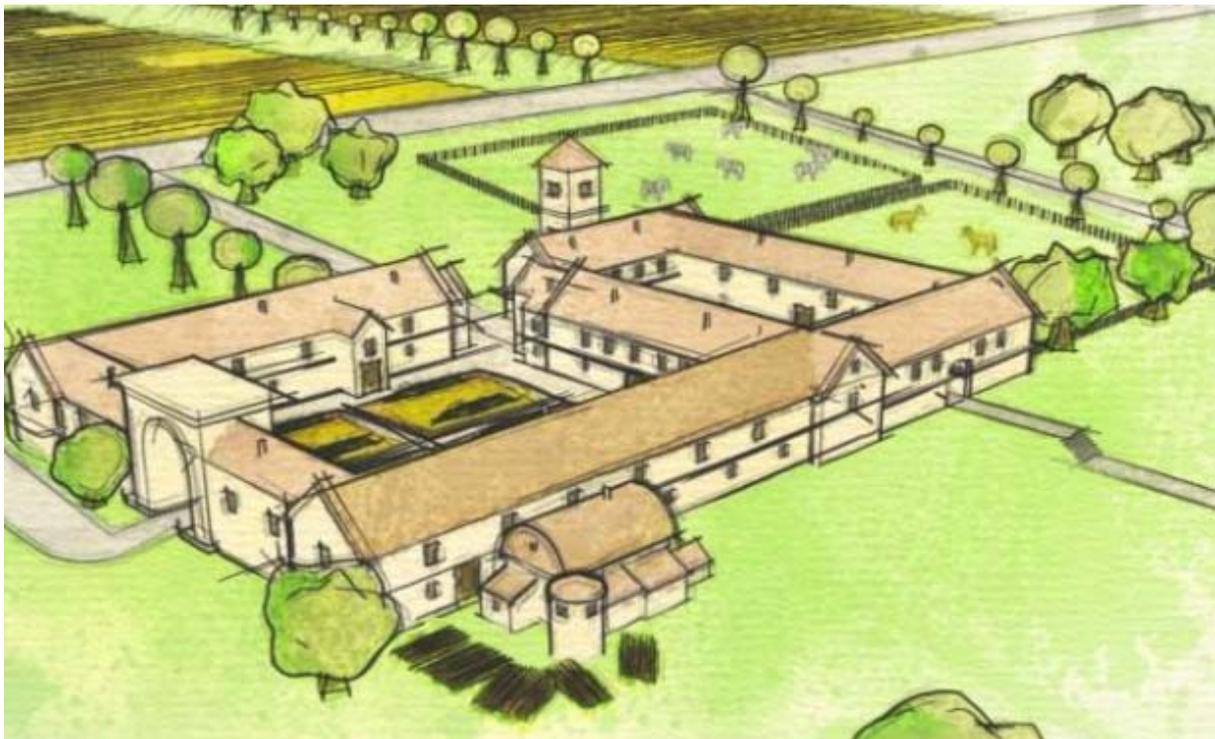


Not another Roman villa, surely?

'Fraid so! They keep coming thick and fast and the latest discovery seems to indicate one of the largest so far revealed and perhaps the most important of such finds for many decades. As so often, it was the chance laying of a power cable to a building, which uncovered a mosaic, leading to further investigations, which suggests that this is one of the most extensive Roman sites ever, similar in size and structure to the great Roman villa at Chedworth. Its value to archaeology lies in the fact the site seems to have remained unnoticed and untouched by human activity such as ploughing during the 1400 years since the building collapsed.

Now known as the Deverill Villa, after the name of the 17th century house in whose grounds it was found, it appears to be yet another member of the cluster of upmarket Roman villas in the Cotswolds, like Chedworth. Then as now the Cotswolds have always attracted posh and dosh. Prince Charles, Liz Hurley and Mrs Tindall are only the latest in a long line of villa dwellers drawn to this most attractive part of England.

What is causing excitement among the professionals is the apparent sheer size of the



building. It is thought to have had at least 25 rooms on the ground floor alone and may have been up to three storeys in height, extending over 100 metres in width and length. It also appears to have been occupied over a considerable period, perhaps into the early 400s. Walls survive up to 5 feet in height, which only adds to the astonishment that it was not discovered much earlier.

The exploratory trenches have now been backfilled and there is nothing visible on the surface. As Dr David Roberts, archaeologist for Historic England explained: "Unfortunately, it would cost hundreds of thousands of pounds to fully excavate and preserve the site, which cannot be done with the current pressures."

So for a generation of archaeologists sometime in the future there awaits this treasure trove of Roman life, its secrets still safely buried beneath the Wiltshire soil. Whilst this may be frustrating for us, it is perhaps, taking a long term view, a “good thing”, for who knows what more sophisticated techniques might be developed to shed unexpected light on this lost world.

As more and more Roman villas are revealed it begins to look as though the southern half of England at least had almost as many villas with their farming estates as there are modern farms today. And this is not too surprising. Rome had an almost insatiable need



for regular and abundant supplies of corn, not least to feed the army and keep it in good humour. A single legion would need something like 13 tonnes of food a month, much of this made up of corn. With lower crop yields per acre compared with today large areas of land would be needed to provide this essential harvest.

It is puzzling, at least to me, why those who came after the Romans and filled the vacuum that they left, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, seemed totally unable to build on what must have been a considerable visual Roman legacy of buildings and other structures. Was Roman technology and building practices completely beyond their grasp? Why did Hermann not say -

“ Now then, Adolf, instead of digging post holes in that lovely Roman mosaic floor to support the thatched roof of our quite primitive new house, which will doubtless leak and encourage rats, why don't we collect up all these excellent Roman tiles lying around and have a go at restoring the original roof? And while we are at it, we could clean out their central heating system ready for the ghastly English winter. And just look at that splendid bath house with hot and cold running water. The missus would love it. She has never had a bath, except for that time when she fell in the Rhine after drinking too much of my home made mead.”

Dream on, Hermann! It would be some 1500 years before we once again began to even approximate to Roman building standards. I was born in my Gran's cottage, also in a

corner of rural Wiltshire, like the Deverill villa. It was totally without services of any kind. It even had an earth floor. Ironically, a couple of hundred yards away, on the banks of the river Avon, had once stood another Roman villa with this mosaic floor (Downton), whose inhabitants would have recoiled in disgust at our primitive 20th century way of life.

Deverill Villa pictures from the Daily Telegraph website.

David Cockman for HDAS April 2016

