

VILLAS, SANCTUARIES
AND SETTLEMENT IN
THE ROMANO-BRITISH
COUNTRYSIDE

NEW PERSPECTIVES
AND CONTROVERSIES

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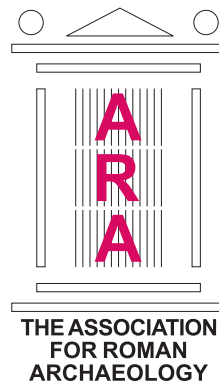
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Contents

List of Figures	iii
List of Tables	x
List of Contributors	xi
Roman villas in Britain and beyond	1
Martin Henig, Anthony King and Grahame Soffe	
Where, when and what for? Coin use in the Romano-British countryside	14
Philippa Walton	
Villa mosaics and archaeology	25
Patricia Witts	
The Roman villas of the Lower Nene Valley and the <i>Praetorium</i> at Castor	42
Stephen G. Upex	
Piddington, Northamptonshire: wealthy private farm or imperial property?	65
Roy and Diana Friendship-Taylor	
Whitley Grange villa, Shropshire: a hunting lodge and its landscape	81
Roger White	
Moor Park, Hertfordshire: two evaluations of an excavation of the 1950s	93
Victoria Leitch and Martin Biddle	
Great Witcombe, Gloucestershire: a reinterpretation of the site as a temple rather than a villa	100
Bryn Walters and David Rider	
Chedworth, Gloucestershire: a question of interpretation	127
Bryn Walters and David Rider	
Acroterial decoration and <i>cantharus</i> fountains	163
Anthony Beeson	
The stones with Chi-Rho inscriptions at Chedworth	197
Stephen R. Cosh	
The St Laurence School villa, Bradford on Avon, Wiltshire	204
Mark Corney	
Dinnington and Yarford: two villas in south and west Somerset	223
Anthony C. King With a contribution by Christina Grande	

The Ashtead Roman villa and tileworks	243
David Bird	
Lullingstone Roman villa	261
Martin Henig and Grahame Soffe	
With a contribution by Anthony King	
Clinging to Britannia’s hemline: continuity and discontinuity in villa estates, boundaries and historic land use on the islands of <i>Vectis</i> and <i>Tanatis</i>	281
David Tomalin	
Where did Sidonius Apollinaris live?	332
John Collis	
From Roman villa to medieval village at the Mola di Monte Gelato, Lazio, Italy	342
Anthony C. King	
Index	358

List of Figures

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Cover

Front: Winter view of the Chedworth Roman buildings, looking south-east from above the 'Capitol'. (Copyright Luigi J. Thompson) See Figure 9.16.

Back: Cut-away reconstruction of the 'deep room' and house church at Lullingstone Roman villa, c. AD 380. (Painting by Peter Dunn/Richard Lea. Copyright English Heritage Archive) See Chapter 15.

Roman villas in Britain and beyond

Figure 1.1 The 'Leopard Mosaic', from Dewlish villa, Dorset	2
Figure 1.2. Map of villas in Table 1.1, and of the villas that are the subject of papers in this volume	3

Where, when and what for? Coin use in the Romano-British countryside

Figure 2.1. The distribution of all Roman coins recorded by the PAS between 1997 and 2011	15
Figure 2.2. The distribution of site and parish assemblages	16
Figure 2.3. Bar-chart profile for rural coin loss compared with the PAS mean	17
Figure 2.4. The distribution of, a) all sites with specifically 'rural' site profiles, compared with, b) the distribution of villas (English Heritage dataset).	18-19
Figure 2.5. The decline of rural coin loss in the fourth century AD.....	21-23

Villa mosaics and archaeology

Figure 3.1. Painting of the Whitley Grange mosaic by David Neal.....	26
Figure 3.2. Bignor villa, Ganymede mosaic	29
Figure 3.3. Mosaic in apse at Bradford on Avon	31
Figure 3.4. Verulamium, Building XXVII,2, Room 8/9, Bacchus mosaic, detail	36

The Roman villas of the Lower Nene Valley and the *Praetorium* at Castor

Figure 4.1. The area of the Lower Nene Valley	42
Figure 4.2. The villa at Ailsworth shown under excavation by Edmund Artis in the 1820s.....	43
Figure 4.3. The villa at Cotterstock showing three of the four courtyards.....	44
Figure 4.4. Plan of the site at Bedford Purlieus.	45
Figure 4.5. View of building 'y' at Bedford Purlieus under excavation in 2010	46
Figure 4.6. Comparative plans of some Nene Valley courtyard villas.....	47
Figure 4.7. The site at Fotheringhay with a villa and its possible associated village.....	48
Figure 4.8. The complex site at Lynch Farm showing dispersed Roman buildings.	49
Figure 4.9. Major villa distribution in the Lower Nene Valley.	50
Figure 4.10. Possible villa estates at Yarwell and Fotheringhay.	51
Figure 4.11. Major Roman buildings within the Fenland basin and the Lower Nene Valley.....	51
Figure 4.12. View of Castor village from the east	52
Figure 4.13. Artis' map of Castor village made in 1828	53
Figure 4.14. Artis' excavations of the bath house below Castor church.....	54
Figure 4.15. Roman walls protruding out of nineteenth-century garden walls at Stocks Hill, Castor.	54
Figure 4.16. Part of the massive wall foundations between Rooms 2 and 3 of the 'North Range' at Castor.....	55
Figure 4.17. Excavations at 'Castor Barns'	56
Figure 4.18. Plan of the 'North Range' at Castor.	56
Figure 4.19. Plan of known Roman buildings at the 'Praetorium' at Castor.	57
Figure 4.20. Photograph of excavations at the 'North Range' of the Praetorium at Castor showing the robbed positions of massive quoin stones.....	60
Figure 4.21. Massive quoin stones built into the early medieval fabric of Castor church.....	61

Piddington, Northamptonshire: wealthy private farm or imperial property?

Figure 5.1. General plan of the villa, showing all features and the main phases discussed in the text	66
Figure 5.2. The pre-villa phase, c. 50 BC – AD 44, showing four D-shaped structures, six round houses, circular structures (with the outline of the later villa)	68
Figure 5.3. Copper-alloy Nertomarus brooch from the Mosel region of Germany, found in a round-house drip gully	68
Figure 5.4. Fragment of an Etruscan spice strainer	68
Figure 5.5. Phase 1; early rectangular wooden and stone buildings, forming the ‘proto-villa’	69
Figure 5.6. Phase 2; ‘cottage- type’ villa, AD 90-100/150	70
Figure 5.7. Building 16, which partly overlay the western fort defences	71
Figure 5.8. Fragment of painted wall-plaster with a floral design, from Building 16	72
Figure 5.9. Phase 4; the villa, c. AD 160-c. 190, with garden post-holes	73
Figure 5.10. Stone base for a timber water tank, for the garden’s irrigation system, adjacent to the well	74
Figure 5.11. Tiles stamped TIB.CL. [SE]VERI	74
Figure 5.12. Phase 5; the post-fire enlargement, c. AD 190 – now a true villa of ‘winged-corridor’ type	75
Figure 5.13. Computer-generated model of the third-century villa of ‘winged corridor’ type	76
Figure 5.14. Painted wall-plaster depicting a human face, against a blue frit background	76
Figure 5.15. A selection of the forty pieces of marble from around the eastern Mediterranean and a fragment of Egyptian porphyry, possibly from a table-top, made in the third century	77
Figure 5.16. Gladiator clasp-knife, third century (replica, as it would have appeared when new)	77
Figure 5.17. A third/fourth-century copper-alloy key handle, in the form of a panther’s head	78
Figure 5.18. Roof tile, with ligatured stamp: PROC	78

Whitley Grange villa, Shropshire: a hunting lodge and its landscape

Figure 6.1. The landscape context of Whitley Grange and the Rea Brook Valley	82
Figure 6.2. Phase plans of Whitley Grange villa	83
Figure 6.3. High-level view of the excavated baths suite looking east towards Meole Brace roadside settlement	84
Figure 6.4. Aerial photograph of the excavation in 1996 showing the mosaic-floored room and baths suite beyond	86
Figure 6.5. Map showing occurrence of cropmark enclosures in the Wroxeter Hinterland Survey study area with the occurrence of Anglo-Saxon <i>-leah</i> place names	88
Figure 6.6. A late Roman hunting party arrives at Whitley Grange villa	90

Moor Park, Hertfordshire: two evaluations of an excavation of the 1950s

Figure 7.1. Moor Park: location sketch map, showing the villa site, The More, and positions of possible water sources	93
Figure 7.2. Moor Park: plan, redrawn from a site plan prepared in the 1950s.	95
Figure 7.3. Moor Park: Room 1, the ‘deep room’, looking south. Scale on ranging rod in feet	96
Figure 7.4. Moor Park: Room 1, showing the three niches in the south wall. Scale rod in feet	96

Great Witcombe, Gloucestershire: a reinterpretation of the site as a temple rather than a villa

Figure 8.1. Plan of Witcombe building by Thomas Lloyd-Baker	101
Figure 8.2. The stepped base of the <i>cantharus</i> fountain	102
Figure 8.3. Plan of drainage system from central Portico and Rooms 34/53	103
Figure 8.4. Plan of phase 1.	104
Figure 8.5. Plan of phase 2.	105
Figure 8.6. Plan of bath suites and access routes in the west range.	108
Figure 8.7. Reconstruction of Room 13	109
Figure 8.8. Reconstruction of lower baths.	110
Figure 8.9. Reconstruction of upper baths	111
Figure 8.10. Reconstruction of Room 46 arch into ante-chamber of upper baths	111
Figure 8.11. Reconstruction of central gallery and octagon, an exterior perspective	113
Figure 8.12. Reconstruction of internal view from the rear of octagon (Room 15)	113
Figure 8.13. Vertical view of restored floor in Room 15	114
Figure 8.14. Reconstruction view of well 32, showing steps and pool	115
Figure 8.15. Attached dwarf column from front portico.	116
Figure 8.16. Reconstruction of interiors in north-east corner of the east range.	118
Figure 8.17. Reconstruction view from vestibule Room 27 to the main staircase	120
Figure 8.18. Reconstruction of interior of phase 2 aisled entrance hall.	120
Figure 8.19. Angled timber stair and doorway in Room 26.	121
Figure 8.20. Roman buildings in the vicinity of the main complex at Great Witcombe	122
Figure 8.21. Reconstruction of the central octagon and portico of Great Witcombe in phase 2	123
Figure 8.22. Reconstruction view of Great Witcombe, phase 2	124
Figure 8.23. Plan of Fanum Martis at Corseul, France	125

Chedworth, Gloucestershire: a question of interpretation

Figure 9.1. Chedworth valley, showing landform contours and the River Coln, and the location of satellite sites.....	129
Figure 9.2. Plan of main site, c. AD 300-360, showing the suggested disposition of rooms and structural features.....	130
Figure 9.3. Computer-generated reconstructed view towards entrance <i>tetrapylon</i> from lower court steps ('The High Place').....	132
Figure 9.4. Reconstruction view looking north over upper court from above Room 2.....	134
Figure 9.5. Summer view from the upper court showing the 'Capitol' dominating the site.....	135
Figure 9.6. Reconstruction view of west tower and <i>nymphaeum</i> from the upper court.....	136
Figure 9.7. Blocking at south end of cross-corridor, showing cut corner stones of west wall.....	136
Figure 9.8. Entrance into Room 20a from north end of cross-corridor.....	137
Figure 9.9. Reconstruction view of the lower court: south wing to tetrapylon steps.....	138
Figure 9.10. Reconstruction view of the interiors in the utility/reception area: Rooms 1-5a.....	140
Figure 9.11. Reconstruction view of the interiors of west wing Rooms 5-5a, 6, 7.....	142
Figure 9.12. Room 5 Bacchic mosaic.....	143
Figure 9.13. Reconstruction view of north baths façade and roof-scape.....	144
Figure 9.14. Reconstruction view to the south-west from exercise 'veranda' Room 25b in the north baths.....	145
Figure 9.15. Aerial reconstruction of courtyard complex.....	149
Figure 9.16. Suggested winter view of the Chedworth complex looking south-east from above the 'Capitol' showing satellite buildings.....	152
Figure 9.17. Reconstruction of the 'Upper Valley Temple'.....	155
Figure 9.18A & B. Column base and capital in Yanworth village.....	156
Figure 9.19. Cassey Compton earthworks in 1962.....	158
Figure 9.20. Site 8: resistivity and contour Survey.....	159
Figure 9.21. Aerial view of site 8 earthworks above the 'villa' in 2010.....	160

Acroterial decoration and *cantharus* fountains

Figure 10.1. The cult chamber, Room 1, at Great Witcombe as first uncovered and recorded in watercolour by Samuel Lysons in 1818 ...	164
Figure 10.2. Lysons' watercolour drawing of the large pierced panel from Great Witcombe as first found but with additions by the author to show all of the decoration on the piece.....	165
Figure 10.3. The S-panel as exhibited at Great Witcombe in 1966.....	165
Figure 10.4. Detail of the chip and incised decoration on the large panel.....	166
Figure 10.6. The large panel as it survives.....	166
Figure 10.5. A previously unpublished fragment of whitened stone from Great Witcombe, presumably from the façade of the building.....	166
Figure 10.7. The detached neck of the larger panel showing the symbolic rope binding and the top of the central upright.....	166
Figure 10.8. Lysons' idea for the placing the S-panels on the roof ridge, redrawn from his sketch.....	167
Figure 10.9. Lysons' alternative placing of the panels as a <i>tympanum</i> or gable decoration redrawn from his sketch to include the outer supports.....	167
Figure 10.10. A restoration of the spectacular acroterion ornament from the Temple of Aphaia on the island of <i>Aegina</i> , c. 500 BC.....	168
Figure 10.11. The <i>acroterion</i> decoration of the Temple of Athena at Assos as displayed in Istanbul archaeological museum.....	169
Figure 10.12. Royal sarcophagus from Sidon.....	169
Figure 10.13. A first-century BC Roman painted terracotta cresting of interlaced double-volutes in the British Museum.....	170
Figure 10.14. Detail of the marble S-cresting from Grottarossa.....	170
Figure 10.15. A rare portrayal of an S <i>sima</i> cresting on the temple of Apollo at Vienne as recorded on a relief in the Musée Lapidaire, Vienne.....	172
Figure 10.16. The end element of an S-cresting frieze from St Laurent-sur-Othain.....	172
Figure 10.17. Pipe-clay shrine to Venus, from Quai Arloing, Lyon, in the Musée Gallo-Romain de Lyon-Fourvière.....	172
Figure 10.18. A block from a frieze as preserved at the Musée d'Art et Histoire, Geneva.....	173
Figure 10.19. Blocks from a continuous frieze as preserved at the Musée d'Art et Histoire, Geneva.....	173
Figure 10.20. The S-motif with supporters used as an <i>acroterion</i> decoration above a gravestone.....	174
Figure 10.21. The bearded Medusa pediment from a mausoleum at Chester preserves Britain's finest illustration of the S-cresting used on a raking pediment.....	174
Figure 10.22. Cresting block from a temple at Corbridge.....	174
Figure 10.23. Angle block from a temple <i>tympanum</i> from Corbridge.....	174
Figure 10.24. Reconstruction of the façade of one of the temples at Corbridge.....	175
Figure 10.25. Cresting block from the site at Well in Yorkshire.....	176
Figure 10.26. An unpublished enigmatic fragment from Great Witcombe that may be part of a third S-panel or an element of a continuous run.....	177
Figure 10.27. The Great Witcombe S-panels used as <i>sima</i> or eave decoration; <i>Above</i> , single panels as spaced decoration and <i>below</i> as a running cresting.....	178
Figure 10.28. The Great Witcombe S-panels used as acroterial decoration.....	178
Figure 10.29. Knossos palace crowned with a row of stylised double S's from a mosaic of Theseus and the Minotaur from Torre de	

Palma, Portugal. The ornament at the rear left has the author's interpretation of the design superimposed	179
Figure 10.30. Ceramic double S's decorating the gutter-line of a nineteenth-century house at Rua de Gil Pais in Torres Novas, Portugal	179
Figure 10.31. A pediment from a pipe-clay shrine found in Gutter Lane, London and crowned with an antithetic <i>S acroterion</i> ornament suggests how those from Great Witcombe may have been used.....	180
Figure 10.32. A moulded terracotta corner <i>acroterion</i> decoration from the early tile kiln found at Coberley villa, Gloucestershire, during the <i>Time Team</i> excavation	180
Figure 10.33. An interpretative reconstruction of a recurvant horned <i>acroterion</i> from a site in South Gloucestershire.....	181
Figure 10.34. A fragment from a large-scale run of gilded bronze S-cresting from a major temple at Écija, Spain	181
Figure 10.35. The V-shaped setting channel on the underside of the Great Witcombe panel	182
Figure 10.36. Edwardian photograph showing panels of Roman S-cresting from the sima of a shrine or mausoleum reused in the exterior wall of the chevet of Nôtre Dame Cathedral, at Le Puy-en-Velay, France	183
Figure 10.37. Holes for fixing metal ties to the rear of the Great Witcombe S-panel	183
Figure 10.38. Tapered side profile of the large panel showing the V-shaped setting channel.....	184
Figure 10.39. A previously unpublished relief from Great Witcombe, featuring a fish on a raised band, suggests that a narrow frieze of fishes similar to those found on some Romano-British mosaic floors was a feature of part of the building	184
Figure 10.40. Buildings with plain gables decorated with large acroterial ornaments from the Pasiphae and Daedalus mosaic from Zeugma, Turkey.....	185
Figure 10.41. The Chedworth S-panel. The curved base suggests that it once ornamented the walls of the <i>nymphaeum</i> . The links that joined the S's remain in the centre and on the right-hand side.....	185
Figure 10.42. The Chedworth S-cresting restored after the pediment relief from Istria and the cornice decoration at Wavre	185
Figure 10.43. An eighth-century AD pediment relief from Istria shows the same kind of linked S-decoration that existed at Chedworth.....	186
Figure 10.44. The Chedworth <i>nymphaeum</i> . The cresting would have ornamented the top of the curving back wall regardless of whether or not this structure was originally roofed in antiquity.....	186
Figure 10.45. The solid S-panel that may have formed part of the Chedworth <i>nymphaeum</i> 's <i>tympanum</i> or acted as the central element of the running S-cresting.....	187
Figure 10.46. Underside of the curved Chedworth cresting panel showing the neatly cut fixing slot for a robbed metal pi-clamp to fix it to an adjoining panel.....	187
Figure 10.47. An interpretative reconstruction of the Chedworth <i>nymphaeum</i> with the curved S-cresting based on the terracotta shrine from Quai Arloing, Lyon. Fragmentary statues found to the rear of Room 5a may have stood on the front pedestals.	188
Figure 10.48. A reconstruction by Forestier, under the direction of the excavator, of the impressive Antonine temple found in Chedworth Wood.	189
Figure 10.49. The stepped base of the <i>cantharus</i> fountain from Great Witcombe	190
Figure 10.50. The <i>cantharus</i> fountain base from Great Witcombe, showing the central hole to accommodate a feedpipe.....	191
Figure 10.51. An interpretative reconstruction of the Great Witcombe <i>cantharus</i> fountain with a low feedpipe	191
Figure 10.52. Deer drinking from a <i>cantharus</i> fountain provided with a tall feedpipe on a mosaic from Carthage and now in the British Museum	192
Figure 10.53. A rare bronze ornamental feedpipe in the shape of a <i>thyrsus</i> . Reputed to be from Pompeii and now in the British Museum. The pine cone is pierced and forms the rose	193
Figure 10.54. A suggested reconstruction of the Great Witcombe <i>cantharus</i> fountain as it might have appeared <i>in situ</i> in the octagonal pool of Room 15	193
The stones with Chi-Rho inscriptions at Chedworth	
Figure 11.1. George Fox's 1886 watercolour of the angular slabs from Chedworth	198
Figure 11.2. Detail of George Fox's 1886 plan of Chedworth villa.....	199
Figure 11.3. The two Chi-Rhos found by Lysons in 1864.....	200
Figure 11.4. Two slabs put together to form a rectangle and shown at the same scale as the plan of the central entrance to the western <i>porticus</i>	201
Figure 11.5. Probable configuration of the coping stones on the rim of the octagonal pool	202
Figure 11.6. Photograph of the Chi-Rho with with <i>alpha</i> and <i>omega</i> encircled.....	203
Figure 11.7 Interpretative drawing of Fig. 11.6	203
The St Laurence School villa, Bradford on Avon, Wiltshire	
Figure 12.1. Site location and environs	205
Figure 12.2. Site plan based on excavation, geophysical survey and air photography.....	206
Figure 12.3. Geophysical (gradiometry) survey	207
Figure 12.4. Pre-villa plough-marks under Room 1, Building 2.....	208
Figure 12.5. Plan of Building 1.....	209
Figure 12.6. Threshold to Building 1. View from the south	210
Figure 12.7. Building 1, Room 9, mosaic floor, as excavated	210

Figure 12.8. Building 1. Room 9 plan as excavated	211
Figure 12.9. Building 1. Room 9 section through platform	212
Figure 12.10. Plan of west end of Building 2	213
Figure 12.11. View of Room 3, Building 2 under excavation. View from the north	214
Figure 12.12. View of Room 8, Building 2 showing pre-villa plough-marks. View from the east	214
Figure 12.13. View of Room 9, Building 2, showing collapsed roof tiles in the flue. View from the east	215
Figure 12.14. Plan of the bath-suite based on excavations in 1976 and 2004	216
Figure 12.15. Burial 1. View from the south	217
Figure 12.16. Burial 2. View from the west	218

Dinnington and Yarford: two villas in south and west Somerset

Figure 13.1. Map showing Yarford (no. 1), Dinnington (no. 35) and other Roman villas in the Ilchester region.....	224
Figure 13.2. Dinnington: geophysical survey, undertaken by GSB Prospection. A: gradiometer survey, B: gradiometer survey summary interpretation, C: resistivity survey, D: resistivity survey summary interpretation.....	225
Figure 13.3. Dinnington: plan of the west wing and the western end of the north wing.....	226
Figure 13.4. Dinnington: mosaic with marine theme, in room F in Fig. 13.3, showing the corner design and the central section of one of the sides.....	227
Figure 13.5. Dinnington: the apsidal hall, room C, from the west.....	228
Figure 13.6. Dinnington: view from the north of excavations in the west wing; in the foreground a layer of burnt grain in room F, with square gridded sampling scheme visible.	229
Figure 13.7. Dinnington: horse skeleton from very late or post-Roman phase	230
Figure 13.8.A Dinnington: Hercules and Antaeus sculpture, found in a rubble layer over corner tower (Fig. 13.3, B)	231
Figure 13.8.B Marble table support depicting Hercules and Antaeus, found off the coast of Catania, Sicily. Greek/Hellenistic, 200-100 BC. Museo Civico 'Castello Ursino', Catania, inv. no. 56.....	231
Figure 13.9. Dinnington: mosaic of Daphne, from the apsidal hall, room C, photographed at the time of excavation.	232
Figure 13.10. Dinnington: mosaic with possible helmeted headdress, from the apsidal hall, room C.....	232
Figure 13.11. Yarford: map showing site location and other Southern Quantocks Archaeological Survey sites	235
Figure 13.12. Yarford: magnetometer survey, by Alex Turner for SQAS	236
Figure 13.13. Yarford: site plan.	236
Figure 13.14. Yarford: the mosaic in rooms D and E.....	238
Figure 13.15. Yarford: the mosaic in rooms D and E, showing Late Roman damage to the mosaic	239

The Ashtead Roman villa and tileworks

Figure 14.1. Overall sketch plan.....	244
Figure 14.2. Relief patterns on box tiles recorded from Ashtead	245
Figure 14.3. Overhead photograph of part of the possible proto-villa, showing the north-west corner of the original building with traces of internal walls and the addition to the north (left).....	246
Figure 14.4. Lowther's plan of the separate bath-house at Ashtead.....	247
Figure 14.5. Contemporary photo of Lowther (left) and Cotton standing behind room B of the separate bath house, with the circular <i>laconicum</i> to the right.	248
Figure 14.6. View looking east across the eastern end of the Lowther house.....	249
Figure 14.7. Lowther's plan of the Ashtead house	249
Figure 14.8. Contemporary photo of work in progress in room 6 of Lowther's house in 1926, looking south-east, and more or less the same view in 2012	250
Figure 14.9. The tile kilns from the west showing the <i>tegula</i> structure at the end of the central flue and the stokehole retaining walls in the foreground.....	252
Figure 14.10. Overhead view of the back of the tile kilns with east at the top	253
Figure 14.11. The face pot; the lower piece probably belongs elsewhere but gives the correct impression	254

Lullingstone Roman villa

Figure 15.1. (A) Plan of the main buildings of Lullingstone villa. (B) Phase plans of Lullingstone villa.....	262-264
Figure 15.2. Reconstruction of Lullingstone villa in its landscape setting, by Peter Urmston	265
Figure 15.3. Archive photo of the cellar (or deep room) with the busts re-positioned as found	266
Figure 15.4. Plaster impression of cornelian intaglio depicting Victoria signing a shield which is attached to a trophy	267
Figure 15.5. Mosaic of Europa and the Bull, the Four Seasons, and Bellerophon and the Chimaera.....	270

Clinging to Britannia's hemline: continuity and discontinuity in villa estates, boundaries and historic land use on the islands of Vectis and Tanatis

Figure 16.1. The natural zones of Wight.....	282
Figure 16.2. The location of the Roman islands of <i>Vectis</i> and <i>Tanatis</i>	282
Figure 16.3. <i>Vectis</i> and <i>Tanatis</i> are near-shore islands with similar lithologies.....	283

Figure 16.4. The ancient course of the Wantsum Channel and the former detachment of the Isle of Thanet from mainland Kent	283
Figure 16.5. The geological base of the natural zones of <i>Tanatis</i> and <i>Vectis</i>	284
Figure 16.6. Pie diagram showing preferred villa locations on Thanet and Wight	284
Figure 16.7. Some geological and coastal geomorphological elements of <i>Tanatis</i>	285
Figure 16.8. Compton Farm, Freshwater, 2022. A scarp-foot farmhouse	285
Figure 16.9. <i>Vectis</i> turned and sliced	286
Figure 16.10. Thanet's villas and its topographical relief, showing the locations of chalk combes	287
Figure 16.11. Thanet's villas and their relationship with earlier human activity represented by Bronze Age barrows	288
Figure 16.12. The villas of <i>Tanatis</i> and their coastal proximities.....	289
Figure 16.13. Villas and cliff-gap beaching points	290
Figure 16.14. Villas and historic anchorages in the Solent and <i>Magnus Portus</i>	292
Figure 16.15. Maritime villas, indeterminate coastal buildings and navigable inlets on the Solent coast of Wight	293
Figure 16.16. The terrestrial themed floor in the outer bay of room 12 in Brading villa.....	294
Figure 16.17. Seasonal farming tasks in the Medusa saltire in the outer bay of the room 12 mosaic at Brading villa.....	295
Figure 16.18. Allusions to human transformations in Ovid's <i>Metamorphoses</i> are conveyed in the room 12 saltire at Brading.....	295
Figure 16.19. With his steersman oar, Brading's Triton assumes the role of navigator, master and captain	296
Figure 16.20. In Brading's maritime panel, a muscular Triton, possibly Gaeos, alludes to the power of the sea and the bounty of its lurking fish.....	296
Figure 16.21. Bowcombe Valley, as the 'central place' of <i>Vectis</i>	298
Figure 16.22. In medieval Wight, the port-borough of Newport supplanted the former villa cluster at Bowcombe to become the Island's new 'central place'	298
Figure 16.23. The principal economic zones promoting the development of medieval Newport as the 'central place' of Wight	299
Figure 16.24. Brading villa regained its ancient coastal configuration under flood conditions in February 1994	299
Figure 16.25. The 'central place' of <i>Vectis</i>	301
Figure 16.26. The Bowcombe Valley. The epicentre of Roman and Saxon Wight	302
Figure 16.27. The bifurcation of Thanet into east and west zones dominated by the pre-Conquest and later possessions of St Augustine's Abbey at Canterbury (Monkton) and the See of Canterbury (Minster)	303
Figure 16.28. <i>Mappa Thaneti insulae</i> , drawn by Thomas of Elmham (c. 1410–11).....	304
Figure 16.29. A general reconstruction of Wight's pre-Norman land units, defined by the boundaries of the Island's mother parishes.....	305
Figure 16.30. The Whippingham/Arreton boundary follows Palmers Brook southwards from A to its rising at B	306
Figure 16.31. The Aran island of Inis Meáin is bisected by an ancient median boundary akin to the primary east–west division of Wight.....	309
Figure 16.32. Boundaries of Wight's militia centons, based on a perceived configuration of 'tythings' and the disposition of named officers and Centoners	311
Figure 16.33. Some apparent trans-Solent landholders with estates in the Isle of Wight	312
Figure 16.34. The integration of the Isle of Thanet within the Juto-Saxon lathe of 'Borough' or land of the 'Borowara'	314
Figure 16.35. Rock villa set within the Saxon estate and mother parish of Calbourne	314
Figure 16.36. The environs of Brading villa showing its former maritime location	316
Figure 16.37. Bowcombe Valley. 'The central place' of Wight in Anglo-Saxon times. The old villa sites of the district are denoted as triangles.....	316
Figure 16.38. The central mother parish divisions of Anglo-Saxon Wight.....	317
Figure 16.39. Dressel 1 type amphorae in the Isle of Wight	319

Where did Sidonius Apollinaris live?

Figure 17.1. Location map of sites mentioned in the text.	333
Figure 17.2. Plan of Phase 2 at La-Chapelle-de-Pessat, Riom	334
Figure 17.3. Plan of Phase 3A at La-Chapelle-de-Pessat, Riom.....	335
Figure 17.4. Plan of Phase 3B at La-Chapelle-de-Pessat, Riom.....	336
Figure 17.5. Plan of Phases 4 and 5 at La-Chapelle-de-Pessat, Riom.....	336
Figure 17.6. Plan of the church of Saint-Victor-de-Massiac.....	337
Figure 17.7. Phasing of the church of Saint-Victor-de-Massiac.	338
Figure 17.8. View overlooking the village and church of Aydat and their relationship to the lake.	340

From Roman villa to medieval village at the Mola di Monte Gelato, Lazio, Italy

Figure 18.1. (A) Map of South Etruria in the early Imperial period, showing the density of villas in the survey area between the River Tiber and the Via Cassia, other settlements and Roman roads. (B) Map of South Etruria in the medieval period, showing Mola di Monte Gelato, other settlements and the roads in use in this period.....	343
Figure 18.2. Mola di Monte Gelato: the excavated sites.....	344
Figure 18.3. Mola di Monte Gelato: phase plan of the excavations, excluding the Castellaccio site	346

Figure 18.4. Mola di Monte Gelato: head of C. Valerius Zetus from the tomb monument, found broken up in the late Roman lime kiln.....	347
Figure 18.5. Mola di Monte Gelato: plan of late Roman features of phases 3 and 4	347
Figure 18.6. Mola di Monte Gelato: north-west corner of the courtyard portico, showing slots and post-holes for probable grain bins dug into the early Imperial floor. The fish-pool infilled in the second century is visible in the background (with vertical scale)	348
Figure 18.7. Mola di Monte Gelato: early Imperial rooms reused in the late Roman period as workshops, with a channelled furnace visible in the central room.....	348
Figure 18.8. Mola di Monte Gelato: excavation of a piece of early Imperial sculpture in the lime kiln.....	349
Figure 18.9. Mola di Monte Gelato: reconstructed plan and elevations of the church and baptistery, c. AD 800	351
Figure 18.10. Mola di Monte Gelato: part of a chancel screen or iconostasis from the church of c. AD 800	351
Figure 18.11. Mola di Monte Gelato: cave adjacent to the main excavated site, with evidence of ninth-century occupation	352
Figure 18.12. Mola di Monte Gelato: ninth-century pottery kiln positioned in the south-west corner of an abandoned late Roman room, itself adapted from the early Imperial villa. A section of fallen masonry is visible in the foreground	352
Figure 18.13. Mola di Monte Gelato: infant skeleton from the baptistery area	352
Figure 18.14. The hill-town of Calcata, on a promontory overlooking the River Treia a few kilometres downstream of Monte Gelato and Mazzano. It is a typical example of a medieval defended settlement in South Etruria.....	354
Figure 18.15. Mola di Monte Gelato: a reconstruction of the late Roman settlement, phase 3.....	354

List of Tables

Roman villas in Britain and beyond

Table 1.1: Select list of villa excavation reports and studies from Roman Britain, 1990-2020.	4
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Clinging to Britannia's hemline: continuity and discontinuity in villa estates, boundaries and historic land use on the islands of *Vectis* and *Tanatis*

Table 16 A: Vectensian villas, suspected villa sites and tile scatters plotted in Figure 16.3	327
Table 16 B: Villas and suspected villas on the Isle of Thanet	328
Table 16 C: Additional unspecified Roman sites on the Isle of Thanet, Jones 2017	328
Table 16 D: The natural zones of Wight and Thanet.....	329
Table 16 E: Villas and the southern chalklands.....	329
Table 16 F: Known villas in southern English counties.....	329
Table 16 G: Chalkland villas loosely grouped by south-coast tribal regions	330
Table 16 H: Ecclesiastical parishes and their sizes in Thanet	330
Table 16 I: The approximate sizes of mother parish/land units of Wight	331
Table 16 J: Wight's principal property owners at the time of King Edward	331

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Roman villas in Britain and beyond

New discoveries and new interpretations of their role in culture, religion and landscape

Martin Henig, Anthony King and Grahame Soffe

The genesis of this volume was a conference held in the Stevenson Lecture Theatre at the British Museum, 13-14 June 2009, jointly organised by the Association for Roman Archaeology (ARA) and the British Museum's Departments of Prehistory and Europe, and Portable Antiquities and Treasure (Soffe 2009, 73; Walters and Soffe 2009). It followed a similar event by the ARA in the 1990s that resulted in the publication of the volume *Architecture in Roman Britain* (Johnson and Haynes 1996) which contained several papers on villas, and can be seen as the basis on which the initiative for the current volume was founded.

The rationale for the 2009 conference was to challenge the traditional focus on villas as agricultural establishments, following the emphasis by Rivet on a definition of a villa as 'a farm which is integrated into the social and economic organisation of the Roman world' (1969, 177). Economic interpretations have tended to dominate villa studies in Britain, especially in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Branigan and Miles 1988), together with socio-economic interpretation of villa plans (e.g. Smith 1997). There had been suggestions, however, that other lines of interpretation could be equally important, notably in the article by Graham Webster (1983; 1991, 95-111) on Chedworth and its possible role as a sanctuary rather than a villa. By the 1990s, the move away from strictly economic interpretations had become more marked, as surveyed in two brief but influential papers by Webster (1993; 1995). Other villas were put forward by Webster as potentially religious shrines rather than purely villas, notably Great Witcombe, Gloucestershire, Box, Wiltshire and Gadebridge, Hertfordshire. Of these, Great Witcombe is the subject of re-evaluation in this volume (Walters and Rider; Beeson), together with new findings concerning Chedworth itself (Walters and Rider; Beeson; Cosh, all in this volume), while Box has been considered elsewhere, including the possibility of a sanctuary to the west of the main building (Corney 2012, 68-73). Gadebridge has been the subject of further excavation since Webster's papers, but the report did not take up the suggestion of a religious reinterpretation (Neal 2001, 124).

In preparation for the conference, speakers were asked to present in-depth interpretations that might lead in new directions, for instance villas with unusual origins, with unconventional architecture, or with topographical locations that might challenge an agricultural purpose. Did some of the villas, both newly discovered and very well-known, have architectural elements that could lead to their being interpreted as something else altogether, such as a religious sanctuary? Were some villas primarily leisure retreats, without a clear agricultural function? Finally, how far did the chronological sequence at a villa indicate changes in usage?

Most of the speakers who delivered papers at the conference are represented in this volume, with the exception of a small number who published their research elsewhere. It has taken far longer than we had hoped and anticipated to collect and edit these papers, and we apologise to those contributors who sent in their contributions on time. Others were held up by new research, or the evidence presented gave rise to new papers or appendices being commissioned. The result is we hope a far better book than it would have been, though inevitably in a work of this sort more questions have been raised than answered. All the papers were fully revised in 2020/21.

As this introduction was reaching its final draft, news of an important mosaic acquisition came through, concerning the sumptuous villa at Dewlish, Dorset (Hewitt *et al.* 2021; Randall 2021). A panel from one of the mosaics, dating from the second half of the fourth century (Fig. 1.1; Cosh and Neal 2005, 74-86, mosaic 164.8) had been lifted at the time of the excavation in the 1970s, and kept in Dewlish House until sold at auction in 2020. It was afterwards sold to a foreign buyer, and was set to leave the country, unless an equivalent to the valuation of £135,000 could be raised. Following a vigorous campaign, it was successfully acquired for Dorset County Museum in Dorchester (where other portions of the mosaic are displayed) thanks to grants from several charitable organisations, including the



Figure 1.1 The 'Leopard Mosaic', from Dewlish villa, Dorset. This was recently acquired for Dorset County Museum from private owners, after a fund-raising campaign. (Photo courtesy of Dorset County Museum and Anthony Beeson)

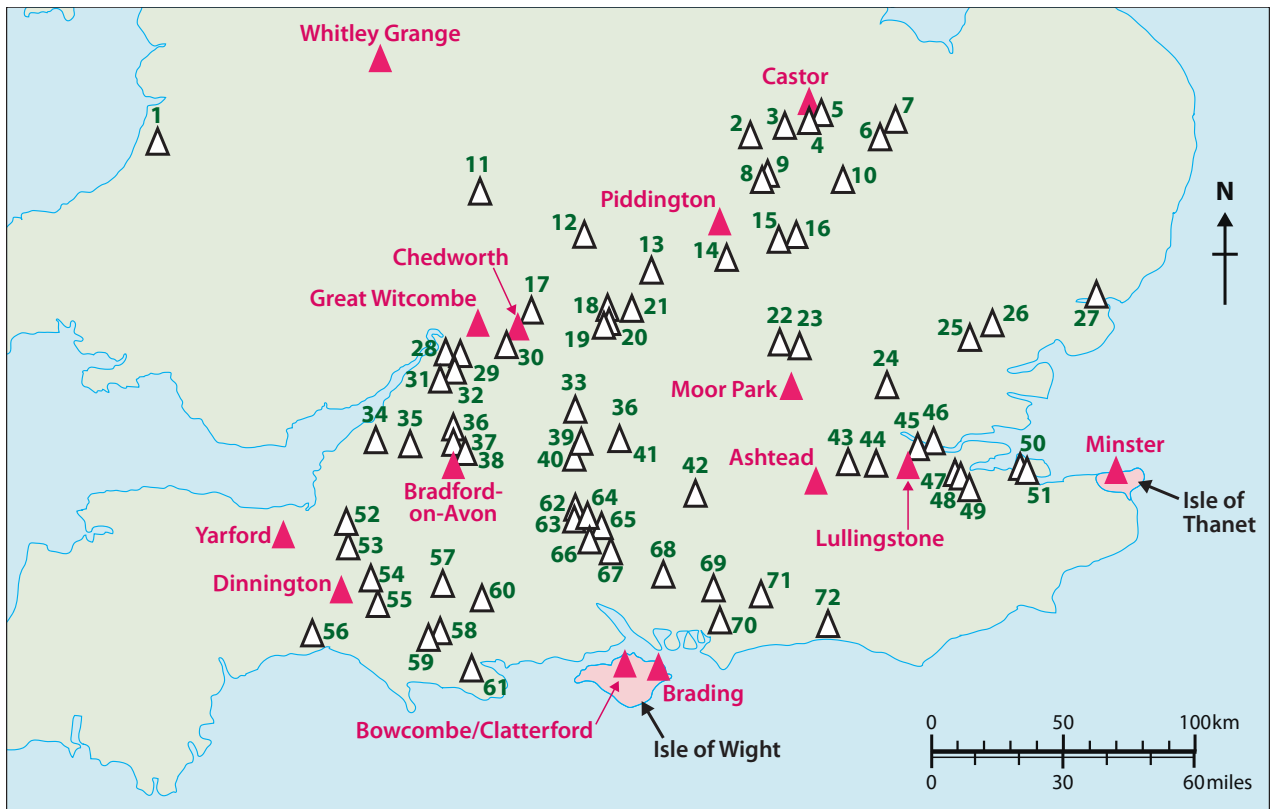
Association for Roman Archaeology. This is the only almost completely surviving figural panel from the site and depicts a leopard leaping upon the back of an antelope. Highly naturalistic, it seems to be influenced by similar scenes of animal conflict from North Africa, though the general style of the mosaic and others from the villa shows it was the work of a regional Durnovarian workshop. The mosaics and wall-paintings from villas in Roman Britain had artistic merit equivalent to those of Mediterranean villas, especially during the fourth century.

Museums such as the one at Dorchester have a vital role to play in promoting our understanding of Roman villas, and also in preserving the Roman past for public display (Dawson 2021). Only a modest number of villa-type sites in Britain have mosaics and structural remains *in situ*, and still visible to the public. These include Chedworth, Great Witcombe, Brading and Lullingstone, all discussed in this volume, although several others, amongst them Fishbourne and Bignor, both in West Sussex, Rockbourne, Hampshire, Newport, Isle of Wight, Littlecote, Wiltshire, Crofton, Greater London, and North Leigh, Oxfordshire,

may also be visited (cf. Allen and Bryan 2020). The Association for Roman Archaeology has links with many of these sites, and membership of the ARA offers a discount or free entry into the vast majority of them (see *ARA News* 43, 2020, for further information).

Changing interpretations

This volume appears to be the first collection of papers on the villas of Roman Britain since Malcolm Todd's *Studies in the Romano-British villa*, published as long ago as 1978, although of course a great deal of work has been done over the past 45 years. Very important studies, including those by Ernest Black (1987), Keith Branigan and David Miles (1988), Richard Hingley (1989), T. F. C. Blagg (1990; 2002), Eleanor Scott (1993), Roy Friendship-Taylor, ed. (1997), J. T. Smith (1997), Pat Witts (2000), John Manley (2000), David Tomalin (2006) and Barry Cunliffe (2008; 2013a), have vastly increased our knowledge, while the great corpus of *Roman Mosaics in Britain* by David Neal and Stephen Cosh (Neal and Cosh 2002; 2009; Cosh and Neal 2005; 2010) has not only provided a comprehensive listing of villa mosaics mostly of fourth-century date but



Key to numbers: 1 Abermagwr; 2 Stanion; 3 Cotterstock; 4 Haddon; 5 Orton Hall Farm; 6 Chatteris; 7 Stonea; 8 Stanwick; 9 Redlands Farm; 10 Rectory Farm; 11 Bays Meadow; 12 Pillerton Priors; 13 Croughton; 14 Bancroft; 15 Marsh Leys; 16 Newnham; 17 Turkdean; 18 Shakenoak; 19 Stonesfield; 20 North Leigh; 21 Tackley; 22 Gadebridge; 23 Gorhambury; 24 Chigwell; 25 Great Holts Farm; 26 Rivenhall; 27 Little Oakley; 28 Frocester; 29 Woodchester; 30 Ditches; 31 Wortley; 32 Kingscote; 33 Alfred's Castle; 34 Gatcombe; 35 Keynsham; 36 Truckle Hill; 37 Box; 38 Atworth; 39 Littlecote; 40 Castle Cope; 41 Boffington; 42 North Warnborough; 43 Beddington; 44 Keston; 45 Darenth; 46 Northfleet; 47 Snodland; 48 Eccles; 49 The Mount, Maidstone; 50 Bax Farm; 51 Hog Brook; 52 Shapwick; 53 Low Ham; 54 Lufton; 55 Halstock; 56 Holcombe; 57 Hinton St Mary; 58 Druce Farm; 59 Dewlish; 60 Tarrant Hinton; 61 Bucknowle; 62 Thruxton; 63 Grateley South; 64 Dunkirt Barn; 65 Fullerton; 66 Houghton Down; 67 Sparsholt; 68 Meonstoke; 69 Batten Hanger; 70 Fishbourne; 71 Bignor; 72 Southwick.

Figure 1.2. Map of villas in Table 1.1, and of the villas that are the subject of papers in this volume (individually named). NB, seven villas in Table 1.1, Aiskew (N Yorks), Beadlam (N Yorks), Eastfield (N Yorks), Ingleby Barwick (Teesside), Ketton (Rutland), Lyde Green (S Gloucestershire), and Bratton Seymour (Somerset; cf. this volume, Fig. 13.1, no. 9) are not shown on this map. (Map by Nicholas Hogben)

made many basic plans accessible (see also Cosh 2020). Sarah Scott's study of the art and architecture of these villas (Scott 2000) places them, or at least the richer villas of the Late Roman period, in their social context.

At a more specific level, individual villas have been published in significant numbers over the last four decades, both as substantial monographs, reports in journals or as more synoptic papers and volumes. A selection of these is given in Table 1.1 and on the map, Fig. 1.2, to illustrate the rich resource now available to students and researchers into Romano-British villas. It is very apparent from the number of reports, especially those of the twenty-first century, that much activity

has been undertaken on villas in Britain. An important contributory factor has been the use of modern geophysical survey methods, which have found new sites, such as Dinnington (this volume), or established the full plans of those already known, such as Low Ham, Somerset (Payne *et al.* 2019) or North Leigh, Oxfordshire (Creighton and Allen 2017). These techniques have fully proved their worth in increasing our understanding of villas, and are destined to be a major element in most field projects in the future. The older technology of aerial photography still yields important discoveries, however, such as the villa at Abermagwr, Ceredigion, discovered from the air during the drought of summer 2006 (Davies and Driver 2018).

Table 1.1. Select list of villa excavation reports and studies from Roman Britain, 1990-2020.

Site	County	Reference
Abermagwr	Ceredigion	Davies & Driver 2018
Aiskew	N Yorkshire	Shepherd 2021; Shepherd <i>et al.</i> 2022
Alfred's Castle	Oxfordshire	Gosden & Lock 2003
Ashstead	Surrey	Bird, this volume
Atworth	Wiltshire	Erskine & Ellis 2008
Bancroft	Buckinghamshire	Williams & Zeepvat 1994
Batten Hanger	W Sussex	Kenny <i>et al.</i> 2016
Bax Farm	Kent	Wilkinson 2011; n.d.
Bays Meadow	Worcestershire	Hurst 2006
Beadlam	N Yorkshire	Neal 1996a
Beddington	Surrey	Howell 2005
Bignor	W Sussex	Aldsworth & Rudling 1995; Rudling & Russell 2015
Bowcombe/Clatterford	Isle of Wight	Busby <i>et al.</i> 2001; Tomalin, this volume
Box	Wiltshire	Corney 2012
Boxford	Berkshire	Beeson <i>et al.</i> 2019; Dunbabin 2020
Bradford-on-Avon	Bath and NE Somerset	Corney, this volume
Brading	Isle of Wight	Hanworth 2004; Cunliffe 2013b; Tomalin, this volume
Bratton Seymour	Somerset	Hughes & Biddulph 2020; <i>The Newt in Somerset</i> 2021
Bucknowle	Dorset	Light & Ellis 2009
Castle Copse	Wiltshire	Hostetter & Howe 1997
Castor	Cambridgeshire	Upex 2011; this volume
Chatteris	Cambridgeshire	Evans 2003
Chedworth	Gloucestershire	Papworth 2021; Esmonde Cleary <i>et al.</i> 2022; Walters & Rider, this volume
Chignall	Essex	Clarke 1998
Cotterstock	Northamptonshire	Upex 2001
Croughton	Northamptonshire	Dawson 2008
Danebury Environs villas	Hampshire	Cunliffe 2008
Darent	Kent	Black 1981; Beeson 2020
Dewlish	Dorset	Putnam 2007, 97-116; Hewitt <i>et al.</i> 2021; Randall 2021
Dinnington	Somerset	Croft 2009; King & Grande, this volume
Ditches	Gloucestershire	Trow <i>et al.</i> 2009
Druce Farm	Dorset	Ladle & Bithell 2016; Beeson 2016; Ladle 2022
Dunkirt Barn	Hampshire	Cunliffe & Poole 2008, Part 7
Eastfield	N Yorkshire	Beeson 2021
Eccles	Kent	Ratcliff 2018; Stoodley and Cosh 2021
Fishbourne	W Sussex	Cunliffe 1991; 1998; Cunliffe <i>et al.</i> 1996; Manley 2000; Manley & Rudkin 2003; 2005; 2006
Frocester	Gloucestershire	Price 2000; 2010
Fullerton	Hampshire	Cunliffe & Poole 2008, Part 3
Gadebridge	Hertfordshire	Neal 2001

ROMAN VILLAS IN BRITAIN AND BEYOND

Site	County	Reference
Gatcombe	Somerset	Smisson & Groves 2014
Gorhambury	Hertfordshire	Neal et al. 1990
Grateley South	Hampshire	Cunliffe & Poole 2008, Part 2
Great Holts Farm	Essex	Germany 2003
Great Witcombe	Gloucestershire	Leach 1998; Holbrook 2003; Walters & Rider, this volume
Haddon	Peterborough	Hinman 2003
Halstock	Dorset	Lucas 1993; Cosh 2022
Hinton St Mary	Dorset	Putnam 2007, 88-9; <i>Mosaic</i> 40, 2013, whole issue
Hog Brook, Faversham	Kent	Wilkinson 2009
Holcombe	Devon	Walters 1996
Houghton Down	Hampshire	Cunliffe & Poole 2008, Part 1
Ingleby Barwick	Teesside	Willis & Carne 2013
Keston	Kent	Philp et al. 1999
Ketton	Rutland	Henig 2022a; <i>ARA News</i> 47 & 48, 2022; Thomas et al. 2022
Keynsham	Bath and NE Somerset	Russell 1985; Walters 1996; 2015
Kingscote	Gloucestershire	Timby 1998
Littlecote	Berkshire	Phillips 2022; Walters 1996; Anon 1994
Little Oakley	Essex	Barford 2002
Low Ham	Somerset	Croft 2009; Henig 2019; Payne et al. 2019
Lufton	Somerset	Walters 1996
Lullingstone	Kent	Henig 1997; Mackenzie 2019; Henig & Soffe, this volume
Lyde Green	Gloucestershire	Hobson & Newman 2021
Marsh Leys	Bedfordshire	Luke & Preece 2011
Meonstoke	Hampshire	King & Potter 1990; King 1996; 2020
Minster in Thanet	Kent	Perkins 2003; Perkins et al. 2004-19; Tomalin, this volume
Moor Park	Hertfordshire	Leitch & Biddle, this volume
Mount, The, Maidstone	Kent	Houliston 1999
Newnham	Bedfordshire	Ingham et al. 2016
Northfleet	Kent	Biddulph 2011
North Leigh	Oxfordshire	Ellis 1999; Wilson 2004; Creighton & Allen 2017
North Warnborough	Hampshire	Wallace 2018
Orton Hall Farm	Peterborough	Mackreth 1996
Piddington	Northamptonshire	Friendship-Taylor, this volume
Pillerton Priors	Warwickshire	Sabin 2003
Rectory Farm	Cambridgeshire	Green 2017, 43-5; Lyons 2019
Redlands Farm	Northamptonshire	Keevil 1996
Rivenhall	Essex	Rodwell & Rodwell 1993
Shakenoak	Oxfordshire	Brodribb et al. 2005
Shapwick	Somerset	Abdy et al. 2001
Snodland	Kent	Dawkes 2015
Southwick	W Sussex	Standing 2014

Site	County	Reference
Sparsholt	Hampshire	Johnston & Dicks 2014
Stanion	Northamptonshire	Tingle 2008
Stanwick	Northamptonshire	Neal 1989; 1996b, 38-43; Coombe <i>et al.</i> 2021
Stonea	Cambridgeshire	Jackson & Potter 1996; Malim 2005
Stonesfield	Oxfordshire	Freshwater <i>et al.</i> 2000
Surrey villas	Surrey	Bird 2017
Sussex villas	E & W Sussex	Rudling 1998
Tackley	Oxfordshire	Sánchez 2021
Tarrant Hinton	Dorset	Graham 2006
Thrupton	Hampshire	Henig & Soffe 1993; Cunliffe & Poole 2008, Part 4
Truckle Hill, North Wraxall	Wiltshire	Andrews <i>et al.</i> 2013; Andrews 2016
Turkdean	Gloucestershire	Holbrook 2004
Whitley Grange	Shropshire	White, this volume
Wilts villas	Wiltshire	Walters 2001
Woodchester	Gloucestershire	Walters 1996
Wortley	Gloucestershire	Wilson <i>et al.</i> 2014
Yarford	Somerset	Croft 2009; King & Grande, this volume

Research on the Romano-British countryside during the 1990s to 2010s has moved away from a focus on villas to an approach that can be regarded as more holistic and landscape orientated, such as the major project *New Visions of the Countryside of Roman Britain* that resulted in three influential volumes in the Britannia Monograph series (Smith *et al.* 2016; 2018; Allen *et al.* 2017). Other projects on similar lines (King 2004; Taylor 2007; Rippon *et al.* 2015; Millett *et al.* 2016, Part IV), also pushed the research direction towards agricultural exploitation, field systems, and integration of varying forms of rural settlement, as prefigured in the research agenda put forward by Webster (1995). This has been mirrored in other Roman provinces, too, notably northern Gaul and Germany (e. g. Roymans and Derks 2011; Habermehl 2014; Roymans *et al.* 2015; Reddé 2017/18). Nevertheless, villas are recognised as a specific form of ancient rural settlement, even if their definition can on occasion be problematic, and a recent volume on Mediterranean villas has highlighted their continuing importance as a focus of study (Marzano and Métraux 2018).

This volume draws on the recent landscape studies of Roman Britain, and has papers devoted to regional evaluations (Tomalin, Upex, this volume). It is, however, specifically concerned with a wide range of structures from the countryside of Roman Britain, which have all at one time or another been designated as Roman villas. They range from buildings of very modest size to

country houses sometimes planned on a palatial scale and endowed with every luxury. Most of the medium sized and smaller houses were centres of agricultural production, and the wealth of the large estates would generally have depended on farming, doubtless from dependent, satellite tenant farms as in the case of the great estates of medieval and early modern times. However, some villas were industrial centres like Chesters, Woolaston, Gloucestershire, with its evidence for iron furnaces (Fulford and Allen 1992), Ashtead, Surrey (this volume) and the villa associated with a tile kiln at Crookhorn, Hampshire (Soffe, Nicholls and Moore 1989), while others both inland as well as on the coast, may have been based on pisciculture (fish farming), for example Shakenoak, Oxfordshire (Brodrigg *et al.* 2005, 420-23, 553), or salt working, such as Bays Meadow, Droitwich (Hurst 2006). David Tomalin's paper in this volume discusses the significance of coastal villas and their links with maritime communications and exploitation (see also Tomalin 2006).

A significant theme in the volume is that it has become apparent that some buildings generally regarded as simple villas also had a religious aspect, where temples were contiguous to villas. This was almost certainly true of Chedworth, where several temples, one of very large size, a number of images of Diana as well as what appear to be two wings of rooms for presumably paying guests are suggestive of some sort of sanctuary. Is one to regard

the main block of the building with its rich mosaics in corridors, bath-house and *triclinium* as a luxury country house like that at Woodchester or rather in the nature of the guest house like that at the sanctuary of Nodens in Lydney Park also in Gloucestershire? More certainly the 'villa' at Great Witcombe and the partially excavated building at Moor Park, Hertfordshire (this volume), represent water sanctuaries on the lines of those in Gaul such as Fontaines-Salées. Lullingstone, discussed in this volume, is enigmatic, with evidence for religious cult extending from a second century shrine of the nymphs presumably of the River Darent in the basement, to offerings made in the third century before two marble busts, and finally a house church in an upper room. Near to Lullingstone, the large villa at Darenth also has good evidence suggesting a water cult was practised at this site, which may have been as much a public building as a private villa (Beeson 2020; Black 1981). Cult activity at villa sites may have originated in the Iron Age, as seen in the horse and foal burials under a mid/late Roman hexagonal building at Meonstoke, Hampshire (King 2020). The hexagonal building is an unusual architectural form for Roman Britain (King 2023) and was almost certainly a shrine adjacent to an aisled building, and probably part of a villa estate.

In the late Roman period, there is evidence for pagan religious rites in a triconch building beside the main villa and beside a stream at Littlecote (Walters 1996; Anon 1994) and in a room attached to the aisled villa at Thruxton, Hampshire (Henig and Soffe 1993; Cunliffe and Poole 2008, vol. 2, part 4). Apart from Lullingstone, Christianity was also present in Hinton St Mary, Dorset, as revealed by the well-known mosaic apparently depicting a bust of Christ set against a Chi-Rho, and at Frampton also in Dorset with a Chi-Rho in mosaic on the cord of the apse in its largest room (see a range of papers with references in *Mosaic* 40, 2013).

Whether luxury houses, working farms, centres of industry or religious sanctuaries, all the buildings discussed were components in a flourishing countryside, so in order to understand them it is important to consider the rural economy as several contributors have attempted to do. In this context, the early establishment of villas during the first century along the south coast, especially in West Sussex (Rudling 1998) or in Kent (e.g. Eccles; Stoodley and Cosh 2021), represents precocious building of Roman-style dwellings within a landscape that was still largely Iron Age in its economy and society. The inspiration for this is likely to have come from villa building activity in northern Gaul, where Iron Age to Roman sequences demonstrate continuity in agriculture and social

organisation, integrated with the newly introduced Roman building techniques (see Agache 1978; King 1990, 92-5; Roymans and Derks 2011).

When villas are mentioned the arts, especially those of the architect and architectural sculptor and the mosaicist inevitably come to mind. With regard to the latter, the figural mosaics of fourth-century Britain are remarkable for their concentration on their owner's *paideia* in preference to, for example, amphitheatre scenes, often displaying an erudite knowledge of mythology. They range from the Greek and Roman epics, as in the mosaic depicting scenes from the denouement of the Iliad, showing Achilles dragging Hector's corpse behind his chariot and including a scene, very rare on mosaic, of the weighing of Hector's body, from a villa near Ketton, Rutland (Henig 2022a; Thomas *et al.* 2002; *Association for Roman Archaeology News* 47 and 48, 2022), and the Vergilian mosaics depicting Dido and Aeneas from the bath-house at Low Ham, Somerset (Henig 2019; 2022a), to representations of myths drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Hyginus' *Fabulae* (Henig 2022b). These include Apollo and Daphne at Dinnington (King and Grande, this volume), the myths of Hercules and Antaeus in a sculpture at Dinnington (*ibid.*) and a mosaic at Bramdean, Hampshire, and no less than five mosaics figuring Bellerophon at Hinton St Mary and Frampton in Dorset, Croughton, Northamptonshire, Lullingstone, Kent and now Boxford, Berkshire. At the last site in this list, however, the main subject was concerned with Pelops, very rare indeed on mosaics. The villa at Lullingstone contains a two-line poem which indicates knowledge of both Ovid and Virgil while the scenes on the Boxford mosaic and others probably derive from Hyginus (Beeson *et al.* 2019; see Henig 2019; Dunbabin 2020). Architecture and architectural ornament, as well as imported marbles from the richer villas are indicative of far-flung contacts (Blagg 2002). However, architectural plans and artistic styles also point to the villas of Britain being in many ways distinctive and locally conceived.

To place the buildings that form the main subject of this volume into context we have thought it good to include a couple of papers on villas in Gaul, where Ausonius and Sidonius Apollinaris provide valuable evidence for villas in Late Antiquity (Collis, this volume), as well as Italy, where the villa at Mola di Monte Gelato demonstrates how a villa became first a farmstead in the late Roman period, and then a focus for a dispersed village in the early middle ages (King, this volume). This is a sequence seen at many villa sites, amplified in the case of Monte Gelato by the presence of an early Christian church from the fourth century AD within the villa buildings.

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Anthony Beeson 1948-2022

This volume was in the hands of the publisher when the editors heard of the sudden and very untimely death of one of our contributors, Anthony Beeson. He was a leading light in the Association for Roman Archaeology, and for many years had contributed prolifically to its periodical publications, *ARA*, *The Bulletin of the Association for Roman Archaeology* and *ARA News*, as well as being a mainstay of the many foreign and British study tours run by the Association. He also published extensively on villa mosaics in *Mosaic* and wrote acclaimed books on Roman gardens and mosaics in Roman Britain (Beeson 2019; 2022). Perhaps his most memorable achievements in relation to villas were ‘rescuing’ the Newton St Loe Orpheus pavement (Beeson and Henig 1997), campaigning to save the Dewlish mosaic from export (see above), and his interpretation of the Boxford mosaic (Beeson *et al.* 2019). His considerable interest in villas and their architecture is attested by his contribution to this volume.

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