

THURNHAM ROMAN VILLA

By ELIZABETH PIRIE

EXCAVATIONS, 1958

IN the early summer of 1958, an excavation was undertaken for the Ministry of Works at the villa.¹ The investigation was limited to the route of the Maidstone By-pass, on land acquired by the Ministry of Transport, with the intention of recording that section of the site before it was destroyed. To the North, areas which had a concentration of tile fragments on the surface were examined first. Two separate buildings were discovered. Trial trenches over the remaining area of Ministry land revealed no trace of other buildings to the South. While the road-works were in progress, watch was still kept at the site, but no further structural evidence came to light.

SITE A (Fig. 2)

Excavation revealed a complex of flint and ragstone walls immediately below the plough-soil. The flint walls were, for the most part, set into the natural gault at a depth of 3 feet. The intermediate wall to the North was laid on a foundation of ragstone. (This feature could not be examined fully, as the wall continued beyond the Ministry boundary.) There was no evidence of occupation on the brown clay associated with the flint walls as a floor, and no small finds with which to date the construction. The fact that the flint wall to the South was distinct from the ragstone structure, and ran beneath it, suggests a date earlier than that of the rag walls. It is unlikely that these flint walls were only the footings to a continuation of the ragstone structure, from which the other stone had been robbed, not only because of their depth, but because there was no sign of yellow sand and mortar. At other points of the site this covered the footings from which ragstone had been taken.

The first phase of construction of the ragstone building seems to have covered only the central rectangle, comprising an anteroom and three main rooms. On the North side the flint wall served as a boundary, except at the North West corner.

The end wall to the East was robbed to the level of the flint footings. To the North West, only one course of the rag wall remained. Beyond, were signs of a trench which may have been part of nineteenth century excavation. There was no sign of an entrance along the West wall,

¹ N.G.R. TQ. 800570.

THURNHAM ROMAN VILLA

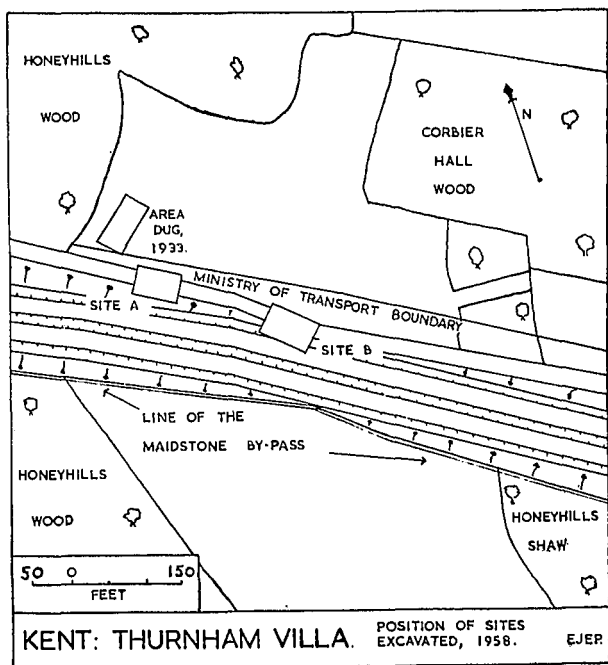


FIG. 1.

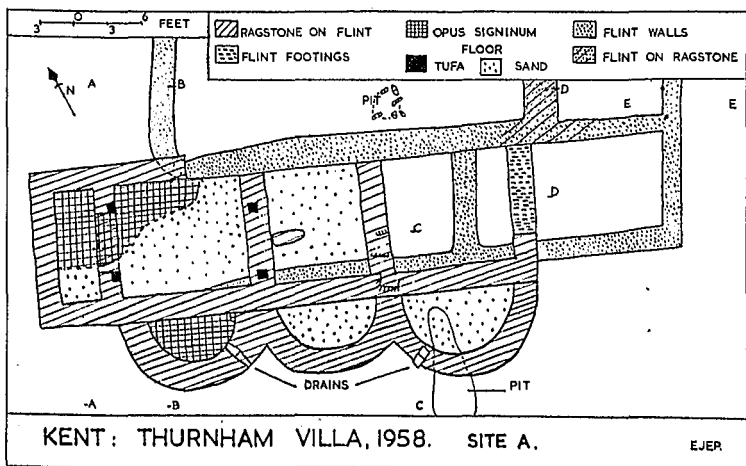


FIG. 2.

but the adjacent interior wall may have been designed as a threshold, with side partitions. Blocks of tufa on the inner corners of the projecting walls were matched by similar blocks on the farther wall. These may have been intended as the bases for some decorative work. A large block of ragstone protruding into the second room seemed to have been laid deliberately. The level of the wall between the second and third rooms was irregular, as there were two ragstone blocks slightly higher than the rest, but not in positions indicating the means of access from one room to the next. At the South corner of the wall there was a slight socket, or niche, set into the rag. The floors of the first and second rooms were of sand. In the filling of the construction trench of the West wall was found a rim-herd (Fig. 5,1) of a grey platter of early second century type.

The original building was subsequently adapted, late in the second century or early in the third. The level of the rooms was raised and a floor of *opus signinum* was laid over flints and sand, packed together with fragments of roof-tile and red and white wall-plaster. The *opus signinum* was found intact in the North-West corner, immediately below the topsoil. Further over, it had been destroyed, presumably by ploughing in recent years. It must originally have extended over the anteroom and the two rooms beyond, which still retained the underlying packing. The floor covered the original threshold (Plate II) but remained clear of the projecting partition wall to the North (Plate I). The arrangement on the South side must have corresponded.

The addition of the three apses to the South must have been contemporary with this reconstruction. Their ragstone walls were not bonded into the walls of the earlier building, nor did their alignment agree with the lines of the interior walls. Beyond the first apse, towards the South-west corner of the building, a pile of rough ragstone blocks (Plate IV) may have been laid down at the same time. Under them were found a few sherds of pottery, datable by a platter-rim of late second century type.

There was no evidence remaining of the means of access from the main rooms to the apses.

The first apse had a floor of *opus signinum*, somewhat softer than that in the room beyond. This was intact, and laid on a foundation of flints and sand. There was no tile or plaster in the filling, but a fragment of Samian, Dragendorff 35. The inner face of the walls of both the first and third apses had a thin layer of rough pink mortar spread over them. Neither the second or third apses showed signs of having been floored with *opus signinum*. There was instead a sand floor in each.

The first apse had a pile of flue-tile fragments and pottery and bones concentrated towards the drain, constructed in the wall with two

THURNHAM ROMAN VILLA

inverted imbrices. Similarly, the third apse was provided with a drain, and there was a concentration of pottery on the floor. No sumps connected with these drains were found outside the building.

The pit which underlay the third apse contained quantities of oyster shells and whelks, imbrex fragments and pottery of coarse native wares (Fig. 2). It may be associated with the first phase of rag building. The pit to the north was of later date. In the filling was a rim-sherd of late third century type.

Destruction debris was found over the third room, where it included numerous small fragments of white wall-plaster, and outside the building to the South and West. The time of destruction of the building may

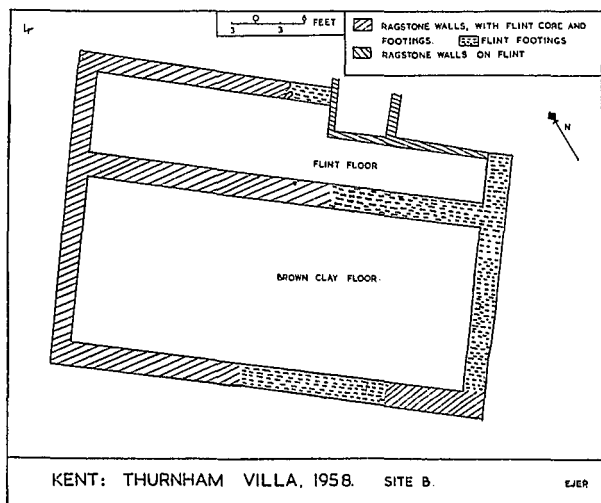


FIG. 3.

be placed at the end of the third century. The only coin found stratified was one of Postumus (A.D. 259-267), which was lying on the *opus signinum* floor of the first room. The types of pottery found on the apse floors and in the layers of debris can be assigned to the latter part of the century.

SITE B (Fig. 3)

The remains of the second building were immediately below the top-soil, and were in poor condition, not only because of early robbing, but presumably also because of more recent ploughing activities. To the South and West, the walls had been robbed to the level of the flint footings. The main structure, of ragstone walls with a flint core,

THURNHAM ROMAN VILLA

comprised two long rectangular rooms. There was no evidence of the Southern portion being divided by interior walls. The floor to the South was of dark brown clay, that to the North of compacted flints. In the North-East corner, the thick rag and flint walls abutted a slighter construction of ragstone only, the walls of which were not

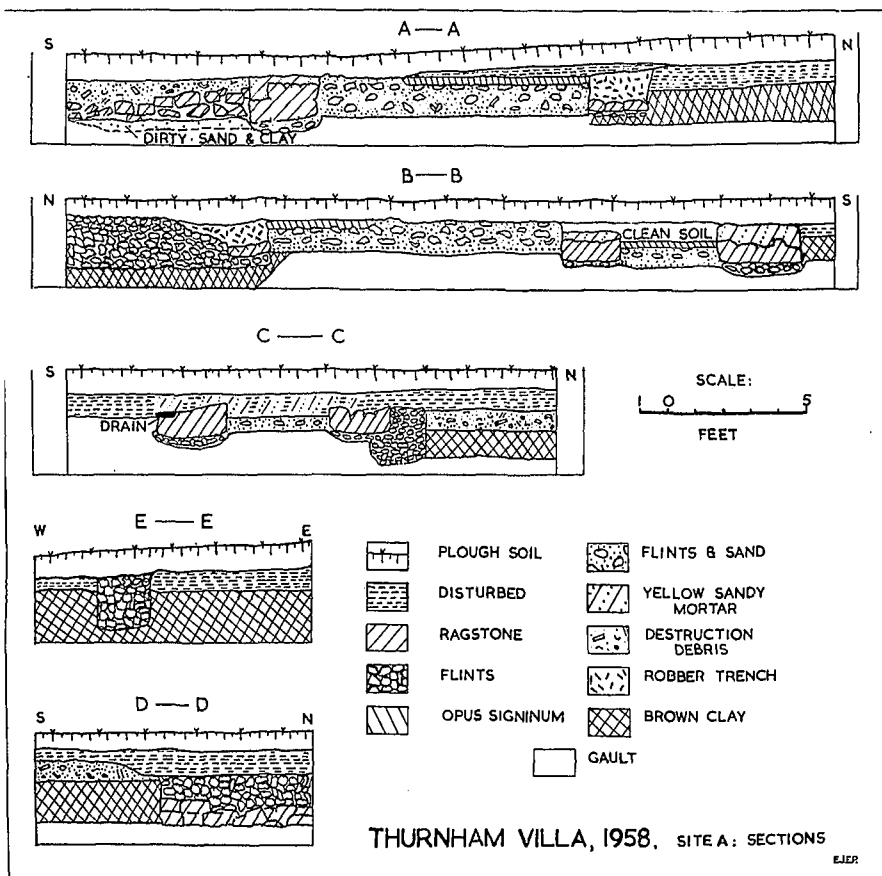


FIG. 4.

more than a foot broad. These walls had also been robbed and it was not possible to recover the complete details of their plan.

There was evidence of only one period of construction, and occupation. Some quantity of very coarse pottery of third century type was recovered from the surface of the clay floor. A small bronze pin (Fig. 5,12) and a coin were discovered in the disturbed soil over the wall in the South-East corner. The coin, a bronze antoninianus, is in too

THURNHAM ROMAN VILLA

poor condition to make certain identification possible. It is thought to be one of Claudius II (A.D. 268-270).

THE IDENTITY OF THE BUILDINGS

There were no definite features associated with either of the buildings which could lead to a certain identification of their original purpose and use. Neither building was pretentious either in construction or in style.

The one on Site A may have had some decoration by the doorways, on a base of tufa, and walls covered with plain white or red plaster, without design. The absence of any finds of ornaments or personal possessions may indicate that the area was not part of the main living-rooms of the villa. In spite of the absence of a recognizable hearth or cooking-place in the building, the presence of flue-tiles, bones, shells and pottery in the first apse, and the drains through the two apse walls suggest that that portion of the building at least may have been used for kitchen purposes. Miss J. Liversidge, in her paper on Kitchens in Roman Britain,¹ describes first a Pompeian kitchen in the House of the Dioscuri :

One led out of the atrium and was provided with a hearth consisting of a platform of masonry faced with tiles on the top, and with a coating of opus signinum along the front.

Later in the paper Miss Liversidge mentions the room in the villa at Spoonley Wood, Gloucestershire, which was believed to be the kitchen, and comments that it lacked a hearth, unless it had had a raised one of the Pompeian type. The arrangement at Thurnham might have been similar.

The building on Site B cannot have been part of the main quarters either. Its size, together with the paucity of finds, suggests that it was no more than an outbuilding on the villa's premises.

CATALOGUE OF FINDS

Site A

1. *From the foundation trench of the ragstone building.*
Platter-rim (Fig. 5.1)—of hard grey ware, similar to, but probably earlier than J. W.² Fig. 19,20, assigned mainly to the Antonine period.
- 2a. *Under the ragstone blocks, associated with the construction of the apses.*
Platter-rim. (Cf. J.W., Fig. 19,20. This type occurs too at Verulamium in late second century context.)

¹ *Archaeological News Letter*, Vol. VI, no. 4, p. 83.

² *Excavations at the Jewry Wall Site, Leicester*, by Dr. K. M. Kenyon. Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London, No. XV, 1948.

THURNHAM ROMAN VILLA

2b. *In the pit to the South, under the third apse.*

Tile fragments and oyster shells in quantity.

Rim of necked jar (Fig. 5,2), of heavy, dark grey ware, brown/black on the outside; native ware, possibly a Belgic derivative. (Cf. Canterbury 1946. *Arch. Cant.*, LXVIII, p. 107, no. 11.)

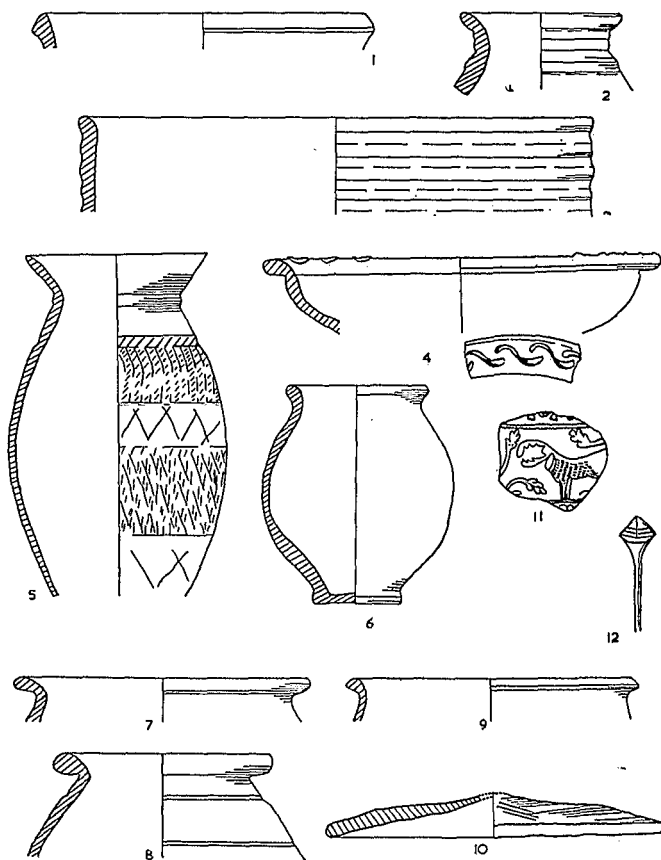


FIG. 5. Finds. (Scale : No. 1-11, $\frac{1}{4}$; No. 12, $\frac{1}{2}$).

3. *Under the opus signinum floor of the first apse.*

Rim-herd of Samian, Dragendorff 35.

4. *In the pit to the North.*

Rim of cordoned dish (Fig. 5,3).

Inturned-rim of straight-sided dish. (Cf. J.W. Fig. 20,6, late third century.)



I

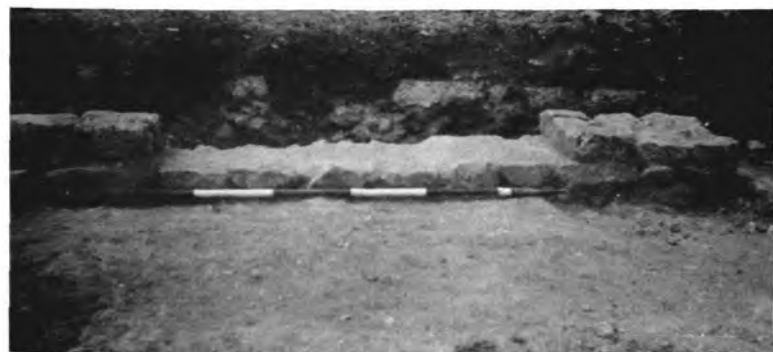
I—Site A—Socket in the *opus signinum* floor for the partition wall.

II—Site A—*Opus signinum* floor overlying the threshold.

III—Site A—The threshold.



II



III



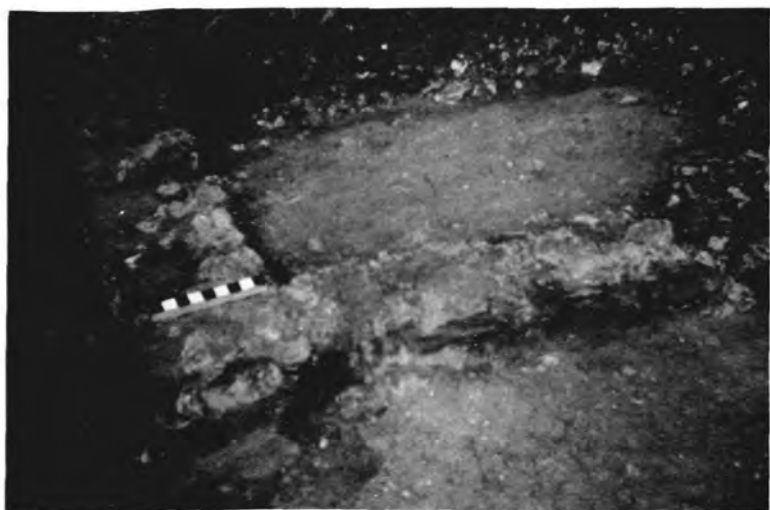
IV—Site A—Ragstone blocks piled up outside the first apse.



V—Site A—The first apse, showing the position of the drain.



VI—Site B—Foundations of the outer wall at the North-West corner.



VII—Site B—Corner of the little ragstone wall.

THURNHAM ROMAN VILLA

Sherds of Samian bowl, Curle 15 (Antonine). (Cf. O. & P.¹ plate LVI, no. 2.)

5. *On the floor of the first apse.*
Flue-tile fragments.
Leg and rib bones of a hare.
Dish of Samian, Dragendorff 35. (Cf. O. & P., plate LIII, no. 13, from Silchester.)
Rim-sherd of Samian, Dragendorff 35, with degenerate leaf-motif (Fig. 5,4).
A "poppy-head" type beaker of Upchurch ware, with zones of crosshatching and rouletting on the body (Fig. 5,5).
Pie-dish rim of smooth brown ware. (Cf. Collingwood,² Fig. 54,36, which also appears at Margidunum in a third century context.)
Sherds of four cavetto-rimmed storage jars of heavy, coarse native wares.
6. *On the floor of the second apse.*
Sherd of a bead-rim dish. (Cf. J.W., Fig. 20,10—terminal date c. 250 A.D.)
7. *On the floor of the third apse.*
Necked bowl of grey ware. (Cf. J. W., Fig. 24,12.)
Platter of dark grey ware, with a dark burnish. (Cf. J.W., Fig. 19,14, which also appears at Margidunum in a third century context.)
Beaker of hard grey ware, well-fired (Fig. 5,6).
Rim of straight-sided bowl or cup, of grey ware. (Cf. Dover, 1945-7, *Arch. Cant.*, LXIV, p. 136, no. 19. Also J.W., Fig. 20,3.)
8. *On the opus signinum floor of the first room.*
AR antoninianus of Postumus (259-267 A.D.).
O: IMP C POSTVMVS P F AVG radiate bust, right.
R: MONETA AVG Moneta standing, right, with cornucopiae and scales.
9. *From the destruction debris.*
Platter-rim of grey ware. (Cf. J.W., Fig. 19,14—third century.)
Necked bowl of grey ware. (Cf. J.W., Fig. 24,13.) (Fig. 5,7.)
Narrow-necked jar of grey ware. (Cf. J.W., Fig. 24, for the type series.) (Fig. 5,8.)
Narrow-necked jar, of fine grey ware. (Fig. 5,9).
Lid of coarse grey/brown native ware, with irregular, grooved decoration (Fig. 5,10).
10. *Unstratified.*
Fragment of Samian bowl, Dragendorff 37 (Fig. 5,11).

¹ *Terra Sigillata*, by Oswald and Pryce.

² *Archæology of Roman Britain*, by R. G. Collingwood.

THURNHAM ROMAN VILLA

Site B

Finds included a bronze pin (Fig. 5,12). (Cf. *London in Roman Times*,¹ Plate XLI, no. 5), and a bronze antoninianus, possibly of Claudius II.

During the progress of the road-works, a workman recovered from disturbed soil a few fragments of a Castor ware beaker, and a bronze antoninianus of Claudius II (c. A.D. 270) :

O : DIVO CLAVDIO radiate bust, right.

R : CONSECRATIO an eagle.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In conclusion, it is pleasant to record the thanks due to everyone who helped at the site—to the Ministry of Works representatives, and to the diggers, especially the volunteers who gave up so much spare time to complete the work of excavation before the road-works began. I am grateful, too, to Mr. Grove at the Museum, for all his help and advice, to Eric Philp for assistance in the identification of various bones and to C. F. Cooper for photograph no. I.

¹ *London Museum Catalogue*, No. 3, 1930.