

Ongoing analysis work

Although the excavation and conservation work is now complete, analysis work is ongoing and the project is far from being over — indeed, some of the most exciting work still lies ahead (for example, the need to explore the possible relationships between the hare-bones and the glass drinking vessels found in the same deposit).

Thanks to the extensive and consistent fieldwork that has been possible over eleven years with a workforce of experienced volunteers — a typical commercial archaeological project simply cannot afford to pour in this sheer amount of human resource — this project has provided a huge quantity and range of artefacts, and CLASP is now working on patient analysis and interpretation of the finds.

Such a large assemblage of coins, glassware, pottery and other artefacts provides a wealth of evidence of the finer details of social life from personal adornment and daily life within the buildings to feasting and entertainment on a grand scale, and to trading links both local and far-flung. It is hoped that this project will serve as a reference point, whose archaeological profile aids and informs interpretation of other nearby sites from the Roman period, including detailed work that is ongoing between Towcester (Roman Lactodorum) and Whilton Locks (Bannaventa).

Links with other projects

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

- At Bannaventa, a Roman posting station and small town on Watling Street (in Whilton and Norton parishes), CLASP's ongoing programme of fieldwork has recovered tens of thousands of potsherds and thousands of coins and other artefacts, and over 50 hectares of the site and the surrounding area have been mapped in detail by magnetometer.
- In the "Local People - Local Past" project, CLASP is aiming to study social evolution and characterise settlement over the wider area, bringing together data from many sites and using map-based analysis, to piece together an overall picture from late Iron Age to early post-Roman times.
- CLASP is currently providing input, for the whole of Northamptonshire, to the Iron Age Hillforts Atlas project, which is being co-ordinated by the Institute of Archaeology at Oxford University.

These projects, and others currently under consideration, all form a part of CLASP's stated aim to research, interpret and document the early landscape of west Northamptonshire, working closely with the local Historic Environmental Record, English Heritage and other regional and national bodies to carry out archaeological research to professional standards.

Find out about CLASP

Although hundreds of visitors toured the Nether Heyford site whilst the dig was in progress, the ground was carefully covered over and the land was restored again once the excavations were completed and sheep now graze peacefully on the smooth pasture, with no hint of the wealth of heritage that lies beneath, except for the weather-proof illustrated signboards that CLASP provided to mark the site.

CLASP is always keen to welcome new volunteers; new projects are regularly planned and executed, knowledge is shared and training is given in a friendly environment. For more details, contact CLASP at <http://www.claspweb.org.uk>.

Roman Villa complex, Whitehall Farm, Nether Heyford, west Northamptonshire



During eleven seasons of fieldwork at the Whitehall Farm site in the parish of Nether Heyford, in west Northamptonshire, members of the Community Landscape Archaeology Survey Project (CLASP) have been involved in recording details of more than six hundred years of the history of a rural hilltop community.

The work has revealed details of a gradual progression from Late Iron Age roundhouses, through various stages in the development of a Roman-style farm with villa and bath-house complex, to the eventual abandonment of this complex, levelling of the site and construction of a British-style timber hall, following the turbulent century after Rome's final withdrawal from Great Britain in AD410.

The project, carried out under professional archaeological direction and in collaboration with experts from all over the UK, has been performed throughout to the highest professional standards. The team of volunteers — mostly Northamptonshire residents with a keen interest in archaeology — have gained training and experience in all disciplines of modern archaeology, including such tasks as:

- Surveying and marking out.
- Use of precise surveying tools — from tapes and poles and optical squares to a sophisticated digital total station.
- Site mapping and precision recording, using GPS-based professional mapping software.
- Field-walking surveys.
- Metal-detection surveys.

- Using a dual-fluxgate magnetometer to carry out geophysics surveys.
- Excavation and recording context layers.
- Detailed plan and section drawings of trenches and trial pits.
- Analysis and interpretation, creation of phased ground-plans for buildings etc.
- Cleaning, conservation and marking of finds.
- Identification of artefacts, and meticulous data-logging.
- Long-term analysis and interpretation of artefacts and environmental remains.
- Data transmission to the county's central Heritage Environment Record.



The villa complex

Patient excavation and analysis has revealed a complete chronology for the site.

Although some of the fine details remain open to speculation and interpretation — as for all projects of this type — a clear picture has emerged for the main sequence of events:

■ Late C1 BC to early C1 AD:

Late Iron Age roundhouses on the hilltop, within a deep-ditched irregular enclosure (approx 0.5 hectare).

■ Late C1 to early C2 AD:

Development of a Roman-style timber dwelling plus ancillary building on the south side below the hilltop.

■ Early C2 to mid/late C3 AD:

Development of two new stone roundhouses below the hill-crest to the east, and the beginnings of an associated field system for a mixed farming economy.

■ Late C3 to early C4 AD:

Construction of a large (two hectare) rectilinear ditched and banked enclosure containing stock management areas (replacing the earlier field system), a bath-house and associated halled range between the stone roundhouses. This period marks a transition from mixed farming to intensive sheep-rearing.



An artist's impression of the villa complex at its peak in the 4th century AD.

■ Mid C4 to C5 AD:

Expansion and modification of the main building and replacement of the early bath-house by a second separate bath-house — this phase may perhaps mark a transition, from the complex being a "tenanted" sub-farm on a larger villa estate to being an independent self-contained estate.

■ Mid C5 to late C6 AD:

Demolition of the main range, preparation of a building platform, and construction of a timber hall.

■ Late C6 to early C7 AD:

Occupation of the site by a new Saxon (squatter?) group.

■ Mid C5 to mid C7 AD:

A Saxon cemetery was also discovered, close to the main site of the complex.

A process of social change

The villa complex shows both similarities and interesting differences from other known Roman villa complexes in the surrounding area; and there are some features which make this one of Britain's most informative sites — not only because of its somewhat atypical ground-plan and sequence of construction, but also in view of some of the artefacts that were recovered.

Both from the structural elements of the building and from the nature of the artefactual assemblages, we are witnessing here a process of social change in this area of England, from a landscape characterised by a large-scale estate with dependent tenanted sub-farms, to a series of smaller independent estates, of which this site was one.

At the same time, the archaeological record established from this site provides a profile that can be used to analyse the process of development on other similar sites.

Patient analysis of the evidence has provided a complete chronology for the site over more than 6 centuries, from the Iron Age through the Roman period into the Saxon era.

Among the finds

In addition to the tens of thousands of stone and pottery artefacts recovered, huge quantities of bone, glass and other objects were patiently excavated, cleaned and identified. The finds include such diverse items as:

- Thousands of fragments of decorated wall-plaster.
- Timbers recovered from building foundations.
- A plain mosaic floor, and the remains of areas of hypocaust.
- About 2500 fragments of glassware, including a rare "gladiator" drinking vessel of the very finest workmanship.
- About 20,000 potsherds, and countless hypocaust tiles, roof tiles, mosaic tesserae, etc.
- Worked architectural stone.
- More than 550 coins.
- Assorted bronze harness fittings.
- Over a dozen rings, 14 bronze brooches, various jet bracelets and similar personal ornaments.
- Items of worked bone, including decorative hairpins etc.
- A rare example of decorative clothing items in leather.

- a) only three British examples are known of wolf bones from the Roman period
- b) decorated spindle weight
- c) fragment of wall plaster
- d) some of the other bones
- e) plain mosaic flooring



Conspicuous consumption

The collection of bone and shell includes material from horses, pigs, sheep, cattle, dogs, hares, a wolf-jaw, freshwater and saltwater fish, a variety of domestic and wild fowls and songbirds, oysters and salmon.

The glass fragments — which were mostly found in the same room as the bones — include glass from at least 30 vessels, some high-quality drinking vessels from the Rhineland, and Samian vessels and plate (these last items were probably family heirlooms).

Such a comprehensive assemblage, together with the associated environmental evidence from nuts, seeds and pollen, provides the basis for a sound understanding of dietary composition, consumption of wine and ale, and social status.

At each stage of excavation, detailed plans, drawings and sections were made of each area, to complement the written records.

There is clear evidence here of conspicuous consumption — throwing artefacts away rather than the prudent recycling that was more common in the Roman era (perhaps as part of the feasting that may have accompanied hunting parties on the villa estate). The unusual quantity of hare-bones suggests that these animals may have been farmed on the site as part of these activities.

The associated environmental evidence from nuts, seeds, pollen etc., when analysed and interpreted, may also reveal a seasonal basis for activities such as feasting.

