

# The Roman Villa at Cotterstock

by Stephen Upex

'A servant of one Mr Champion, a gentleman farmer, being at plow in an open field belonging to the village of Cotterstock . . . on a headland commonly call'd the Guild Acre discovered in a furrow several little stones which made a very uncommon appearance, and with which having acquainted his master, he with an intimate neighbour or two, went privately to the place and caused so much of the earth to be cleared from it, as to give them a view of a small part of a very elegant piece of work . . .'

This extract from a newspaper article of 1737 describes the discovery in July 1736 of the villa at Cotterstock near Oundle. The report goes on to describe how a mosaic floor 20ft square was uncovered, with quantities of bone and pottery. Other reports suggest that more mosaics were found, but, unlike the first, were not recorded by drawings. The news of the discovery obviously spread quickly around the local villages and many people crowded to see the work taking place — so many in fact, that they eventually destroyed the principal mosaic, probably by walking over it.

Discoveries were presumably made earlier than this: for the name in 1736, 'guild' or golden acre, must refer to finds from the villa.

Further discoveries were made in 1798 when another mosaic was recorded showing a two-handled cup crowned with leaves and with a border at the top and bottom of Asiatic shields. Other mosaics are mentioned, but were described as 'of inferior character', and were not recorded in the drawings made by the farmer, Mr John Selby. Mention was also made of two cisterns or cesspools being found.

No later mention is made of the villa. Mr Richardson, the present farmer, relates how local tradition tells of discoveries in the 1860s, but no other information can be found for this period.

Even though the two principal mosaics from the 1736 and 1798 excavations were recorded and eventually published by Mr E. T. Artis and others, the exact position of the villa was forgotten and the Ordnance Survey records it as lying on the south side of a small stream running between Glapthorn

and Cotterstock. However, during the remarkably dry summer of 1976, the villa, lying under grassland for many years, revealed itself as a series of parch marks. The site itself (centre TL 09 033911) lies close to the 125' contour on great oolite clay. To the north the Oxford and boulder clay rises to over 200', to the south the land falls for a quarter of a mile to a small stream valley. An extensive terrace seems to have been levelled from the gentle slope of the ground on which the ranges of buildings were constructed (fig. 15).

From the 1976 photographs it was possible to produce the accompanying plan (fig. 16) showing the overall dimensions and some internal features of the principal rooms. The first and over-riding impression is of the great size; for the villa is over 200 metres in length and some 60 metres wide. Villas of such dimensions are rare in Britain, and comparable structures are best found on the Continent, notably in the valley of the River Somme. The plan suggests spontaneous growth through many periods of building. At the north-west corner one room appears to have five sides, the result, perhaps, of two building periods.

Of the courtyards the western one seems more likely to be the domestic range. The buildings are arranged around three sides of a central yard, with other structures shown within the central area. Over this part of the villa, and visible from the air and ground, are three areas of disturbance where the ground is very uneven. It may be that these areas represent the positions of the 1736 and 1798 excavations and, if so, the recorded mosaics add weight to the view that this area is the domestic range. Alternatively, the areas may represent stone-robbing of more recent times.

The eastern courtyard, which is the larger of the two, may prove to be the agricultural range. On the northern side of this yard the rooms appear very long and remarkably wide, suggesting that many of the internal arrangements still need to be recorded. Ditching work along the modern hedgeline during the years 1940-50 cut through walls of this range. These walls were still visible on the ground in 1976, providing useful datum-points for planning from the aerial photographs.

To the north of these two courtyards parch marks, although indistinct, suggest further buildings (only certain structures are recorded on the plan). It is on this northern side of the main building that a spring rises (and ran throughout the 1976 summer). If it existed in the Roman period, it may possibly be associated with the markings on this northern side.

Future research and survey will obviously add to our present knowledge of the site, its date, the extent of the villa estate, its fields and its basic economy.

Interesting, too, is the relationship with the settlement at Ashton, only 1½ miles (2.5km) away.

I am grateful to Mr Richardson for allowing me to walk the field, P. P. Parnell and J. P. Wild for locating references and to A. G. Cockin for help with the ground survey.



Fig 15 Aerial photograph of the Cotterstock villa from the north-east (June 1976)

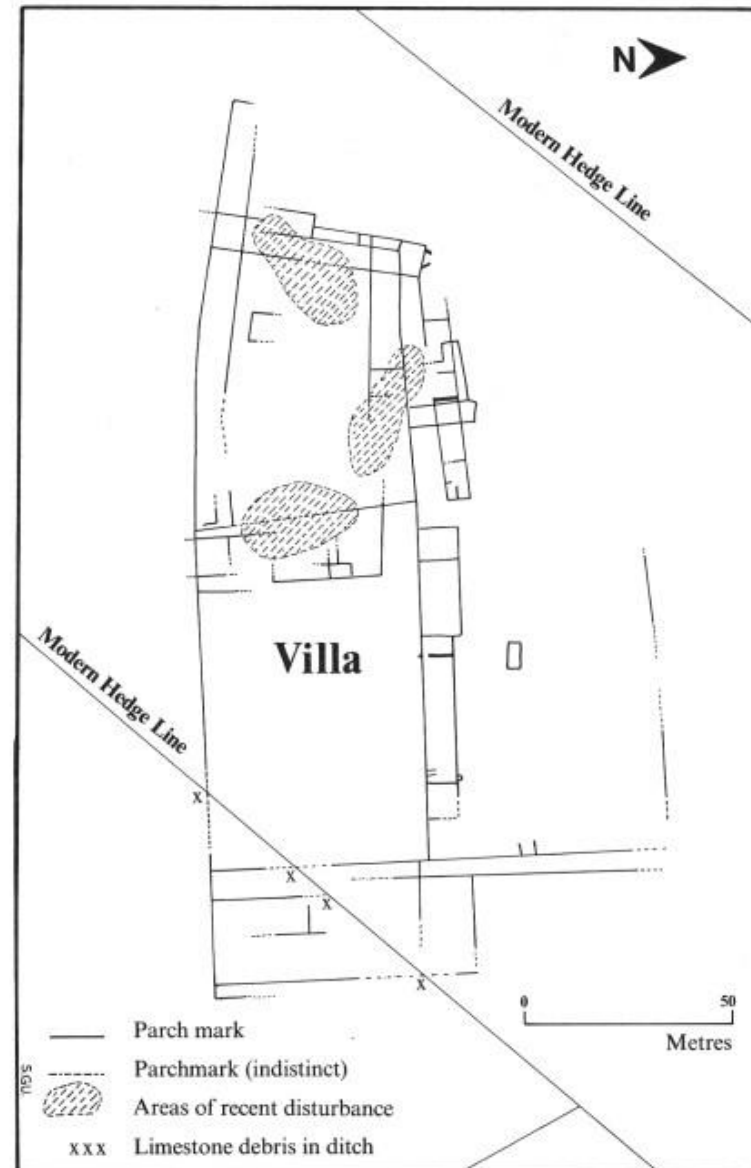


Fig 16 The Roman villa at Cotterstock plotted from aerial photographs