

The distribution of villas in some south-eastern counties: some preliminary findings from a survey

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Introduction

THIS ARTICLE extends to five counties north of London (Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, Essex and the area within the boundaries of the old county of Middlesex, encompassing a total area of approximately 9,150 sq. km. (3,533 sq. miles)), some preliminary findings from a survey of the distribution of Romano-British villas in Kent, Surrey and Sussex¹.

Difficulties remain over the definition of the term 'villa'. Generally the majority of buildings identified as villas in Britain have been regarded,

1. H. Sheldon *et al.* 'The distribution of villas in Kent, Surrey and Sussex: some preliminary findings from a survey' *London Archaeol* 7 no 2 (1993) 40-46.

or discussed, by others, as farms either central to, or parcels of, larger estates (see for example River²). In only a few of the sites considered in this survey have field systems been reported at or near the villa building, suggesting that the villa may have been the centre of agricultural activity. However, as Hingley³ has pointed out, this is largely because excavators have too often studied stone-walled villa houses without exploring beyond the bounds of a single building, thus ignoring any additional dwelling houses, outbuildings and field systems, which might give some indication of the status of the villa within a broader settlement context. In

2. A. L. F. Rivet *Town and country in Roman Britain* (1964) 103-5.

3. R. Hingley *Rural Settlement in Roman Britain* (1989).

(continued from p. 186)

ordshire Slipware. The range of forms increased over time, with a general tendency towards food preparation and tablewares, with the number of vessels associated with cooking declining. These trends in vessel shapes are as expected for the period. None of the vessel forms from the pottery analysed could be linked to the agricultural or horticultural activity known on the site. From the mid 17th century, tea, coffee and chocolate-drinking became fashionable social activities that the middle classes readily adopted. The presence of a tea drinking vessel in the form of a mid 17th century Chinese porcelain bowl/cup may indicate affluent social activity for the period.

The Harts estate mirrors the climate of change in London over several centuries, and the archaeological work undertaken since 1991, together with the documentary evidence, provides insights into the development and gentrification of rural Essex.

Acknowledgements

Newham Museum Service and the authors would like to thank the developers, Persimmon Homes, in particular Geoff Smith, David Thornton and Andrew Sinclair, and Goldsborough for kindly funding the site, and for their help.

Thanks are also due to the field staff of the Museum, for all their efforts on site; to Dr. Frank Meddens for negotiating and managing the project and for the pottery dating; to Nick Truckle for the editing of this report; to Ray Sinclair for the documentary research; to Chris Jarrett for the pottery analysis; to Ken Sabel for the brick analysis; to Graham Reed and Paul Thrall for the illustrations; to the Greater London Archaeological Advisory Service for their advice; to Geoff Egan of the Museum of London for dating the lead weight; and to Rose Kerr of the Victoria and Albert Museum for dating the Chinese porcelain.

most cases it has been difficult, from the data available, to differentiate between villas which formed part of a working farm, "country seats" of wealthy town dwellers, roadside stations, minor military and civil establishments and temples.

Richmond⁴ considered that villas could be said to show the adoption of Roman standards in greater or lesser degrees by natives of substance, and Rivet⁵ described them as showing a degree of integration into the social and economic organisation of the Roman world. However, as Percival⁶ comments, whilst such definitions may emphasise the fact that villas developed as a result of Romanisation of the province, selecting the point at which Romanisation may be considered sufficient to warrant giving a building the title of villa remains arbitrary.

For the purposes of this survey three basic criteria were adopted:- there must be sufficient architectural evidence to indicate a Romanised house or mansion, the site must be in a rural setting, and there must be evidence of domestic occupation.

No criterion was imposed upon the size nor the shape of structure included in the survey, and they accordingly vary from a series of communicating rooms through the conventional winged corridor type to large courtyard villas. Heated rooms, mosaics or tessellated floors as well as bath suites may or may not be present in all cases.

As in the previous survey, there was found to be considerable variation in the quality of the data available, ranging from brief notes on work carried out in the 19th century to detailed reports prepared in the last decade. The discussion and analysis of finds similarly varied in detail and quality.

The survey

The questionnaire devised for the previous survey was used with some minor modifications in the present survey, and was applied to records of reported villas in the area under study. For each villa the height above OD was recorded, and distances from the site to the nearest river or estuary, to the nearest main Roman road, to Roman towns and to roadside settlements were deduced from OS maps. Records were consulted to establish, where possible, the building plan, the extent of the structural remains, the range of building materials used

4. I. Richmond in A. L. F. Rivet *The Roman Villa in Britain* (1969) 51.
 5. *Op cit* fn 2, 178 et seq.
 6. J. Percival *The Roman Villa* (1976) 15.

and the orientation of the main building complex. An attempt was made to elucidate each villa's 'history' by recording when the villa was thought to have been built, when it was at its maximum extent and when it was abandoned.

Methodology

The questionnaire was applied to two hundred and ninety eight sites that were identified through searching County Sites and Monuments Records, published site reports and syntheses. The sites were allocated to one of the following four categories:-

1. *Certain villa*: fully excavated or sufficiently excavated to be able to identify the form of the main building -- 32 examples.
2. *Probable villa*: at least partially excavated, main building found or deduced and domestic artefacts and building debris found -- 29 examples.
3. *Possible villa*: stone foundations located by excavation associated with building debris and domestic artefacts, Impossible from the record to define the form of structure found -- 102 examples.
4. *Unlikely villa*: despite Romano-British building debris and artefacts, excavation, if any, revealed no evidence of a structure bearing any resemblance to a villa, or the structure has been destroyed without record and is unclassifiable -- 135 examples.

With two exceptions, crop marks revealed by aerial photography have not been deemed adequate evidence for the existence of a villa unless associated with some excavation or the presence of building debris or artefacts which provide supporting dating evidence. The exceptions are Bledlow-cum-Saunderton, Lodge Hill Farm (no 106), close to which Romano-British inhumations have been excavated, and Chidwickbury (no 126), where aerial photography showed a layout of the main building and the outbuildings remarkably similar to the known villa at Gorhambury (no 125), which has been fully excavated.

The numbers of sites in the different categories in each of the counties was:-

County	category			
	1	2	3	4
Bedfordshire	2	2	15	19
Buckinghamshire	10	6	31	45
Essex	7	15	27	43
Hertfordshire	13	6	19	14
Middlesex	0	0	10	14
total	32	29	102	135

The sixty-one sites in Categories 1 and 2 are listed in the Appendix. These sites are considered in detail in the discussion which follows.

Topography and orientation

Fig. 1 shows the location of the villa sites in relation to the topography. The Chiltern and East Anglian Hills, which cross the study area from south-west to north-east, are the controlling factor in the topography of the region, rising to a maximum height above sea level of approximately 260m close to Aylesbury. This range of hills divides the study area into three broad riverine systems:-

• rivers and streams draining south (e.g. the Lee and the Colne) to join the Thames and thence to the English Channel,

• rivers and streams flowing north to the Cam and the Great Ouse, discharging into the North Sea at the Wash beyond the area of the survey, and

• rivers flowing east across the Essex plain to discharge into the North Sea south of the Wash.

The sixteen sites in the catchment area of rivers and streams flowing eastward across the Essex plain to the coast are almost without exception below an elevation of 60m above sea level. The elevation of the remaining forty-five sites ranges from 20 to 130m above sea level with an average of

75m. No fewer than twelve sites lie at or above an elevation of 100m.

South of the Chilterns, there is a noticeable lack of villa sites in the lower reaches of the River Colne, in almost the whole of the valley of the River Lee and in the region between the 61m contour and the River Thames. North of the Chilterns, the pattern may be distorted by the limitations of the study area, because the greater part of the catchment areas of the River Cam and Great Ouse lying below the 61m contour is outside the study area.

From available plans it was possible to identify the orientation of 28 of the 61 main villa buildings. Almost 90% of them had a southerly aspect, and 50% faced in the quadrant between south-east and south-west. In the previous study it was found that 90% of the villas faced the southern half of the compass; both surveys thus confirm the commonly accepted concept that this was the most usual orientation adopted in Britain to achieve most benefit from the sunlight. However, as most sites lie in river valleys, an equally important criterion may have been to find a sheltered position away from the direct force of the prevailing wind.

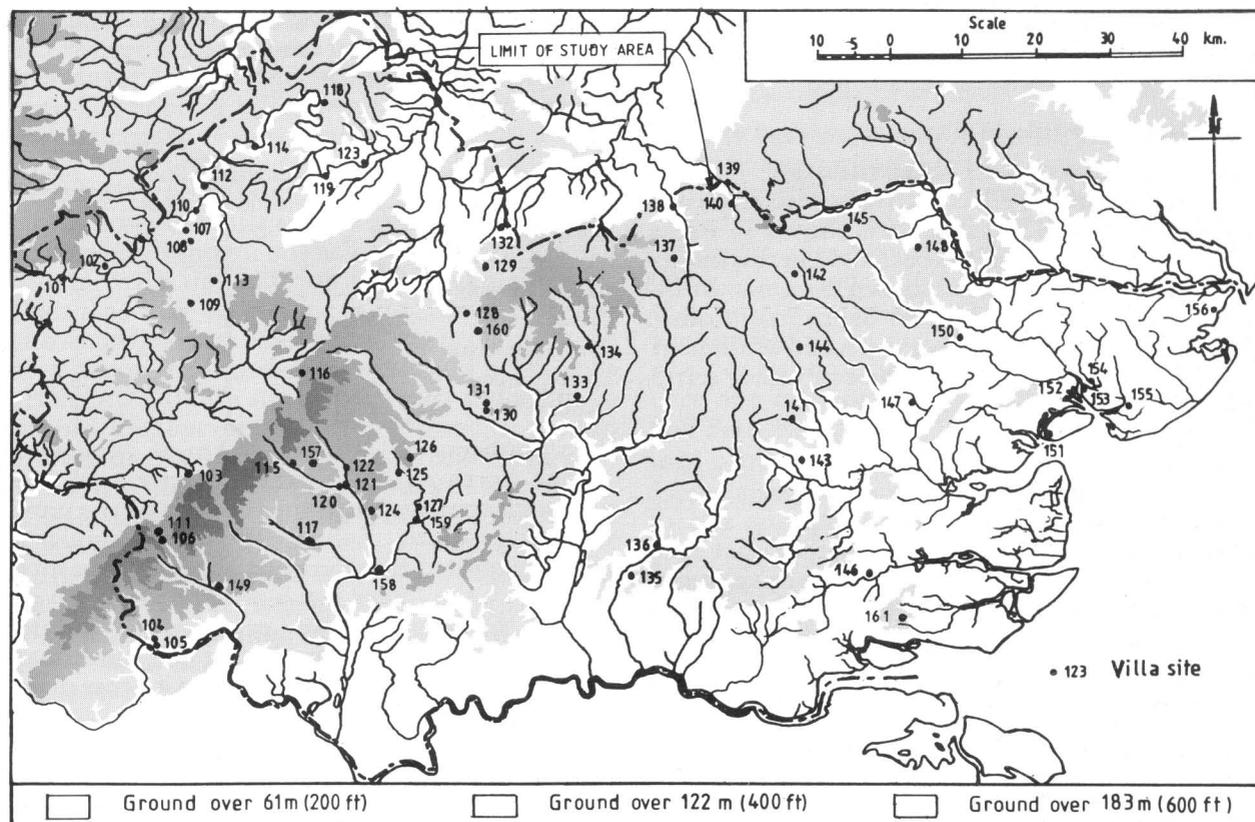


Fig. 1: distribution of villas in five counties north of London.

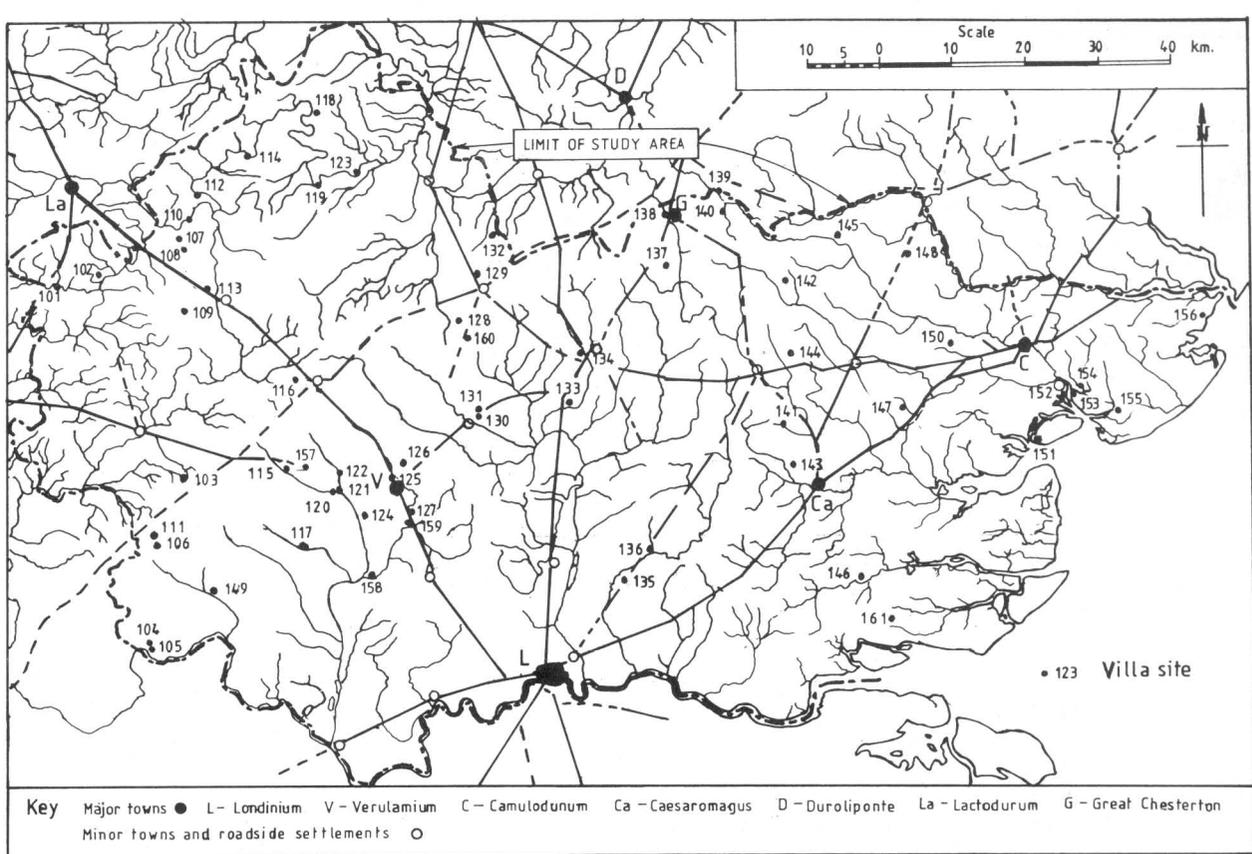


Fig. 2: location of villas in relation to roads and towns.

Access to towns and settlements

The location of the villas with respect to major and minor towns and settlements is shown in Fig. 2. The term 'major town' has been used in this discussion to embrace those sites shown as *coloniae*, tribal cities and towns on the 1978 OS map of Roman Britain, and the term 'minor town and settlement' to embrace sites marked as major or minor settlements on the OS map.

It has often been suggested that villas may have been grouped round towns or settlements, which provided markets for the exchange or sale of agricultural products. If it is assumed that four hours of the day might be assigned to travelling to and from market, one could expect villas to be not more than approximately 10 km. from the market place for someone travelling on foot, or 20 km. for someone travelling on horseback.

An analysis of the data shows that 42 of the villa sites (i.e. 69% of the total) lie within 20 km. of one or other of the seven major towns in the survey area and that 15 of the sites (i.e. 25%) lie within 10 km. The distribution is as follows:-

town	no. of sites within (km)				total
	0-5	5-10	10-15	15-20	
Londinium	0	0	1	1	2
Verulamium	3	5	4	4	16
Camulodunum	0	2	3	1	6
Caesaromagus	1	0	2	1	4
Great Chesterton	1	3	0	1	5
Lactodunum	0	0	3	3	6
Irchester	0	0	1	2	3

The number of villas within 20 km. of *Londinium* to the north of the Thames is strikingly low, although comparable to the findings of the previous survey south of the river. Reasons similar to those suggested there may be applicable, particularly if in the lower reaches of tributary rivers, such as the Brent and the Lee, there were limited areas of soils capable of producing sufficient quantities of high value crops to support a dense distribution of wealthy villas.

It appears from this analysis that only *Verulamium*, with 16 villa sites within 20 km, can lay claim to have been the centre of a number of villas. The absence of any concentration of villas round *Camulodunum* may appear surprising in view of

the fact that it was the first *colonia* to be established in the province. However, it is interesting to note the concentration of villas in the coastal estuary near Fingringhoe and Brightlingsea (nos 152 to 155). Finds from Fingringhoe Wick, 6 km downstream of *Camulodunum*, have long suggested the presence of an early Roman military supply base⁷. Gravel-working has destroyed much of the site and most of the known finds are dated to before 120 AD. Nevertheless, particularly with the *wick* element in the name, the continuation later into the Roman period of a major estuarine port and distribution centre might be conceivable.

The analysis of the data for the ten minor towns and settlements, all of which lie adjacent to the major road network, showed that 42 villa sites (i.e. 69% of the total) lie within 20 km, and of these 20 lie within 10 km.

Millett⁸ has suggested that villas were more closely related to major towns than to small towns and settlements; his argument presupposes a social elite amongst major town dwellers who held country estates near the towns, which may or may not have been regarded as economic agricultural units.

A corollary to Millett's argument must be a progressively decreasing concentration of villas at increasing distance from a town. The Verulamium area showed some evidence of this effect; there were not enough villas around other towns for any patterns to be observed.

Proximity to roads

Fig. 2 shows the villa sites in relation to the main Roman roads shown on the 1978 OS map of Roman Britain, with the addition of the Icknield Way. The villas were on average 5.5 km from the nearest known major road; 28% of the sites lie within 1 km of a major road, 10% between 1 and 2 km, 21% between 2 and 5 km and 3% between 5 and 10 km. In the previous survey, villas were found to be at an average distance of 7 km from a major road with 80% at less than 10 km. That about a quarter of the villas in each survey lay within 1 km of a major road might suggest that they served, or were associated with, the roadside stations which were probably placed at fairly regular intervals along the main communication routes. Indeed, with a likely spacing of *mansiones* at about 35 to 45 km and intervening *mutationes* at about 15 to 20 km, it is probable that a greater number of such stations existed than those named on the routes listed in the Antonine Itinerary. It may well be, therefore, that some of

the sites categorised in this survey as villas may not have been farms or country houses. A particular example is the villa at Braughing (no 134), which lies at the intersection of five roads.

There would undoubtedly have been a network of secondary roads and tracks, which have not yet been traced, and which linked villas and other sites to the major roads. At three sites, Kempton Church End (no 119), Bedford Newnham (no 123) and Wendons Ambo (no 137), the excavators reported the presence of metalled roads or tracks very close to the villa.

Proximity to rivers and streams

All except one of the villa sites lie close to a river or stream. The availability of water near to a villa would have been indispensable for household purposes, particularly at those sites at which there is evidence for a bath-house, and would also have been necessary for watering stock. If the villa economy was based on agriculture, the utilisation of the fertile soils in the valley bottom would have favoured sites located close to a river or stream. Even those sites where the economy may possibly have been based in part on iron smelting or tile and pottery production, such as Northchurch (no 115), which is close to the iron area around Cow Roast, or Park Street (no 127), which may have been associated with nearby kilns, would have required an assured supply of water.

Springs and wells may have supplemented the rivers and streams as sources of water for domestic and industrial purposes, but could not have replaced the waterways as convenient and economical means of transport. Despite some of the sites being fairly high up the river course, it is thought that the vast majority of the villas would have been accessible by shallow craft. The importance of river transport is shown by the reported existence of a quay or wharf at Stanton Low (no 110) and Park Street (no 127).

The close correlation between the siting of villas and waterways was also noted in the previous survey. If wealth was derived in many of the villas from the sale of bulky agricultural products to military or civilian markets, then the selection of a location close to water transport networks where distribution costs are estimated to have been less than one fifth of those for land transport⁹, is likely to be significant.

Proximity to rivers or streams would not, however, always have been beneficial. Some of the sites

7. R. Dunnnett *The Trinovantes* (1975) 35 & 39.

8. M. Millett *Roman Britain* (1995) 67 et seq.

9. K. Greene *The Archaeology of the Roman economy* (1986) 40.

might have been subject to seasonal flooding when the rivers were in spate. At Dickets Mead (no 130) the villa was so close to the river that one corner is reported to have suffered persistent damage from flooding; it has been suggested that this may have been the reason for the abandonment of the site. At Bedford Newnham (no 123) the excavation was interrupted by winter flooding, which may also have been a hazard when the villa was occupied.

Geology, soils and land use

The three principal geological features of the survey area are the chalk hills of the Chiltern and East Anglia Ridge, with Secondary sands and clays to the north and north-west, and more resistant Tertiary sands and clays to the south and south-east. The coastal areas and the river valleys are covered with alluvium.

The general distribution of soils in the study area is shown in Fig. 3, which is based upon the detailed soil map¹⁰. Fig. 3 shows that the predominant soils are clays and slowly permeable soils of the Evesham beds, Jurassic and Cretaceous or limestone clay and the Windsor beds of Tertiary clay. Interspersed

amongst these features are well-drained soils and alluviums, primarily on the lower ground and in the river valleys.

In order to examine more closely the soils at specific villa sites, their locations were plotted on the Soil Survey map and the soil type at each site noted. As so many of the villas were located in the river valleys, it was not unexpected to find that thirty sites (50% of the total) lie on well-drained soils and thirty-nine sites (70%) lie on loamy and silty soils, which have the advantage of being light and easy to work. In most cases the villas would have been within easy reach of other soil types, which could feasibly have been farmed, thus providing scope for a diverse cropping regime or for stock breeding. Variations in the type of soil, the micro-climate and the farming techniques make it difficult to define what crops might have been grown at the villa farms and the archaeological data is extremely sparse. However, it is relevant to note Spurr's¹¹ comment that there is no suggestion in the classical literature that even the heaviest soils could not physically be worked. He argues

¹⁰ Sheet 6, South East England, published by the Soil Survey of England and Wales.

¹¹ M. S. Spurr 'Arable cultivation in Roman Italy' *J Roman Stud Mono 3* (1986) 38.

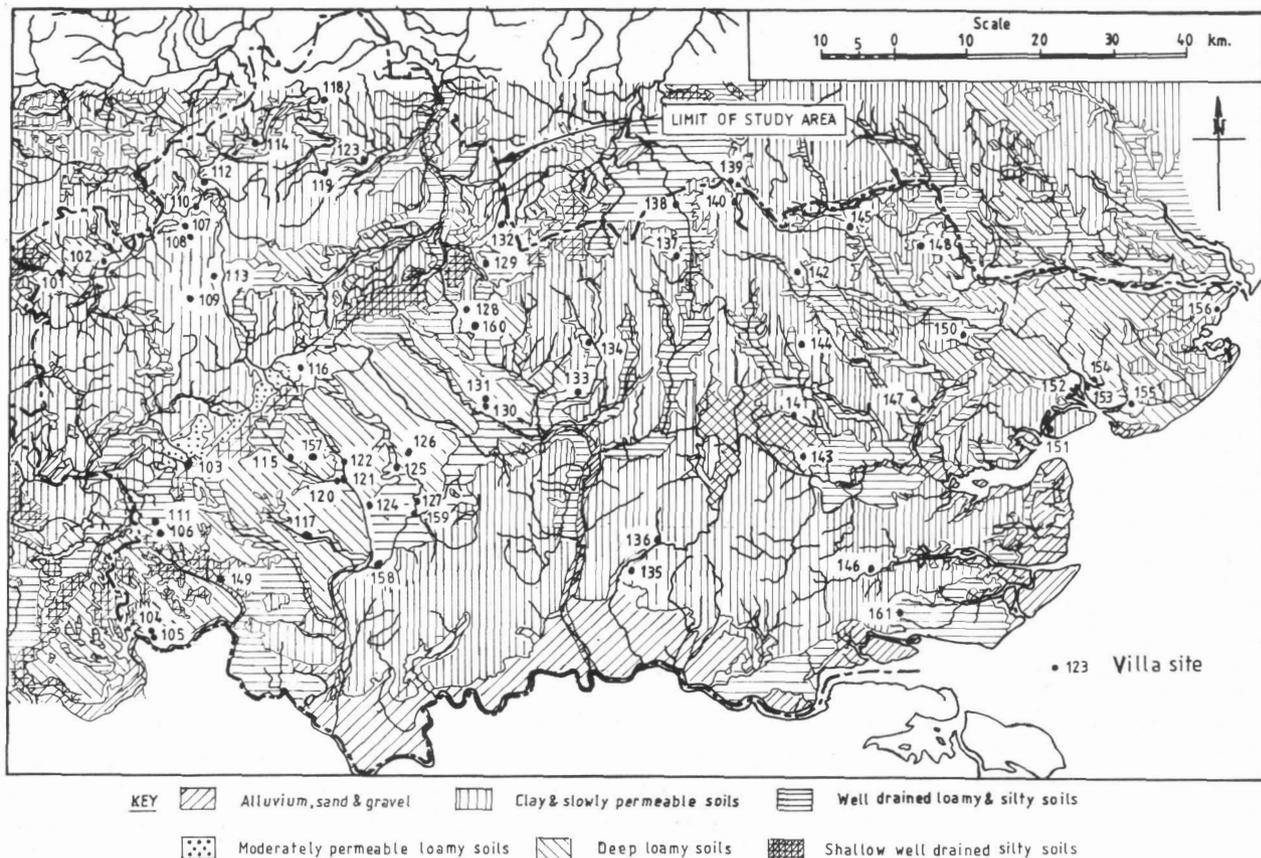


Fig. 3: location of villas in relation to soil types.

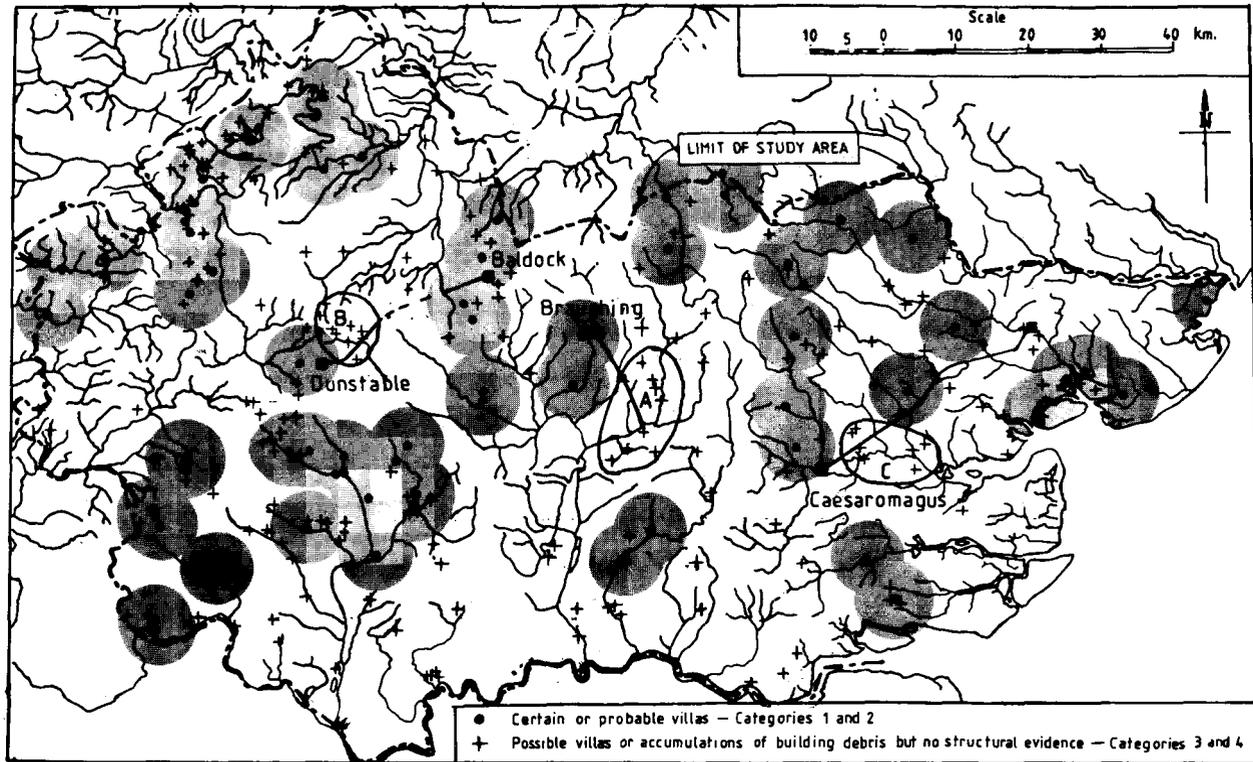


Fig. 4: distribution of villas and other finds within the survey area.

that the selection of the soil types to be farmed was more probably based upon fertility and upon an analysis of the capital and labour cost and the yield and profit.

Reynolds has shown by his work at the Butser experimental farm that Iron Age farming was extremely successful and was capable of producing a wide range of products. Sites such as Gorhambury (no 125), Park Street (no 127) and Lockleys (no 131) are amongst those which have evidence of Iron Age origins and suggest that the farmsteads may simply have been upgraded after the conquest with little or no change in the farming activities. Salway¹² has suggested that the existing Iron Age agricultural system could have produced more than it did if the incentive had been there to do so. The incentive came from the need to meet the demands of the towns established after the conquest. The surplus required need not necessarily have come from improved technology but, more likely, from an increase in the area of land under cultivation. At the present time insufficient field data is available to show whether this was indeed the case.

Cropping and land use of the present day, given in the Legend accompanying the Soil Survey, indicates that potential products from the most common soils close to the villa sites include cereals, winter cereals, field vegetables, other arable crops, sugar beet and potatoes. In addition there is dairying and sheep farming on the available pasture land and on water meadows. Emmer wheat and barley are both likely to have been grown in Roman times as both are tolerant to a wide range of climatic conditions; the latter, having a shorter vegetational cycle, is less exposed to the risk of disease and might therefore have been preferred, although as Spurr¹² reports, it does not seem to have been very common in Roman Italy. Oats, which succeeds in the poorest soils provided it is well watered, may also have been grown, particularly for animal forage.

Dating

Dating evidence for the construction and occupation of the villas was only available for approximately half of the 61 sites, and in a number of cases the information was sparse or conjectural. Twenty

12. P. Salway *Roman Britain* (1981) 623.

sites (nos 104, 110-2, 116-7, 120-1, 123, 125, 127, 131, 136-8, 143, 145-8) provided evidence for construction in the late 1st century AD, in most cases the original building in timber being replaced by stone in the 1st half of the 2nd century. Rebuilding appears to have been common in the 2nd century as no fewer than eight of the villas (nos 112, 118, 122, 124-5, 131, 146-7) were modified during the century; in one case, at Wickford (no 146) the rebuilding seems to have followed a serious fire.

Most of the villas for which dating evidence is available seem to have been occupied more or less continuously throughout the 2nd and 3rd centuries and some continued into the 4th. No fewer than fourteen sites (nos. 107, 110-2, 116, 122-5, 127-8, 130, 134 and 146) were apparently demolished or abandoned within a very short time span between 330 and 360 AD, although this does not always mark the complete desertion of the site.

The distribution of villas known to have been constructed in the 1st century AD shows no marked differences from the distribution of all the villas. The data available do not make it possible to establish any firm sequence of construction and occupation within different zones of the study area.

Consideration of Category 3 and 4 sites

Category 3 and 4 sites, i.e. 'possible' and 'unlikely' villas, have not been fully excavated; full excavation may reveal that some represent as yet unidentified villa sites. On the other hand, they may represent no more than deposits of building debris and artefacts from 'certain' and 'probable' villas (Categories 1 and 2), which have been robbed from the original villa and reused or intermingled with middens used for manuring the fields.

All two hundred and ninety eight sites in Categories 1 to 4 have been plotted in Fig. 4, together with the envelope enclosing an area within a radius of 5 km of Category 1 and 2 sites. Concentrations of Category 3 and 4 sites within the envelope may be indicative of further villas but their presence would not make any appreciable difference to the pattern of distribution of villas already discussed for the survey area. Outside the envelope there appear to be three areas with concentrations of 'possible' and 'unlikely' sites which merit comment. These areas are marked A, B and C on Fig. 4.

A -- the sites in this area straddle the road which runs south-east from Braughing and may be connected with that town.

B -- the sites in this area straddle the road between Dunstable and Baldock and are all within 10 km of Dunstable.

C -- the sites in this area may be associated with the fort and town of *Caesaromagus*.

The sites in areas A, B and C may represent the distribution of material from villas which have not yet been fully identified or excavated or may be no more than deposited material from known villas. However, whatever the source of the debris and artefacts the addition of Category 3 and 4 sites to the survey does not appear to make any material difference to the general distribution pattern shown by selecting Category 1 and 2 sites only for the analysis.

Some preliminary conclusions

A number of preliminary conclusions are suggested by the findings of the present survey which has concentrated on the relationship of villa sites in five counties north of London to the topography, rivers, roads and towns.

No attempt was made to consider the relationship between the selected sites and minor farms or agricultural settlements in the immediate vicinity, nor to establish whether the larger courtyard villas such as Totternhoe (no 116), Chenies Latimer (no 117), Gadebridge (no 122) and others replaced or co-existed with minor villas nearby.

The elevation of the villa sites ranged from 20m to 130m above sea level, with an average of 75m. No fewer than twelve of the sites lie above 100m. Of those sites whose orientation could be identified, about 90% had a southerly aspect.

Of the seven major towns in the survey area, only *Verulamium* has any appreciable number of villa sites within a 20 km radius, with some evidence for concentration close to the town. The apparent concentration may be as much related to the use of the River Colne as to the town itself (see Fig. 1). As in the previous survey, the absence of villas close to *Londinium* was apparent.

As in the previous survey, approximately a quarter of the sites area lay within 1 km of a known major Roman road and almost half within 5 km. The high proportion within 1 km suggest that some sites may have been either *mansiones* or *mutationes* or combined the villa economy with accommodation for official travellers.

In both this survey and the previous one there appears to be was a close correlation between the siting of villas and the location of inland, estuarine and coastal waterways, which strongly suggests that agricultural products were transported by water, probably over long distances. The main rivers draining south from the Chilterns could, as

tributaries of the Thames, have linked the villas to the port of *Londinium* and beyond. Similarly, the rivers running from the high ground east to the Essex coast could probably have provided access to markets either side of the North Sea via estuarine ports such as Fingringhoe. The rivers to the north-west of the survey area drain towards the North Sea with outfalls at or near the Wash; the villas situated close to these waterways are likely to have been related to different trading networks.

Most of the villa sites lay close to or in river valleys where use could have been made of the fertile valley soils. Seventy per cent of the villas lie on loamy or silty soils shown on the present day Soil Survey map. This statistic needs to be treated with some caution, as it is known that soils change with time; however, a wide range of farming would have been possible, akin to the present day, but more detailed pollen analyses and excavation data are needed before a fuller picture of the agricultural economy can be predicted. Although some sites show evidence for iron-smelting and other industrial activity, these activities may simply have served the villa. There are insufficient data to be

able to state with certainty that the economy of any of the villas was entirely based on industry as opposed to agriculture.

Firm evidence for dating the construction, flourishing and decline of the villas was incomplete in at least half the sites considered. However, at least twenty appear to have been constructed in the late 1st century AD and most of these seem to have been occupied throughout the 2nd and 3rd centuries with modifications and extensions being made at different times. Almost one quarter of the total number of villas were apparently demolished or abandoned between 330 and 360 AD.

Acknowledgements

The survey was undertaken as an Extra Mural Post Diploma Research study at the Centre of Extra Mural Studies, Birkbeck College, University of London. The authors acknowledge the assistance of the County Archaeologists of Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Essex and Hertfordshire and their staff who made their records available and who gave of their time in discussing aspects of the survey.

Appendix

Category 1 villas

site no.	county	name
101	Bucks	Tingewick
102	Bucks	Foxcote (Foscote)
103	Bucks	Ellesborough – Terrick
104	Bucks	Hambledon Yewden Manor
107	Bucks	Wolverton
108	Bucks	Loughton – Wymbush
10	Bucks	Stanton Low
14	Bucks	Newton Blossomville
115	Herts	Northchurch Common
116	Beds	Totternhoe
117	Bucks	Chenies Latimer
120	Herts	Boxmoor House
122	Herts	Gadebridge Park
123	Beds	Bedford Newnham
124	Herts	Abbots Langley
125	Herts	Gorhambury
127	Herts	Park Street
128	Herts	Wymondley
129	Herts	Radwell
130	Herts	Dicket Mead
131	Herts	Lockleys
132	Herts	Ashwell
133	Herts	Standon
134	Herts	Braughing – Mentley Farm
137	Essex	Wendens Ambo
138	Essex	Chesterford
139	Essex	Hadstock
143	Essex	Chignall St. James
145	Essex	Ridgewell
147	Essex	Rivenhall I/II
149	Bucks	High Wycombe
154	Essex	Alresford, Alresford Lodge

Category 2 villas

site no.	county	name
105	Bucks	Hambledon Mill End
106	Bucks	Bledlow cum Saunderton Lodge Hill Farm
109	Bucks	Mursley
111	Bucks	Bledlow cum Saunderton Hemely Hill
112	Bucks	Gayhurst
113	Bucks	Bletchley Holn Chase
118	Beds	Felmersham
119	Beds	Kempston Church End
121	Herts	Hemel Hempstead Railway Station
126	Herts	Chidwickbury
135	Essex	Chigwell
136	Essex	Theydon Bois
140	Essex	Ashdon
141	Essex	Pleshey
142	Essex	Finchingfield I
144	Essex	Stebbing II
146	Essex	Wickford
148	Essex	Gestingthorpe Hill Farm
150	Essex	Great Toy
151	Essex	West Mersea
152	Essex	Fingringhoe Wick
153	Essex	Brightlingsea III
155	Essex	St. Osyth II
156	Essex	Little Oakley
157	Herts	Berkhamstead
158	Herts	Moor Park
159	Herts	Netherwild Farm
160	Herts	Little Wymondley
161	Herts	Castle Point