

Folkestone -
Roman Villa
1989

FOLKESTONE ROMAN VILLA, 1989

(Report on excavations by the Kent Archaeological Rescue Unit)

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1984 the Kent Unit applied to the Shepway District Council for permission to excavate a section of the Roman Villa at Wear Bay Road. This was agreed in principle, but the Unit's application for Scheduled Monument Consent took a year to process by English Heritage and the Unit's resources had to be deployed elsewhere. It was not until 1989 that the Unit was able to seek formal permission to excavate the site from the council and this was granted in June. Work started on the 4th of July, 1989 as agreed and was completed at the end of September, also as agreed.

The excavation was confined to a single wide trench, set some two metres from the edge of the cliff, aimed at assessing the extent of what survived of the Roman buildings at this point. It was agreed that the excavation would be backfilled on completion.

Funding from the operation came from three sources. The District agreed to contribute £5000, the Kent Unit £1000 and the Kent Archaeological Trust another £1000.

The villa had originally been excavated in 1924, following earlier discoveries on the cliff face. The excavation had revealed parts of three large masonry buildings and many other interesting features and finds. The work had been directed by a schoolmaster from Sussex and undertaken by a group of unemployed local workmen. It seemed likely that much important information had been missed.

The specific aims of the 1989 excavation were as follows:-

- a) To locate parts of Blocks B and C.
- b) To determine how much of Block C has fallen over the cliff since 1924.
- c) To check on the condition of the surviving Roman masonry.
- d) To see what structural and stratigraphic evidence still survives.
- e) To provide Folkestone residents and visitors with an opportunity to see part of the villa for the first time in 30 years.

The excavation proved highly successful and all the above aims were achieved in spite of several unexpected difficulties. The project encountered a prolonged and severe heatwave and an unusually great volume of backfill. This caused major problems for the volunteers and the Unit had to bring in a number of its full-time staff to complete the project. Even so the increased amount of work was completed within the time limit, but this caused a small overspend of the budget.

With the completion of the excavation at the end of September, council officers suggested that it might be possible to carry out first-aid repairs to the exposed masonry. This was carried out by the Kent Unit, in consultation with English Heritage staff, throughout October at a cost of just over £2000. The site was eventually backfilled in late November and subsequent clearing up done in December and January 1990.

2. DAMAGE TO THE SITE SINCE 1924

Following the 1989 excavation on the Roman Villa site, it is now possible to assess the extent of the damage that has occurred over the past 60 years and also to suggest some likely remedies. The damage seems to have been caused by two agencies, storm damage and military activity.

a) STORM DAMAGE

It is certain that the soft Gault Clay underlying the Roman Villa site continues to be drastically affected by erosion from the sea, particularly during storms. Such storms drive large waves into the foot of the cliffs in Wear Bay and eat away and dissolve the soft clay leading to significant erosion. With erosion at the foot of the cliff, the weight of the higher zones of clay push downwards and cause the top edges to slump in wide sections.

The excavation in 1989 has now proved that about 30 ft. (10 m.) of the Roman Villa has slumped downwards due to continuous erosion in the 60 years since the site was first excavated. This constitutes an annual loss of about 6 ins. per annum (15 cms.), though the actual erosion may not have occurred at an even rate. Some additional loss may have been caused by normal weathering. It is now clear that Rooms 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 of Block C have been totally lost and that parts of Rooms 7 and 9 have been partially lost.

b) MILITARY ACTIVITY

The 1989 excavation also revealed that some parts of Block B had been damaged during World War II. In particular, Army Units appear to have cut trenches in Room 12 of Block B and to have removed most of the large stone piers in that room. They also removed the top half of the furnace-arch between Rooms 11 and 12 and the remains of this were found in the trenches. Several other walls seem to have been partially knocked down, or damaged, at about the same time though the reason for this is not clear. Certain evidence was found that several walls had subsequently been repaired between 1945 and 1957 when the site was finally filled in. Military activity on these cliffs is well known to many local residents who remember Wartime Folkestone.

SUGGESTED REMEDIES TO PROTECT THE SITE

- 1) An immediate short-term remedy to protect the exposed foot of the cliff would be to dump several hundred tons of large boulders, or concrete blocks, along the 200 yards of beach where there is no protection whatsoever. Massive concrete walls already protect the area to the north and for some reason the critical section below the villa has remained entirely unprotected.
- 2) A short-term remedy might be to construct a barrier of steel and concrete close to the foot of the cliff and to infill behind it with a permanent fill. This might prevent erosion for a period of 30-50 years, but might not provide permanent protection.
- 3) It seems likely that the only permanent remedy for the problem of storm-damage is to construct a major concrete barrier as an extension to the British Rail defences to the immediate north. This would need to be at least 200 yards in length. These remedies would not only protect the villa, but would also help protect the car-park and eventually Wear Bay Road and the houses along it.

3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

The 1989 excavation clearly showed the nature and extent of the excavations carried out over 60 years ago. The site had then been cleared by unskilled labourers who had removed not only the unstratified topsoil, but also any surviving Roman stratified soil deposits to the top of undisturbed natural. This was sometimes common practice in the 19th and early 20th centuries and with Winbolt being trained only as a schoolmaster he had minimal archaeological skills. Many of the skills used today were developed since World War II and these regard the stratified soils as of prime importance, for they contain the vertical history of the site. Sadly, the 1924 excavation effectively destroyed the entire stratigraphy in the area re-examined in 1989 and this must be regarded as a serious loss of information.

The many small finds, pottery and other material found in 1924 must have been located within stratified deposits, but the unskilled method of digging has resulted in the great majority now being classified as unstratified. Their original context would have been crucial to the dating of the history of the site, both in terms of periods and phasing. Many of the finds are held in the museum at Folkestone.

The 1989 excavation also disclosed additional information:-

1. That some stratification had survived in the areas immediately outside the limits of the 1924 excavation and these contain important archaeological material.
2. A pair of small ditches, of late Iron Age date, had been missed in 1924 where they survived beneath supposed Roman floor level.
3. That a deep deposit containing sherds of prehistoric pottery existed well below Roman wall level on the north part of the site.
4. That in spite of war-time damage considerable amounts of Roman masonry survive and can provide evidence of period phasing, mostly missed in 1924.
5. That the extent and quality of the masonry of the Bath House apse was exceptional and rates amongst the finest surviving masonry in Roman Britain.
6. That the west side of the stoke hole supplying the Bath House was flanked by a substantial masonry wall, not previously seen. Clearly the stoke hole area was never fully excavated and significant amounts of archaeological information probably survive here and to the south.

4 PUBLIC INTEREST

In view of the very late permission for the excavation it was impossible to give any advance publicity for the project. Without the permission no excavation could have been undertaken and it was thought wise initially to start the project with a low profile. This allowed work to start without interruption in early July and for visitors to see the progress in August and September. The very severe heat caused half the site to be covered part of the time for the underlying Gault Clay dried out and split open.

More than three thousand casual visitors came to the site, studied the plan of the villa, saw the excavation in progress and had their questions answered by those working on the site. Many of the casual visitors returned several times to keep up with the progress of the work. This proved to be a much appreciated service and it was interesting to note how many of these visitors had seen the site before it was filled in about 1957.

In addition to the casual visitors some ten organised groups of special visitors and groups from more than 30 local schools came to the site by prior arrangement, many in special coaches, and were given detailed site-tours by members of the Unit staff. These tours lasted from 30-60 minutes and were very much appreciated. Many aspects of the site, including its location, its history, the early excavation, its war-time role and its archaeological importance and significance were explained.

It seems certain that had it been possible to give prior notice to very many groups and schools, across Kent and beyond, that very many more organised parties would have visited the site. Thanks to the success of the 1989 excavation it is now clear that substantial masonry survives and such visits can be encouraged with some confidence. Prior to the excavation it was not certain that enough survived to be of interest.

5. CONSOLIDATION

In view of the considerable public interest and the quality of much of the Roman masonry it was agreed that first-aid repairs should be carried out to the wall tops and to any crumbling masonry before the site was back-filled. The Unit, in consultation with English Heritage and Shepway District Council, worked out a crisp programme of cleaning, treating and consolidating all the exposed masonry. Details of this are given below.

1. Nearly 100 m. of Roman masonry, exposed during the re-excavation of part of Blocks B and C, were cleaned with water, trowels and brushes several times. The walls were found to be in very grimy and ingrained state and cleaning proved to be a major task.
2. All of this masonry, both wall tops and wall faces, were treated with two coats of stabilising liquid. The primary coating was a solution of about 6-1 and the final coating about 3-1.
3. All the large voids in all the walls were grouted with a special mortar/lime mix, to an agreed specification, and repairs made at the same time where stone blocks were falling away.
4. All the wall tops were then grouted, leaving the masonry blocks exposed, with the same mix to create a very firm cap prior to re-burial.
5. All the masonry was then carefully covered with thick plastic sheeting, provided at the Unit's own expense, and the wall tops completely covered with sandbags filled with suitable material.
6. The site was then gently back-filled by hand and machine and left level for seeding, if required.
7. The whole site was left fenced off on completion and the final inspection and tidying up on the site took place at intervals during 1990, up until the month of June.

6. THE FUTURE

The success of the 1989 excavation and the considerable public interest has encouraged the Shepway District Council and the Kent Archaeological Rescue Unit to outline possible plans for a second and third phase of work in 1991 or beyond. This would include excavation and consolidation and a significant visitor element. It seems likely that the Kent Archaeological Trust would again financially support such future work.

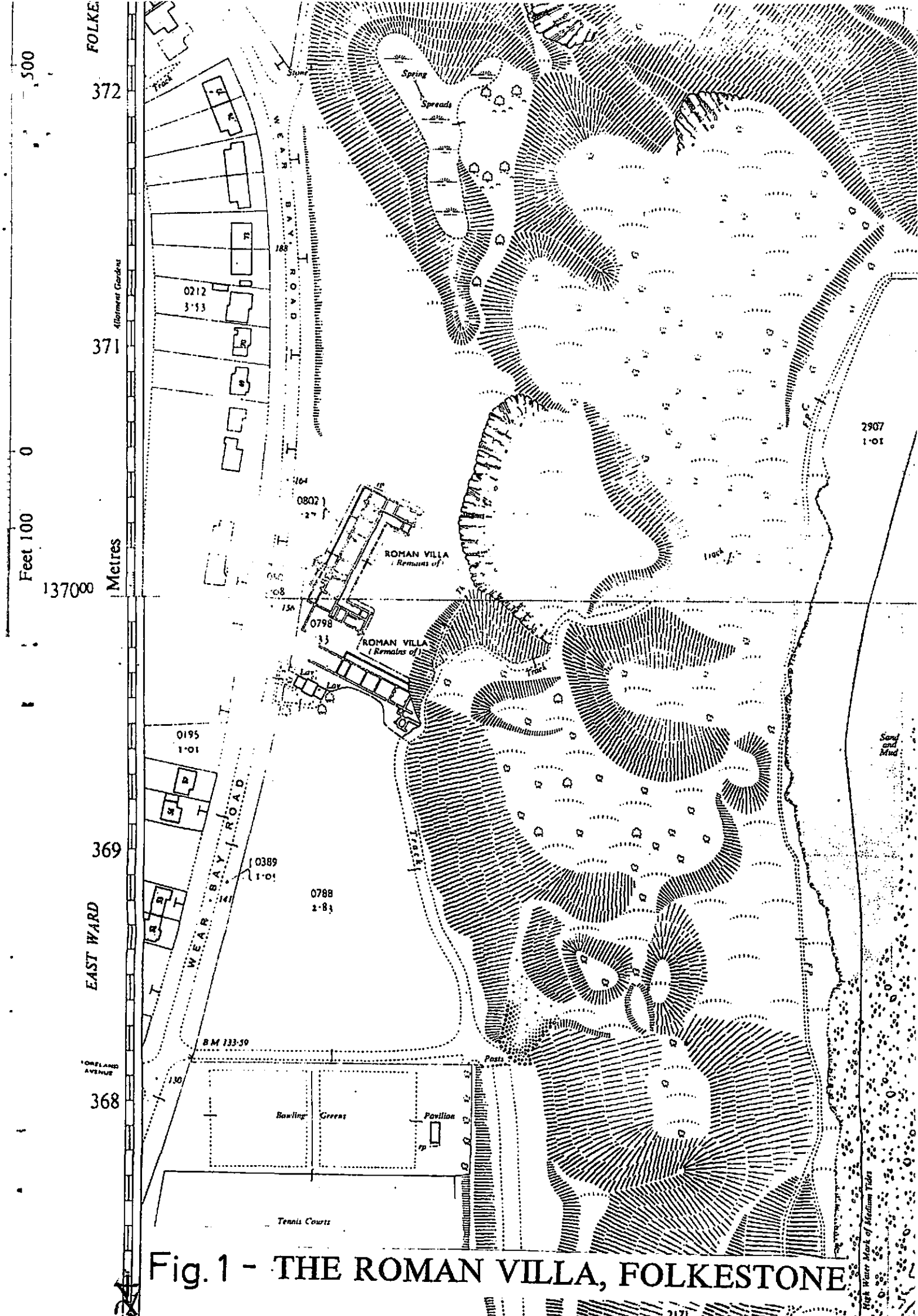


Fig.1 - THE ROMAN VILLA, FOLKESTONE

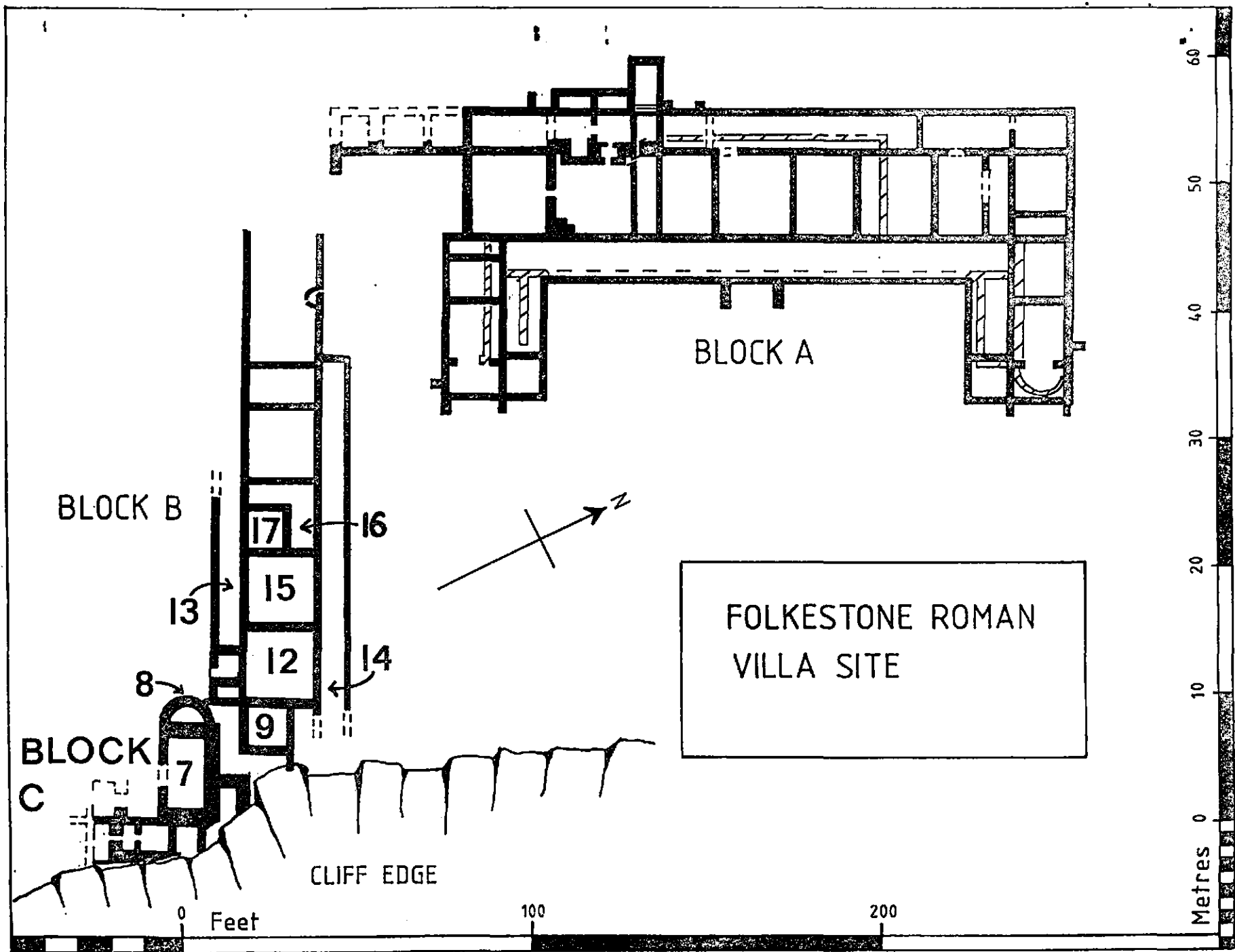


Fig 2 : PLAN OF THE ROMAN VILLA, FOLKESTONE, 1924

DESCRIPTION OF THE EXCAVATIONS

Room 7 (Block C)

This room was oblong in plan and recorded by Winbolt as being 21 ft. long and 11 ft. 4 ins. wide internally. It was massively constructed and at least one wall stood to a height of 6 feet. It contained a substantial hypocaust.

Only a very small part of Room 7 lay within the limits of the excavation and it was not possible to examine the interior of the room. Only the top of the wall deviding it from Room 8 was exposed and this was slightly decayed and had to be repaired.

Room 8 (Block C)

This room was a major element of the building (Block C), of which it formed an integral part with Room 7. It was apsidal in plan and Winbolt reports that the apse had an external measurement of 29 feet. Again it was massively constructed and as Winbolt reports stood to a height of 8 ft. 1 in. It had also contained a hypocaust.

The 1989 excavation confirmed much of the detail given by Winbolt and more fully examined a massive furnace arch (fig. 4) in the centre of the apse on its west side. The arch was turned in two rows of large Roman bricks producing a very dramatic effect. The arch was flanked by two low piers and also by a substantial stone buttress. The internal area of the apse was only excavated to a depth of about 80 cm. and no trace of the hypocaust was seen. The internal face of the apse was built of tufa blocks and the external face of round sandstone blocks, similar to those found in other parts of the building. The external rendering of the apse was largely missing and must have weathered away over the last 60 years. Similarly the brick arches showed some signs of decay.

Room 9 (Block B)

This room was excavated by Winbolt and said to be about 12 ft. by 8 ft. in internal area. Only the extreme west corner of the room lay within the 1989 excavation but it was not possible to examine it due to the closeness of the cliff edge. The short sections of wall tops seen seem to suggest substantial masonry, though it seems likely that more than half of Room 9 has slumped over the cliff edge since 1924.

Room 10 (Block B)

This room was described by Winbolt as a latrine and was said to measure 7 ft 3 ins. by 4 ft. internally, having a drain in its south wall. This room was fully excavated in 1989 when all its walls were found to be up to a metre in height and all of them repaired. No trace of the drain was seen.

All the stratification had been removed and no floor was found. It is likely that this small room had a specialised function and its position near the major drain may be significant. It clearly lay on the south side of the major Room 12 and flanked Room 11 which was directly connected to Room 12.

Room 11 (Block B)

This room was described by Winbolt as the stoke-hole for Room 12 and its internal dimensions given as 8 ft 6 ins. by 7 ft 3 ins. An arched opening on its north side joined it to Room 12.

This room was re-excavated in 1989 when its east and west walls were found to be at least two courses high and both showed signs of repair. Its south wall was largely missing. Very little stratification survived in this room, but part of a shallow hollow filled with rubble had been missed in 1924.

The north wall of Room 11 survived several courses high but the tiled arch, clearly shown intact in Winbolt's book, had been truncated.

Room 12 (Block B)

This room was described by Winbolt as 'the finest thing left on the site', being 20 ft. square, with massive stone walls and 16 massive stone piers built on a low level base. It was, as already stated, joined to Room 11 by means of a substantial tiled arch in its south wall.

About three-quarters of this room was excavated in 1989 but the remaining part lay too near the cliff edge to allow its excavation and it seems likely that the extreme east corner may have already gone over the cliff. The walls survived to a remarkable extent and clearly still represents a major feature of the site. These mostly stood at least 80 cm. high with much deeper foundations. Most of the wall tops seem to have been repaired at some time.

The re-excavation of this room required the removal by hand of some 50 tons of filling which had to be removed by buckets across the site. The all important stratification was again missing, but the 1924 excavation had missed a large rubble-filled hollow and also traces of a construction layer. Of the original 16 piers, only traces of five around the walls remained.

On the east side of the room was a substantial army trench dug in World War II which contained a substantial number of masonry blocks and fragments of the tiled arch which was in place between Rooms 11 and 12 when found in 1924. It seems likely from this that the soldiers guarding the cliffs from German attacks removed the arch and some of the masonry, perhaps to provide easier access into this deep room. No trace of the late-Iron Age ditches extending from Room 15 was found, but these would anyway have been removed when the stone piers were placed in this low level room.

The precise function of this room is not clear but the 16 evenly spaced stone piers must have supported a paved floor under which air could circulate through the arch joining with Room 11. The spacing of the piers is very large and there is no way that standard bridging tiles could have spanned these. The probability is that they were spanned by very large sandstone slabs to create the base for a supported floor. No trace of wall flues were found, but it is possible that this room was heated by means of the arched opening in the south wall which would make Room 11 the stoke-hole. Little evidence of burning was actually seen and this question requires further consideration.

Room 13 (Block B)

Winbolt shows this to be a long corridor, 7 ft. 3 ins. wide, flanking the south side of Block B. Only the very extreme eastern end of this corridor fell within the excavated areas. No related stratification survived here and the wall showed as a shallow footing. No further work was possible in Room 13 in the time available.

Room 14 (Block B)

Winbolt shows this to be a long corridor, 7 ft. 3 ins. wide, flanking the north side of Block B, but adds very little detail. A substantial section, about 14 metres in length, fell within the 1989 excavations limits and it was possible to examine a section of this north corridor.

The walls survived up to two courses high and again showed some signs of having been repaired. Again, all stratification had been removed by the 1924 clearance and no trace of any floor survived. Examination of the underlying gault clay showed the presence of two small ditches, never seen by Winbolt, that underlay the south wall of the corridor and passed into Room 15 (ditches A and B).

The Unit excavated a trial trench into the underlying gault clay near the east end of Room 14 to a depth of about 1.50m. (fig.5). This showed a succession of fine clay silts beneath the Roman walls and sealing a buried land surface of prehistoric date. This showed as a dark brown deposit that contained small pot shers of possible Bronze Age date. This deposit was never located by Winbolt or others and it adds a new and important dimension to the site.

Room 15 (Block B)

This room was described by Winbolt as being 20 ft. square and identified as a 'sitting room'. The walls were described as little more than footings and no floor surface was identified.

The walls on the south, west and north sides were in fact only one or two courses high and showed clear traces of having been repaired. The wall on the east side, however, was massively constructed and survived to a height of at least 1.50m. Its unusual height was due to the fact that it also formed part of the sunken-floored room 12. Small gaps in the south and north walls are modern.

The 1989 excavation showed that the stratification within the room had been totally removed during the 1924 clearance and that little information on the structural elements survived. However, careful examination of the exposed subsoil showed the presence of three small ditches (fig. 3.) One (Ditch A) turned at about 90° and passed under the west wall under Room 16. The other two ditches (Ditches B and C) passed diagonally under the north side of the room, heading for rooms 14 and 12 respectively. All ditches had silted and contained small sherds of pottery of probable late-Iron Age date.

Room 16 (Block B)

This square room was identified by Winbolt as a possible 'bedroom' and it clearly seems to have occupied a large part of the rectangle represented by the rest of Room 16, again with an internal area of about 20 feet square.

The 1989 excavation only located a very small part of the eastern corner of this room and again no stratification survived. The walls survived as shallow footings and these showed signs of having been repaired.

Room 16 (Block B)

Winbolt shows this as an L-shaped room and seems not to have found any floor detail within it. The 1989 excavation only exposed the eastern end of the north arm of this room. The walls survived as footings and again these seem to have been repaired. No stratification survived and again this must have been removed during the 1924 clearance. Close examination of the underlying gault clay, however, showed the presence of a small ditch running east-west and joining with Ditch A in Room 15. This seems to be of late-Iron Age date.

Stoke-hole area (Block C)

The large furnace arch in the apsidal Room 8 was clearly worked from a deep pit, or stoke-hole, on its west side. This was only partially examined by Winbolt and found to contain a small drain flowing to the east.

This area was re-examined in 1989 when some 10 ft. (3m.) of backfill had to be removed with buckets and ropes. It was then clear that the sides had slumped since 1924. It was significant that the base of the stoke-hole area was very much deeper than the presumed floor levels of the adjacent rooms in Block B. Accordingly, the excavation was extended marginally westwards (still well within the original intended limits). This eventually picked up an hitherto unknown masonry wall (Fig. 5), running roughly north-south forming the missing west side of the stoke-hole area. The new wall was found to have butted to the south wall of Room 11 and was therefore added to it.

Drain (6b) (between Blocks B and C)

This major drain (fig. 3) ran eastwards from the stoke-hole area. It seems to have been fed by the small drain in the bottom of the stoke-hole, but it increased in height between Rooms 8 and 10 to almost 1m., where it was capped with a large sandstone block.

It was unusually narrow in the west side and could not be entered, but it seems likely to have expanded further west towards the cliff edge. This drain was the first feature located by Winbolt in 1924 and others rather earlier.

FOLKESTONE ROMAN VILLA 1989

Fig. 3

