

The Cannington villa: its wider context

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The distribution of Roman villas across South West Britain

The villa at Cannington is of particular interest as it lies on the very western edge of those regions where such palatial country houses were a characteristic feature of the Roman countryside. **Figure 1** illustrates our current understanding of the distribution of Roman villas across South West Britain (the historic counties of Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, and Somerset). Rather than simply recycling one of the many published maps of villa distributions – that often differ significantly with regard to which sites they include (e.g. Jones and Mattingly 190, map 7.6; Millett 1990, fig 48) – **Figure 1** is based upon primary data obtained from Historic Environment Records and the published literature. Mapping ‘villas’ is, however, not an easy task which explains why published maps differ so much. There are two problems. Firstly, Roman Britain had a spectrum of rural settlement ranging from timber-built roundhouses through to palatial country houses, and so a judgement has to be made as to where on this spectrum a settlement can be regarded as a ‘villa’. The definition used here is a residential building of Roman design (e.g. based upon rectangular modules), stone construction, and with a minimum of mortared floors, plastered walls, and a tiled roof. Cannington clearly exceeds those criteria – it also had under floor heating in one of its buildings – but was still quite modest in that it lacked mosaic pavements (that are very common on other villas found right across central, eastern, and northern Somerset).

A second problem with trying to map the distribution of Roman villas is the very incomplete archaeological record with which we have to work. The most problematic sites are those known only from surface scatters of material, or very fragmentary and/or antiquarian excavations. If a site has only produced unstratified ceramic roof and hypocaust tile then for the purposes of **Figure 1** the threshold has not been crossed as it may have been brought to the site from elsewhere as rubble. If, however, there is a large unstratified assemblage of masonry building debris, hypocaust and roof tile, tesserae, and wall plaster then the site is classed as a ‘probable’ villa as even here there is the possibility that it comes from a temple, *mansio*, or roadside settlement. If there is relatively little material, or there is only *opus signinum* and painted wall plaster but no tessera, then it is regarded as a ‘possible’ villa. The threshold for defining a villa, and the criteria for defining a site as certain, probable, and possible, have therefore been set fairly high but are designed to embrace the evidence from surface collection as well as aerial photography and excavation (for a fuller discussion see Rippon in press).

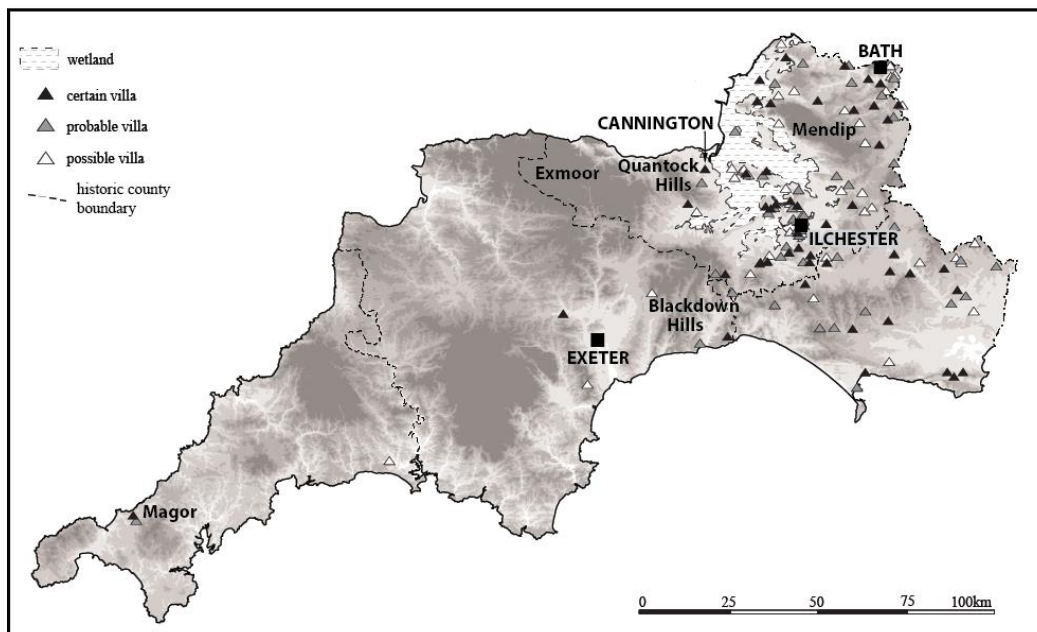


Figure 1: the distribution of villas across South West Britain (research and drawing by David Gould).

Cannington within the Durotrigian *civitas*

Figure 1 shows that the greatest density of villas in the West Country has been recorded in central and eastern Somerset and northern Dorset, notably in the immediate hinterland of the small towns at Ilchester and Bath. The most westerly example in Somerset lies just 11 km south west of Cannington at Yarford, on the southern flanks of the Quantock Hills (King and Grande 2015). To the south, a small number of villas occupied the sheltered valleys within the Blackdown Hills, but to the west of these prominent uplands the Romano-British countryside had a very different character, with just two definite villas (Crediton in Devon, and Magor in Cornwall) and a small number of possible examples. It is likely that the Blackdown and Quantock Hills formed the boundary between the communities and *civitates* of the Durotriges (whose capital lay at Dorchester, *Durnovaria*) and Dumnoni (whose capital lay at Exeter, *Isca Dumnoniorum*: Rippon 2012). Establishing the boundaries of the Romano-British *civitates* is extremely difficult, although a detailed study of the landscape of eastern Britain suggests that they generally ran through areas of sparsely settled land, most notably on high ground (Rippon in press). It is, therefore, also possible that the boundary between the Durotriges and Dobunni lay along the Mendip Hills, in which case the northern part of Somerset will have lain within Dobunnic territory (as mapped by Jones and Mattingly 1990, map 5.11): the traditional view, that this area lay with the *civitas* of the Belgae (e.g. Millett 1990, fig. 16), gives rise to an utterly illogically shaped territory.

The layout of the villa at Cannington

That Cannington lay on the western edge of the heavily Romanised countryside of lowland Britain may explain some of its more curious characteristics, most notably its layout. It is increasingly recognised that there is marked regional variation in villa plans, with the classic wing-corridor layout for example being particularly common in the Dobunnic *civitas* (e.g. Frocester: Price 2000). Barnsley Park and Kings Weston, in Gloucestershire, are two examples of villas with a winged-corridor façade, although the arrangement of their rooms is that of a hall-type plan (Smith 1985), a form that is also characteristic of this region. Another villa plan-type that included a large open space is the aisled halls, and these are particular characteristic of central-southern England and the South East Midlands (Hadman 1978; Cunliffe 2013; Rippon in press), and it is striking that they are absent in Somerset (the only aisled buildings being agricultural in character, such as Churchie Bushes near Bawdrip: Dewar 1957), Hadman 1978, 192).

Interpretation of the plan of Cannington villa is made difficult due to its very fragmentary preservation, although there appears to have been several buildings laid out in an exact rectangle around an open space. There is a large corpus of villa plans from elsewhere in Somerset with which we can compare Cannington's layout. As part of a University of Exeter and Cotswold Archaeology jointly-funded Collaborative Doctoral Studentship, Stephen Armstrong has undertaken a comparative analysis of those sites for which there are partial or complete villa plans, of which there are 33.¹ Four villas comprise small, free-standing, winged-corridor buildings, all of which are in the north of Somerset (Blacklands, Brislington **Figure 2**, Chew Park, and Somerdale), while the main domestic block within the courtyard villa at Wellow **Figure 2**, and one of the two houses at Newton St Loe **Figure 2**, both near Bath in northern Somerset, are also of winged-corridor form. Villas of this plan probably lie within the cores of Wemberham and Whatley Combe, and while Skinner's sketch plan of the villa at Paulton, near Camerton – also in northern Somerset – has to be viewed with caution, it too appears to show a winged-corridor layout. That these classic winged-corridor forms are so characteristic of northern Somerset – north of Mendip – but not areas to the south may just be the product of the small sample size and the rather fragmentary nature of some villa plans, or it may be another example of regional variation in villa architecture. Although several of the larger, more complex courtyard villas in southern Somerset may have contained

¹ Banwell (Rippon 2006, fig. 5.8), Blacklands (Lawes 2006, fig. 9, fig. 20), Bratton Seymour (Hughes and Lambert 2017, figs.2-3), Brislington (Branigan 1972, figs.1-2), Butleigh (Martin and Driscoll 2010, fig.2, fig.4), Cannington (this volume), Chew Park (Rahtz and Greenfield 1977, fig. 12), Dinnington (King and Grande 2015, figs.2-3), Durley Hill, (Cox 1998, fig.6), Ford Farm (Knibb 2009, fig. 26), Ham Hill (Hamilton Beattie and Phythian-Adams 1913, fig.18), Hurcot (Gator et al 1993, fig.11), Ilchester Mead (Hayward 1982, fig.4, fig.12), Littleton (Haverfield 1906, fig.81), Lopen (Lopen Villa Website 2017), Low Ham (Goodburn et al 1975, fig.21), Lufton (Hayward 1972, fig.2), Newton St Loe (Stanton 1936, fig.4) (Owen 1968, fig.4), Paulton (Haverfield 1906, fig. 75), Pitney (Haverfield 1906, fig.83), Queen Camel (Graham 2010, fig.1), Seavington St Mary (Graham and Miles 1996, fig.2, fig.6), Somerdale (Bulleid and Ethelbert 1925, fig.12), Spaxton (Wallace 1977), Star (Barton 1964, fig.2, plates.1-2), Stawell (Ellson 2001, fig.4), Wadeford (Anon 1865, 65), Wellow (Haverfield 1906, fig.69), Wemberham (Reade 1885, 65), Westland (Radford 1928, Plate K), Whatley Combe (Stead 1970, fig.2), Wraxall (Sykes and Brown 1961, Plate.1), and Yarford (King and Grande 2015, fig.13).

residential blocks with elements of this architectural form (e.g. Bratton Seymour, Ham Hill and Westland), the more common layout was for there to have been a longitudinal corridor either just at the front of the main domestic range (e.g. the southern end of the western range at Dinnington (Figure 2), Ilchester Mead, Littleton and Pitney) or at both the front and the back (e.g. Hurcot).

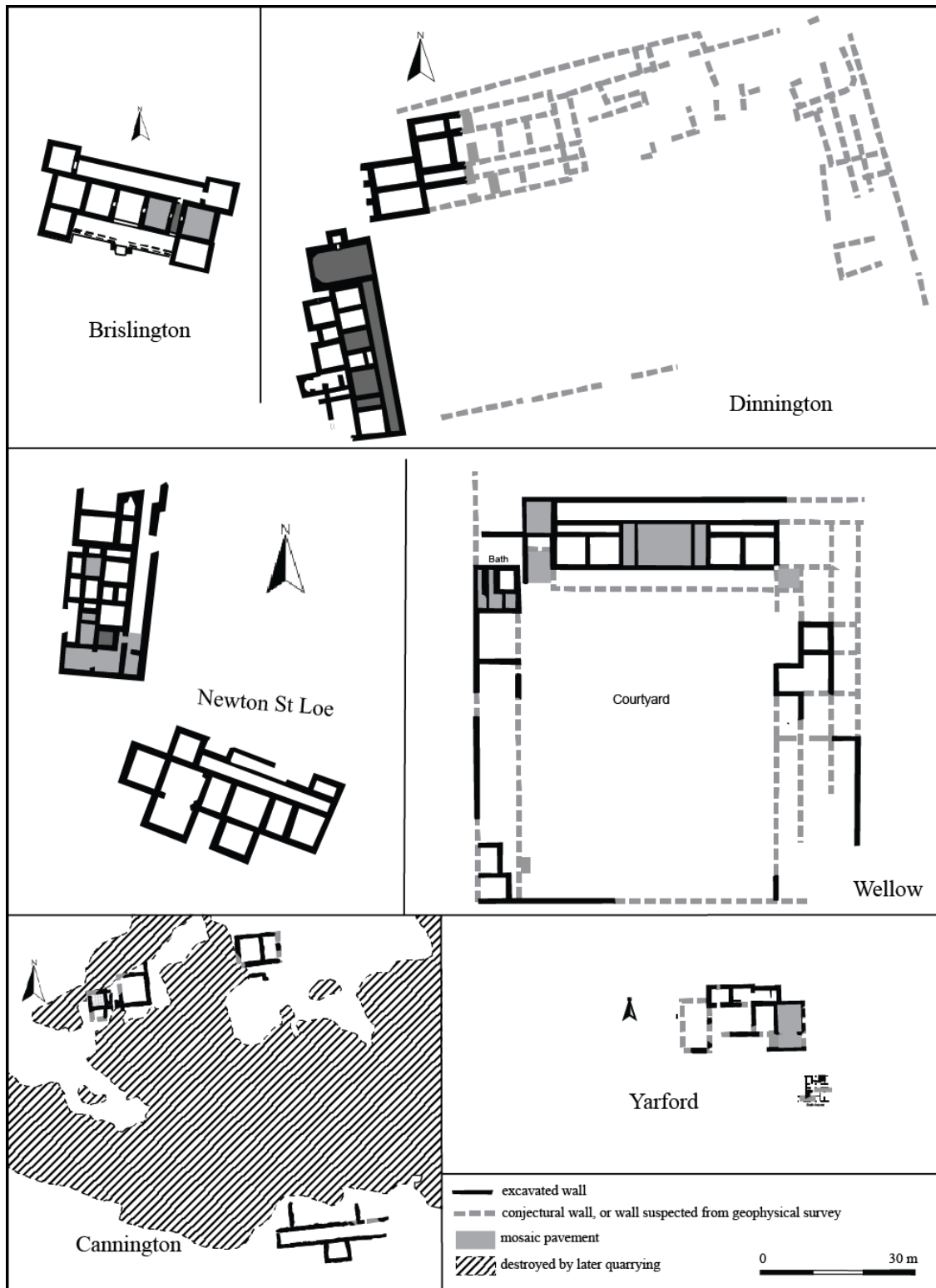


Figure 2: plans of selected villas from across Somerset, all redrawn at the same scale and with north at the top (research and drawing by Stephen Armstrong).

And so we must turn to the very fragmentary plan of Cannington, where we must remember that extensive later quarrying has removed all evidence from large parts of the site. It is a common feature of villas in Somerset to have buildings arranged around a courtyard, which is seen at seven other villas in Somerset (Banwell, Dinnington (Figure 2), Durley Hill, Ilchester Mead, Pitney, Wellow (Figure 2), and Westland). The most common arrangement in these courtyard villas is for the main residential block, usually with an attached bath house, to fill one side of the courtyard, and for there to be subsidiary wings created a U-shaped arrangement. The villa complex can be regarded as facing the direction that the main residential wing looked, and conversely the direction that it will have been approached from, although villas such as Newton St Loe (Figure 2) were of the unit-type plan with two domestic blocks facing onto the courtyard and so the direction which it faced is less clear. There is in fact a lot variation in the direction in which villas faced with Blacklands looking west (Wessex Archaeology 2007), Banwell and Ilchester Mead facing south west, Brislington and Yarford facing south (Figure 2), Chew Park facing south east, Lufton facing directly east, and – crucially for our interpretation of Cannington – the villa at Whatley Combe and the southern house at Newton St Loe facing north (Figure 2).

Cannington shows some similarities to these other villa layouts in Somerset in that Buildings A-C are all on exactly the same east-west orientation (i.e. Buildings C to the south is exactly parallel to Buildings A and B to the north). The size of the open area between Buildings A-C at Cannington is also very similar to Banwell, Dinnington, Pitney, Wellow (Figure 2), and Westland. What is unusual about Cannington, however, is the way that rather than having long ranges of buildings that extended the full length of a courtyard, relatively small, discrete buildings may have been spread around the edges of a central open area (although it must be stressed that most of this was destroyed by later quarrying). That what appears to be the main residential wing – Building C – faces north is not without precedent (e.g. Newton St Loe), although the apparent absence of a range of buildings down the western side (i.e. south of Building A, the possible bath block) is curious. Although large areas have been lost to later quarrying, there are undisturbed areas to the south of Building A, yet no traces of stone buildings were found in this area. Perhaps there were timber structures here whose ephemeral remains have not survived?

Could it be that in fact Building C at Cannington faced south and not north? There is very little evidence to go on, although topographically this will have made little sense as the ground rises up to the south: there will have been far better views looking north, including towards the hillfort at Cannington which may still have had some psychological significance for the residents. The key architectural feature in Building C is the projecting Room 1 that appears to have been rebuilt/strengthened sometime after its initial construction. In most of the Somerset villas projecting rooms, or blocks of rooms, were at the back of a domestic range, seen most clearly with the bath houses at villas such as Dinnington (Figure 2), Lufton, and Wemberham. The single projecting room at Ilchester Mead (6.0 x 4.5 m) was also clearly at the back of the house, and comparable in size to Cannington Building C Room 1 (c.7.6m by 5.9m). At Littleton there were similarly a series of rooms projecting from the back of the house, but also a small structure at the front that was interpreted as a porch (Haverfield 1906, fig. 81) although this measured c.3.7m by 2.4m, making it considerably smaller than Cannington Building C Room 1.

Another distinctive feature of the site at Cannington is the way that the domestic buildings lay within a ditched enclosure. In many cases it is simply not possible to say whether other villas in Somerset lay within ditched enclosures as the early excavations were restricted to the stone buildings themselves, and relatively few sites have seen geophysical survey and/or excavations beyond the main residential buildings. With these caveats in mind, the only examples of a Roman villa in Somerset lying within a fully excavated substantial ditched enclosure is Blacklands, and there the enclosure was rectilinear. Other excavated examples of ditches in association with villas include Ilchester Mead and Chew Park, although in all these examples the full extent of the ditches was not uncovered making it difficult to say whether they related to villa boundaries or were to aide drainage as at Wroxall.

Overall, the Romano-British villa at Cannington is a difficult one to find local parallels for. There are some elements of the overall layout (its rectilinearity, with buildings arranged around an open yard) and the architecture of individual buildings (mortared painted-plaster walls, under-floor heating, opus signinum floors, tiled roofs) that are typical, whereas the layout of the site - with three individually small buildings, spread around here sides of an extremely large open space - is without precedent in Somerset.

Antecedent landscapes

Compared to the South East of Britain, the onset of villa construction in Somerset appears to have been relatively late, often starting in the 3rd century. This led to suggestions that Somerset was an 'Imperial estate' in the early Roman period, with villa development being delayed until it was replaced by private ownership as late as the 3rd century (e.g. Branigan 1976). This hypothesis was refuted by Roger Leech (1981) in part because many villas in Somerset have evidence for pre-3rd century occupation before buildings of villa status were constructed (e.g. Yarford and Chew Park) Therefore in this regard, Cannington is typical among the Somerset villas .

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