Simon Esmonde Cleary, Jason Wood and Emma Durham, *Chedworth Roman Villa, Excavations and Re-imaginings from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-first Centuries* (Britannia Monograph 35. Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies in association with the National Trust, 2022). xxviii + 580pp, illus. (many colour), maps, plans (some fold-out). Paperback. £100 [ISBN 978 0 907764 49 6]

This substantial volume, whose publication is designed to coincide with the centenary of the National Trust’s custodianship of Chedworth Roman Villa, presents a comprehensive and scholarly account of this iconic Gloucestershire site.

While Professor Esmonde Cleary and his co-authors undoubtedly meet the needs of readers wishing to learn everything known about the villa, this comprehensive tome can hardly be described as a light read. Published in A4 paperback format, the volume contains 580 pages, weighs 2.5 kilos and includes more than half a million words. Its size and format make it a work more suited to desk-based or armchair study, rather than a volume which could be conveniently carried around the site as a handy guide to the remains.

The primary audiences for this monograph are likely to be professional archaeologists, academic scholars, or readers with a particular interest in key aspects of the site’s evolution. Presenting a coherent account of a series of buildings which underwent multiple phases of development over 300 years represents a significant challenge, particularly as Victorian and later rebuilding of the remains leaves practically nothing of the villa’s original structure visible today. The authors have risen to this challenge however and the volume is coherently structured and contains helpful lists of figures and tables, as well as a comprehensive index.

The monograph commences by outlining the history of exploration of the villa from antiquarian to modern times (Ch 1). The core of the analysis is then presented in the form of in-depth accounts of the structural remains, comprising a fabric survey of the extant stonework (Ch 2), an interpretation of the Roman structural remains (Ch 3) and a review of the decorative elements and finds, most of which were discovered during the initial exploration of the site in the 1860s (Ch 4).

The authors’ decision to present a fabric survey and an analysis of the villa’s structural remains in consecutive chapters has inevitably led to some degree of overlap. This has been compounded by the fact that the multiple phases of the villa’s development required the same room (and in many cases individual walls) to be reconsidered at each stage in the structural sequence. The authors are conscious of this repetition, although in fairness it is difficult to see how some degree of overlap could have been avoided. An advantage of this approach however is that researchers seeking to understand the evolution of a single room, or suite of rooms, benefit from having the information from each phase of development set out in a single place. It is therefore important to remember that different readers’ information needs vary and when designing the layout of a report of this kind the style of presentation chosen by the authors may not appeal equally to every reader.

An example of the challenges the authors faced when attempting to provide a definitive account of the villa’s physical structures may be illustrated by the complex history of the north baths. This area of the villa experienced five major phases of development: a pre-baths stage; the creation of the initial bathing complex; a structural reversal of the layout of the bath suite; major modification of the hot room to convert it from a *caldarium* into a *laconicum*; and finally, a reduction in the size of the baths, with its eastern half being converted into a series of grand reception rooms. In the course of such developments walls were built, demolished and sometimes rebuilt on different footprints; floors were laid, then subsequently raised or lowered; hypocausts were inserted, removed, re-inserted or modified; and mosaics were laid, torn up, cut through, re-laid or overlaid by later features. Every component of the bath suite has its own structural history, which the authors painstakingly attempted to unravel. They freely admit however that some aspects of the building remain enigmatic, as vital evidence of their development has been lost during previous episodes of excavation, with those responsible often leaving few written records and little photographic evidence.

The text of these core chapters is lavishly illustrated with photographic images, fold-out plans and elevation drawings, many of which are colour coded to indicate the various phases of development. The authors’ own analysis of this material is accompanied by an excellent contribution from Dr Stephen Cosh, who provides clear descriptions of the villa’s mosaic pavements, with accompanying visual illustrations of the surviving portions of each. Similarly, while Dr Martin Papworth’s recent archaeological interventions in the north and west ranges (2010-2018) fall outside the scope of the present report, he has generously allowed his interim findings to be incorporated into the present study where they serve to further our understanding of the villa’s development.

As very few of the artefacts from the Victorian excavations can be attributed to a particular location within the villa, the substantial section of the monograph devoted to the decorative elements and finds (Ch 4) is again primarily aimed at the specialist reader. The artefacts covered in this section of the report are described in coherent groups, with many of the objects being individually illustrated by photographic images or line drawings. Where close parallels are known from other Romano-British sites (or in some cases, continental locations) reference sources are provided.

The remaining sections of this comprehensive volume step back from the detailed coverage of the material remains. The authors provide an overview of the villa’s chronological development (Ch 5), its landscape setting (Ch 6) and a review of how contemporary attitudes to the villa have evolved over time (Ch 7). These are probably the sections of the monograph which will appeal most to the general reader; particularly in the synthesis Professor Esmonde Cleary provides in chapter 5, which draws together and interprets the material from each of the preceding chapters. This provides a convenient *résumé* of the key issues for those readers who have diligently studied the content of the earlier sections of the monograph, while offering a concise digest of the villa’s evolution for those who prefer to receive this information in summary form.

The penultimate chapter of the monograph (Ch 6) broadens the geographical scope of the discussion by considering the place of the villa in its overall landscape setting. By comparing Chedworth Roman Villa to other high-status Romano-British sites in the Coln valley and the wider Cotswold region, readers are invited to consider the importance of the site in its spatial setting. Important as these considerations are, a limitation of this approach is that few other comparable Romano British sites in the locality have been extensively excavated, particularly in modern times, while other sites from this period presumably still await discovery in this once densely occupied landscape.

The volume concludes with some valuable observations on the way in which contemporary attitudes to Chedworth Roman Villa have altered over time. In doing so, this final section of the monograph provides important insights into the ways in which successive generations have interpreted and presented these iconic remains to the public, whose collective expectations and understanding have themselves evolved in the century and a half since the villa was originally discovered. This analysis brings the authors’ analysis full circle; the opening chapter of the monograph having focused on the villa’s initial discovery and introduced the leading characters in the site’s evolution. Revisiting these issues in the final chapter is a salient reminder that re-interpretation of the evidence we see before us is a generational phenomenon, as historical understanding, social attitudes and cultural norms change over time. By respectfully overlaying our predecessors’ perceptions with the knowledge gained from subsequent research we should recognise that the study of Chedworth Roman Villa remains a journey of discovery and there is still much to learn from these iconic remains.

*CHEDWORTH ROMAN* *VILLA: Excavations and Re-imaginings from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-first Centuries* provides an important and timely contribution to the public’s understanding of this magnificent Gloucestershire site. In presenting their findings in monograph format, the authors have produced a report more suited to the needs of academic and professional audiences, although many none-specialist readers with a serious interest in Chedworth Roman Villa may still find much to appeal to them in this volume. For readers interested in learning more about Chedworth Roman Villa, but who consider the prospect of perusing 580 densely packed pages too daunting, Professor Esmonde Cleary’s earlier publication, *Chedworth: Life in a Roman Villa,* (Stroud: History Press, 2013), offers an excellent alternative. For those who wish to read the definitive report on Chedworth Roman Villa, however, this latest volume cannot be bettered.

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