

Roman Villas Revealing History

There are several reasons why the Romans invaded Britain in AD43, one of the major motivations was that Claudius had been recently installed as Emperor by the army following the assassination of Caligula, and needed a military victory to impress the Roman people and cement his position. South-East Britain was an attractive target. It had good agricultural land and valuable metal resources such as iron and lead.



Villas in Brading & Newport

On the Isle of Wight the first signs of social and economic change were the construction of villa farms at Brading and Newport, on or near to late Iron Age settlements. These were the country homes of wealthy Romano-British farmers and in contrast to the native round house, they had rectangular ground plans. A villa also included a range of functional buildings such as barns, granaries and workshops, and an estate incorporating other settlements. Over 700 villas have been found, mostly in southern England, which formed the agricultural heartland of Roman Britain. They formed part of a market-orientated economy, and developed in response to the growth of new towns and the needs of the army.

All the materials for the construction of the villas on the Isle of Wight could be obtained locally. Clay for bricks and tiles was widely available. Walls were made of flint gathered from arable fields, chalk and greensand from the downs, and Bembridge limestone from coastal outcrops. Timber for supports, floors and roofs was available from the northern woodlands.

Newport Roman villa was built to a winged-corridor design. It consisted of three parts: a long

rectangular house with several rooms; a projecting room on each end; and an entrance corridor in front. The villa lies close to an important fording point across the river Medina and pottery found at the site dates from the late 1st Century AD. The villa we know today was not built until the late 3rd Century AD, and seems to have been built in one operation. The whole of one end formed a superb bath range with mosaic floors, baths and sweat rooms. The dining room had a red tessellated floor with a chequerboard design at the centre. The wing at the other end of the house also had a hypocaust (an under-floor heating system), suggesting it was a special room.

The villa at Brading is an example of a courtyard villa which consisted of a series of buildings around a square courtyard. These were the largest type of villa and were owned by the wealthiest Romano-Britons. The Villa you can see today probably developed from a small stone building occupied by a British or Romano-British farmer. These were usually modest wooden crofts of two or three rooms in a row. Later they were often rebuilt in stone with additional rooms, as appears to be the case at Brading.



Life at Villa

By the mid 2nd Century AD the farm had developed into an impressive villa with stone and wooden buildings on three sides of a central courtyard or garden. Brading Roman Villa was sited to take full advantage of Brading harbor situated between Sandown and Bembridge the main port of the Isle of Wight. Produce farmed at the villa may have been shipped to other parts of Britain and the Roman Empire in exchange for Samian ware from southern France, quernstones from Germany and wine and olive oil from Italy and Greece.

Calm waters around Brading Haven provided good fishing, including oysters, cockles and mussels the shells of which have been found around the Villa.

The forest that covered the northern land of the Isle of Wight was a rich source of food. Storks and cranes were hunted. The forest floor provided a home for wild boar, red and fallow deer (the tusks and antlers of which have been found at the Villa). The sheep that grazed on Brading Downs provided wool and food. The peasant farmers tended both the sheep and crops such as wheat, barley, rye, oats and beans. Several ards and iron shoes, which formed wooden ploughs, have been found at the Villa and are now on display.

Highs and Lows

Probably no more than waist high, the stone walls of the Villa would have supported a stout timber frame, infilled with wattle and daub. Some walls were built with large boulders carried straight from the beach. Corners, doors and windows were constructed from blocks of Bembridge stone. The roof was tiled with limestone and clay tiles. Inside, the walls were finished with brightly painted plaster. Surviving fragments show floral and woodland scenes, a hanging basket of flowers and a peacock. Windows either often had iron grills, or small panes of misty green glass and heavy wooden shutters. The front door of the Villa had a grand lock faced with a large brass plate, and its key was later found in the remains of this once great house.

The Villa suffered a disastrous fire in the 3rd Century AD. Despite this the site was still used for farming purposes for another 100 years. The decline of Brading Roman Villa started after about AD340, when estates in southern Britain suffered frequent raids by barbarian pirates. Life and trade were both at risk; yet Roman coins excavated at the site indicate human activity continued at Brading until the twenty-eight year reign of Emperor Honorius began in AD395.

In the chequered corridor of the main house, a deep stokehole was dug for a corn-drying furnace. Most of the magnificent mosaics survived, possibly buried and protected by stored grain. How long occupants continued to live in this sub-Roman style is difficult to tell. Once a building was abandoned, anything useful would have been scavenged. In the 5th Century the Villa collapsed and was covered by a deep blanket of soil and leaf mould. By the time the undergrowth was eventually cleared for agriculture, the name and position of Brading Roman Villa was lost to sight and memory.



The Villa Resurrected

In 1879 Captain Thorp of Yarbridge began searching for Roman antiquities in the fields of Morton Farm. Mr. Munns, a local farmer, also became interested. One evening whilst using an iron bar to make holes for a sheep pen, he struck the Bacchus mosaic floor. The following morning he and Captain Thorp had uncovered the Gallus panel.

By spring 1880, half of the Roman villa had been excavated on farmer Munns' land. The remainder of the site extended beyond the field and onto the Oglander estate. Lady Louisa Oglander then purchased the entire site so that excavations could continue. Now as a registered charity, the Oglander Roman Trust is continuing the story of Brading Roman Villa and its unique mosaics into the 21st century, and a series of archaeological digs led by Professor Sir Barry Cunliffe of Oxford University hope to expand the story of Roman life at Brading and on the Isle of Wight as a whole.

By Adam Watson, Brading Roman Villa

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