

Ongoing interpretation

Although the prime task of archaeological fieldwork is to investigate and record details of historic features, archaeologists should also be prepared to offer suggestions that attempt to interpret the 'why and how' of these bare details.

Analysis of the fieldwork at Harpole raises several points of interest:

- The speculation that this site had significant status during the Iron Age, and the fact that it ultimately became an important double-courtyard focus for a *latifundium*, both suggest that its interim function from 1C to late 3C as a farmstead would probably also have been recognised as a status site;
- The question of whose initiative was responsible for construction of the *latifundium* — imperial Rome or regional senator — was discussed briefly above. Longterm analysis of the LP:LP study and comparison with data from elsewhere in the Roman Empire will continue, in an attempt to resolve this question;
- The construction in the late 4thC of a large basilica within the area of the *villa urbana* suggests a change in function of the site. The *basilica* — a rectangular hall with two rows of interior posts — was not necessarily a church, but it may perhaps indicate that the site had become the base of a religious community?

The range of artefacts retrieved by the fieldwork opens up new opportunities. The findings begin to address aspects of daily life on a communal and personal level, which will inform our ability to assess the impact of Romanisation and what this process meant in any given locality.

Links with other projects

CLASP is involved in several other long-term projects focused on Iron Age and Roman-period sites in west Northamptonshire.

- At Whitehall Farm, a Roman villa site close to Watling Street (in Nether Heyford parish), CLASP spent 13 years excavating the villa site. The focus is now on preparing for publication what has been learned;
- At Bannaventa, a Roman posting station and small town on Watling Street, CLASP's ongoing fieldwork has recovered tens of thousands of potsherds and thousands of coins and other artefacts, and over 220 hectares of the site and the surrounding area have now been mapped in detail by magnetometer, bringing to light exciting new data that will significantly advance the analysis of this important site;
- The 'Local People: Local Past' and 'Lactodorum Hinterland' projects have significantly aided interpretation of about 200 sq.km. of west Northamptonshire's Roman countryside, allowing close study of the development of 'Romanisation' across this wide area; CLASP provided input, for the whole of Northamptonshire, to the Iron Age Hillforts Atlas project, coordinated by the universities of Oxford and Edinburgh;
- At Barby Hill, near Rugby, a CLASP team spent 4 years surveying a large Iron Age hilltop settlement, mapping its extent, excavating test trenches in selected locations, and collaborating with Cotswold Archaeology who were also involved in excavating part of the site.

Find out about CLASP

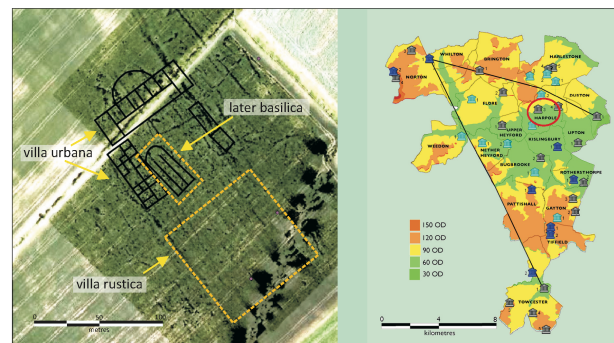
If you found this leaflet interesting, and think you might like to work with a friendly group, and get healthy exercise whilst making a serious contribution to professional archaeology, you should consider joining CLASP!

CLASP is always keen to welcome new volunteers. New projects are regularly planned and executed, knowledge is shared, and training in fieldwork and archaeological computing skills is given in a friendly environment.

For more details, contact CLASP at <http://www.claspweb.org.uk>.

CLASP thanks Harpole Parish Council for generously funding the cost of printing this Case Study. A full list of CLASP's charitable donors may be found on our website.

The double-courtyard villa at Harpole: West Northamptonshire's largest Romano-British villa complex



Over a 15 year period, CLASP has been analysing the 'Romanisation' of west Northamptonshire, by a combination of two complementary fieldwork techniques:

- Detailed surveying of specific sites, such as the Roman posting station at Bannaventa and the Roman villa complex at Whitehall Farm, Nether Heyford; and
- Surveys of much larger areas, such as the 148sq.km. 'Local People: Local Past' project, and the associated wide-area survey of the hinterland around Lactodorum (modern Towcester).

These other projects have all been documented in other CLASP case studies in this series — and the 'Local People: Local Past' study in particular is recommended as background reading for this present

leaflet, which deals with the largest Romano-British complex in west Northamptonshire, at Harpole.

The villa at Harpole was extremely important. It was the only double-courtyard villa in this area, with a similar layout to the large double-courtyard villas in the Roman Empire's Rhineland territories.

Villas of the 'double-courtyard' type are relatively rare, other notable examples in Britain being at Llantwit Major in Glamorgan, Darenth in Kent, and Woodchester in Gloucestershire.

The Harpole complex was huge, even by modern standards; by way of comparison, the footprint of the Harpole buildings covered an area roughly twice that of the Spencer country seat at nearby Althorp!

Project methodology

As with the Local People: Local Past project, a 'context framework' was created as a basis for analysis, involving a range of complementary archaeological techniques:

- Potsherds provide a basic timeline and illustrate the distribution of goods across the area;
- Coin lists supplement and cross-check the potsherd dating. Systematic metal detection surveys were carried out;
- The combined evidence indicates the types of settlement and also the nature of their economy;
- Geophysics surveys integrate the archaeology below ground with the evidence from field surveys, providing a backdrop against which to interpret surface scatter;
- Magnetometry can identify wider features such as field systems, trackways, enclosures, stock pens and boundary ditches;
- Resistivity surveys can provide clear outlines of the layout of stone buildings.



Fieldwork at Harpole

This site is scheduled by Historic England, and all CLASP's work here (as on other scheduled sites) is carefully coordinated with the relevant authorities both at national and local levels.

The initial fieldwork was structured so as to establish the character and extent of the site, and its periods of construction and general chronology.

Integration of unpublished previous sitework in the 1950s by local amateur Harold Frost was a further important step in assessing the site.

A logical and systematic approach was followed — fieldwalking followed by geophysics (both magnetometry and resistivity) followed in turn by test pitting and trial trenching to ascertain the status of the archaeology.

Fieldwalking revealed a huge amount of finds from across the site:

- 47,686 ceramic tile fragments, weighing in total 1279kg;
- 9,270 tesserae;
- 8,045 Roman period potsherds;
- 450 coins

These quantities are substantially greater than from any other site in the area — at least eight times the quantity of roofing tiles, and twice the number of potsherds that would be expected from a typical villa site. These statistics are further evidence of the high status and huge size of this set of buildings.

Each category of finds was grouped



Above: Trial trenching to identify a wall and interior surface within the villa urbana. Although mosaic pavements are known to have been in use all over the site (based on finds from fieldwalking), they have not survived in situ, probably due to recent deep ploughing down to the natural level. This can be seen above, i.e. only the hardcore sub-floor is left.

Below: Archaeology has survived, especially where it is cut into and below the natural level. Excavation of a clay-lined cellar (or cistern) at the west end of the villa urbana: contains interesting worked stones, showing architectural features of the building (e.g. stone finial, part of a column base). There may also have been wooden posts for storage furniture.



Sitework has included excavations, guided by geophysics and fieldwalking.

by period — 'early, middle, late' — and overlaid on a 10x10m grid of the site.

Once these essential basic questions were resolved, a second stage of sitework could be initiated, moving from pure quantitative assessment towards more qualitative questions; for example — "in what way(s) does this evidence fit into our emergent picture of Romanisation in west Northamptonshire?" — and this is the stage of sitework that has now been reached, and will continue for the next few years.

To add to the challenges, this site (at about 12ha) is the largest single site within this area (most other villa sites are around 2ha), and it lies on relatively poor quality clay soils (because the Roman development of this area focused on sheep rearing, to which such soils are well suited).

Layout of the wider area

The diagram below on left illustrates the distribution of Romano-British sites in the wider area around the Harpole site.

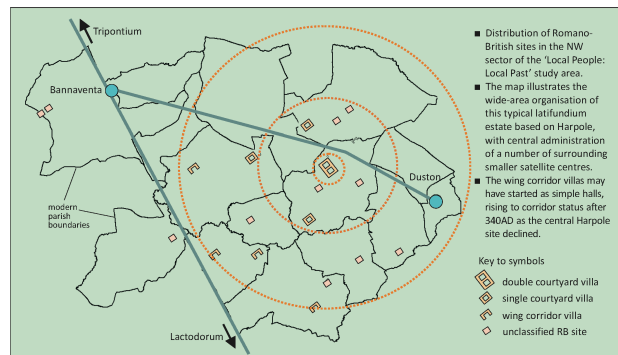
It will be noted that the central double-courtyard villa at Harpole has a series of single-courtyard villas around it, and further out there is a scattering of small wing-corridor villas.

CLASP's 'Local People: Local Past' study stated that:

- "The prosperity of the late 3C is evident in the luxurious layout of the villas in the survey area. Their limited period of construction and similarity in layout suggest the existence of a significant 'latifundium' (Latin: 'latus' = broad + 'fundum' = farm) in the hinterland of Bannaventa (Whilton) on Watling Street. The scale of the edifices and abrupt changes to the local rural landscape both imply a huge influx of resources."

It seems clear that this *latifundium* centred upon the double-courtyard villa at Harpole. Proximity of the Harpole site to the Roman road from Bannaventa to Duston is a further significant clue to the importance of this site during the Roman period.

The concentric distribution of smaller villa sites around Harpole suggests that this was a latifundium estate.



A rationale for Harpole

The LP:LP study suggested that:

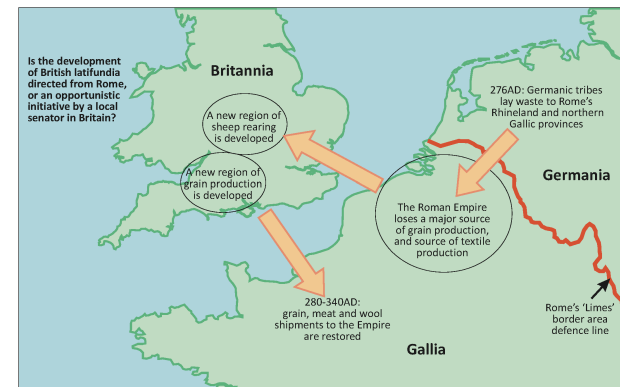
- The sudden period of villa construction in Britain in the late 3C was probably linked to major upheavals in Gaul due to Germanic invasions in 276AD, when 60-70 of the largest cities in the Gallic and Rhineland provinces were destroyed;
- The Rhineland collapse in the 270s destroyed the industrial and agricultural base. Villas in north Gaul were abandoned, whilst British villas (especially on the Jurassic limestones of the south-west and Midlands) began to appear and flourish on a large scale, indicating a 'flight of capital' from the stricken areas;
- Construction of villa complexes in Britain may have been part of an organised response to the economic challenges of Rome's north-western provinces. By the mid-300s, Rome relied on Britain's grain output and fleet to maintain power in the north-western provinces.

Why at Harpole?

Current opinion on the distribution of double-courtyard villas across the Roman Empire's territories remains undecided; one popular theory is that the double-courtyard villa may have originated in the social structure of the Late Iron Age, in which tribal elite families had large retinues of followers — and that the double-courtyard Roman villa perpetuated this social arrangement, the patron living in the villa urbana and his clients occupying the villa rustica and providing the labour force for the estate.

The Harpole site certainly fits this pattern — gold Iron Age coins were found there, along with early status potsherds.

A further major factor is the 'Imperial Crisis' (AD 235–284), a period in which the Roman Empire almost collapsed under the combined pressures of invasion, civil war, plague and economic depression.



Whose initiative?

This raises a key question — was the development of villa complexes in Britain an imperial initiative master-minded centrally from Rome, or opportunistic independent action from a canny regionally-based senator?

In view of the wide-ranging compass of the redevelopment of Britain and Gaul, it seems more likely that the orders probably came from Rome — however, this topic will remain open to further speculation.

Decline of British latifundia

The coins and pottery from the villa complexes suggest that prosperity based on continental trade went on until c340AD. The collapse of the trade was probably initiated by the death of Constantine II and the upheavals caused by the ensuing civil wars. This probably heralded the break up of the large privately owned

Background to development of British latifundia, 276-340AD

'latifundia' with their far-flung trading contacts, into either state-run operations or a series of smaller independent estates, as the local landlord paid the price for supporting the losing imperial faction.

Henceforth local estates were managed to meet more limited local requirements. However, analysis of the finds recovered in the LP:LP survey shows that some villas remained prosperous well into the late 300s, and that several estates continued into the mid-400s — although for the estates and farms in the survey area it was most likely subsistence agriculture.

Continuity of occupation at Harpole is further illustrated by the basilica building phase, which may perhaps be connected with the long-term high-status significance of this site.

A selection of artefacts from the Harpole site

Coins of Catuvellauni tribe, late Iron Age
Above: gold chase stater, c40-20BC
Below: silver mounted warrior, c20BC

Above: Aescia type brooch (L1C-2C), enamelled disc brooch (L2C-3C)
Below: greyware and samian bowls

