

THE ROMAN VILLA AT WOODHAM'S FARM, KINGS WORTHY, HAMPSHIRE

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ABSTRACT

Additional information about the Romano-British villa at Woodham's Farm was discovered whilst researching the villas at Sparsholt and Twyford. Amongst the Sparsholt material held by the late David Johnston was an envelope containing coins from Woodham's Farm. Similarly, amongst the Twyford paper archive held by Martin Biddle was a letter from Mr. W. H. Blake of Woodham's Farm to Lieut. Colonel Montague dated 14th September 1925. The letter briefly described his excavation of the site and contains a sketch of the exposed ground plan of parts of the villa. This short report is based on the information held by Winchester Museum Services (History File ARCH 296). It documents the discoveries found and attempts to put the Romano-British Villa at Woodham's Farm into a regional context.

BACKGROUND

The villa is located 2 km to the north of Winchester at NGR SU 4870 3345, at a height of 50 m above Ordnance Datum. The Winchester (Venta Belgarum) to Silchester (Calleva Atrebatum) Roman Road was only 1 km to the east and the Winchester to Andover Roman Road 2 km to the west. The geology of the site consists of outcrops of Clay-with-Flints on Upper Chalk of the Seaford Chalk Formation, a white chalk with conspicuous semi-continuous nodules and tabular flint nodules (Chatwin 1948; British Geological Survey 1976). The villa lies on a gentle south-east facing slope overlooking a dry valley which leads down to the River Itchen just over 1 km to the east. The site is in Cleaver Field, which had probably been cultivated for centuries, but the repeal of the Corn Laws between 1815 and 1846 possibly

led to the revival of growing corn. W. H. Blake recalls that the field had been deep-ploughed using powerful steam tractors in the early part of the 20th century. This involved two steam tractor engines either side of the field with a six-furrow plough tilling to a depth of 0.56 m (18 inches). This deep ploughing was much deeper than using horses and would have disturbed the flint foundations and floors of any buildings.

Evidence of a Romano-British villa was first identified in 1924 by the two Blake brothers, W. H. C. and R. C., whilst digging out a rabbit warren in Cleaver Field, Woodham's Farm (Fig. 1). Amongst the finds was a Roman coin of the emperor Gratian (AD 375–383), a broken bone hair pin, iron nails, part of a spindle whorl and numerous tesserae.

Over the next two years the brothers partially excavated the south-west corner of the villa, consisting of three rooms, a corridor and a hypocaust-heated room situated around a flint cobbled courtyard. In addition, a corn-drying oven to the south-east and a large pit, 6m to the south of the building, filled with demolition rubble, were also uncovered. It was during this time that Lt. Col. Leopold Montague was excavating the Romano-British villa at Twyford and in 1925 there was close cooperation and correspondence between the two sites. The site was left open for three years and then, due to lack of interest, was back-filled. The only published record of the excavation was a brief note by Leopold Montague (Collingwood & Taylor 1925). In 1943 fire destroyed the brothers' farm house and with it most of the records and artefacts from the villa.

In 1944, whilst serving as a Lt Commanders in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserves, W. H.



Fig. 1 R. C. Blake excavating at Woodham's Farm c 1925

G. Blake and Gerald Dunning took six aerial photographs of Cleaver Field which revealed additional information about the extent of the villa as well as pre-Roman occupation on the site. These would seem to indicate that the villa extended to the south and 55 m (60 yards) to the east. The original partially excavated building was one of four contained within an enclosure.

The site of the villa at Woodham's Farm was scheduled in 1953 (166). In 1973 the Blake's sold the land to John Laing Homes Ltd and the farm house to a Mr Addison. Laing Homes applied for permission to develop the site, but this was rejected by Hampshire County Council. The tenant farmer, James Bright, gave permission to a Mr. Bishop to metal-detect on Cleaver Field even though it was a Scheduled Monument. In 1979/80 several metal-detected finds were handed in to Winchester Museum for identification. They included nine metal objects and 79 coins. It is highly probable that this was just a small selection of the material recovered by Bishop.

Southampton University undertook a field-walking survey of the site in 1982. The results of the survey, which were published in the Hampshire Field Club Newsletter, were inconclusive and added little further information, except to

confirm that the area had been cultivated for many centuries (Currie 1985, 19–20). A series of aerial photographs were taken of the site in July 1989 (HE NMR SU 4833/16–27) which confirmed the existence of an Iron Age 'banjo' enclosure(s) and a possible field system which pre-dated the villa (Fig. 2). These photographs of Cleaver Field confirmed the existence of the 'banjo' enclosures identified in 1953 (Gladwell 1953, 63–4).

The last recorded investigation of the site was in 1990 when Winchester City Museum Services and Tempus Reparatum conducted a Field Walking Programme and Trial Trenching Survey outside the scheduled area on behalf of Laing Homes. The few artefacts recovered during the field-walking were insufficient to draw any conclusions, but the trial trenching discovered a Bronze-Age ring ditch and established that the crop marks to the south of the scheduled site were Romano-British linear features probably field boundaries. All had been damaged by long term arable activities.

THE 1925–6 EXCAVATION

The methods of excavation in the 1920s were

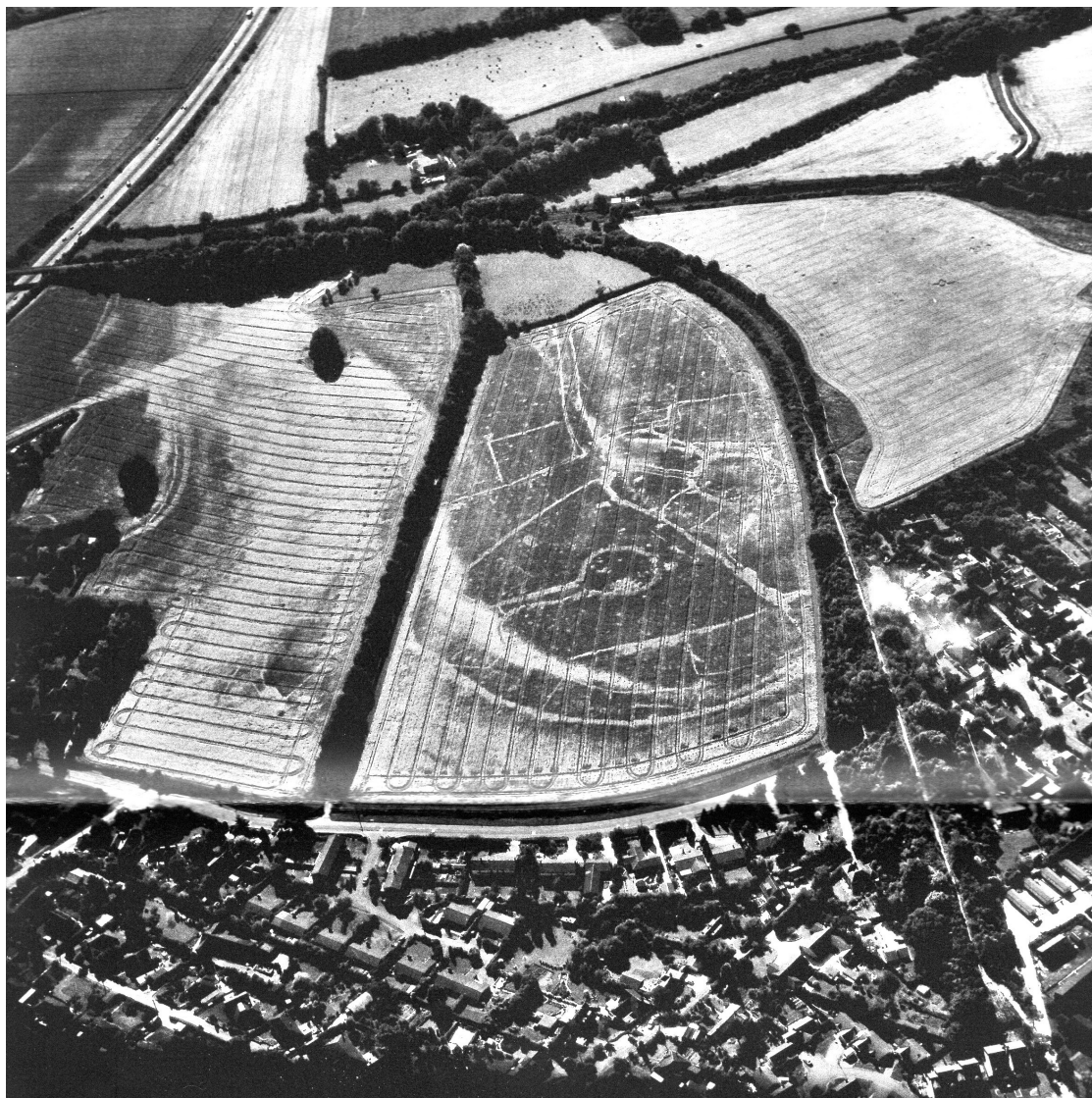


Fig. 2 Aerial Photograph of Cleaver Field July 1989 (courtesy of Hampshire County Council)

very different from those that would be applied today. The two brothers were digging the site with no previous experience or archaeological excavation knowledge and, as can be seen from Fig. 1, the site was dug using shovels and mattocks. The site was 'surveyed' by drilling with an iron bar with the hope of striking foundations (Blake 1926). The excavation was undertaken from February 1925 until sometime during 1926. There are very few

surviving records from the excavation, but correspondence held in the Winchester City Museum History file (ARCH 296) provides some evidence of what was found.

The rabbit warren, which first attracted the brothers to the potential significance of the site, turn out to be a large pit backfilled with Roman refuse. The pit, 2.1 m deep and 1.5 to 1.8 m wide, was about 75 m (80 yards) to the north of the villa buildings in the centre of the field.

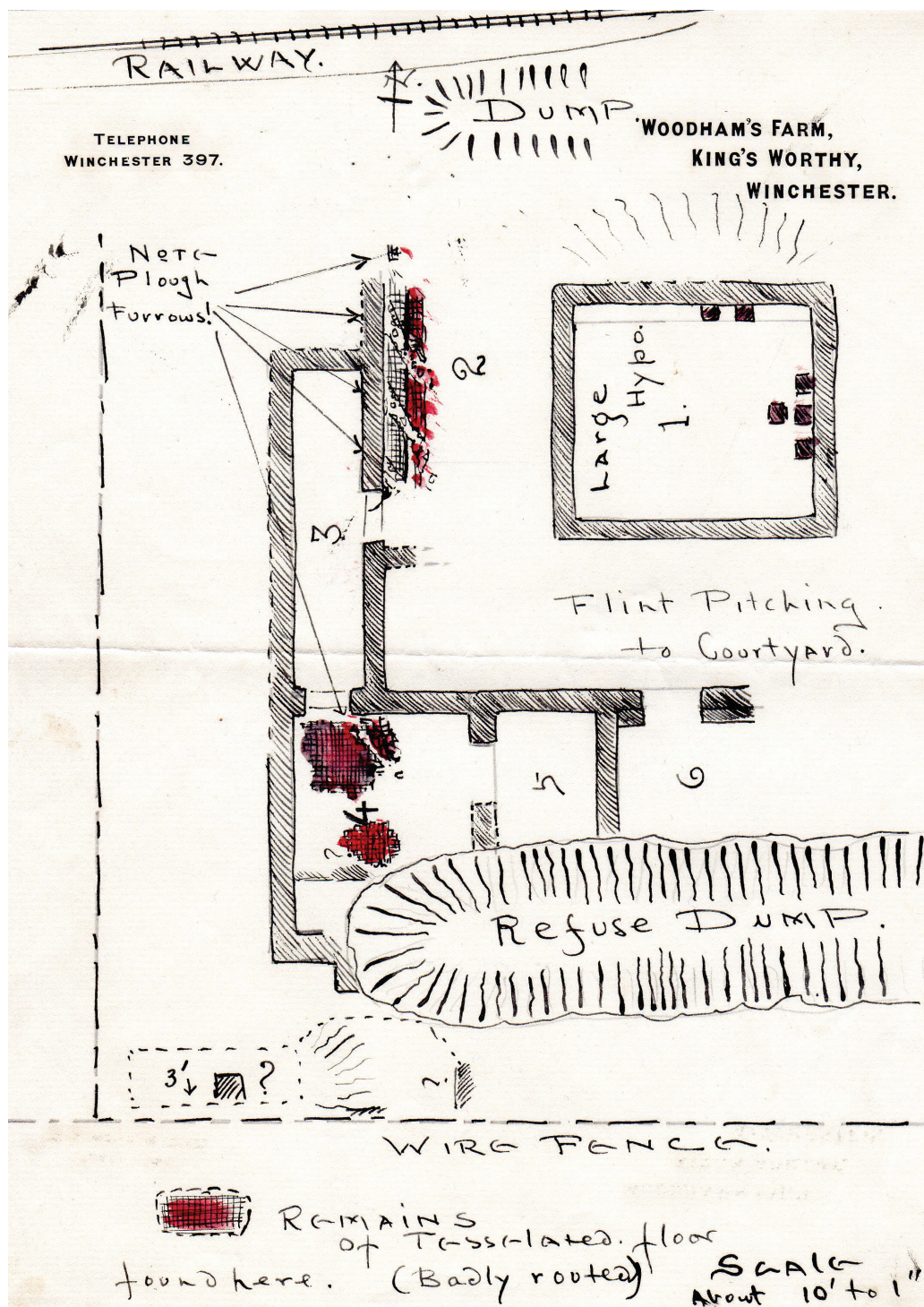


Fig. 3 Sketch of Plan of the Villa drawn by W. H. G. Blake 1926

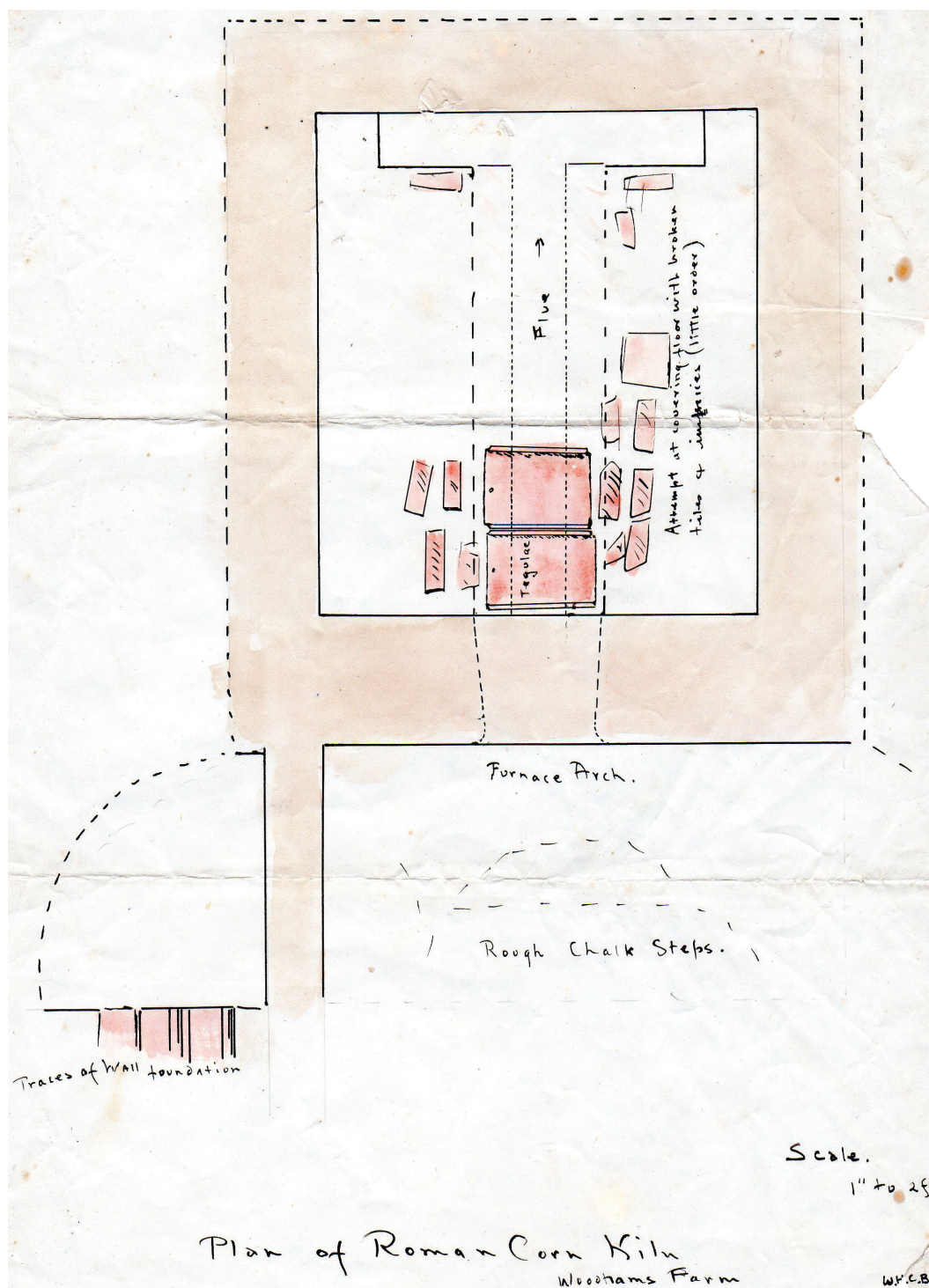


Fig. 4 Sketch Plan of Corn Drier: Blake c 1926

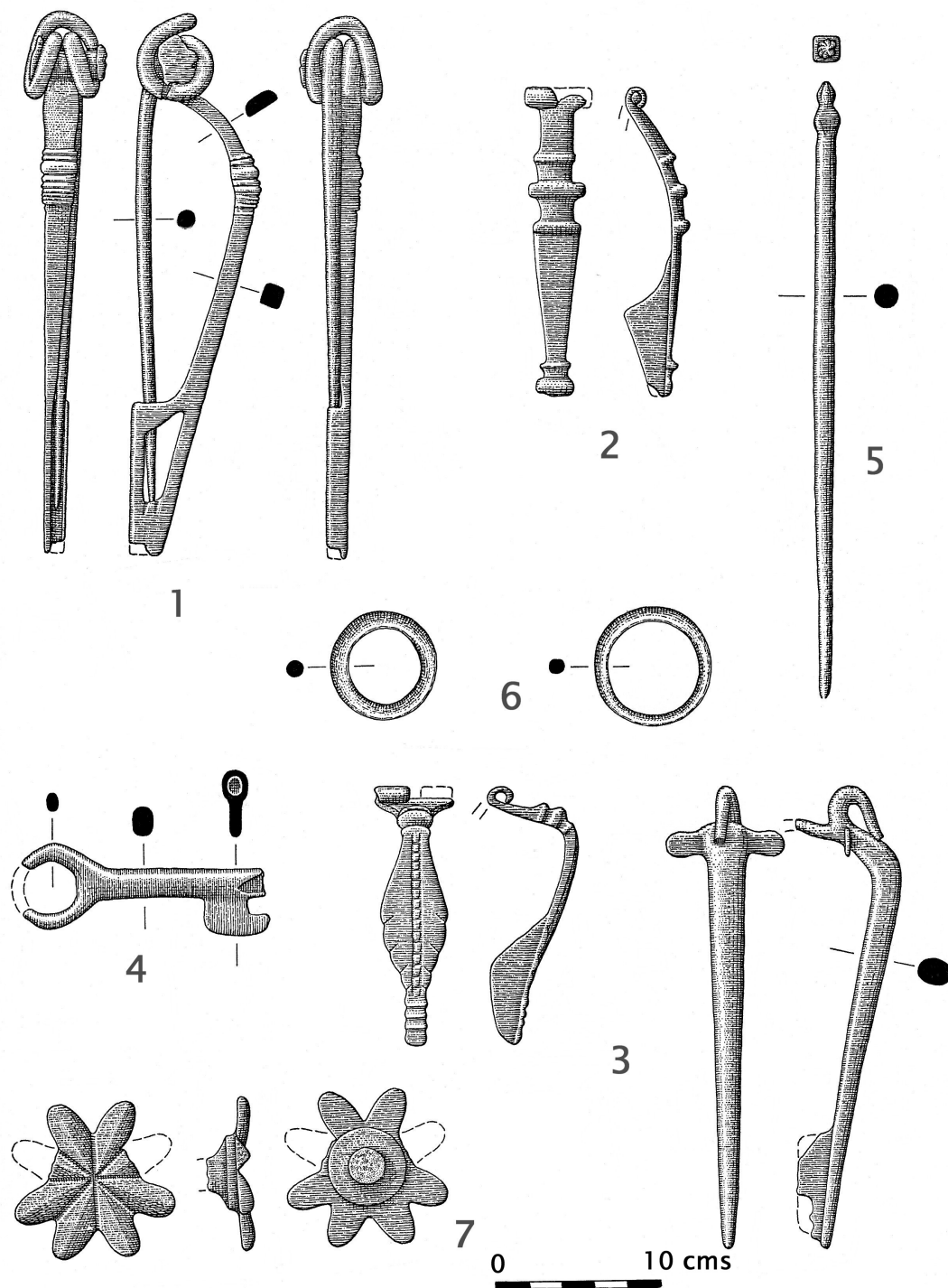


Fig. 5 Bronze Small Finds 1-7 (Illustrator unknown)

The excavators stated that the pit contained a coin of Gratian (375–383), several bone pins, a few pieces of samian ware, half a spindle whorl, a number of red brick tesserae and a large quantity of rough hand and wheel made pottery. Unfortunately, none of this material has survived to validate the excavator's conclusions. The pit was later stated to be probably an Iron Age grain storage pit (Bowen, C. letter dated May 1961).

A sketch plan of the site was drawn by W. H. G. Blake and sent with a covering letter dated 14th September 1925, to Lt-Colonel Leopold Montague (Fig. 3). This would seem to show a corridor (Room 3) linking to Room 4. Rooms 5 and 6 would seem to be part of the north wing of the villa. The siting of the hypocaust-heated room would appear to be in the middle of a metalled courtyard and may have been drawn there out of convenience and not representing its true position. The excavators stated that there was evidence of red (tile) tessellated floors with a simple, 0.36 m wide, white surround in both Rooms 2 and 4. Room 3, the corridor, had a rammed chalk floor and was 0.23 m (9 inches) below the floor levels of Room 2 and 4.

The hypocaust-heated room (Room 1) measured 5.80 m (19 feet) by 5.90 m (19.5 feet) and amongst the rubble there were a few pilae, a bone pin, eight coins, pottery, a large quantity of nails, and painted wall plaster in various colours. In addition to the pilae there were the remains of box flue tiles, Purbeck stone tiles, tegulae, and a quantity of red white and black tesserae. Again, none of this material has survived and cannot be verified. Assuming that the excavators have correctly identified the material recovered it would seem to indicate that this heated room had a coloured tessellated floor, painted plaster walls and was roofed with ceramic and stone tiles. No other rooms were reported to have been discovered, which could indicate that this was not connected with a bath house but a heated room, possibly a triclinium (dining room).

The exact location is uncertain as it is not shown on Blake's plan (Fig. 3), but 46 m (150 feet) further to the south-east of the villa building the excavators discovered a T-shaped corn drier. This consisted of faced flints with a tile coursed central flue with two branches at

the end. The flue was covered by large ceramic tiles, on top of which many were tegulae (Fig. 4). The flue still contained ashes and charred grain. The grain was identified as 'wheat of the usual Romano-British type' by Professor John Percival of University College, Reading (Collingwood & Taylor 1925, 243).

THE FINDS

There are very few artefacts in the site archive, but some were recorded from the metal-detecting activity in the 1980's. The archived material primarily consists of a mortarium and part of a supposed stone-chipped table top, both of which are currently on display in Winchester City Museum.

Metalwork

The metal-detected finds are limited to those presented for identification and there may well have been more material from the site. The metal artefacts consisted of four brooches, a small bronze key, a bronze pin, two small plain bronze rings and a bronze eight-petal flower object (Fig. 5).

- 1 Bronze brooch or fibula of 'Colchester' type. This is a British pre-Roman type which survived for some years after the Conquest of AD 43. It consisted of a long bow with side wings to protect the spring and pin (missing). The catch-plates would have been perforated and the bow decorated. This type of Straight Wire fibula, also known as the Soldier's fibula, can be dated c AD 30–70 (Hattatt 1982, Fig. 14).
- 2 and 3 Three small Roman brooches with decorated bows. The pins, which in both cases are missing, were hinged. Late 1st or 2nd century AD.
- 4 Small bronze rotary key, broken.
- 5 Bronze pin with ornamental head. Bent. Pins were used extensively to keep clothes fastened. Roman.
- 6 Two small plain bronze rings, not finger rings, date and function uncertain. They are not finger rings since the cross section

is of the wrong shape to match any known types of Roman date. Their use is unknown but may have been associated with domestic furnishings.

- 7 Bronze object, broken, representing a flower with eight petals. Probably some kind of decorative mount. Date uncertain.

Coins

A total of 79 coins was recovered from the site. Three were found by the Blake brothers but the majority were found by Mr Bishop, the metal detectorist. All the detected coins were submitted to the British Museum in 1985 for identification. 64 of the coins were from the Roman period, and of these 14 could only be dated broadly to either the third or fourth centuries (Table 1). The coin of Gratian (375–383) mentioned in the 1926 excavation report was not present in this inventory, but had been identified by Montague (Montague 1925).

The coin loss at Woodham's Farm can be set into chronological periods to establish a framework to enable numerical analysis. The periods used are 'Reece Periods' to which it was possible to assign the coins and their date range (Reece 1991). The totals have been converted into coins per thousand values (per mill) which allow the coin assemblage to be compared quantitatively with other villa sites (Fig. 6). The coin-loss profile from Woodham's Farm ranges from the first to fourth century AD. The coin-loss pattern would seem to compare positively with other rural villa sites. Coins issued in the first and second centuries were often circulated long after their issue date, and more small lower value coins were minted in the late third and fourth centuries.

A comparison of the coin assemblage recovered from Woodham's Farm and that of the two known Romano-British rural villas of Sparsholt and Twyford would indicate that the Romanisation at the Woodham's Farm site did not start until the middle of the 2nd century AD (Fig. 7). The major coin loss at both Sparsholt and Twyford occurred during the mid-3rd century AD whilst at Woodham's Farm this major coin loss was during the late 3rd to mid-4th centuries AD. Unlike Sparsholt

Table 1 Coins recovered from Woodham's Farm

Period	Number
Iron Age	1
Roman (identifiable)	50
Roman 3rd/4th century	14
Medieval jetton	2
Modern	11
Not a coin	1
Total	79

both Woodham's Farm and Twyford would seem to have continued to operate a money economy well into the late 4th century AD.

Pottery

The only archived pottery was a mortarium in a very fine white to off-white iron-free fabric (Fulford 1975, Fabric 2b) with angular flint trituration grits. It was recovered from the rubbish in the corn drier. The mortarium was 0.25 m in diameter and 0.07 m high with a turned-down flange decorated with a stabbing or a kind of slash (Fulford 1975, Type 106, 6). This type of New Forest vessel has been dated to c AD 300–370 (Fulford 1975, 76). Other documents in the archive file mention pottery including samian ware, New Forest ware, and 'black rough-glazed type with lugs and eyes both large and small' e.g. Dorset BB1.

Worked stone

Embedded in the wall of the corn drier and used as building material were three pieces of a pink sandstone carved on one face with a well accomplished carving of a rose (Fig. 8). When joined together the three pieces produced a carved slab of stone 0.50 m by 0.10 m. This has been identified as an example of a Romano-British chip-carved stone side table top. There are many other examples of similar stone carved tables recorded in Roman Britain but they can only be dated to within the life span of the villas in which they were found. This would give a date of the late 3rd to 4th century AD (Solley 1979, 176). The excavation

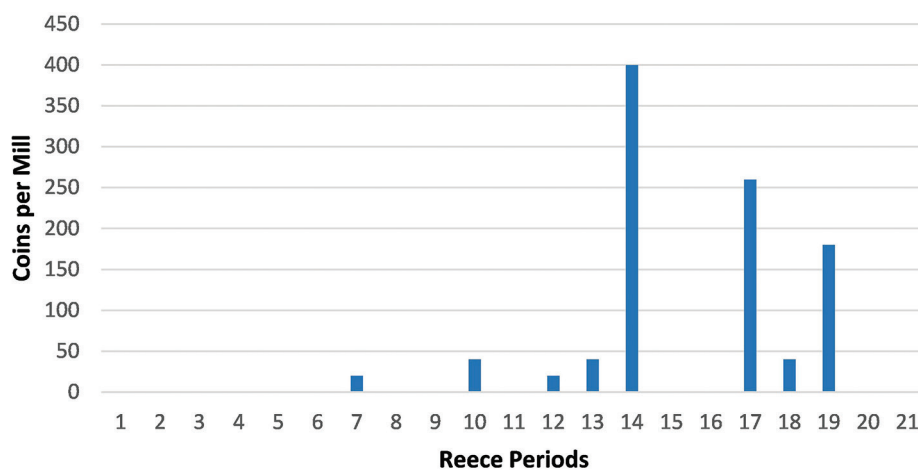


Fig. 6 Woodham's Farm Coin Loss Profile per Mill

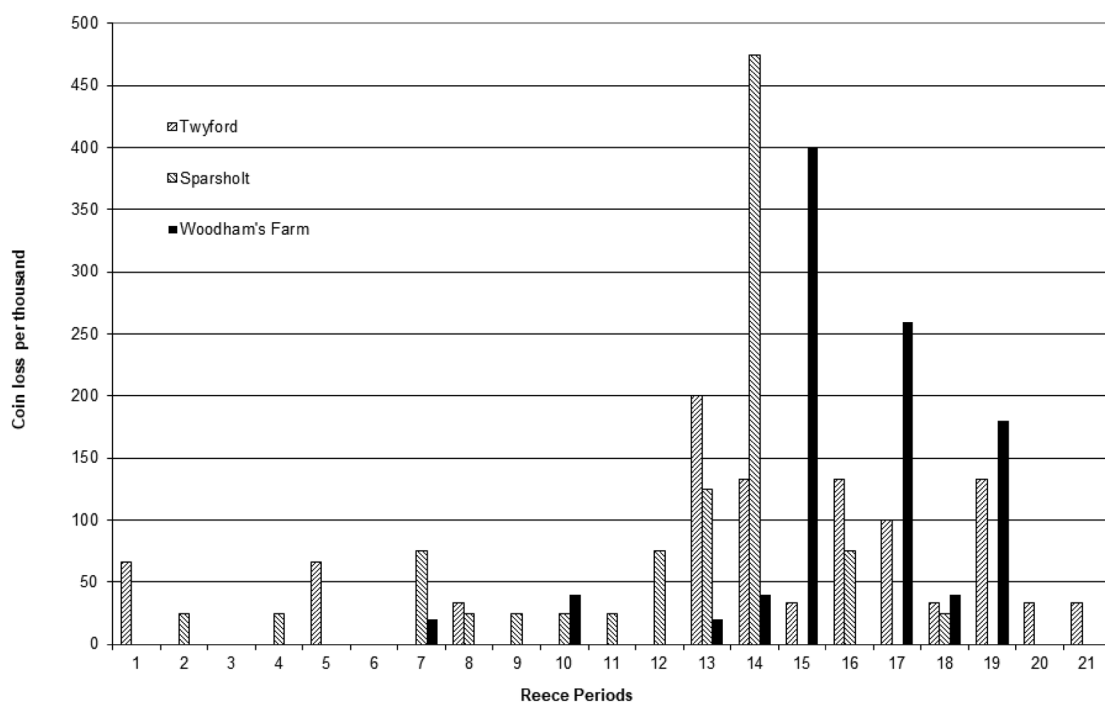


Fig. 7 Coin Loss at Woodham's Farm compared with the Villas at Sparsholt and Twyford

also recovered many hexagonal-shape Purbeck stone roofing tiles, many still with an iron nail in them. Such tiles were also found at both Sparsholt and Twyford.

DISCUSSION

The Romano-British villa at Woodham's Farm was the apparent successor of Bronze Age and

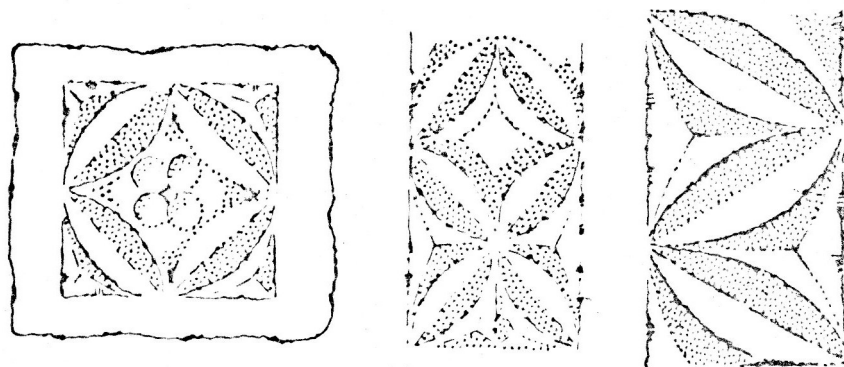


Fig. 8 Examples of carved images on the stone table (Illustrator unknown)

Iron Age settlements. The 'banjo' enclosure visible on aerial photographs of the site is typical of those associated with the Middle Iron Age (c 400–100 BC). Fieldwork suggests that 'banjo' enclosures originated during the mid-1st millennium BC and continued in use through to the Roman Conquest, with apparently more intensive use between 100 BC and AD 43 (McOmish 2011). There are other examples of 'banjo' enclosures recorded in Hampshire at Micheldever Wood (Fasham 1987), Nettlebank Copse (Cunliffe & Poole 2000) and Bramdean (Perry 1982) all confirming a Mid to Late Iron Age date range. The centre of the 'banjo' enclosure at Bramdean contained about 25 typical Late Iron Age storage pits (Perry 1982, 60 015064) and it is possible that the storage pit found at Woodham's Farm was similar to those at Bramdean. The lack of early 1st century AD coins may not be significant, as samian pottery and 1st-century AD bronze brooches were recovered, implying a continuity of rural agricultural activities from the Iron Age into the Roman period.

Woodham's Farm is one of three known rural villas within 6 km of Winchester. It lies 4 km directly north of the city whilst the Romano-British villa at Twyford was 5 km south-east and Sparsholt 6 km north-east respectively. The common factor with for all three villas was that their major market (Winchester) was only a short distance away and easily accessible. Both Woodham's Farm and Sparsholt had evidence of Iron Age activities prior to the Romanisation

of the estate, although there was no such evidence at Twyford. The dating evidence at Woodham's Farm indicates that the villa site was occupied from the mid to late 1st century AD, slightly earlier than Sparsholt (Johnston & Dicks 2014) but similar to Twyford (Biddle & Dicks forthcoming). All three villas would seem to have been abandoned in the late 4th century AD.

The villa was situated near a chalk ridge which would have provided ideal and favourable conditions for the cultivation of cereals and the rearing of sheep. The presence of a T-shaped corn-drier supports the theory that Woodham's Farm was operating an agrarian farming regime. A corn-drier was found at Sparsholt, but none was located at Twyford.

There is limited information from the excavation to provide any detail of the historical development of the site during the Roman period. The sketch plans of the site (Fig. 2 & 3) and aerial photographs would seem to indicate that this was a 'courtyard villa' with a large farmyard with numerous outbuildings. The villa estate was accessed by a road from the west, possibly from the Winchester to Andover road, with a track leading into the courtyard from the south (NMR SU 4833-17 AP). The main building was a corridor house with either a heated triclinium (dining room) or baths suite in the north wing. Corridor houses consisted of a strip of at least three rooms, all accessed from the corridor or balcony. The central room, which was the largest, acted as the main reception area with the rooms either side used

for private domestic functions (Smith 1997, 117). Wings were added to both ends of the strip house creating additional rooms and creating a winged-corridor villa. It is highly probable that the villa at Woodham's Farm became a winged-corridor type villa but there is currently insufficient evidence to prove this theory. A geophysical survey of the site would help to establish the true nature of the buildings and their layout.

The presence of Purbeck limestone roofing tiles at all three villa sites suggest that there was a commercial link between this part of Hampshire and East Dorset. The stone tiles were probably conveyed by boat from the Poole area. This sea route could also have been used

for the local Black-Burnished Wares (BB1) manufactured around the modern-day town of Wareham.

Coloured tesserae recovered from the demolition rubble of the heated room indicate that it may have contained a simple mosaic. Other rooms had red tessellated pavements which show that the villa owners had sufficient means to allow them to embellish their buildings with Roman features. Their wealth would have come from the profitable disposal of their agricultural produce in the civitas of Winchester and flourished during the 4th century. It is probable that their survival and ultimate decline were also directly linked to the fortunes of Winchester.

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