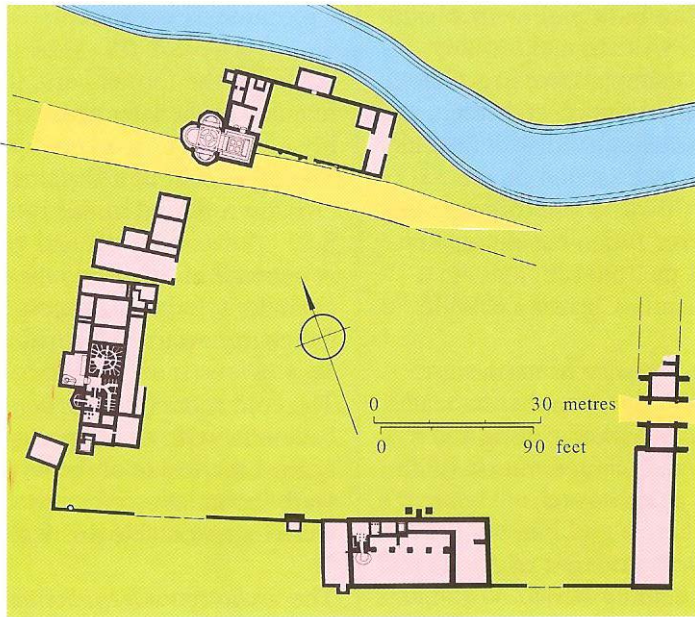


Littlecote Roman villa and House, Wiltshire: archaeology and history (notes for visitors, prepared by the Royal Archaeological Institute, 2017)

Not far from *Cunetio* (see separate entry) in the Kennet valley is a Roman villa at Littlecote. The site has the best visible Roman remains in the county; it is now in the grounds of a late Elizabethan/early Jacobean house, and was excavated by Bryn Walters from 1978 to 1991.

Littlecote villa. By Bryn Walters, Director, Association for Roman Archaeology

Knowledge that a significant Roman monument existed in Littlecote Park first came to the



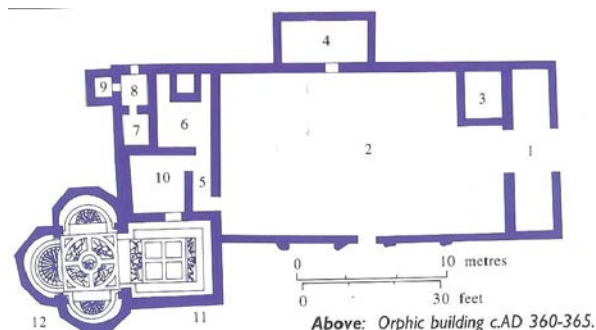
Plan of the remains displayed.

attention of antiquaries in 1727, when its Orpheus mosaic was discovered. Roger Gale the following year called it ‘the finest pavement that the sun ever shone upon in England’. The site was then lost, probably deliberately, as the park’s owner Sir Francis Popham said that its position was quarter of a mile west of the real one. The remains were rediscovered in 1976 and a long-term excavation began in 1978 under the patronage of Sir Seton Wills.

Excavation continued with a permanent team for thirteen years.

The principal Roman structures were fully conserved while the excavations progressed and it is estimated that approximately one million visitors saw the work. Use of the site began in the mid first century, and it was occupied intermittently thereafter. The Roman remains were buried beneath part of an extensive medieval village, which was dismantled in the fifteenth century to make way for a hunting park, within which a hunting-lodge was constructed in the seventeenth century, adjacent to the buried mosaic.

Controversy has arisen over the excavator’s interpretation that the famous mosaic floored an ‘Orphic-Bacchic’ cult chamber, contradicting the orthodox view that it had been the summer dining-room of the villa (Walters 1984; 1994). The excavation revealed that the complex was being extensively modified by the end of the third century, and that all agricultural activity had ceased by the mid fourth. The site was then converted into a ‘Bacchic-collegium’, a form of pagan monastery. During this period of change remarkable



Above: Orphic building c.AD 360-365.



Photograph of the triconch chamber by B. V. Hill, for the Association for Roman Archaeology

architectural innovations took place. An elaborate twin-towered gatehouse had been erected and the south tower on the main house was enlarged, both structures being fitted with larger upper chambers above the smaller ground-floor rooms, the upper levels supported on projecting external arched vaults. This was followed in about 360 by the rapid construction of a towered and polygonally faceted triconch chamber, housing the 'Orpheus' mosaic. This building is unique in Roman Britain and is considered, by the excavator, to be the earliest in this style yet dated from the Roman Empire. Such chambers have been referred to as 'The House of the Lord' (Lavin 1962). The particular form of triconch building is generally believed to have evolved in the Aegean in the fifth century, several decades after its potential use at Littlecote, and became the pattern adopted for early Byzantine churches (Krautheimer 1965).

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Littlecote House is a fine brick-built mansion, with a few earlier elements incorporated; it is either very late Elizabethan or early Jacobean. The main front is viewed at its best from the



slope above, as its owners probably always intended visitors to see it first (photograph by Phil Catterall, reproduced under common licence, accessed from Wikimedia). It contains a splendid baronial hall, chapel and other rooms. These were re-created when the complex was owned by Peter de Savary in the 1980s. The new owners, Times-Warner, have maintained some elements of the theme

park, and have restored the walled garden. The parkscape around is basically eighteenth-century in its concept, with a ha-ha (a dry ditch to prevent deer entering the gardens) to preserve the illusion of the house and its surrounds as a seamless whole.

References and further reading

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These notes were originally prepared for the annual summer meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute held in July 2016; see www.royalarchinst.org for further information. RAI members have access to the printed Report which contains syntheses of the significance of recent research to archaeological understanding of the county. The RAI is grateful to Bryn Walters for his contribution, and for guiding members round the villa during their visit. The other notes were prepared by David A. Hinton. Other on-line entries can be accessed through the RAI web-site.