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## A Roman Villa Complex at Withington, Gloucestershire

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In August 2005 an archaeological evaluation was undertaken by Channel 4 Television's *Time Team* programme on the southern outskirts of the village of Withington, Gloucestershire, approximately 14 km south-east of Cheltenham. The project concerned the environs of the Roman villa (Scheduled Monument GC200) which occupies an important position in Roman studies. It was the subject of early investigation by the antiquary Samuel Lysons. He reported that 'the remains of a Roman villa were accidentally discovered in the autumn of the year 1811...by some men at plough in the common field' (Lysons 1817, 118) and his subsequent excavation discovered the Orpheus mosaic that was removed from the villa and donated to the British Museum. Withington villa also has an important place in debate on the transition from Roman to post-Roman and medieval rural settlement in Britain. Finberg's seminal study (1955) of Roman and Saxon Withington provides a model for continuity from a Roman villa estate to a monastery and ultimately the medieval village.

Time Team's evaluation (centred on OS Nat. Grid SP 031148) focused on three areas of investigation (Fig. 1): Manor Court Field (Site A), where a local archaeologist had recovered Roman material from molehills; the Scheduled Monument (Site B), a tripartite corridor building with hypocaust and mosaics dating from the 2nd–4th centuries AD; and an area between Sites A and B, known locally as Withington Upon Wall-Well (Site C), the location of finds of Roman tile and pottery close to a spring. Lysons referred to this part of the field as 'Old Town, or Withington Upon Wall-Well; from a fine spring so named which rises near it, and which no doubt takes its name from the names of walls which formerly appeared in its vicinity' (Lysons 1817, 118).

The three areas, all within 300 m of each other, lie west of the river Coln on a gentle slope on which a series of streams rise and flow down to join the river. Manor Court Field lies immediately above the floodplain of the Coln, on a low rise. Between it and Withington Upon Wall-Well, higher up, a spring feeds a stream that flows to the south of Manor Court Field. Above Withington Upon Wall-Well the valley side rises further to Withington villa, which stood close to the highest point of the valley side with a commanding view across the Coln and down to Withington Upon Wall-Well and Manor Court Field.

Time Team's project aimed to investigate the nature of the Roman activity in Manor Court Field and its relationship, if any, to the villa complex to the west, and to assess the villa's condition nearly 200 years after its discovery and excavation. The work within Withington Upon Wall-Well was intended to establish the nature of Roman activity in this area, especially any associated with the site of the spring, and its relationship, if any, to the villa and any activity in Manor Court Field.

The investigation comprised a geophysical survey, comprising both magnetometry and resistance surveys, across most of the three areas (GSB Prospection 2005) followed by the excavation and investigation of eight trenches. The fieldwork was conducted over three days.

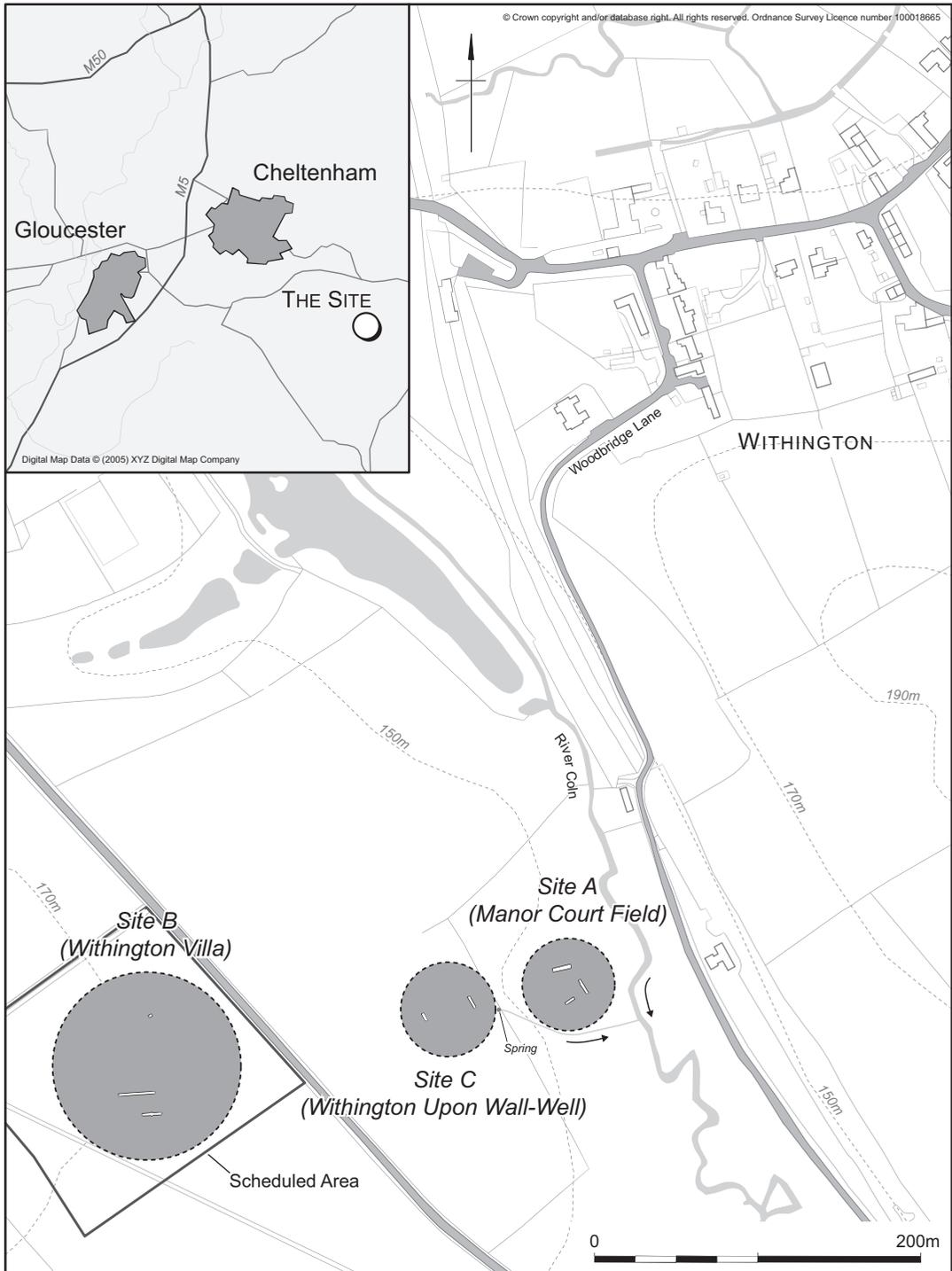


Fig. 1. Withington villa and the location of sites investigated by Time Team.

### Site A: Manor Court Field

The survey established the presence and plan of a substantial building complex, which is interpreted as a villa building (Fig. 2). The survey suggests that the complex is larger than Withington villa, although the full dimensions of the latter remain unclear, and indicates an 'L'-shaped building with an east–west and a north–south range of rooms. Each range was c.35 m in length.

Three evaluation trenches (numbers 1, 4 and 5) were excavated across the north–south range. The building complex was subsequently interpreted as a bath-house and an external sunken feature associated with it as either a reservoir for water storage or a cold plunge pool or possible swimming pool.

#### *Caldarium*

Trench 1 revealed the remains of a room which had been extensively robbed. It was likely to have been the *caldarium* or hot room of the bath-house, a dry heated area which would normally have led to a hot plunge pool. This was inferred from the surviving structural evidence, comprising both *in-situ* hypocaust *pilae* and redeposited *opus signinum* and mosaic fragments. The dimensions of the room were at least 8.00 by 2.50 m; the floor had seen a certain degree of repair and possibly a full replacement. No direct evidence for the hot plunge pool was recovered, only a single piece of redeposited *opus signinum* with characteristic moulding. The position of the furnace or *prae-furnium*, which would have heated the hypocaust system, was not identified. This may have been sited on the eastern side of the building, close to the possible reservoir identified near by, to minimise the risk of fire.

At least three phases of construction were identified, with evidence for the initial construction, later repair and alteration, and a final phase of robbing and recycling of material. The earliest phase, involving the construction of the hypocaust system, is likely to date to the 2nd century. Although this phase was not securely dated, it is rare for hypocausts constructed from tile *pilae* to date later than this period.

The second phase, repair and alteration, is likely to date to the late 3rd/early 4th century, when it is considered that there was a revival in mosaic art and many villa sites show evidence of refurbishment (Johnson 1987, 33). The style of the mosaic fragments in Trench 1 show that they belonged to the same floor surface. The design with 'L'-shaped schemes and lozenge patterns is not dissimilar to the early 4th-century Great Pavement at Woodchester (D.S. Neal pers. comm.) which belongs to the Corinthian *officina* or school of mosaicists based in Cirencester in the first half of the 4th century. The Corinthian school was also responsible for the Orpheus mosaic discovered at the Withington villa (Johnson 1987, 37–41). It is therefore likely that the same mosaicists laid both the Orpheus mosaic and the mosaic which once covered the *pilae* hypocaust identified in the bath-house in Manor Court Field.

The external wall of the bath-house formed one side of a corridor, running alongside a second, parallel, wall to the west of the hypocaust heated room. The corridor contained a tessellated pavement which has been tentatively dated to the late 4th or possibly early 5th century because of its 'crude and rustic nature' (D.S. Neal pers. comm.). This represents later work within the bath-house and potentially confirms activity up to 300 years after the initial construction. However, it is unclear if the tessellated pavement represents a simple repair to an existing corridor or was a completely new addition to the bath-house.

The final phase of the bath-house describes disuse and the robbing out of walls, leaving only foundation material. It seems that the structure had, by this time, at least partially collapsed, either from neglect or from deliberate demolition, as the robber trench was found to cut through a layer comprising collapsed roof material.

*Tank or Pool*

Trench 4 revealed a structure which was 3.20 m wide and 0.80 m deep. The structure was lined with clay and the sides were constructed of walls of un-mortared and unlined limestone blocks.

The function and date of this structure remain unresolved, although at least four possible interpretations may be suggested. It may represent a cold plunge pool (*frigidarium*) within the bath-house, although if that were the case, a number of aspects of the structure, chiefly the lack of any *opus signinum* lining, are unusual. It is possible that any such lining might have been removed during an episode of robbing activity, but there seems no logical reason for this. The main argument against interpretation as a plunge pool appears to be its location. Areas of natural geology were exposed around the structure, and no evidence of flooring was observed, implying that it was an external feature, and not within the bath-house at all.

A second possible function is as a cistern for the storage of water for use within the bath-house. This may have been necessary if access to water was unreliable and it needed to be stored for future use. Excavations at Stanwick villa, Northamptonshire, for example, revealed a pair of potentially timber-lined water tanks fed from a small spring near by (Neal 1989, 162–3). No evidence for the presence of a conduit or aqueduct to feed water into the bath-house was identified during the evaluation, leading either from the Coln or from the spring and tributary located to the south of the structure.

A third suggestion may be that this feature represents a swimming pool or *natatio* for recreational bathing. Swimming pools are more usually associated with large public bath-houses or *thermae*, located within large urban centres and run by the State. Although such pools have been recorded on other villa sites, such as High Wycombe (D.S. Neal pers. comm.), they remain an unusual feature in the context of Romano-British villas. The structure is, however, relatively small; at just over 3 m wide it may not be large enough for a viable swimming pool and there is no evidence for any waterproof lining to its sides, either wood or *opus signinum*, which would have been necessary for the pool to function effectively.

It is possible that the structure was not contemporary with the bath-house at all, but represents a later construction of unknown date.

*The Hypocaust*

Trench 5 revealed part of a channelled hypocaust system. From the nature of its construction it was possibly of 4th-century date for there was a trend away from tile *pilae* towards channelled hypocaust systems in the 4th century due in part to the decline of tile production. Pottery from the 2nd to 4th centuries recovered from the trench confirmed the likely 4th-century date, making it likely that the hypocaust represents a phase of alteration to the bath-house structure. It may be, however, that the apparent change in construction technique is due to function rather than chronology. A stone hypocaust system would have provided gentle radiant heat in contrast to the rapid and efficient heating provided by *pilae* constructed hypocausts and would be more suited to a *tepidarium* or warm room requiring gentle warming and not the almost overpowering heat required for the *caldarium*.

**Site B: Withington Villa**

The geophysical survey mapped the broad footprint of the villa complex (Fig. 2), but was unable to identify individual rooms or walls within it or to establish with clarity the full dimensions and extent of the structure. The existence of a possible rectangular walled courtyard was identified; it

postdated a larger, sub-circular ditched enclosure likely to be of prehistoric date. Field boundaries and other linear features, including a possible trackway, connected the villa site with the newly identified building in Manor Court Field.

Further investigation of the villa through evaluation trenches (numbers 2, 3 and 6) was limited due to the constraints of the granted Scheduled Monument Consent. It was able to show that severe truncation of the underlying archaeology had occurred and that a number of the structural remains identified by Lysons in the early 19th century have been disturbed by ploughing during the intervening two centuries.

Some interesting dating evidence came from the upper layer of an otherwise unexcavated pit in Trench 3. There sherds of Malvernian limestone-tempered pottery, potentially of pre-conquest date, possibly related to native British occupation of the site prior to the construction of the villa.

Trench 6 was excavated over an area of the villa complex instantly recognisable from the plans and paintings of the 1811 excavations. The exposed fabric provided clear evidence of damage to the walls and mosaic of Lysons's Room 'F' (Lysons 1813) since the early 19th-century excavation. Lysons recorded the room as approximately 6.10 m square and the mosaic as intact. Walls that Lysons had recorded as upstanding in 1811 have been truncated at the eastern end down to foundation deposits. Only an area of 3.8 m square of the recorded mosaic has survived, with almost half of the floor having been destroyed, presumably by ploughing.

Destruction of areas of the mosaic provided an opportunity to investigate deposits beneath it. The floor comprised only a single clay make-up layer which overlay bedrock. This was in turn sealed by a deposit of limestone mortar into which the mosaic had been set.

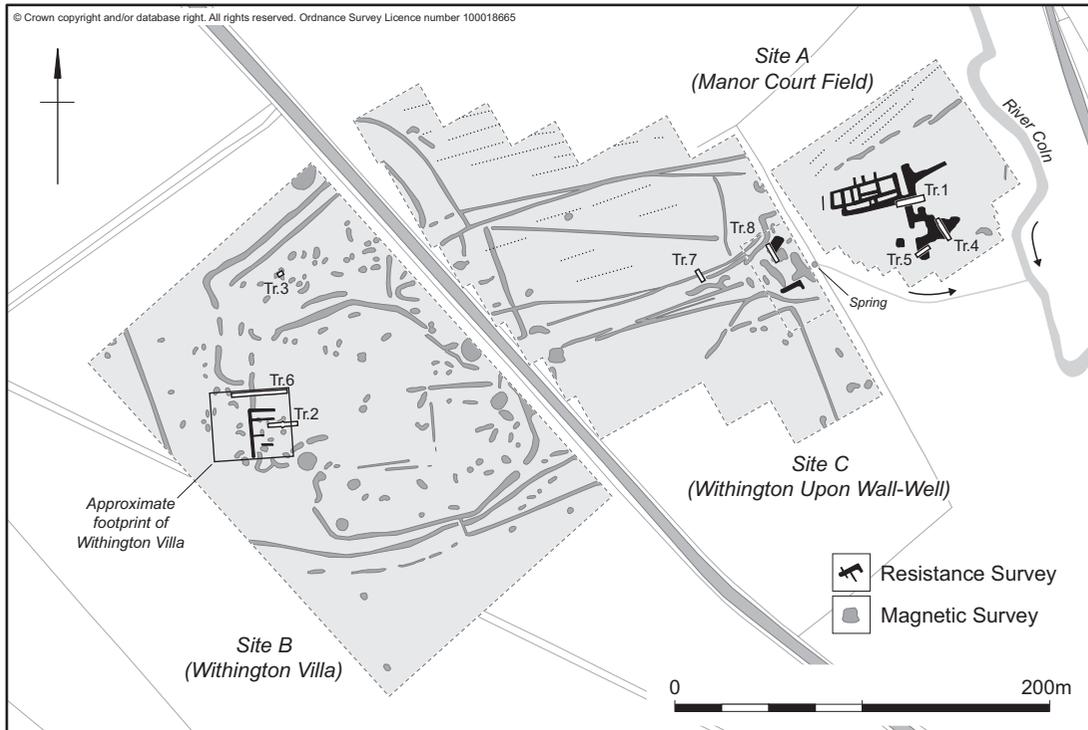


Fig. 2. The geophysical survey results and trench locations.

Two of the main aims of the project had been to identify the room from which the Orpheus mosaic had been removed and to investigate the possibility of earlier phases of construction. The project did meet both aims. The room which had contained the Orpheus mosaic, Lysons's room 'D', was identified in the west of Trench 6, although only the 19th-century backfill was exposed. Although the area exposed was limited, it was clear that bedrock lay immediately below the mosaic in Lysons's room 'F' with no evidence for earlier phases of activity.

### **Site C: Withington Upon Wall-Well**

The geophysical survey revealed anomalies indicating a possible linear trackway connecting Withington villa with the newly identified building complex in Manor Court Field (Fig. 2). The route of the trackway becomes unclear in the vicinity of the spring on the east side of Withington Upon Wall-Well, where a number of other discrete geophysical anomalies were recorded, suggesting the presence of features and deposits associated with the spring.

Two trenches were excavated, Trench 7 to investigate the possible trackway and Trench 8 to investigate geophysical anomalies close to the spring. Trench 7 produced no evidence for a trackway but Trench 8 revealed a ditch and wall of unknown date and purpose close to the spring.

### **Conclusions**

Within the limitations of a three-day project, Time Team's evaluation demonstrated the extraordinary complexity of the Withington villa site. The geophysical survey, allied to eight targeted evaluation trenches, revealed a complex that comprised two substantial buildings set within a landscape of enclosures, boundaries and trackways, stretching from the upper slopes of the valley down to the river Coln.

The evaluation was unable to clarify the full extent and dimensions of the villa excavated by Lysons but it was able to demonstrate, unsurprisingly, that the structural remains of the villa have suffered damage from ploughing in the nearly 200 years since it was first recorded. Lysons recorded that 'the walls were for the most part one foot eight inches thick, and of different heights; in some places very little remained above the foundations; in others, especially at the west end of the building, they were four feet high' (Lysons 1817, 120). Unfortunately the wall remains are no longer so well-preserved, and the surviving mosaics also have suffered some damage. It is to be hoped that the current Scheduled status of the monument will preclude any worsening of their condition.

While excavation of the villa remains were necessarily limited, the results suggest the building was not itself sited on an earlier structure, although the recovery of 1st-century BC/AD pottery from a pit and the results of the geophysical survey suggest a settlement existed prior to the construction of the villa building. A series of curvilinear enclosures suggests that the villa developed from a Late Iron-Age or Early Roman farming settlement as has been shown for a number of Roman villas in the Cotswolds (Holbrook 2006, 103). The geophysical survey also indicates some linear boundaries which may relate to the later Roman villa complex.

The most exciting result of Time Team's project was the identification of a previously unknown substantial Roman building in Manor Court Field. The geophysical survey was able to demonstrate the presence of an 'L'-shaped building with two ranges, one of which comprised a bath-house. The limited dating evidence suggests a building from the later Roman period and subject to a number of phases of rebuilding and repair.

This discovery raises questions of its relationship to the known Withington building some 300 m to the west and upslope. The geophysical survey in the intervening land in Withington Upon

Wall-Well has shown the presence of a possible trackway linking the two buildings and suggests that they represent part of a substantial unified complex. A number of interpretations could be put forward for the relationship of the two complexes; that one was a replacement for the other perhaps following Withington villa 'being consumed by fire' (Lysons 1817, 119); that they had separate functions, the building in Manor Court Farm serving primarily as a bath-house given its ideal location close to two sources of water; or that they serviced separate familial groups of the owners or occupiers of the estate that was run from the buildings.

Perhaps most significantly, the trackway linking the two buildings broadens out and encompasses the spring that rises to the west of Manor Court Farm. The geophysical survey suggests that structures and features were located close to the spring although no certain Roman features were identified in the one trench (8) that investigated this part of the site.

Unfortunately there is currently insufficient dating evidence to determine the origins and longevity of the two main structures and the degree to which their use or disuse overlapped. Both buildings were occupied into the 4th century and possibly beyond although there was no tangible evidence for occupation in the 5th century or later. Given the limited scale of Time Team's excavations its project was not able to add to the discussion of the transition from Withington's Roman villa estate to Saxon monastery and medieval village. However, the discovery of two substantial Roman buildings plus the presence perhaps of yet unknown ancillary structures, the remnants of much of which must have survived as upstanding features for several hundred years after their disuse, suggests why this part of Withington village was traditionally known as 'Old Town' (Lysons 1817, 118) and hints that of much of this complex must have been known to the founders of Withington's monastery in the late 7th or early 8th century.

Although limited in extent Time Team's project at Withington has added considerably to our knowledge of this important villa site. The results inevitably raise more questions than answers but they have clearly re-emphasised the importance of considering villas within their wider landscape to establish the full history of their development and use. In this case the results have been strikingly successful in demonstrating that the villa building excavated by Lysons nearly 200 years ago was only one component of an extensive, long-lived farming estate in an area already well-known for the density and complexity of its villas. Further discussion and consideration of the Withington villa estate and other villas within Roman Gloucestershire is presented by Holbrook (2008).

A detailed report on Time Team's evaluation at Withington (Wessex Archaeology 2006) and a copy of the geophysical survey report (GSB Propection 2005) have been deposited with the Gloucestershire Historic Environment Record. The project archive and finds will be deposited with The Corinium Museum, Cirencester.

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