

SUMMARY REPORT

Thurnham Roman Villa, Thurnham, Kent (TQ 79954 57111)

Between November 1998 and June 1999 Oxford Archaeological Unit was commissioned by Union Railways (South) Limited to excavate the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Thurnham Roman Villa (SAM KE 299), to the south-west of Thurnham village near Maidstone, Kent. This work, which was part of an extensive programme of archaeological investigation carried out in advance of construction of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, revealed a continuous sequence of occupation spanning the Late Iron Age through to the early 4th century AD. Prehistoric remains were represented by a large ramped waterhole near Thurnham Lane, which produced a small Middle Bronze Age rapier. A sparse in situ flint scatter was preserved beneath the villa levels.

A large rectilinear ditched enclosure, containing one definite and two possible roundhouse and two 4-post structures was established in the late Iron Age, following clearance of woodland from the site. Remodelling during the early post-conquest period saw the enclosure levelled and replaced by a larger enclosure containing a proto-villa placed centrally and towards the rear. This building had a painted plaster interior and firm clay floor surfaces. A possible shrine or temple was added shortly afterwards, overlying the former enclosure ditch. Further development followed at the end of the 1st century AD with the construction of a stone two storey villa replacing the proto-villa. By the early 3rd century AD, following many structural additions, this had developed into a large winged corridor villa with a bath suite attached to its southern side (excavated in 1958). No in situ floor surfaces relating to the main villa phases were encountered although several opus signinum and sand floors were recorded in previous excavations.

The 'temple' structure remained in use throughout this period and was accompanied within the core of the estate enclosure by a large aisled building constructed early in the 2nd century AD. Massive wooden posts supported the central roof whilst shallow flint foundations supported the outer walls. A crushed tufa floor defined a room at the western end of the building, which had a neatly constructed oven at one end. Personal items such as pins, brooches, coins and fragments of mirror were all recovered from within this building. The boundary to the estate was redefined with successive fence lines around the villa and the aisled building replacing the earlier ditched boundaries.

Access to the villa enclosure was gained by a cobbled trackway approaching from the east, passing a large timber building located outside the enclosure boundary. This large 14-post structure, which probably had an agricultural role, had a number of surrounding and internal drains. It was demolished and replaced, by the 3rd century AD, with a stone-built corndrier. Two wells were investigated, one of which was excavated to a depth of 3.7 m without locating the bottom. Both were stone-lined at the top, and the lower portion of the deeply excavated example was supported by a timber box-frame.

Trenches excavated in Honeyhills wood, immediately adjacent to the villa complex, strongly suggest that the wood was present when the Iron Age settlement and later villa complex were established. The western boundary ditch of the settlement enclosure closely follows the modern edge of the woodland, and the trenching demonstrated that Roman occupation did not extend beyond that boundary. The earthworks in the wood, which do not form a clear pattern, were very shallow and were not associated with subsoil features. Insufficient artefactual material was recovered to indicate their date of origin.

The final occupation on the site saw the demise of the villa complex towards the end of the 3rd century AD and early into the 4th century. By this time the temple structure had already collapsed or been demolished, and the character of occupation in the main villa building had changed substantially (one of the central rooms was utilised extensively as an iron smithy).

Several coins of Constantine were recovered, generally from the upper fills of defunct features, representing the latest evidence for Roman activity on the site of the villa.

Activity ceased on the site until the foundation of Corbier Hall in the 14th century AD. Associated postholes and gullies were located to the immediate south-east of the Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM KE 309) and the moat area, but all were peripheral in character. The most recent period of activity was represented by successive field boundaries and drainage ditches aligned along the length of the low lying ground. These were dated to the 19th and 20th century and associated with the expansion and subsequent clearance of Corbier