

The county of Kent has a barely matched tradition of fieldwork and excavation by local groups. Here Simon Elliott, Paul Wilkinson and David Staveley describe how they came to investigate a Roman villa on the banks of the river Medway, culminating in an excavation over the 2013 Easter season

A Roman Villa at Teston



SIMON ELLIOTT

In Roman times the Medway valley was a densely populated spur of industry and farming south of Watling Street, a major route that ran from the east Kent coast, through London and on to Wroxeter near the Welsh border. A road branched off Watling Street at Rochester, and tracked the river Medway south to Maidstone, then turned west and continued through the Weald on to Beauport Park, an important ironworking area. Roman sites proliferate along the river banks. But without the modern system of locks and weirs, the Medway above the tidal reach is little more than a stream. What drew substantial villas and, at East Farleigh, a Romano-Celtic temple, to

this watercourse?

Simon Elliott, a local archaeologist and historian, proposed that Roman engineers had created their own management system that made the river navigable at least as far as Teston, some 25 miles (40km) upriver from Rochester. This, he suggested, was principally to support a ragstone quarrying industry. Evidence for this (detailed in a masters dissertation at UCL Institute of Archaeology) included 17th century records made by the Medway Commissioner of Sewers, in which the removal of antique weirs and stone shelves is described.

Millions of tons of building material fed urbanisation in south-east England,

the later fortification of the region's towns and cities (including London) and the building of the local Saxon Shore forts. Elliott hypothesised that the villas were occupied by elites who ran the quarries on behalf of the procurator (the local financial official), and established that both quarrying and villas dated from very early in the Roman occupation to very late. Quarrying activity fell into two distinct phases, as might have occurred had the *Classis Britannica* (the Roman fleet) been heavily involved from the outset until its apparent demise in the mid third century, after which a more localised operation took over.

Elliott's initial research focused on

East Farleigh, where he lives with his family. The village featured a stone shelf removed from the river (described in the Commissioner of Sewers records), an antique river crossing now occupied by a 13th century stone bridge, and a Roman villa. With its associated temple, the site was first located in 1838 and became the subject of a very successful investigation by the Maidstone Area Archaeological Group. Five buildings including the temple have been investigated, with at least three occupation phases. The site made international news when a lead curse



Above: East Farleigh Roman "temple" site under excavation



Left: A tufa arch in West Farleigh church, perhaps made from recycled Roman stone

scroll was deciphered, featuring the names of 14 local inhabitants (Britain in archaeology Sep/Oct 2012/126).

Paul Wilkinson, director of the Kent Archaeological Field School (KAFS), helped identify Roman bath house tufa

Below: River Medway below the villa site

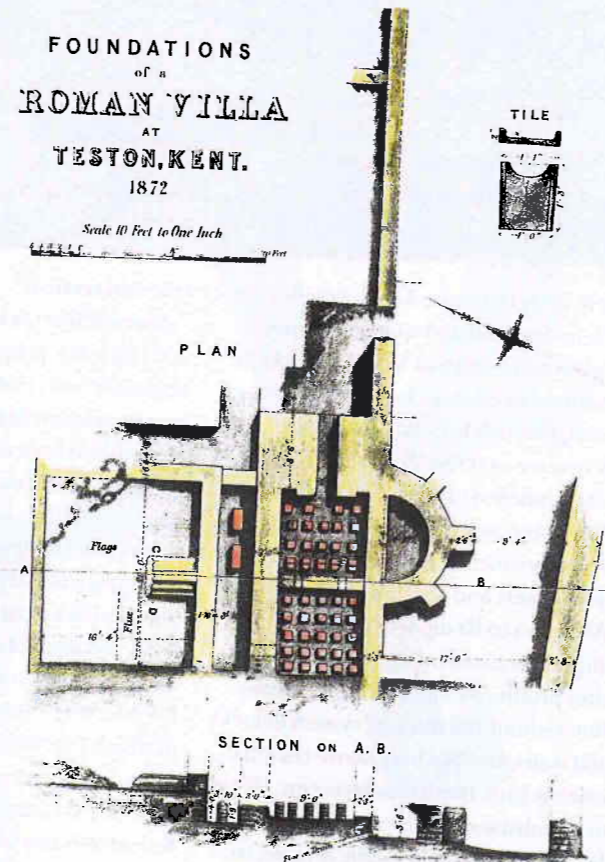


reused in the Anglo-Saxon walls of St Mary's church in East Farleigh and All Saints church in West Farleigh, and a reused monumental tufa entrance arch in West Farleigh's All Saints church. Wilkinson also suggested that capping stones on St Mary's churchyard wall could be the ragstone from the removed

stone shelf, as well as finding Roman mason's marks in worked ragstone in the entrance to the church hall.

Elliott presented the findings to the Farleighs' History Society. At the end of the gathering, local resident Linda Dale showed him a chunk of *tegula* (Roman roof tile) with a human hand print in it. She explained that she owned a stable at nearby Teston, and that the tile was one of many similar pieces standing almost proud of the surface on her land. Elliott volunteered to fieldwalk the site with her, aided by his daughter Lizzie. This revealed evidence for a substantial range of buildings, with worked ragstone, broken *tegulae* and *imbreces* (curved tiles), wall plaster and mortar almost immediately below the surface – in

Below: Teston villa as revealed in 1872



Above: The site of the main range

marked contrast to the site at East Farleigh, where villa remains were sealed beneath substantial amounts of hillwash. Part of the Teston site had been ploughed, but most of the land had previously been hop gardens and had been little cultivated.

Finding the villa

Already in 1872 excavation had located a Roman bath house on the west bank of the Medway at Teston, with hypocaust and box flue tiles, and attached apsidal building with built-in drainage. The exact site, however, was lost, until examination by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust on behalf of Southern Water in 1991 uncovered four walls. On one of these survived a coat of painted plaster on ragstone, and finds included window glass, Samian ware and other fine pottery, coins, a spindle whorl and a bone pin. The 17th century Commissioner of Sewers had removed a stone shelf near to Teston Bridge, with many loose stones beneath it.

Elliott notified Kent County Council about the finds on Dale's land, and a second walk was arranged with Wilkinson. He concluded the site was a major villa. A previous owner had cut a caravan platform into the gently sloping hillside, creating a section that revealed a mass of tile and mortar down to a depth of one metre. Dale produced broken pottery which had washed out of this section, including pieces of Samian and black burnished ware.

Looking south towards the main villa range and wings along the line of trees



The same trees looking west, with main range and wings of villa under excavation at foot of trees, and Staveley's Area B immediately in front of camera; the river is to the left



Wilkinson identified a range of terraces heading down from the villa site to the river. Dale and Elliott interviewed neighbours along the road to the north-west, who reported finding Roman material in their gardens: one garden alone produced coins, roof tile and pottery. Clearly this was a very large site!

Elliott asked licensed metal detectorist Kevin Clarke to examine the earth disturbed when the caravan platform had been dug. Within one minute of starting work on the mound, Clarke found a 4cm copper alloy disc brooch with beautiful lapis lazuli surround; apart from a missing central gem, it was largely intact. The find was reported to the Portable Antiquities Scheme, and is the most impressive for the site to date. It has since progressed through Maidstone Museum to UCL for conservation.

Meanwhile Wilkinson contacted

David Staveley to arrange a geophysical survey. On an early summer morning Elliott, Wilkinson, Dale, Staveley and Brian Powell, his assistant for the day, gathered at the stables. Two sites were selected, both with Roman building materials in the immediate vicinity, some eroding out of the hillside.

Staveley's one-day survey was undertaken using a TR Systems earth resistance meter, sampling one metre squares in 20m grids. The first survey to the west (Area A) found high resistance adjacent to visible masonry. That to the east (Area B) revealed a line of slightly high resistance running north-south, and strong high resistance in the steep north-east, where Dale had indicated masonry had been found. It was decided to target this area for a further, final survey. The data were then processed using Staveley's own Snuffler geophysics software.

The results suggested the former presence of a large villa, with at least two masonry rooms in area A, and an old stream-like depression in Area B. To west and east are features which seem broadly to follow the same alignment, while to the south are others on a different alignment, describing what looks to be a number of rooms, one of them apsidal, with an entrance to the south.

This seems to represent a complex series of buildings, perhaps with

Right: Inside a possible Roman ragstone quarry at Dean Street, near Teston



Right: Excavation in 2013



Below: Villa south wall looking east: buttresses are visible, with part of the baths first found in 1872 in the foreground, which immediately filled with water from the Roman conduit to a spring upslope (scale 1m)



different phases, as seen at other Medway valley villas, for example that at East Farleigh. The immediate discussion questioned whether the building with an apsidal room was the bath house located in 1872, but as will be seen it is now clear that it is not. Wilkinson speculates that there might be two bath houses, given the site's size, while Staveley wonders if the apsidal building might actually be a grand dining room.

A palatial site?

We decided to excavate. As a first step, test pitting was carried out in three areas: the neighbours' gardens; beside the 1991 excavation; and where the apse was indicated in Staveley's Area B. In the gardens we found a Roman floor surface and artefacts. Some of these seem to have been previously disturbed by the construction of a Southern Water treatment works west of Dale's land, when the gardens would have been farmland. The test pits using the

1991 work as a guide found a deep demolition layer with much tile, mortar, worked ragstone, painted wall plaster and even a broken amphora. Meanwhile the pits in Area B quickly located wall foundations.

Full excavation followed over ten days, involving a KAFS team of up to 20 led by Wilkinson. Targeting the villa's main range and wings using the 1991 excavation and the test pitting as a guide, the team braved snow and freezing winds. Almost immediately we found the south wall of the main range of this grand villa, eventually exposing a 39m east-west length. At each end bases of substantial towers or pavilions were revealed. Rooms with hypocaust heating lay to the north, stretching into the adjoining field and towards the 1991 site. We found marble *tesserae* from a mosaic pavement in the hypocausts, and copious amounts of painted plaster and window glass. We solved the 140-year-old mystery of the location of the 1872 discovery: it was in the north-west

area of the villa. Its apsidal room and a plunge pool, still being filled by its intact water conduit, were also found.

Decorated Samian sherds date the construction of the towers or pavilions to the second century AD, whilst North Thameside ware dated the main range to the late first century AD. Coins recovered from the site range from Nerva (AD96–98) to Honorius (AD393–423). Recycling hearths for glass and lead were found in the latest occupation phase, with pottery in front of the south wall dating from the late fourth and early fifth centuries, and including Anglo-Saxon material. The latter was perhaps from late period estate workers or *foederates*, or from those who briefly occupied the site after the Roman occupants had left.

It is clear from this evidence that this is a very large and important site with a huge main range, numerous ancillary buildings including at least one bath

quarry, to support his theory that the villas upriver of the tidal reach were occupied by elites associated with ragstone quarrying.

The initial excavation concluded with a community presentation. This was the highlight for Elliott, seeing local neighbours and members of four local history and archaeological groups pulsing down the country lane to the site, and listening to Wilkinson provide phenomenological insight into how it would have been experienced by those who lived there in the past.

All participants are very excited about the findings of this first season of activity at Teston. Further work will follow on the main range and on Staveley's Area B, while Elliott is examining local records to track down potential mortuary activity associated with the site. At least one barrow burial detailed in the Kent historic environment record would have been



Above: Hypocaust heating channel north of south wall; mosaic tesserae were found in the demolition rubble of this room (scale 25cm)

Disc brooch from Teston (3.3cm across)



Below: Excavating "recycling hearths": after the demise of the villa, lead and glass were melted down in some quantities



house, and with multiple phases of occupation. The terracing leading down to the Medway from the main range suggests landscaping. Wilkinson is convinced the site is as important as that at Eccles, a palatial-scale villa on the east bank of the Medway excavated by Alec Detsicas between 1963 and 1976. Wilkinson emphasises the preoccupation of Roman landed gentry with the Arcadian delights of the countryside, the natural resources of woodland, Kentish ragstone and first class grazing, and the water connections to Rochester and London.

For Elliott, the key feature is how far upriver the villa is of the tidal reach on the Medway: apart from a single coin from nearby Wateringbury and a handled jug found in the Medway at East Peckham, it is the highest Roman site on the river. Elliott has also located what he believes is a nearby ragstone

visible from the villa site on the skyline south of the Medway. Finally, the whole area will be geophysically surveyed.

The full results of this first season will be presented at the Council for British Archaeology South-East's annual general meeting and conference on November 16 in Faversham. A major new high status villa can now be added to our knowledge of luxurious Roman living.

Simon Elliott has masters degrees in archaeology (UCL) and war studies (King's College London), and is studying for a part-time PhD in archaeology at the University of Kent; he is the managing director of a PR company. Paul Wilkinson is director of the Kent Archaeological Field School and of SWAT Archaeology. David Staveley is a geophysical survey specialist and consultant with Chris Butler Archaeological Services Ltd ■