

# NOTES

## A POTENTIAL NEW ROMAN VILLA AT THE RYE, HIGH WYCOMBE

*The analysis of modern aerial photographs of the recreation ground at the Rye, High Wycombe, has revealed the presence of previously unrecorded rectilinear parch marks. Located to the north west of the excavated Roman villa, the shape and form of these parch marks are sufficiently characteristic to suggest another Roman building or separate villa site at the Rye.*

While the author was undertaking research for the Historic Towns Project for Wycombe, the study of the County Council's 2003 vertical aerial photo-

graphs around The Rye revealed a some distinctive rectilinear parch marks. Located c.60 metres to the northwest of the Roman villa site (Fig. 1, boxed area) the parch marks are orientated northwest southeast and extend for some 25 metres before losing their definition. The marks seem to show a partial plan of a building which is analogous to the character of the floor plans of the excavated villa site. The marks appear to demarcate a series of rooms or chambers of varying sizes; the dimensions of the smaller rooms measure c.4 x 4 metres while the larger ones are 15 x 4 metres. The extent

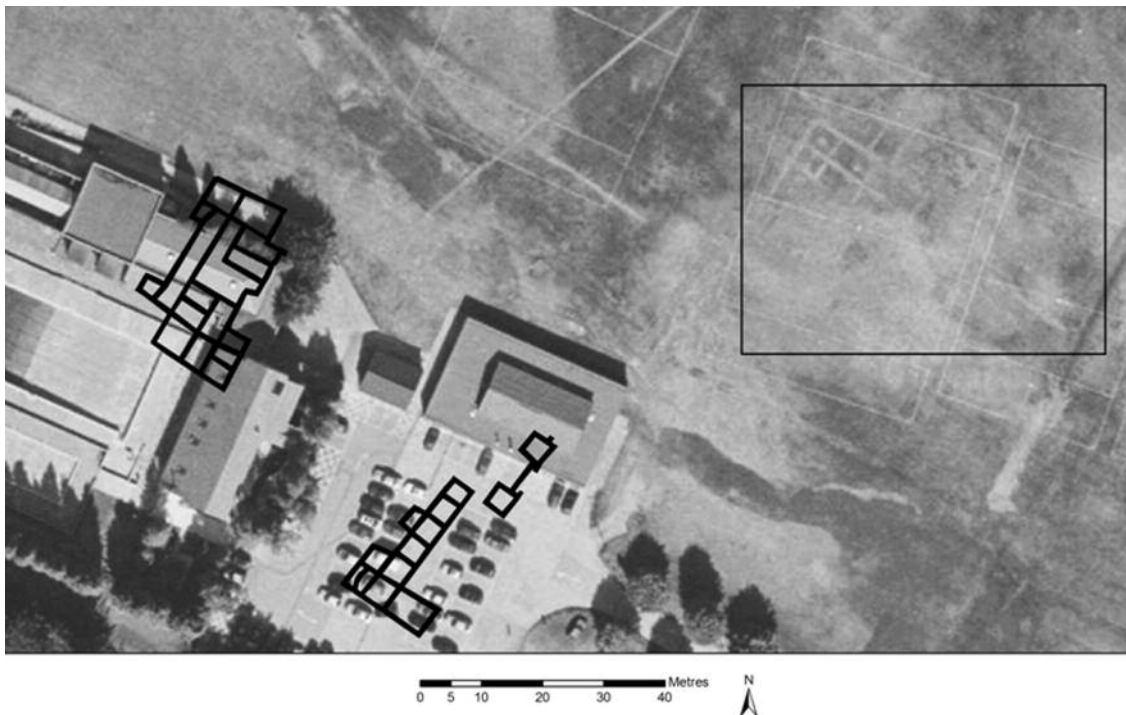


FIGURE 1 Aerial photograph of the Rye (2003) showing the parch marks indicating the possible presence of a Roman villa. The excavated villa, bathhouse and gate are shown in black (*Geo perspectives*)

of the building may potentially be larger, as there appears to be a continuation of a parch mark along the same alignment; if so the building could be c.59 metres in length (Fig. 2). There also appear to be interesting circular anomalies in the centre of two of the ‘rooms’, this might be unrelated to the building’s plan form or could indicate some sort of structure or feature within the building.

These archaeological features are absent on previous vertical aerial photographs (years 1999, 1995, 1985, 1979 and 1945), although the summer of 2003 was exceptionally hot and dry. Water stressed conditions are conducive for the appearance of archaeological sites that have previously lain undiscovered and are revealed for what seems the first time (Wilson 2000).

## DISCUSSION

The Roman villa complex at the Rye is well documented. The first recorded evidence of the site was in 1722–3. It was partially excavated in 1863–4 (Payne 1864) and again in 1932 by Francis Colmer, although the results of Colmer’s work were never properly published. It was not until 1954 that a systematic excavation of the site was undertaken prior to the construction of a swimming pool (Hartley 1959). The excavations revealed four distinct structures including a medium-sized villa building of a double corridor type, a detached bathhouse, a gate and gatehouse outbuilding and a boundary wall surrounding the buildings. Rather

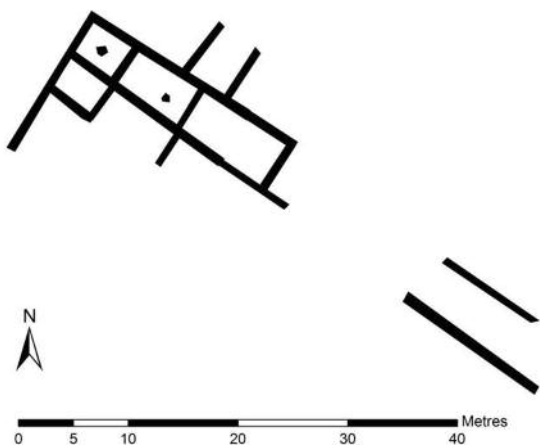


FIGURE 2 Interpretation of parch marks at The Rye

than a military station, Hartley’s interpretation was that the site was a prosperous villa complex, the buildings of which dating to c.AD 150–170 (*ibid.*). However, the later history of the villa is unclear, and there is no evidence of destruction or a violent end. The latest securely datable object from the site comes from a worn coin of 320–4.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century there have been a number of smaller, less intrusive investigations at the Rye which have indicated cumulatively that the Roman settlement extends over a larger area. This included the discovery of stacked (*pila*) tiles and tesserae during the erection of goal posts in 1995 (Bonner pers comm.). A watching brief carried out within the swimming pool complex indicated that remains of the villa might survive beneath it (Parkhouse 1996). Trial trenching prior to the construction of the proposed Rye Environment Centre confirmed this (Holmes 2000). There has also been a more extensive geophysical survey carried out on areas to the north and west of the excavated villa, though not on the area covered by the parch marks. The results of this survey produced some significant archaeological anomalies, including two potential structures, one immediately to the north of the swimming pool, the other coinciding with the previous discoveries of *pila* tiles in the playing fields (Masters 2001). A watching brief on an extension to the car park in 2006 revealed a spread of destruction rubble, and a possible extension to the boundary wall of the complex, 100m south-east of the villa (Sims 2006).

The potential for another Roman building at the Rye adds weight to this area being more widely settled. Comparison of the parch marks with the plan forms of other Roman buildings suggests the presence of a second villa, possibly of the ‘corridor’ variety where a rectangular block of rooms is served by one or more corridors (Percival 1976). The corridor villa appears to be a common type in the Chilterns, with examples found at Yewden and Latimer (Bucks). The front of the house is very often marked by projecting wing rooms on the corners, one at each end of the front corridor. It is not unusual for two villas to be present in close proximity; precedents in the Buckinghamshire Chilterns are the villas of Yewden and Mill End, which are c.800 metres apart (Eyers 2011).

Although the exact extent of the second ‘villa’ building at the Rye has yet to be determined, it is possible to make some inferences about the social

organisation of the site from the configuration of the buildings using the research undertaken by J T Smith, who devised a comprehensive typology of villa house plans in order to draw conclusions about how villas functioned (Smith 1978). Smith focused on understanding how rooms are grouped together, how they intercommunicate; the ways in which individual rooms and the house are approached, and from this identified various social patterns, questioning traditional ideas about the Roman family and household. Smith argued that virtually all houses were occupied by groups of varying composition, and challenged the received wisdom that they were single family houses whose size reflected only the owner's wealth and number of servants. In the case of the villas at The Rye, the presence of two houses clearly indicates an area governed by joint proprietorship. Smith has identified two examples where a similar arrangement is found: the villas at Newton St Loe, Somerset and Beadlam, North Yorkshire (Fig. 3). The configuration of these villas mirrors that of The Rye, where two villa buildings were laid out at an obtuse angle to one another. The plan form of the buildings also share similar characteristics; the villas orientated

north-south have a more complicated form with smaller, more numerous rooms, while in contrast the villas orientated east-west have a simpler corridor form, with a portico and range of larger rooms. The interpretation for these differing plan forms may reflect separate phases/periods of development, which were stylistically different, though this may not always be the case as Beadlam was occupied from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century, and Newton St Loe is much later, dating to the 4<sup>th</sup> century. It is possible that the differences in plan form could be an indicator of hierarchy and social standing, though the excavations at Newton St Loe revealed that both buildings were of similar status containing mosaics, hypocausts and painted wall plaster.

In addition to the shape and size of the buildings, the spatial orientations of the villa at The Rye are also of note. The position of buildings almost at right angles to one another suggests that the villas were enclosing some sort of shared communal space. The evidence for this is greatest at Beadlam, where the villa formed three sides of a square. Such an arrangement is seen in the early phases of much larger villas such as Chedworth, Gloucestershire,

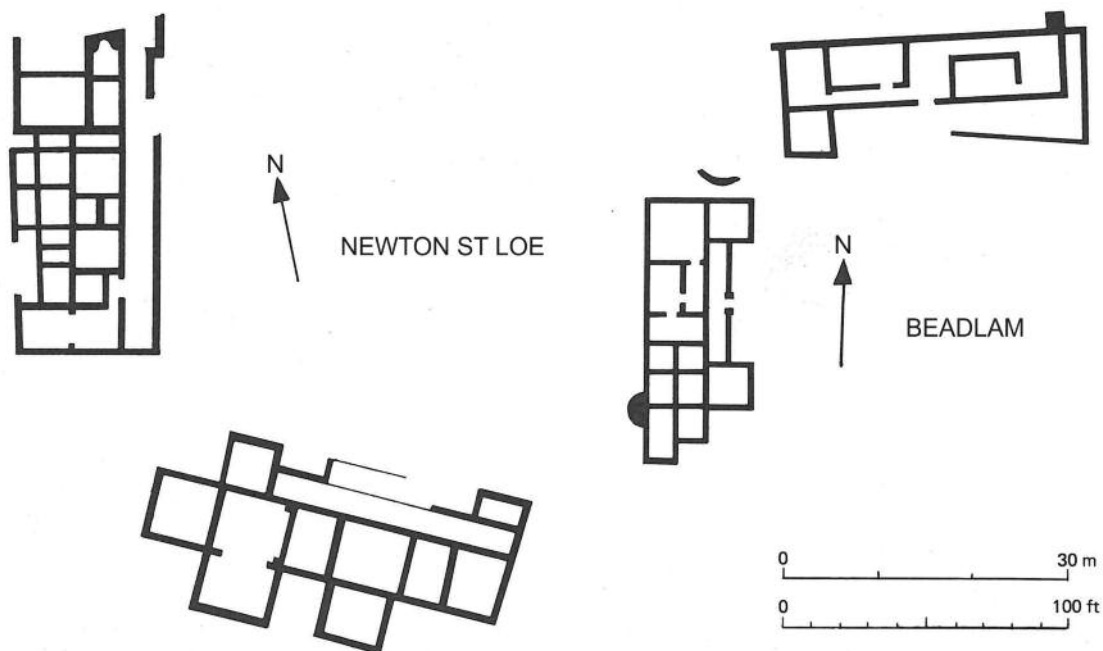


FIGURE 3 Comparative plans of double villas at Newton St Loe, Somerset and Beadlam, North Yorkshire

where the south and east ranges were originally separate, and were extended until they coalesced (Smith 1978).

#### CONCLUSION

The parch marks at the Rye provide evidence that Roman occupation there was more extensive and more complex than previously thought. Further archaeological investigation in the form of geophysical survey and limited excavation would be needed to determine the extent and size of the building and to confirm its date. At present this part of the Rye is not protected as a scheduled monument, although it has been identified as being of national importance by English Heritage's Monuments Protection Programme.

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