

Castor

by Donald Mackreth

The Roman buildings recorded by Artis under the village of Castor and lying around the church have at times been thought to be houses belonging to the town of *Durobrivae* itself. They have also been interpreted as belonging to potters. It was only as a result of renewed investigation by J.P. Wild that Artis' original idea that all these elements belong to a single great house was re-established. It was the manner of Artis' own publication which gave rise to the idea that here was a series of loosely co-ordinated and separate structures (Artis (1828), pl.XIII) (see fig. 11).

Fortunately, there are still fragments of walls to be seen in Stock's Hill and Church Hill, as well as in the churchyard. They show that the foundation works are of a scale far greater than would normally be found in an ordinary Roman villa. Similarly, the impression given by the plans available is of a series of ordinary rooms; but when a scale is applied to these their very large size becomes apparent. Also, it is only when the remains and the plans are related to the topography that we can see that the major parts of the known plan are uncomfortably placed on quite a steep hill-side. However, a careful assessment of the floor levels recorded by Artis in relation to the slope shows that the buildings are terraced and the whole carefully adapted to the site to produce a grandiose effect.

The fact that the modern village prevents any concerted investigation beyond a few very small areas is the major obstacle to a good understanding of the complex. The picture which is presented here is based upon the remains which are visible, the details which were recorded by Artis, and further ones recovered in work carried out by J.P. Wild and, from the Committee's Field Centre, Calum Rollo. If all the buildings recorded by Artis are to be included, the whole complex would seem to measure 270m by 140m – an area of about 3.75 hectares; but our knowledge is largely confined to the north-eastern end of the site and it is this part that is considered here.

The structures are on three major levels with the north-eastern end raised up on two great terraces. The lower of these runs along the 'south' side of the church and the upper, running parallel with the first, crosses the 'northern' part of the churchyard. The church itself is aligned basically with the Roman structures and is markedly out of true with the traditional east-west line. No trace is recorded of the lower terrace, although it must have been cut into by graves when the churchyard was extended towards the end of the last century. The sharp drop along the line of the old churchyard boundary shows clearly where the terrace lies. As for the upper

terrace, one end shows in the side of Stock's Hill and the other is recorded by Artis in his pls. II and XI, which also show the differing floor levels.

One of the factors which has delayed a proper appreciation of the layout of the site is that the only plan published by Artis was based on a survey of the village which has some inbuilt distortions. Thus his room F is sited too near the church. Fortunately, he gave the dates of the burial of those in whose graves the mosaic was found. The approximate area covered by these can be identified and it is much more in the area shown on the plan in fig. 12. In effect, F is a room set in the front face of the upper terrace and almost certainly aligned with Artis' room J which must be on the upper terrace itself. Similarly, C, the so-called temple, can be seen as a room at first terrace level with the wing from the upper terrace running out over it, and this wing is matched by one at the other end of the terrace. The use of a modern map shows that Artis' building D is also set in the front face of the upper terrace and the long room to the west of that can be moved so that its north end parallels his rooms A, B and C.

It was J.P. Wild's discovery of the north end of the room marked K which revealed most about the scale of the whole design. He found that in the centre of the north wall was a flue opening into the room which had remains of a full *pila*- supported hypocaust. The internal width of the room is some 9m and, as the walling in Church Hill shows, its length is not less than about 20m. If the room ran out so that it ended in line with the wing containing rooms A, B and C, the floor area would have been some 216m². As an indication of size, the area of the great pavement at Woodchester is about 204m². Another indication of the scale of the Castor building is the minimum height of the wing needed just to contain room K. The terrace is some 5m high and the room would have been not less than its width (another 9m) and some 5m can be added for the roof works. Hence the height of the wing from the level of the first terrace to the approximate ridge-line of the wing would have been about 19m. As some kind of confirmation of the size of the room, it should be mentioned that the type of hypocaust, as is the case of the similar system under the Aula Palatina at Trier, should be a reflection of the volume which needed to be heated.

If this interpretation is accepted, the scale of the rest of the buildings on the terraces becomes a matter of note: the width over the wings is about 110m and, taking room I as a good indication, the width of the main block is about 20m. It is these dimensions which suggest a truly palatial scale for the structure and it is the interpretation of the relationship between rooms F and J which reveals whether or not we can speak of a 'palace'. It is possible to see here a great hall on the top terrace running out to the front edge of room F, a length which can only be estimated, but which may be as much as 30m with a width of 20m. It is a great pity that all we know about

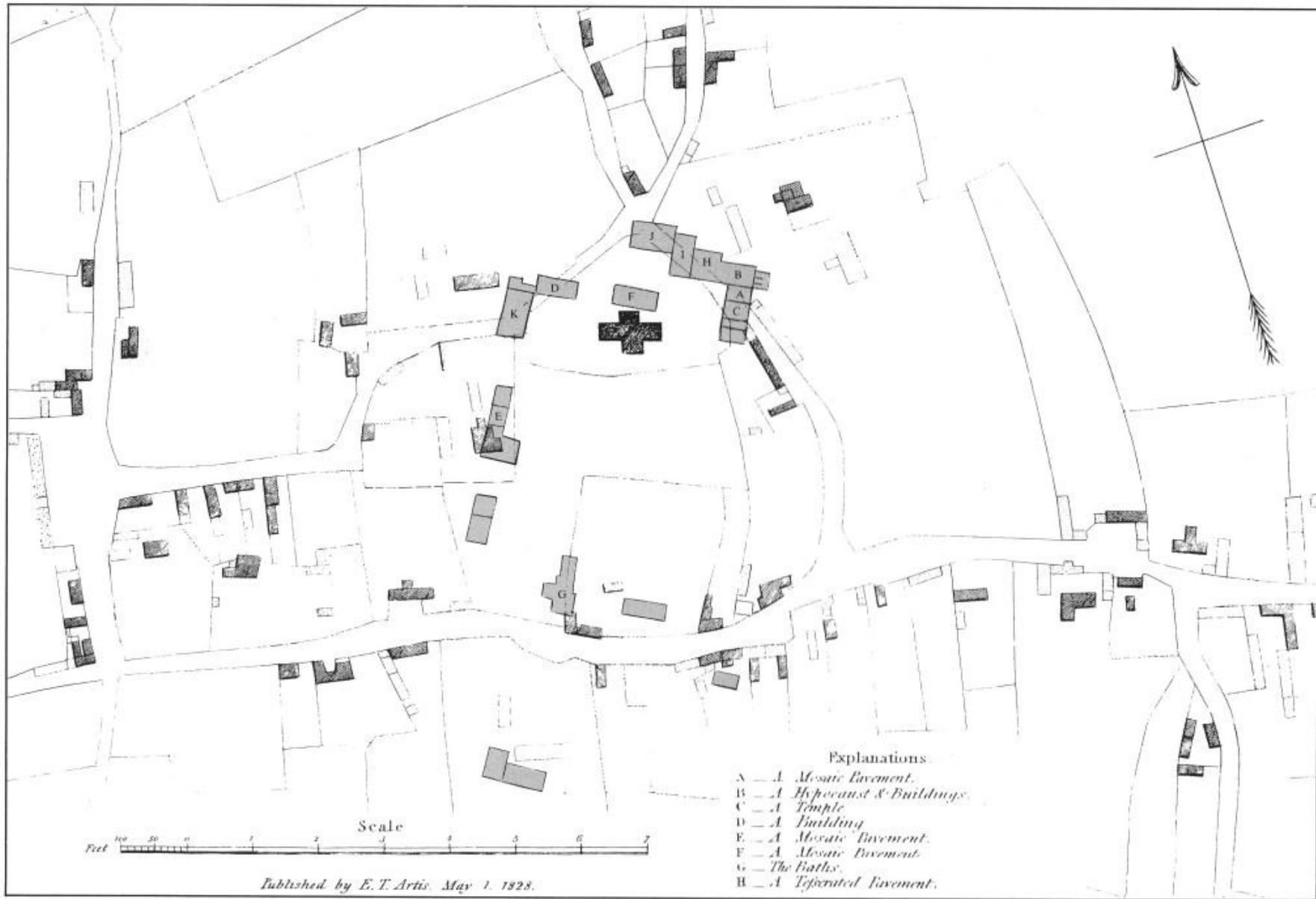


Fig 11 Artis' plan of the Roman buildings under Castor village (Roman remains shown by grey tone). Items I, J, K are explained in the text

these two rooms comes from outline representation on Artis' pl.XIII. It seems more than likely that Artis first found the Roman buildings when the lanes north of the church were cut down in order to improve their gradients; hence J may only have been detectable as foundations, and F itself was never fully opened because of the nearness of other burials. What should be borne in mind is that the back wall of F may have been only a revetment for the upper terrace and may have been the same as the apparent front wall of J.

Having arrived at a possible over-all plan, all that remains is to give some idea of how the building masses may have been arranged and this is done in the highly interpretative drawing here, figs. 12. The return of the wings inward is deduced from the foundations furthest up the hill slope in Stock's Hill, which belong to a right-angled wall junction in which both walls are major ones.

It is one matter to put forward the thought that here was a palace and another to see who, in c. 300 when it was built, may have used it. It is surely striking too high to think in terms of an imperial residence; coming down the social scale, it may have been intended for one of the major officials in the administration of the Britains. As *Durobrivae* would appear to be peripheral to any of the provinces of Roman Britain at this date, it does not seem likely that it was for a provincial governor. The presiding Vicar of the Britains would, presumably, have been based on London, but might have had a summer residence. Even so, Castor is probably too far north to have served as such.

If the civil administration has to be discounted, what about the military? There are only two officials who might be considered. One is the commander of the mobile field army within the island who, although York may be a more natural centre, could have operated from a base further south. Failing him, there is the Count of the Saxon Shore. His area of responsibility certainly lay more in the south than in the north, but in c. 300, he probably controlled both sides of the Channel. Yet for the site of a headquarters it should be noted that *Durobrivae* had good land communications, sitting, as it did, astride the main north-south and east-west routes in the East Midlands, and the Nene was navigable from the Wash to the town, thus giving good access to the whole of the east coast.

From a set of foundations and disjointed records has been created a major complex and a plan which accounts for all the known details. The site seems palatial; but if we put it forward as a palace in the strict sense of the word, we are left with the problem of determining for whom it could have been built! What *does* seem clear is that what lies under Castor (and was

later used as a Middle Saxon monastic site) looks much *more* than a great villa.

Bibliography

Artis (1828) E.T. Artis, *The Durobrivae of Antoninus*, 1828.

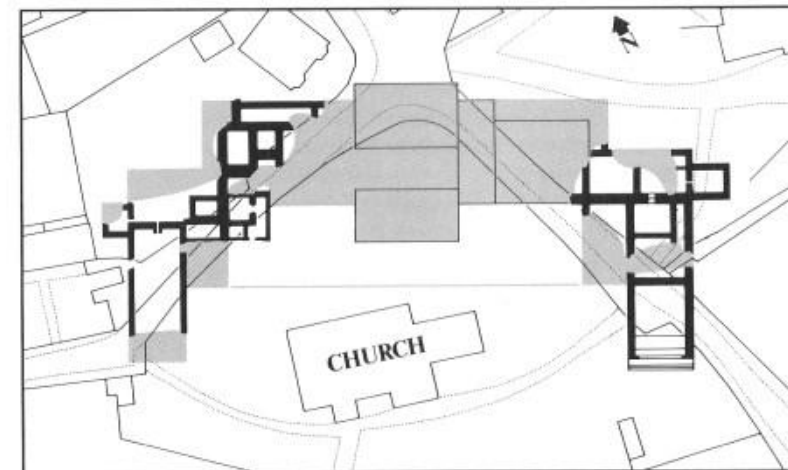


Fig 12A Castor: a reconstruction of the great Roman building showing the plan and probable outline (grey toned area)

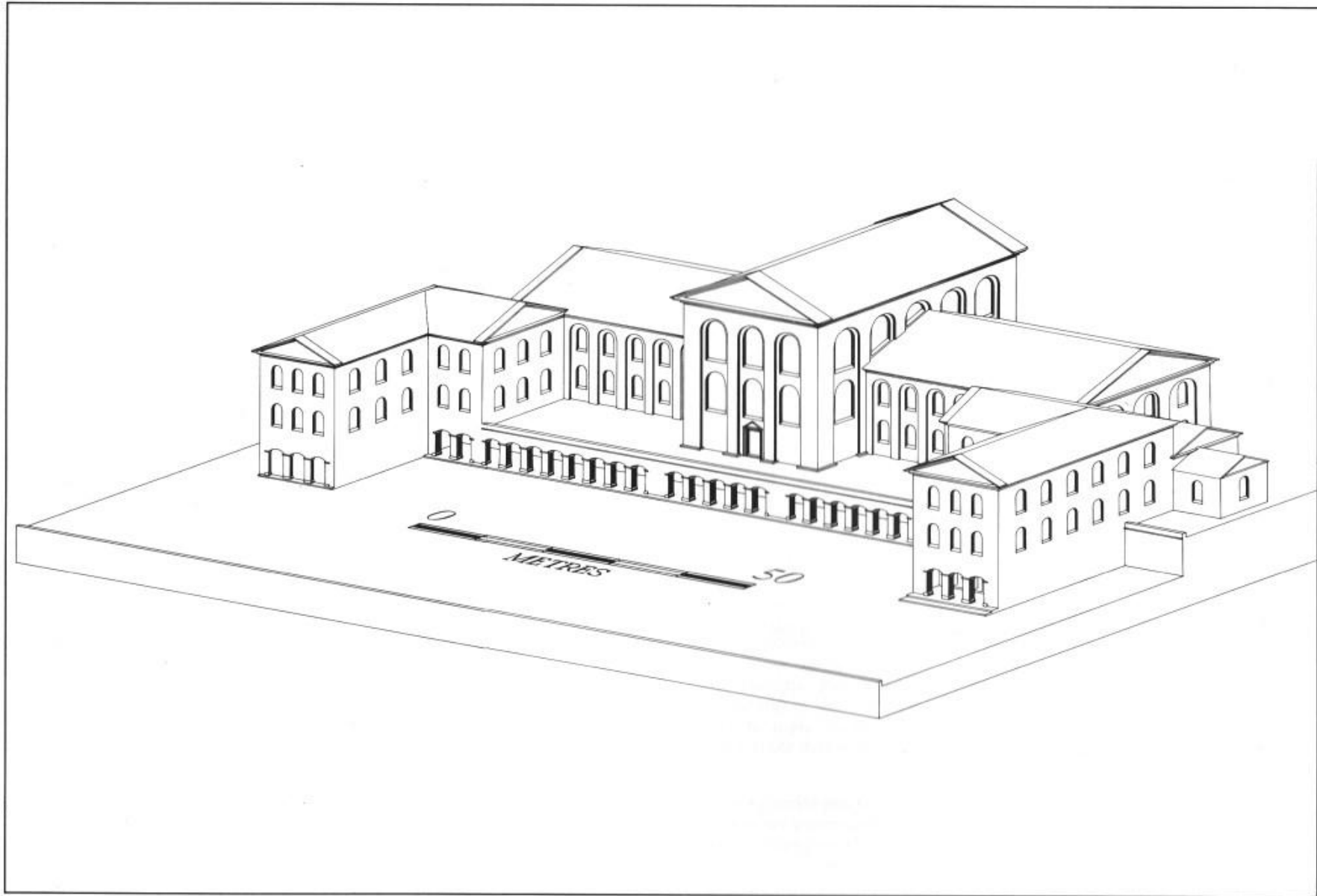


Fig 12B Castor: a reconstruction of the great Roman building