

**Folkestone,
East Wear Bay
Roman villa:
Interim report on
excavations 2011**

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Excavations at Folkestone Roman villa, 2011: Interim report

1. Introduction

1.1 The second season of excavation at the East Wear Bay Roman villa, Folkestone ran between May and November 2011. The work forms a major component of a three year Heritage Lottery funded community archaeological and historical project entitled ‘*A Town Unearthed: Folkestone Before 1500*’ (ATU). The excavation is being led by Canterbury Archaeological Trust, working in association with Canterbury Christ Church University and the Folkestone People’s History Centre. Additional funding for the work has come from the Kent Archaeological Society and the local Roger De Haan Charitable Trust.

1.2 More than 130 days of fieldwork were recorded in the site diary. In June a visit by Dr Alice Roberts and the *Digging for Britain* film crew provided national TV coverage of the site. This was followed in early July by an open weekend, with Roman re-enactors bringing in more than one thousand visitors. The main dig started in mid-July and lasted for four months.

1.3 This year’s excavation took place across a piece of ground in front (i.e. south-east) of the main villa house (Plate I). This was the area assumed to have once been occupied by the villa courtyard and gardens where ornamental features such as pools or statues might have been located. It is also that part of the site most imminently threatened with collapse into sea. Previously, during the original excavations of 1924, S.E. Winbolt and his team had looked only very briefly here and found nothing of interest (Winbolt 1925, 27).

2. The stratified sequence

2.1 The 2011 area measured about 16 by 14 metres, set in the angle between the front corridor wall of the villa’s central range and its projecting north-east wing. It was found to be free from any significant modern disturbances other than the continuous narrow trench cut around the outside of the main walls by Winbolt and a Second World War dug-out. Nothing which might be equated with Winbolt’s test pits was identified and it would seem that his diggings had been quite shallow.

2.2 The new season’s work re-affirmed the findings of the previous year and again demonstrated that a substantial thickness of stratified archaeological deposits exist on this part of the site. In fact, the deposits here were found to be even more developed than in the 2010 area (Parfitt 2010), with a recorded thickness of up to 1.75m below the base of the modern topsoil. This is a quite remarkable build-up of deposits on what is essentially a rural site. Investigation established that much of the accumulated soil derived from habitation that had occurred before the construction of the Roman villa complex.

2.3 The first major feature encountered in 2011 was an extensive layer of rubble representing the final courtyard surface of the late Roman villa (Plate VIII) and this marked the start of a long stratified sequence going back into prehistory.

3. Summary of results

3.1 At the base of the stratified sequence, the surface of the natural Gault was sealed by a succession of clay deposits producing significant amounts of struck flint, flint-tempered prehistoric pottery, animal bone and marine shell, although there were only two small associated features.

3.2 The surface of the uppermost clay layer was cut across by a sunken, metalled trackway, running north-west by south-east and associated with pottery provisionally dated to around 100 BC (Plate II). An infant burial had been casually deposited by the side of this track at some stage. A short distance further to the north-east was a substantial sub-rectangular oven pit. These discoveries, together with a scatter of odd post-holes, appeared to represent the earliest features of a settlement area continuously occupied throughout the late Iron Age and into the Roman period.

3.3 Eventually, the trackway went out of use and the hollow became filled with soil and domestic rubbish. At one point a pit had been cut into these accumulated soils to allow the insertion of a burial urn containing cremated bone. Subsequently, the levelled area became occupied by hearths and chalk floors relating to two separate timber buildings, each one rebuilt several times but neither very large or of substantial construction (Plate III). Traces of a possible four-post structure, perhaps a raised granary, were also recorded close by. All these structures would seem to date from the late first century BC.

3.4 After these timber buildings had gone out of use the area was cut across by a succession of ditches, running on various axes (Plates IV & V). These probably served to delimit rectangular fields and enclosures, further traces of which had been found during trenching to the north-east of the villa in 2010. Some of the ditches were of substantial proportions and the latest ones discovered in 2011 seemed to be early Roman in date (Plate V). The final ditch in the sequence had been deliberately backfilled, probably sometime during the late first century AD, to make way for the construction of the first villa.

3.5 Once the ditches were levelled, the 2011 area was covered by more soil and clay before rough, patchy metalling was laid down as a courtyard in front of the Roman villa (Plate VI). No evidence of any associated garden or ornamental features was discovered and the whole arrangement appeared somewhat work-a-day and lacking much refinement. The metalling did, however, yield one important find – an engraved gemstone, found near the main entrance (Plate IX). This had presumably been lost by someone entering or leaving the house, becoming trampled into the pebbled yard surface without being noticed. On the north-east side, during the earlier part of the fourth century, the yard became covered by a mixture of abandonment soil, building debris and accumulated domestic rubbish. Quite clearly, this portion of the courtyard was now out of use. Subsequently, a section of the villa roof collapsed onto the courtyard (Plate VII), followed by masonry from the walls. It would seem that at least part of the villa was by then ruinous and unoccupied.

3.6 Later, however, the roof-fall, collapsed walling, and soil and debris layers over the courtyard were all sealed by a deliberately laid rubble surface which seemed to constitute a new (upper) courtyard (Plate VIII). Mortar fragments and obvious building stones were scarce suggesting that much of this material did not come from demolished walls of the villa. Along the south-western side of the excavated area, closest to the main entrance into the villa, the new rubble layer occurred at two distinct levels. Nearest the building it existed as a clear platform, the outer edge of which lay some 6.25m forward of the front wall (Plate VIII). A sloping rubble bank around 0.30m high separated this raised area from the remaining spread. As well as pottery and animal bone, the soil matrix in which the stones were set produced eight coins. Their dates indicate that the rubble cannot have been laid before the mid-late fourth century AD. It is not entirely clear what was going on then but the heyday of the Roman villa had certainly passed and the new courtyard may have been laid down as a work area after the main house was abandoned.

3.7 A thin layer of dark soil accumulated over the rubble surface. This contained much broken pottery, animal bone and marine shell, together with a further nine coins, all of which are of fourth-century date, one perhaps being as late as *c.* AD 390. The general absence of the very latest Roman coin issues reaching Britain, however, suggests that activity on the site did not continue much into the fifth century. After the villa was finally given up the site appears to have remained largely unoccupied until the present-day.

4. Finds

4.1 A significant quantity of finds was recovered from the 2011 excavation. The bulk of the material consists of pottery, animal bone, marine shell, Roman roofing tile and prehistoric flintwork. There are also more than 800 registered small finds, including coins, brooches (Plate X), glass, iron implements, rolled lead weights probably from fishing nets and quernstone fragments. Of special interest were the engraved gemstone (see above; Plate IX), four pieces of a small Mother Goddess figurine, a complete iron writing stylus, a decorated Iron Age bead of blue glass, and an important collection of Iron Age coins (see below).

4.2 As in 2010, many fragments of quernstone were recovered from this season's excavations. Virtually all of these are made from the local greensand rock. About sixty-five examples were discovered in 2011, including many broken fragments and unfinished pieces, further confirming that these items were being made in the immediate vicinity (Keller 1989). No evidence for any specific production site was located. From the associated datable finds, a production period of *c.* 25BC – AD 50/60 may be very tentatively suggested for the main Folkestone quern industry. There are also three fragments of non-local Puddingstone quern contained within the assemblage.

4.3 Winbolt recovered seven Roman tiles bearing the stamp of the *Classis Britannica* (CLBR). Another example was recovered from Winbolt's backfill in 2010 and the 2011 season produced one further, unstratified specimen, again a round stamp.

4.4 *The coins from the 2010 and 2011 excavations: an interim summary* by David Holman

4.4.1 Iron Age

Forty-nine Iron Age coins were found during the course of the 2010 and 2011 excavations. Even allowing for the truncation and/or previous removal of some of the Roman layers by earlier excavators, this represents a remarkably high proportion of the total number of coins recovered during the present excavations (106), and their density confirms the previously suspected presence of a major late Iron Age site here, perhaps more significant in its own way than the later Roman villa.

All metal types are represented but the chronological distribution of these Iron Age coins shows a very heavy bias towards the middle decades of the first century BC with evidence of earlier activity also. The near absence of later Iron Age issues, i.e. those dated after *c.* 25 BC, is striking and puzzling and would, by itself, suggest a sudden sharp reduction in activity, at least on those parts of the site which have been excavated, although the possible existence of a late first-century BC/early first-century AD focus elsewhere cannot be discounted. This early bias is also seen among previous finds from the site made over many years (Holman 2005, 32).

The most numerous Iron Age coin types found were potins, accounting for half the total. All three of the Kentish types were represented, with perhaps the largest number of securely stratified Kentish Primary potins from any one site, although some were clearly residual in later contexts. The most frequently found potins were those of Allen's Flat Linear II series, which are found in east Kent on three principal sites only, of which Folkestone is one (Holman 2005, 31).

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the Iron Age coins is the appearance of no fewer than nine bronze and silver imports from Gaul. These originate not just from the areas closest to Kent but also much further afield, from central and even southern Gaul, perhaps suggesting an extensive network of trading contacts, presumably through intermediaries. The possibility that the Folkestone site was an Iron Age trading port should certainly be considered, particularly when including an assessment of the ceramic material. There are also two non-local British 'imports' from areas well to the north of the Thames, one of which appears to possibly be of Corieltauvian origin and thus a very unusual find for east Kent.

The 2010 excavations saw the discovery of three gold Iron Age coins, although no more were found in 2011. These came from different contexts and clearly do not represent a scattered hoard; rather, they seem to have been lost or deposited in much the same way as the majority of the coins here, i.e. in a domestic rather than any obviously 'ritual' context.

4.4.2 Roman

There are fifty-seven Roman coins, mostly fourth-century issues. The presence of only three radiate coins, a very low number, strongly suggests a hiatus in the occupation, for whatever reason, sometime before AD 270. This is echoed at the Minster Roman villa, on Thanet, where a similar hiatus has been proposed prior to a reoccupation of the site in, most likely, a different form than before. Early Roman coins were disappointingly few in number and little can be inferred from these owing to their very poor condition, which means they could well have been lost long after their issue date. One early, deliberately cut, but extremely worn coin came from a context suggesting that it is probably Augustan in date.

4.4.3 Post-Roman

One post-Roman coin find is worthy of note, this being a penny of Alfred the Great, dating to the late ninth century. It perhaps hints at some form of activity here during the mid-Saxon period, a fact given added weight by the recent identification of broadly contemporary pottery from one of the ditches excavated in 2010.

5. Conclusions

5.1 The two seasons of work at Folkestone have now yielded some remarkable results and show that a great deal of new information is still to be recovered from this long-known site. It is clear that the excavated Roman villa complex occupies the site of a much older settlement, which as yet has seen only limited investigation.

5.2 Intact stratification, untouched by previous excavation, would appear to survive across much of the area but the entire site is ultimately threatened by coastal erosion. Without doubt, much more fieldwork is warranted on this important Kent site.

5.3 The information recovered from the present excavations has provided an important addition to our knowledge of this part of the south-east Kent during the Iron Age and Roman periods. There has been considerable interest in these findings both amongst the residents of Folkestone and the archaeological community at large.

5.4 Cross-Channel trade and contact would seem to represent a common theme of considerable significance to our understanding of the site throughout its occupation. Such links provide the site with an international dimension, making it of some interest to continental scholars.

6. Future work

6.1 Upon completion of all the fieldwork, the results of the East Wear Bay villa excavations will be published. Publication will take several forms. At local level, there will be a series of public lectures and workshops describing the discoveries and this will be supplemented by popular books setting the site into its archaeological context.

6.2 The results of the excavation also clearly warrant appropriate academic publication. The evidence for the nature and period of use of the Roman villa, the pre-Conquest origins of the site, the

quern production industry and the possibility of a late Iron Age port of trade here, are all key aspects which are deserving of careful study and reporting. Accordingly, a full monograph report on the results of the excavations will be produced in due course.

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Plate I Volunteers at work on the site, October 2011



Plate II The late Iron Age metallurgical trackway under excavation, looking north-west



Plate III A late Iron Age chalk floored building with remains of a burnt hearth



Plate IV Successive late Iron Age–early Roman ditches crossing the site, looking north-west



Plate V Early Roman boundary ditch, F. 620 crossing the site, looking west



Plate VI The villa courtyard metalling, looking north-east



Plate VII The roof-tile collapse under excavation, looking east



Plate VIII The late Roman rubble spread forming an upper courtyard, looking north-east



Plate IX A Roman engraved gemstone recovered from the courtyard metalling (SF 463)



Plate X Small Roman plate brooch in the form of a hare, unstratified (SF 330)