

# u The bathhouse of Angmering Roman villa

## A RECONSIDERATION OF ITS SEQUENCE AND CONTEXT

by Oliver J. Gilkes

*The Roman villa at Angmering was one of the first of the elaborate early Roman villas of Sussex to be excavated. The bathhouse has always been seen as a structure with a single main phase, and the arrangement of the rest of the villa complex is far from clear. This article re-examines the bathhouse and proposes a new interpretation of its structural sequence based around four principal phases of activity. The rest of the villa complex is briefly examined in relation to the bathhouse.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Roman villa at Angmering is situated about two kilometres to the west of Angmering. A small stream, known locally as the Black Ditch, runs past the site before joining the slightly larger Rustington Stream. Both waterways are now canalized, but even within living memory were susceptible to seasonal flooding, the fields to either side acted as water-meadows and are still marshy (M. Heynes pers. comm.). The site lies on a slightly elevated area of ground, about 5 metres above sea level. This is a significant location, as other later Iron Age and Romano-British settlements on this section of the West Sussex coastal plain are concentrated in similar positions, relatively safe from the seasonal inundation of the River Arun and its tributaries (Fig. 1). While it is a convenient position for the exploitation of the nearby wetlands, the site is damp and cold in winter.

Angmering was the first of the architecturally elaborate early Roman villas of Sussex to be excavated. Up to 14 of these sites have now been identified (Black 1987, fig. 1), although some are merely suspected from fragments of tiles. Their social and economic significance is still debatable, but these complexes of buildings were undoubtedly major focal points in the early Roman landscape.

Excavations at Angmering in the early 19th century revealed parts of the bathhouse with its vaulted drain, and elements of a nearby cemetery (Dallaway 1832, 72–3). Further excavations were undertaken 100 years later by the Littlehampton Natural Sciences and Archaeological Society, which carried out six seasons of work (1937–41, 1947). The

first of these campaigns was by far the most intensive (Scott 1938; 1939; Keef 1945; Wilson 1947; Gilkes 1998b). This work sampled an extensive complex of structures, the most thoroughly excavated of which was the large detached bath building which lies towards the northern side of the site (Scott 1938, 3–45) (Fig. 2). Owing to the outbreak of the Second World War a full report on the excavations was never produced. As a consequence, the site is still only poorly understood. Recent interest has concentrated on the detached bath building (Black 1987, 87–9). In this article I will propose a revised structural sequence for this part of the complex, and attempt to place this revised phasing within the local context of the villa complex and the wider one of Roman Sussex.

Since its excavation, the bath building (Figs 2 & 3) has been generally accepted as a structure with a single main phase with a later reconstruction in cruder masonry (Scott 1938; Black 1987). The main block of baths lay on the southern side of the building, comprising two heated chambers, rooms G and F, and two cold plunge baths, H and M. A further heated room, K, with its own separate *praefermium*, N, lay to the east. The northern side of the building consisted of a corridor, L, with eastern and western wings, rooms O, P, C and D. A number of connecting spaces joined all these elements together, rooms A, B, E and later S and T. This basic plan of the main phase of the baths has never been called into question. The only recent discussion is a valuable study by Ernest Black (Black 1987, 87–9) who has suggested a new chronology based on a study of the box flue tiles used in the bathhouse as well as attempting a reconstruction of the vaulting of the main rooms.

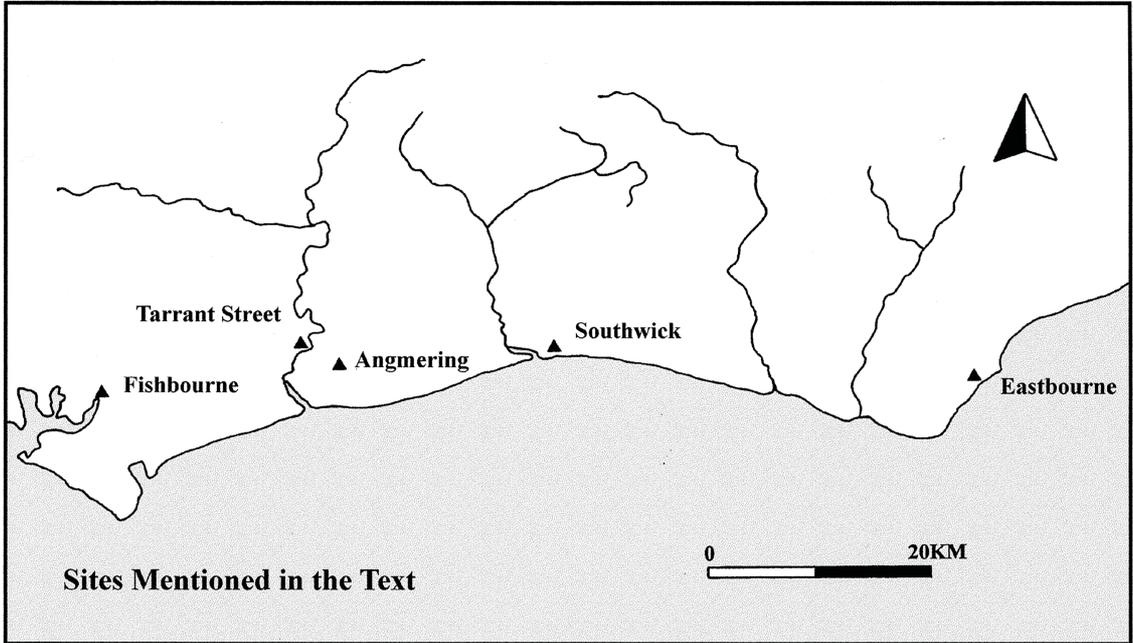


Fig. 1. The location of Angmering and other sites mentioned in the text.

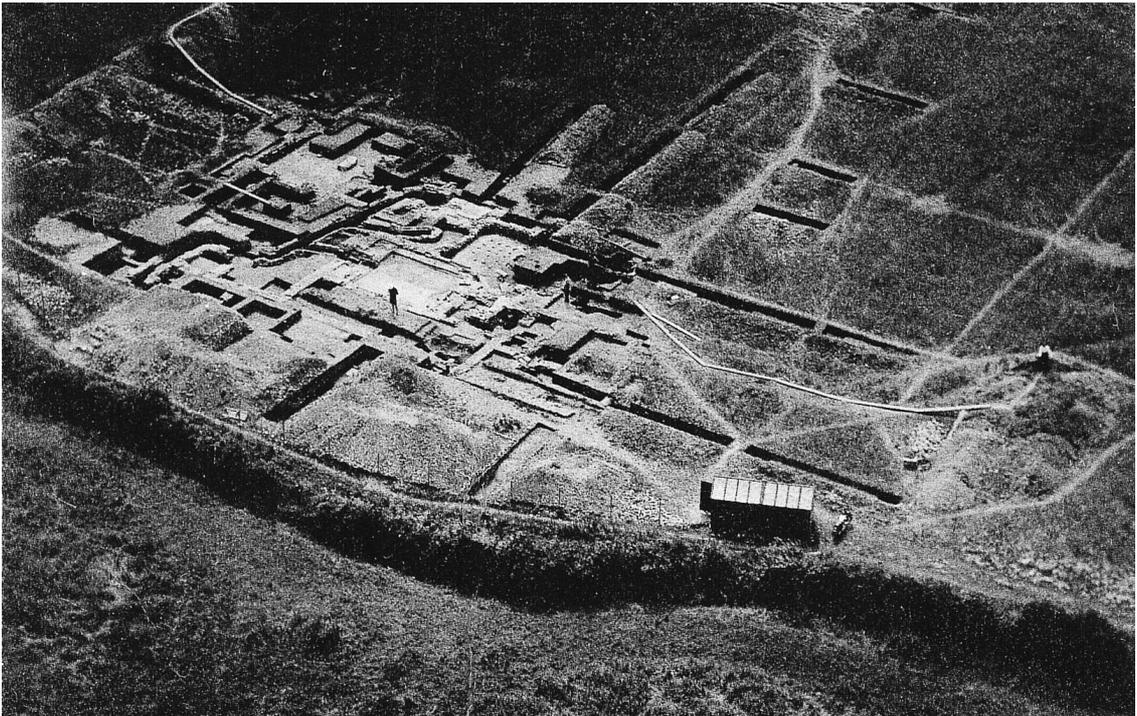


Fig. 2. Aerial view of the bathhouse under excavation.

### THE PHASING OF THE MAIN BATH COMPLEX

A detailed examination of the published plan of the bathhouse (Fig. 3) reveals that there are peculiarities in the mode of construction which require explanation if the building is to be seen as the result of a single phase of construction. Two distinct types of relationship between the walls are apparent: bonded joins and butting relationships. As far as can be determined by cross-checking with the surviving photographic archive (stored in Littlehampton Museum), the plan is a reliable record of these structural relationships.

Normally in Roman construction techniques the bonding together of two walls of the same structural style indicates simultaneous construction. The ideal Roman mortared masonry building would be constructed so as to have all the foundations bonded together, forming a single and immovable mass. The origins of this technique can be seen in Italy with the perfection of *opus caementicium* construction during the later Republic (Lugli 1957, 363–442). Here, a mortared rubble foundation and core, laid in layers, provided the structural strength of a building (Ward Perkins 1981, 99). This was then faced with brick or ashlar masonry as appropriate. This style of construction was utilized for the

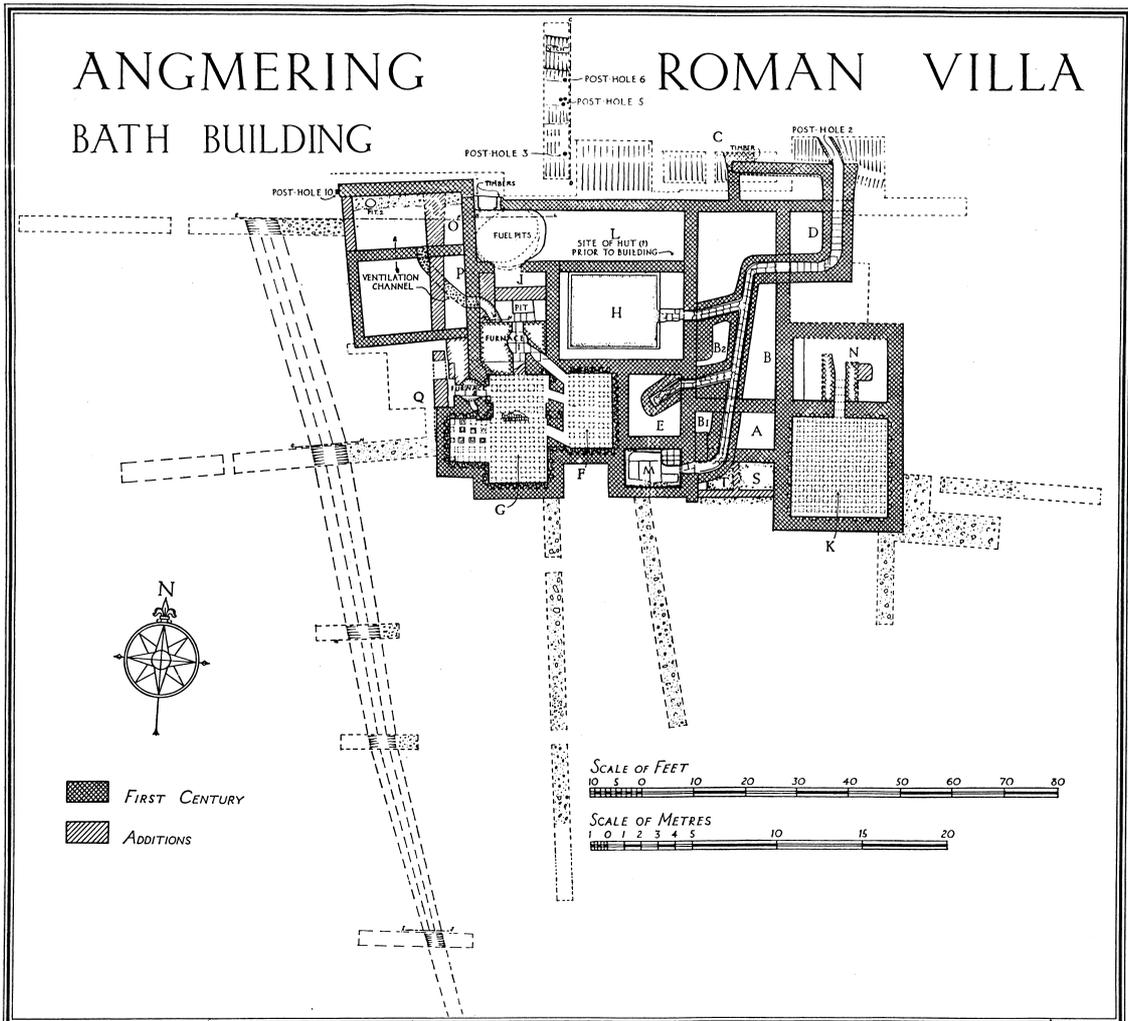


Fig. 3. Leslie Scott's published plan of the excavated bathhouse.

footings of buildings with superstructures of wood, clay or other materials and also for all stone buildings with vaults such as the Angmering bathhouse. This technique was employed in the provinces of Gaul, Germany and eventually Britain (Lamprecht 1985). While there may seem few points of comparison between the imperial structures of Italy and Roman Britain, the mortared rubble masonry techniques employed in both regions are essentially similar. The major difference lies in the differing intrinsic strengths of the mortar bonding the aggregate together. At Angmering the foundations of mortared flint rubble were laid in foundation trenches and then faced, above the level of the foundation, with chalk ashlar. Unfortunately, the walls at Angmering had been sufficiently reduced by plough damage so as to leave little or no trace of the superstructure above the foundations.

On the other hand, the butting of one wall against another may indicate two different phases of building activity. This is not always the case, and some walls, particularly internal non-load-bearing walls, may be bonded into the structure only above the level of the foundations (Kenyon 1971, 83). Some butting relationships may be the result of other compromises during construction, for example at Angmering the mass of walls around the drain in rooms A and B, although here some

relationships may have been obscured by the mass of masonry. Where there is uncertainty other factors such as the levels and compositions of floors need to be examined. At Angmering there are a number of butting relationships that require further examination in this context, in particular those in rooms C, D, O and P.

The most striking feature of rooms C and D is the awkward fashion in which this complex lies on the north-eastern corner of the bathhouse. The northern wall of room C does not bond with the western, and these two structures butt at such an awkward angle that a further construction seems to have been added to the north to act as a buttress. The western wall of this room is bonded into room B, and was intended, I suggest, to act as a buttress for the northern wall of this large vaulted room against the slope which exists at this point. Room D has been plausibly identified as a latrine (Black 1987, 87), although it seems to have been an afterthought or a rebuilding of an earlier structure. Although the northern wall of room D is bonded into room B, the southern and western walls are incorporated in the drain structure. Within room B this is paved with rectangular tiles but in room D it uses square tiles, again suggesting two phases of construction. These factors seem to provide solid evidence for considering rooms C and D to be an addition to the original structure.

The other section of the building where butting relationships shown on the plan seem to indicate an addition is the wing containing rooms O and P. All the walls of these two rooms appear to butt the main central bath complex on the plan, and also on a surviving photograph (Fig. 4, arrowed). This should be indicative of a structural addition, as it would seem odd not to have bonded this wing into the walls of the main bathhouse structure if it had been erected at the same time. The excavator (Scott 1938, 27–8) suggested that room O had been



Fig. 4. View southwards showing butt joint of rooms O and P with the main bath block.

deliberately left open on its western side to act as a shed for storing fuel. In light of the prevailing wind from the south-west, it seems unlikely that this was the case. Here we can also refer to the published section-drawing which also seems to support the idea of this western wing being an addition (Fig. 5).

This section purports to be a record of the actual stratification. However, there are some anomalies which, given the importance of the section to the argument, need to be discussed. Firstly, the line of the section through room O is shown on the plan (Fig. 3). However, this plan also indicates an unlabelled surface within the area of room O to the north of the actual section line. This seems to be an uneven chalk floor, '... now visible only on the north ... which originally sloped up over the dumped level on the south ...' (Scott 1938, 29). Is this the same as the chalk trample shown below the dump of earth levelling on the section drawing? (Fig. 5). An examination of the surviving photographs seems to indicate that excavations in the northern part of room O never reached much below the topsoil. On the southern side of the section the excavations were deeper. The rather cramped trenches used here make this difficult to discern on the photographs, although there is a definite difference in level on the two sides of the section to the west of the late wall crossing room O. On the section it is clear that the excavation to the south is almost a metre in depth. Additionally, Scott states clearly that the uneven chalk floor visible on the plan survived only on the north, and that it was above the level of earth dumping and not the upcast from the ditch (Scott 1938, 29).

It seems that we are dealing with two different layers of chalk trample, one sloping up above the

level of earth dumping, which can be seen to be a make-up for this, and a second sealed below this level, the upcast from the ditch which probably predates room O. Thus the section line indicated on the plan appears to be accurately located. In the absence of the actual excavation records it is difficult to be certain, but for the reasons outlined above this reinterpretation assumes that the section is an accurate record of the stratification. Finally, it needs to be noted that the sequence of layers in room P was different (Scott 1938, 29). This should not, however, detract from the potential validity of the published section especially given the apparently limited trenching that occurred in room P. Leslie Scott's training by Mortimer Wheeler at the Institute of Archaeology in London stressed the value of accurate actual section drawings. It is likely that this is an actual record of the layers rather than a reconstruction or composite section. Scott seems to have been especially insistent on sections being drawn and to have trained local personnel to do this accurately in her absence (Gilkes 1998b, 76, 78).

As can be seen, the upcast from the north-south boundary ditch to the west of the bath building is sealed by a chalk surface which probably predates room O. This is itself overlain inside room O by a horizon of earth levelling, possibly of make-up for a floor, the unlabelled chalk floor on the plan, and outside also by a later chalk pathway and the cobbled surface surrounding the bathhouse. This latter exists only on the exterior of rooms O and P and is clearly cut by the foundation trench for the west wall of room O. The cobbles must therefore have abutted an earlier boundary on this line; or else they would also occur within the room, which they do not. I suggest that this was a wall, door lintel, or even a wooden sill beam, which was later rebuilt,

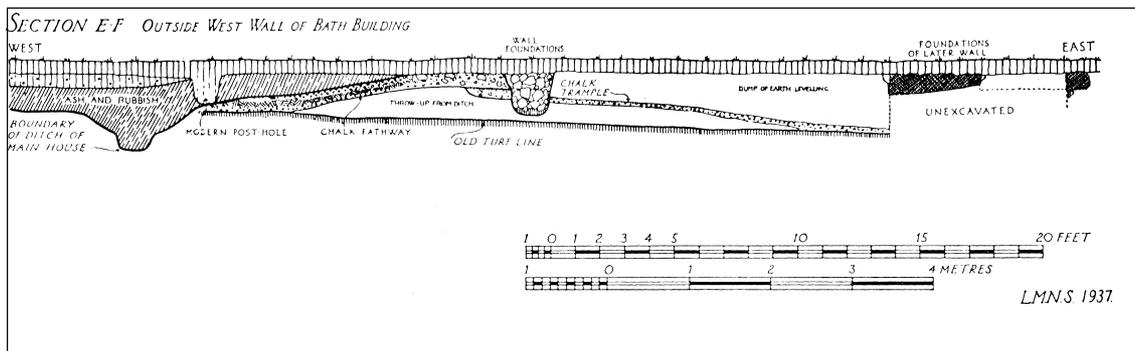


Fig. 5. Section to the west of rooms O and P.

explaining the absence of the cobbling on the interior. Leslie Scott described a chalk surface within room O as belonging to the phase when this space was open to the west. As we have seen, it is unlikely that this is the chalk trample of the section drawing, but may be the unlabelled chalk floor on the plan (Fig. 3). Again, had room O ever been truly open on its western side, it could be expected that traces of this chalk surface would have been found outside to the west of the building, which they were not. The level of chalk trample that is shown on the section as extending beyond the western side of room O, is below the dump of earth levelling. If this latter is the make-up for the floor of room O, then, as outlined above, the chalk trample shown on the section must predate the room.

It appears then that the main period of the Angmering bathhouse had at least two phases, one comprising an approximately rectangular block and a second when the bathhouse was elaborated with wing rooms. A third element might be seen in the later additions including the rebuilt west wall of room O, the small rooms S and T and the rebuilt *praefernium*. However, there also seems to have been a fourth phase of occupation that requires consideration.

The two different destruction levels observed over the bathhouse area were interpreted as indicating different fates for the eastern and western areas of the building (Scott 1938, 12–13). There is also the possibility that this was simply the result of disturbances caused by the original excavations of 1816. There was certainly late activity in the western half of the bathhouse. Here, a new series of walls was constructed over the presumably demolished walls of rooms O, P and the furnaces in this area. Other walls were erected in room J which might have continued into room H. Room F was robbed of its *pilae* and given a floor of clay and the hypocaust channels were blocked off.

Scott (1938, 22) suggested that room G was in a state of disrepair at this time, although she also presented evidence for the construction of a late east–west wall subdividing this room. This may suggest that there were rough floors here as well, possibly at a higher level than in room F. The reuse and subdivision of room M, apparently with wooden partitions, might be assigned to this phase. Scott had originally proposed this as a latrine, but it is obvious that the gullies she saw are secondary and are probably subdivisions for a wooden tank or vat.

This may point to some industrial process, perhaps tanning or fulling, which could have made use of the still intact drain.

#### THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE BATHHOUSE

The original dating proposed a period of about 100 years between construction and demolition (Scott 1938, 12). This phasing rested on fragments of Claudio-Neronian Samian Ware found sealed within the brickearth make-up. This, of course, merely provides a *terminus post quem* of the third quarter of the 1st century AD for the building of the bathhouse. Providing a date for the end of occupation is much more difficult. Scott suggested that the rubble sealing the building contained ceramics covering the whole of the building's life. On the basis of the latest Samian ware this would provide a *terminus ante quem* of c. AD 150–160.

A number of comments can be made concerning the pottery assemblage as it survives in Littlehampton Museum. There are numerous examples of forms such as hemispherical bowls that have good late 1st-century AD parallels at other Sussex sites (Cunliffe 1971). Additionally, there are no extant examples of the later indigenous fine wares, such as the New Forest products, and none of the coarse wares from the site need be later than the early 3rd century in date (M. Lyne pers. comm.).

Recent interest in relief-patterned flue tiles has presented the opportunity of approaching the chronology of the early villas of Sussex from a new perspective. Ernest Black has suggested that the flue tiles used as wall jacketing in rooms F, G and K might be datable to AD 90–110 (Black 1987, 84–6). There are problems with this chronology (Cunliffe 1993) and more generalized dates in the early Flavian period have been proposed (Betts *et al.* 1997, 40–42, 93, 97).

Whilst the available dating material is far from satisfactory it does seem to provide us with a plausible *terminus post quem* for construction. How long a period elapsed between the first two suggested phases is difficult to say; it may well be the case that the 'wing' rooms were an addition to the original design shortly after construction. In Britain, the practice of elaborating a building with wing rooms seems to have commenced in the later 1st century (Smith 1978, 117–48). This would not be incompatible with a construction date for the bulk of the building

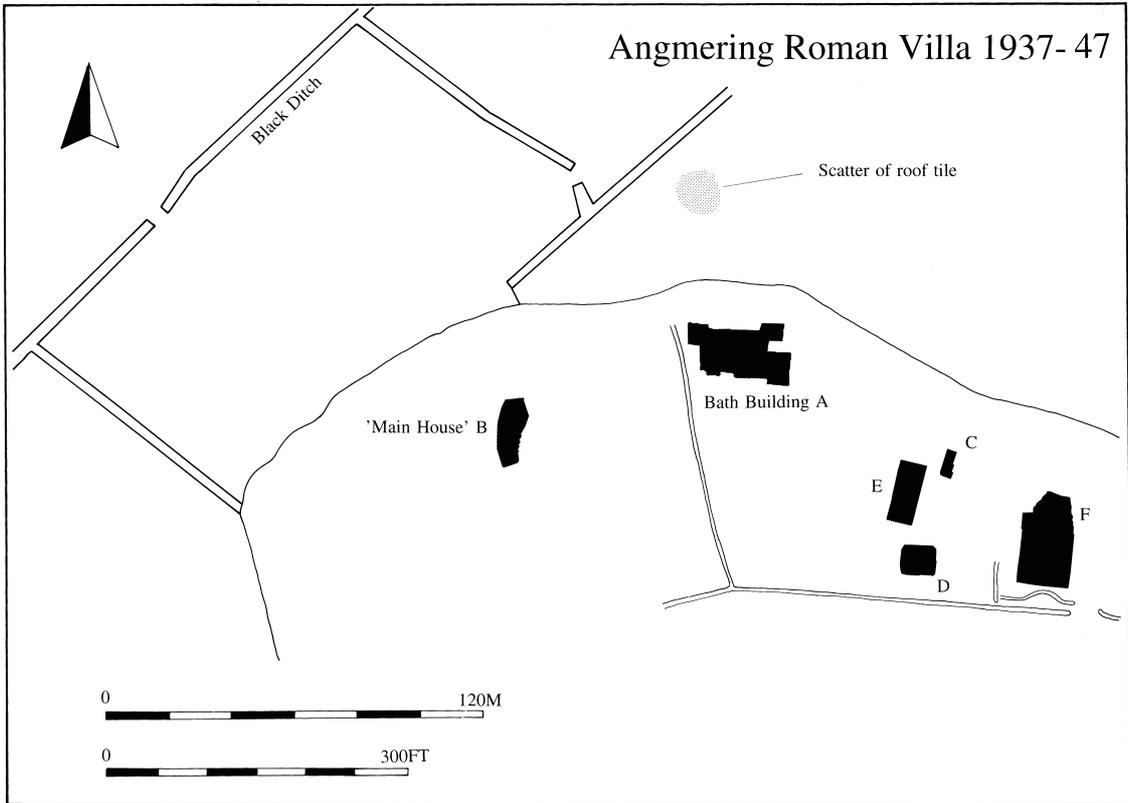


Fig. 6. Angmering Roman villa, plan of the overall complex.

in the second half of the 1st century AD. A surviving photograph (Fig. 4) seems to show that the southern wall of room O was of similar construction to the rest of the building. This may provide further support for a modification undertaken shortly after the completion of most of the bath block.

The principal chronological problem lies with the later history of the site. An obviously multi-phase building with such a short structural history seems unusual. Further work is required to shed light on this problem.

#### THE ORGANIZATION OF THE VILLA

Whatever its actual phasing, the problem of how the Angmering bathhouse fits into the villa complex as a whole needs to be considered. The first two main phases, the original and 'winged' buildings, are likely to be associated with the phase of occupation of building B, the 'main house', whatever this structure

actually represents, and probably also building D (Keef 1945, 83–108) which uses the same wall construction technique as the bathhouse. Building B stood clear of the other buildings, apparently within its own enclosure, and the bathhouse, together with building D, appears to have occupied a second enclosure (Fig. 6). The isolated position of the bathhouse accords with other early villas in Britain (Black 1987, 53), where distancing the baths from the main buildings of a complex appears to be a sign of Romanization and status (Smith 1997, 190). However, it should be noted that the bath blocks of the two other early Sussex villas for which we have reliable plans, Fishbourne and Southwick (Winbolt 1932, 13–22; Rudling 1985, 83–108) are integral parts of the villa complex.

Still to be considered are the bathhouse in its latest phase and the three remaining buildings known to exist on the villa site. These comprise building C, the small bathhouse excavated in 1938

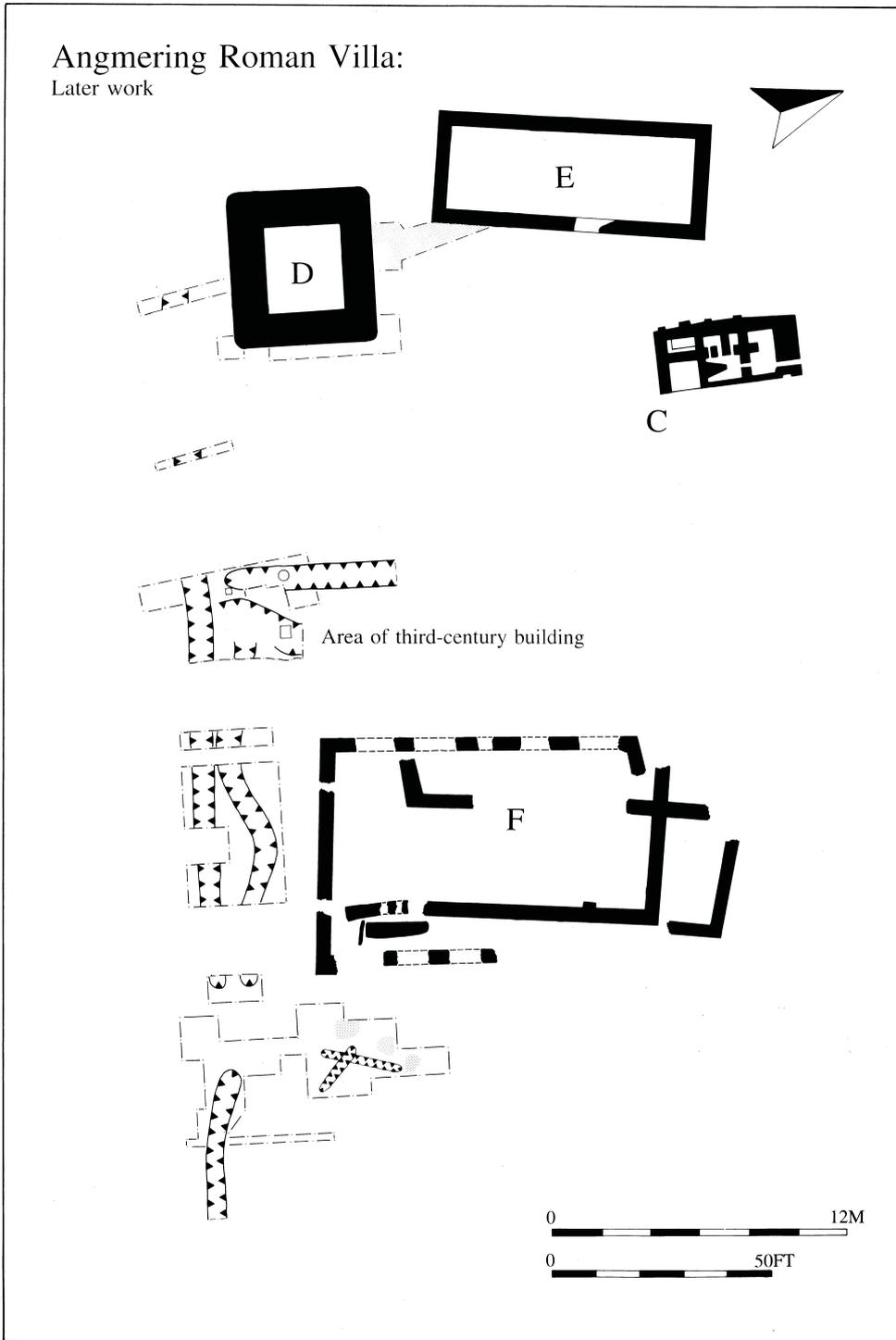


Fig. 7. Angmering Roman villa, plan of the later excavations.



definite conclusions cannot be drawn, it can be demonstrated that there was later activity in this area of the site.

How does the dispersed nature of Angmering villa compare with the other early villas of Sussex? While a number of sites are now known or suspected from the first half-century of Roman rule, there is still a paucity of definite information. Essentially we have detailed plans only of Fishbourne and Southwick which are both unitary courtyard villas. Other complexes may well have been more dispersed. For instance, there are hints that the bath block of the early Eastbourne villa may have been detached (Gilbert & Stevens 1973). Another villa of this early series, situated at Langstone, Havant, on the Hampshire coastal plain, may also have consisted of a series of detached buildings (Gilkes 1998a).

Nevertheless, perhaps it might be wise to call into question the nature of the complex at Angmering. The complex was clearly dispersed and does not appear to focus on any of the known structures. The bath building was the most elaborate building. While the so-called 'main house' seems to have been of an early date (Gilkes 1998b, 11), the surviving documentation of the excavations does not provide any real basis of identifying this as the central point of the villa rather than another structure. The baths are of unusual plan, with an overlarge cold plunge pool, room H, which stops somewhat short of being a *piscina*. Additionally, they are orientated with an entrance facing northwards, the only demonstrable doorway into the complex gives access into room L. While other entrances may have existed, their remains have apparently not survived. The open cobbled yard area to the south is in a typical position behind the heated rooms. Certainly other, as yet unexcavated, structures exist on the site. Whilst walking across the site in 1990 the present writer observed a concentration of roof tiles in the field to the north of the bathhouse which may represent a further unexcavated element (Fig. 6).

### CONCLUSION

It has been suggested here that the detached bathhouse of Angmering Roman villa has a more complex structural history than previously recognized. This can be summarized in four main phases (Fig. 8):

1. Construction of the core of the bathhouse in the mid 1st century AD as part of a complex of structures situated in individual enclosures.
2. The aggrandisement of the bathhouse by the addition of suites of wing rooms including a latrine.
3. A series of minor alterations and rebuildings during the life of the bathhouse.
4. The partial demolition of the bath building and subsequent reconstruction and utilization for industrial or agricultural purposes. This may be connected with the construction and occupation of a series of buildings immediately to the south. With the current evidence a date cannot be ascribed to the beginning of this phase, but it continued at least until the 3rd century AD.

The location of the site next to the Black Ditch, a waterside location also to be seen at the villa in Tarrant Street, Arundel (Rudling 1984), may also be significant. During the excavations of Dr A. E. Wilson in 1946 a large ditch of Roman date was found and partially excavated to the south of buildings D and F (J. Holmes & C. Wilson pers. comm.). Only one side was traced and the excavation had reached a depth of 5 feet, without bottoming the ditch, before work was halted. The nature of this large feature is now impossible to determine, but it may be connected with the systematization of a natural watercourse. It has been suggested (Black 1987, 13; Gilkes 1993, 1–20) that the Arun and its coastal tributaries may have been exploited as waterways, before the modern embanking of the river. The location of the villa at Angmering may have been determined by similar considerations.

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