

The Mosaics of Roman Leicester

by Peter Johnson

Like most Romano-British *civitas* capitals, Leicester, *Ratae Coritanorum*, has yielded the remains of numerous mosaic pavements. The substantial number of thirty mosaics has been recorded to date in various states of preservation, despite much recent investigation, the majority are 19th century discoveries. Most pavements have been found in the western half of the town and, except for one or two examples, the north-east quarter of *Ratae* has a dearth of mosaics.¹

Leicester's origins are military, going back to the 1st century, though none of its mosaics can be assigned to this period. By the middle of the 2nd century, however, the town's growing prosperity can be gauged from the sophisticated mosaics which decorated its comfortable houses. The *Blackfriars* mosaic (Plate 1), was found in Jewry Wall Street in 1830.² This pavement, of nine-octagon design, has a high standard of craftsmanship and is worked in fine tesserae of well-blended colours, notably a soft pastel green sandstone. The panels, framed by three-strand guilloche, show, as far as can be estimated, a diagonal symmetry in terms of their contents. These consist of tightly-designed shield and bifurcated-scale patterns enclosing simple knots and a conventionalised flower bordered by wave-crest pattern. The bottom centre panel contains the so-called 'Leicester flower' bordered by miniature scroll and superposed thorns. The mosaic is bordered by heavily-outlined cornice pattern with an unusual elaboration of 'thistles'.³

The *Blackfriars* mosaic is one of a small number of pavements that has been dated by the red samian tesserae in their make-up. The mosaic was transferred from its original location *in situ* underneath the Central Station in 1977. Brian Hartley examined the undersides of these tesserae and concluded that they had originated from bowls made by Lezoux potters between 125-140 A.D.⁴ Thus, allowing for a period of wear and tear on the vessels, the *Blackfriars* mosaic was probably laid not long after 150 A.D.

This dating also holds significance for the mosaic found in *St. Nicholas Street* in 1898 (Plate 2).⁵ The resemblance to the *Blackfriars* mosaic is quite striking. The octagonal-panel design is the most obvious common feature although here the frame is formed by a simpler guilloche. Similar patterns of wave-crest, superposed thorns and the cornice border all indicate a strong connection with the *Blackfriars* mosaic. Conventionalised flowers are used, if anything, more often on the *Peacock* mosaic and among them is a badly damaged, though still recognisable, 'Leicester flower'. Lozenge patterns decorate two of the panels and suggest an elaboration on the *Blackfriars* pavement. Squared rosettes occupying the interstitial spaces are found on other urban mosaics of the 2nd century.⁶

The most significant difference is that instead of the central panel containing a geometric pattern it features a peacock. This magnificent bird, largely restored in paint, proudly faces us, legs straddled and tail outspread, the eye-feathers of which are worked in blue glass tesserae. The panel is bordered by a chain guilloche whose individual links are picked out in alternating colours, a practise known in Britain only on 2nd century mosaics.⁷

Trans. Vol. LV



Plate 1 Blackfriars mosaic, Jewry Wall Street 1830

Leicestershire Museums, Art Galleries and Records Service

This mosaic also contains samian tesserae and these have been identified as sherds from vessels with a *terminus post quem* of c. 140-145 A.D.,⁸ thus slightly postdating that proposed for the Blackfriars pavement. That the St. Nicholas Street mosaic features a bird as its focal point rather than a geometric pattern may support the difference in samian dates. It can be concluded, therefore, that the Peacock pavement, although certainly from the same workshop as the Blackfriars pavement, was laid a few years later, perhaps soon after 155 A.D.

This Leicester workshop may also have been responsible for two mosaics from the *Blue Boar Lane* townhouse⁹ excavated in 1958. A fragment of one pavement features a swastika-maeander while another room had the remains of a panel with guilloche border and a four-petalled flower in red and white, resembling a flower on the Blackfriars mosaic. The standard of work appears to be just as high and the tesserae as fine. The excavator, John Wachter, dates the Blue Boar Lane house and its mosaics to the Antonine period and is thus roughly contemporary with the Blackfriars and St. Nicholas Street mosaics.

The mosaic found in 1839 in *Vine Street* (Plate 3; left), has a compass-drawn design found on mosaics from the 2nd to the 4th centuries. This pavement has only survived as fragments,¹⁰ its panels containing somewhat uninspired leaf motifs and *canthari*. The central roundel has,

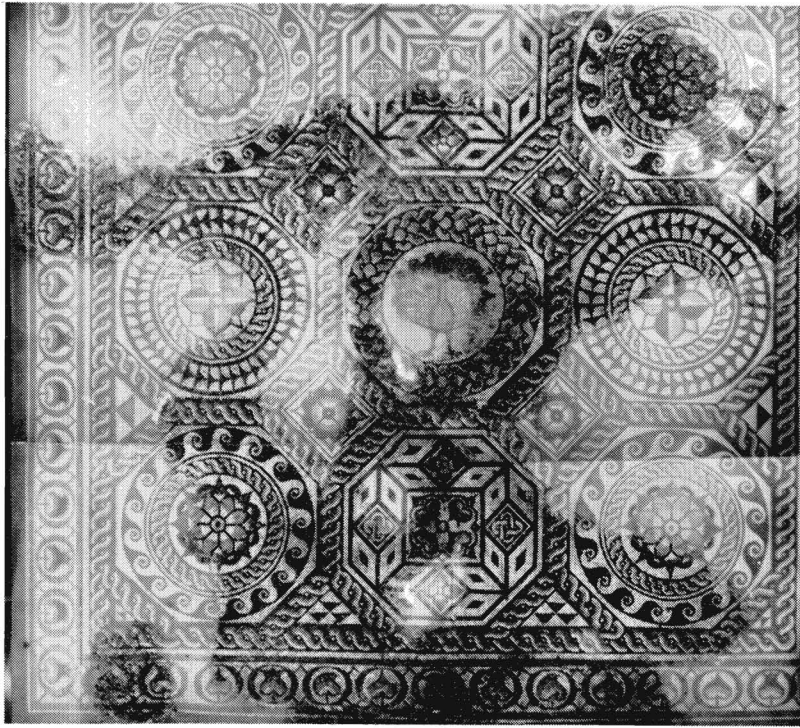


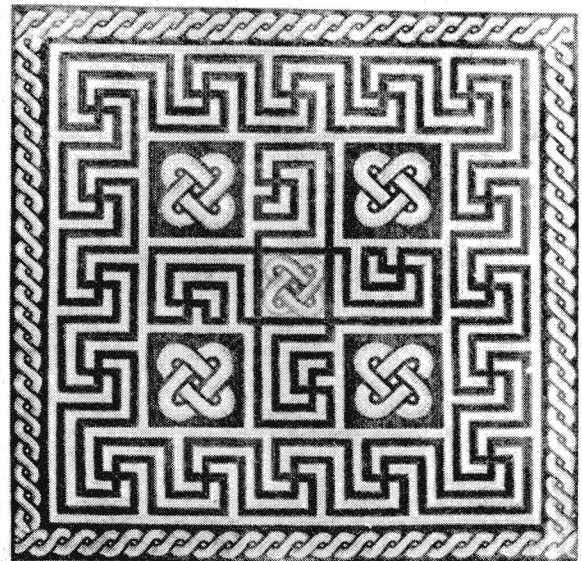
Plate 2 Peacock mosaic, St. Nicholas Street 1898

Leicestershire Museums, Art Galleries and Records Service



Vine Street 1830

Plate 3



Blackfriars Street 1754

V.C.H. Leics. I (1907)

unfortunately, been destroyed but the 'squared rosette' squeezed into a concave-sided square bears a close resemblance to squared rosettes on the Peacock mosaic as well as to a flower enclosed by bifurcated-scale pattern on the Blackfriars mosaic. These rosettes are of good quality work whereas the Vine Street rosette is quite coarse in comparison and was probably inspired by these mosaics at a time when standards were slipping. Alternatively, it can be argued that the Vine Street mosaic was produced at roughly the same time but by a far less skilled hand. The mosaic appears to contain samian tesserae which could suggest a 2nd century date. However, the coarseness and degenerate character of the work does, on balance, indicate that a date very late in the 2nd century or early in the 3rd century may be more appropriate.

Third century mosaics, as with the rest of Britain, do seem to be poorly represented in Leicester. However, such a date could be assigned to a pavement found several feet to the west of the Peacock in *St. Nicholas Street* but at a slightly higher level (Plate 4). This mosaic, possibly from a corridor, has a chequer pattern with L-shapes and dentil border that is found on mosaics dating from the 1st century to the 4th.¹¹ The tesserae, of grey limestone and white chalk, are quite small but cut irregularly, and thus of an inferior standard to the 2nd century mosaics already discussed.



Plate 4 50 St. Nicholas Street 1898

Adjoining the chequer pattern and forming part of the same corridor, was a very coarse piece of pavement decorated with small white crosses on a largely grey ground, apparently made from re-used tesserae. This must have been a later insertion of salvaged material though both of these patterns probably belong to the 3rd century, a date which is supported by coins of Victorinus and Severus Alexander found above, though not sealing, the pavement.¹²

In the 4th century Leicester maintained a modest prosperity as is attested by the appearance of houses furnished with mosaics of an unspectacular though competent standard. The villa excavated in 1851 at the Cherry Orchard site in *Norfolk Street*¹³ lay about a quarter of a mile west of the conjectured town wall. All its rooms were floored with geometric mosaics of late type (Fig. 1). The southernmost room had a fairly plain pavement featuring interlaced squares

Plan of Pavements
found in the
CHERRY ORCHARD
LEICESTER
1851

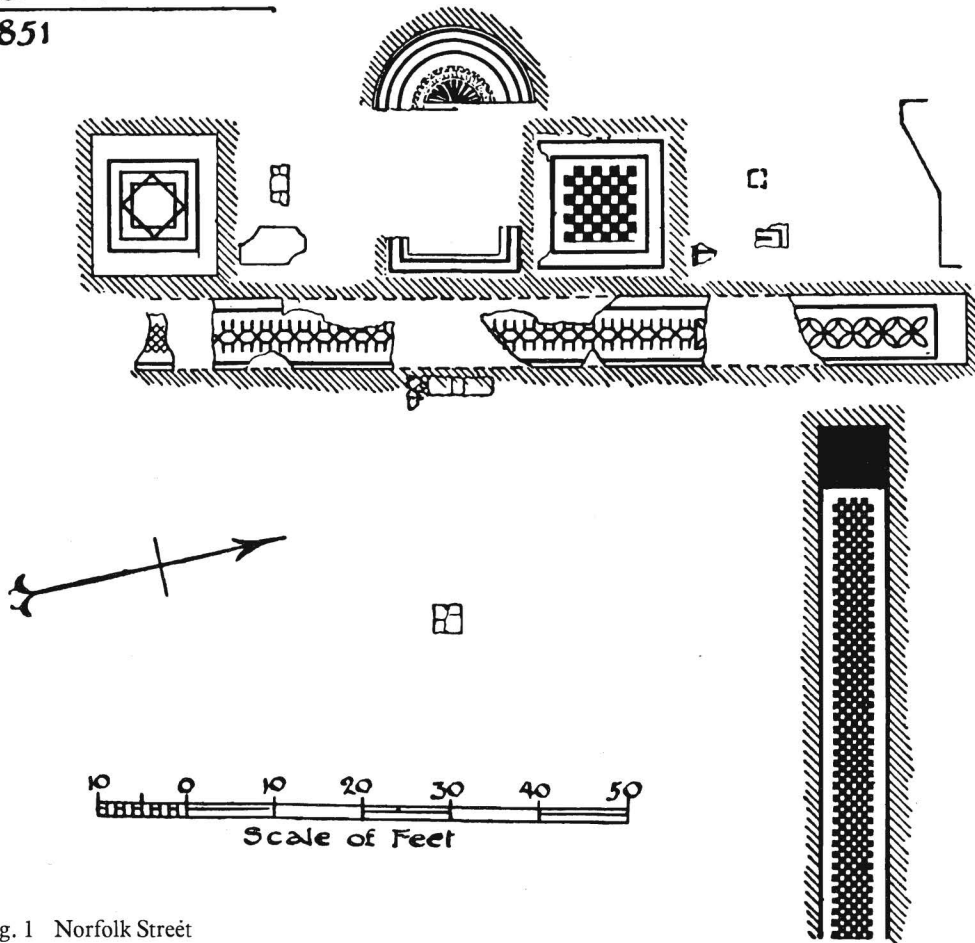


Fig. 1 Norfolk Street

of red terracotta on a grey ground while the east-west corridor and the northernmost room apparently had floors with chequer patterns, also in red and grey. The main corridor of the house, running north-south and 120 feet long by 11 feet wide, comprised three separate patterns. For most of its length interlaced octagons are used, a pattern that is found on several sites in Britain but with noticeable concentration in the east Midlands.¹⁴ The northern end of this corridor was decorated with large interlaced circles with a diameter of approximately 3 feet. When the north wing of the Norfolk Street villa was excavated in 1979 a room in the bath-house had a mosaic with a very similar pattern.¹⁵ This is also found on the corridor mosaic at *Scampton*,¹⁶ Lincolnshire and at *Bancroft* villa,¹⁷ Buckinghamshire, both attributable to the *Durobrivan* school. The closest parallel, however, is the corridor mosaic at *Great Casterton*, Rutland,¹⁸ where the design is virtually identical. As the diameter of the circles is also about 3 feet the dimensions correspond closely to the Norfolk Street circles. The Great Casterton interlaced circle pattern is in red tesserae on a yellowish-brown background, as is that from Norfolk Street. The mosaics of Great Casterton villa were certainly produced by the *Durobrivan* school and date to after 350-365 A.D.

At the southern end of the Norfolk Street main corridor the pattern of interlaced circles ends next to a pattern of smaller intersecting circles with a concave-sided square within each circle. The same pattern occurs as an all-over design on one of the mosaics from *Haceby*, Lincolnshire,¹⁹ which is attributable to the *Durobrivan* school. The interlaced circle design is not the only *Haceby* design to parallel a Norfolk Street floor. Intersecting octagons, grid patterns and chequer patterns are all featured at Norfolk Street as well as at other *Durobrivan* sites.²⁰ There can be little doubt that the Norfolk Street mosaics are products of the *Durobrivan* school and, as such, probably date to around the third quarter of the 4th century.

The main room of the villa was floored with mosaic but only its northern apse had survived (Plate 5). This was of a scallop design, as opposed to a sunburst design.²¹ A marine interpretation is to be preferred as there also appears on this panel one dolphin surviving from a pair. Its outline is handled clumsily and the work is quite crude yet this dolphin is only the third animal known from a *Durobrivan* mosaic and therefore of no small importance.²²

The Norfolk Street mosaics are not the only products of the *Durobrivan* school from Leicester. Three 9 feet square panels of mosaic were found in *Blackfriars Street* in 1754²³ and, as they all lay in line, must belong to a single pavement, possibly from a corridor. One panel with intersecting circles is so similar to a pattern on the Norfolk Street corridor and to a mosaic from *Haceby*²⁴ that it is clearly from the same workshop. The second panel from *Blackfriars Street*, featuring alternately-opposed swastika-peltae, is reminiscent of a mosaic from *Great Staughton*, Huntingdonshire,²⁵ and a mosaic from *Denton*,²⁶ Lincolnshire, both attributed to the *Durobrivan* school. The mosaic from the villa at *Medbourne*,²⁷ Leicestershire, has swastika-peltae as an outer border and is also *Durobrivan* work. This pattern occurs throughout Britain but there is a concentration in the Midlands. The third panel from the *Blackfriars Street* corridor (Plate 3; right), has a *quincunx* arrangement of knots within a meander pattern, which is also found on a *Durobrivan* mosaic from *Norton Disney*, Lincolnshire.²⁸

Another mosaic of all-over geometric pattern was found in 1901 on the *Coffee House* site on the corner of High Street and *High Cross Street*.²⁹ This has a unique design of all-over guilloche knots bordered by four-strand guilloche, a type usually of late date. This mosaic, probably of 4th century date, is reported to be very similar to one uncovered in *Townhall Lane* in 1903.³⁰ Although lacking parallels elsewhere, these two pavements appear to have been products of the same workshop, not necessarily that responsible for the *Blackfriars Street* and *Norfolk Street* mosaics, although this cannot be ruled out.

Leicester was clearly well within the *Durobrivan* school's sphere of influence. Few villas in the vicinity of Leicester have been investigated yet two, *Sapcote*³¹ and *Medbourne*, have mosaics



Plate 5
Dolphin Mosaic, Cherry Orchard/Norfolk Street 1851

Author

of Durobrivan work. The question arises whether Leicester may have been an additional 'focus' for the school's activities. There are distinctive groupings of the school's mosaics around *Durobrivae-Water Newton* itself, as well as in and around *Lincoln*, and it may be that Leicester provided at least a temporary base for Durobrivan mosaicists although head office probably remained at *Durobrivae*.³²

Perhaps the most problematical of Leicester's mosaics also happens to be one of the earliest mosaic discoveries in Britain. The *Cyparissus* panel (Plate 6) found in *High Cross Street* in about 1675,³³ is only the second example of true figured mosaic known from the Midlands.³⁴ This has long been held to represent the youth *Cyparissus* who held such great affection for a stag that when the animal died his grief caused him to turn into a cypress tree. At the bottom of the panel *Cupid* aims an arrow at the stag but does this symbolise the affection of this unlikely couple or, rather, the poor creature's imminent death?

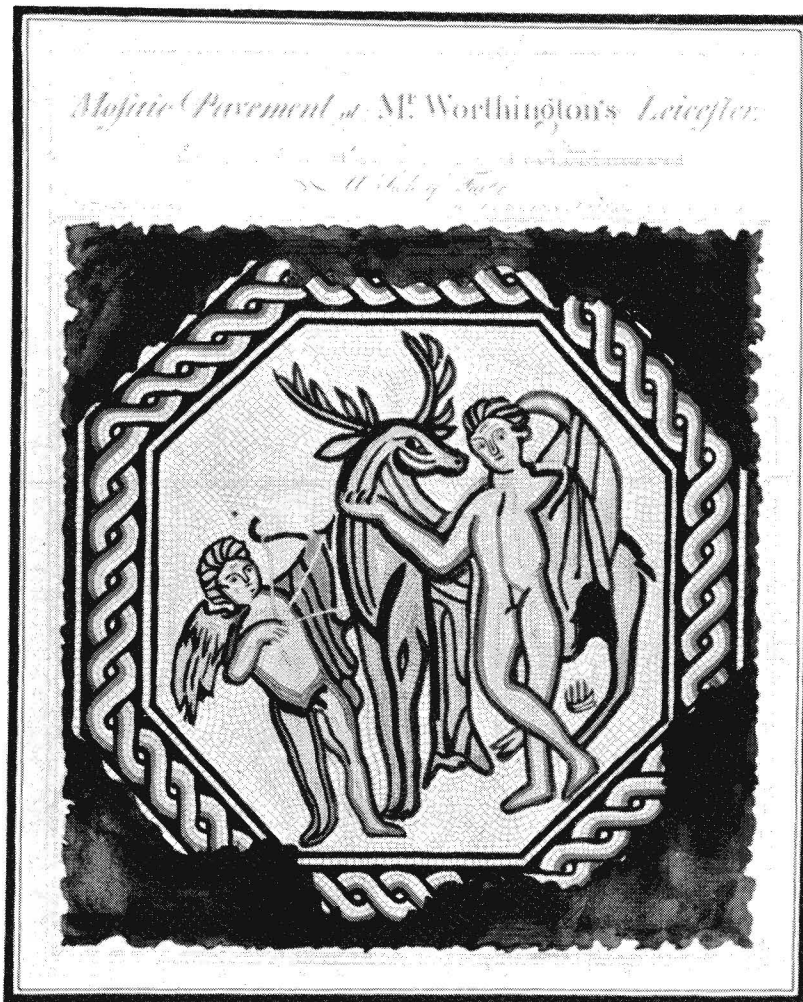


Plate 6 *Cyparissus* mosaic, High Cross Street c. 1675

The figures are well drawn with good proportions yet the workmanship is mediocre. The mosaicist has made an attempt at modelling but the overall effect is as if a copy has been made from a pictorial original. We know that wall-painting had reached a sophisticated standard in Leicester by the middle of the 2nd century and it is not impossible that Cyparissus and the stag once adorned a wall in one of *Ratae's* private houses. Alternatively, the scheme may have been inspired by a cartoon used by wall-painters and mosaicists alike. This might lend weight to an earlier rather than later date for this mosaic which has been assigned to the late 2nd to early 3rd century on style.³⁵ At first glance this belongs to an octagonal-panel design, albeit figured, and therefore belonging to the 2nd century. However, David Neal has suggested that the 'octagon' of guilloche is in fact a pair of interlaced squares of guilloche and therefore of 4th century date. Inspection does show one strip of guilloche overlying another yet, despite considerable 18th to 19th century restoration, there appear to be samian tesserae in its construction and, therefore, a pre-4th century date is still a possibility.

The difficulty lies in assigning the Cyparissus mosaic to a workshop. A completely figured panel does not conform to present ideas of the Durobrivan repertory. The workmanship is of a similar standard to the Norfolk Street scallop panel, although the subject matter is of a more sophisticated nature suggesting a patron of refined tastes. Evidently the skills that catered for this taste flourished in a still prosperous *Ratae*.

Notes

This paper was first presented to a symposium at Leicester Polytechnic, 26th April, 1980.

1. Leicester's Roman mosaics were first catalogued in 1918 by Professor F.J. Haverfield, *Arch. J.*, LXXV, 31-43
2. *Victoria County History Leics.*, I, (1907) 195, pl.III (Henceforth V.C.H.). On display in Jewry Wall Museum, Leicester
3. Smith, D.J., (1975), 'Roman Mosaics in Britain before the fourth century', in Stern, H., (ed.), *La Mosaique Greco-Romaine II* (Paris, 1975), 282-3
4. CBA, *Archaeology in Britain 1977*, (1978), 57
5. *VCH Leics. I*, *op. cit.*, 188. On view in Jewry Wall Museum
6. Smith (1975), *op. cit.*, 274-5
7. The mosaic from Middlesborough, Colchester, Crummy, P. *In search of Colchester's past*, Colchester Archaeological Trust, (1979), 43-4, and the mosaic from North Hill (C) Colchester, Dunnett, B.R.K., (1965), 'Excavations on North Hill, Colchester, 1965, *Arch. J.*, CXXIII, 42-3, pl.VIII, both dated to the second half of the 2nd century
Also the mosaic from Fordington High Street, Dorchester, dated on style from the late 2nd to the early 3rd century, Smith, (1975), *op. cit.*, 283, pl.CXXXVI
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Trans. Leics. Arch. and Hist. Soc. XXXV*(1959), 79. Fragments were lodged in Jewry Wall Museum
10. *VCH, Leics. I*, *op. cit.*, 196, pl.V. Fragments are at present stored in an annexe of the Jewry Wall Museum. I am grateful to the Keeper of Antiquities, Mr R.A. Rutland, for arranging access both to the mosaics in store at the Museum and those on display
11. Chequer patterns with 'L' or 'T' shapes occur at *Verulamium*, IV.X, from a corridor of c. 300 A.D., Wheeler, R.E.M. and Wheeler, T.V., (1936), '*Verulamium: a Belgic and two Roman cities*', pl.XLVIIIb, at Gloucester, Bon Marche site (1958), of c. 200 A.D., *Trans. Bristol and Gloucester Arch. Soc.*, LXXXII (1936), pl.IIIa, and at the Silchester 'church' dated to the early 4th century, *Archaeologia*, LIII (1893), pl.XL
A reduced form filling small panels occurs at Silchester, XIV, I, 23 of the late 2nd century, *Archaeologia*, LV (1896), pl.XIII, and at Roxby, Lincs., photograph in Scunthorpe Museum
Chequer pattern with 'T' shapes but without dentil border occurs on a second period mosaic at Fishbourne, W6, Cunliffe, B., 'Excavations at Fishbourne, 1961-1969', Vol.I, *Soc. Ants. Lon. Res. Rep.*, pls.XVIb, LXXIV
12. *VCH, Leics. I*, *op. cit.*, 188. Recently consolidated for display
13. *Ibid.*, 197 (plan). Most of the pavements were left *in situ*

14. On a corridor mosaic from Denton, Lincs., as a somewhat decadent type, Fowler, W., '26 Plates of Roman Pavements' (1796-1818), No.10; as an all-over pattern at Greetwell Fields, Lincs., *Antiquary*, X, 258-262; at Haceby, Lincs., (see text), Fowler, *op. cit.*, app.2, no.22; at Southwell, Notts., *Trans. Thor. Soc.*, LXX (1966), fig.13; at Tixover Grange, Rutland, *Trans. Leics. Arch. and Hist. Soc.*, XLVI (1970-1); and at Great Weldon, Northants., *VCH*, Northants., I, (1902), fig.22
15. *Brit.*, XI (1980), 367. During 1980 the west wing of the villa was re-excavated and below the mosaics were found sherds of pottery of early 4th century date. I am grateful for this and other information to the excavator, Miss Jean Mellor, of Leicestershire Museums Archaeological Field Unit
16. Smith, D.J., (1969), 'The Mosaic Pavements, in Rivet, A.L.F., (ed.), *The Roman Villa in Britain*, (1969) pl.3.22
17. *Brit.* X (1979), 303, fig.8 (plan)
18. Corder, P., (ed.), 'The Roman Town and Villa at Great Casterton, Rutland: First Interim Report' (1951), pl.Ib
19. Fowler, *op. cit.*, app.2, no.22
20. Grid patterns also occur at Denton, Lincs., *loc. cit.*, *Lincs. Architect. Arch. Soc.*, Reports and Papers, X ns. (1964), pl.7; at Roxby, Lincs., original coloured tracing by William Fowler in Scunthorpe Museum; at Greetwell Fields, Lincs., *loc. cit.*, *Antiquary*, X, *op. cit.*; at Southwell, Notts., *loc. cit.*, *Trans. Thor. Soc.*, LXX (1966), *op. cit.*, pls.Ib, 4a, fig.13; at Tixover Grange, Rutland, *loc. cit.*, *Trans. Leics. Arch. and Hist. Soc.*, XLVI *op. cit.*, 1-8, fig.4; and at Medbourne, Leics. now destroyed, *VCH* Leics.I, *op. cit.*, pl.VIIa
Interlaced octagons occur at Denton, Lincs., *loc. cit.*, room 2, Fowler, *op. cit.*, no.10
21. A similar design at *Veralamium*, Mosaic 8 of 130-150A.D. is bordered by wavecrest pattern and thus certainly a scallop in inspiration, Wheeler and Wheeler, *op. cit.*, pls.XXXIX, XCVIIIa. The 4th century Orpheus mosaic at Littlecote Park, Wilts., however, with a similar design in each of its three apses, has a cat-like face in the 'hinge', identified as a representation of Apollo-Helios, hence the design is a sunburst, Walters, B and Phillips, B., 'Excavations in Littlecote Park, Wiltshire: First Interim Report', (1979) pl.7
The Norfolk Street apsidal mosaic is now displayed at the Jewry Wall Museum
22. At Kirmond-le-Mire, Lincs., photo in Lincoln City and County Museum; and at Roxby, Lincs., *loc. cit.*, Fowler, *op. cit.*, nos.I, IV, and 3. Both these mosaics have a solitary bird used as a filling motif
23. *VCH* Leics. I, *op. cit.*, Pls. IV, V. Now destroyed
24. Fowler, *op. cit.*, app.2, no.22
25. Room 6, unpublished drawing
26. Room 7, Smith (1969), *op. cit.*, pl.3.26
27. *VCH* Leics. I, *op. cit.*, 189, pl.VIIa
28. *Ant. J.*, XVII (1937), fig.9
29. *VCH* Leics. I, *op. cit.*, 189, pl.VII. In store at Jewry Wall Museum
30. *Ibid.*, 189. Destroyed
31. Found in 1770 and now lost, Nichols, J., *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, IV (1811), 898, '... similar to that found some years ago near the cathedral at Lincoln'
32. See Smith, (1969), *op. cit.*, 107-9, for the first major discussion of the Durobrivan school
33. *VCH* Leics. I, *op. cit.*, 192-4, pl.III. On display in Jewry Wall Museum
34. The 4th century mosaic found in 1971 at Thenford, Northants. features a bust of uncertain identity, *Current Archaeology*, 35, III.p. 333
35. Smith, D.J., *Mythological Figures and Scenes in Romano-British Mosaics*, in Munby, J. and Henig, M., (ed.), *Roman Life and Art in Britain*. (B.A.R. 1977) 41(i), 141-2