

Acton Trussell Roman Villa

Report of Excavations by

Penk Valley Archaeology

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by

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Site Narrative

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Excavations of a Roman Villa, Acton Trussell, Staffordshire

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Introduction

Acton Trussell is a village situated some 4 miles south east of the county town of Stafford. In 1951 the population was just 432, but more recently the village has become popular with West Midland commuters and has seen a surge of new houses being built.

The village of Actone is mentioned in Domesday.

“Held by Robert (Robert de Stafford) for the Bishop of Chester, land for 4 ploughs. In lordship 1; 10 villagers and 8 smallholders with 4 ploughs. A mill at 2s; meadow, 8 acres; woodland 3 furlongs long and 2 furlongs wide. Value before 1066, 5s; now 20s.”

It was during 1979 that Penk Valley Archaeological Group became interested in Acton Trussell, when questions were raised regarding the geographical detachment of St James Church from the village.

It seems the same question had occurred to others before, in “**A short history of the Church**” by a previous vicar the Rev W.A. Appleby, he says “*many people have expressed some surprise that it should have been built on that particular spot. Some attempt must be made at suggesting a reason why this spot was chosen*”. This prompted a series of field studies; the objectives were, if possible, to identify any signs of occupation that might signify a shifted village.

The church sits on high ground to the south of the village, between the church and village are three fields and the, now developed, Moathouse farm, the two fields nearer the church are arable, the other is

a narrow strip called Parsons meadow. The meadow is bisected by a stream that fed the moat of the nearby site of the Trussell Manor house, before discharging into the river Penk. An 18th century estate map shows the stream entering this field, and only continuing after leaving, it is probable therefore, that due to the low-lying nature, regular flooding took place making it unsuitable for occupation.

Vibro-Coring for pollen samples in this same field, carried out in conjunction with Wolverhampton University, found water sodden black peat like mud, containing rotten wood & vegetation, at least down to 3.5 meters and continuing, the resulting poor concentrations of pollens are considered to be due to the continuous cleansing of the soil by fresh water. Comments by Rev Appleby also refer to Parsons meadow, “*Also there would be Riddings brook flowing through Parsons meadow and past Moat farm to the river Penk. Parsons meadow was very wet and undrainable, there must have been frequent floods, not a suitable place for a church”, or any other occupation*”.

Geophysical Survey

During the summer of 1996 a resistivity survey was carried out over the agricultural land to the south of the villa, this area would include the south leg of the ditched and the later walled enclosures. The summer of 1996 came after one of the driest 2-years periods for some considerable

time, in some areas the driest on record, a cereal crop had further depleted moisture content. The results were mixed, as might be expected in these none ideal conditions. The continuation of the ditched enclosure could be identified, also, a then unknown, ditched enclosure was apparent, the north-east corner of this feature, is cut by the south-east corner of the 2nd century ditch, (top centre of Fig 2). Although the southern extremes of the anomaly are outside of the survey, the enclosed area covers at least 2660m².

Despite the success with the ditched enclosures, the 4th century walled enclosures, later discovered by excavation, nor the remains of two buildings within trench 6 were detected. The conditions for the survey were not necessarily ideal for the location of sandstone walls, particularly when built directly into a sub soil of gravely sand with poor water retention. There was no contrast between walls and the equally dry sandy gravely sub soil.

Of further interest regarding the result is that the 2nd century villa ditch, 2.9m wide and up to 1.5m deep, top centre of plot, did not give such a strong response as the possible Iron Age ditch 3. The fill of ditch 2, particularly the top 30cm, is known to be made up of a high proportion of sandstone debris and broken roof tile material. A trial trench across ditch 3 showed it to be of similar width 3m, but only 40cm deep, the fill was clean dark loam. The debris top fill of ditch 2 appears to have affected the moisture retention, the debris in effect allowed better drainage of the top fills. The clean dark loam of ditch 3 gave better moisture retention, and contrasted better with the sandy gravely sub soil, particularly in such dry conditions.

A fault occurred in the equipment, this resulted in spurious results, these are apparent on Fig 2 above, although this spoilt the end presentation, it did not totally negate the results.

The Excavation

The main area available for excavation is to the east of the church, it covers an area of approximately 998m², and is bounded by the cemetery to the west & north, by a wooded area surrounding an ancient clay/marl pit to east, and agricultural land to the south.

Since the sale of land, for the extension of the cemetery in 1932, this area became too small to be of any use for crops, and was used mainly for machine storage and/or silage. For a short period, generally about 1 month, between harvest & re-seeding, opportunities exist to excavate the arable areas to the south.

Trenches had been dug along the south boundary of the churchyard, and during the later years permission was obtained to excavate the full extent of this boundary.

During the build of the nearby M6 Motorway, waste products were disposed of in the marl pits mentioned above, to facilitate heavy vehicles a temporary road was built along the south boundary and across the main excavation area to the east of the church, topsoil and subsoil was removed and replaced with hardcore and furnace slag, most of which was removed later and soil replaced, however this construction destroyed stratigraphy down to, and into, Roman levels.

Probing with metal rods had suggested the presence of a stone structure close to the east boundary of the churchyard. A trial trench confirmed mortared walls, together with Romano-British pottery,

micaceous slate roof tiles, and painted plaster. Detailed in Fig 3.

Before excavation began an east/west datum line was taken 1m out from the south wall of the nave, the line was taken 25m into the site area, sufficient to include the sandstone remains. From this a north/south line was taken 10m to the cemetery northwards, its extreme end would be the 25/0 position, and the intersection with the 25m line would be 25/10. This formed the basis of the 1m square site grid into which all features and artifacts are recorded.

Due to the asymmetric line of the churchyard boundary, this produced a wedge-shaped area running 29m along the east boundary, but tapering from 8m wide at the north to 0m at the south end. Section 1 was 10m long and an area of 63.5m² – see Fig 3.

Topsoil removal was taken down 20cm, although this increased up to the hedgerow of the churchyard, which is on average 50cm higher than the site level.

Section 1 Building remains

Below the old plough level there was much disturbance, with no visible stratification until quantities of sandstone rubble were encountered, this rubble was overlying fragmented micaceous slate roof tile, a thin layer of dark soil separated the tile from a deposit of painted wall plaster, lying mostly face down, directly over an Opus Signinum floor.

A possible 47 post & stake holes had penetrated the tile & plaster layers and intruded into and through the floor, due to the damage to the floor it was not possible to determine exact numbers.

A fine rubble spread continued for circa 1-2m around the outer building, and lay on an otherwise clean occupation level, it was on this level that two Constantine coins, 's 36 & 43 on the coin list, were located on a thin spread of mortar dust. One coin was a Constantine I, the other his mother Helena, minted after her death, although little worn, bronze disease had taken place round the edges.

Virtually all tile and painted plaster was contained within the apsidal. The stonework exposed is that of an apsidal wing the outer line is semi-hexagonal- Plate 2. Fig 3 illustrates the walls A.B.C, that are attached to walls D & E of the north-east corner of a 2nd C. building. This wing is a later addition to the main structure.

Four courses of stonework survive, the uppermost only partly, all are mortared, and sit on a marl foundation strengthened with large river washed cobbles, the lower two courses are generally as quarried, angular, and more irregularly laid, moreover the colour and texture of the mortar on the part surviving top course is different to the lower levels. All the walls are stepped, wall A is stepped, but more untidily, near its juncture with wall B the stepping reduces to minimal proportions. The outer walls were trench built, in the trench of Wall B, was a solitary un-abraded sherd of Samian Dr 37 with ovolo above a continuous wavy line, followed by a rosette design, see pottery report no.17. Plate 47

Across the chord of the apse, mostly covered by the floor, is Wall D. The east wall of the 2nd C. build within the Apse, now a sleeper wall which is only visible in part through postholes and near

its joint with wall C where mortar evidence and the ghost of the wall, shows it to be a sleeper across the inner part of the apse only. It remained above floor level to form a buttress protruding into the apse, this was echoed on the opposite side partly hidden under the church hedge.

The floor of the apsidal was Opus-Signinum, a red coloured concrete. There were a number of anomalies. At the apex of the apse a section of plaster, cut off at floor level, was sandwiched between the floor and wall. See Plate 3.

In section it could be seen that the plaster was painted, it is unlikely that the decoration would be applied to the plaster before laying the floor concrete. It was thought possible therefore, that this plaster was contemporary with an earlier floor that exists, or existed, below the present level. Another anomaly was the floor, on the north side of the apse. It overlies wall C, the inner of the two curved lines on the north side of the floor shown in Fig 3, and represents the line of the inner wall, the outer line is that of the floor. This can also be seen in Plate 2. It was also noted that the mortar used on the part surviving top course of stonework on walls A, B, and E, was of a different colour and texture to that below.

Another point to consider was a marl foundation, strengthened with large river washed cobbles, running along the north side (Wall C). See Plate 2.

A further point is the posthole sitting in and over Wall E as depicted in Plate 4 below. It is apparent that the stonework has been built around an existing post, note here the different colour of the mortar to that used on the walls below. It is clear that there are two phases of construction, with the painted plaster, the posthole, and the lower courses of stonework belonging to an earlier phase, the post hole suggesting a timber structure on stone foundations. With the top course of stonework, including that surrounding the posthole, the floor, and marl foundation, belonging to a later phase.

Although the Wall C had been moved northward by some 22cm, the extra room created was certainly not the reason for this work. It had been difficult to suggest reasons for these modifications. Then in 2004, after nearly 20 years of debate, it was decided that the floor would be sectioned. This would hopefully answer not only the question of the existence of an earlier floor, and the realignment of Wall C, but also did the wing have a hypocaust heating system as there was no evidence of flues in the wall remains. Box flue tiles however can be seen in the section to the left of the posthole F41 on Plate 4.

There was no evidence of an earlier floor, the sunken floor was brought back up to level by a skim of new Opus-Signinum mortar, zero thickness at the south end, 5cm thick at the north, this repaired the damage due to subsidence, it was during this work that the section of painted plaster was left sandwiched between wall and floor – see Plate 3.

The newly repaired floor was extended to butt up to the new wall alignment. A large quantity of used red, white, and occasionally black tesserae had been utilized in the mortar of the new floor, some still had adhering white setting mortar.

The top course of stonework on walls A & B, the top course of the buttress at the end of wall D, and the stonework round posthole (F41), coloured black on Fig 3. are the only remains of the 4th century rebuild. Certainly, the wing rebuild was necessary due to the subsidence problem, but it appears that the rebuild included the whole building now up to 200 years old.

The stonework surrounding posthole F41 can be seen to have been built around an existing post, this post would have been one of the main wall/roof supports of the timber phase, the rebuild in

stone round the post suggests that the roof timbers were in good condition and were retained, even though the Tegulae and Imbrex may have been replaced.

The posthole top tapers, from 50cm to 25cm across at the bottom, the taper may have been due to the trimming of the lower end of the post due to decay, before being buried in the new wall. Below the floor, the internal buttress (of wall D) had been strengthened with the addition of mortared walling on either side, it is possible that this buttress is the remains of an arched entrance into the wing from the main building. In this case it may have been necessary to strengthen the base of the arch in order to carry the extra pressures, or the weight of the stone rebuild.

Over two thousand tesserae, red, white, and black were recovered, again some exhibited traces of setting mortar, they were mostly contained within a deposit outside of wall C. This deposit was a thin layer of fine mortar dust and light sandstone debris which lay on an otherwise clean sandy loam surface of an occupation level. It was in this context that two Constantine coins were located, one Constantine I, the second of Helena his mother, this coin was minted after her death. The presence of the coins in this context suggests a reconstruction phase near to, but later than AD 337. A nearby mortar mixing pit 1m east of the wing, is probably contemporary with the 4th century rebuild.

There is no evidence on the existing floor to suggest there had been a mosaic. Several sherds of pottery were recovered from in and under the floor. The roof material recovered was both pan tile, Tegulae & Imbrex, and grey/blue micaceous slate. The pantile was spread around the outside of the building, the grey slate was confined, other than the odd fragments, to a deposit over the painted plaster on the floor of the wing, with a paucity of slate elsewhere on site, it suggests a different roof material between wing and main building.

Burnt stone mound.

Outside the northeast corner of the wing was a mound of burnt cobbles, it would be more accurate to say a 30cm deep deposit. At this point space is restricted to 1m between Wall E and the graveyard to the west and north, the extent of the mound could not therefore be ascertained. The sectioning of the wing floor showed that both the wing and the main building had cut into this deposit.

Iron Age and early Romano-British pot sherds, including a 1st C. Midland Grey Ware Carinated Beaker with lattice decoration, as detailed in the later Pottery Report, were recovered from over the top of the mound. It was impossible to say whether these were originally deposited on the mound, or were disturbed during the 2nd C. Villa build that cut the mound. More burnt stones were discovered later in the churchyard.

Post Romano-British Occupation

Inserted into the floor of the wing are upwards of 42 post and stake holes, the damage around some of these intrusions makes it difficult to be sure of exact numbers. It can be seen on Fig3. and Plate 2, that two sets of three stake-holes near the apex of the apse extend over the walls, with stake holes F17 & F21 leaving a ghost of their position. The remaining stake and postholes penetrated through the tile and painted plaster deposits. All these intrusions obviously postdate the early decay stages or the robbing of Wall B.

It was impossible to determine whether they cut through any later robbing/demolition debris above. It is reasonable to conclude that, other than F41, all the post & stake holes are contemporary, and all are post decay and early demolition/robbing intrusions. No pattern can be seen in the post or stake holes, however some do appear to follow the contour of the apse. The fall of the painted plaster is more likely to have been the result of general decay. The roof tile fell later, either due to the same cause, or due to robbing of the walls. There are a number of possible periods for the robbing.

During the decline of the Romano-British villa estates, it is suggested that in some cases occupants robbed the buildings in order to maintain a shrinking house, if this were the case here, it would provide a time line for the post hole intrusions to be sub-Roman or Anglo-Saxon. There is also the possibility that the robbing took place during any of the 12th century chapel and 13th century church additions, or rebuilding phases of the 17th, and 19th centuries. It seems more likely that there were at least two phases of robbing. The first perhaps anytime during the sub roman period, by the occupants themselves, or later squatters. Or the postholes are possibly Anglo-Saxon, despite no firm dating. A larger scale robbing may have then occurred during any of the church build, or rebuild phases.

PHASES OF CONSTRUCTION

Phase 1

Walls D & E are contemporary, with the exception of the uppermost course of wall E surrounding posthole F41, they are foundations for an early/mid 2nd C. timber framed rectangular building.

Phase 2

Late 2nd century an apsidal wing was added, again timber frame on stone foundations. An entrance from the main structure was created through wall D. It is not possible to say, at this stage, if the internal entrance to the wing was arched, with wall D becoming a sleeper, or if entry was by a wicker doorway requiring a smaller aperture. The wall plaster was painted, the floor was Opus-Signinum.

Phase 3.

The west leg of the 2nd century enclosure ditch and parts of the adjoining south and north legs were deliberately infilled. This then allowed the villa to be extended westward at least to the west end of the church nave. The extensions gave new accommodation that allowed the 2nd century villa to be rebuilt in stone.

Phase 4.

Mid-4th century the wing, and almost certainly the whole of the 2nd century building, was re-constructed in stone, utilizing in the main, the old foundations. These are substantial enough for the purpose, at least of a single story. Wall C was re-built slightly northward to align with the buttress end of wall D, the new wall used the old foundations in part, the remainder sitting on a new foundation F48, in marl & cobbles.

Wall D certainly was now mainly a sleeper within the apse, a short, just 1.4m, run was left standing in the north corner of the apse. This is possibly the base of an arched entrance, walling was added, below floor level, on both sides of Wall D, adding strength to carry the weight of the arch. It is possible the similar features existed on the south side but evidence is lost under the boundary hedge.

The roof material of the wing was slate, but the main building was roofed in red pantile. Flue box tile can be seen in the debris beyond Wall D, and left of Wall E. This is demolition/robbing debris. See Plate 4.

Phase 5

Undated occupation of the robbed/demolished wing, with the insertion of post & stake holes through the floor.

Section 2

The area took in the entire length of the east boundary, south of section 1 (plate 7 below), an area of 116m². This extended the excavation to the South-East corner of the church boundary. Due to the asymmetric boundary this forces the section further away from the projected building line, a number of features were identified.

F53, consisted of a deposit of sandstone fragments, this was flanked by two 40cm square post holes F51 & F52. The fragments sloped downward away from the projected building line of wall D beyond the hedge boundary. Above the stone fragments was a soil deposit 10cm thick, and then the remains of a mortar spread F54, 2.5cm thick, see plate 7. Abraded pot sherds were present in the soil deposit.

An area of sandy and gravelly subsoil at the base of the slope of F53 appeared to have been washed out leaving a mainly gravel deposit, it appeared to be the result of water dripping from above.

Further along the boundary hedge was a section of mortared wall F55, 4 courses deep. This feature was just visible in the section of the hedge boundary, there was an angle to the wall very similar to wall C of the apsidal wing, although the stone was not so roughly cut.

Next were a number of postholes F56, 57, & 59, all square in section and 17cm across, and another post hole F58 some 20cm across containing stone packing. These features were first discernible at level 4, the floor level of the wing. Three were 10cm deep, two were deeper and were into level 6, the marl foundation level of the wing, a natural sand & gravel level, these may have been associated with scaffolding for the building work.

Two features of sandstone and pantile fragments, F60 & F61, were found later to be a very hastily dug drain that runs completely across the front of the villa.

A sherd of Neolithic Peterborough ware was recovered on the interface with the natural levels. Flints were also recovered from these lower levels.

Discussion of Section 2

F51, & F52 are contemporary, these post holes may have been supports for a roofed entry into the main structure. The water running off this roof appeared to have washed out the soil below leaving a mainly gravel fill. The sloping sandstone fragments F53 would then be packing for a pavement out of the entrance, after a period this was reinforced with mortar F54.

Posthole F50 is probably contemporary with F49 in Section 1, both predate the wing. It is pure

conjecture but the stonework F55, is possibly the remains of a robbed out second wing. Unfortunately, the remains are under the hedgerow of the cemetery. If it were a second wing, the supposed doorway is midway between both. A second wing would have balanced this aspect of the building with the possible entrance discussed above. This would provide a similarity with the nearest known villa at Engleton, near Pennocrucium, some 5m to the Southwest, excavated in 1930's.

Feature F61, a linear deposit of sandstone and pantile fragments, proved to be the fill of a continuing drainage cut mentioned later in Section 4. The possibility is that the filling of the ditched enclosures, detailed later, caused water ingress of the villa due to the gentle slope of the site.

South boundary

Section 3

There are two gateways into the south field, with the re-location of the main farm out of the village. The gateway near the Southwest corner of the churchyard was seldom used, with permission, this was closed off to provide an area of 162m², without interfering with the crops.

The ground all along this south boundary, and that later to be discussed in Section 4, had been subjected to heavy disturbance by the construction of a temporary roadway. This road was built for heavy transport carrying waste material from the construction of the M6 into a large marl pit to the east of the site. Topsoil and some subsoil had first been removed, then large quantities of hardcore & slag were laid down. On completion, 90% of the hardcore was removed and soil replaced, but the residue of hardcore was found pressed into roman levels.

Several features were exposed. As illustrated in Fig 4, the first, a single course of stonework, F69 and F136, forms a right angle. At the corner there is a break, possibly a gateway. The lack of any wall trench in the gap suggests the missing stones were not due to robbing, or the above-mentioned damage. As illustrated in Plate 10.

A number of misplaced stones, at the near corner on as shown in Fig 4 and evidenced in Plate 10 (F69), are thought to be the remains of a corner buttress. Confined within the wall was much sandstone debris, loose and disturbed. This debris, as previously illustrated in Plate 8, was probably the remains of a second course of stonework, pottery at this level was much abraded.

The next level, level 4, 10cm below the sandstone debris, produced further features. The first was a rubbish pit F134 (Fig 4), 1.5m diameter and 1m deep. The fill was a very dark loam containing animal & fish bones, pottery, small sandstone fragments, a complete Imbrex tile, iron nails, a door key, knife blade, latch lifter, a Constantine minim, and two carved bone hair pins. Some of the contents are illustrated on Plate 9. The metal objects were quite badly corroded, the bone & pot however were in exceptional condition. Image of pit is illustrated on Plate 11.

The top of this pit, and possibly any further courses of the enclosure wall F69 and F136, were almost certainly removed during the earth removal for the temporary roadway. A large section of BB1 cooking bowl amongst the debris matched exactly a sherd recovered from the pit.

There were two small shallow pits. F137 was the smallest just 50cm diameter and 10cm deep, it contained the incomplete skeleton of a small animal.

The context at this level appeared to be a natural sandy gravel, however a further cut was made, Level 5, revealing a ditch corner (F133). This is illustrated in Plate 12 below. The width of the ditch was circa 2.2 - 2.4m and 75cm deep. The fill was a dark loam and sandy gravelly mix, the fill was homogeneous and consistent with deliberate filling. There was no visible stratification except for a thin silt at the bottom.

There were just two dateable potsherds recovered in the fill, these included a 2nd century mortarium sherd with hooked flange recovered from the silt, and a 2nd century BB1 cooking pot.

These ditch dimensions later become a problem. Excavations of a similar feature in other areas showed a ditch much wider and deeper. Over the following 30 or so years, the excavation continued along the south boundary, as and when the land became available.

At first trenches were spaced, the gaps between the trenches were then excavated. For clarity however, the report will follow progress along this south boundary irrespective of trench numbers or chronology.

South boundary

Continuing east from Section 3. (Reference Plate 13 and Fig 5). Total length 17m, width 5m. Here again disturbance was evident with modern slag and hardcore. This was present into roman levels driven in by the wheels of the heavy transport involved in the temporary road.

At Level 4 several features were exposed. The ditch, observed in section 3, continued and again the fill was homogeneous with . stratification. See Plate 14. As opposed to the ditch in S3 where little pottery was recovered, that in this section was of sufficient quantity and contained black burnished (BB1) cooking pot and bowl rim sherds all . later than 2nd century. This suggests a fill date of that century and coincides with the build date of the 1st villa in the churchyard.

Below the disturbed ground there was a horse burial. It is a small horse perhaps just 10 hands. Although inserted into roman levels, the top of the burial pit had been destroyed by the earth removal for road construction, there were no horse fittings or associated items found in the burial pit.

It is considered that the burial dates from late medieval at the earliest, perhaps even later. The skeleton did have some anomalies, firstly the front legs had been removed and placed along the body.

The legs had been removed complete with the scapula, not at the first joint as perhaps you would expect. The hooves were not present, and the absent of the coffin bones that are situated inside the hoof, suggests they were not included in the burial.

Nearby a small amount of mid to late medieval pot sherds, and fragments of medieval glazed floor tiles were located, but not associated with the burial. See Medieval supplementary report.

Trenches 1 and T1 extension - See Fig 5 and Plate 19, are 14m x 1m and 9m x 4m respectively.

Trench 1 was the first trench excavated on the south boundary, but it was the extension that provided vital information as to the development of the complex. It was T1 extension that proved there were two enclosure ditches, a late 1st century ditch F133 associated with the timber buildings already discussed in Section 1, and trenches 10, 11, & 12 and F143 contemporary with the 2nd century villa. With the new villa in the churchyard the timber buildings in section 4, to be discussed later, and in trenches 10-12, became redundant and were demolished.

The enclosure F143 around the new villa was created by utilising the east section of the narrower and shallower F133, the west section becoming redundant and was backfilled. F143 itself was to become redundant when the villa was extended to the west. This required the leg visible in the photo above to be backfilled together with parts of adjoining legs. For confirmation of the villa extension see "Watching Brief" later.

Posthole F400 belongs to the linear set postholes in trenches 10-12, part of a 1st century timber building.

Trench 8

T8 was longer at 19.5m x 2m to include an anomaly shown on the resistivity survey (Fig 2). Besides the continuation of the enclosure ditch, T8 also contained a rough drain F150 coming from the direction of the villa. This drain is similar to others that were hastily dug across the front and from the sides of the villa building. The drain crossed the backfilled ditch and is probably the latest of the roman features. These drains were possible created in response to flooding caused when the enclosure ditches were backfilled, a problem made worse by the fact the villa was midway down a gentle slope from east to west of the site.

The drain also passed through the rubble of the 3rd century enclosure wall, itself a replacement for the ditches. To the right of the drain some lower course of the enclosure wall survives intact. The new ditch feature, suggested by the resistivity survey, was confirmed. This feature was only 40cm deep into the sandy/gravelly subsoil but was filled with dark clean loam. No artifacts were recovered.

It can be seen on the plot in the resistivity report (Fig 2), that this new feature appears to be earlier than the 2nd century enclosure ditch that cuts through it. Fig 2 also shows this shallow feature was just missed by trenches 1 & 2, and was probably too disturbed by the cutting of the enclosure ditch, and the drain cut, to be identified in trench 3. This is further detailed within Figure 6.

Trenches 8,13, 2, 14, & 15.

All these trenches are in line with, and just a few metres to the south of, the 2nd century villa in the churchyard. The 2nd century ditch, with the deliberate fill, continued into T15 and at the extreme end of the trench it appeared that the ditch was terminating.

There were 4 post holes in T13, F470 was clean, F467 and F471 contained Romano-British pottery fragments and pantile, F469 contained Romano-British and Iron Age pottery. The date of the postholes is uncertain but the fill is mid-2nd century. T2 and T14 confirmed the continuation of the ditch with no other features present.

There were 6 postholes in T15, F476 and F480 were clean. The others contained pantile fragments and one contained two tesserae blocks. Again, the fill suggests a 2nd century fill of earlier post holes.

A hastily cut drain entered the trench from the position of the 2nd century villa, and is picked up again in T3.

Trench 16

12m x 5m Fig 6

The termination of the ditch in T15 was only temporary, after a gap of 3.5m, the ditch appeared again and continued into T3. The gap, F482, was an entrance used by both the late 1st and 2nd century ditched enclosures. The entrance in this position halfway down a slight slope east to west, must have been a problem during wet weather when the ditch carried water and overflowed. This was evident by the amount of ash, stone, clay and general debris used to maintain the entrance. There was no evidence of a drain across the entrance or bridge over the ditch.

F480, as illustrated in Plate 21, shows a posthole in the entrance contained only clean fill. It was amongst this debris that 75% of a Black Slipped Beaker was recovered. See Plate 22

Trench 3. 14m x 3m

More time was available for this trench, with the land being available throughout the winter months. Due to the proximity of a tree the trench was started 3m away from the hedge line. The continuation of the ditch line was confirmed, the fill again similar, rubble top fill, dark soil below the rubble, then a primary silt. There were two phases to the fill, deliberate, then a period of compaction followed by the rubble filling the sink.

A drainage cut F142 was present. It started at the north end of the trench, the branch cut can be seen in Fig 6 and Plate 23 exiting T16 and joining the main channel. This branch would be coming from the south-east corner of the 2nd C. villa. It then continued southwards over and through the enclosure ditch and out of the south end of the trench. This is almost certainly a continuation of the hastily dug drain F61 in section 2, and F147 in section 4. It would appear there was no knowledge of the existence of a filled ditch at the time as this would have presumably made an ideal soak-away.

Below the temporary roadway hard core, a Denarius of Alexander Severus 222-235AD was recovered.

Trench 17. 11.5m x 3m.

See Fig 7 and Plate 24

4 Post holes were present, all contained fragments of Roman pantile or pot, suggesting a 1st century fill of late Iron Age features. The ditch line continues, the fill was again homogeneous, evidence of a deliberate fill. No other features were discovered.

Section 4. Fig 8, Fig 9 and Plates 25 – 34.

Section 4 continues the excavation eastwards from sections 1 & 2, and covers an area of 750 square metres. The temporary road cuts across this section but does not, in the main, appear to have penetrated Roman levels. The exception is where hardcore has been forced lower by the heavy vehicles.

Until 1932 this was agricultural land, but 60% was given to the church for a graveyard extension, the remaining ground became too small for crops and was used as machinery storage, and silage etc.

Below the old plough soil 60 marl features were discovered see Fig 8 and plate 25, 26 and 27. In the main they were rectangular, circa 50cm square and 5cm thick. A few were irregular in shape, and being above roman levels may have been damaged by the road construction. It's possible some were destroyed by the road which came across the bottom as illustrated in plate 25 below.

The usual interpretation would be post pads, but they appear to be too close together at circa 2m, and the pattern did not suggest a building. They were left in situ for a number of years in case an interpretation came up.

Continuing eastwards linear deposits of sandstone debris appeared. The first was the top fill of the eastern leg of the enclosure ditch mentioned earlier. The second was the rubble of a robber trench from the 3rd century walled enclosure that replaced the 2nd C. ditch.

The fill of the east leg of the ditch was not homogeneous and was filled over a period of years, an example of the fill can be seen in trench 4. First a primary silt then an accumulation of general rubbish, a period of consolidation and a final levelling of the sink with sandstone rubble and pantile fragments. This being the debris from the 4th century rebuild of the mid-2nd century villa. There was pottery at all levels.

However, the north leg had been subject to deliberate filling and a 5.5m section was filled entirely of ash and burnt stones. See churchyard excavations later for possible explanation.

A further cut of showed the marl pads were sitting above a cobbled area, into which was a mortar mixing pit had been dug, and a crude drain (not yet excavated on the photo below) cutting both.

The mortar pit is considered to be contemporary with the 4th century rebuild of the 2nd century villa, the drain cuts through the pit. There is no doubt here that the pads are post Roman, the drain is late 4th century.

At level 4 the earliest Romanised building was exposed as a series of postholes 17m long by 9m wide. This is the same length as the line of postholes in trenches 10-12 which almost certainly represent another similar construction. Both are contemporary with the ditched enclosure also seen in the same trenches. See Plate 28.

Many postholes contained either Romano-British pot sherds, pantile fragments, or a mix of both. In the case of two, the fill was exclusively unused black tesserae blocks, it would appear that with a new mid-2nd century villa completed. These late 1st century buildings were now redundant, with the timbers removed, the postholes were backfilled with the debris of construction work associated

with the new villa.

From the pattern of the posts it would seem that the row on the far right represent an outside portico or covered colonnade as illustrated in Plate 28. The next set to the left would then be an internal corridor.

Across the ditch to the north were the remains of what appear to be 3 ovens F528, F532, and F533, identified in Fig 9 below. All reduced to floor level, all showed signs of burning. The floor of F528 was laid cobbles.

These are considered to be late Iron Age or early Roman associated with the timber buildings. At level 5 archaeology continued with the discovery of numerous postholes, a late Iron Age gully dug stockade/palisade, an earlier Iron Age gully and a pit. See Fig 7 and Plate 30 below.

Although no definite pattern can be seen in the postholes, it is possible that a broken circle, bottom right, might represent a circular hut, cut by F263 gully, as illustrated on Plate 30. The earlier of the gullies seen entering the section from the bottom centre (north) before turning to the left (east) crossing the 2nd century ditch, into section 5 and continues into the woods behind. This gully contained Iron Age pottery. See Plate 31.

The gully dug stockade/palisade seen coming in from the bottom left (east) and crossing the earlier gully then continuing to top of photo (south), is a late Iron Age feature with the post impressions still clear, and contained both Iron Age pottery sherds and a 1st century mortarium rim stamped by the potter Albinus. (Plate 30. no.356.) Albinus was active at St Albans (Verulamium) from AD60 to AD90, then it is believed he moved to Mancetter/Hartshill.

Examination of the fabric, see Plate 32 and 33, confirms it is a product of the Verulamium kilns, and therefore is certainly older than AD90. The contents confirm a redundancy and backfill date probably on or about the construction of the late 1st century timber building.

The mortarium is a Roman vessel used with a pestle in the mixing of herbs and spices, it illustrates the fact that the Iron Age family at Acton had already adopted, at least in part, the diet of Rome.

A sub rectangular pit F260, 1.25m wide x 80cm deep, contained a fibular brooch, pantile fragments, and late 3rd century Romano British pottery. It appeared that the pit was much earlier then re-used in the 2nd/3rd century.

Discussion on section 4.

Marl pads. F70-F128 – Plate 25 and Fig 9.

The marl pads remain a mystery. They were first recognized just above roman levels and terminate 2-5cm above the cobbled area and the 4th century mortar mixing pit. They range from a thickness of 5cm - 8cm and 30-40cm square, although a few have no regular shape, they appear to be post pads, but for what?

After leaving in situ for two years attempting to identify their use, they were all eventually removed. Under one was a Barbarous Radiate coin, so these features at least post-date the mid-3rd century, they also postdate what is considered to be a 4th century mortar mixing pit, their context puts them certainly post roman.

Referring to Fig 9, various patterns may be suggested, but none that might suggest their use.

Drain F147

This feature circa 25cm wide and 50cm deep runs across the front of the building, it cuts through and post-dates the cobbled area, and the concrete mixing pit F146, considered to be a 4th C. feature. In Trench 3 this drain appears again, this time cutting through the ditch. It seems there was no knowledge of the existence of the ditch when the drain was put in.

The general slope of the land east to west down to the building may have allowed rainwater to run down towards the main building, when the ditch was in use water would have been collected and diverted away. There would be a different situation, perhaps, when the ditch was redundant and filled in, and the natural drain lost. But from the crude digging of the drain, it would appear that the problem was sudden, a period of particularly heavy rainfall may have caused short term flooding.

Mortar mixing pit F146.

The mortar was filling a small pit circa 0.75m diameter x 35cm deep. There were red fragments in the mix, mainly from smashed pan tile material. The probability is this is a 4th C. mixing pit used by the those working on the reconstruction of the wing, discarded before the final mix was needed.

The linear postholes.

These represent the first Romanized rectangular building on site, they measure 17m x 9m with 2 narrow lines of posts suggesting an outside portico and an inside corridor. Inside was an oval of stones containing the ash of a simple hearth – F196. Within the ash was a distorted flagon, the fabric was a typical Malvernian Reduced Ware. No.357 in pot report.

It is almost certain that the linear set of postholes discovered in trenches 10, 11 and 12, are of a similar building. Both contained within a ditched enclosure, it was this early ditch that was modified to create the 2nd C. enclosure for the new villa.

Gullies.

F263 is Iron Age and only contained pot sherds of that period.

F261 is late Iron Age and contained pottery both Iron Age and a late 1st century Romano-British pottery in the form of a mortarium rim from the Verulamium (St Albans) area. The presence of this pottery, and the late 1st century buildings, shows that the folk at Acton had become Romanized quite quickly.

The reason for the short run of walling F129 is still in doubt.

Across the section north to south was the robber trench of the east leg of the 3rd century walled enclosure that replaced the 2nd century ditch. There was an anomaly here with a 3.75m gap in the trench and a single course of stonework, F132, set back from the gap. A possible interpretation is that this is an entrance into the enclosure with a walled obstruction to allow access to humans but keeping out animals, but then why not a narrower gap?

The robbed-out wall line F129 continued to the north-east corner of the section where it ended. It was picked up again as F162, three courses still survived, the wall runs westward into the churchyard. These remains, and the robbed-out wall trench are part of the north-east corner of the

4th century walled enclosure. The south-west corner of which was located in section 3. The north-east corner is located in the churchyard.

The Enclosure ditch S4

The ditch in this section is contemporary with the 2nd century villa construction.

The south-west corner was located in trench 1 extension. It appears to follow the line of, and replaced, a 1st century ditch associated with the late 1st century timber building.

The bottom fill was primary silt, a little worn coin of Vespasian was recovered from this deposit. This was followed by a secondary silt containing pottery, followed by dark soil fills, with occasional ash, and more pottery and occasional debris fragments.

Other than a short stretch near the wing, and at its juncture with the 1st century ditch in trench 1, the fill suggested a long period of neglect, and ad-hoc filling, before being finally filled and levelled using building debris from the 4th century villa rebuild.

Neolithic to Iron Age.

Dozens of small fragments of late Neolithic pottery have been recovered, together with two rim sherds with twisted cord decoration, a body sherd with bird bone impressions, and several flint tools and wasters, some none stratified, others on an otherwise clean sandy gravelly level below Iron Age.

A Bronze Age rim section, with finger nail impressions was found, also unstratified. There was a deposit of burnt & cracked stones alongside, and cut by, the wing.

The section of the 2nd C. enclosure ditch nearest the wing was also completely filled with burnt stones that had been re-deposited from the churchyard. The deposit near the wing may be the edge of a burnt stone mound, or it could be material re-deposited during the villa construction.

These mounds are generally considered to be dated to the Bronze Age, but they are normally associated with a nearby water supply, . such supply has so far been located. The nearest is Riddings brook at the bottom of Parsons meadow, some 400m north of the site, or the River Penk a little further to the west.

The gully (F263) is Iron Age, pot sherds, both rims and base, of the period were found in the fill. This feature predates a stockade (F261). This is a gully built stockade with the post impressions clearly identifiable. This feature contained early Roman and Iron Age pot sherds. Two short and shallow gullies crossed F261, stake holes at the base suggest a wicker type entrance.

The majority of the many post and stake holes contained no dateable artefacts in their fill. However, a number did contain Roman ceramic, pot or pantile fragments. This applied to many of the post holes that identified the first Romanised rectangular timber building. It is almost certain that others belong to this period but with no datable material, it is pure conjecture, it is equally arguable that some are contemporary with the late Iron Age stockade.

Section 5 Fig 11.

This section is outside and to the east of both the 2nd century ditched, and 3rd century walled enclosures, archaeology was present, first a cobbled area F163 some 3.5m wide running 6m east into the wooded area, and westward toward section 4.

The Iron Age gully F263 also continues through the section and into the woods beyond.

Above this cobbled area was a circular burnt area with a burnt clay base F164, and at the southwest corner a semi-circular deposit of burnt sandstone with black fill, a possible hearth F165.

There were some 37 postholes, of which 17 were clean, one F425 contained Neolithic pottery fragments, another contained Iron Age pot, the remaining 18 contained either Roman pot or pantile. But it is likely all are Iron Age.

At level 6, the natural is reached and into this was a short run of gully F408, cut by F407, containing Bronze Age pottery with finger nail decoration. See pot report no. 589.

A trench, T5, was dug in the arable to see if the semi-circular hearth F165 protruded into the area under crop, nothing was found, the remainder of the hearth is probably in the baulk.

Trench 4.

Fig 12. Plates 34, 35 and 36.

With the line of the enclosure ditch confirmed along the south boundary, together with that in section 4, it was possible to plot the south-east corner. It was also hoped to discover if the enclosure wall that appeared to end in trench 14 reappeared at the corner.

The south-east corner of the enclosure ditch was located, the fill here was not deliberate it had occurred over a number of years, first a primary silt, followed by ingress of general rubbish, then a period of consolidation, before finally topping off the sink with demolition debris probably from the 4th century rebuild of the 2nd century villa.

A Follis of Diocletian AD284-305 was recovered from the top fill, and a Denarius of Septimius Severus AD191-211 was located on top of the sink and under the late rubble fill, with a Denarius of Vespasian AD69-79 found in the primary silt. There was no evidence of the 3rd century walled enclosure.

Beyond this building was a break before the remains of a second building F153. mainly a single course, but in parts a second course leveled up due to sloping ground. This break is almost certainly an entrance between both buildings. There was no evidence to show that there were any more walls associated with F152, it may have been a lean-to with other walls or structure in timber.

There was however evidence that F153 was not just a single wall, there were scant remains of the corner of a wall running to the west, see Fig very little stonework remained and what was there was mainly scattered. It can be seen from the photos that the remains are quite shallow just under the plough.

Churchyard extension

Reference Fig13

In 1932 there was an extension to the east end of the cemetery, approximately 60% on the north side has been used for burials, and is 90% full. In a few years the remaining 40% would be required for internments.

In keeping with the now defunct “Association of Diocesan and Cathedral Archaeologists, Guidance notes 2004, Appendix 1, D5 Graveyard Extensions”.

“Proposals for new burial grounds need to take archaeological considerations into account if desk-top assessments show that the location is sensitive”. “Particularly where the church occupies an already old site, there might be settlement or defensive earthworks or Roman or prehistoric remains.”

The confirmation of the Romano-British villa site shows the site to be sensitive, and with the ground being brought into use in the foreseeable future, Penk Valley Archaeology gained permission to carry out the necessary fieldwork.

The probable line of the north wall of the 3rd C. enclosure was plotted, it was planned to carry out full excavation from the south fence to 3metres outside the walled enclosure, a total area of 166m², together with test pits in the remaining ground to the north. Because of the problem of spoil storage, the area was sectioned into 5 trenches 18,19,20, 21, and 22.

The storage shed, seen in the background of the Plate 39, was in very poor condition and was dismantled with the group committed to repair and re-siting in a more suitable position, its original position then used for the spoil heap, and finally became trench 23.

Trench 18.

The north enclosure wall F162 was located just 20cm below the surface, at the west end just a small run 0.5m long then a 1.25m gap before continuing eastward to the next trench 19. Along the north side of the wall an extra course of stonework had been added. It was impossible to say if the gap was an entrance or the result of robbing, if it were an entrance then the added stonework may have been strengthening for a gate.

At the same level as the wall remains there was the continuation of the drain F147 seen in section 4. here designated feature number F494, there was a short secondary drain F495 adjoining to the east.

Just below the drain level, and at the south end of the trench, the 2nd century enclosure ditch F131 continued in from section 4.

The fill was deliberate but mixed, at the west end the fill was clean soil that contained a fibula brooch 31, at the east end a small segment of the ditch was filled with burnt stones.

Near the natural sandy gravel, the continuation of the Iron Age gully F263 was discovered passing under F162 wall, and designated number F496.

Just one more feature was recorded a posthole F497, there was nothing dateable in the fill, but it is probably Iron Age. Besides the pottery a 1st century fibular brooch was also recovered from the sides of the enclosure ditch. see fibula report 29.

Trench 19

This trench saw the continuation of the wall F162 with a short stub 60cm long then a 2.4m gap before continuing eastward, again there was no evidence that the gap was an entrance or the result of robbing, just a single dry course survived.

There was a thin deposit of burnt stones, F499, at the junction with the next trench 20. this deposit is thin and is cut by the 3rd century wall. The deposit of burnt stones is now directly opposite and close to the burnt stone filled enclosure ditch located in section 4.

F508 is a marl pad similar to those found in section 4.

Near the natural in Iron Age levels, 4 postholes F505, F506, F507, and F525 were discovered, all were clean with no datable material.

Trench 20

With the exception of 2 loose stones, the enclosure wall F162 does not continue. The deposit of burnt stones F499 stretches from T19 all across this trench, but it is reducing in area, amongst the stones a fibula brooch no.32 was recovered.

Sitting above the stones are 3 more marl pads F501, F502, F503 and F504, these features still remain a mystery and now stretch for a distance of 32metres across section 4.

Below the burnt stones a fibula brooch was recovered. fibula report no.32.

Below the wall level, another 6 postholes were discovered, F408, F500, F508, F515, F517, and F518, the fill of all lack any dating material, but are almost certainly Iron Age.

Trench 21

This trench was ended short of the east end of the churchyard due to the presence of a mature tree. The burnt stone deposit did not continue.

The enclosure wall F162 continued, still a single course, and was sitting on over a much more substantial run of dry sandstone walling F513, of which 2 courses survived. F513 was surrounded by heavy deposits of loose small sandstone fragments F511 on the north side, and equally heavy, but larger sandstones F510, on the south side, this had all the markings of an earlier stone building probably a lean-to of sorts, this building was demolished when the enclosure wall was constructed. Just above the sandy gravelly natural 4 postholes, F521, F522, F5523 and F524, were recorded. Again, no datable material was recovered from these postholes.

Trench 22.

This started as a test pit, but the presence of a posthole F521 caused the pit to be extended into a 5m x 1.5m trench. Despite this no other features were discovered.

Trench 2

This was the final trench in the churchyard, and due to the proximity of a mature tree was asymmetrical. There were substantial amounts of building debris spread just below the ploughsoil. This is probably debris from the 4th century rebuilding of the villa just a few metres away.

The enclosure wall F162 continued as a single course to the full extent of the trench, as did the 4th century drain F494, both continuing to the west.

The enclosure ditch F131 continued, again a homogeneous fill of a deliberate filling.

Pottery was recovered - see pot report.

Third ditched enclosure.

An aerial photo by Jim Pickering flown 28/07/79 sheet 127 frame 15A showed a possible ditch feature some 200m south west of the villa, in 2002 these crop marks could be seen from ground

level. Two trial trenches have been completed, pottery was recovered, mostly abraded, from the top fill, two sherds only could be drawn. A larger open area excavation is required before anything other than a tentative date of 2nd C. could be suggested. The dimensions of this ditch are 2m wide, and circa 1m deep.

Summary

The results of the excavation over the last 34 years or so have confirmed not only the existence of a Romano-British villa site, but also microlithic evidence of at least a transient presence during the Mesolithic, followed by occupation from the Neolithic, Bronze Age, and the Iron Age.

Several sherds of Neolithic pottery have been recovered, mainly small fragments, but larger examples with twisted cord, bird bone impressed, finger nail & stabbed decorations from at least three separate vessels of the late Peterborough ware type.

Two rims and several finger nail decorated Bronze Age body sherds have also been recovered.

An Iron Age gully containing only pot sherds of that period, a gully dug stockade, the gully of which contained Iron Age and early Roman pot, and several postholes suggesting possible round houses can be added to the discoveries.

Four linear sets of postholes representing a large rectangular building measuring 17m x 9m, together with further postholes suggest a second similar building, both are contained within a ditched enclosure covering an area of 2730m², these early houses represent the first Romanized structures on site, and date from late 1st century, each of the buildings contained a hearth/oven.

The next phase of construction took place during the early to mid-2nd century, almost entirely within the confines of the churchyard of St James, this phase, more substantial than its 1st century predecessor, included a timber structure, but now on stone foundations, only the north-eastern corner of this building protrudes into the excavation area.

The 1st century enclosure ditch was widened and deepened, but reduced in area to accommodate the new villa building, the new enclosure now covered a reduced area of approximately 1,780m². (see Fig 1.). Whereas the west leg of the 1st century ditched enclosure passed under the tower at the west end of the church, the new ditch, was reduced on the longer sides so that the west leg now passes under the east wall of the church, this provides the limits to the size of the 2nd century villa, the presence of over 2000 tesserae in the fill of two of the 1st century postholes does suggest this 2nd century villa contained a mosaic.

By the end of the 2nd century a wing had been added at the north-eastern corner, almost certainly timber construction on stone foundations. The outer walls are semi-hexagonal in shape, with a apsidal shaped inner, possibly a dining room (Triclinium). Four courses of stonework under the church boundary hedge, inaccessible without disturbing the hedgerow, suggest a possible second wing at the south-east corner.

During the 3rd century the west leg of the 2nd century ditched enclosure, parts of the north & south legs adjoining the west leg, were deliberately filled, the remainder of the ditched enclosure was allowed to silt up and attract general rubbish, before being finally being topped off with building rubble sometime around the mid-4th century. The now redundant, ditched enclosure was replaced with stone walls, creating a much larger enclosure of some 3740m². plus, an annex at the south-east

corner, the extents of which are not yet known, the annex contained the remains of more buildings, probably storage, animal sheds or barns. This deliberate filling of the ditch allowed the villa to be extended to the west, these extensions were confirmed in 2010 when a watching brief was carried out on behalf of the St James church.

The brief was to cover service trenches being dug to enable the installation of pipework for toilets and a kitchenette. During this work walls and floors were discovered. See “Watching Brief”, included at the end of this report.

But the presence of large quantities of waterproof painted plaster, and a floor of smooth cobbles, suggests that a bath house was included in the extension close to the church tower.

The extensions in the 3rd century allowed the now aged 2nd century villa to be rebuilt, if its predecessor didn't have hypocaust central heating the new build certainly did.

With the villa extended in the 3rd century it allowed the 2nd century phase to be rebuilt in stone, it appears roof upright support timbers were retained and the new stonework was built around the uprights. The rebuilt wing used grey micaceous slate for its roof, this probably came from the Malvern or Ludlow area, the main building was roofed in the normal red imbrex and tegula, this would result in a contrast of colour.

The fill of part of the north leg of the ditch nearest the wing, consisted exclusively of burnt and cracked cobbles, and adjacent in the churchyard is a large quantity of burnt stones, these are redeposited from elsewhere on site, possibly from the area of the apsidal wing where more burnt stones were discovered, the area of the wing was probably the location of a Bronze Age burnt stone mounds. This mound was disturbed during the construction of the wing, and the stones were re-sited outside the enclosure ditch. When the ditch became redundant the stones were moved again to become part of the deliberate filling. A third ditched enclosure some 400m to the south-west of the villa is tentatively dated to 2nd century, only two trial trenches have so far been carried out.

There are 2 outstanding questions as yet unanswered, the first is the use of the Marl squares, the other is a source of water especially for the bath house. Some years ago, while installing field drains to the south of the church, the farmer came across a stone channel with stone capping, water was running down this channel, unfortunately he could not remember the location. The field in question is called the “Sluice” on a 19th century estate map, a further clue to the presence of water.

Archaeological Watching Brief

Carried out by

Penk Valley Archaeological Group

On behalf of

St. James Church

Acton Trussell

Staffordshire.

SJ937175

Site Location.

St. James Church

Acton Trussell

Staffordshire.

SJ937175

28/06/2010-13/07/2010

Project outline.

Installation of toilets, wash basin, and kitchenette facilities.

This will require trenches for the installation of water pipes and connection to supply. To minimise risk of freezing, pipes to be laid at a depth of 75cm

To excavate trenches for the installation of foul pipes, depth suitable to allow for fall.

Sponsor of Application.

Mr Len Bates churchwarden

Aims of the brief.

1. To ensure that the work carried out follows the project design/specification, with regard to ensuring the preservation/conservation of the historic environment, and that archaeological considerations are met.
2. To ensure a full-time presence as required, when work is carried out in areas of known, or potential risk.
3. To prepare an outline plan of known, and possible areas at risk.
4. To record photographically, or by drawing, or both, any features exposed, and produce a report of the findings.
5. To carry out a safety audit to ensure that those carrying out the brief are suitably protected.
6. Endeavour that the results of the brief are available with reasonable despatch.

Methodology.

Observe and check all mechanical soil removal. Examine trenches, both base and sides, for:

6a. Disturbance of burials/human remains.

6b. Disturbance of any archaeological structures/features.

In the case of 6a it may be required that work stops, that a suitable expert be called in, and/or that an amendment to the route of the planned trench may be considered.

In the case of 6b, the possibility of the work being re-routed must be considered, if not, at the very least allowance must be made for the features to be recorded, photographed, and if necessary examined by mini excavation within the confines of the trench.

Risks, known and potential.

Besides the obvious standing features of St James Church and churchyard, it is also expected that hidden burials exist below the surface.

The site is also known to contain the remains of a Romano-British villa dating from the 2nd century, the villa is contained within the area between the east end of the church and the cemetery hedge east boundary, an area not involved with the civil work.

However circumstantial evidence suggests that during the late 3rd/4th century the villa was extended westwards well into the area of the planned disturbance.

Besides the walls of the extensions, an enclosure wall associated with the villa poses a potential risk, some of this still survives outside of the confines of the churchyard, even though most has been robbed away.

A 1st C. enclosure ditch entering the churchyard on the south side, at least one timber building contemporary with the ditch, and Iron Age features known to exist outside the south boundary hedge, are expected to be too deep to be affected by the work.

See simplified site drawing Fig 60 & detailed local plan.

Results of Brief.

The civil work was completed with only minor problems, varying amounts of sandstone were encountered, the higher density in Trench no.1. these had to be examined before progress could continue.

The amount of stone was to be expected on a site that was literally a stone quarry from the various building projects over the years.

Human remains consisted of disarticulated remnants, these were collected and reburied as each portion of the trenches were backfilled, it would appear there has been considerable disturbance in the past.

A number of drainage pipes varying from 6" to 11" caused the most disruption, only one of these pipes was known to exist, thought to be an overflow from a water sump on the north side of the church. These pipes did not form a recognisable pattern, and seemed to run haphazardly without purpose.

This required hand excavation to allow supply and foul pipes to be installed beneath.

The larger 11" pipes were running south easterly direction, from under the north hedgerow at the point where the foul pipe left the cemetery.

All spoil was examined, and large amounts were sieved.

Medieval glazed floor tiles and white/cream washed early church plaster were recovered, together with an assortment of early to late medieval pottery.

Two Roman coins and a Neolithic flint were also recovered, strangely, given the history of the site, virtually no Romano-British pottery was found.

A large amount of Roman painted plaster, in very good condition, and an amount of red, white & black tesserae of varying sizes, together with a very crudely finished block of black tesserae were recovered, these were mainly concentrated under the church foundations in the short trench 3.

Amongst the mortar, painted plaster, and a small amount of Opus-Signinum concrete debris from under the church foundations, five fragments of Opus-Signinum concrete were recovered that were much harder than the others, these were also painted red, again unlike the normal Opus-Signinum.

All these discoveries are covered in more detail below.

Trench 1

This trench runs from the south west corner of the churchyard, to a point directly in line with the north wall of the church, and west wall of the vestry.

The trench depth was 75cm and was cut with a 230mm bucket on the digger.

The line followed that marked out by Penk Valley Archaeology, the line had been previously probed with a metal rod, so that subterranean as well as visible obstructions could be avoided.

This trench did not pose a risk to any known archaeological features.

No obstructions were encountered, however large amounts of loose stone work needed investigation, this only caused slight delay.

A small amount of disarticulated human bone was recovered, this was reburied in the same area during backfilling.

Trench 2.

This trench was the continuation of trench 1. turning to run west to east into the new vestry toilet, the eastern half would be a shared trench, and would be used both for water and for the returning foul pipe.

A junction at a point near the north-west corner of the nave would create trench 3. to the south, and trench 4. to the north west.

Trench 2 was planned to be the same dimensions as trench 1. except at the juncture with trenches 3 & 4.

Here the trench was broadened out for the insertion of a stop tap, rodding point, and manhole.

The plan was modified slightly when at 70cm Roman walls were discovered in the eastern half of the trench, there was also the first sight of what may be an articulated skeleton, as it would have required the removal of stonework, and disturbance of a possible burial, to go any deeper, it was felt that 70cm depth at this position near the vestry was adequate.

In the north face of the trench in what was to become trench 4. a further roman wall was uncovered, this will be described in trench 4 discussion.

Again, small amounts of human bone were recovered, this was buried in the same position on backfilling.

From the spoil 2 Roman coins, and a Neolithic flint were recovered, see Plate 64.

Roman painted plaster became more prevalent in this trench.

The line of the trench was passed between two interesting grave markers, see over.

Trench 3.

Was a short trench to contain water supply and waste water from the kitchenette, it ran from the manhole and under what was thought to be the church foundations, other than one course of stonework, the space contained rubble with painted plaster, a roman coin, and general building debris.

The gap in the foundations coincided with the probable position of a north doorway, this door was known to exist until the 19th century rebuild.

A Roman wall (F4) was located at the start of the trench, a 70cm length of this feature lay in the north section of trench 2. at the position of the manhole.

The designation as a wall is debatable, neither the depth, width, or length is known, likewise whether it is a section of a wall running east west, or the end of a wall running away to the north, without excavation outside of the trench parameters it was impossible to say.

Trench 4.

This trench was for the waste pipe from the toilet, and as such would not require the minimum depth to reduce the risk of freezing.

However, a minimum fall was required to enable proper drainage, the outfall started at 70cm out of the vestry, and was 1.2m at the hedge boundary.

Two unexpected drainage pipes, one 6" diameter, the other 8", both running west to east, neither, if continuing in the same direction, would finish near the church, a third pipe, found during probing, also ran roughly west to east, in this instance the diameter was 11".

Hand excavation was required to enable the foul discharge pipe was set below these drainage pipes. It is probable the pipes, that are 19th Century and glazed, were probably inserted during the rebuild of the derelict church.

Discussion on the Roman remains.

It is now clear the during the 3rd century the 2nd century villa was extended westwards, the presence of the various walls revealed during the watching brief, confirms that the villa extended at least to the end of the nave.

But is there any clue as to the use that these extensions were put to.

There are a number of points regarding the discoveries that together might enable a suggestion to be made.

1. The walls F1 & F2 in trench 2. are only 1.75m apart.
2. The large quantity of painted plaster from under the church foundations, was very much harder than that found on the floor of the apsidal wing of the villa, more like concrete. A crude test by immersing a sample of each in water, showed the plaster from under the church absorbed virtually no water, while there was significant absorbed by that from the apsidal.
3. The narrow dimensions of the two walls in trench 2. seem too wide for a passageway, nor wide enough for a normal room, it would be about the size expected for one of the baths, Frigidarium, Tepidarium or Caldarium
4. The painted plaster recovered is waterproof, there are many examples where it has been used to line aqueducts, drains, and to line the walls of baths, that found under the church foundations are of the highest quality, are very hard, the matrix contains a high quantity of very well sorted pantile/ceramic aggregate, and is unlike that from the apsidal wing.

Each of the features discovered on their own are not significant, even put together they are not conclusive, but a case could be made to at least consider that the area on the north side of the nave is the site of the villa thermae.

The source for water has not yet been found, but, if the bathhouse is near the north west corner of the nave, then the source must be nearby.

No specific use can be suggested for the wall F4 constructed from tegulae, if it is a wall.

Medieval Supplement to Roman Villa Report

During 34 years of excavation immediately south & east of the village church, there has been virtually no evidence of occupation during the Medieval period.

This is despite the proximity of the pre-conquest village of Acton, and the site of the Trussell manor house less than 300 meters to the north-west.

That is until the summer of 2008 when excavations outside the south boundary of the churchyard uncovered a spread of Medieval artefacts in a fairly concentrated area.

The items discovered include: Pot sherds, Glazed floor tile fragments, 2 Bronze pins, 2 hammered coins, a plain medallion, and the horse burial which is also reported in trench 12 of the main report.

Context.

The full length of this Southern boundary has been subject to heavy disturbance.

During the construction of the nearby M6 Motorway, a large marl pit to the rear of the church was used to dispose of construction debris, this required a temporary road access to be built.

The plough/topsoil was machine removed, large quantities of hardcore and furnace slag were tipped to create a firm bedding for the heavy loads transported.

This operation barely missed the Roman levels, although some hardcore was forced into the Roman archaeology by the heavy wheel tracks. The result meant stratification was destroyed.

The horse burial pit escaped damage, although the top of the pit was lost.

The medieval artefacts, probably in a far tighter deposit initially, were spread over 8m, one hammered coin and the medallion were recovered some 13m further along the line of the roadway, and may therefore not be part of the same deposit.

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