

Dewlish Roman Villa, Dorset

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Introduction

In 1969, WG (Bill) Putnam began a trial excavation at the site of a visible scatter of Romano-British pottery and ceramic building materials within the parkland of the eighteenth-century Dewlish House, Dorset (SY 768972). This triggered a series of annual excavation campaigns at the site until 1979. For context, Bill Putnam had been appointed to the History Department of Weymouth College of Education in 1967. His employers had been seeking a recruit with an archaeological background and Putnam fitted this role admirably. Undoubtedly, there was an expectation that there would be occasional field schools. The first of these, in 1968, was a small excavation on the course of Margary's route 4e Roman road which ran through Thorncombe Woods, Dorset (Margary 1973, 83, 84, 108–110). The Dewlish project began as a similarly limited enterprise of just four days at the end of the college summer term. However, the first trial trench revealed a mosaic pavement, apparently undisturbed (Fig. 2), and this encouraged a second trial trench to be set out in the succeeding year. By then, the genie was out of the bottle and in 1971 a full excavation programme began comprising three weeks in the first instance.

If the results of the 1969 season's work had suggested that the Dewlish villa was in an undisturbed state, then that notion was refuted by the evidence of the trial trench in the next year. It was then that it became clear that in the past the mosaic pavement had been lifted, revealing the hypocaust beneath. As the excavations progressed it became apparent that fragments of fallen wall and ceiling plaster had been 'shovelled' around making it difficult to be certain of their place of origin. An examination of Hutchins' *History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset* (1863, 607; originally published in 1774) reveals that a villa mosaic had been

revealed in 1740 when a storm uprooted a tree. More of the site was uncovered by digging and left exposed for the curious to view. In "about the year 1790", Hutchins continues, a Mr Knight obtained permission from the owners of Dewlish House to uncover the villa once more but few useful details are recorded and those finds that are mentioned are now lost. Nevertheless, these recorded disturbances together with an episode of twentieth-century ploughing explain the disruption to the site that the Putnam excavations were to encounter.

The Putnam excavations

It is important to understand that the Putnam excavations at Dewlish were primarily a teaching exercise and, to some extent, the strategy was determined by this consideration. A box-grid system was employed for two reasons. First, it was a method that Putnam (the Director) had been taught as a student of Sir Mortimer Wheeler. Second, the individual box components of the grid provided individual excavation areas in which two or three students at a time could be working and honing their archaeological skills (Figs. 1 and 3). It was effectively a wall-chasing exercise. The first grids were excavated to the east of Building 2 in 1971 and, generally, progress continued in a westerly direction, with six or so boxes being excavated in any one year. As each new room was encountered, it was allocated a number and these are marked on the Director's schematic plan of the site (Fig. 1). Buildings were not numbered at this time. The disadvantage of box grids becomes apparent once one enters the post-excavation project stage:

1. The baulks that separate the individual boxes (in this case 0.5m wide) tend to conceal potentially diagnostic features unless these baulks are subsequently removed. Removal of baulks was not a routine practice at Dewlish.
2. Each box had its own series of contexts and these could not be related to contexts in adjacent boxes.
3. Plans and sections were drawn for each separate box in the grid. Conjoining these away from site at a later time introduces inaccuracies in the overall plan.
4. Although there was a set baseline that was used in each excavation season, effectively, the grid had to be set out each year. This introduced cumulative errors that became particularly marked in the later stages of the eleven season project.

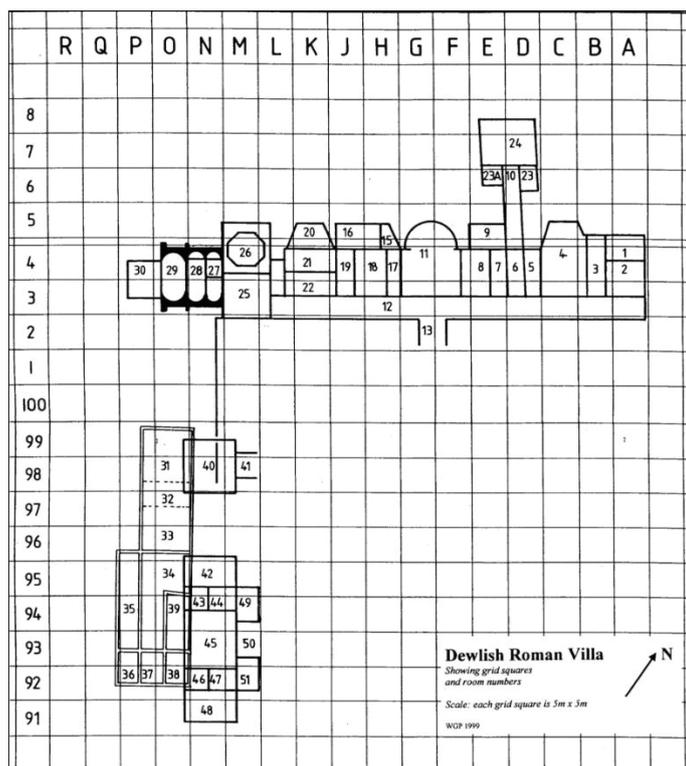


Fig. 1. The Dewlish villa excavation grid as set out by Bill Putnam. Each box is 5m square. The 0.5m wide baulks are not shown.

Photo: © Bournemouth University.

Overall, the written recording system was sound. The Director kept site diaries that are frequently well illustrated. Each excavated box in the grid had its own site notebook. These were maintained by students in accordance with set procedures. The notebooks include contexts with descriptions, sketch plans and sections and lists of finds. The finds lists were regularly read through by the Director who annotated any items that were not to be retained. Measured plans and sections were all pencil-drawn on A2 sheets of metric graph paper. For reasons unknown, the plans and sections for 1976 have not survived; perhaps they were never drawn at all. The photographic record is particularly important. It comprises a number of colour slides generally of excellent quality, numbered in sequence and annotated. Some of these photographs are reproduced for this article in digital form. There are some monochrome shots too.



Left: Fig. 2. Room 11, the reception room and apse. The earlier remains of part of Room 15 can be seen in the bottom right-hand corner.



Right: Fig. 3. Box grid excavation in progress. The square foundation plan with attached porch of the shrine-like Building 1 (right and centre) can be seen to overlie the earlier north-east end of Building 1 (left).

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Informative interim reports were published in the Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society for each season from 1969 to 1975. Thereafter they decline in length and usefulness which is a particular problem when trying resolve issues relating to Building 1 (an aisled barn), for which most of the plans and sections are missing also.

Bill Putnam retired from his lecturing post in 1995 and subsequently spent much of his time attempting to pull together a post-excavation project and final publication. He died in 2008 with the report unwritten, even in draft form. However, he did write a valedictory chapter to Dewlish in his revised edition of Roman Dorset (2007, 97–116). It usefully sets out his thoughts and it is against this benchmark that subsequent work has been measured, and reinterpretations considered.

The villa plan and its development

Essentially, Bill Putnam envisaged a villa complex of a limited number of developmental stages. Beginning in the late third-century, there was a 'longhouse' (*sic*) (Building 1) that is

sometimes referred to as a 'small farm' with integral barn orientated north–south in accordance with the site grid. Building 1 was approximately 36m long and 7m wide. Later developments saw the introduction of a western aisle (Figs. 1 and 3). The date-range for this building was based upon pottery finds. However, Putnam was conscious that limited finds of earlier pottery types, including Samian Ware, might indicate the former presence of an earlier building phase. In the event, he never found one.

To the north-east of Building 1, and represented by Rooms 1 to 30, was an east–west range with south-facing corridor and porch. In the Putnam scheme of things this range included a bath-house, Rooms 26–30. He saw this building as being of just two distinct phases. The first phase was constructed in the early fourth-century, without mosaics and hypocausts but with rammed earth floors. This part of the villa was soon abandoned and allowed to fall into ruin, but in the second half of the fourth-century the north range was rebuilt, a process that included the addition of hypocausts to some rooms and the laying down of mosaic pavements.

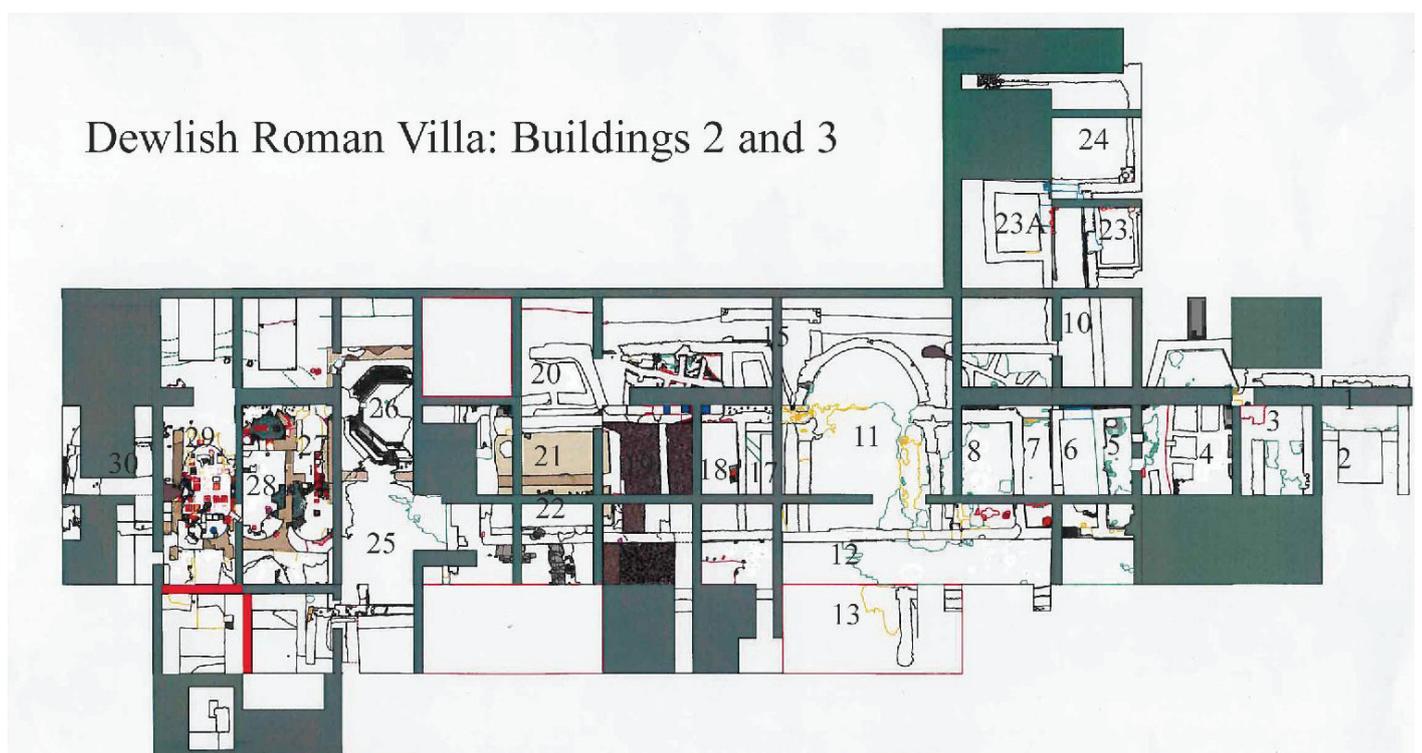


Fig. 4. The newly Computer Aided Design version ground plan of Buildings 2 and 3, the north range. The bath-house is on the west side (left). The rooms have been numbered in accord with Putnam's scheme.

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Building 1 (the 'longhouse') was demolished and replaced by a 'temple' (Building 5) and a 'priest's house' (Building 6) (Putnam 2007, 97). Putnam goes on to speculate upon the purpose of each of the rooms and finally, suggests that the villa was in ruins by about AD 400.

Bournemouth University project

In 2010, the Faculty of Science and Technology, Bournemouth University, took the decision to reassess and work towards the publication of its earliest archaeological projects. The most extensive of these projects was Dewlish Roman villa. The situation was critical because the excavation archive had been removed from the University in order to facilitate Bill Putnam's own post-excavation project. The first objective was to retrieve the paper and material archive and to centralise its location. Pivotal to this work was the input of Maureen Putnam who has been a stalwart member of the current project team. Funding has been essential with money derived from a number of sources including the Association for Roman Archaeology. There was much that needed to be done. Reports needed to be commissioned for the glass (Denise Allen), the general pottery (Rachael Segar-Smith) and the Samian Ware (Jo Mills). The evidence of the mosaics needed to be reviewed (Stephen Cosh), as did the coin report (James Gerrard). Ellen Hambleton and Mark Maltby have re-examined the animal bones report and Anna Rohnbogner has written the osteological report of the human remains from the site. Members of the team from Bournemouth Archaeology have produced a Computer Aided Design plan of the villa from the individual site drawings (Fig. 4) and Emily Rhodes has carried out similar work on the section drawings. New artefact drawings have been produced by Jon Milward, David Watt and Tilia Cammegh. The committed help of many Bournemouth University students has been invaluable.

Results of the new post-excavation project

The excavation report manuscript is now at an advanced stage of preparation although there are some remaining tasks ahead. However, from the sum of the new evidence it is possible to make some provisional observations. The developmental history of the villa is more complex than previously thought and five phases can be postulated.

1. The earliest phase centres upon Building 1, the 'longhouse' / aisled building (Rooms 31 to 39) but which conceivably includes the core rooms of Building 2 (the north range): Rooms 5–8, 11, and 17 to 19. These rooms were certainly unheated by hypocausts and without mosaic floors in this phase. It is not clear whether a detached form of the bath-house (Building 3) existed at this time. The date for this earliest phase is probably a little earlier than the late third century that was envisaged by Bill Putnam.
2. Phase 2 involved a limited two-room extension to the south end of Building 1 (Fig. 1, Rooms 37 and 38) and a single unheated room attached to the north wall of Building 2 (Room 15). It is possible, though not demonstrable, that the corridor feature (Room 12) was added to the south elevation of Building 2 at this time.
3. Phase 3 involved some major extensions. Building 1 was extended westwards by the addition of an aisle. There is no evidence that an aisle was added to the east side. Rooms with hypocausts and mosaics were added to the east, north and possibly the western elevations of Building 2 (Rooms 7, 9, 16 and 20). An unheated apse was added to the north of Room 11 which required the partial

demolition of the Phase 2 Room 15, the remainder of which was remodelled as a trapezium-shaped chamber (see Figs. 1, 2 and 4). It is unlikely that these developments took place simultaneously but that each was part of a longer term project. An early fourth-century date seems likely for this phase in the villa's development.

4. Phase 4 constituted the final aggrandisement of the villa which probably included the integration of Building 3, the bath-house, with Building 2 by the addition of an *apodyterium* (Room 25) and a cold plunge bath (Room 26). These rooms filled the space between the two buildings. An additional group of unheated rooms (1, 2 and 3) was added to the east and a stand-alone block, comprising Rooms 23, 23A, and 24, was constructed to the north but connected to Building 2 by a passage, Room 10. During this construction process, there is evidence to suggest that materials were being reworked and reused, for example a dwarf pillar that had been reworked on all facets and presumably reused, perhaps as a quoin. The total length of the north range was a little less than 75m west–east. The north–south dimension approximated to 32.5m. Elsewhere in the villa complex, Building 1 was demolished and replaced by the shrine-like Building 5 (Rooms 40 and 41), and a multi-roomed residential building to the south of that (Building 6).
5. Phase 5 represents a period of marked decline in the use of the villa. The floors of Rooms 6 and 8 are punctured by post-holes, suggesting that the roof was being supported against collapse. Late coins of the House of Theodosius (AD 388–402) were recovered from beneath the fallen roof material of the added northern block (Rooms 23, 23A and 24) and the connecting passage (Room 10). In addition, a large vessel of a late form of local pottery, South East Dorset Orange Wiped Ware, was found in Room 24. All of this implies that the villa was functioning at some level beyond AD 400, though for how long is uncertain. It is not unreasonable to suggest that Dewlish had a sub-Roman history.

Going forwards

Much of the necessary post-excavation work is complete but, in the absence of plans and section drawings for Building 1 (Rooms 31 to 39), there is some work to be done in making good the overall site plan. One box of environmental samples has been salvaged from a barn and its contents need to be fully assessed and tested as appropriate. As part of the current project, a partial geophysical survey was carried out on the Dewlish villa site. This revealed that the complex is more extensive than previously supposed. It is now clear that there was an east range that was not detected during the 1969–79 excavations. However, Bill Putnam was aware that there was an 'Iron Age' (*sic*) settlement to the north of Building 2 (2007, 97) and the survey indicates that it is not a minor feature. The current survey area needs to be extended in order that this important site can be better understood.

References

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