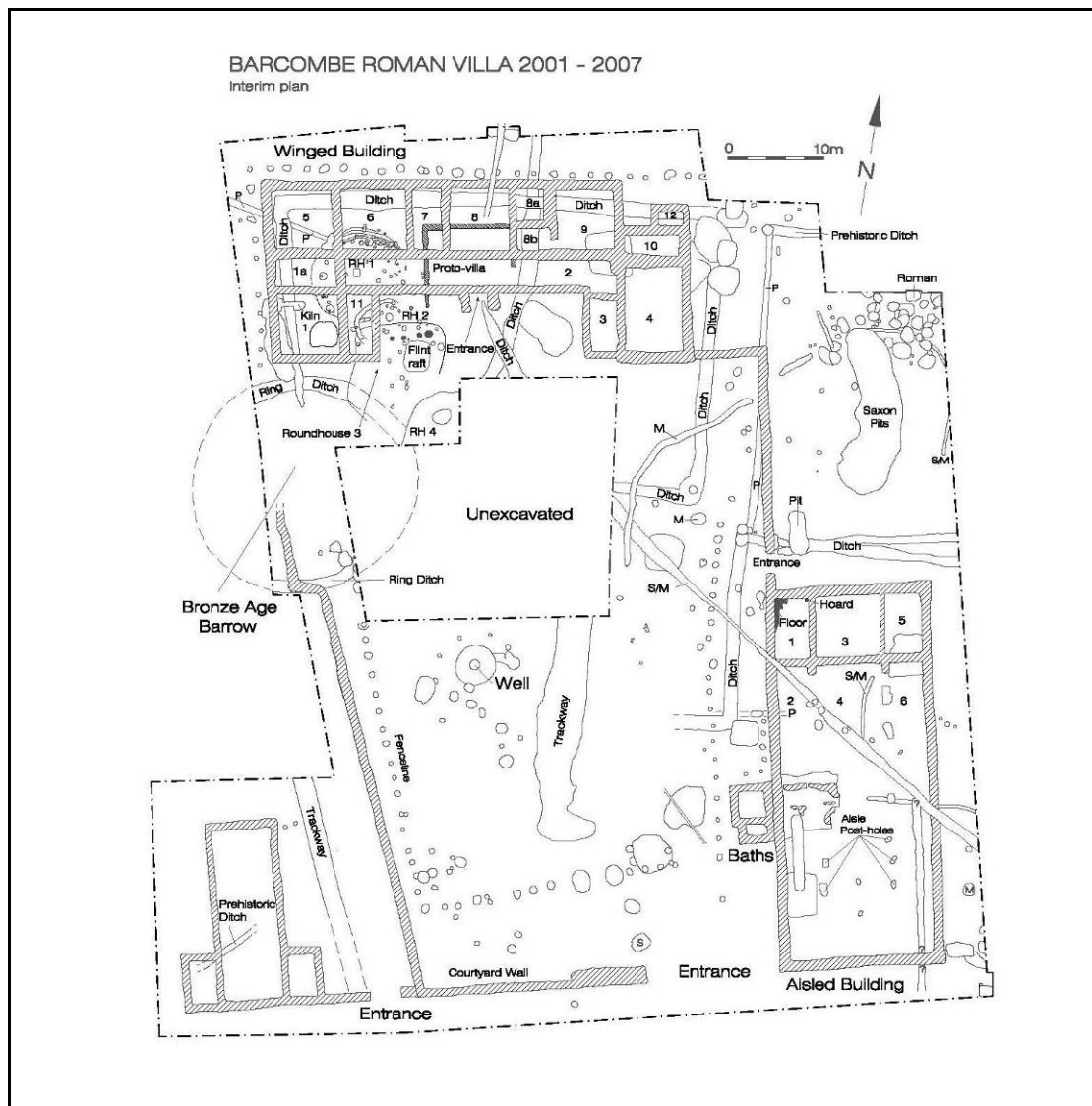
### The 'proto-villa'

Also dating to the mid/second half of the second century are the narrow flint footings of the first rectangular building on the site. This structure, the 'proto-villa', was probably of timber-framed construction resting on masonry foundations. It was aligned with the earlier ditched enclosure (which was replaced by a much larger fenced enclosure) and lies under the centre of the later winged corridor house. It is possible that this switch to a rectangular building with masonry foundations occurred alongside the continued use of at least one of the timber roundhouses. Such a mixture of indigenous and imported building traditions can be seen today in parts of South Africa, and such transitional / mixed scenes may once have been common in Roman Britain.



## The winged corridor house

During the early to mid- third century, the first masonry building was replaced by a much larger 'winged corridor' house. This had more substantial masonry foundations than its predecessor, and great care was taken to consolidate any areas of underlying potential problems, such as in filled pits or ditches. The residence comprised fifteen rooms including a line of living rooms, which was fronted by a main corridor with a porch for the main entrance and flanked by projecting pairs of wing rooms. It is uncertain whether the building was one or two storeys high. Unfortunately the building has suffered badly from both plough damage and stone robbing (probably to build the nearby parish church of St Mary). Although no floors have survived, some mosaic cubes and many larger tesserae made from pieces of tile indicate the nature of some of the floors (with possible mosaics in rooms 1 and 8). Similarly, various finds of painted wall plaster indicate another aspect of interior decoration. A preliminary study by Malcolm Lyne of the pottery finds recovered from this building, together with other types of dating evidence, suggests that it had gone out of use by about AD 300.



## **?Ritual deposits**

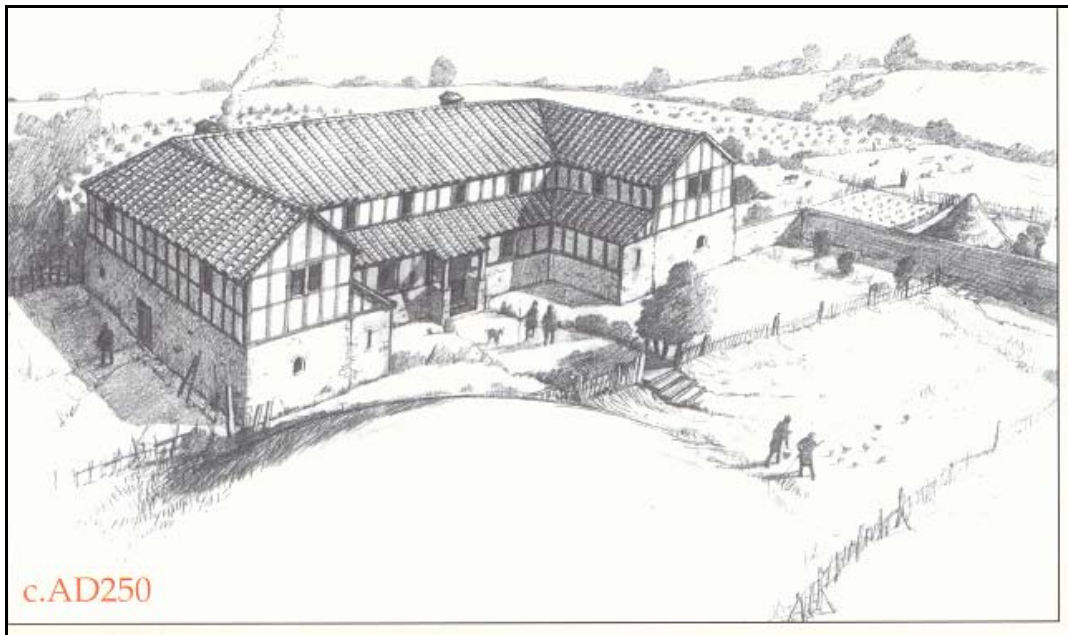
At the eastern end of the winged corridor house were several large ?quarry pits and of these three just to the east of the eastern wall of the house yielded some interesting finds: two dog burials and an unbroken pot. The later was placed upright on the floor of the pit, whilst the pit containing the two dogs was sealed by mortared flints. All three finds may represent offerings as parts of rites of termination undertaken when the pits went out of use.

## **Aisled building**

The south-east corner of the winged corridor house was linked by a masonry wall with chalk foundations to a large aisled building with flint footings. This aisled structure flanked the eastern side of the yard which lay to the south of the winged corridor house. Just to the north of the aisled building was a small entrance. The aisled building, which is c. 39 metres long and 17 metres wide, has three rooms (at least two of which were tessellated) at its northern end. Such an arrangement of higher status rooms at one end of an aisled building is fairly common (eg Chilgrove Villa 2, Sparsholt and Clanville) and may represent offices and/or more elaborate accommodation, perhaps for a villa official.

The discovery of a small (?plough) dispersed hoard of antoniniani coins in one of the northern rooms may represent a money hoard buried beneath a floor or, perhaps more likely, a foundation deposit to confer good fortune on the building/complex. The latest coin in the hoard was issued by the emperor Tacitus c. AD 275-6. Unfortunately, due to severe truncation of floor levels due to plough damage, the function/s of the southern part of the building is uncertain. However, possibilities include accommodation for estate workers (including slaves) and/or agricultural or storage functions. The southern wall of the aisled building had noticeably deeper and wider foundations than the other walls and this may indicate that it was designed to have a much greater weight bearing function. If so, it is possible that these foundations once supported an elaborate masonry end gable, probably with a major entrance, of the types found at the Meon Stoke and Batten Hanger sites.

A preliminary examination of the pottery finds from the aisled building suggests to Malcolm Lyne (pers. comm.) that some activity continued in this building during the fourth century, ie *after* the winged corridor house had apparently gone out of use. Did the owners leave the main residence but continue to run the villa estate from elsewhere, or perhaps via a bailiff housed in one or more of the northern rooms in the the aisled building? The location of the aisled building at Barcombe in relation to the main winged corridor house can be paralleled at various villa sites, such as at Bignor, Brading and Sparsholt. Underlying part of the aisled building, and cut by its west wall, were the foundations of a small east-west orientated bath house. It is uncertain whether these baths may have served the proto-villa or belongs to a phase of the winged corridor house before the construction of the aisled building.



## The Courtyard

The south-west corner of the aisled building forms the eastern side of a major southern entrance into the villa courtyard. On the west side of the entrance flint and chalk wall footings resume and continue westward before turning roughly north-west towards the south-west corner of the winged corridor house; this alignment being roughly parallel with the former western side of the fenced enclosure. Strangely, at its junction with the location of the southern circuit of the Bronze Age barrow ditch, the boundary wall briefly diverts westward again before continuing its journey to the north-west. At this point the boundary wall is within the area of the former barrow before petering out near its centre. No indication was found for any central burial pit within the barrow.

Elsewhere within the courtyard were various post holes and pits, and traces of a metalled track way which may have served the entrance along the southern boundary of the fenced enclosure. Another major discovery in 2007 was the long-looked for well. The well shaft was lined with very large flints and had been constructed within a large circular construction pit. Unfortunately time and financial resources prevented a full excavation of the well, with excavations stopping at a depth of three metres. At this depth were the remains of a dog – perhaps another rite of termination.

## **Masonry Building 4**

To the west of the south-west corner of the courtyard the southern boundary wall resumes briefly before stopping for an entrance which provided access to a metalled track way which runs along the outside of the courtyard's western wall. Having resumed beyond this entrance, the southern boundary wall connects with the south-east corner of a badly plough-damaged 'T' shaped building which consists of a large rectangular hall with two small flanking rooms at its southern end. Such a building may have helped to add some sense of balance to the villa complex when viewed from the south. The function/s and dating of this building are uncertain, but may include agricultural functions. The location of this building slightly away from the main courtyard complex invites comparisons with the final phase rectangular timber-framed hall at Sparsholt.

## **Post-Roman activity**

During the seven seasons of excavations at this site we found various features and finds relating to both later Saxon and medieval activity. For the Saxon period the most important find was a sunken-featured building to the west of the aisled building; various pits (including latrines); post holes, etc. The area to the east of the winged corridor building had a particularly large number of Saxon pits and these have yielded evidence for both occupation and industrial activities. Representing the medieval period are large numbers of robber trenches which resulted from the removal of building stone from the Roman masonry buildings.

## **The bath house site**

In 2008 a new research and training project was started in Church Field, which lies between the villa site/field and St Mary's Church (see aerial photograph). Previously fieldwalking, geophysics and test-pitting had indicated the presence of a Roman-period building with a hypocaust heating system. Subsequently the excavations in 2008 and 2009 revealed a large bath house in excess of 20 metres long and 6 metres wide and orientated approximately north-east to south-west.

At the northern end of the complex is a large rectangular furnace room (*praefurnium*) with walls made of mortared flints. The south-western side of this room had a tile base set into flint masonry, possibly for a boiler, and south-west of this was the hot room (*caldarium*) with a projecting apse on its south-eastern side. At the apex of this architectural feature was a tile-lined drain running south-eastwards towards a large external drainage ditch. On the opposite side of the hot room, but set within masonry along the side of the construction pit, were the poorly preserved remains of another apse. In between the two apses in this room were a number of bases of pilae tile columns.

The next room was the warm room (*tepidarium*) and this area also still contains some hypocaust pilae columns. This room also had traces of two more facing and outward projecting apses. Beyond this room and along the north-western side of the baths are a further two stoke holes. Whilst as yet these features have not been fully investigated, it is possible that they were associated with either a heated entrance/changing room (*apodyterium*) and/or a hot dry room (*laconicum*). Alternatively they may relate to a different phase of the baths. Although as yet no conclusive evidence has been found for a cold room (*frigidarium*) or cold plunge, these may be represented by partially investigated chalk wall footings to the south-west of the area heated by the pair of stoke holes referred to above.

The drainage ditch to the south-east of the baths was found to contain four large stone weights which have provisionally been identified (Luke Barber pers. comm.) as anchors. Based upon coin finds, the ditch appears to have gone out of use in the late third century. Although the dating evidence from the bath house site in general has not yet been studied in detail, other finds include one piece of roller-stamped (Die 9) box-flue tile dating to c. AD 120-250; second and third century pottery and a number of coins ending with two examples issued in the 320s; thus indicating that the baths were broadly contemporary with the nearby villa site. If so, what, if anything, was the relationship between the two sites? Did the Church Field baths replace the small baths found beneath the aisled building? Or were the baths in Church Field a villa estate bath house? Alternatively these baths may be connected with an as yet undiscovered Roman building/s located even closer to the nearby Norman church. Such an elevated location, edged by springs, may have been suitable for a temple or mausoleum, or perhaps another domestic building.

A major difference between the two sites however, is the apparent absence at the Church Field bath house of medieval or post-medieval stone robbing; the baths having apparently been 'robbed' of re-usable materials during Roman times. The probable water source for this bath house is one of the springs in the vicinity of the church.

Other important discoveries in 2008/9 in Church Field included traces of a major palaeochannel along the south-western side of the field and very near, perhaps adjacent to, the southern end of the bath house complex. This feature was found as a result of augering undertaken by Dr Mike Allen and students of the University of Sussex. Preliminary results indicate that it may have been possible in the past, including Roman times, to access the bath house site (and thus also the villa) by boat from the River Ouse. Other findings, from work undertaken in the adjacent Dunstall's Field, include a large lynchet formation along the edge of the field. Mike Allen will continue this interesting environmental work in 2010.

### **The Culver Archaeological Project**

In 2005 Rob Wallace, then an undergraduate archaeology student at UCL and now a postgraduate DPhil student at the University of Sussex, began a programme of field-walking, survey and trial trenching on Culver Farm in the hope of identifying further archaeological sites within the landscape around Barcombe villa. The first season saw the identification of a Roman road to the south of the villa complex, and this discovery has become the focus of subsequent fieldwork seasons as the road has been traced through adjacent fields.

To date evidence for the road (ie initially an alignment of heavily compacted flints above a clay agger and flint foundations) has been found in four separate fields, and its course has been projected over a much wider area, with the road apparently linking the Offham area to the Greensand Way (a major Roman road which connected the Pulborough area of West Sussex with the intersection of the 'London-Lewes' Roman road and the River Ouse in the vicinity of modern Barcombe Mills). In addition to the study of the road, the Culver Archaeological Project has also examined Roman industrial activity and settlement adjacent to the road and these finds have been dated to the first to fourth centuries. Assuming that such discoveries may come from within the estate of the nearby Roman villa, this evidence may indicate that for this villa at least industry may have fulfilled an important economic function.

In 2005, 2007 and 2009 excavations in Pond Field along the projected alignment of the Roman road revealed traces of both the road and a flanking ditch, a possible boundary ditch, post holes, pits (including a puddling pit), Roman pottery, burnt clay and ceramic building material, and some Bronze Age cremation burials. In 2006 evaluation excavations in Culvermead revealed further evidence for the road, together with possible collapsed building material from which a very worn and corroded coin of Hadrian was recovered. Other important discoveries included three water-logged 5 foot oak timbers at a depth of 1.2 metres in a large cut feature. These timbers, which may perhaps have lined a well, have subsequently been radio-carbon dated to c. AD 250 +/-80 years.

Other types of archaeological investigations undertaken by the Culver Archaeological Project have included extensive geophysical soil resistivity surveying in order to better document the course of the Roman road and adjacent areas. As a result of such surveying the Project returned to Court House Field in 2009 in order to investigate a very pronounced kink in the road alignment, it appearing that this deviation may have been undertaken to avoid a large circular anomaly which showed up on the resistivity plot-out. Whilst as yet no reason has been discovered for the large anomaly, a very long section of the road was exposed and recorded. At the location of the kink in the road, a large palaeochannel was found to underlie it and is further evidence which Mike Allen is studying in order to document the former landscape and environmental contexts of the Roman villa and its estate.

### **End dates**

A metal detector find in the vicinity of the 2009 excavations in Court House Field, and along the projected route of the Roman road, is an unclipped siliqua of the emperor Honorius. Minted at Milan between AD 395 and 402, this silver coin is the latest Roman coin found at Barcombe, and belongs to a period when both the villa complex and the bath house in Church Field may have been long abandoned. Reasons for decline or abandonment at these sites might include attacks from channel pirates (real or perceived) and/or the demise by the end of the third century of many of the iron working sites to the north of Barcombe which may previously have been important markets for villa produce.