

# THE ROMAN VILLA

## at Great Weldon, Northamptonshire

By David Smith, Ph.D.

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THE Roman villa at Great Weldon, Northamptonshire,<sup>1</sup> which was first uncovered in April, 1738, is now (August, 1953), in view of its possible destruction by opencast ironmining, being re-excavated under the auspices of the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, Ministry of Works.

Within three weeks of its first discovery the villa and its patterned mosaics attracted the attention of Thomas Eayre of Kettering, whose letter to Sir Edmund Isham of Lamport, describing the remains and urging him to prevail upon the owner of the land to erect a protective building over them, is our earliest record of the site.<sup>2</sup> William Stukeley also visited the excavations and set down his observations, with a sketch-plan, "as well as I can do it by eye and memory, for they would not let me measure it", in his Diary and letters to Roger Gale.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, however, a more reliable plan than Stukeley's exists in the very carefully drawn and coloured engraving which was published by Messrs. J. Lens and J. Cole in 1738.<sup>4</sup> This gives not only the plan of the villa but also, on a larger scale, very accurate reproductions of the patterned mosaics found in the corridor, which ran along the south-east front of the building, and in two of the rooms which opened off it. These were the parts of the house which Lord Hatton eventually decided or was persuaded<sup>5</sup> to cover over in 1739 with a protective building, for knowledge of which we are entirely indebted to Stukeley. "The two apartments, and the hall in the middle", he wrote to Gale, "are entirely excluded and left open to the weather, so that this winter will finish their appearance. The pavement

<sup>1</sup> See F. Haverfield, *Victoria History of the County of Northampton*, Vol. I, 1902, p. 193, fig. 22.

<sup>2</sup> See P. I. King, "Thomas Eayre of Kettering", in *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, Northamptonshire Record Society, Vol. I, No. 5, 1952, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Preserved in the Bodleian Library. The references are Diary, Vol. III, p. 43, entries dated 1 April, 1739, and September, 1739, Letters, 3 April, 1739 (Stukeley to Gale), 4 May, 1739 (Gale to Stukeley), 11 October, 1739 (S. to G.), 3 November, 1739 (G. to S.). The present writer is much indebted to Miss Monica Greenfield for transcripts of these documents.

<sup>4</sup> A copy is preserved in the Northamptonshire volume of the Topographical Collections of the Society of Antiquaries of London. The plan reproduced in the V.C.H. is an inferior copy of the Lens-Cole plan.

<sup>5</sup> See Thomas Eayre's letter, note 2 above.

has been very pretty, but is at present imperfect, and of that which remains, we manifestly see it has been mended, bunglingly patched up even in Roman times, so that it has been destroyed more than once, and some places have evident marks of fire upon it, in spots and broad plots".<sup>6</sup> Haverfield, summing up the early records, concluded that "the excavated portion was but a fragment of a large house . . . and we may suppose that the villa was occupied, at any rate, during the first half of the fourth century".<sup>7</sup>

The plan of the remains uncovered in 1738 is that of a villa 90 feet long, with a range of rooms of unequal size opening off a corridor, which ran along the full length of what was presumably the front of the house, facing towards the south-east. The central and evidently the most important room, perhaps the *cenaculum*, 18 feet wide and 32 feet from front to rear, terminated at its north-west end in a three-sided apse, but the Lens-Cole plan shows no rear wall to any of the other main rooms, none of the other partition walls having apparently been traced for more than 22 feet from the corridor. The present excavations have already shown, however, that the rear wall of the house in its latest period still stands in places one course high at 20 feet from the corridor, but why it should not have been found in 1738 it is impossible to say with certainty. Between this wall and the corridor is a rear wall of an earlier period, which in 1738 was entirely and now is still partly overlaid by the floors of the rooms. Similarly, two walls which cross the corridor, but which in 1738 lay below the corridor pavement, are further evidence of structural alterations during the history of the villa. Evidence of what may prove to be a still earlier building phase is furnished by a wall which exists parallel with the north-east wall of the central apsidal room, at a distance of  $4\frac{1}{2}$  inches from it, and which appears to have been cut through by the foundations of the earlier wall of the house. The corridor itself must have existed throughout at least the two later periods and there are grounds for believing that the floors at the north-east end of the corridor and in the north-east end room were at some time re-laid after a fire.

It seems clear that the eighteenth century excavations were strictly confined to the area represented by the Lens-Cole plan. Some twenty coins found in uncovering only a small part of the courtyard of packed stones and gravel in front of the villa, Roman roof-tiles still lying as and where they fell behind it, and an undisturbed annexe and bath-house at the south-west end, all support this conclusion, whilst the presence of structures revealed by trial trenches in the next field to the south and walls leading off from the villa into ground still to be excavated confirm

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Roger Gale, dated 11 October, 1739.

<sup>7</sup> Haverfield, *loc. cit.*

Haverfield's opinion that the site extended over a much larger area than that uncovered in 1738.

None of the patterned mosaics now remains except a small section in the corridor opposite the second room from the north-east end.<sup>8</sup> The small central panel, about 4 feet square, of the pavement numbered II on the Lens-Cole plan, was of the strictly linear type of geometric pattern which Haverfield noted as a particular feature of the mosaics of Romano-British Northamptonshire,<sup>9</sup> though examples of the "gable-end" pattern which surrounded this panel and also formed a complete panel at the north-east end of the corridor can be found elsewhere in Britain as well as in other provinces. For the rest of the corridor mosaic, which simply consisted of two closely similar geometric patterns, there are no known parallels. But the mosaic numbered I, measuring probably 10 feet square, was an exact replica of one excavated in 1951, under the direction of Dr. Philip Corder and Mr. Graham Webster, and dated to not earlier than A.D. 375, at Great Casterton, Rutland, only 13 miles from Great Weldon.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from this mosaic, which may be assumed to have been laid at most not many years before or after the one at Great Casterton, the discovery of some hundred coins, most of them of the Constantinian period, strongly suggest that the villa was built and occupied in the fourth century, to which period also belongs almost all the pottery from the present excavations. But the possibility of an earlier occupation is not ruled out. It is, in fact, supported by the discovery of a few fragments of pottery, including Samian ware, two brooches of first century type and a coin of Vespasian. But it has not yet proved possible to ascribe any part of the building so far uncovered to a period earlier than the fourth century.

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### BOOK REVIEW

*Monastic Sites from the Air* by David Knowles and J. K. S. St. Joseph (Cambridge Air Surveys Series) 11 x 8½ xxviii + 283 pp. incl. pls. text illus. Cambridge U.P. 1952. 55/-.

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This is the first volume of the Cambridge Air Surveys Series with the photographs being taken by Dr. St. Joseph. Altogether 127 monastic sites are illustrated with an excellent general introduction and notes on each site by Professor Knowles. Sites included in the book illustrate all the various states of preservation.

Although the general standard of the air photographs is very good, there are a few exceptions, mainly where the remains above ground are scanty. Professor Knowles' notes and introduction are always clear, concise and well referenced to existing papers. The general standard of the production is high. W.A.S.

<sup>8</sup> The protective building erected in 1739 was eventually demolished, probably in the nineteenth century, and the site was filled in and returned to the plough.

<sup>9</sup> Haverfield, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

<sup>10</sup> I have to thank Dr. Corder for this information and for permission to anticipate his forthcoming report by publishing it here.