

The Roman Villa at Helpston

by Adrian Challands

The villa is situated just over three quarters of a mile south of Helpston village (TF 123042) on limestone at about 16 metres above OD. The land slopes gently north-east.

The villa was located in the early nineteenth century and partially dug by Mr E. T. Artis. Unfortunately, he only illustrated a mosaic pavement (Artis (1828), pl. XXIV) and did not produce a plan. In late 1967 re-excavation was commenced on a very informal basis under the direction of Mr Michael O'Brien (*BNFAS* 3, 1969, 11). Various individuals and groups worked on the project, often not supervised. Consequently, a detailed report cannot be published. Later the site was abandoned and became a prey to the elements and 'treasure' hunters, until the Nene Valley Research Committee called the attention of the Department of the Environment to the situation. The site was then scheduled as an Ancient Monument. Before backfilling the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments was asked to survey the partially excavated building. The survey (fig. 11) was executed by Mr C. C. Taylor and the site finally backfilled in early 1971.

A brief summary of the excavations to the end of 1968 has already appeared (*BNFAS* 3, 1969, 10-14). The aim of this article is to publish the overall plan and additional information obtained from various sources.

Although only a small proportion of the original building was excavated, the plan and topographical survey show that it was probably a winged corridor villa. While it is impossible to produce from the available data a chronological series of plans for what is a very complex structure, the finds suggest that the villa began life modestly, perhaps as early as the early second century. It was then a cottage, which may be represented by some of the walls in the numbered areas. Considerable subsidence here indicates earlier occupation to which late Iron-Age pottery of Belgic type recovered in the vicinity may be attributed. Structural alterations were made and wings added in the third and fourth centuries when the villa attained its maximum extent.

The room numbering system (1 to 13) used in *BNFAS* has been transposed to the Royal Commission's plan and additional walls added as described there. Discrepancies in dimensions which occur may be accounted for by the damaged state when surveyed. New features excavated after 1968 continue the notation (14 to 23).

Four rooms (14 to 17) forming an extension to the south were bounded by

walls 75cm to 1 metre thick. They were all 6 metres north-south and respectively 2.4, 1.5, 2.7 and 2.7 metres wide. Rooms 16 and 17 were floored with rough limestone slabs bearing extensive signs of burning. Towards the western end of 16 a type of furnace was located. The east wall of 5 was seen to continue south for 5.5 metres, perhaps linking up with the villa's south wing. The wall inferred by the Royal Commission bounding 18 to the east could be the base for a colonnade 19 metres long. No 19 may represent a room 14.5 by 4 metres in the north wing or perhaps a corridor serving rooms 11 to 13. Two rooms west of 7 and 8 not recorded in *BNFAS* are numbered 20 and 21. They are respectively 6 and 5.2 metres long and 2.4 metres wide. A 60cm wide party-wall serves the two rooms, ending in a butt-joint against the main west wall.

Immediately east of rooms 11 to 13, which contained mosaics, robber trenches indicate further structures in what must be the principal rooms of the north wing. A very strange structure (22) was noted 6.4 metres east of 11 to 13. It consisted of a room 3.7 metres square bounded by 53cm thick walls on the north and east, a 46cm thick wall on the west and a badly damaged external wall 30cm thick on the south. A rough limestone floor was noted 50cm below the top of the serving wall. Centrally placed on the floor was a substantial block of limestone. Its socket, 61cm in diameter, had been cut 16cm deep. It is unfortunate that no dating evidence exists for this structure; for it may post-date the domestic use of the north wing and is probably for industrial or agricultural use. Two substantial limestone bases (23), 1.22 metres square, cannot be connected with the stone in room 22, although they had similar sockets in the top when found.

In conclusion the Helpston villa can be seen from the scraps of information gleaned to have been a large and palatial establishment at the height of its prosperity. It had decorated walls and mosaics. Only a well-planned excavation, however, can elucidate its history and scope.

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Bibliography

BNFAS *Bulletin of the Northamptonshire Federation of Archaeological Societies.*

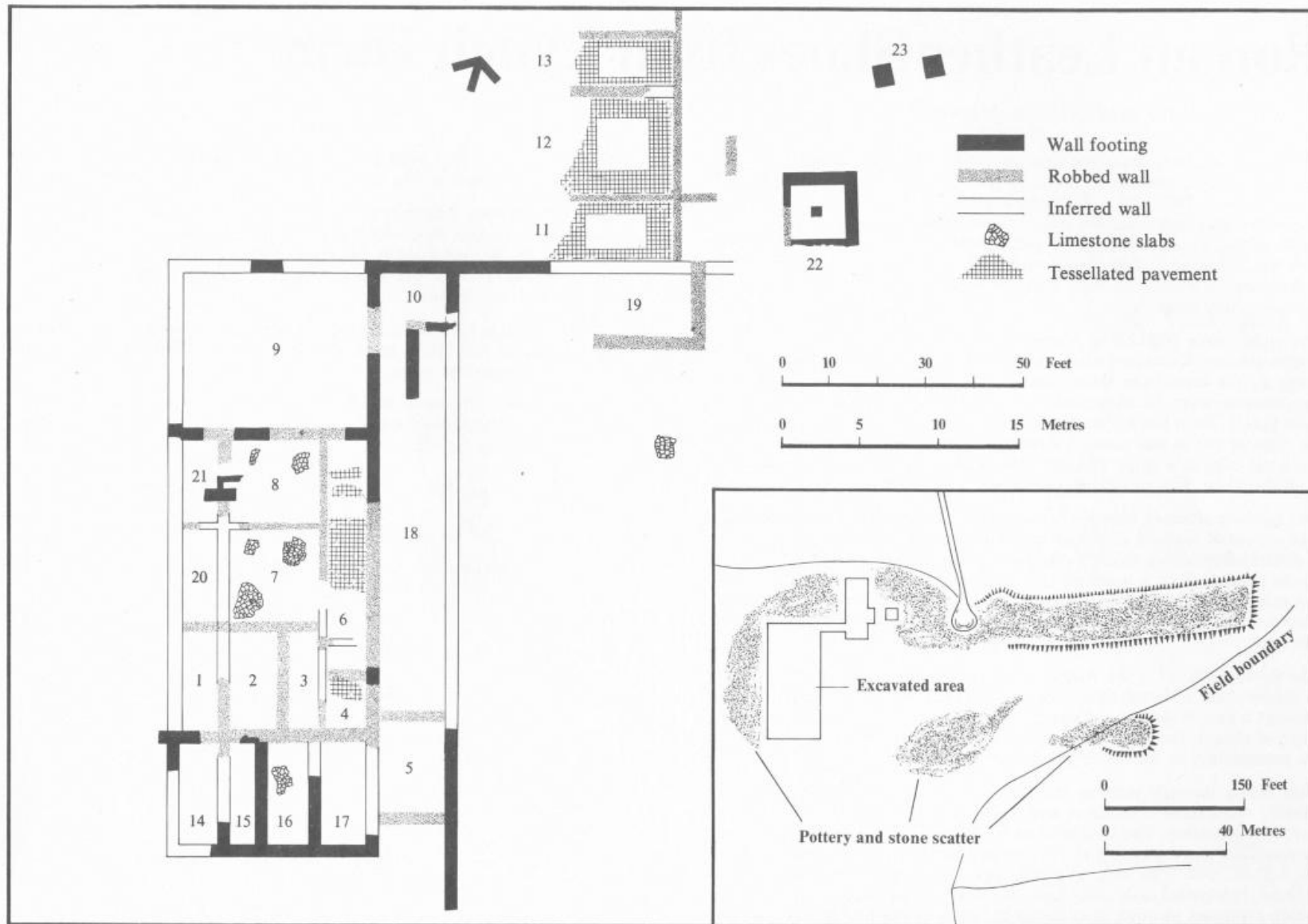


Fig 11 Plan of the Roman villa at Helpston