

THE ROMAN VILLA (By Peter Latham)

The great Norman Church of Southwell stands on a very ancient site indeed and can be considered the topmost layer of a multi-layered sandwich of history. An important Saxon church stood here before the present church was built; however, that was not the first building to occupy the site.

Britain was occupied by the Romans for four hundred years and during that time a dwelling, a villa, occupied a large area just to the east of the present Minster. It was very large indeed, at least 100 yards long and 80 yards wide and for some time was a most palatial dwelling; the home of someone of wealth, taste and distinction.

The story of the villa's discovery and exploration is a fascinating one. As a starting point let us take the year 1959 when a decision was made to build a new school in Southwell, the Minster School, on the site where it now stands, close to the grounds of the Residence and Vicars' Court. For many years evidence of previous occupation had been appearing mostly in the gardens of Vicars' Court where, since 1780 there had been finds of tessellated paving, pottery, coins, painted stucco and other materials. Because of this evidence the then Ministry of Works authorised an archaeological dig and appointed Mr C.M. Daniels of Newcastle University to oversee it. His findings were published as a fascinating and lucid report in Volume 70 of the Transactions of the Thoroton Society. (A copy is held in the Minster Library).

The illustration, drawn by the late Don Keefe, shows the position and minimum size of the villa (100 X 80 yards). In addition there would be many exterior structures; servants' quarters, grain stores, stables and so on. The whole complex would have covered an area of land much larger than the present Vicars' Court. Daniels chose to dig on two sites. Site "A" revealed the foundations of six rooms, four with mosaic floors; the tiles (tesserae) were arranged in complex patterns and were of four colours. Site "B" revealed the most exciting find, for here was found the cold bath (frigidarium) measuring 24' X 15'. Strangely, the bath had been filled in and covered over with a mortar floor. When this was removed the team found that the bath had been filled with thousands of fragments of plaster, many of them coloured. These, it seemed, had been chipped off the walls and ceiling and dumped in the bath. Over a period of ten months some of them were pieced together and the result is now on display in the South Quire Aisle of the Minster, a superb ceiling painting of the god Cupid, surrounded by fish and other sea creatures. For a description of this please see a separate entry.

Throughout the area of the excavation many fragments of glass, pottery and tile were found and these were of high quality, suggesting a dwelling of some sophistication. Clearly, for at least part of its life, the villa was lived in by a family of some importance.

As well as the Roman finds, several interesting finds of a later date were discovered. Two trenches had been dug and filled with human bones, often limbs rather than complete skeletons; perhaps these were bodies denied a Christian burial in the nearby churchyard, or the remains of burials cleared out of the Minster during a rebuilding phase?

Daniels describes another interesting later burial. This time the skeleton was complete and was found to have been pierced at the shoulders, ankles and heart with iron studs. Treatment of this sort was sometimes used on bodies which had died unnaturally or where there had been some reason to fear the supernatural; presumably the evil was nailed down and thus contained. Many burials were found, mostly Christian; clearly part of the area had later been consecrated ground.

There were several "robber trenches" across the site; much of the stone taken will have found its way into dwellings in Southwell and may still exist today.

Roman finds that could be dated, mainly pottery fragments, showed that occupation of the villa began in the early 2nd century. There had been some demolition and rebuilding before the early part of the 3rd century. The mosaic floors tell of redecoration and embellishment in the early 4th century. Very little material from the periods after this date was found. The next significant finds were a Saxon urn of AD 500 and the post holes of a wooden hut of the same period.

Daniels was of the opinion that there is a strong likelihood that part of the villa extended to the west, under the grounds of the Archbishops' Palace. His 1959 report on the Southwell villa ends with the following

remarks: *"In short we appear to have a counterpart to the great country seats most frequently found much further south. More excavations would be well worthwhile should it prove possible at some future date."*