

## WHITEHALL ROMAN VILLA & LANDSCAPE PROJECT

### REPORT ON THE 2009 EXCAVATION

The 2009 excavation season at Whitehall Farm continued to be focused on the systematic investigation of Bathhouse 2 situated within the south eastern part of the villa complex. This is the third year of exploration on the structure which has turned out to be far larger and more complicated than originally supposed. In addition further fieldwork was undertaken on the late 1<sup>st</sup> to mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD transverse field ditch which was a significant feature in the pre villa landscape. This feature runs diagonally through the villa courtyard on an alignment that passes between the north east of the villa and south west of Bathhouse 1. This field boundary lies mainly beneath the 3<sup>rd</sup> /4<sup>th</sup> century AD gravel surfaces that form the courtyard of the main structural range. The material from the fill of this 'field ditch' is of considerable interest because it contains a valuable early pottery assemblage which is extremely helpful in understanding the stratigraphic for this phase of activity on the site.

A third area of archaeological interest was intended to finally clarify whether there was a pavilion room or wing built on the north eastern end of the villa. The area is considerably disturbed and the previous archaeological evidence we uncovered somewhat ambiguous and difficult to interpret. Further small scale work was also undertaken on Bathhouse 1 in relation to the removal of the remaining structural evidence of the north and south wall of Room 5. The archaeological intention was to investigate the surviving stratigraphy between it and the foundations of Room 4 which lies beneath it. This also led to the lifting and excavation of the capping on the leat or drainage channel supplying water to the culvert servicing Room 4 in Bathhouse 1. Some additional work continued on the area immediately to the east of Bathhouse 1 to examine the surviving elements of building walls for any structural connection between the two bathing facilities. It had also become critical to explore these features because those parts of the site containing the remaining uncovered elements of the villa range corridor, a significant part of the courtyard as well as the extensive remains of Bathhouse 1 were all scheduled to be recovered with plough soil. Our intention then was to grass the area over to help ensure better conservation of the ruins already excavated. Finally an investigative trial excavation was undertaken on a partly excavated distinctive geophysical anomaly to the south of the villa complex to ascertain the nature and meaning of the feature and whether it was a well head or not.

In parallel with the research excavation a comparative survey of the pottery and coin assemblages of our site and its neighbouring settlements has helped to construct a definitive chronological framework for Whitehall Farm and the surrounding villa economies. The importance of this general settlement chronology lies in the way it explains the archaeological context that spurred the origin and particular development of the villa complexes whilst also attesting to their subsequent economic performance as estates through time. Understanding the story of villas like Whitehall Farm ultimately enables us to profile and characterise this type of settlement and will

inform the basis of our future views, especially as the villa complex is the predominant mechanism for reflecting the level of Romanization of the locality.

We already know that the origin of our settlement lies in the late Iron Age and we can now confirm this is typical of many sites in the locality. However in the Roman period these farmstead and associated field systems undergo reorganisation and development during the late 1<sup>st</sup> to early 2<sup>nd</sup> century. A further period of rising prosperity can be observed through the subsequent enhancement of that growth in the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD as evidenced in the sheer quantity of material culture retrieved in the course of the excavation and other fieldwork. However it is now very apparent that earlier assumptions concerning the advent of the villa phase at Whitehall Farm are correct and we should be firmly linking their appearance to the major political and social upheavals of the Gallic Empire in the last quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. Specifically in relation to the devastating Germanic invasions that affected the Rhineland and Gallic provinces in the mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century and particularly in 276 AD when between 60 and 70 of the largest cities and their hinterlands are recorded as being destroyed in those provinces.

Not only did the military collapse on the Rhine have a devastating impact on urban life in the north western provinces but it must also have been extremely destructive and ruinous to the industrial and agricultural base of those territories. The Roman strategic response was to construct a new system of defence in depth allied to state sponsored commercial attempts to revitalise the countryside. However, well established large scale industries such as wool and textile must have been severely disrupted at this time as was the cultivation of grain. The dislocation would have been immense and sufficient to cause the inception of new approaches to deal with the challenges that abounded for supplying the clothing and essentials of life. It can be demonstrated that large numbers of villas in northern Gaul were abandoned probably because of these troubles whilst at the very same time British villas located particularly along the Jurassic limestone spine of the south west and Midlands such as Whitehall Farm and its neighbours appear to be conceived and begin to flourish approximately at this time. This indicates a situation where we see a 'flight of capital' from the stricken areas if not the actual relocation of the owners themselves. I am now sure the construction of villa complexes like Whitehall Farm and its partners may have been part of an organised and extensive commercial opportunistic response to meeting the economic challenges and industrial requirements of the north western provinces of the empire: a trading situation that became common place by the mid 4<sup>th</sup> century as reliance on Britain's grain production and fleet in the reign of the emperor Julian demonstrated.

An exciting link supported by our own findings is that all these villa estates were planted in the locality within a limited timescale covering less than a generation. In addition to our general chronology we can show our locality had a hierarchy in size, distribution and Romanization of the villas. The archaeological profiles of these display close structural, economic and cultural relationships similar to those one would expect with large centralised estates called 'latifundia' in the historical texts. This taken in conjunction with the perceived shift in the agricultural practice at Whitehall Farm and its neighbouring settlements from a mixed farming economy towards the rearing of sheep and wool production, as well as the strong cultural links indicated by the continental material culture available at the site from this exact

period, emphasises the bond between our locality and the north western provinces. The development of wool production in a more settled provincial background such as existed in our locality with its excellent communication links would make sound commercial sense in trying to meet the broader needs for raw material and finished goods for the textile industry of Northern Gaul.

Both the coinage and pottery assemblages from Whitehall Farm and the surrounding enclave suggest that this period of prosperity based on a continental trade system continued until circa 340 AD. The collapse of the trade was probably initiated by the death of Constantine II in the social and economic upheavals caused by the civil wars fought between the heirs of Constantine; a state of affairs that culminated in the usurpation of Magnentius (350-353 AD) and the assimilation of the Roman Empire by Constantius II after the former's defeat. It was a change of political circumstances that probably heralded the break up of the large privately owned 'latifundia' into either state run operations or a series of smaller independent estates as their landlord paid the price for supporting the losing imperial faction. Henceforth local estates would have been managed to meet the needs of the state or a more limited agricultural horizon based upon local and possibly regional farming requirements. Interestingly for Whitehall Farm this is exactly the era in which we see the construction and replacement of the large and well appointed bathhouse with more modest bathing facilities on a scale that reflects the new economic realities and priorities affecting the estate. However, we can also demonstrate that many of the more modest villas like Whitehall Farm continued to be reasonably prosperous well into the Valentinianic period (364-378) of the late 4<sup>th</sup> century. This is a condition which persisted to a degree into the early fifth century as indicated by the number of coins from the House of Theodosius which appear on most of the sites in the locality. The continuity of occupation in the locality is obviously further illustrated by the existence of the Post Roman timber hall at the centre of the estate which survived into the mid 6<sup>th</sup> century AD although most likely on an increasingly less productive scale of subsistence agriculture.

At Bathhouse 2 there is enough dating evidence to confirm these bathing facilities are the earliest on site and that they were contemporary with the initial construction of the main villa range and its enclosure. The late 3<sup>rd</sup> century date is probably instrumental in determining the comparatively large size and sophistication of the bath house. It would appear to reflect the measure of resources available to a new enterprise with international links that formed part of a much larger commercial unit whereas the smaller bathhouse that replaced it speaks of a different lower level of resource geared much more directly to the requirements of a self sufficient unpretentious villa estate. It is beyond doubt that the surviving archaeological remains of Bathhouse 2 building were methodically 'robbed' by the mid 4<sup>th</sup> century AD and the area sealed by a later layer of building debris and earth which probably represented a levelling of the plot for other uses in the ensuing decade. However the substantial elements of foundations and hypocaust systems in several rooms have survived the reclaiming process in situ with enough remaining to provide detailed evidence of the civil engineering methods employed in the construction process.

Bathhouse 2 has at least three rooms containing hypocausts one of which is apsidal in shape. The size, layout and construction of these rooms indicate several more rooms remain to be uncovered before the plan of the structure will finally be revealed.

Overall these rooms cover three times as much floor space as the hypocaust excavated in Bathhouse I. The 'step foundations' of the west wall are exceedingly large and are similar to those underpinning Room 4 in Bathhouse 1. Again it demonstrates the care exercised when dealing with the constructional issues of building along the contour of a slope. A series of wooden lined drains servicing the bathing facility also show how intricate the drainage system was in this area. Their exact role in the day to day activities of the bathhouse will be revealed next year when they are excavated. The size of the hypocaust supports (pilae), floor tiles and fragments of painted plaster have also aided our understanding of these elements of the structure and its interior design.

A total of 1194 sherds were retrieved during the excavation with another 14 Roman coins also recovered making an overall assemblage of 541 Roman coins. All of these coins were legible with 6 of 3<sup>rd</sup> century and 8 of 4<sup>th</sup> century AD date. The overall site assemblage of identifiable coins is 466 but unfortunately 12% of all the coins recovered from the excavation and fieldwork are too corroded for any sort of interpretation apart from being generally attributable to the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.

A considerable length of the early field ditch was excavated which confirmed the findings of the archaeological excavation already undertaken although no new credible evidence was produced for the existence of a pavilion or a range of rooms to form a wing for the villa. The demolition of the villa range in the Post Roman period, with the creation of a terrace for the timber phase of buildings and the extensive 'robbing' of the site in the late 18<sup>th</sup> early 19<sup>th</sup> century have obscured any meaning. All that can be said with any confidence is that there is no evidence of any wall foundations or 'robber' trenches in this area that could be associated with such structures and that we should deduce from this that none ever existed. In the excavation of the remaining elements of Room 5 in Bathhouse 1 the stratigraphic sequence was re-confirmed and the association of the drainage culvert with Room 4 understood and recorded; perhaps the most striking feature of the walls in Room 5 being the poor quality construction methods employed in building them. The excavation of the geophysical anomaly didn't reveal any features of particular interest either and those that we revealed and recorded appear to be the remains of two field ditches which crossed at this location.

We were also able to hold another open day which was very well attended and attracted over 1100 people although a significant proportion of them were children. The day went very well and a substantial profit was made to help pay for all of the things we shall need for the academic report.