

# The Roman Villa at North Lodge, Barnwell, 1973

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Excavations were carried out by the Middle Nene Archaeological Group and Prince William School at North Lodge, Barnwell, in the autumn of 1973 at the request of the farmer, Mr T. Litchfield, an eminent local antiquarian. For several years the plough had been removing masonry in the field, and this disturbance gave the impetus to begin investigations. The site at North Lodge is one of a group of Romano-British sites discovered in recent years near the 200 foot contour above the Nene Valley. To date, there are 6 sites known on the ridge running from Clopton to Luton. It is hoped that in due course light will be shed on Romano-British agriculture on heavy boulder clay soils in what was probably a wooded area (fig. 13).

A magnetometer survey of the field showed two areas with heavy anomalies and several curvilinear features (probably ditches). It was decided that initial excavations should concentrate on one of the areas of high anomaly. This eventually revealed itself to be a pit some 15 metres long by 6 metres wide and 3.5 metres at its deepest point. Immediately to the east, not detected by the magnetometer, were the stone foundations of a building.

The building covered a rectangular area and was open at first on its south side (fig. 14). The pottery from the mason's trench for the north wall suggests that the first phase came at the end of the second century. Although only 12 metres long, the foundations for the north wall were quite massive, being of herring-bone construction, 1.2 metres wide and over 1 metre deep at the west end. In contrast, the 3 post-holes on the south side were quite shallow and insubstantial. It seems probable that the first structure had a clay floor.

The pit was probably dug sometime later, perhaps when the building had gone out of use or was in a state of disrepair; for its edge reached right up to the foundations of the west wall. Spectrographic analysis by Mr M. Bull of Leicester shows that clay from the pit was used to produce tiles, fragments of which abounded on the site. The tiles included roof-tiles, box-tiles and several types of floor-tiles, some of them coarsely made with little attempt at removing inclusions.

It was obvious that after the clay had been extracted, the pit had remained open for a number of years. The bottom layers consisted of organic material to a depth of over 0.5 metres. Twigs, leaves, seeds, insects and molluscs had all been preserved below the level of the

water-table and, before the pit was eventually filled in, it could have served as a pond. The sides and the east end were very steep and time did not allow the excavation of the west end, but the magnetometer readings suggest that here it shelved upwards, quite gently, and could have been used for watering stock.

Animal bones from the site including many from the pit indicate that cattle and pigs had a place in the economy. The absence of sheep bones may be accounted for by the presence of woodlands and the heavy clay land.

Preliminary inspection of organic matter from the pit shows wheat-straw and several grasses, and imported molluscs include fresh-water mussels, whelks and oysters.

The second and final phase of the building took place sometime after the mid-third century when a wall with shallow foundations replaced the posts on much of the south side, still leaving it open for approximately 1.5 metres at the east and west ends. In the central part of the building a floor had been laid. Limestone underpacking butted right up to the top foundation course of the north wall and varied in depth across the building. It was held by a loose crumbly mortar and covered by a firm layer of *opus signinum*, 25cm thick. On top of this had been a floor of square building-tiles. In the open area within the west end of the building was a stokehole and part of a flue-arch, built of tiles directly on top of the filling of the mason's trench for the north wall. A post-hole to the south of this suggested a lean-to type of shelter over the stoking area. The heating channels underneath the tile floor could be located by areas of baked mortar. There was no evidence for the function of the heated room.

Contemporary with the final phase of building was the consolidation of the east end of the pit. To prevent further erosion and possible subsidence, oak posts and planks had been used as revetment, backed by limestone boulders and redeposited yellow clay. A coin of Gallienus (253-268) was sealed in this. Colour-coated pottery from the pit and the destruction layer over the building confirm the dating evidence of the coin. The oak posts were in good condition, showing adze marks, and at the upper ends which had been pointed after insertion the marks of a saw could be seen.

Finds from the site include third- and fourth-century coins, brooches, glass, iron knives and painted wall plaster. The nature of the evidence points to a much larger site than was anticipated; the excavated building is a small part of a larger complex. The association of industry with agriculture makes it potentially an extremely interesting site.

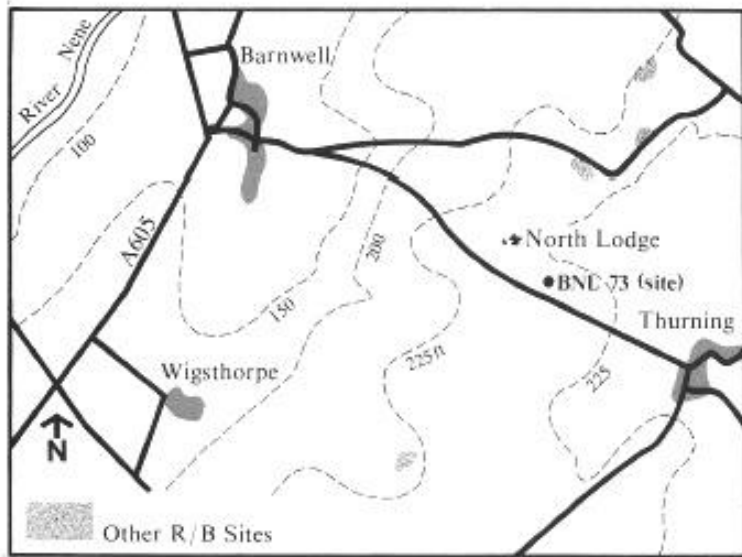


Fig 13 Map of sites in the Barnwell area.

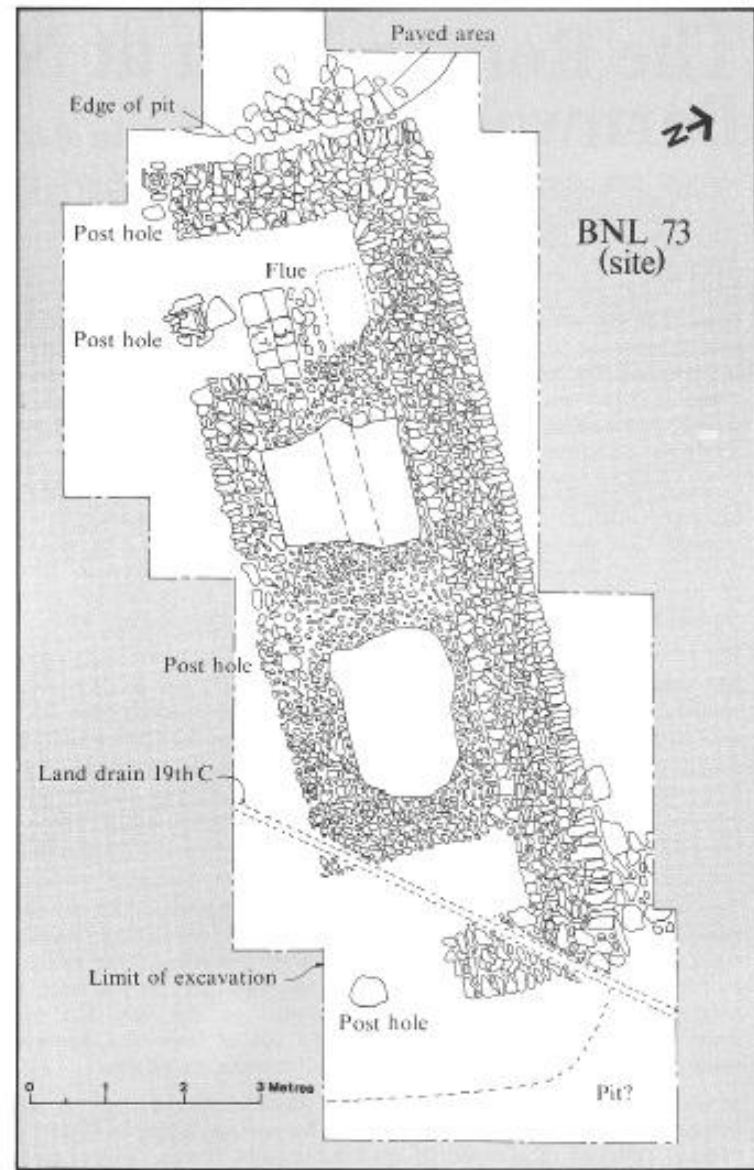


Fig 14 The Roman building at Barnwell, 1973



*Fig 15 A reconstruction of the second phase of the Roman building at Barnwell*