

2: A Roman Villa near Rossett

by **Caroline Pudney and Steve Greuter***

In the light of the discovery of the Roman lead ingot near Rossett in 2019, a partnership project was established between the University of Chester and Wrexham Museum with the aim of investigating its wider archaeological context. As part of this, the footprint of a winged-corridor villa was identified. This article outlines the initial findings and their potential significance.

Introduction

In October 2020 geophysical surveys were conducted at a site in Burton Green, Rossett, by the University of Chester, Wrexham Museum and Archaeological Survey West as part of a project entitled 'In the Footsteps of Trebellius Maximus'. The results revealed a Roman winged corridor villa, outbuildings, associated field system and trackway. The existence of the complex had been hinted at through stray finds and metal detecting over a number of years, and a subsequent Historic Environment Record entry postulated a high-status Roman building, possibly a villa. Through magnetometry, the presence of a villa has now been confirmed.

Archaeological background

The discovery near Rossett in September 2019 of a lead ingot inscribed with the name of Trebellius Maximus, the governor of Roman Britain from AD 63 to 69, raised important questions about the character and intensity of activity across north-east Wales and north-west England, especially the northern part of what is now Wrexham County Borough. This part of the borough is largely bereft of known Roman sites. A postulated Roman road (Margary 66a) extends south from the fortress at Chester before heading south-westwards through Ffrith and then onwards through Bala to Brithdir (SH 7721880) near Dolgellau. Roman sites around Wrexham town such as Plas Coch indicate industrial activity (pottery production) and the production of agricultural surplus (these will be returned to later in the discussion), yet a large area to the north and west remains largely empty of identified Roman sites. The discovery of the ingot therefore prompted a broader investigation, not only into the context of the ingot itself but also into Roman activity more generally in the area.

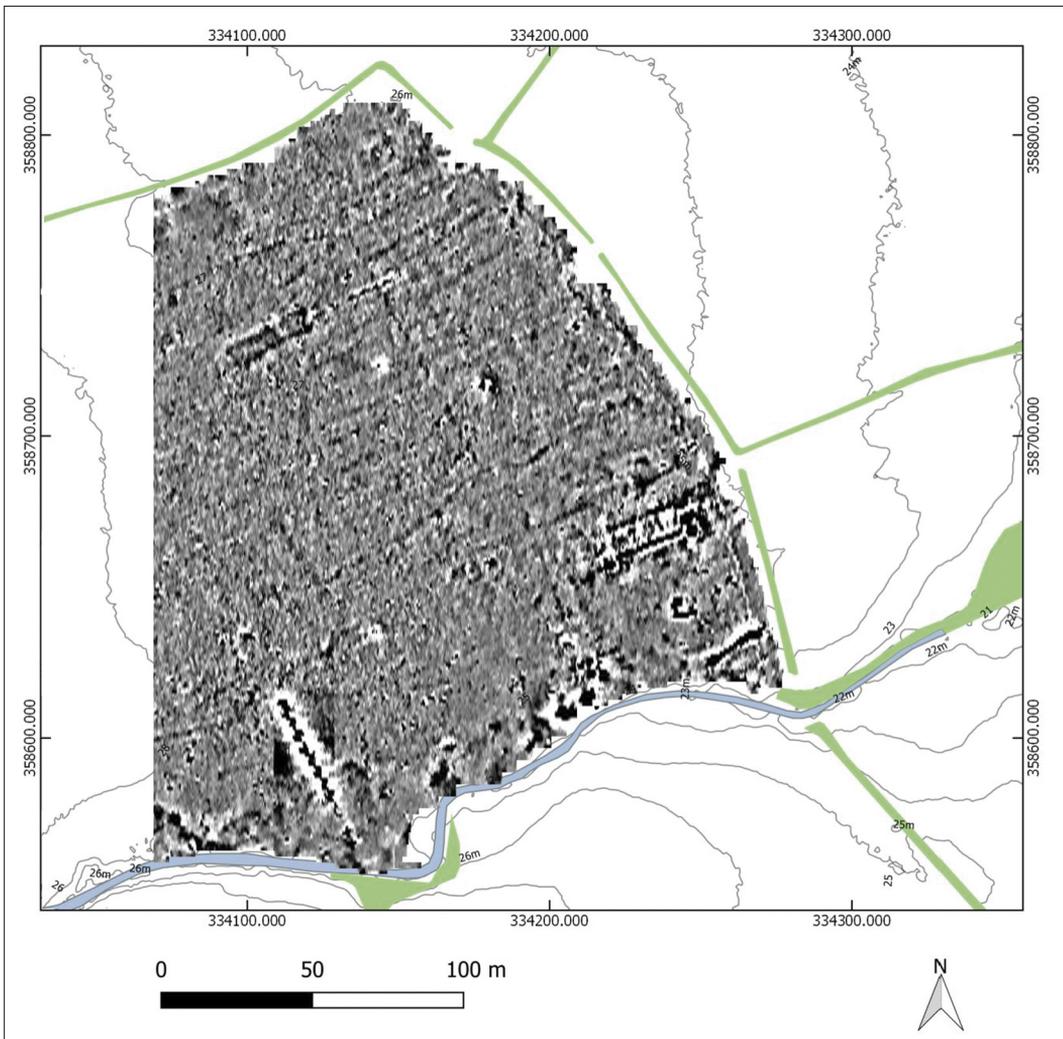
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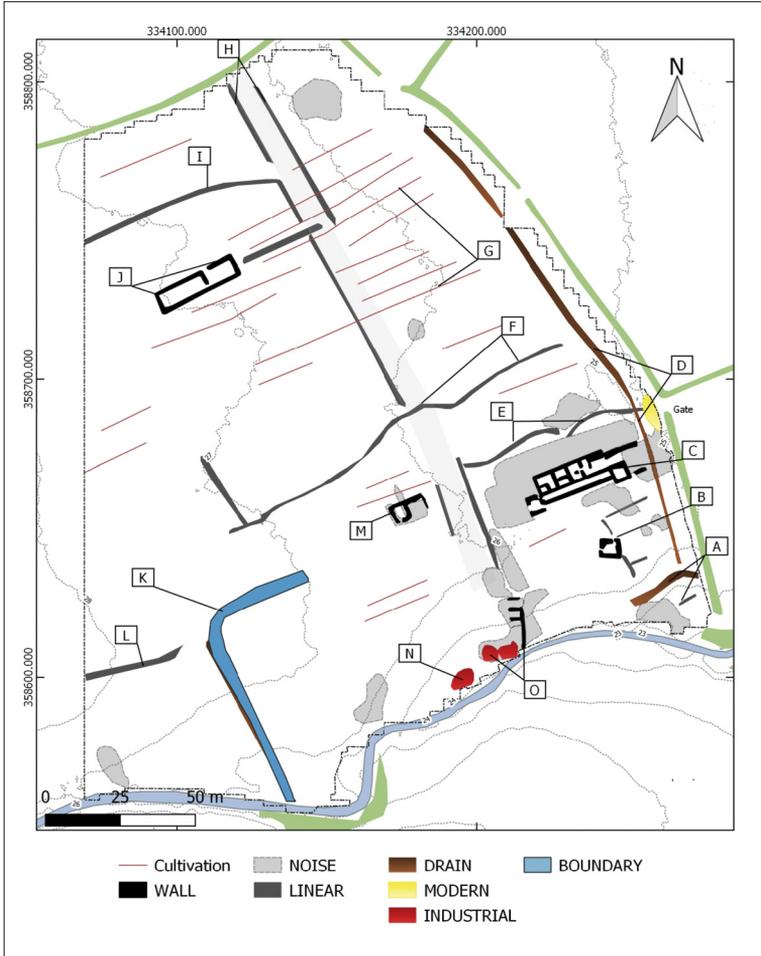
Just off the proposed alignment of Margary road 66a, a site west of Stringer's Lane, c 500m north-west of Burton Green, had yielded clear evidence of Roman occupation, with Samian ware, box tiles, mortaria and quernstone fragments, leading to the suggestion of a villa (CPAT PRN 84365), whilst more recent metal-detectorist activity had also revealed hints of potentially significant Roman activity, albeit probably later than the governorship of Trebellius Maximus. Thanks to the Portable Antiquities Scheme, it is now becoming apparent that there may have been more substantial activity and settlement in this area than previously identified.

Geophysical surveys at Stringer's Lane

To characterise the archaeological remains, a combination of magnetometry and field-walking was undertaken to identify the remains of the postulated Roman building along



Illus V.2.1 Stringer's Lane: magnetometry survey, showing the villa footprint in the south-east corner. (Scale 1/2500)



Illus V.2.2 Initial interpretative plot of features. (Scale 1/2500)

with any other possible buried archaeological features and to collect and map unstratified finds from the ploughsoil.

A five-hectare survey was targeted on the area where Roman ceramics and metal artefacts had been found, using a dual-sensor Bartington Instrument Grad 601-2 fluxgate gradiometer. The survey area was plotted with a temporary grid of 20m x 20m. For the primary survey, each 20m grid was then walked using a zigzag traverse with a sample interval of 0.25m (four points per metre) and a traverse interval of 1m. The area of the villa structure was subsequently resurveyed at a higher resolution. This high-resolution survey utilised a survey interval of 0.25m (four points per metre) and an overlapping traverse interval of 0.5m. The results can be seen in Illus V.2.1.

The villa itself, labelled Feature C in Illus V.2.2, comprises a large and well-defined structure comprising sharply defined wall anomalies measuring up to 42m long and 13m wide. Around

the structure is a spread of magnetic noise likely to be associated with demolition material composed of burnt or fired material such as ceramic building material (CBM). The strength and clarity of the wall anomalies could suggest either thermal activity associated with occupation, destruction, or more likely, the presence of CBM in the wall construction.

Situated to the south of the villa building, Feature B is a square structural anomaly measuring 6m by 6m on a north–south alignment. It is composed of sharply defined linear features that probably reflect the presence of walls. The strength of the reading could again indicate the presence of fired materials such as CBM or *in-situ* burning associated with either an industrial feature such as an oven, kiln or hearth, or a single event of burning.

Elsewhere, linear boundaries appear to form part of a possible field system, associated with which is Feature J, which comprises a rectangular structure, 28m long by 8m wide with a possible central dividing wall. The feature may be a large ancillary structure associated with the field system or some form of narrow, rectangular agricultural enclosure.

Features N and O comprise large anomalies suggestive of significant burning, both adjacent to the brook at the southern end of the site (Feature N) and connected to an area of structural disturbance with some possible poorly defined walls (Feature O). The spikes could be associated with thermal features such as an oven or kiln. However, the connection to possible structural anomalies could indicate a building with significant thermal activity, such as a bath house.

Discussion

The geophysical results revealed the well-defined outline of a large structure, the layout of which shows a strong resemblance to a Roman corridor-type villa (Richmond 1969, 3–9), similar to those in south Wales at Five Lanes, near the Roman town of Venta Silurum (Caerwent, in Monmouthshire), and at Ely (Cardiff) in its earliest phases. This type of villa consisted of a long corridor with several adjoining rooms along one side, with occasional further rooms at the ends of the corridor, sometimes forming small ‘wings’, giving them the alternative name of ‘winged corridor houses’. Often in southern England these structures evolved over time, with the addition of extra rooms or even whole wings, as at Frocester Court, Gloucestershire (Price 2010), and some became multiple compound villas. Until excavation takes place it remains uncertain whether the layout of the Stringer’s Lane villa was altered, such as through the addition of further wings.

Although the plan is typical of that of a Romano-British villa and would have been easily recognised as such in south-east Wales or southern England, it is the first of its kind to be discovered in north-east Wales. The number of identified Roman villas in north-west England, north Wales and the Marches in general is extremely low when compared with the central belt of England and the south (Smith *et al* 2016, 334). The reasons for this are disputed and are likely to be complex. For example, it could reflect a combination of factors such as lower levels of agricultural production (Allen *et al* 2017, 174), perhaps due to topographical limitations (*see*, for example, Burnham & Davies eds 2010, 150–7), although this would not mirror the more general picture of an increase in rural settlement across north Wales, Cheshire and Merseyside in response to the need to supply the Roman

army (Smith *et al* 2016, 301–2, 367). It could reflect different modes of living (Reynolds 2018), where complex motivations probably led to variable architectural styles and material culture use. Another consideration must be the amount of land under direct military control and the impact this had upon the rural landscape, reducing the opportunities for amassing large-scale landed wealth and its display in the form of villa architecture. However, this largely depends on one's view of the *prata legionis* throughout the life of the Chester fortress (see Mason 1988). The final, and perhaps simplest reason is that to date, the evidence has not been found. The Stringer's Lane discovery therefore raises the possibility that more villas may have existed but have simply not been identified through survey such as aerial reconnaissance/cropmarks or through developer-funded interventions, and so helps to inform this debate.

Perhaps the most similar in layout to the Stringer's Lane villa may be those identified at Abermagwr (Ceredigion) (Davies & Driver 2018) and at Eaton-by-Tarporley in Cheshire (Mason 1983; Petch 1987, 210–11). The latter is currently the nearest confirmed villa to that at Stringer's Lane and may suggest that simple corridor layouts were the most common variety in the area rather than those that developed into large, multiple-compound varieties found across southern England. Occupation at Eaton appears to have had four main phases. The stone villa was constructed in the last quarter of the second century AD, apparently succeeding two timber phases, and measured 26.3m by 14.4m. The main wing comprised a block of five rooms, the large central room being subdivided into three and flanked by two rooms of equal size. The two projecting wings, the southern one containing a bath suite, were linked by a veranda, replaced by a solid-walled corridor in the final phase. In addition to the bath suite, there were three hypocausted rooms in the main and northern wings. A second storey was also added in the final phase. Overall, evidence of hypocausts and complex water supply systems, painted plastered walls, *opus signinum* flooring and, at a late date, possible corn-drying ovens, suggest a well-established villa perhaps with some links to the legionary fortress at Chester.

The Stringer's Lane villa appears to be set within a possible enclosure containing smaller buildings. This includes a square structure which, if Roman, could be a shrine or an agricultural structure such as a corn dryer, and a larger L-shaped burnt structure adjacent to the stream, which could indicate production of some sort or possibly a bath house associated with the villa. The presence of ancillary structures is common at Roman villas, and their arrangement around an enclosed yard at Stringer's Lane shows strong similarities to sites such as Sparsholt villa, Hampshire, and Ely villa, Cardiff. Sparsholt consisted of a rectangular enclosed area with corridor villa on one side, a bath house on another and a possible barn on a third (de la Bédoyère 1993), while Ely originally consisted of just a rectangular building (20m by 18m) with projecting wings enclosing a cobbled courtyard. However, Wheeler (1925) showed that the villa had undergone various alterations during its life, including the construction of a bath house. Abundant traces of iron working were found, and in the earlier excavations a foundry was discovered. To the north of the villa complex was a long rectangular structure set within a field system that appears Romano-British and may have been a contemporary agricultural building or animal enclosure. In more recent years, archaeologists from Cardiff University have undertaken a geophysical survey which showed that the villa and ancillary buildings were surrounded by four banks and ditches; two flanking

linear features cross the site towards the western side of the villa and were positioned six metres apart. The western linear feature is likely to have been a boundary, but the eastern one may be a truncated ditch. Whilst these are likely to have been associated with agricultural activity, the linear form, dimensions, and connection to the villa site could suggest a road or trackway, the surfaces of which are often poorly represented in magnetic survey data (Young 2001).

Villas have been postulated elsewhere in north-east Wales and west Cheshire. An example has been suggested at Saughton Camp, just south-east of Chester (Wood & Griffiths 2016). Excavations at the site, only 3km from the legionary fortress, revealed a subdivided rectilinear enclosure containing both round and rectangular houses, associated with a field system, and it has been conjectured that the excavated settlement was ancillary to a villa lying to the south. The field system and associated settlement were structured around two trackways aligned north-west to south-east and north-east to south-west, meeting at a cross-roads; the site flourished from the early second to fourth centuries. A villa has also been suggested at Plas Coch, Wrexham within a sharp-angled, banked and ditched enclosure, although again, as yet, it has not been confirmed structurally (Jones 2011). Another villa may have existed at Borrás Quarry, Wrexham.

It is likely that the Stringer's Lane villa and associated field system and structures did not exist in isolation, and further survey and investigation in the region could uncover previously undetected sites. Whether the presence of the villa bears any relation to the existence of the recently discovered lead ingot is uncertain; however, both discoveries certainly add to our understanding of Roman activity in north-east Wales and raise significant questions concerning early military activity in the area and the subsequent character and intensity of rural settlement. A first season of excavation of the Stringer's Lane villa was carried out in September 2021 and the results are currently being analysed.

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