



The Roman Villa at Scow Brook, Carsington by Wirksworth, Derbyshire

Wirksworth Archaeological Society
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Introduction

The location of the former Roman villa is now under the middle of the reservoir at Carsington Water, which before the reservoir was built was the upper valley of the Scow Brook. A Roman building was first suspected from stone and other remains in a field in 1964 but a programme of archaeology was not undertaken until work was being done on the reservoir from 1979. The reservoir was officially opened in 1992. The reason for this summary of work was that a box of finds was kindly handed to the Society in late 2019 having been found in an attic of a house in Hognaston and these finds are now in the Wirksworth Heritage Centre. The main finds from the original digs are at Buxton Museum.



The upper valley of the Scow Brook, looking north in about 1987



Carsington Water Reservoir, looking west in 2008

The Roman villa

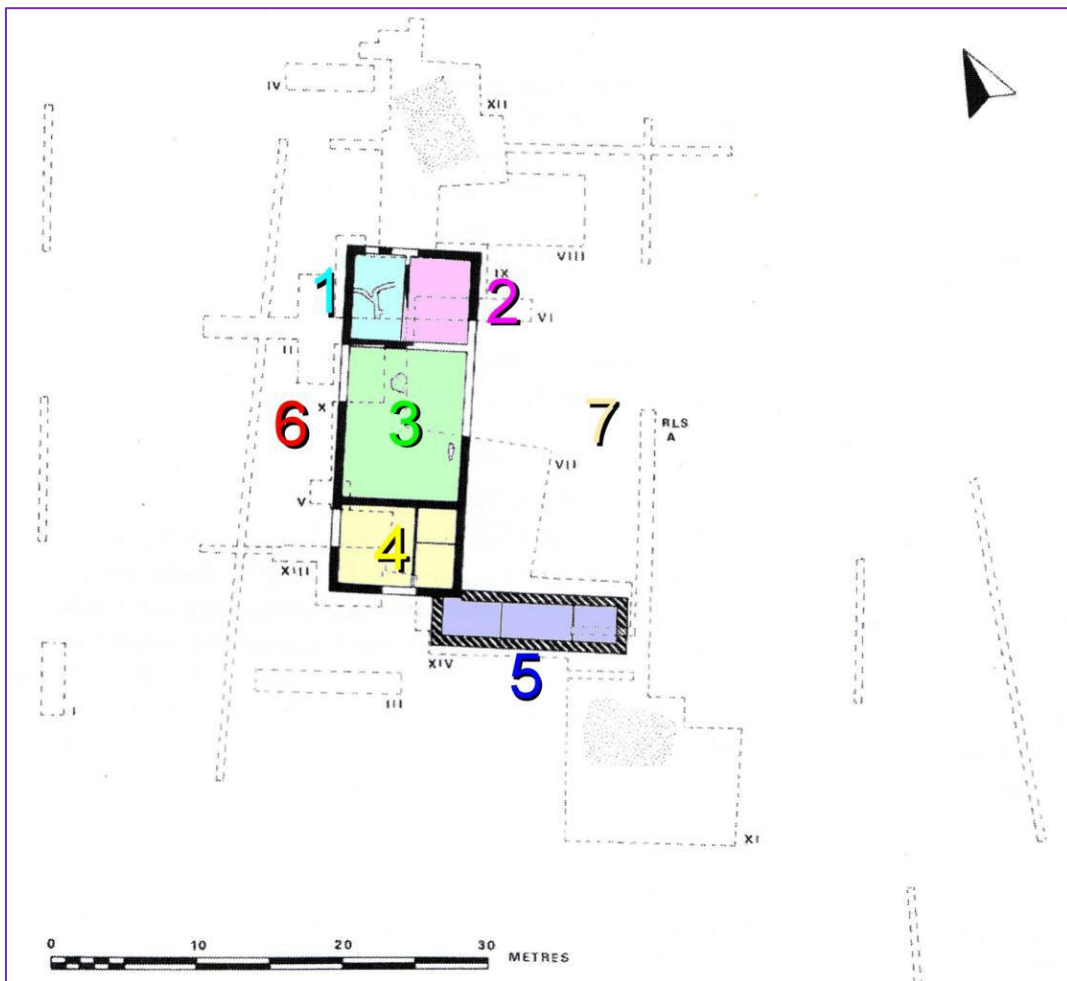
Size of the villa

The villa had a main house, a bathhouse, a courtyard and a number of outbuildings. The main house was 9 metres wide by 28 metres long, so 252 square metres - this is three times the size of a modern house. The bathhouse, attached to the south-east corner of the main house was 13.5 metres long and 4 metres wide, a total of a further 54 square metres. The villa was raised on a small platform to keep it dry above the normal field level round about it. The main house had a verandah on the west side which would catch the evening sun in the summer.

The rooms and features

The main building consisted of the following rooms and features:

1. At the north end a room with a hypocaust ("central heating") on the west side, this room may have been a dining room or study (the Romans could read and write).
2. Also at the north end but on the east side a room which was probably a utility, store or servants room, it was quite large but had no obvious or unusual features in the excavation.



The floorplan of the villa: based on Ling et al, 1990, p31

3. The main hall. This is the main living room of the villa and had two hearths, a large one and a smaller one. These were probably used both for cooking and heating, braziers were also used for

heating, for example perhaps in the bedrooms. The main door from this room would have opened onto the verandah on the west side and there was probably a back door opening on to the courtyard on the east side. Roman buildings do not have chimneys as such, but there would probably have been a louvre or roof vent to let the hearth smoke out of the building and the windows were probably fitted with louvres or shutters over the glass. There was no mosaic at this villa but two types of coloured tile were found during the excavations suggesting the building may have had a patterned floor.

4. The bedrooms. At the south end there was a part of the main building which was split into one large and two smaller partitioned areas, these appear to have been the bedrooms. Bedrooms in Roman or medieval buildings tend to be at the south side or south east corners as this is where there is the most heat gain from the sun in the morning.

5. The bathhouse. This is attached to the south-east corner but not directly accessible from the main house (you have to go round), this is because of the fire risk from the furnace that heats the bath. Roman bath houses are often detached or semi-detached for this reason. There were three rooms in this building, at the east end a changing room, in the middle a heated room, that is the warm room where you could sit and talk and dry yourself after your bath and at the west end the bath itself. The bath was heated by a wood burning furnace. The furnace would provide heat for the hypocaust (a similar furnace must have existed at the north end) and would have been underneath a copper or iron tank rather like your immersion heater at home, except not electric (the Romans did not have electricity). The hot air from the furnace would heat the tank and then pass into the hypocaust to heat the floor and then up through box flues in the walls to heat the walls, being vented under the eaves through vent tiles. Next to the furnace is the woodstore. The furnace can use wood or charcoal, but charcoal is expensive, and wood was probably both easier and cheaper to obtain.

6. The verandah. This was on the west side of the main house and would have provided some shelter from bad weather and a place to sit and talk or do small tasks in good weather. The verandah had a clay and pebble floor, and if this was indeed the main frontage of the villa it may have had a garden and the approach road on that side, the Romans were knowledgeable gardeners as the garden would have provided a source of food, cookery and medicinal items such as herbs.

7. The courtyard. The was on the east side of the building but sheltered somewhat by it from the prevailing wind. There were at least two outbuildings and we would expect these to have been a stables and cart house and one or more store houses. These were on opposite sides of the courtyard so that the complete villa footprint would have been rather U shaped looking at it from the east.

What the villa looked like

The villa was constructed of sandstone and grit stone, and the sandstone may have been quarried nearby at Warrington Knob, where there was a small disused quarry reported by the archaeologists. Grit stone (Millstone grit) could have been obtained from the south side of Pitty Wood which is about 1.5 km south west of Wirksworth. This would give it the appearance of a large stone-built Derbyshire barn or farmhouse but with crucial differences: the villa had a verandah on its main west frontage; It had small Roman windows (window glass was found in the excavations) with shutters; the main house had a pink shiny stone slate roof and this was composed of mica sandstone from a quarry at Wyver

Wood at Belper Lane End (Palfreyman and Ebbins, 2015): this would have glittered in the sunlight; the bathhouse and the verandah had pantile roofs composed of Roman imbrex (curved) tiles and tegula (flat) undertiles, which were orange. In short it would have stood out clearly in the background green of the landscape.



Artist's impression of how the villa might perhaps have looked: Anton Shone

The people in the artists impression and the activities of the farm

In addition to the impression of what the villa might have looked like, there are four people shown. By the steps up to the main door is a lady who is spinning using a drop spindle, this is a common activity in Roman times, people mostly have to make their own clothes and fabrics, so people spin and weave. Quite a large number of spindle whorls were found by the archaeologists here and nearby. The lady might be the mistress of the house, in Roman times women and men were quite equal, although ladies could not vote. But the lady here might actually be the villa owner or run a business such as lead smelting.

Nearby, at the top of the steps, is a young person lounging around, as young people do, he is holding a gaming box containing pieces for 'Ludus Lutrunculi' ("Robbers") a board game a bit like chess which he is hoping to play when his friend arrives. There are no smartphones in Roman times so recreation tends to be about games, sports, bathing and going to the amphitheatre to see the entertainments there. The nearest amphitheatre and market was probably in nearby Lutudarum (Wirksworth).

In the front of the bathhouse are two people talking. With his back to us is a person who might be the master of the house and who is giving instructions to the second person, perhaps about the working of the furnace which has been lit to heat the water for the bath. Today is bath day and everyone would participate but perhaps at different times. The bathhouse is also used as a business meeting place and in this case it may be that other people are expected so that the adults might bathe together and

discuss business or other subjects and then the young people (after they have played games), finally the servants.

Talking to the gentleman in the foreground may be the senior house servant who is looking after the furnace and has many other duties around the house or estate. The furnace may have to be lit in the early morning ready for the arrival of their visitors at the 5th hour (Roman timing is by hours from dawn, so if dawn was 6am then the 5th hour would be 11am). Their visitors might arrive by walking, on horses or by cart or chariot, there are no cars 2,000 years ago. When they arrive they may have some drinks and snacks and then bathe, talk or address business things or gossip and then there would be a formal meal later. The house servants would be busy making the food and looking after the guests, quite a hard life, but this type of domestic life went on through the ages and still exists in some affluent homes today where there may be household staff.

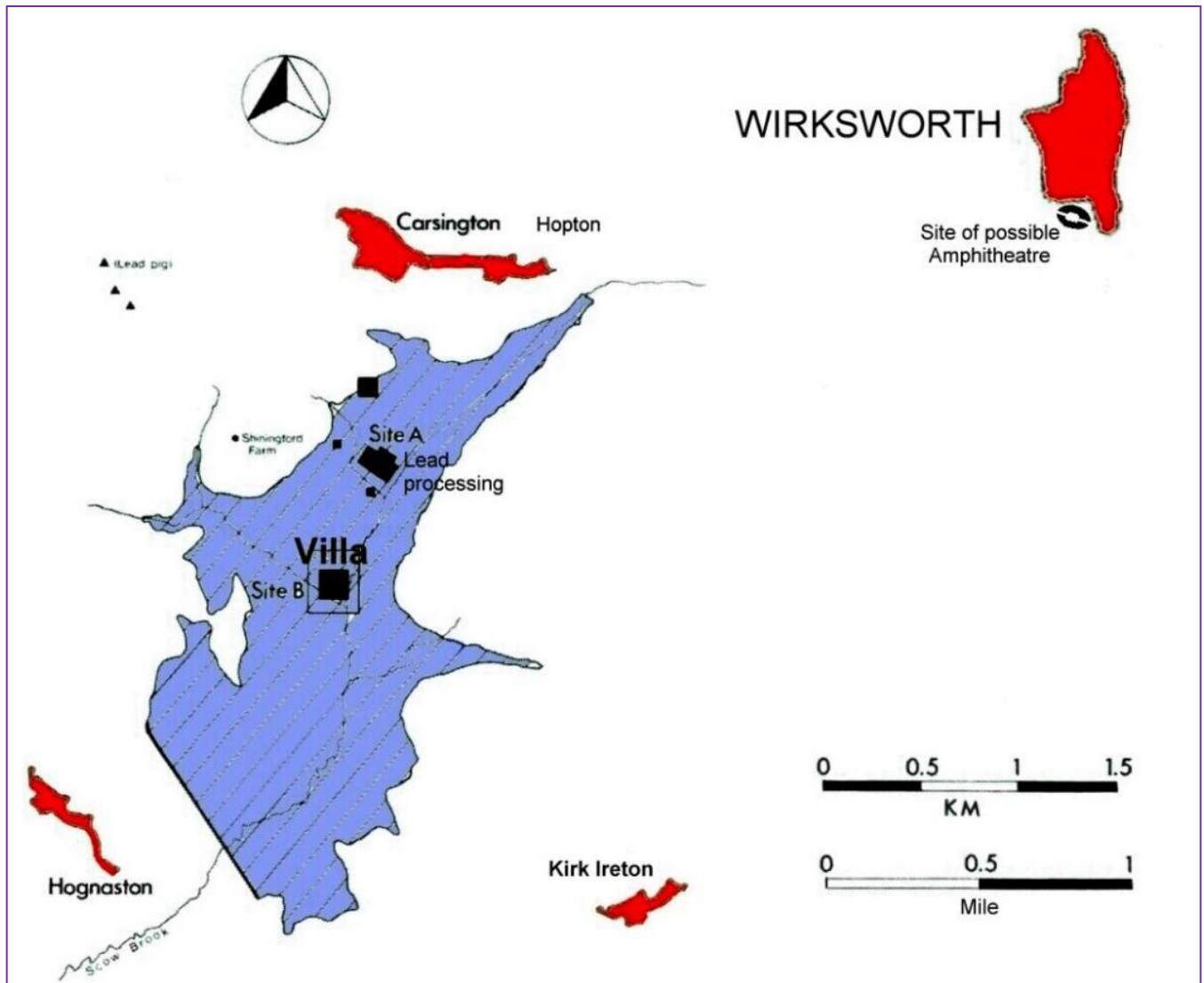
The villa appears to have been the main house of a large farm or estate in which the main agricultural features were animal pasturage and cereal production (e.g. barley). Nearby was a lead smelting site and its close proximity may suggest an additional or even principal source of the estate's activities and income.

The end of the villa

From the dating evidence found during the excavation, it is thought that the villa existed between 300AD and 400AD or to perhaps a little later. The archaeologists felt there were no signs of a catastrophic or sudden end to the life in the villa, there was no fire or disaster and the interiors was described as surprisingly clean of finds as if the house had been tidied up, the doors locked and the occupants had quietly left. The villa therefore had a slow, gentle decay and gradually became a ruin: by 500AD it was gone. Its remains lay in a grassy field undiscovered until 1964.

Finds from the Scow Brook Villa, Carsington, Wirksworth

A box of Roman finds was recently handed to us from a resident of Hognaston, through the kind offices of Chris Stait, the Co-ordinator of Hogpast, the village's local history group. This box had been in the attic of a house in Hognaston when the house was purchased some 25 years ago and remained there until mentioned to Chris Stait a few weeks ago by the householders. It resides now in the Wirksworth Heritage Centre.



Location of the Scow Brook Villa, based on Ling and Courtney, 1981, p58

The box had no indications of its original owner and simply contained two pieces of blue paper which said, respectively, "Tiles from the villa's hypocaust" and "Roman roof tile from villa". In addition, in the bottom of the box were four index cards which appear to be field-walking notes from the reservoir site.

The supposed roof tile:



The first assemblage is not Roman roof tile, although the note in the box suggested it was. It consists of two essentially intact sections of field drain of the mid Victorian age, also one half and five fragments. The half is shown measured to 33.5 cm in length. The intact arched sectional field drain weighs 2.5 kilos, is 33.3 cm long (slightly damaged at one end) 11 cm high and a maximum width of 11.5 cm. On the very right, a fragment of hypocaust stack tile: a pilae. These items probably come from the bath house area of the villa as field drainage is mentioned (Ling et al, 1990).

The box flue tiles and pottery:



The second assemblage consists of what appears to be a selection of items perhaps intended to show to the public or present at talks because it contains single samples of various kinds of pottery rather

than, how shall we say, a pile of the same old stuff. It is not clear how the box came to be in the house attic, but it is known that the former Hognaston School was used for a time as a study centre and some of the villa materials were there when the centre closed. Although a number of the items in the box are not annotated, the pottery assemblage is mostly numbered.

Items in the above photograph and in same bag numbers.

1 a-f. Six sherds of Coarse Buff Ware box flue tile (tubuli). Not annotated but see Ling and Courtney, 1981 for fabric types. Total weight 267 grams.

2. One sherd of Coarse Red Ware flue tile. Not annotated. 99 grams.

3 a b. Two pieces of shaped stone. 3a has a blackened interior coating as if it were used as part of a mould for something, but had it been a pottery item it might have been interpreted as the base of a small oil lamp. 3b is of no identifiable function. Neither have any annotation. Unweighed.

4. Number on item: C.F.83 T.1. [4] Orange-grey hard fabric body sherd of Derbyshire ware 61 grams.

5. Number: C.F.83 T.1. [3] Very hard grey fabric orange core, striped effect interior surface, body sherd in two parts 67 grams

6. Number: C.F.83 T.1. [4} Very smooth unknown pink thick fabric tile? with pale grey core and red spotted inclusions 171 grams

7. Number: C.F.83 T.1. [4] Derbyshire ware base sherd, grey outside, thin layer of orange and black core in two parts 96 grams

8. Number: C.F.83 T.1. [4] 27. Derbyshire ware rim sherd buff orange, light grey core in six parts, two glued together 68 grams

9. Number: C.F.83 T.1. [4] Grey ware rim sherd with black core in thirteen parts 56 grams

10. Number: C.F.83 T.1. [4] 12. Rim shard of large open neck jar, gritty red-orange fabric grey colour coat in two parts 120 grams

11. Number: C.F.83 S.1. [4] Five sherds of grey ware of possibly different vessels, largest being a rim sherd of 17 grams

12. Number: C.F.83 T.1. [4] 19. Rim sherd of Samian ware (or copy of Samian) in five parts, broken as received but this is item ix listed on page 40 of Ling et al, 1990. It is the only rim sherd of Samian recorded. Considered to be Central or East Gaulish Samian possibly of Antonine date AD138-193 and perhaps a "Colchester" copy. 36 grams very soft and very worn.

13. No annotation. Single sherd of rouletted black burnished ware 5 grams.

14. Hypocaust tile (or floor tile) of buff orange fabric 271 grams.

It is not possible to reconcile the numbering on the sherds to any of the reported items in the articles reporting the excavation except the Samian. The numbers on the items must be in a catalogue which

we have not been able to find, but it may be in the archive for this site which is allegedly at Sheffield Museum. In general, the pottery was reported to be almost 60% Derbyshire ware of the Hazelwood Kilns with a dating range of AD 275 to AD 400.

The Derbyshire ware kilns are thought to have operated from about AD 150 to AD 400 although closer dating of the fabrics of some kilns is possible, for example Lumb Brook (Leary, 2003) appears to have operated from AD 175 to AD 300 (dates are approximate).

The villa, according to these finds and the excavation, was built over a previous building which may have been timber. It was constructed of local gritstone and had its own bath house, no others have been found like it in the Peak District. The principal occupation range was the fourth century AD 301-400 (Ling et al, 1990). This is based on judgements about the pottery and other finds. However, at the nearly adjacent lead working site (site A on the map) the latest coin find was of Valentinian II (Dearne et al, 1995), which earliest date was AD 383 and two lead pigs found in a datable context were regarded as being 350-400AD (Branigan et al, 1986). Given that there were almost no large scale numbers of new minted coins arriving in Britain much after that date, these coins may have been in use for a long span of time, even into the fifth century.

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