

## WHITEHALL ROMAN VILLA & LANDSCAPE PROJECT 2008

### Friends December Newsletter Report

The archaeological focus for the 2008 season of excavation at Whitehall Farm centred on two main areas of interest associated with the various phases of the bath house buildings that have been identified on the lower slope. These facilities formed an important structural element in the development of the late villa complex and the level of archaeological survival is extremely good in comparison to some other sites in central Northamptonshire. The widespread survival of the remains in this particular area of the site is in stark contrast to the extensively robbed and eroded state of the main villa range, albeit that the bath house structures themselves were subject to reconstruction and to a degree of demolition in the Roman period. These remains therefore are particularly important components in developing a dependable chronology in the interpretation of the archaeological story of the settlement at Whitehall Farm in its late Roman stage.

This year's archaeological priorities related to the continued detailed investigation of Room 1 and 2 of the 'earlier' bath house phase which is aligned approximately north to south along the contour of the lower slope. This also included an attempt to identify the layout and plan of any other potential rooms in the range that would probably lie directly to the south. Meanwhile on the upper slope of the villa complex the area immediately outside of the southern wall of the late Roman bath house which had been terraced into the contour of the slope, occupying an east west alignment, which had been partly obscured by the Post Roman timber hall, was examined. The intention to ascertain whether any further structural elements associated with the bath house lay in this area that would enable us to demonstrate more clearly the relationship of the structure to the courtyard and possibly the eastern elements of the main villa range. We also excavated a drainage channel that divides the upper and lower parts of the slope in an attempt to try and differentiate between the drainage strategies used on the hill side to aid occupation in the Roman period on the one hand and cultivation of the area in medieval times on the other.

We were able to establish that the building on the lower slope which is now described as Bath house 2 has a larger under floor hypocaust system than at first thought. It is approximately double the size of that uncovered in Bath house I and although the original Roman floor level has been removed many of the remaining pilae have survived and these are in a better condition than those found in the later phase of bath house I's construction discovered during earlier periods of excavation. We have also identified a third room a joining that containing the hypocaust although its full extent has not been determined at present. A most important discovery is that although the exterior walls of the range have been partially robbed we were able to determine that they had been constructed on top of a larger masonry platform or wall foundation which is at least a metre wide that underpinned the structure at least on the western side. Most likely in an attempt to alleviate the problems of drainage and the instability of the slope of the contour cause by the emergence of the local spring at this point. It

reinforces our understanding of the extent to which the Roman 'builders' understood the mechanics of basic civil engineering and the range of problems posed in the erection of such structures especially in this location. A situation brought home to the 'digging' team with the general flooding we experienced whilst excavating the area. A positive aspect of this is again we have a situation where the environmental survival of material is to be expected and one hopes that next year even more material will become available for analysis.

The pottery assemblage recovered from the different excavated contexts for 2008 amounts to a total of 954 sherds or nearly 15 kilos of ceramic material. Overall the pottery assemblage from the archaeological work at Whitehall Farm is approximately 14,000 sherds or 175 kilos of pottery. Those contexts associated with Bath house 2, although they contain some residual late 1<sup>st</sup> to mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century sherds, appear to date predominately from the late 2<sup>nd</sup> to mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. However the pottery from the layers above and sealing the structural remains is characteristically 4<sup>th</sup> century AD providing a workable chronological profile for these archaeological features located on the lower slope. Meanwhile the pottery associated with the raised paved area or possible veranda on the south side of the Bath house 1 has helped considerably in establishing a clearer chronological understanding of this building and its relationship with the development of the courtyard. One of the phases of paved material contained characteristic Central Gaulish black colour coated ware of the mid 2<sup>nd</sup> to mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD as well as 4<sup>th</sup> century material demonstrating the longevity of parts of the bath house structures.

During our investigation of the site we have retrieved 527 coins in total of which 515 are Roman and two are of late Iron Age date, issued in the reign of Cunobelin in the immediate pre-conquest period. Apart from the coin assemblage for the villa at Piddington this is the largest collection that has been recorded anywhere in the county. This year 53 coins were added to the list: seventeen from the excavation, six from the spoil heap associated with the areas examined and thirty collected from an impromptu metal detecting survey of the entire site by Dave Derby and Tim Binns prior to cultivation and the commencement of the higher level scheme for Whitehall Farm. The majority of the coins retrieved from the lower slope Bath house 2 building date almost exclusively to the period of the Gallic Empire in the later 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, whilst the metal detecting survey in the field containing the proto villa produced a selection of coins from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The stratigraphy associated with a hard core foundation layer of a possible veranda or paved 'patio' outside the possible entrance way to Bath house 1 in its south wall produced a magnificent 'silver' ring with a gem stone of late 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century date. A figure depicted on the gem appears to represent the God Mercury although this awaits confirmation. On going analysis of the pottery and other material from the contexts is helping us to decipher the reason for the existence of this feature which seems instrumental in understanding how Bath house 1 was accessed.

Our grant from the County Council of £1700 obtained through our local councillor Joan Kirkbride has been spent on commissioning two specialist reports. The first was an archaeomagnetic survey of the hypocaust floor of Bath house 2 which had been so successful in Bath House I. Unfortunately this turned out to be inconclusive in providing a fixed date for the last firing of the hypocaust because of the difficulties in accessing adequate magnetic field profiles from the present insitu material. It demonstrates that modern technological procedures are not always able to confirm aspects of chronological detail and standard archaeological practice as applied at Whitehall Farm remains central to our interpretation of the site. The residue of the award has been spent on obtain a series of detailed carbon dates for the skeletal remains of the Anglo-Saxon cemetery. This process is rather complex and only one laboratory in the world undertakes such work. The analysis will be attempted by Dr A. Hogg of Waikato University in New Zealand and should be completed during the next six months. A close range of burial dates would suggest a familial tie between the skeletons which would then offer the prospect of a locally based Anglo-Saxon DNA grouping. A tantalising prospect which could then be utilised against similar work based on the Roman skeletal populations when we locate their position at Whitehall Farm.

Next year will be a key season in resolving many of the chronological and contextual issues appertaining to the site and the open day planned for 2009 should help us to raise the necessary finances to fund the full archaeological report concerning the research of the last ten years. I hope you will continue to support the project and the work currently being pursued.