



Light fantastic?

With money scarce in the heritage world, even top sites don't often have the chance of a makeover. **Clive Orton** went to see how English Heritage had tackled a major revamp at one of London's most accessible Roman villas.

The news that Lullingstone Roman villa had re-opened after a £1.3m refurbishment project encouraged me to make my second visit to it, more than 30 years after my first. Access by public transport is straightforward: a slow train from Blackfriars (or Elephant and Castle) to Eynsford on the Sevenoaks line, then a 15-minute walk from the station (provided that you turn left at the main road, and not right as the road sign suggests, and take the first public footpath on the right).

So what's new? The centrepiece of the refurbishment is a large screen located directly above the mosaics, onto which is projected a 10-minute introductory film. This replaces the old audio guides, which now seem to be going out of fashion in some places while still coming into fashion in others. The film is linked to low-level floodlights, which surround the villa, facing inwards from the cover building's walkway, so that different rooms and features can be highlighted as they are mentioned in the film's

story. When the film is not showing, these lights provide the main illumination of the villa's foundations, so that the overall effect in the cover building is quite dark. In addition, there are two sorts of displays: small panels

facing inwards from the walkway, explaining the function of each room or set of rooms, and large ones facing outwards, explaining the history of the villa, how it was constructed, how it functioned in its rural landscape, what



it might have been like to live there, and the religious significance of its 'deep room' and house-church. The latter are amplified by small thematic displays of relevant artefacts from the site, some apparently on show to the public for the first time. There are also four basic phase plans, two on each end wall of the cover building, as a constant reminder of the villa's growth and development.

How well did it work? I thought the film was very successful, providing a valuable context to the otherwise potentially baffling foundations, although it took me a while to relate the changes on lighting to the topics in the voice-over. It appealed to more of the senses than the audio guides (though not everyone agreed, see below). The use of the floodlighting at other times could be irritating, as the strength of the lighting appeared to cycle round the building, rather like an electronic Mexican wave, suggesting perhaps a need to keep visitors moving (or perhaps there was a more subtle message, which I missed). The large display panels and associated artefacts succeeded in maintaining interest and breathing life into the foundations. The small panels were less successful, being less well lit and placed so that it was very easy to stand in one's own light, making them difficult to read.

We visited on a damp Thursday in August, and the building was busy without being overfull. It was good to see children being encouraged to take worksheets from the ticket desk, and then enthusiastically using them around the building. It was noticeable that the large displays attracted more attention than the foundations themselves; even the mosaics did not seem to be a big crowd-puller. In the tea-bar after our visit, it was interesting to read the comments in the visitors' book (sorry, 'exhibition questionnaire'). In general, the feeling was that the new look was a

TOP LEFT: The lighting effects are a major component of the refurbished villa.

LEFT: The shadowy mosaics in the triclinium and antechamber seem to receive somewhat less attention than the display panels.

TOP RIGHT: A bright new fascia for the building, and new parking arrangements also featured in the renewal project.

RIGHT: Many of the artefacts recovered from the site are on display for the first time, with plenty of explanatory material.



great improvement, but . . . The 'buts' centred on the lighting – too dark, no daylight, irritating floodlighting, shadowy panels (and therefore difficult to read). There was also some nostalgia for the old audio guides, and much angst about having to pay to park. Children expressed enthusiasm for the 'quizzes' (worksheets), games and dressing-up clothes.

My overall impression is that, even

if you've been before, Lullingstone is worth a visit. There is enough background information to help one to ponder what this small piece of Rome was doing here in Kent, and how it survived and developed for 300 years. Yes, there are glitches, especially the manic floodlighting and the shady panels, but it's still a worthwhile experience. And the children will love it.