

# Review Article:

## Reconstructing A Roman Villa

by

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Dai Morgan Evans with Christine Shaw and Roger James, *Rebuilding the Past: a Roman Villa*, London 2003, pb, 250x190mm., 182pp., 120 ill., mostly colour, £14.99, ISBN 0-413-77396-5.

Butser Ancient Farm, near Petersfield in Hampshire, is a name well-known in Britain and abroad for the circular Iron Age houses reconstructed by the late Peter Reynolds, whose archaeological expertise, wide reading and a grasp of the practicalities of building construction produced convincing and durable structures that earned him an international reputation. Now Butser has acquired under very different circumstances a Roman villa or, more precisely, the principal house of the Sparsholt villa (in the Latin sense of a farm) as it was in its first phase, before wings were added. After an unpromising start, its reconstruction, undertaken for and funded by the Discovery channel for a ten-part television series, was ensured (as Roger James makes clear) by the energy and determination of Dai Morgan Evans. The book of the series makes interesting and easy reading, is plentifully illustrated and includes many candid admissions about the limits of archaeological evidence and the possibility of equally valid alternative interpretations. As such, it is a welcome addition to the large body of popular literature on archaeology, the more so for its cautions and the stamp of authority given by its principal author.

Butser was chosen for the venture because a reconstruction of the Sparsholt hypocaust by Peter Reynolds was already in place as the first instalment towards the main house of the villa, but on closer inspection the chosen site proved inappropriate and a fresh start had to be made, including dismantling and rebuilding the hypocaust. To make matters worse the planning officers of the East Hampshire district council, to whom the design of the reconstruction had to be submitted, acted as if they were dealing with a new bungalow rather than an experimental structure intended to advance knowledge as well as provide entertainment.

In dealing with a planning application within an area designated as 'of outstanding natural beauty' concern that the new building should not detract from its surroundings was very proper, as also that it be structurally sound. So the planners, said to be sympathetic to the educational value of a reconstructed villa, 'wanted a "new" building

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J.T. Smith retired in 1987 as principal architectural investigator for the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England. Among his many publications is *Roman Villas: a study in social structure* (1997).

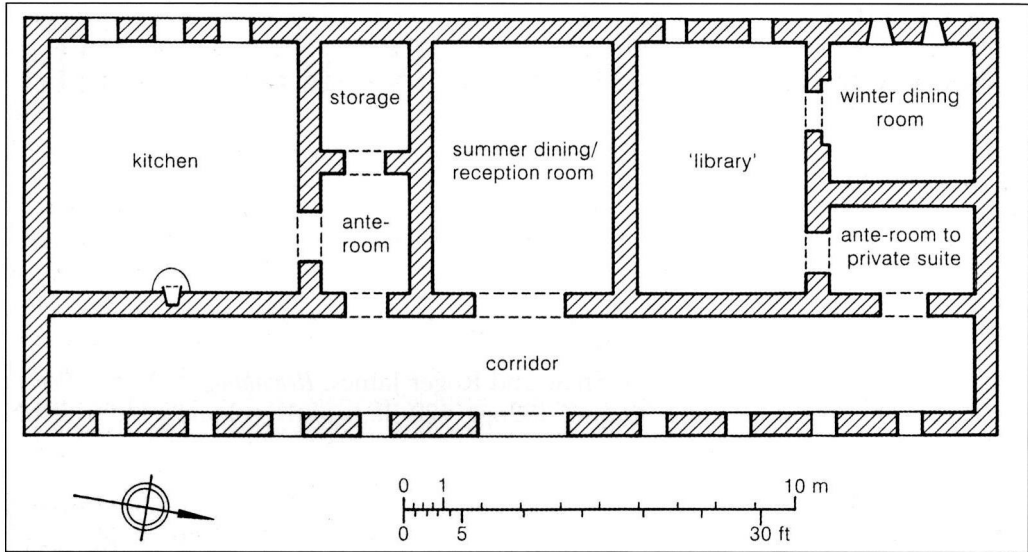


Fig. 1

that would blend into the countryside...the more it could blend into the countryside the better' (p.44). That creates an historical contradiction. A villa, particularly in its first phase, was surely intended by its location and its whitened or coloured walls to be conspicuous from a distance, just like the white- or cream-coloured Regency villas that still form such a prominent feature of many a southern English landscape: it was precisely their newness and visibility that the proud owners prized. And the need to blend led to a second condition, that the building should not exceed 'the height [six metres] which is felt appropriate for new agricultural buildings' (p.48), thereby limiting the archaeological possibilities of reconstruction. This limitation was one reason for precluding the clerestory windows originally envisaged above the lean-to roof of the 'corridor' or porticus that ran the length of the house front. True, as is pointed out, one of the small villa-like shrines found in Luxembourg which served as models for the reconstruction appears to lack such windows although, surprisingly, the one chosen for illustration appears to have either windows or shuttered openings (p.32); but in any case such models, like the villas themselves, no doubt had much detail rendered in paint, just as did, for example, Elizabethan and Jacobean houses.

A second and quite bizarre reason was adduced: 'that putting "upper" windows in was felt to make it appear to be a two-storey building and this was unacceptable to the planners' (p.48). Curiouser and curiouser – the planners dismiss any academic arguments for a particular element in a building designed to interpret just such arguments for the general public in favour of their own perception of how that public might view it from the outside. Did they really imagine that visitors would have no leaflets or displays to inform them?

Given these constraints, the next question was how to interpret the plan. Very fairly, two possibilities are discussed briefly, essentially whether it provided for one household or

two. It was perfectly reasonable to decide that a single family occupied the whole, though it is one the reviewer has argued strongly against,<sup>1</sup> but the problems that follow from the decision were not explored at all. The plan (Fig. 1) divides into two near-symmetrical units each comprising one large and two small rooms and separated by a sizeable middle room. A remarkable feature, one recurrent in nearly all villas of this type, is that there is a certain balance of size between the units. The north unit has the largest room of all, plus two small square rooms; the north one a slightly smaller main room and two minor ones rather larger than their counterparts, while the middle room, unconnected with either, is slightly smaller than either of the other big rooms. They are entered from what is called a corridor, although the north end of it serves no such function and must have been in effect a room which, like the middle room, was open to the front entrance. Only if there were a doorway at the end could it properly be described as a corridor.<sup>2</sup>

So, accepting that interpretation, what were the room functions? Clearly the middle room was in some sense the most important, facing the wide entrance and entered by a doorway equally wide – a summer dining room or reception room, we are told. North of it was the private suite, reached, appropriately enough, through a small lobby at the farthest point from the entrance. Adjoining the lobby and entered from the principal room – designated, rather fancifully, the ‘library’ – is a room heated by a hypocaust and said to be the winter dining room. At the north end, whose inferiority is marked by its being entered by a doorway near to the main entrance, a lobby gives access to a small ‘storage room’ and the largest room which, from the presence of a fireplace, is interpreted as a ‘kitchen or service room’.

By this time an instructed reader knowing the connotations of Butser becomes uneasily aware that the research underlying the reconstruction lacked the depth associated with other work there or with that underlying the reconstructed Anglo-Saxon buildings at West Stow. It is hard, for example, to understand how the largest room can ever have been thought of as a kitchen. ‘When we used the kitchen/service room for cooking the...‘feast’ it was surprising how much smoke from the room spread throughout the rest of the villa into the higher status rooms, even with all the upper windows open. It makes a point about where the cooking took place – so we will want to look carefully at the problem again. And here’s another practical point – the cook found it really very tiresome not to have a drain or sump in the room. Is the room in fact a kitchen?’(p.70). Answer: No.

The smallness of the recess at the back of the hearth and the fact of its discharging into a flue make that improbable. Had the recess continued upwards to the wall top to improve draught and had the hearth in front of it been covered by a timber and plaster flue cooking would have been possible, as in some traditional Irish houses, but hardly otherwise. But the absence of a drain for waste water is decisive. Oelmann, writing about the Mayen villa as long ago as 1928,<sup>3</sup> made the point that the hearth in the middle of the large open hall was used for cooking because a drain ran from it; yet still the many lessons to be learnt from that justly famous and far-reaching report have not been absorbed on this side of the Channel. A second important objection is the lack of a doorway through which supplies could enter and waste be disposed of, functions ill becoming the dignity of the pedimented front entrance, quite apart from inconvenience. Doubts about the

kitchen function are in fact expressed on just these grounds (p.170), but why did they not surface in the planning stage?

So if the alleged function be rejected, where was cooking done? Not in any part of the reconstructed building: it must have been outside somewhere. This is a problem nobody seems to have thought of in connection with this type of building, certainly not the reviewer, despite having examined villa plans from all over Europe.<sup>4</sup> Nor should contemporary west European preconceptions cloud the issue. We take it for granted that a main meal is mostly served hot, other cultures do not, and since Romanised Britons may well have been in the latter category their kitchens may have been quite removed from where they ate.

Other room functions are equally questionable. Did a quite small villa really have any room fit to be called a library? The ascription surely stems from the lingering feeling that small villas were essentially small country houses, part of a social structure much like that of nineteenth-century England – a misconception once common in other countries too. In fact, Vitruvius thought that ‘libraries, picture galleries and basilicas, finished in a style similar to that of great public buildings’ were needful for ‘men of rank, holding offices and magistracies’,<sup>5</sup> and only in the eighteenth century did modest English country houses begin to acquire such a room.

Then there are the two dining rooms, the larger being called alternatively the reception room, and the smaller, being heated, the winter dining room. If the latter had any such function, the ‘library’ was a passage room through which prepared food was brought in. Interpretation of the middle room appears to have been decided by ‘the suggested themes in the mosaics which might be seen to be associated with feasting’ (p.35) and is supported by a detail illustration (p.124) showing a *cantharus* drinking vessel. Whether mosaic themes generally correlate at all closely with room function is open to doubt, however they may have been used on first introduction. No clear link seems to exist between, for example, the subjects depicted in expensive eighteenth-century wallpapers and the function of the rooms they embellished; while the pediment, which in Vitruvius’s day and still in the seventeenth century was, as Roger North said, ‘a piece of state’,<sup>6</sup> soon became used in ever less discriminating ways until in the late twentieth century plastic

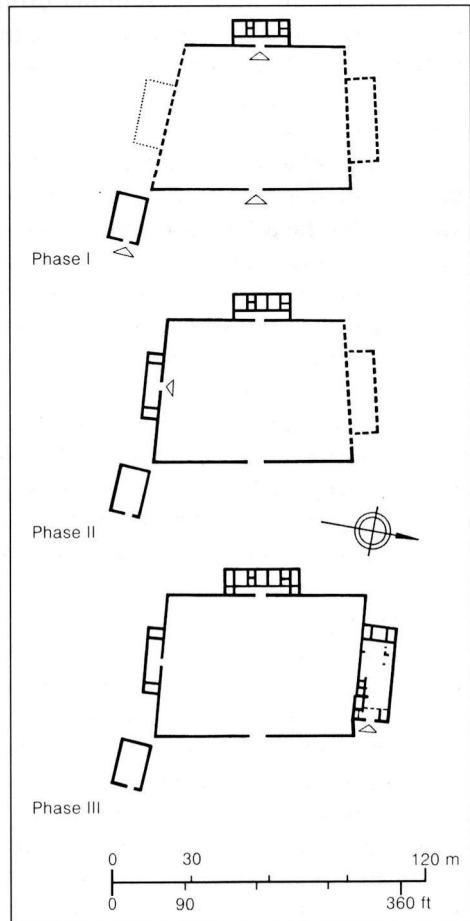


Fig. 2

versions of it adorned newly-purchased council houses. But how credible is the middle room as a summer dining room anyway? What need was there for an unusually wide doorway (*c.*2.3m.) in a dining-room? Surely none, unless a modest version of the public dining days of English kings, when they could be observed at table by their subjects, is envisaged. Dining in Roman times seems to be depicted as a private activity in well-appointed and more enclosed surroundings. A reception room is a more plausible notion, but for whom? – and, again, why the wide opening, which was perhaps closed by curtains rather than doors (p.162)?

This is where the difficulty of reconstructing a Roman villa intelligibly becomes acute and where the totality of the villa is crucial. Sparsholt began as a principal house standing axially at the head of a tapering courtyard (Fig. 2) whose outline is determined on the south side by the outermost building and on the east by a demolished building and a fragment of early courtyard wall. Unusually, the house was equidistant from either side, commonly it stands nearer one side.<sup>7</sup> That situation only arose later, when extensive rebuilding was accompanied by a reshaping of the courtyard to express the changed relations of the three principal buildings to each other. Now the aisled house on the north side was larger, better appointed than its predecessor, incorporating a bath suite, and socially closer to the main house. That is why its axis was swung to north, to express a lesser degree of inferiority. On the opposite side whatever originally stood there was replaced by what is described as a barn, but if it was no more than that it is hard to imagine why a different alignment was needed. At the same time the house was enlarged by the addition of two cross-wings identical in plan<sup>8</sup> although, strangely, they added very little accommodation, the larger serving principally to shelter the stokehole of the hypocaust and the fuel to feed it. The slightness of these additions to the main house just when the aisled house was much enlarged and improved is striking and tends to confirm greater equality between the two.

It is precisely because change in the social structure can be so clearly observed that the reconstruction of a Roman villa – and Sparsholt is only the clearest of many where change can be inferred – differs from that of almost any kind of house dating from before the late middle ages. If only one phase is presented the relation of the four buildings to one another ought to be made clear. But it is the change itself that needs to be presented to the public in order to convey the notion that buildings in the past reflected closely the society that altered them as it evolved to meet new economic and political changes. Visitors ought not to leave Butser thinking they have seen anything that can properly be called a villa when it does not match the authenticity of the reconstructed Iron Age houses or that of the Anglo-Saxon settlement at West Stow.

What could be done to achieve such an end? Large-scale reconstruction like that undertaken at the Xanten archaeological park in the lower Rhineland is unthinkable in the current financial climate and impossible under the planning constraints of the present site and, since the existing building gives a good general idea of what a Roman house was like, it is desirable but perhaps not essential. Plans of the phases are useful but leave many visitors none the wiser. Models made to related scales are a more practicable possibility, using a small scale for comparative courtyard plans and a larger one to show the interiors of complicated buildings, with the possibility of alteration as research and



interpretation proceeds. Increased public understanding of the site would not be the only benefit. Such models, accompanied by research papers, could prompt discussion of the numbers of people who lived at Sparsholt at different times, a topic capable of drawing on detailed studies of other villas.

The social structure and size of population of Iron Age and Roman settlements are notoriously problematic and even Peter Reynolds felt unable to tackle them effectively. This is where Sparsholt might play an important role, taking into account evidence of different kinds from other sites and permitting comparison with other ways in which villas developed – comparative social structure, in fact. And if research excavation were possible, the relation between villa and Iron Age settlement ought to be explored. How far did the replacement of timber roundhouses by substantial stone structures of itself reduce the possibility of change, as the Dutch villa of Rijswijk-de Bult suggests?<sup>9</sup>

When decisions about location and plan had been taken the practical problems of reconstruction began. The walls were of flint, as established by excavation of the villa, but collecting the amount needed – two hundred tons were used for a thickness of c.0.80m. and a height of 2m. – and the limestone and sand required for the mortar and plaster, enough to make twenty tons of quicklime, took about a fifth of the total building time. Bedding the flints in mortar is heavy and time-consuming work so, when the walls were two metres high, it was decided to finish them in timber-framing (p.56). It was an understandable decision in view of the physical constraints, not least the need for scaffolding with its attendant health and safety problems. Whether it was valid on any other grounds than those of convenience is doubtful, and in fact this is the only part of the book where special pleading is apparent.

Once it had been decided to finish the walls in timber-framing the form of roof was limited to what is known archaeologically from the remains of a timber building found in London. It excludes any kind of roof based on what is known about the roofs of Roman stone structures, such as that of St Paul's Outside the Walls at Rome itself, built at the end of the fourth century. The pre-eminent characteristic of this roof and that of St Peter's, built at the beginning of the fourth century, is that they relied for longitudinal stability on the masonry walls into which the ends of the trusses, not only of the tie-beams but also the feet of the principals, were embedded.<sup>10</sup> The efficacy of this system is shown by its perpetuation in Italian church roofs for a millennium thereafter and the adoption of embedding in the otherwise completely different Romanesque roofs of north-west Europe.<sup>11</sup>

It also explains a difference in provincial Roman building construction. The internal structure of an aisled building having earthfast posts is thereby adequately supported; when, as often happened, the posts were removed from the ground and set on stone bases or footings, a thick gable- or cross-wall was needed to give lengthwise stability; it could be a gable wall into which the plates over the posts were embedded, or even a whole truss, posts and all. Equally, such an embedded truss could be internal, placed towards the end of the building. Since thicker transverse walls of this kind seem not to occur in monospan masonry buildings it is a reasonable assumption that the problem they were intended to solve did not occur, which is a reason for preferring a roof with embedded trusses and masonry gable walls. It is a pity that the popularising aim of the

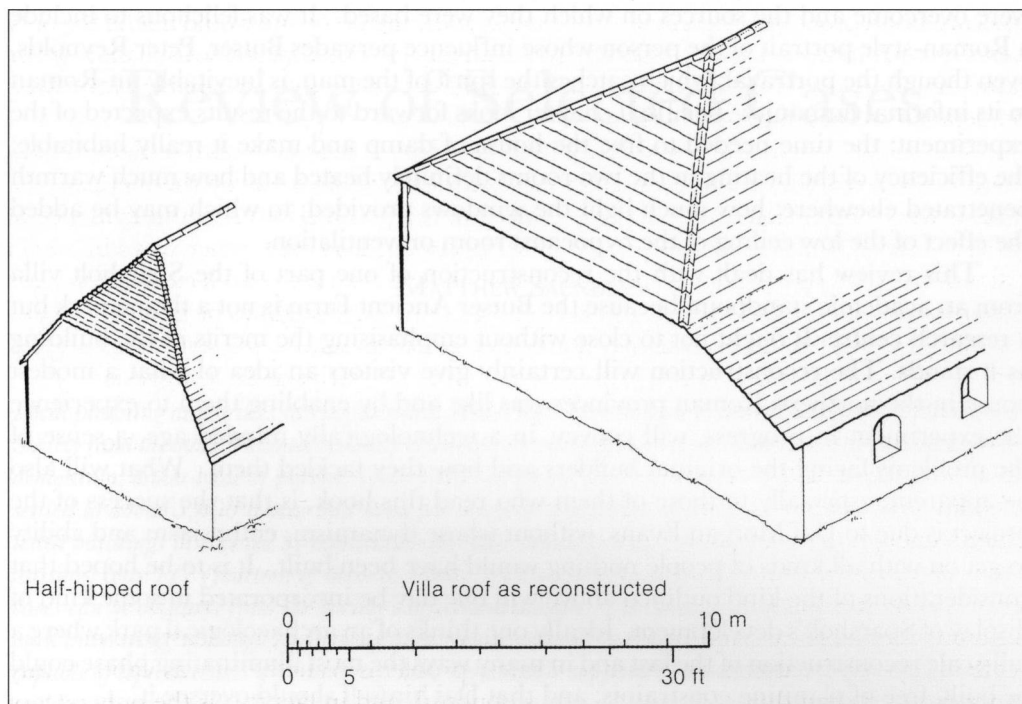


Fig. 3

book did not allow for explanatory roof drawings which would have made clear how the king-post structure that was adopted was stabilised in the absence of both triangulation, using braces to link horizontal and vertical timbers, or masonry support. The next very strong winds may decide the issue, as they did some years ago at West Stow when one roof racked from end to end.

It would in any event have been impossible to build a roof of the kind suggested because 'the local planners wanted the ...villa to look as much like a Hampshire vernacular building as possible. We therefore accepted that a half-hip had to...finish both ends of the roof' (p.98). Some justification is offered for this: 'what seem to be hip rafters' have been found at Scole (Norfolk). A hipped roof, yes, but a half-hip? Did provincial-Roman builders know such a thing? Once again we see the planners having the last word on issues that ought to have been decided on purely archaeological grounds for the reconstruction to be of value as experimental archaeology. Unfortunately they were in a position to enforce their regulations or compel the abandonment of the project, leaving the archaeologists an impossible choice between sticking to principle or upsetting the sponsors. All the odder, then, that the reconstruction has a hipped, not a half-hipped roof (Fig. 3). Did the planners not understand roof terminology or did they turn a blind eye to what was put up?

Other aspects of the reconstruction are hardly contentious. Interesting chapters on woodwork, mosaics and wall-paintings describe the difficulties presented, how they

were overcome and the sources on which they were based. It was felicitous to include a Roman-style portrait of the person whose influence pervades Butser, Peter Reynolds, even though the portrayal, which catches the spirit of the man, is inevitably un-Roman in its informal humanity. The final chapter looks forward to the results expected of the experiment: the time needed to free the house of damp and make it really habitable; the efficiency of the heating in the two rooms definitely heated and how much warmth penetrated elsewhere: how much light the windows provided; to which may be added the effect of the low ceiling of the hypocaust room on ventilation.

This review has dealt with the reconstruction of one part of the Sparsholt villa from an academic standpoint because the Butser Ancient Farm is not a theme park but a research centre. It ought not to close without emphasising the merits of the building as it stands. The reconstruction will certainly give visitors an idea of what a modest house in the northern Roman provinces was like and by enabling them to experience the experiment in progress, will convey, in a technologically minded age, a sense of the problems facing the original builders and how they tackled them. What will also be apparent, especially to those of them who read this book, is that the success of the project is due to Dai Morgan Evans, without whose dynamism, enthusiasm and ability to get on with all kinds of people nothing would have been built. It is to be hoped that considerations of the kind outlined above will one day be incorporated in some kind of display of Sparsholt's development. Ideally one thinks of an archaeological park where a full-scale reconstruction of the last and in many ways the most illuminating phase could be built, free of planning constraints; and that Dai himself should oversee it.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to the Leverhulme Trust for the research grant that made possible my research on Roman villas, of which this review is a late fruit.

#### NOTES

1. Smith, J.T., *Roman Villas: a study in social structure*, London 1997.
2. It is not clear from existing publications whether a doorway could have existed there from the first, or indeed whether the possibility was ever considered.
3. Oelmann, F., 'Ein gallo-römischer Bauernhof bei Mayen', *Bonner Jahrbücher*, 133, 1928, 51-140.
4. Smith as n.1, chapter 4.
5. Vitruvius, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, transl. M.H. Morgan, 1914, repr. New York 1960, 182.
6. Roger North, quoted in Girouard, M., *Life in the English Country House*, New Haven and London 1978, 122.
7. For the significance of courtyard shapes, Smith as n.1, chapter 10; for Sparsholt, 246, 250.
8. Except that, if the plan at p.23 is correct, the north wing is slightly wider, matching the better rooms at that end and revealing to anyone approaching which was the superior part. But this contradicts the plan at p.24 and earlier plans, e.g., Todd, M., (ed.), *Studies in the Romano-British Villa*, Leicester 1978, 80 and *Britannia* 4, 1973, 319.
9. Bloemers, J.H.F., *Rijswijk (Z.H.) 'de Bult' een nederzetting van de Cannanefaten* (= Nederlands Oudheden 8); and for the effect there of building in stone see Smith as n.1, 234.
10. Choisy, A., *L'Art de bâtir chez les Romains*, Paris 1873, repr. Bologna 1984, 151-56; Adam, J.-P., *Roman Building: materials and techniques*, London 1994, 210-3.
11. Smith, J.T., 'The origins and early development of the coupled-rafter roof', in *Alles unter einem Dach: Festschrift für Konrad Bedal...*, Petersberg 2004, 305-7.