
Artistic Lysons? New work on the 'lost' mosaics of Frampton Roman villa, Dorset

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In 1796, the great antiquary Samuel Lysons (1763-1819) (Fig. 1) oversaw the clearance of a series of figured mosaics on a site at Nunnery Mead in Dorset overlooking a bend in the River Frome, near Frampton about 9km north-west of Dorchester. The floors, considered to be among the richest produced in Roman Britain,¹ were recorded in considerable detail and left open for a limited time in order that King George III and his entourage could inspect them before the site was abandoned late in 1797.

Although Lysons published the results of investigations at Frampton in his *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae*,² key questions regarding the structural form, extent, chronology and sequence of the buildings revealed, remained unanswered. The ultimate fate of the mosaics themselves, following the completion of works, was unclear. Archaeological investigations, conducted in the early half of the twentieth-century, strongly suggested that the mosaics were lost, possibly even deliberately disfigured or destroyed, during a series of unrecorded nineteenth-century explorations. Recent work at Nunnery Mead, however, has shown that not only do significant areas of the original Roman floor survive, but also that evidence exists to help interpret both the form of the Roman building and the nature of backfill and consolidation following Lysons' work.

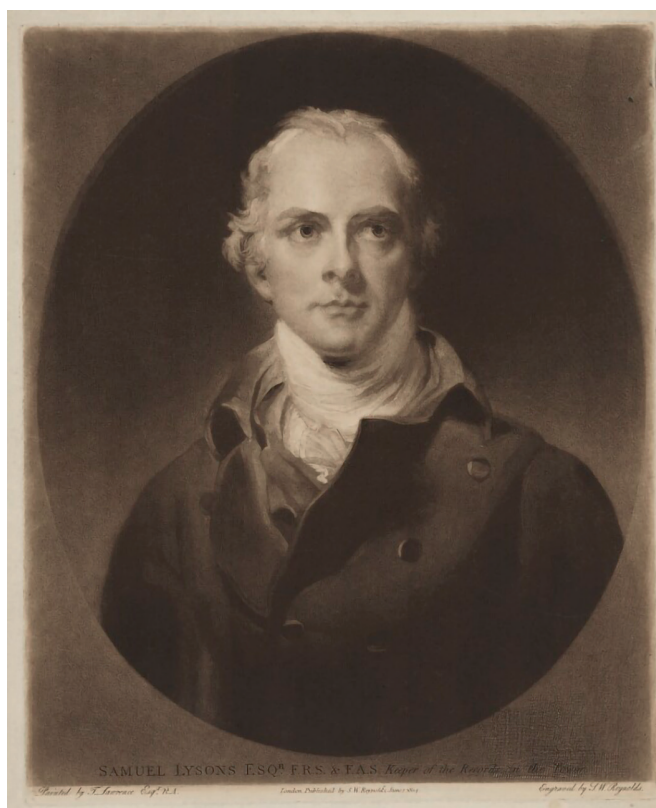


Fig. 1 Samuel Lysons in 1799 (two years after completing works at Frampton Roman villa in Dorset) published as a mezzotint in June 1804 by Samuel William Reynolds, after a painting by Sir Thomas Lawrence now in the Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Center for British Art. (© National Portrait Gallery, London. NPG D38048. Image licenced: CC BY-NC-ND 3.0).

Background

On Thursday 12th February 1795, a watercolour drawing made by James Engleheart, recording a lavish mosaic floor 'accidentally discovered near Frampton in Dorsetshire', was exhibited to a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries of London.³ The precise nature of the original discovery and how Engleheart came to record it are unknown, although Samuel Lysons was later to note that first contact had been as a consequence of 'labourers digging flints for buildings' in April the previous year (1794). This, of course, suggests that the existence of a substantial Roman masonry structure within the upper meadows of the River Frome had long been known in the neighbourhood and was a source of building material.

Engleheart's watercolour, depicting a large rectangular mosaic with a series of elaborately figured roundels, so intrigued Samuel Lysons, then a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, that he was seized by a desire to see it for real and to ascertain 'whether some further discovery might not be made'.⁴ Unfortunately, by the time Lysons had made the journey to Dorset, the mosaic had suffered significant damage. We do not know whether the floor had been covered in the two years since its initial discovery in 1794, but several parts had evidently been destroyed, or illicitly removed, in the meantime.⁵ Comparing Lysons' engraving, completed in 1796, with the drawing made by Engleheart, the scale of loss becomes tragically apparent. The central roundel in the northern half of the floor,



Fig. 2 Engraving of the mosaic found in Nunnery Mead in 1794, recorded by Samuel Lysons in 1796 and published in *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae* I, part iii as plate IV in 1813. Lysons used detail recorded by James Engleheart in 1794 to reconstruct areas of the mosaic that had been destroyed by weathering and souvenir hunters. (Photo: Miles Russell from Lysons 1813)

originally depicting Bacchus, naked except for a cloak, holding a thyrsus and brandishing a large bunch of grapes above his head, had almost completely been removed together with the greater part of a square panel featuring another near-naked male (probably Cadmus) spearing a serpent coiled around a tree. In these two instances, the highly specific nature of tesserae loss, given that the borders of respective panels remained intact for Lysons to record (assuming that he was scrupulous in his recording of the less 'interesting' parts), suggests that these were the victims of targeted removal following the mosaic's original exposure, rather than accidental loss or differential weathering. Luckily, using Engleheart's watercolour, Lysons was able to reconstruct the missing scenes for his coloured etching (Fig. 2).

Realising that only a very small area of the Roman building had been exposed and there was a very good chance of finding additional mosaics in the immediate vicinity, Lysons travelled to Weymouth to speak directly to King George III, then on one of his annual visits to the town. 'His majesty understanding that I was desirous of making further discoveries', Lysons later noted, 'was graciously pleased to order a party of the Royal Lancashire regiment of fencibles, then encamped in the neighbourhood, should be at my disposal for that purpose'.⁶ The Royal Lancashire fencibles, one of a number of home service regiments created in order to free units of the regular army for action overseas, were duly dispatched to Frampton with tents and shovels to work under Lysons' direction.

The mosaics exposed

Samuel Lysons, as has been well documented,⁷ stood out from the majority of his antiquarian contemporaries, believing that the accurate recording of buildings, through the use of plans and elevations and the swift dissemination of published results, was an essential element of archaeological research. Although cut features, such as pits, postholes and ditches, fills and layers were not always recorded (or understood) by Lysons and others to the same degree as major structural elements, such as mosaics and walls, his accurate recording of architectural features, and his exquisite attention to detail was both exceptional and decidedly uncommon in the late eighteenth-century. At Frampton, Lysons also recorded a slice of archaeological stratigraphy in the main range, both in words and in a sectional diagram.⁸

Unfortunately Lysons rarely described the methodology for his archaeological investigation of Roman buildings. Bignor villa, in West Sussex, excavated from 1812, is one of the few Roman digs overseen by Lysons where an insight into his strategy can be gleaned. This is due to the fact that professional duties in London, coupled with increasing bouts of illness, kept him from being present on site as much as he would have liked, necessitating direction

through regular correspondence between himself and the landowner, John Hawkins.⁹ The main aim at Bignor, as stressed in the letters, was the 'laying open the foundations of the walls' in order to 'trace the plan of the building'. Such wall-chasing practices were fairly common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, transects being hand cut across a site until masonry was located. Once walls were found, the direction of work changed in order to follow structural footings, thus completing the outline of individual rooms.

Lysons placed great emphasis on the swift, but orderly, removal of soil overburden down to Roman archaeology. This, while it guaranteed the speedy exposure of buried remains, ultimately resulted in the loss of significant layers and finds relating to later phases of settlement. At Bignor, as at many other villas investigated at this time, later phases were removed without proper record, meaning that we frequently possess a clear understanding of buildings in their masonry heyday, but no real idea of what happened immediately thereafter. Such a digging strategy, in which sites were opened at speed, spoke for itself. The end results, from Lysons' perspective, justified the means.

At Frampton, the limited amount of time and resources available to Lysons no doubt meant that, as at Bignor 16 years later, his key priority was to outline the overall building plan, expose any mosaics and complete all recording of key structural components as efficiently as possible. Occasionally, problems with this strategy of rapid cut and reveal were encountered, Lysons noted that, during the first season of works in 1796, operations in exposing a corridor mosaic were 'stopped by a large hayrick'.¹⁰ Sadly, the only physical record of the Frampton excavation is a sketch, made by Lysons, which was published in the *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae*.¹¹ Here, 33 figures (presumably all men from the Royal Lancashire Regiment of fencibles) can be seen shovelling and generally moving soil in the near distance (Fig. 3). The clearance, although energetic, appears somewhat haphazard and disorganised. Perhaps it is no surprise, given the need to swiftly remove soil overburden, that few finds were recorded at this time, Lysons simply noting that 'several fragments of stucco, coloured in stripes' and 'a few coins of the lower empire' were found 'among the rubbish'.¹²

Finally, on the 9th of September 1796, sufficient areas of Roman building had been exposed at Nunnery Mead to allow a royal delegation, comprising King George III and Queen Charlotte, together with 'their Royal Highnesses the Princesses Augusta, Elizabeth and Mary' to visit the site and inspect the freshly cleared mosaics.¹³ No doubt a royal inspection had further focused Lysons' mind, helping ensure that all topsoil and overlying layers were removed by the military in time.



Fig. 3 Sketch by Samuel Lysons, published in *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae* I, part iii as plate I in 1813. Captioned 'View near Frampton showing the situation of the mosaic pavement discovered in the Nunnery Meadow', this is the only known contemporary image of the villa being excavated. (Photo: Miles Russell from Lysons 1813)

The following year, in September 1797, work exposing Roman structures at Frampton continued. Lysons supplies no information as to whether the mosaics previously uncovered had been left exposed to the elements or had been covered during the interlude, although he hints at the latter, noting that, in order to fully record the site, all pavements were 'again laid open to enable me to finish my drawings'.¹⁴ With the hayrick obstruction finally removed, Lysons' team, this time 'a party of the South Gloucestershire regiment of militia', also supplied by George III, exposed more rooms, resulting in a second visit by the then Weymouth-based royal family.

A total of five mosaics were on display in 1797 for the visitors to inspect. The first, comprising the earliest discovered and recorded by Engleheart, consisted of a rectangular floor, measuring 6.1 by 9.2m. The southern half of this floor was badly damaged, possibly during the initial phases of stone removal in 1794, and some areas lost subsequent to Engleheart's investigation. Enough survived of the central roundel, however, to suggest there had originally been an image of Venus, surrounded by mythological aquatic creatures (possibly sea-cows). The northern part of the floor had, in each corner, a portrait bust of one of the Four Winds, each holding a conch shell, and a much-damaged depiction of Bacchus (with grapes) at the centre. The remaining square panels had a variety of mythological scenes described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Aeneas ripping the golden bough from the sacred oak of Persephone in order to travel safely through the underworld; Perseus killing the monster Ketos during his rescue of Andromeda; Cadmus spearing the giant serpent which guarded the spring of Ares; and (quite possibly) Achilles escaping from King Lycomedes on Skyros.¹⁵ A mosaic, with a black-and-white swastika-meander paved a 1.5m wide porticus that led directly from the Bacchus and Four Winds mosaic, and was traced by Lysons for a length of nearly 13m.

To the north east of these floors, and apparently unconnected to them, lay a bipartite room, measuring 12m by 6.5m, the larger half of which had an apse on the south-western side (Fig 4). This appeared to be a major reception room. The centrepiece of the larger floor space was originally an image of Bellerophon astride Pegasus slaying the Chimera; corner squares containing images that may originally have depicted pairs of mythological lovers. The only complete image, in the northern corner of the room, had a semi-naked woman and a fully dressed man in a Phrygian cap (possibly Paris and Oenone or Attis and Sagaritis); the western corner possibly depicted Venus grieving the death of Adonis.¹⁶ The remaining squares, together with the semi-circles that lay in between, appear to have been deliberately removed, possibly in antiquity, although perhaps more likely following their initial exposure in 1797. Alternatively, the apparent absence of the figured scenes here may be due, at least in part, to the method of recording deployed by Lysons. On the Woodchester Orpheus pavement, engraved by Lysons just prior to his work at Frampton, the guilloche and other repetitive bands are shown as complete, breaks occurring only in the figured work,¹⁷ whilst his sketch of the Halstock mosaic, made in 1818, shows how he did not immediately record the repetitive elements in any detail.¹⁸

On the south-western side, just before the apse, a head of Neptune, with lobster claws sprouting from his forehead (normally, although not exclusively, an attribute of Oceanus¹⁹) and spewing dolphins was uncovered. Neptune was accompanied by the text: NEPTVNI VERTEX REGNEM SORTITI MOBILE VENTIS SCVLTVM QVI CAERVLEA EST DELFINIS CINCTA DVOB (The head of Neptune allotted the domain stirred by the winds, whose dark blue figure is flanked by two dolphins). A foliate scroll at the edge of the apse, facing the head of Neptune, had a chi-rho Christogram in a circle. At the south-eastern edge, the second half of a damaged panel read: ...NVS PERFICIS VLLVM ...GNARE CVPIDO (and you do not perform any service, if you deem it fit, Cupid). The partially destroyed centrepiece to the mosaic within the smaller half of the bipartite room originally contained a leopard and rider, probably Bacchus, flanked by two hunting scenes, one with a spearman confronting a leopard, the other, a hunter pursuing two deer.

Running almost the entire length of the north-western range, a distance of 29m, was a 2.5m wide porticus with a swastika meander. It was divided in two by a threshold panel (largely destroyed), originally framed in simple guilloche and fringed with a pattern of running peltae. The panel, which marked the approximate centre of the porticus, led directly into a room, or suite of rooms, apparently floored with *opus signinum*. Lysons was fairly dismissive of this, believing it to be a form of external 'hard terras floor, of reddish colour' which extended all around the building. Small exploratory transects were

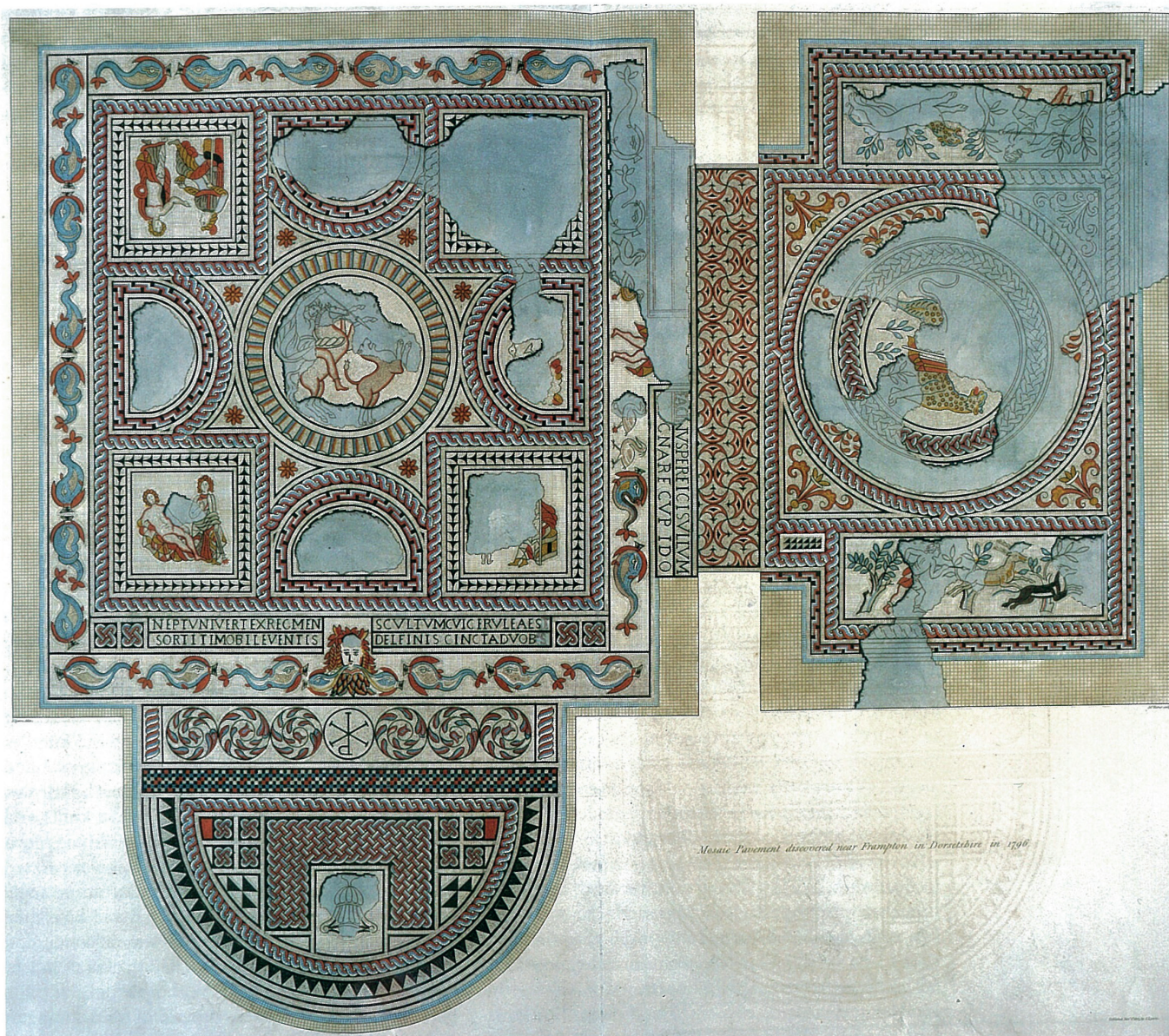


Fig. 4 Engraving of the bipartite reception room mosaic found in Nunnery Mead in 1796, as recorded by Samuel Lysons and published in *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae* I, part iii as plate V in 1813. (Photo: Miles Russell from Lysons 1813)

evidently cut into this floor, but its full extent remained untested and Lysons evidently felt that, with no obvious sign of a mosaic, the area could not be examined in the time available. At the north-eastern end of the porticus, a door led directly into a rectangular room, measuring 3.9 by 6m, floored in a brightly coloured mosaic at the centre of which was another image of Neptune or Oceanus with a lobster emerging from his head (Fig. 5). Four surrounding octagons contained portraits of the four winds (or tritons) with wind-ruffled hair, each with a conch shell, and a series of 10 blue-grey dolphins.

Having only exposed those areas in the building which contained mosaics, Lysons was left with a curiously eclectic series of rooms which, he felt, bore 'no resemblance to a Roman house', the spaces having not been 'adapted to domestic purpose'.²⁰ Quite what he meant by this statement is unclear, although he may have been alluding to a perceived lack of rubbish material, such as pottery or

animal bone. Unfortunately, as has already been noted, it is not known how much supervision the military, who may have been given orders to merely expose the floors, had during the excavation process and many artefacts were possibly ignored, overlooked or simply pocketed. Topsoil clearance work at Bignor villa, conducted between 1812 and 1818, similarly produced no artefacts to speak of, whereas later examination in the second half of the twentieth-century produced finds in relative abundance.²¹

The perceived absence of domestic finds, combined with the curiously elongated nature of the rooms shown on Lysons' plan as two independent L-shaped structures (Fig. 6), led Lysons to interpret the building (or buildings) as being religious in function: a series of temples 'probably dedicated to different deities, but the principal attention appears to have been paid to Neptune'.²² This point was picked up by Bill Putnam who, in his book *Roman Dorset*, suggested that the site may have comprised three



Fig. 5 Engraving by Samuel Lysons of the Neptune and Four Winds mosaic found in Nunnery Mead in 1796 and published in *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae* I, part iii as plate VII in 1813. (Photo: Miles Russell from Lysons 1813)

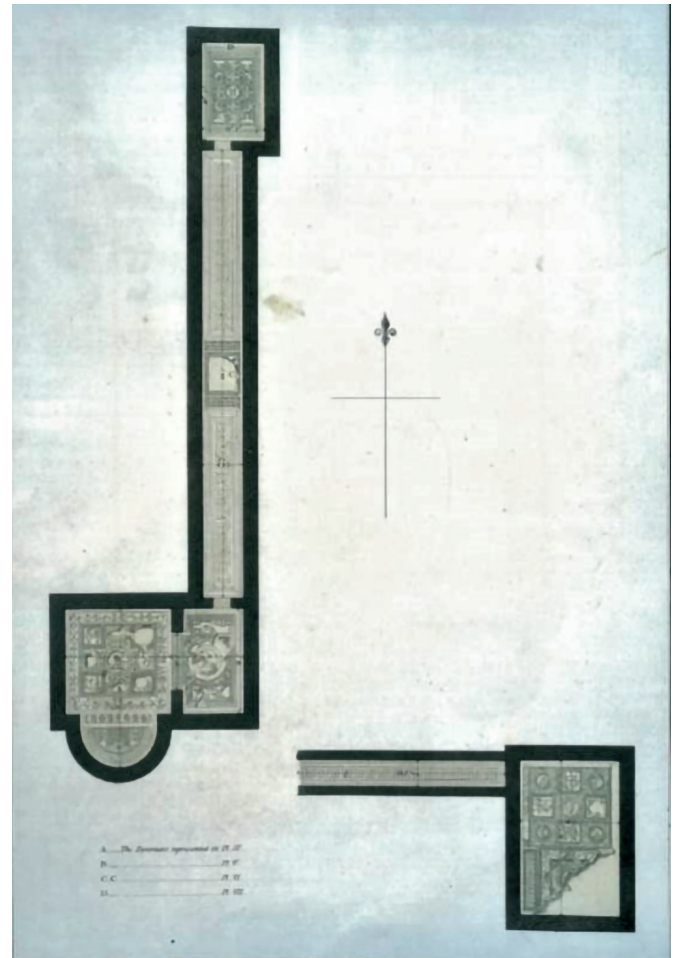


Fig. 6 Engraved plan of the rooms and mosaics at exposed at Nunnery Mead between 1796-7 made by Samuel Lysons and published in *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae* I, part iii as plate III in 1813. Note the north arrow is incorrect, north being in the direction of north-west as indicated here. (Photo: Miles Russell from Lysons 1813)

temples, joined by long corridors and dedicated to water deities, the source of the River Frome lying close by.²³

In 1903, Welbore St Clair Baddeley opened three trenches across the presumed area of Lysons' excavations with the hope of resolving the date and state of mosaic preservation. The work, sadly, proved largely inconclusive. Baddeley submitted his findings to Dorset Museum with a note that read 'I think it is best to ask you to keep this communication to yourself'.²⁴ It is not clear where precisely the 1903 trenches were dug, the plan of works being little more than a sketch, but the combination of loose flints and disturbed mortar led Baddeley to conclude that 'the whole site has been severely mauled by the people that last filled it in' with the result that 'some, if not all, of the mosaic must have gone'.²⁵

Baddeley further noted that in 1903 two locals remembered the whole site being 'laid open for about two days, about 49 years ago, at the time of the Crimean War'.²⁶ There being no further detail concerning this particular investigation, which must have occurred around 1850, the full extent of the investigation conducted at this time remains unknown. Lysons noted that the mortar in

which the tesserae had been laid was 'of an inferior quality' 'being for the most part in a state of decomposition, so that it was difficult to remove the earth without deranging the tesserae'.²⁷ The extremely fragile nature of the floors, combined with the negative discoveries of Baddeley, led to the view that the mosaics had likely all been destroyed.²⁸

Excavations in 2019 and 2021

Today, the Roman structure investigated by Lysons and Baddeley in Nunnery Mead, a meadow covering an area of approximately 5ha—three-quarters of which has been historically engineered to create a water meadow, the remainder comprising rough pasture—is owned by the Dorset Wildlife Trust. The meadow is fed by the River Frome at the northern end and drains through leats, one on the eastern edge and one dividing the meadow from the slope. Towards the southern end of the water meadow is the platform of the Roman building, protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument²⁹ but covered by bushes of hawthorn and blackthorn (Fig. 7).

With permission from both Historic England and the landowner, Dorset Wildlife Trust, a team from Bournemouth University established a project designed to



Fig. 7 The raised platform of the Frampton Roman villa in Nunnery Mead, protected by Dorset Wildlife Trust and Historic England, as a Scheduled Ancient Monument, here covered by hawthorn bushes and a herd of highly curious cows in spring 2019. (Photo: Miles Russell)

investigate the state of preservation of the archaeology at Frampton. A geophysical survey using magnetometry, earth resistance and ground-penetrating radar, confirmed the general position of the Roman structure and further suggested the presence of additional ranges. This new survey indicates that the building identified by Lysons was indeed a villa, comprising at least three wings, the main domestic range being at the north-west, facing south-east, together with a series of associated outbuildings, rather than a series of loosely connected temples.

Five small, targeted trenches were dug across the site between 2019 and 2021. The revised interpretation of the Nunnery Mead building as a villa, the phasing of which is determined by the artefactual assemblage, will be considered more fully in another paper. Two aspects of the investigation are, however, worth considering here, given what they reveal about Samuel Lysons, antiquarian excavator: the objectivity of late eighteenth-century mosaic recording and the nature of backfill and villa reconsolidation.

Artistic Lysons?

The first trench, which measured 2m by 12m, was cut at right angles across the platform defining the main northern wing of the villa (Fig. 8), being targeted on the central 'threshold' panel of the porticus mosaic recorded by Lysons (Fig. 9). The trench missed the centre of this by about a metre but exposed a small part of the guilloche frame belonging to the centre panel, an area of the running peltae pattern and the swastika-meander to the east. The condition of the mosaic here was relatively good, in that there was only very minor active root intrusion from surface vegetation, however only some 50% of the mosaic shown by Lysons had survived (Fig. 10). The absence of loose tesserae in soil overburden indicates that damage to the mosaic must have occurred before the final phase of excavation was backfilled (see below).

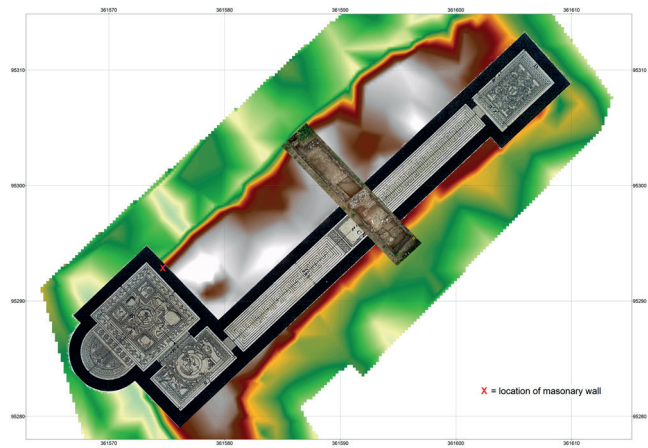


Fig. 8 Aerial photo of Trench 1 at Frampton villa taken in 2019 positioned over a plan of the rooms in the north-west wing by Samuel Lysons in 1797 and published in *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae* I, part iii as plate III in 1813, in turn overlying topographic model of extant villa platform. (Aerial photo and contour survey: Harry Manley)

The area of mosaic exposed in trench 1 compares extremely favourably with Lysons' coloured etching³⁰ with no significant discrepancies in design, although the width of the large tesserae border is, on average, 10cm wider than it appears in Lysons' plan. The start of the eastern, single fret section of the corridor is also marked by a change in the size of the larger tesserae that form the plain border.

Beyond the masonry wall that delineated the northern edge of the north-east/south-west aligned porticus, the trench exposed a mortared floor with a thin veneer of *opus signinum*, the crushed tile forming an extremely hard, smooth red surface (Fig. 11). This floor extended to the northernmost edge of the villa, where the outer wall marked the north-western limit of the northern range. This wall was not identified during either of the seasons directed by Lysons. Indeed, the absence of a mosaic in this area seems to have deterred the eighteenth-century labour force from fully exposing the room. There was considerably more stone in the spoil overlying this space, the soil being not as homogenous as that which overlay the porticus mosaic and contained numerous artefacts. Building material recovered here, within spoil largely untouched in the 1796-7 excavation, included box-flue, suggesting the presence of a hypocaust (something not alluded to by Lysons), ceramic roof tile, stone tile, a sandstone roof finial, painted plaster, pottery and oyster shells.

Together, these observations suggest that Lysons' dig team never fully exposed the area of *opus signinum* floor, nor, in the limited amount of time available to them, attempted to identify the north-western most, external wall to the villa. As already noted, Lysons believed the crushed tile represented a surface that entirely surrounded the Roman building, rather than comprising an internal one. The likelihood is that the *opus signinum* represented a waterproofed surface, perhaps set within an area originally constructed as part of a bathing suite. Only further archaeological examination in this area will be able to determine this.

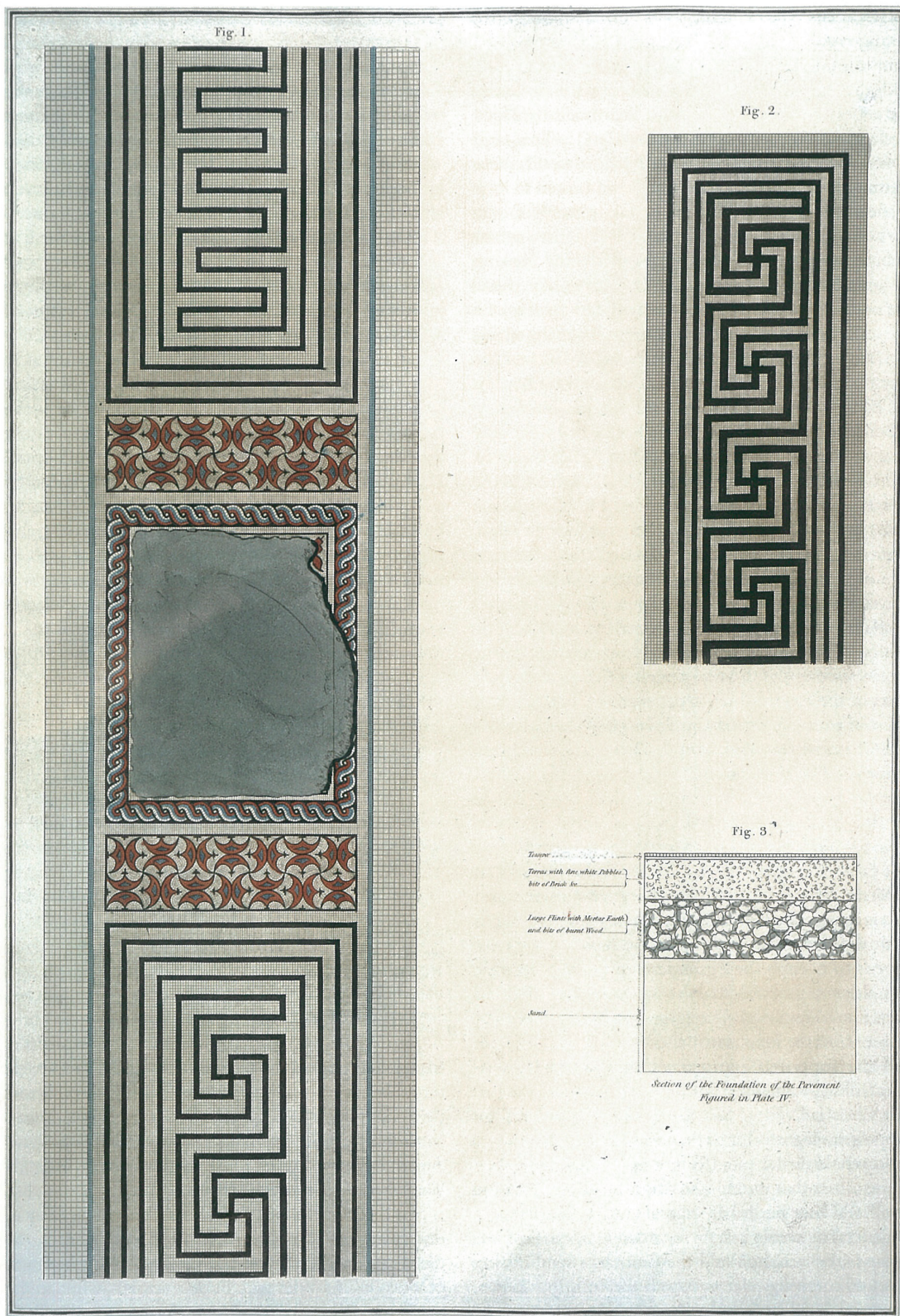


Fig. 9 Engraving by Samuel Lysons of mosaics found in Nunnery Mead in 1796 and published in *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae* I, part iii as plate VI in 1813. Figure 1 depicts the central part of the long porticus mosaic in the north-west wing; Figure 2 depicts a piece of the porticus mosaic in the south-west range; figure 3 shows a section cut through the mosaic found in 1794. (Photo: Miles Russell from Lysons 1813)

Given the discovery of a surviving fragment of geometric mosaic in the porticus of the north-west range, combined with the damaged state of the *opus signinum* floor to the north, a two metre square hand-cut test trench was added to the schedule for 2021, in order to ascertain the condition and survival of the Neptune and Four Winds mosaic in the north-eastern most room of the villa. This new trench was positioned according to Lysons' original excavation plan, as published in 1813, in the hope of

exposing the guilloche border abutting the north-east wall and perhaps one of the mosaic dolphins and Four Wind portraits.

An irregular fragment of mosaic, measuring 0.62 by 0.98m was recorded within the southern quarter of trench 5, at a depth of 0.42m. The area preserved the face of the northernmost personification of the Four Winds set within a white, red-fringed octagon, together with the



Fig. 10 Surviving sections of the porticus mosaic in the north-west wing exposed by trench 1 in 2019, looking north-east. To the left of shot, the porticus mosaic is protected by late 18th slate and stone rubble backfill. To the right, an area of secondary disturbance, probably dating to the mid 19th century, has removed the mosaic. (Photo: Miles Russell)



Fig. 11 Part of the opus signinum surface revealed in 2019 within trench 1 to the immediate north-west of the long porticus. (Photo: Miles Russell)



Fig. 12 Detail of the surviving northernmost panel in the Neptune and Four Winds mosaic, north-west wing of Frampton villa, as exposed by trench 5 in 2021. The upper part of portrait, chin, lower neck and shoulders have been damaged by root action. (Photo: Miles Russell)

upper half of a yellow conch shell carried over the left shoulder (Fig. 12). The upper part of the portrait had been damaged, an area of the red, wind-swept fringe having been lost, whilst the chin, lower neck and shoulders had also been destroyed. Loose, root-disrupted tesserae occurred throughout the topsoil. Areas of the interlocking red, blue/grey and white guilloche design that originally framed the octagonal portrait panel survived, as did a small upper fragment of a blue/grey dolphin with feathery red flume to the immediate north-east, one of ten noted by Lysons in the 1796-7 excavation.

Although largely complete, the portrait was in an extremely fragile condition, the mortar bed into which it was originally set having decayed. The floor surface itself was uneven, soil and roots having intruded between the tesserae further dislocating them so that they were no longer attached. In several places the white limestone tesserae appeared to have been partially dissolved, becoming rounded and depressed in relation to the red and blue/grey tesserae that surrounded them.

The detail noted in this re-exposed portrait of one of the Four Winds is important as in certain respects it differs considerably from the face recorded by Lysons in his engraving of 1797. Lysons' drawing is, in detail, looser than the real portrait, although it certainly captures the 'feel' of the image (Fig. 13). Of course, we do not know what time pressures he was working under as large areas of flooring would have required his full attention prior to being backfilled by the military; the groundworks team provided by George III undoubtedly could not remain on secondment forever and Lysons' accommodation costs, combined with a need to return to his day job in London, perhaps conspired to speed up the recording process.

Examination of the mosaic area exposed in 2021 shows that not only was the original portrait facing more directly towards the observer (rather than the left-facing three-quarter view provided by Lysons), but that the eyes and eyebrows were more solidly outlined in a way that almost exactly replicates the eye structure noted in the 'Face of Christ' and Four Winds in the Hinton St Mary mosaic, found 30km to the north-east in 1963 (Fig. 14). This would suggest that both the Frampton and Hinton St Mary mosaics were contemporary in design and that they were, almost certainly, created by the same mosaicist or mosaic school. This is something that is not immediately apparent in Lysons' drawing, the eyes and eyebrows here being defined in more sketchy terms, the nose being more flattened whilst the mouth and lips, though damaged in the original, are fuller than in Lysons' version.

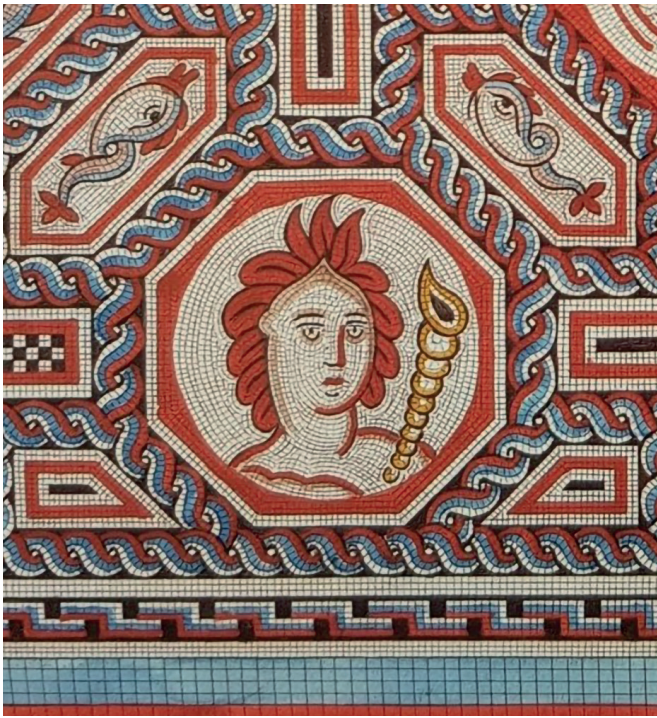


Fig. 13 Detail of the northernmost panel in the Neptune and Four Winds mosaic at the northern end of the long porticus as recorded and published by Samuel Lysons in *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae* I, part iii as plate VII in 1813, for comparison with Fig. 13. (Photo: Miles Russell from Lysons 1813)

Comparison of the hair and conch shell in both the freshly exposed portrait and Lysons' picture, create the clearest divergence in form. First, the conch shell appears too high up in Lysons' drawing, its tip being level with the upper part of the first cascading lock of hair whereas, in the original image, it is on a lower plane, its shell-coils being thinner and less bulbous. The locks of hair depicted by Lysons also differ from the original portrait, both in width and distance from the scalp, the eighteenth-century image creating a hairstyle that is altogether more fulsome and buoyant.

These are, perhaps, all minor concerns for Lysons was a masterful illustrator whose attention to recording archaeological information in the late eighteenth-century was arguably second to none. Working closely with colleagues, such as Richard Smirke at Woodchester, he was able to boast that the Great Pavement there had been 'copied with scrupulous fidelity',³¹ something that has been confirmed by later exposure.³² It is important to remember, however, the conditions that Lysons was working under (at Frampton, as noted, he may have been severely pressed for time) and any discrepancies and subtle differences in detail, style and execution between the recorded image and reality perhaps reflect this. Although Lysons' work was (and remains) an invaluable record of Romano British art, large amounts of which has now been lost, we must sometimes be wary of relying solely on his record.

Another aspect of the new work that requires consideration is the nature of the surviving walling within



Fig. 14 Detail of the central panel, probably depicting Christ, from a mosaic found in 1963 at Hinton St Mary, Dorset for comparison with the Four Winds portrait uncovered at Frampton in 2021. (© The Trustees of the British Museum. 1965,0409.1 Image licenced: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

the villa and how much of the structure revealed in 1796 and 1797 was 'tidied-up' prior to inspection by George III. We know that later, in 1812, when work began to erect a cover building for the Ganymede mosaic at Bignor villa in West Sussex, Lysons wrote to landowner John Hawkins concerned that only loose flint and greensand rubble be used, with no other part of the structure being actively 'defaced in search of stones'.³³ Earlier, Lysons had also stressed, in correspondence with Hawkins, the need to record Roman remains in situ, exactly as they were revealed, resisting any attempt at reconstruction or aesthetic 'beautification', taking care to record each and every imperfection and area of disturbance.³⁴

At Frampton, however, the requirement was that the mosaics should be cleared of debris and the overall room plan comprehensible for two royal visits; after all the King had provided the workforce necessary for the initial clearance. Here, then, the desire to resist aesthetic beautification may have been less pressing. In trench 1, for example, what appeared to be the wall defining the south-eastern edge of the porticus, although in the position recorded by Lysons, was found to be less a piece of solid masonry and more an unmortared bank of flints combined with other building rubble and, perhaps more significantly, pieces of grey (non-Roman) roofing slate. This highlights the difficulty in dating the standing flint walls of the porticus. The lower courses of the northern side are quite regular although lacking any mortar, the upper levels become less structured with bigger nodules. Since the existence of the L-shaped bank covering the villa pre-dates the excavation,³⁵ it is likely that it comprised



Fig. 15 The north-west 'wall' of the room containing the Neptune and Four Winds mosaic as revealed by trench 5 in 2021, is little more than a bank of flint nodules and may be 18th century 'reconstruction' reusing Roman stone. (Photo: Miles Russell)

Roman wall debris that collapsed in situ. How much of this material was later removed and replaced, in order to present a better structure to the King and his entourage, is impossible to gauge accurately without unpicking it all.

A second example of possible eighteenth-century modification was noted in trench 5, cut to expose a small area of the Neptune and Four Winds mosaic at the north-eastern end of the porticus in the main north wing. On the north-west side of the trench, as exposed, the mosaic noticeably sloped down, apparently disappearing beneath the wall that ran the full width of the trench. Whilst the steep angle of the slope suggested ground subsidence, the nature of the 'wall' itself, really little more than a bank of flint nodules, may indicate that it too was not an in situ discovery, but perhaps a masonry 'reconstruction' using original Roman stone, to beautify or tidy up this area of the villa prior to royal inspection (Fig. 15). Only a more complete examination of this room will resolve the nature of possible eighteenth-century rebuild.

Backfilling and Consolidation

In his lifetime, Samuel Lysons recorded a large number of mosaics, some from villa excavations overseen by contemporaries, such as Horkstow, Lincolnshire (1797) and Halstock in Dorset (1818), but the majority were from sites that he either directed himself or where he worked in close collaboration with others.³⁶ Unfortunately, we know very little about what ultimately happened to the villas and other Roman sites investigated by Lysons once the excavations had ended and the recording work was complete.

At Woodchester in Gloucestershire, first examined by Lysons in 1794, a series of floors, including the Great Pavement, appear to have been carefully reburied in order to limit damage from the elements and souvenir hunters, preserving them for future generations.³⁷ The precise nature of this original overburden, however, is unknown as



Fig. 16 Reburial of the porticus mosaic revealed in trench 1 with a layer of stone free soil overlain with slate, stone and ceramic roof tiles. (Photo: Miles Russell)

it was, for some considerable period of time up until 1973, removed every 12 years in order to reveal the mosaic. At Colesbourne, Gloucestershire, also investigated in 1794, the villa was only partially cleared by Lysons and a small team, the ultimate fate of the mosaics exposed there being unknown. At Rodmarton, only limited areas of mosaic floor were recovered during the examination of 1800, the villa presumably being backfilled afterwards. The story of Withington villa, in Gloucestershire, where excavations were directed by Lysons and H. C. Brooke between 1811 and 1812, is a little more complex. A number of mosaics recorded here were subsequently reburied but the main Orpheus-themed floor was later lifted in sections by the landowners, with limited success. The majority of the pieces went to the British Museum and only a single fragment ended up in Bristol City Museum.³⁸ Although areas of the villa have been archaeologically re-examined, most notably in 2005, the structural remains had been significantly disturbed by ploughing,³⁹ making an understanding of Lysons' potential reinstatement and backfill strategy unclear.

At Bignor the landowners wished to retain the villa, examined by Lysons between 1812-19, as a resource. Here, concerns about weathering and deliberate vandalism, as well as the need to limit damage to tesserae by frost and earthworms, led to the construction of cover buildings. At Great Witcombe, excavated by Lysons and William Hicks in 1818, the key floors within the bathhouse were also eventually protected by a cover building, the fully exposed foundations of the main domestic range being left open for public display. At Halstock, Lysons recorded only part of a mosaic in 1818, his sketch being unfinished at the time of his death the following year. When re-excavated, in 1971, the mosaic was found to have been backfilled with 'modern bricks laid over the southern end'.⁴⁰ Unfortunately the precise nature of Lysons' involvement at Halstock is unclear, so we cannot definitely attribute this consolidation work to him.

In all these villas, the details surrounding the nature of possible reburial and whether the floors were simply reburied beneath a blanket of spoil or a more considered approach was undertaken (assuming the site was not left open for visitors), remains largely unknown. At Frampton, as there was no interest by the landowners to keep the mosaics exposed following the royal visit of 1797, the working areas were abandoned. As has already been noted, the suggestion that the mosaics were covered between the initial work of 1796 and the final season, as suggested by Lysons,⁴¹ provided some hope that an attempt had been made to protect the site from both the extremes of winter and the attention of souvenir hunters. The cutting of small targeted, hand-cut transects at Frampton allowed a detailed consideration of the backfill strategy to be made.

After removal of the surface vegetation, trench 1 was excavated down to the level of Lysons' investigation, which was marked by a discontinuous layer of grey roofing slate, a material not generally found in the Roman period. Close examination of the section edges of trench 1 demonstrated that the areas of preserved mosaic appeared to coincide with the layer of slate which lay a few centimetres above the flooring, separated by a layer of well-sorted, stone free soil and overlain by soil with stone and rubble. In the areas where the floor was missing there was no slate and they were overlain by a largely stone free soil. It would appear, then, that two very distinct phases of backfill are represented here. The primary phase of consolidation comprised the deposition of a thin soil, itself sealed by a layer of eighteenth-century roofing slates, directly over the mosaic. Judging by the relatively 'fresh' and unweathered nature of the mosaic here, this must have occurred at, or shortly after, the completion of archaeological works in 1797. With the floor levels sealed, the remaining areas of the villa were backfilled with loose Roman building rubble, including roof stone and some tile. The predominantly stone-free soils overlying areas of damaged mosaic seem to indicate a secondary period of investigation, which can probably be equated with that of the mid nineteenth-century, as noted by Baddeley (see Fig. 10).⁴² It is not known who instigated this work, nor why, but the absence of flint rubble in the backfill of disturbed areas suggests that the collection of stone, presumably for building work elsewhere rather than archaeological curiosity, was the primary objective. Broadly speaking, this phase of disturbance seems to have coincided with the formal creation of the water meadow system and it is possible that flint removed from the villa was used in the construction of this.

In trench 5, soil overburden comprised root-disturbed earth with little in the way of Roman or other finds, with the exception of the occasional flint nodule, possibly derived from the original villa wall. At a depth of 0.2m a densely packed layer of Roman stone roof tile, ceramic floor tile and sandstone wall material was unearthed,

filling most of the north-eastern half of the trench. On discovery, it was hoped that this deposit represented material found during the 1790s excavation, which had been reused and carefully placed following the completion of fieldwork, with the intention of covering and protecting the mosaic. On removal, however, it was discovered that this material lay directly on top of a much-disturbed mortar layer, the original bedding deposit for tesserae, since removed. As areas of mosaic that did survive were found beyond the area of redeposited Roman structural material, we may presume this mass of tile and stone relates to the period of villa re-exposure thought to have occurred in the 1850s.

Once fully recorded by the team in 2019 and 2021, the fragments of surviving mosaics in trenches 1 and 5 at Frampton were carefully covered with a layer of stone free, packed earth overlain with slate and redeposited stone and roof tiles, in order to stabilise the tesserae more securely and limit additional root disruption (Fig. 16). In this way, the new trenches were backfilled and the areas of floor consolidated, much as Lysons' team had done when they departed the site following the completion of works in 1797.

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Notes

- 1 Barrett 1977, 312; Henig 1984; Cosh 1996, 13; Beeson 2000; Perring 2003, 99; Witts 2005, 17; Ling 2007
- 2 Lysons 1813, I, part iii
- 3 Henig 1984, 143
- 4 Lysons 1813, I, part iii, 1
- 5 Lysons 1813, I, part iii, 1
- 6 Lysons 1813, I, part iii, 2
- 7 Johns 2000; Scott 2013
- 8 Lysons 1813, I, part iii, plate III; Johns 2000, 9
- 9 Rudling and Russell 2015, 12
- 10 Lysons 1813, I, part iii, 4
- 11 Lysons 1813, I, part iii, plate LI
- 12 Lysons 1813, I, part iii, 4

- 13 Lysons 1813, I, part iii, 5
- 14 Lysons 1813, I, part iii, 5
- 15 Cosh and Neal 2005, 132-4
- 16 Cosh and Neal 2005, 136
- 17 Cosh and Neal 2010, 215
- 18 Cosh and Neal 2005, 146
- 19 Witts 2005, 124
- 20 Lysons 1813, I, part iii, 1
- 21 Rudling and Russell 2015, 81-2
- 22 Lysons 1813, I, part iii, 5
- 23 Putnam 2007, 88
- 24 Baddeley 1903, 1
- 25 Baddeley 1903, 2-3
- 26 Baddeley 1903, 1
- 27 Lysons 1813, I, part iii, 4
- 28 Farrar 1956, 82
- 29 SAM 1002683
- 30 Lysons 1813, I, part iii, plate 3
- 31 Scott 2013, 7
- 32 Baddeley 1926; Cosh and Neal 2010, 214-23
- 33 Rudling and Russell 2015, 17
- 34 Rudling and Russell 2015, 15
- 35 Lysons 1813, I, part iii, 1
- 36 Scott 2013, 6-9
- 37 Cosh and Neal 2010, 212-3; Scott 2013, 14
- 38 Cosh and Neal 2010, 204-9
- 39 Thompson and Armour Chelu 2009, 199-200
- 40 Lucas 1993, 39
- 41 Lysons 1813, I, part iii, 5
- 42 Baddeley 1903, 1