

Littlecote Roman Villa

Littlecote Roman Villa - 6. Exploring and Understanding the villa today

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Why is the Littlecote Roman Villa so special?

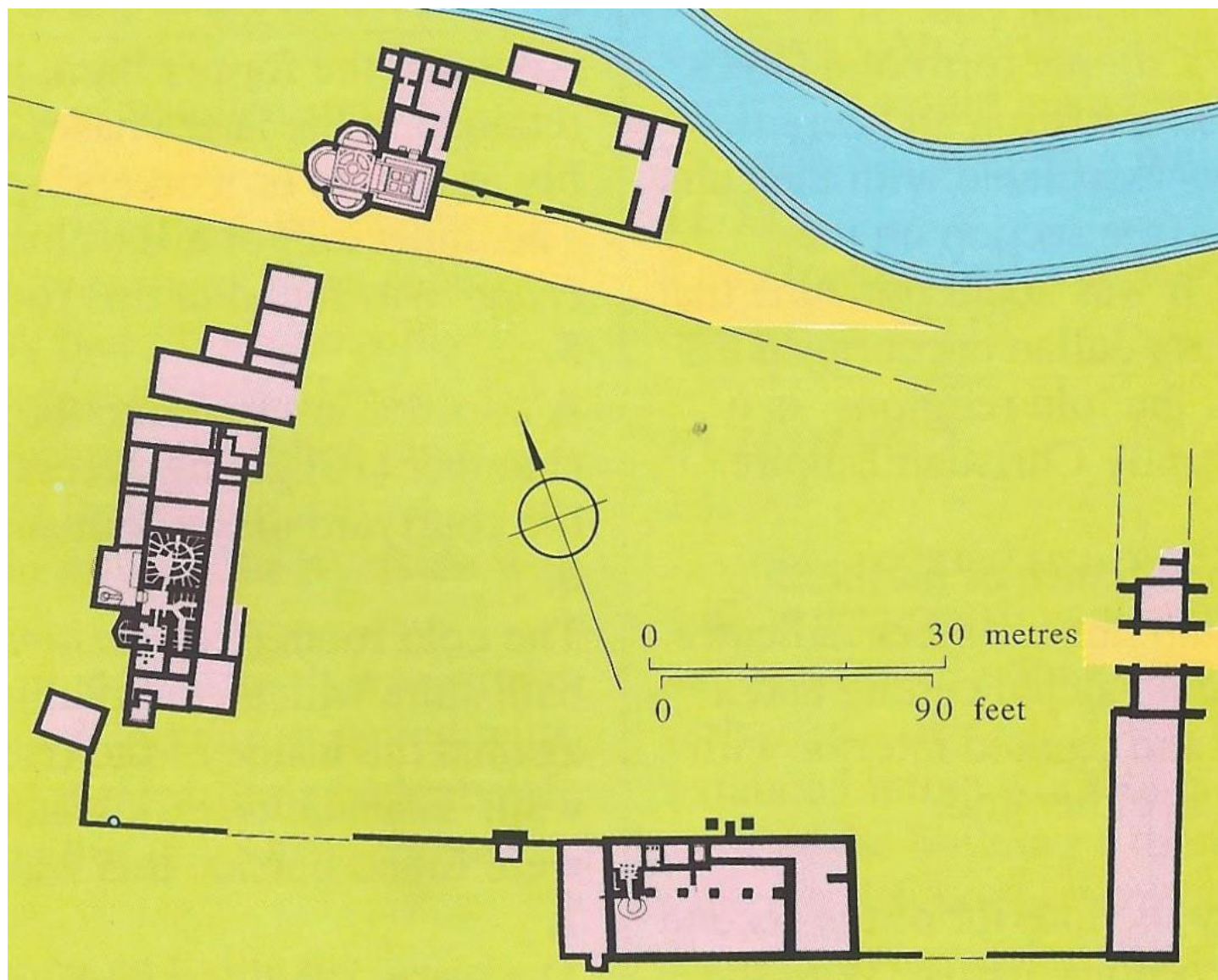
- It is the largest fully exposed Roman villa in Britain
- It is the best-preserved Roman villa above ground in Britain
- It had the largest gatehouse of any Roman villa in Britain
- It had the earliest triconch (triple apse) hall in the Roman world
- It has the finest Orpheus mosaic in Britain – the fourth largest and arguably the finest Roman mosaic on display in Britain.



**An aerial view of the villa as restored, 1991
(Note the gravel within the villa rooms and the old roadway)**

Exploring the site:

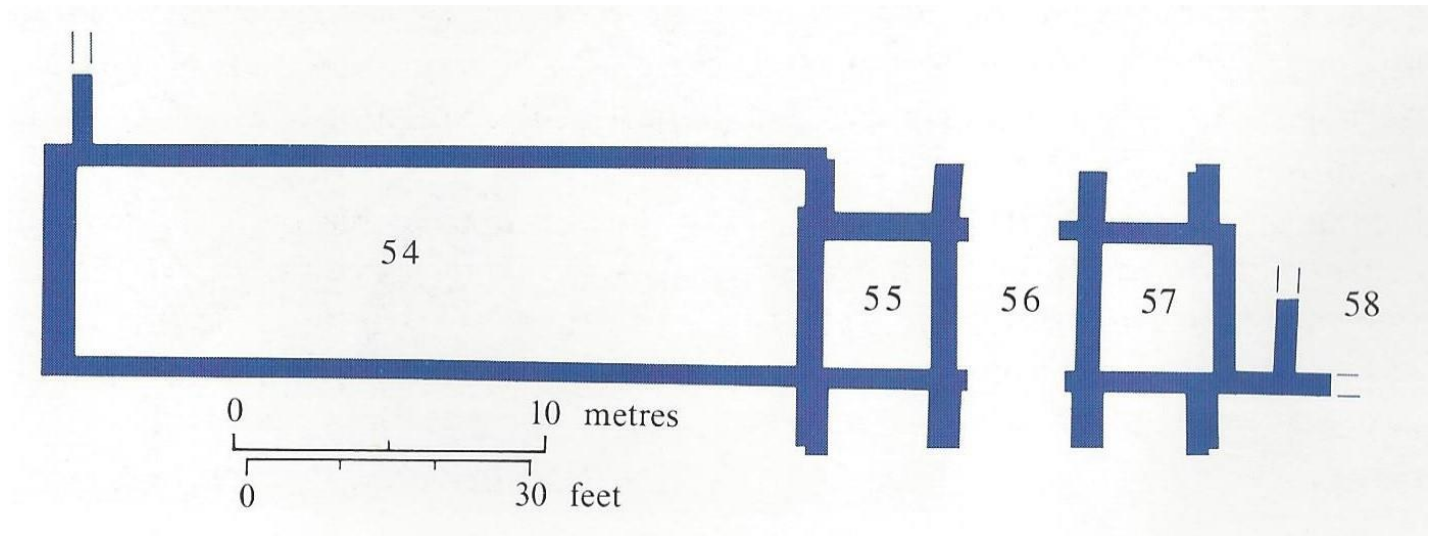
The villa has four ranges of buildings set around a large rectangular courtyard, approximately 100 metres square. Most of the walls of all four ranges can be seen in the aerial photo above. There were no buildings on the north-east part adjacent to the river.



Plan of the villa remains as displayed, representing AD365

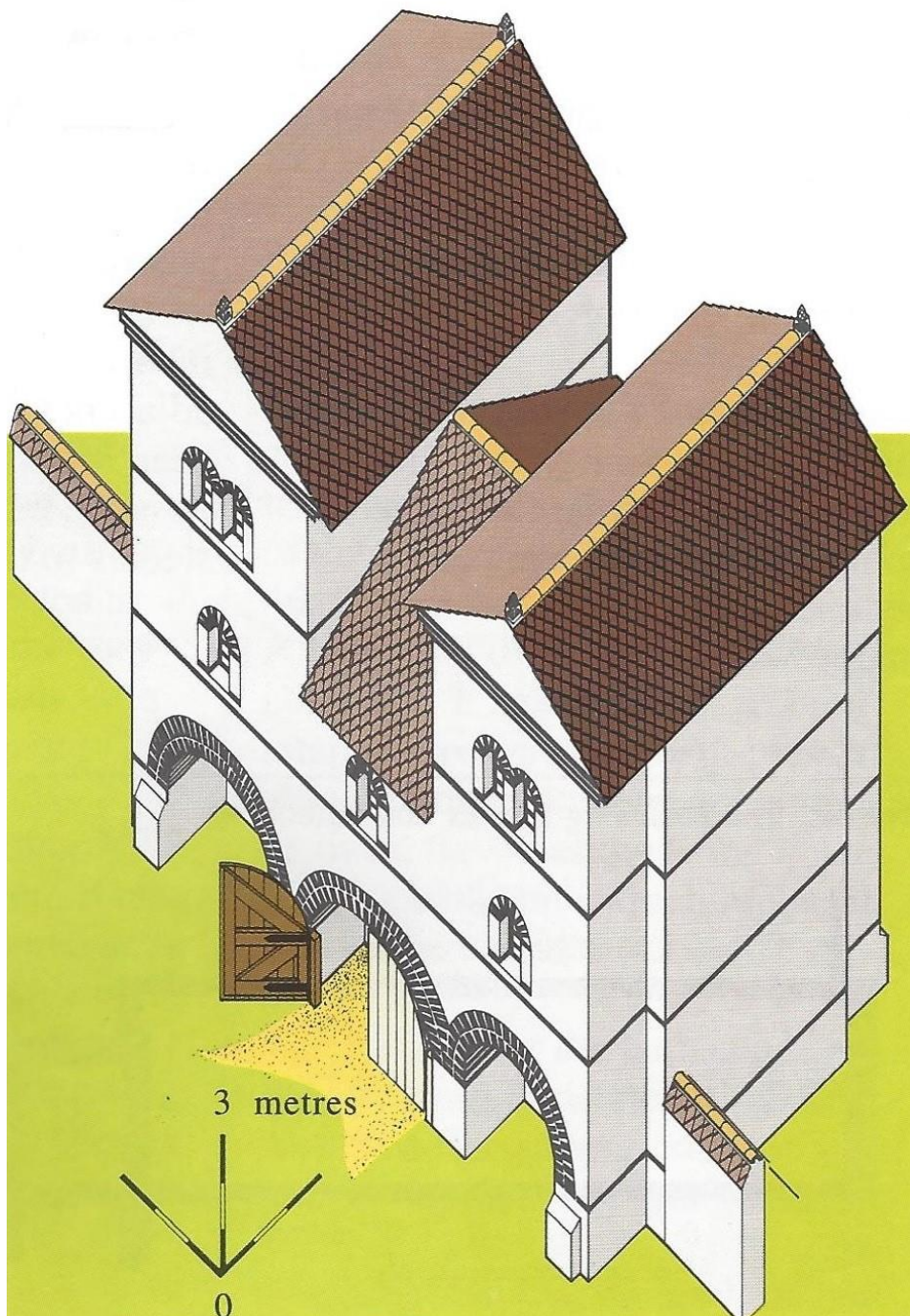
The east range – gatehouse and stable block:

The east range was built around AD 290-300 (Phase 4), when the villa acquired the enclosed courtyard form.



Plan of the east range – stables and gatehouse.

An impressive gatehouse (55-57) with an entrance passage (56) was built, faced on its east and west sides with three arched vaults to support extended rooms on the upper floors, possibly for grain storage. The buttresses are very substantial at over 1 metre deep, and the gatehouse is considered to be the most massive of any villa in Britain.



The gatehouse (55-57).

To the south of the gatehouse is a large building (54) whose use is unclear. There is a series of post-pads and post-poles adjacent to its east wall, and these may have been supports for stalls. This “Building 7” is thought to be a stable block which replaced an earlier one in the west wing.

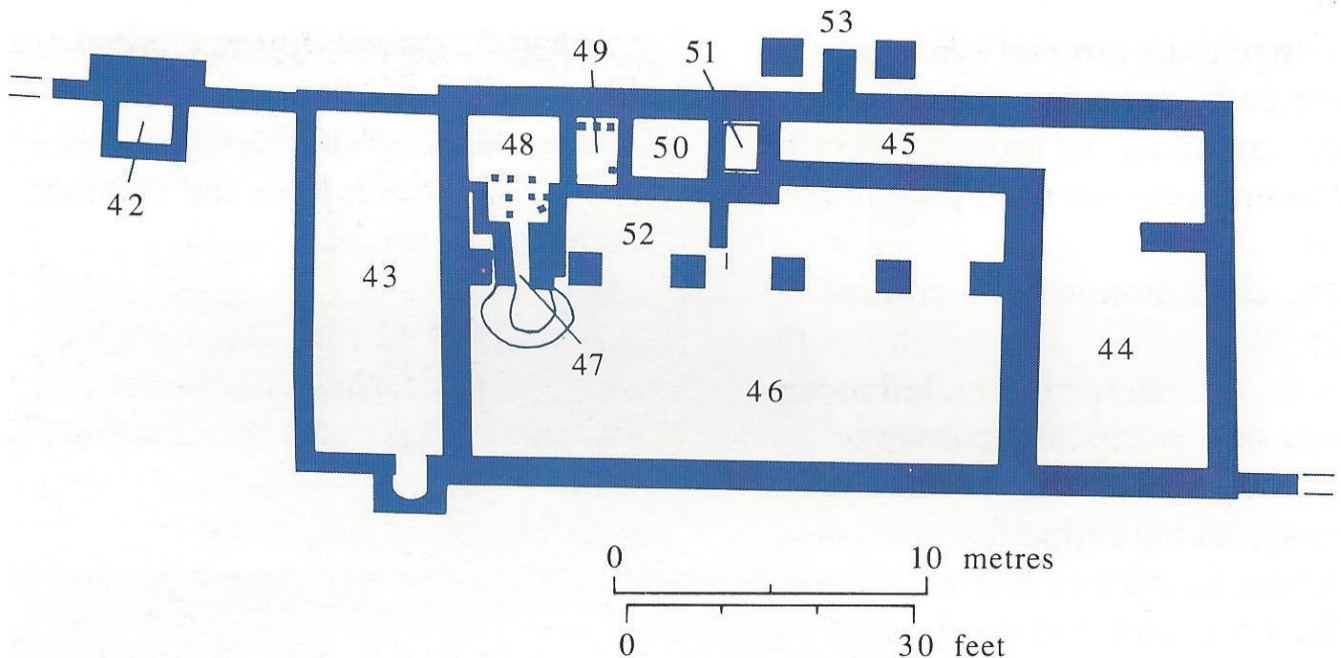
A similar large room (58) continued this east wing northwards, creating a closed façade to the villa. (Nothing remains of this because of an extensive late medieval cutting).

The south range (Building 6), domestic dwelling and baths, c.AD 270-280.

The south range began in the 3rd century as a **large barn-like building** sometime around AD 200-250.

Around AD 270 it was transformed when the barn underwent major alterations; a rear doorway was blocked, a wide cross-wall was erected towards the east end, and internal corridor wall was built, and a row of pads was constructed to hold columns supporting the roof along its centre line.

A **bath suite** was added in later alterations.



The south range

42 – Originally a free-standing flint-built structure, possibly a **garden shrine**, it was later incorporated into the courtyard wall. A projecting façade was added later.

43 – Attached to the west end shortly after its construction, it may have served for general domestic or farming purposes. Its south end was demolished late in the third century and a small projecting apse, intended to form the heated section of a bath suite, was constructed but never completed.

44 – The erection of the cross-wall formed a large room (44) which was entered via the new corridor (45). (Function unknown).

45 – An unusually narrow forward corridor which originally extended from room 44 to the west wall of the former barn.

46 – A large hall divided by a row of columns. It appears to have been later subdivided, one half, presumably, became a kitchen containing an oven, the other the firing chamber of a bath suite which replaced part of the corridor (45).

47 – **The *prae-furnium* (furnace) of the bath suite**, inserted c.AD 280. The tiled flue supported a hot water tank to supply a hot plunge bath.

48 – **The *caldarium* (hot room).** A hot plunge bath probably existed adjacent to the furnace.

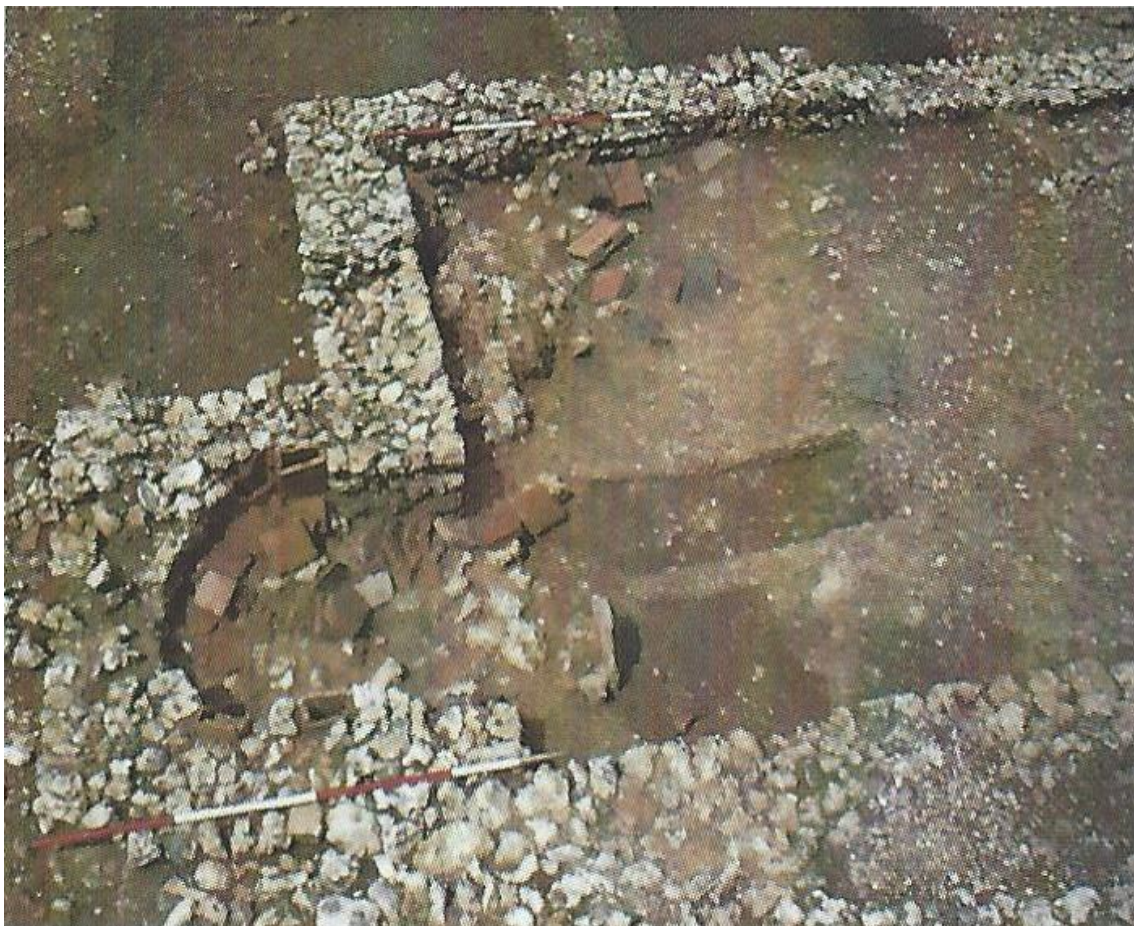
49 – **The *tepidarium* (warm room).**

50 – **The *frigidarium* (cold room).**

51 – **The cold plunge bath.** This room was floored and walled with crushed tile cement (*opus signinum*). A lead pipe (original now in the museum) carried wastewater from the bath into an external flint-lined drain.

52 – **The *apodyterium* (changing room)** of which only part of one wall survives. The wall on the south side incorporated the columns supporting the roof.

53 – The foundations of the most imposing **entrance porch** on the villa. Its remains indicate that two large columns supported a pitched pedimented roof over a central stepped entrance.



Room 43 – the unfinished bath suite under excavation

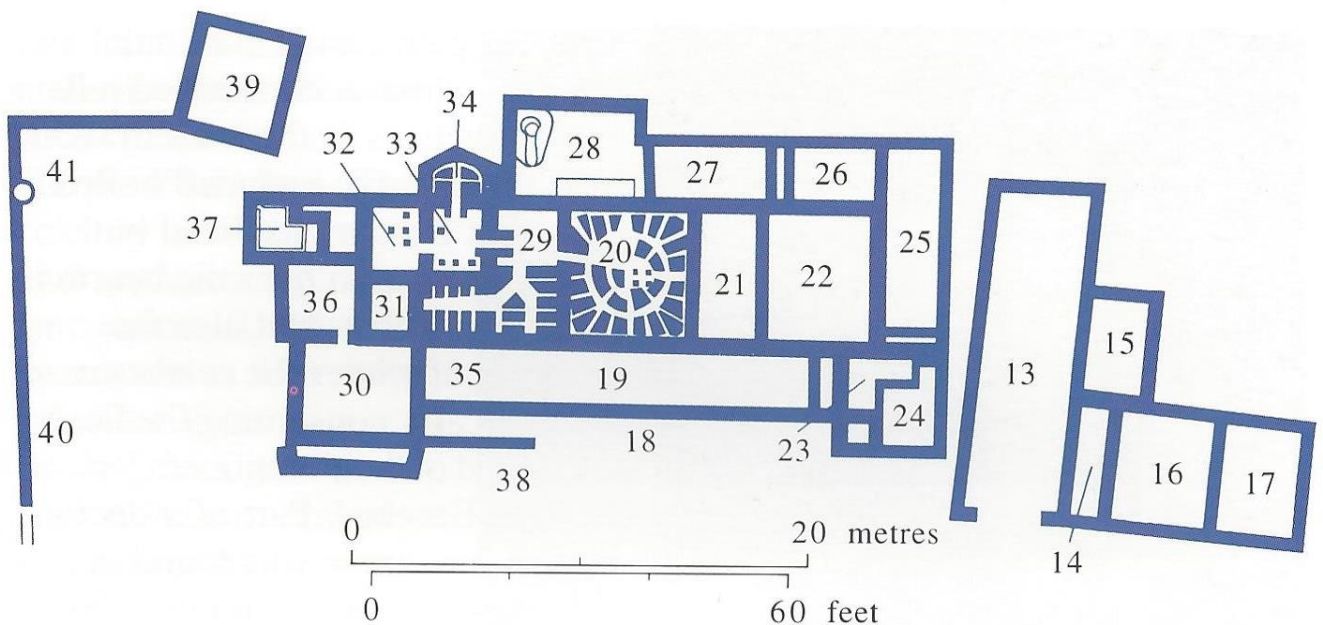
The west range – the Villa House (Building 3), initially c.AD 170, rebuilt c.AD 270:

Building 3, the villa house (18-37) presents a very confusing picture.

In its earliest form, c.AD 170, there was a corridor with a central porch fronting a range of rooms. It was probably two storeys high.

Additions and alterations, in particular the rebuilding in c.AD 270, present the confusing ground plan seen today.

As with a modern mansion, the rooms were for the needs of a family and its servants. Decay and collapse of the building early in the fifth century, and subsequent robbing, have reduced the remains to floor level.



The west range – Building 3, the Villa House and Building 2, the Workers' Cottage.

18 – The base of the original **entrance porch** (reburied).

19 – **The *porticus*** (front corridor).

20 – **The *triclinium*** (central dining and reception room). Around AD 220 its floor was removed, and a circular channelled hypocaust was then laid. By c.AD 270 the floor was removed, and the channels infilled with building debris. A new mosaic floor was then laid of which little survived.

The *triclinium* takes its name from the Latin for 'three couches', which would be arranged around three side of a square, with the guests reclining on them and dining off tables.

21 – **A cross-corridor** giving access to the adjacent rooms and corridors. It may have contained a stairway.

22 – **Probably a living room**, it was re-floored at least once – finally in mosaic. A gold betrothal ring of the third century was found in the mortar bedding of the mosaic.

23 – This room, at the northern end of the *porticus*, served as a **passageway** between rooms 19 and 25 allowing privacy to room 24.

24 – This oddly shaped room was tessellated in hard white chalk. During the major alterations of c.AD 270 this room, and room 23, was demolished to make way for a single square room, possibly the base for a tower.

25 – Perhaps, initially, a **store-room**, it gave access from the servants' austere working area to the more comfortable private quarters.

26 – This room may have been the **original kitchen**. It contained traces of an oven beneath a later mortar floor.

27 – Adjacent to the kitchen, this room may have served as a pantry.

28 – The main kitchen (possibly the best excavated Roman kitchen in Britain) added to the house c.AD 190. On the east side was a ledge inset with timber posts (modern replacements in original sockets). The ledge also gave support to the main wall foundation when the ground was lowered for the kitchen floor, and it also served as a cooking range; smoke would have vented through the roof via a hood supported by the posts. In the south-west corner are the remains of an oven. Next to the oven is a doorway which gave access to the rear courtyard. The kitchen floor was replaced at least twelve times. Between each floor level sealed ash contained evidence of the household diet: animal, bird and fish bones, eggshells, oyster, mussel and whelk shells, hazel nut shells and carbonised grains were found.

Continuing the tour of the west range:

29 - **The *prae-furnium* (furnace room)** of the early house, from which the main dining room (20) and the rooms of the bath house were heated.

During the alterations of c.AD 270 the furnace room was infilled with building debris, and, together with part of room 34, became a cross-corridor linking the kitchen with the front porticus.

30 – Originally a 'T'-shaped chamber leading off the porticus, this room was the ***apodyterium* (changing rooms)** of the house baths, in which the bathers would undress before proceeding through the baths.

During the modifications of c.AD 270 this room was demolished, and, like rooms 23 and 24, was replaced with a tower, the ground floor of which was heated by a hypocaust.

31 – **A small antechamber** which gave access to the bath suite.

32-35 - The underfloor heating systems to the bath suite. The floors of these rooms were supported on tile stacks allowing circulation of hot gases beneath. They were destroyed during the remodelling of the villa house c.AD 270.

32- **The *tepidarium* (the warm room)** of the baths.

33 – **The caldarium (hot-damp room)** of the baths.

34 – The heating chamber for an apsidal hot water bath. It was pulled down c.AD 270 and replaced by a small ante-room to room 23 (not shown). The external drain for this bath can be seen in the yard outside.

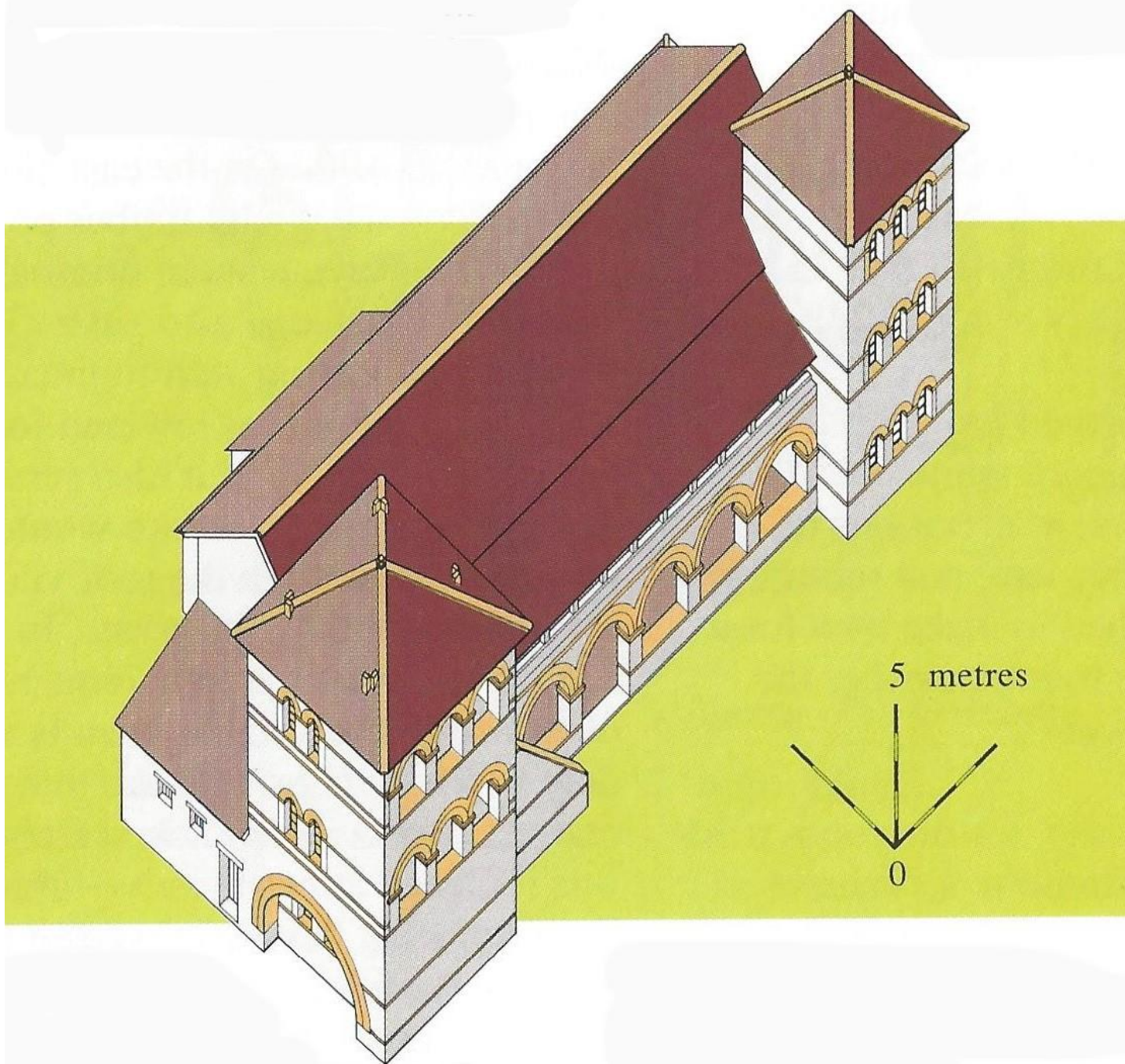
35 – **The laconicum (dry-heat room)** was an addition of c.AD 220 to the bath suite to give bathers an alternative to the damp heat system. Demolition of the baths during the alterations of c.AD 270 created a large unheated room from rooms 31,32,33 and part of 35. This was floored with a mosaic, only a fragment of its border survived.

36 – **The frigidarium (cold room)** of the baths, where a bather could cool off gradually, or more quickly by dipping into the cold plunge bath (37).

37 – **The cold plunge bath**, entered by a flight of steps. The ceiling of the bath was probably vaulted as the east and west walls converge slightly. The bath was painted in interlocking red and white 'L' shapes below the waterline, and with floral and aquatic scenes above.

In c.AD 270 the cold room and bath were demolished, and a single chamber created that served as a wood store and praefurnium for the new hypocaust in room 30. A doorway in the south wall gave access from the main courtyard.

38 – This was an addition of the mid-fourth century and is associated with an extension to room 30 when the south tower was enlarged. The shallow foundation and its position suggest that it was the base for an **external stairway** to an upper gallery.



The west range villa house, c.AD 365



Artist Trevor Caley's impression of the west range c.AD 360-365

West range - Building 4, possibly a worker's cottage:

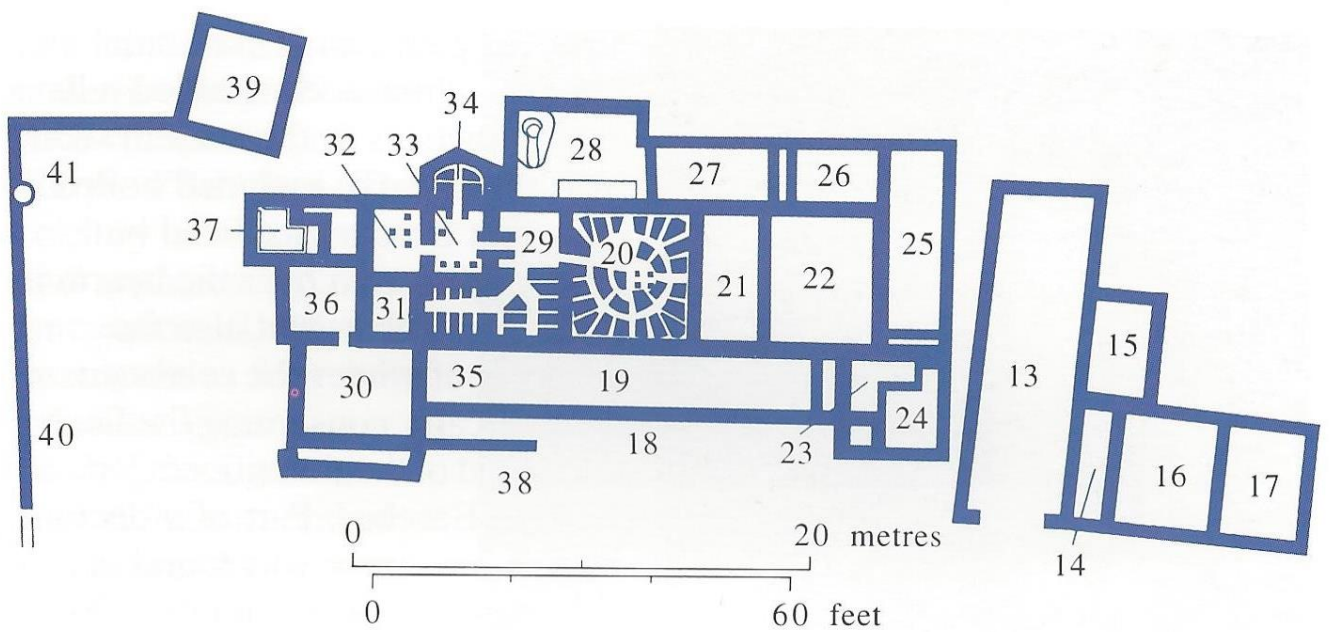
39 – A single-roomed structure, probably a **worker's cottage**, erected c.AD 260.

40 – A free-standing courtyard wall of c.AD 280, which joins the southern corner of room 39.



Excavating The 2nd century well (41)

41 – A **well**, built of flint blocks, which supplied the earlier villa house and its baths. It predated the courtyard wall.



The west range – Building 3, the Villa House, and Building 2, the Workers' Cottage.

West range - Building 2 – a worker's cottage:

13 – A single-roomed structure of c.AD 170, it was possibly a smokehouse as it contained a long central hearth (reburied).

By c.AD 240 it was extended into a workshop.

North-west of the building a ditch contained a fish pool (reburied).

Excavation revealed that a section of the western wall had collapsed inwards, traces of a roof plate indicate that the wall stood to a height of 6.10 metres (20 feet).

14-17 – **A workers' cottage.** This group of rooms of c.AD 280 consisted of a corridor (14) linked to a possible kitchen (15).

Rooms 16 and 17 were living rooms. An infant burial was found in a corner of room 17.

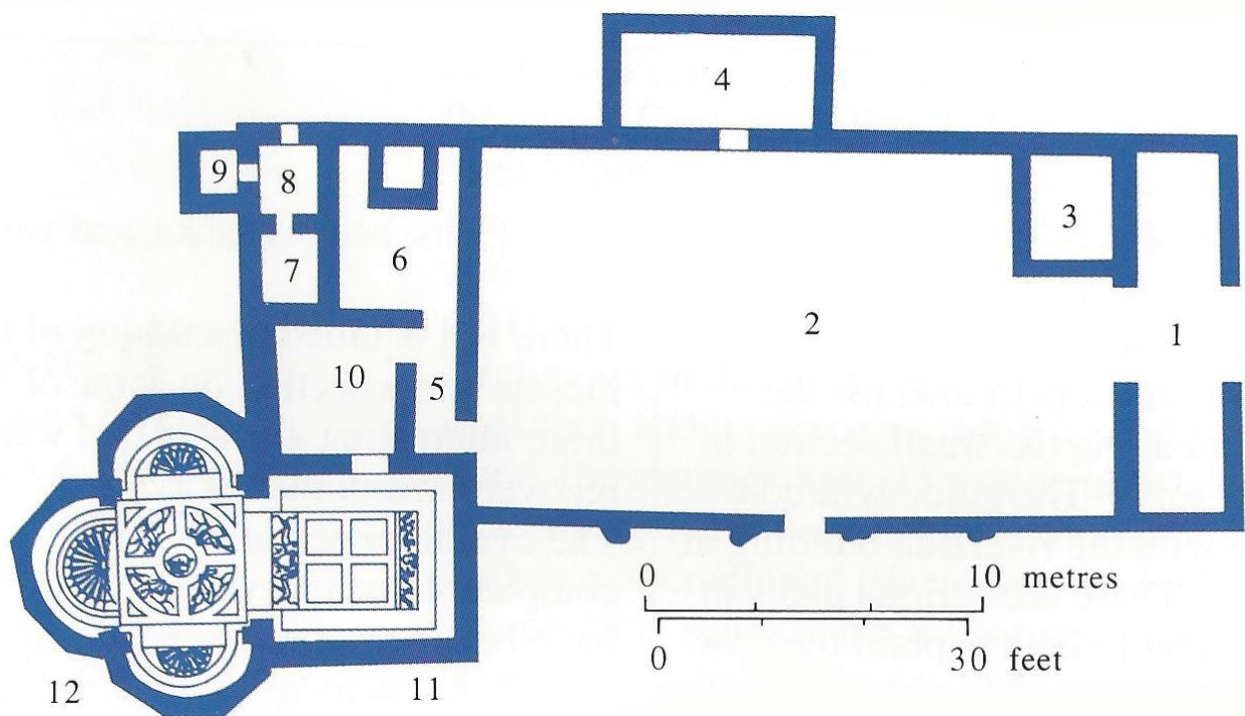
The north range - the Orphic building (Building 1):

The Orphic Building:

This structure was converted shortly after c.AD 360 from a third century flint-built barn with a bath suite at its western end.

1 – The *narthex* (main entrance). Debris from this chamber indicates that it had a vaulted ceiling and a plastered and painted interior with windows at either end.

2 – Originally the interior of the second and third century barns. With the removal of the roof, it became an open paved courtyard, probably for private gatherings.



The north range, incorporating the Orphic Hall

3 – Built into the east corner of the courtyard, it was seemingly used as a mosaicist's workshop.

4 – Added to the former barn, it was retained in the later phases, possibly as a store or workers' quarters. The upper half of a Bacchic wine crater was found in this room.

5 – A corridor inserted into the ante-chamber (10) giving access from the courtyard to the bath suite.

6 – **The *frigidarium* (cold room)** of the bath suite with a cold plunge bath against the riverside wall. Foundations for water tanks were found outside this wall.

7 – **The tepidarium (warm room)** of the bath suite. It was probably entered from the corner of the frigidarium by a flight of wooden steps.

8 – **The caldarium (hot room)** adjoining the tepidarium. Both rooms originally had floors, possibly tessalated, raised on tile stacks (*pilae*) around which hot gases circulated from a furnace set at the tiled stoke-hole in the riverside wall.

9 – **The hot plunge bath.** It was similarly heated and was supplied with piped hot water from a tank above the fire in the stoke-hole entrance.

10 – **The ante-room to the mosaic chambers.** The cooking range was inserted at a later date, the same time as room 5 when the building was reduced to a peasant-like dwelling. An earlier sarsen stone fire-place would have been in use at the time of the Orphic hall.

11-12 – **The Orphic Hall and Mosaic.** The Orphic Hall contains the fourth largest mosaic ever found in Britain, and arguably the finest mosaic in Britain.



Artist Trevor Caley's impression of the riverside building c.AD 360-365

From farm to “Orphic collegium” - the major changes of c.AD 360:

The excavation revealed that the villa complex was being extensively modified by the end of the third century, and that all agricultural activity had ceased by the mid fourth century.

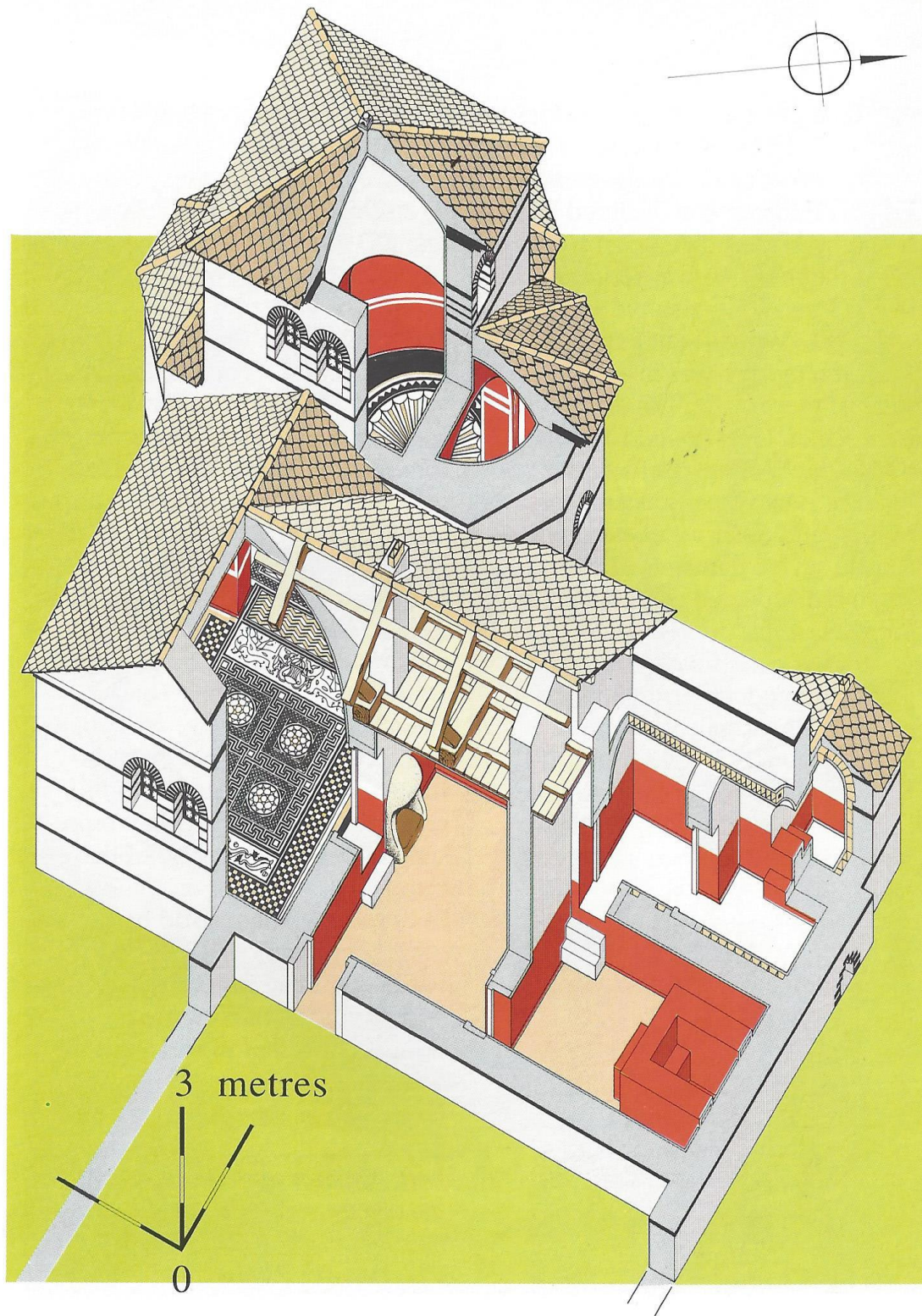
The site changed from being essentially a farm, albeit a large one, to become ceremonial complex or *tenemos* (a piece of ground surrounding or adjacent to a temple; a sacred enclosure or precinct), a *collegium* or pagan monastery, for followers of a sect based on the cult of Bacchus and the legends of Orpheus and Bacchus. Bacchus, the Roman god of agriculture, wine and fertility, was equivalent to the Greek god Dionysus. He was considered to be a saviour deity who promised eternal life to his followers.

But why was the Littlecote villa transformed from a farm complex to a sacred site? One possibility is that the transformation occurred during the reign of the pagan emperor Julian the Apostate (reigned 361-363 AD), who rejected Christianity and tried to return the Roman Empire to the 'old religions'. During and after Julian's brief reign many pagan temples and shrines in Britain were restored and new ones built. This may well be what happened here at Littlecote.

During this period of change remarkable architectural innovations took place:

- An elaborate twin-towered gatehouse had been erected and the south tower on the main house was enlarged.
- Both structures had been fitted with larger upper chambers above the smaller ground-floor rooms, the upper levels being supported on projecting external arched vaults.
- This was followed in about AD 360 by the rapid construction of a towered and polygonally faceted triconch chamber in the north range, housing the ‘Orpheus’ mosaic.

This triconch building is unique in Roman Britain. It conforms to a pattern later adopted for churches in the Byzantine empire of the sixth century onwards in having polygonal exteriors to its apses, but the Littlecote building pre-dates these by at least a century. Bryn Walters considers it to be the earliest building of this style from the Roman world, having been firmly dated by archaeology (a sealed coin of Constantius II (emperor AD 337 to 361) providing a *terminus post quem* [earliest date established with certainty]) to c.AD 361.



Cut-away drawing of the Orphic Hall and baths, shown from the east

What was the Orphic Hall used for?

So many features suggest strongly that the Orphic Hall performed a ceremonial or religious function related a syncretic cult of Orpheus, Apollo and Bacchus.

The Orphic Hall, with its grand entrance hall and unique triconch sacrum and fabulous mosaic floor, may have witnessed the initiation ceremonies of celebrants into the cult. These may have included cleansing in the adjacent bath suite and ceremonial feasting which often accompanied religious practices in the ancient world. The feast may have included boiled meat, cut from a sacrificed bull, perhaps prepared over the hearth in the antechamber, and it is very likely to have included the drinking of wine – the celebrants symbolically consuming the flesh and blood of their sacrificed God Zagreus (Bacchus).

This conjecture is supported by some of the historic finds at the site including:

- Part of a decorated wine crater was found in a side chamber of the inner court (room 4).
- Two bronze heads were found in a field behind the villa - one of Bacchus himself (or one of his companion *maenads*), and the other of a youthful Bacchus representing the rebirth of the God rising from the head of a flower, similar to those in the corners of the square enclosing the circle of goddesses.

See also:

- [Littlecote Roman Villa - 1. Introduction.](#)
- [Littlecote Roman Villa - 2. The history of the villa, AD 60 - 1700.](#)
- [Littlecote Roman Villa - 3. The Discovery of the mosaic, 1727.](#)
- [Littlecote Roman Villa - 4. The Rediscovery and restoration of the villa, 1976-1991.](#)
- [Littlecote Roman Villa - 5. The Conservation Plan, 2019-2024.](#)
- [Littlecote Roman Villa - 6. Exploring and Understanding the villa today.](#)

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- [Archaeological Excavations in Littlecote Park Wiltshire, 1978 - First Interim Report](#)
 - [Archaeological Excavations in Littlecote Park Wiltshire, 1979 & 80 - Second Interim Report](#)
 - [Archaeological Excavations in Littlecote Park Wiltshire, 1981 & 82 - Third Interim Report and Guide](#)
 - [Archaeological Excavations in Littlecote Park Wiltshire, 1983 & 84 - Site Guide and Fourth Interim Report](#)
 - [Littlecote Roman Villa - Illustrated Guide](#)

Details

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