



Bignor Roman Villa, Bignor, West Sussex
Report on Two Archaeological Watching Briefs
January 2007

NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

During the course of 2006 two small watching briefs were carried out at Bignor Roman villa in West Sussex. One was in advance of the installation of a new soak-away in the north wing of the villa, while the other was undertaken during the laying of a new drain from the south-west corner of the existing cover buildings. The work for the soak-away confirmed the absence of a mosaic in the north corridor (Room 10) and the lack of any floor in Room 13. The work for the drain revealed some evidence for a floor and demolition layers previously identified by Frere in Room 31 of the west wing.

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BACKGROUND



Figure 1 Maps showing the location of the site © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. License no: AL100036068.

1. Bignor Roman villa lies to the east of the village of Bignor in West Sussex, just below the north scarp of the South Downs, at 55m aOD, OS grid reference SU 9875 1475. The underlying geology of the site is Upper Greensand.
2. West Sussex Archaeology Ltd. were appointed by Mr. T. R. Tupper to carry out all below ground archaeological works associated with repairs to the cover buildings at Bignor Roman villa (Scheduled Ancient Monument No. 73). These repairs and the associated archaeological works were carried out under Scheduled Monument Consent (ref. HSD 9/2/7201). Two small-scale watching briefs were undertaken, the first carried out on 13th February 2006, in advance of the construction of a new soak-away, and the second on the 16th October 2006, during the laying of a new rain water drain. The results of these archaeological interventions are detailed below. The project archive will be deposited with West Sussex Records Office.
3. The Roman villa at Bignor is one of the largest known in Britain; in its final form it was composed of four blocks enclosing a courtyard of some sixty-five by forty metres. Settlement on the site is thought to extend back into the early Iron Age and by the early Roman period a farm is believed to have been established in the vicinity of the later villa. The history of the villa itself has been divided into three broad phases; with the first encompassing a substantial timber building, occupied in the first half of the third century. This was replaced in the second phase by a flint and timber built structure, occupied for the second half of the third century. During this period small projecting wings were added to the north and south ends of the villa. In the third phase the whole was rebuilt in greensand and massively enlarged to include north, south and east blocks surrounding a central courtyard (see figure 7). It is likely that this was carried out in the first half of the fourth century in a number of sub-phases. The date at which occupation ceased

at the villa is unclear, but there is no evidence to suggest that it was abandoned before the beginning of the fifth century AD (Frere 1982).

- There have been four major programmes of excavation on the site of the villa, the first that carried out by Samuel Lysons between 1811 and 1818, immediately following on from its discovery. Lysons exposed the majority of the walls and produced an overall ground plan of the remains of varying accuracy (Lysons 1817a, 1817b & 1821). The second was carried out by Sheppard Frere from 1956 to 1962 in order to re-examine the remains and prepare for their marking out for the benefit of visitors (Frere 1982). The third was carried out between 1985 and 1990 by Fred Aldsworth and David Rudling as part of a further re-assessment of the nature of the villa, followed by a further ten seasons of work by Rudling between 1991 and 2000 (Aldsworth & Rudling 1996 and Rudling 2000 & 2001). Several minor excavations have also taken place during the relaying of some of the mosaics, notably by Winbolt in 1926 and 1929 and Rule in 1973, 1975 and 1976 (Winbolt 1926 and Aldsworth 1983).

ASSESSMENT OF THE EARLIER EXCAVATIONS

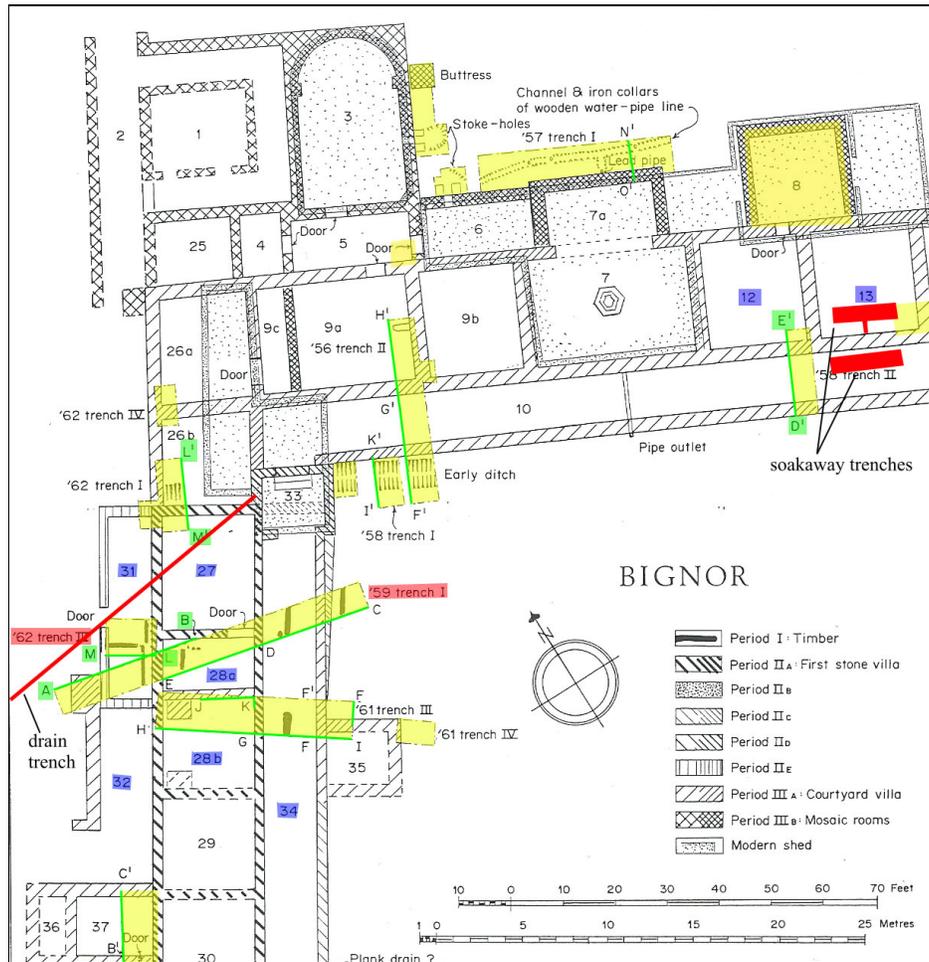


Figure 2 Plan showing the location of Frere's trenches in relation to those dug in 2005. In red are the trenches of 2005 and in yellow Frere's trenches, with recorded sections highlighted in green (original plan from Frere 1982).

A. The soak-away area

1. The soak-away trench was originally to be located within the north corridor of the villa (Room 10). It was subsequently moved to a position within Room 13. Two of Frere's excavation trenches were located nearby.
2. The first of Frere's trenches, positioned in the south-east corner of Room 13, showed that "no stratification survived; fine brown soil extended down to the natural rock, possibly as a result of Lyson's activities. Lysons records a floor of sandstone tesserae in this room" (Frere 1982).
3. The second, across the north corridor (Room 10) and into Room 12 at a point where the corridor "mosaic was known to be missing", found a floor of stone chips sitting above an old ploughsoil containing Iron Age and early Roman pottery sherds. Frere states that the chips are likely to be an earlier floor, rather than a base to the mosaic, since a thin occupation layer was found above them in a trench located further to the west also across Room 10 (Frere 1982, p.165). Inside Room 12 a similar floor of stone chips was found, but no trace of the opus signinum floor recorded by Lysons.

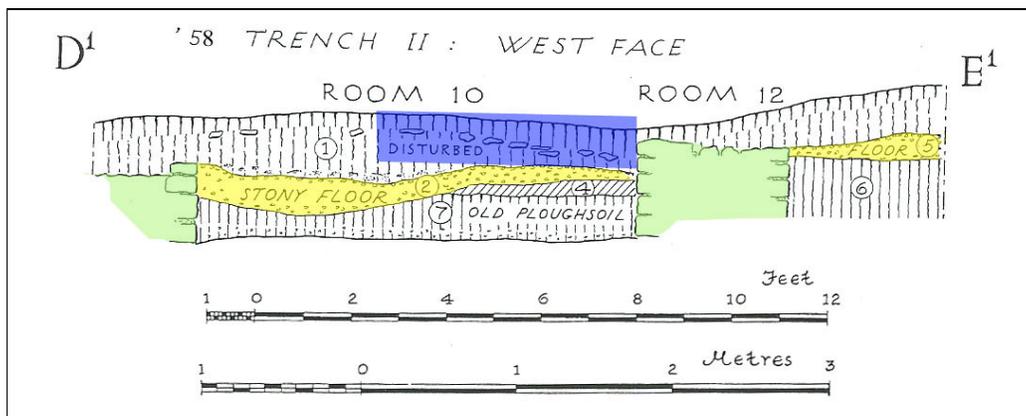


Figure 3 Frere's section across Rooms 10 & 12 indicating the floor of stone chips in yellow and the depth of excavation in the southern of the two soak-away trenches in blue (original section from Frere 1982).

B. The drain trench area

1. The drain trench was positioned to run through three of the rooms within the west wing of the villa, Rooms 26b, 27 and 31. Thus the archaeological features likely to be affected would be the floor of Room 26b, the wall between Rooms 26b & 27, the floor in Room 27, the wall between Rooms 27 and 31, the floor in Room 31 and the west wall of Room 31. Three trenches excavated by Frere relate to these rooms and their walls.

B.1 The floor of Room 26b, the wall between Rooms 26b & 27 and the floor in Room 27

2. Frere's trench '62 I was placed to examine these features. Within it he found that the wall between Rooms 26b & 27 had been robbed away, except at its north-

west corner and that the surviving parts of that wall and the opus signinum floor of Room 27 lay at a depth of 1.3m – well below the level of the drain trench. The floor in Room 26b sits much higher, but it was found to have been disturbed to a depth below the level of the drain trench.

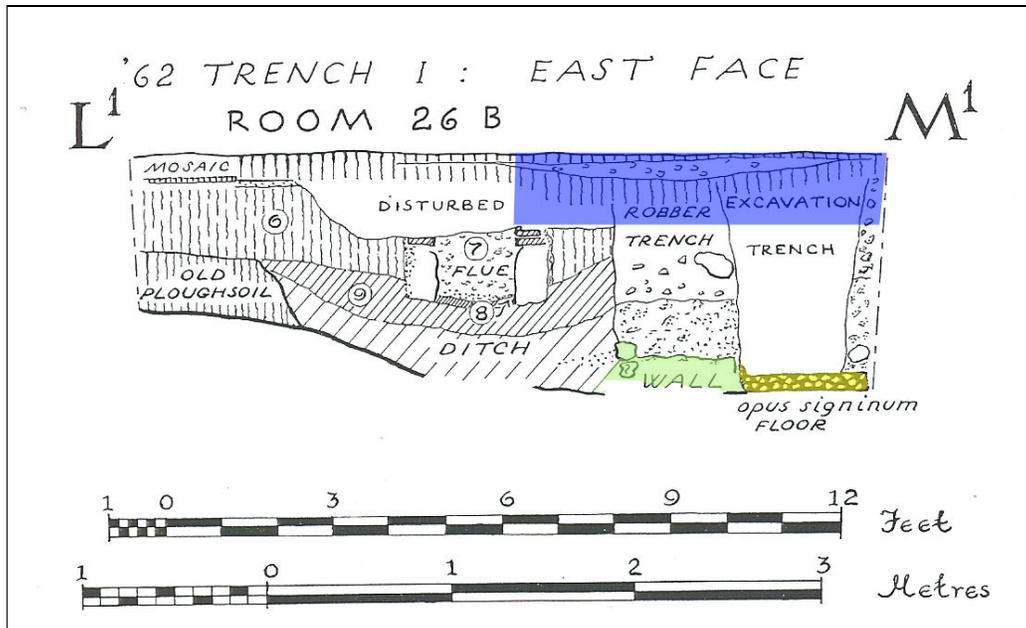


Figure 4 Frere's section across Rooms 26b & 27 indicating the wall remains in green, the floor of opus signinum in yellow and the depth of excavation for the drain trench in blue (original section from Frere 1982).

B.2 The wall between Rooms 27 and 31, the floor in Room 31 and the west wall of Room 31

1. Frere's trenches '59 I and '62 III were located across and within Room 31 and its east and west walls. The top of the remains of the east wall of Room 31 was found to lie at a depth of 0.5m, below the level of the drain trench. However the top of the west wall was shallower at between 0.35m & 0.4m, and so as a precaution it was decided to route the drain trench through the western doorway of Room 31 to avoid this wall. Frere records that this doorway had been blocked with flints in a later phase of the villa, but no information was available on the surviving height of this blocking, although it is unlikely to be higher than the walls to the north and south.
2. The floor levels in Room 31 are not consistent in the two trenches excavated by Frere. The north of the two ('62 III) shows a last phase floor which lies at a depth of 0.3m, whereas in the southern ('59 I) the highest floor layer is of an earlier phase and lies at a depth of 0.4m. Both these should be below the proposed depth of 0.3m for the drain trench, but obviously the northern would be very close.

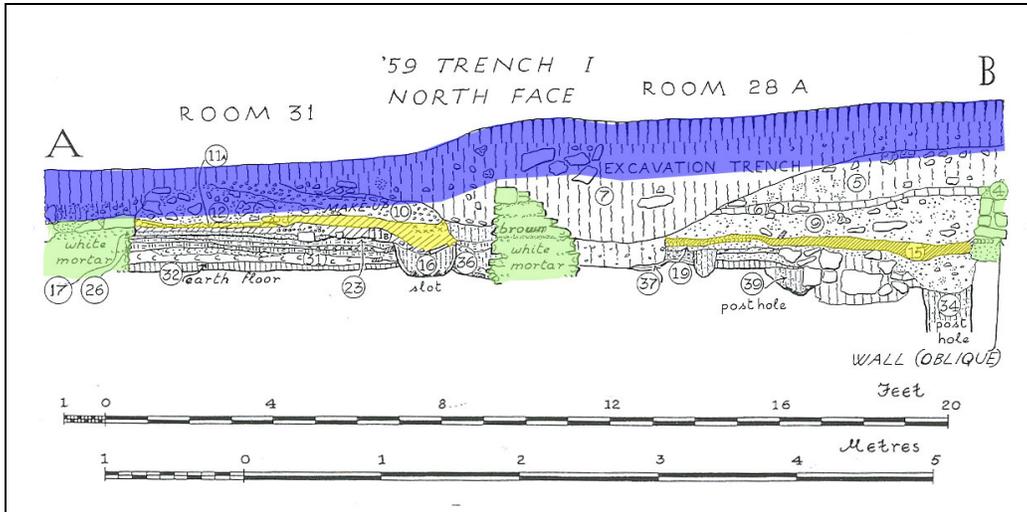


Figure 5 Frere's section across Rooms 31 & 28a indicating the wall remains in green, the highest surviving floors in yellow and the depth of excavation for the drain trench in blue (original section from Frere 1982).

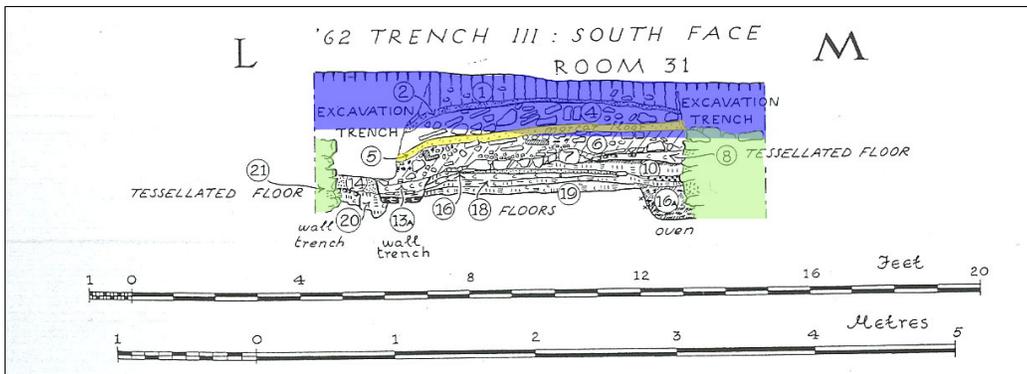


Figure 6 Frere's section across Room 31 indicating the wall remains in green, the highest surviving floor in yellow and the depth of excavation for the drain trench in blue (original section from Frere 1982).

B.3 Land to the west of the west wing

1. Excavations by Rudling in 1999 located two ditches running north-south to the immediate west of the west wing of the villa. The drain trench was on a course to intersect with the projected line of these two ditches. One of these ditches is believed to be part of an early Roman enclosure pre-dating the construction of the west range. The other may be much later in origin, possibly post-dating the villa, since it was filled with much building debris (Rudling & Barber D. 2000 & 2001). The upper fills of these two ditches lay under 0.2m of topsoil and thus it was likely that the new drain would impact 0.1m of archaeological deposits. In the case of the later ditch this may include a layer of building rubble largely composed of tesserae found in the 1999 trench (layer 5b in Fig.2).

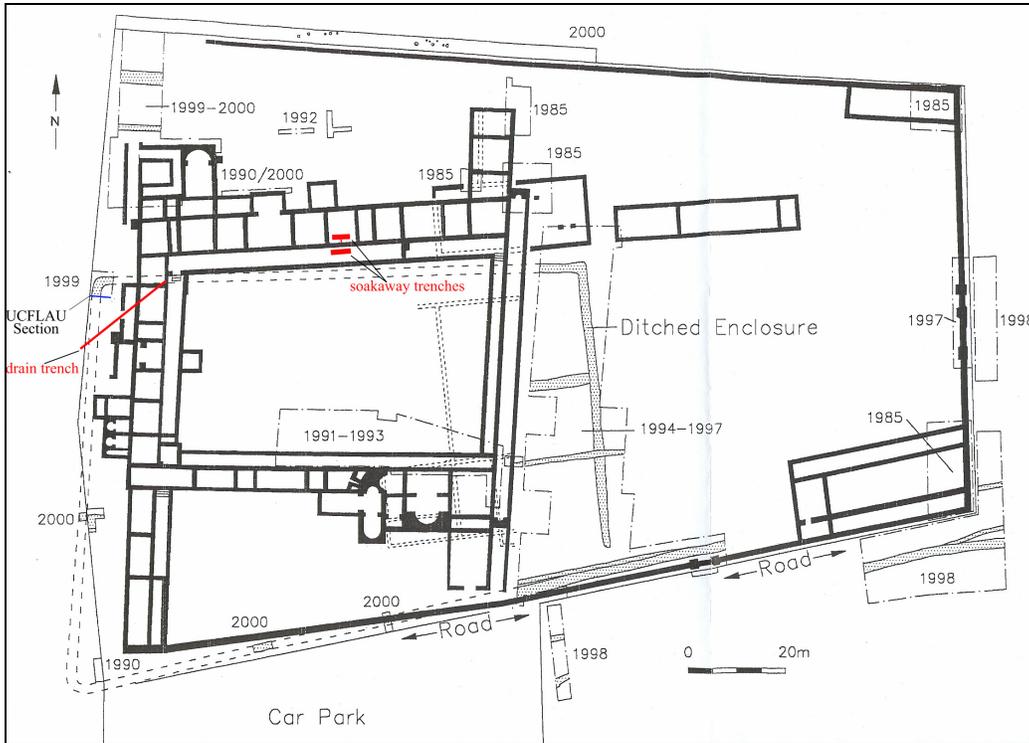


Figure 7 Plan of the whole villa complex at Bignor showing Aldsworth's & Rudling's trenches, including section shown in figure 8 (original plan courtesy of David Rudling).

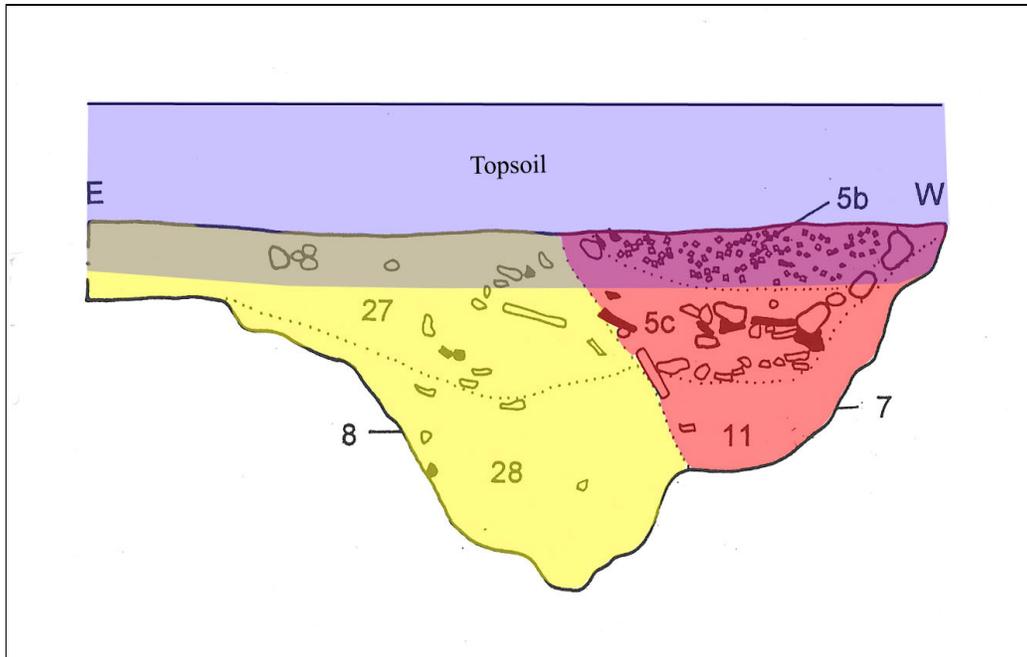


Figure 8 Section through the two ditches to the west of the west wing. The earlier ditch is shown in yellow, the later in red and the depth of the drain trench in blue (original section courtesy of David Rudling).

RESULTS

A. The soak-away area

1. Two trenches were excavated in order to find the pre-existing soak-away, which was presumed to lie in the angle between the villa museum and shop. The first trench (4m x 1m), which was dug into the north corridor, revealed no trace of the soak-away and was abandoned at a depth of 0.3m. The top of the floor of stone chips noted by Frere was revealed, disturbed by tree roots at its eastern end. As with Frere's trench across Room 10 discussed above, no trace of the mosaic noted by Lysons was seen, except for two loose tesserae (one of chalk, one of brick).



Figure 9 The trench in the north corridor (Room 10), looking west and showing the stone chip floor. The scale is 1m.

2. The soak-away was then located using a metal-detector, which picked up its corrugated iron cover. A new trench was excavated (3.6m x 1m & 1.4m deep), which encompassed the old soak-away and an area around it to allow for its replacement. No archaeological features were noted. Two soil layers were recorded lying above the upper greensand. The upper was a dark brown silt (0.5m deep), containing occasional modern debris, the lower was a more compact lighter coloured silt (0.25m deep). This lower soil layer maybe the buried soil noted elsewhere by Frere of an Iron Age and/or early Roman date, although he

makes no mention of two layers in the trench he dug into Room 13. No trace of Lysons' sandstone tessellated floor was found.



Figure 10 The north face of the soak-away trench in Room 13, showing the three layers. A is the topsoil, B is the possible early buried soil layer and C is the Upper Greensand. The scale is 1m.

3. A small extension was excavated to the south of the trench (0.2m x 0.5m), in order to locate the north wall of the north corridor. This proved to consist of upper greensand blocks, roughly shaped, set in a buff mortar. The base of the mortared wall lay at a depth of 0.65m, sitting above what appeared to be unmortared and un-dressed upper greensand blocks, which formed the foundations dug into the undisturbed upper greensand.



Figure 11 The south wall of Room 13 seen in the extension to the soak-away trench, the scale is 1m.

B. The drain trench



Figure 12 The drain trench, looking towards the cover buildings from the south-west.

1. The drain trench ran from the angle of the two westernmost cover buildings (those over Rooms 33 & 26) in a south-westerly direction until reaching the existing western fence of the villa site. It then ran under the fence for another 0.5m before emptying into an open land drain.

- Nine different layers were observed in the trench (see figure 13), but due to the shallow depth of the trench, which nowhere sank to more than 0.4m below the current surface, very little can be stated with any confidence about them. Nos. 1, 5 & 7 were brown silt layers with some Roman building debris. No. 2 was a dark brown layer over the line of the blocked doorway into Room 31, possible representing an old excavation trench backfill. No. 3 was a yellowish mortar layer, which maybe the top of floor 5 found by Frere in Room 31 (see figure 7). No. 4 was a soil layer with a higher rubble content than elsewhere, which maybe layer 4, a demolition layer above floor 5 observed by Frere (see figure 7). No. 6 was the existing tarmac and concrete marking out the walls. No. 8 was a layer similar to no. 4, which may again be the remains of a demolition layer. No. 9 was a layer with a large amount of Roman tile and other building debris, which is probably associated with a previous archaeological excavation or the erection of the cover buildings. No obvious sign of the ditches discovered by Rudling to the west of the wing was seen, and certainly no deposit of tesserae. This is probably due to the shallow nature of the drain trench and the absence of any tesserae at this point.

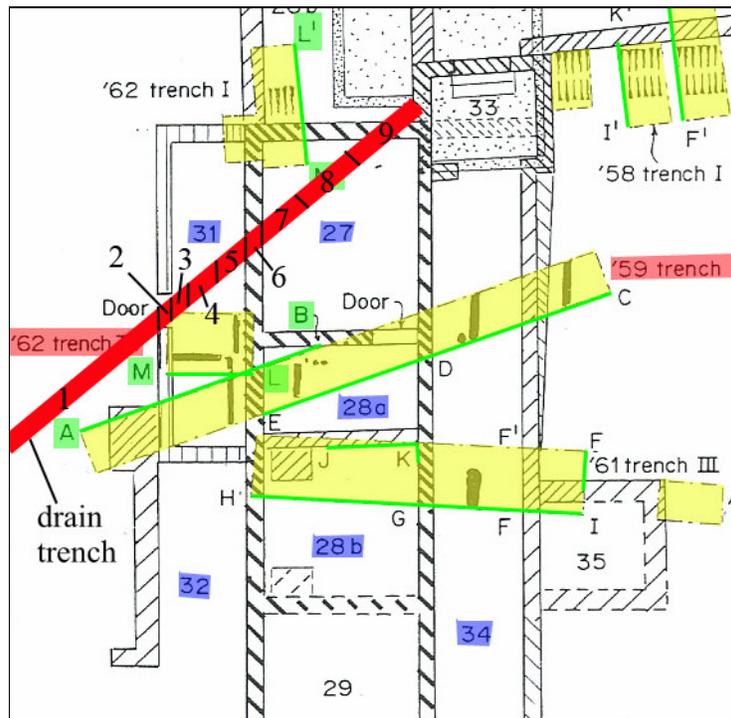


Figure 13 Plan of the layers in the drain trench (taken from figure 2).

3. SURVIVAL OF DEPOSITS

A. The soak-away area

- The two trenches excavated for the soak-away tended to confirm Frere's earlier observations concerning the survival of remains in the rooms concerned. The north corridor (Room 10) appeared to have the same stone chip floor that Frere

noted, with no sign of the overlying mosaic discovered by Lysons. Room 13 appeared to have no floor remaining, with no indication of the sandstone tessellation apparently seen by Lysons. Some concern should perhaps be raised over the damage being done by the tree sitting over the north corridor just to the east of the southern soak-away trench.

B. The drain trench.

1. The limited depth of this trench has meant that little information was gained from its observation. What can be said again tends to confirm Frere's work, if the identification of his floor 5 and layer 4 in Room 31 are correct. However, the poor quality of the mortar identified as floor 5, together with its sloping surface, suggest that it may instead be the remains of the base to a floor, rather than the floor itself.
2. As identified in the assessment detailed above, any other significant archaeological deposits lay too deep to be seen, including any identifiable layers within Rudling's ditches to the west.

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