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**The First Badminton House: discovery of a Late Roman mosaic in
South Gloucestershire**

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Thomas Pigot (1657–1686)

He haz some pieces of opus tessellatum found at or near Badminton (the duke of Beauford's) not long before his death¹

Introduction

In the later 17th century the antiquary John Aubrey (d. 1697) in the entry for Thomas Pigot in his *Brief Lives* gave a tantalising hint of the presence of a Roman mosaic on the duke of Beaufort's estate of Badminton. The Sites and Monuments Record contains this reference and one other relating to excavations on the estate by the duchess of Beaufort and Lord Albert Conyngham in 1846 'in the park at Badminton, on the site of a Roman building'. Finds included much pottery, 'coins of the lower empire', a bronze statuette of a female figure and three intaglios 'evidently late' (South Gloucestershire SMR 2140).

The site lies close to the main Roman road between Cirencester (*Corinium*) and Bath (*Aquae Sulis*). 'From Whitewater cottages or Lansborough Park lodge for 5½ miles the road runs (as widened for traffic in the 18th and 19th centuries) pretty direct by Badminton past the Dunkirk to Sodbury camp, and on to Old Sodbury' (St Clair Baddeley 1930, 162–3). The same author noted (*ibid.* 163, note 24) that 'Aubrey under 1686 (*Monumenta Britannica*: Bodleian) records a mosaic pavement having been found here, *i.e.*, villa; a very interesting fact (cf. O.S. LXIX). Its exact site is not certain now, but is probably much nearer the road than the villa (v) on our map'. This was the totality of our understanding of Romanitas on the estate until the summer of 2003.

The excavation of the Roman buildings at nearby Lower Woods, Hawkesbury, in 2003 (Cosh 2004, 4–6 and fig.1) revealed the presence of the remains of a mosaic. This pavement subsequently proved to have an inscription within its border; the first such mosaic in Britain – REG[]S (*ibid.* 5 and fig. 2). The excavation was visited by the duke of Beaufort who gave his permission for a geophysical survey to be undertaken on the Badminton estate. One area had been earmarked for such work by the estate's head forester, Mr Donald Watts. Over the years he had recovered a spread of Roman material from a specific site; limestone roof tiles, pot sherds and the occasional tessera. Aerial photographs of this area held by South Gloucestershire Council (AP Run 38/204) show possible trackways leading to this location and nearby traces of ridge and furrow. Grumbald's Ash Archaeology Group, the team that had excavated Lower Woods, carried out a resistivity survey in the summer of 2003 with astonishing results (Fig. 1).

1. John Aubrey, *Brief Lives chiefly of Contemporaries set down by John Aubrey between the Years 1669 and 1696*, ed. A. Clark (Oxford, 1898), 155.

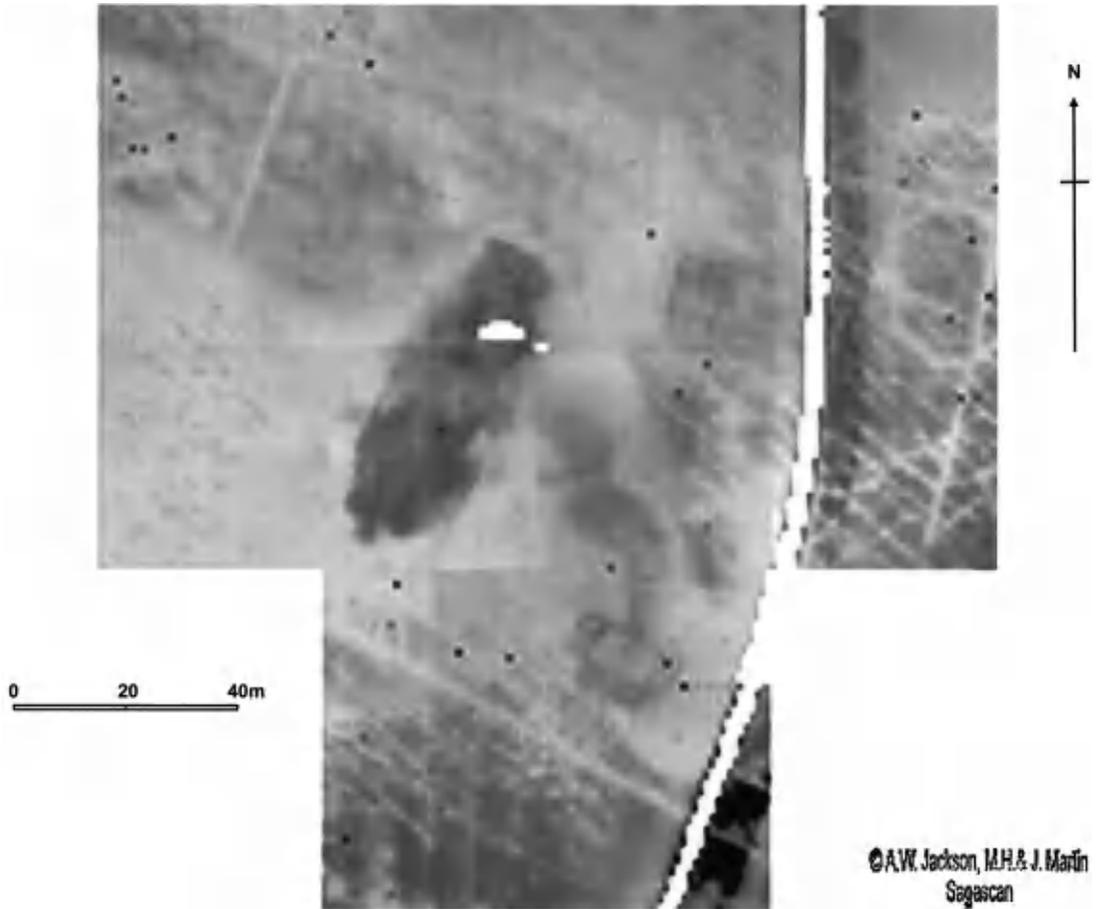


Fig. 1. Resistivity survey of the area of the Badminton villa undertaken by Grumbald's Ash Archaeological Group in 2003 (© A.W. Jackson, M.H. and J. Martin, Sagascan).

The Site

The survey of the area with the spread of Roman material mentioned above, centred on OS Nat. Grid ST 81028584 (Fig. 2), revealed a large building, some 65 m in length, with at least two smaller buildings just to the east possibly surrounding a garden or water feature (Bryn Walters pers. comm.). All of the structures seemed to be enclosed by the walls in an area trapezoidal in shape (Fig. 3). Of particular interest was the room on the northern end of the largest building as the survey showed it to be, on its east side, apsidal in form. A sample trench in that area showed that limestone walls of a structure remained *in situ*. All of the walls exposed were still covered by remnants of the original Roman wall plaster. This was coloured salmon pink with splashes of purple but many other fragments of colour were also present. On extension of the trench, it soon became apparent that the walls lay adjacent to a phenomenal mosaic, some 60 m², covering the floor of the apsidal room and the corridor that led to it.

The building had caught fire and collapsed. Patches of timber scorching were present on the mosaic and one patch of linear burning (presumably an individual timber) was especially clear over

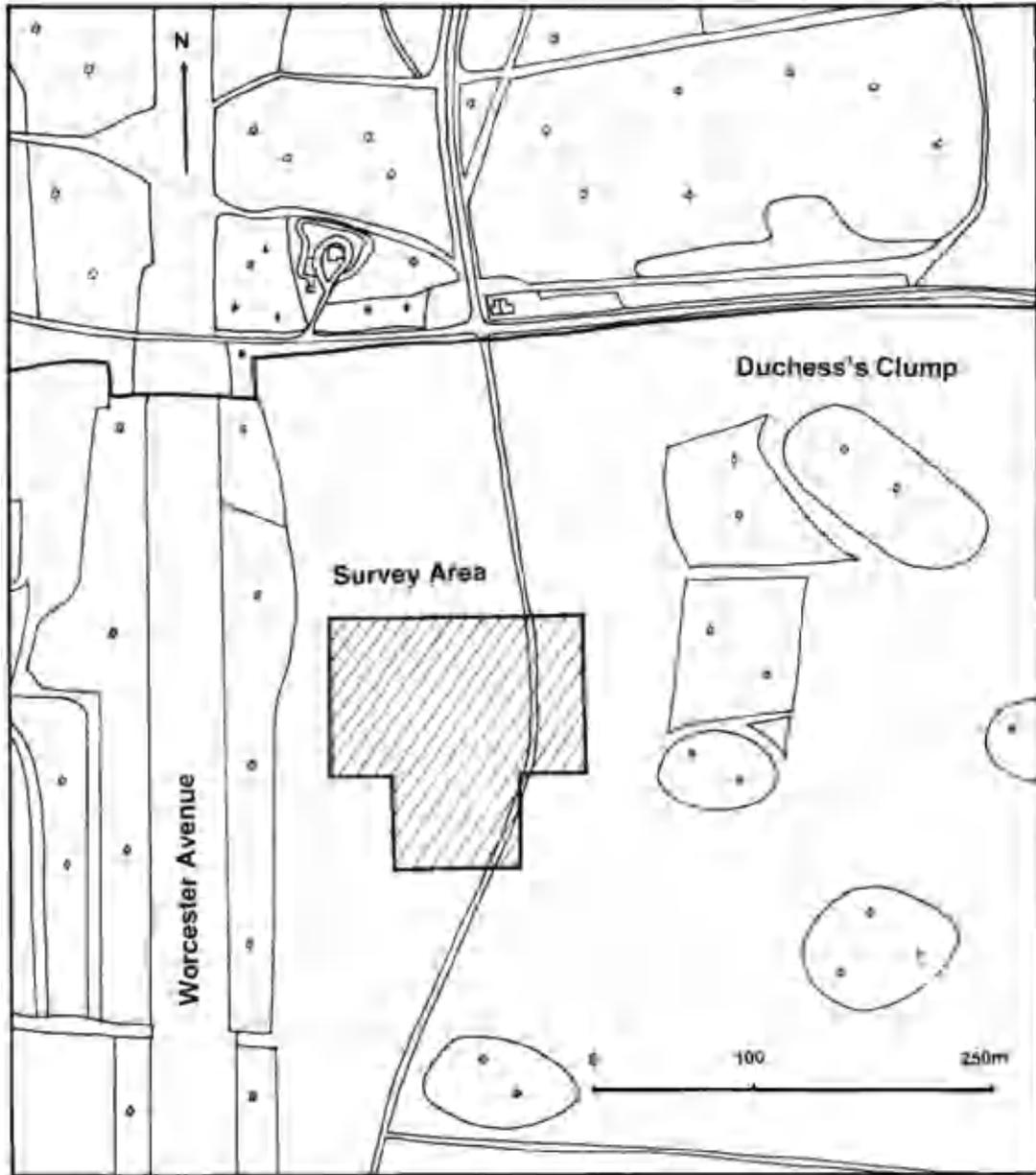


Fig. 2. Location of the survey area on the Badminton estate.

the rays of colour emanating from the central roundel within the apse. Large fragments of oak charcoal were recovered from this layer – the last remnants of these timbers. The collapse had covered the floor with building detritus, in particular pennant roof slabs that had, ironically, afforded the floor some protection from subsequent ploughing and ensured its preservation. Almost none of the stones that made up the walls of the apse-ended room survived. The only surviving

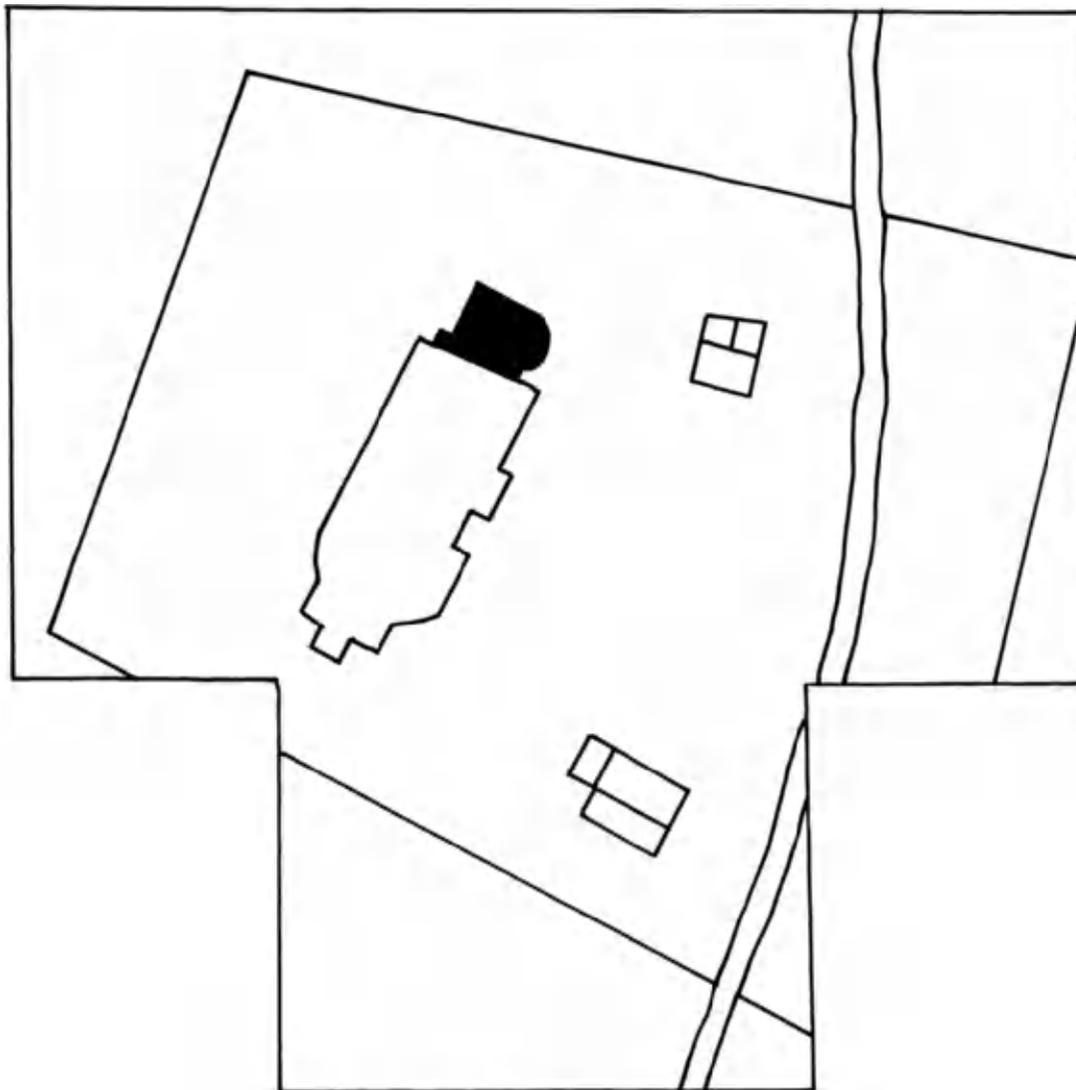


Fig. 3. Schematic plan (north to the top) of the major structures revealed by the survey; the apse-ended room is highlighted.

walls seen were those mentioned above, covered with painted wall plaster and demarcating the area of the corridor. The site was covered and then re-opened in the summer of 2004. The carefully worked stones of an arch, that would have been present in the apse region of the room, were found within the collapse layers and the respond of this arch was located at the edge of the mosaic floor (Osgood 2004, 29).

The Photography of the Mosaic

Following consultations with English Heritage Photogrammetric Unit (Survey Team), it was decided that, alongside the preparation of a coloured scale drawing on site by David Neal, the most accurate and versatile methodology for recording the Badminton mosaic would be through the production of a rectified photograph in a fashion similar to that of the Lopen pavement in Somerset (URL cited in bibliography). Thus in 2004 a photograph of the mosaic in the apse-ended room and the corridor was taken by Downland Survey and Measurement. Downland used site photography with control measurements, the images rectified using Rollei MSR software. The resulting photograph (Fig. 4) ensures that researchers will be able to take accurate measurements of the pavement from the scaled image. The remit of this article is to report the result of this survey and to draw together some expert opinions on the mosaic. A full report on the excavation work of 2003 and 2004 will be produced at a later date.

Opinions on the Mosaic

Since the discovery of the pavement, much debate has raged over its quality. Was it constructed by craftsmen with little skill, attempting to copy floors which they had seen but without the requisite competencies to accomplish the task, or was the mosaic fashioned by an expert team that felt unfettered by the normal restraints that encumbered the mosaicist and thus able to apply more artistic touches? In passages worth quoting at length, the arguments of the two schools of thought are put forward below.

On the subject of the mosaic floors in both the corridor and apsidal room, Stephen Cosh, co-author with David Neal of the ambitious and sumptuous corpus of Roman mosaics in Britain, wrote (2004, 4):

Two mosaics were exposed. One, paving a passage is relatively simple, comprising a coarse purplish-brown pennant stone border with a band of white about 0.60 m wide running down its centre and relieved by blue double fillets at the margins. The neighbouring room with an apse has a large well-preserved mosaic, which, although ambitious in concept, is relatively crude in execution, although the geometry, while unusual is accurate....The centrepiece is a guilloche knot with excrescences. Between the responds, and flanked by squares of guilloche containing knots, is a medallion with an unusual flower comprising bifurcating stems terminating in pairs of inward-pointing heart-shaped petals....Its style and associated finds possibly indicate a late fourth-century date.

Another expert on Roman mosaics, Anthony Beeson (forthcoming), took a differing view of the skills of the artisans involved:

The new work shows how colourful and artistically impressive the floor is. Geometric mosaics were common in Roman Britain and the same designs and devices were employed and copied by mosaicists throughout the province. What is remarkable about the large pavement at Badminton Park, particularly the apsed area, is that it employs motifs so far unique in mosaic anywhere. It is obvious that the room was designed to hold a *stibadium*, a curved dining couch. The design in the apse is surrounded by a broad band of plain tessellation affording plenty of room for an impressive 'C'-shaped couch to be placed on it and yet still leave room for about half of the fan-shaped radiant design to be seen by the diners. A guilloche-bordered roundel shows where the circular table would have stood for their convenience...

It is the device found in this roundel that is the most exciting feature of the floor. One is used to the petalled rosettes used in this manner as on the new mosaic from Bradford-on-Avon. What is remarkable here is that the normal petals have been turned into double leaves on shared 'Y'-shaped stems. A variant of the same device appears in the lunettes at each end of the main rectangular section of the mosaic. This

part of the floor also has an unusual design. The mosaicist has based the pattern on a conventional scheme of interlaced squares, but has tilted those in the corners and thereby enlivened the design. Bright patterned areas of blue and white chequer work vie for attention with diamond-shaped panels containing another stylized and unique device extremely reminiscent of Jupiter's thunderbolt. The whole floor is remarkable. It is as though the mosaicist (who was obviously perfectly au-fait with conventional geometric designs) decided to completely break from the slavish tradition and re-interpret motifs using the artist's eye rather than the ruler. Artistically this is the most exciting geometric floor to have been discovered in Britain for many years).

Whatever the truth, the pavement is of such a size and of such preservation as to render it one of the most important Roman discoveries of recent years in the region. It may also go some way to filling a clear gap in our understanding of Roman South Gloucestershire – the distribution map of Roman sites within the former county of Avon (Aston and Iles 1987) being radically altered in recent years and hence the conclusions that authors are able to draw.

The Construction of the Mosaic

Once the walls of the apsidal room were built, the mosaic was added, and then the walls were plastered and painted – there were clear patches of plaster that covered the floor. The project was fortunate enough to draw upon the expertise of someone who was examining a series of mosaics within the Roman world. As part of his D.Phil. thesis at Queen's College, Oxford, William Wootton studied the construction techniques employed on the Badminton mosaic. The border tesserae were pennant stone, purples, blues and greens. The patterns were picked out in white and blue lias limestones, with orange/red tesserae of terracotta.

As mentioned above, the roof of the room crashed down in a fire damaging the mosaic in places. Where tesserae were dislodged or loosened by this event, the make-up of the floor was revealed. Following removal of the covering layers of roof slabs and charred material it was possible to investigate the structure of the floor. It was found that the individual tesserae were set down into wet mortar – where an individual tessera was missing, its 'ghost' could still be seen in the remaining mortar. This mortar, grey-white in colour and flecked with small fragments of terracotta utilised as an aggregate (the nucleus), was itself laid over a footing of rammed sand. This sand lay on top of the natural subsoil clay and was thus perhaps a slighter foundation than that afforded many other mosaics, certainly well below the blueprint prescribed by the architect Vitruvius (30–20 BC – see Ling 1998, 11).

The mosaic had also undergone at least one element of repair before the destruction of the room; in the second band of the rays within the apse, on the northern side of the pavement, tesserae of what had originally been white and blue lias and pennant, had been replaced with no care as to the colour chosen. Other, single, tesserae had also been replaced in 'incorrect' colours. One reason for believing that these are evidence for repairs is that the Badminton Park mosaicists had been aware of the importance of precise use of colour. This is born out by the fifth 'ray' of the fan-shaped design (starting from the left in a clockwise direction). Here, the upper colour-band is blue lias with a lower band of purple pennant – this is a reversal of the design of the first four 'rays' and would have ensured that the final 'ray' would close with the required blue band to correctly seal the guilloche knot. Another oddity in terms of colouration was the large pennant square located in the central white panel of the corridor that led to the apsed room. It appeared to have been placed deliberately rather than to have been a replacement of damaged or missing tesserae.



Fig. 4. Rectified photograph of the Badminton pavement taken by Downland Survey and Measurement and revealing its lack of symmetry and areas of damage to it.

What happened to the pavement?

From the geophysical survey Bryn Walters hypothesised that the scan shows much about the form of the building with the apse being an attempt to maintain the symmetry of the building – a bath building added to one side and the apse-ended room to the other. The apsidal room certainly appears to have been added to the original structure and was aligned east-west with the apse at the east end. Although there were no stratified coins and little by way of small finds within the stratigraphy of the room, the pottery seems to indicate that this room was late, possibly constructed in the mid 4th century. Perhaps the attempt to maintain the symmetry of the site might indicate that this was an important family seat over several generations and thus an important precursor of the current Badminton House.

As mentioned, this room at least appears to have been subject to a major fire – either the cause of abandonment or its immediate precursor. The floor was covered by the remains of pennant roof slabs which had crashed onto the mosaic. The vast majority of finds from levels within the room were iron nails which were connected with the roof structure. Unlike the mosaic at Hawkesbury, there was no evidence for later use of the pavement as a surface, there being neither obvious postholes cut through the mosaic nor evidence of the clearance of the collapsed debris from it. At some stage most of the stones of the walls had been robbed.

Conclusion

This was far from being an ordinary villa. It was probably akin to a vast country residence. With two villas potentially in a courtyard (perhaps linked by corridor) and a trapezoidal enclosure it has elements of a continental layout to it – perhaps like Seeb in Switzerland (Bryn Walter pers. comm.).

As Ling has pointed out (1998, 134–5), the motives which inspired a patron to commission a particular mosaic were as many and varied as our current appreciation of the pavements. Whatever the skills of the mosaicists involved in the construction of the Badminton mosaic and whatever ‘school’ of work they based their designs on, the Badminton mosaic survives as an exceptional find. Following the photography of the pavement, the site was carefully backfilled to ensure it will last for many future generations.

Acknowledgements

The mosaic would not have been discovered had it not been for the kind permission of His Grace the duke of Beaufort for work to proceed and the persistence of Donald Watts in researching all the archaeological sites of the estate. The survey of the site and most of the backbreaking work was carried out by Michael and Jill Martin, Andrew Jackson and Rebecca Ireland, ably assisted by many volunteers. My thanks are due to the following individuals who visited the site and made comments on the mosaic and other elements of the archaeology – Mark Corney, Bryn Walters, Anthony Beeson, Graham Soffe, Pat Witts and Michael Stone. David Neal and Stephen Cosh also lent their expertise on matters concerning mosaics. As ever, my friend Martin Henig was generous with his invaluable advice and thoughts as was William Wootton. David Evans, Historic Environment Record Officer of South Gloucestershire Council, traced all known elements connected to the site and examined the small amount of pottery recovered.

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