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**Spoonley Wood Roman Villa, Glos., May 1952**

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## NOTES

### SPOONLEY WOOD ROMAN VILLA

#### GLOUCESTERSHIRE

MAY, 1952

by HELEN E. O'NEIL, F.S.A.

It has been recently proved that the pavements at the Spoonley Wood Roman Villa are not the originals but substitutions, evidently made towards the end of the 1880's, after the excavations carried out by the Rev. W. Bazeley and Professor J. H. Middleton in 1882.

A résumé of the history of the site shows that the first mention of Roman finds in Spoonley Wood was made by Mrs Emma Dent in her book, *Annals of Winchcombe and Sudeley*, p. 15, published in 1877, where, after the description of the find and excavation of Wadfield Villa in 1863, she writes: 'In Spoonley Coppice we have found great quantities of tesserae, the remains of what must have been various apartments, each painted in different coloured frescoes, coins, bones of animals, tusks of the wild boar, and wood ashes. Owing to the roots of the trees having reached the pavement, all form and pattern have been destroyed.'

At the invitation of Mrs Dent, the Rev. W. Bazeley and Professor J. H. Middleton started an excavation of the site in 1882, the latter producing a Report with plan and drawings, published in *Archaeologia*, LII, 651 ff, in 1889. The Rev. W. Bazeley also published a short account in the *Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society's Transactions*, XIV, p. 208 (1889), where he mentions the discovery of the villa and the great interest it aroused. He goes on to say: 'For two years it lay open, and was so injured by frost, rabbits and also,

he was afraid, by visitors, that Mrs Dent thought fit to restore the stones to the positions in which they were found, and to cover the best of the pavements, one of which, however, she had had removed, rather earlier to Sudeley Castle.'

At a later date the Rev. W. Bazeley, writing of his excavation in *B. & G. Trans.*, xxxiii, p. 12 (1910), says: 'Mrs Dent gave him the services of twenty men to use as he desired, so need he say no antiquary was ever happier. They excavated the whole villa, built up the walls that had fallen down, and covered the buildings with the tiles which had formed the roof of the original building.'

In *B. & G. Trans.*, xxii, p. 300, mention is made that Mrs Dent built substantial sheds over the tessellated pavements at Spoonley and Wadfield villas.

On the occasion of a visit of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society to the site on 17 July 1889, the Rev. W. Bazeley suggested that they might revisit it to see further excavations, to which Mrs Dent replied 'she would be delighted if the members came, each with a spade, to continue the excavation; if they did so she would provide the bread and cheese.' (*B. & G. Trans.*, xiv, p. 210).

Professor J. H. Middleton, in his report on the Roman Villa in Spoonley Wood (*Arch.*, lii, p. 651 ff.) states in a note that the Rev. W. Bazeley, Honorary Secretary of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society gave much time and trouble to the superintendence of the excavations and the skilful protection of the remains. Mention is also made to Mrs Dent 'in roofing over and protecting in other ways the crumbling walls and mosaic pavements of the house; a very important and difficult task, which, in this case, has been carried out with unusual judgment and skill.'

Mr E. P. L. Brock, F.S.A., Hon. Secretary of the British Archaeological Association, read a note to that Society on 17 May 1882, on a Roman Villa in Spoonley Wood, near Sudeley Castle (*J.B.A.A.*, xxxviii, p. 215). He states that excavation was in progress and was difficult, due to the site being covered by a thick coppice, and that it was found by

workmen opening a pit for stone when they came on solid walling. He continues, that it is proposed to cover the best of the pavements for protection and to remove detached fragments for safety into Sudeley Castle. He mentions that a pavement from the Wadfield Roman Villa had been removed and placed in one of the Conservatories at the Castle. The Spoonley pavement, he states is of elaborate and elegant workmanship, while many of the others are much broken and damaged by the roots of the trees.

Mr G. B. Witts, in his *Archaeological Handbook of Gloucestershire*, p. 70, says after a brief description of the villa that: 'Under the care of Mr and Mrs Dent we may hope to see a Roman Villa preserved as it ought to be.'

Lastly, in reprinting Professor Middleton's report from *Archaeologia* in the *Winchcombe and Sudeley Record*, iv, 1893, further illustrations were added. These consisted of drawings of the pavements by the Rev. J. H. Cardew, and a coloured reproduction of a fragment of another pavement depicting a man holding a rake. There are also three drawings showing a general view of the villa with the newly erected sheds. After the death of Mrs Dent in 1900 (an appreciation of her work is printed in *B. & G. Trans.*, xxii, p. 300), interest in the antiquarian remains of the Sudeley Castle estate was not maintained. It is known that at some subsequent time, when repairs to the greenhouse were carried out, the tessellated pavement placed there by Mrs Dent was discarded and thrown away. It is not, however, known at present, which of the pavements removed to the Castle was the one destroyed at this time.

The first visit paid by the writer to Spoonley Wood was in 1933. It was not possible to enter the two sheds covering the pavements, as they were locked, and the keys were only available by calling at Sudeley Castle some distance away. However, it was noticed that two of the roofing slates of the lowest course, at the s.e. corner of the larger shed, were missing, thereby allowing a glimpse of the interior. Advantage was taken of the situation, and it was seen that a glass show case

of objects occupied the centre of the room, while a wooden shelf stood all round the walls. Most of the objects appeared to be of stone. Very little of a tessellated pavement was to be seen and the impression gathered was that of a cement floor. After that the site became more and more neglected, the doors of the sheds were forced and the objects stolen, until in 1945 the roof of the larger building collapsed (*B. & G. Trans.*, LXV, p. 229).

The pavements under discussion are numbered 7, 8 and 18 on Professor Middleton's plan, 7 and 8 in the larger shed and 18 in the smaller. The pavement in Room 18 consists of large slabs of cement ( $1\frac{3}{4}$  inches thick) with machine-cut imitation tesserae firmly embedded in it, the slabs being laid down with straight joints. The centre panel is circular and all in one piece, neatly rounded to fit its position, but now smashed up by a fall of some heavy implement on it. The tesserae are not even re-used Roman material. The design of the pavement is, however, a copy of the original, as seen from the Rev. J. H. Cardew's drawing in the *Winchcombe and Sudeley Record*.

The pavement in Room 7 has also been treated in the same way, nothing of the original remaining. The word *restored* is used in the caption of the drawing of this pavement by the Rev. J. H. Cardew.

Very little of the original pavement remains in Room 8 and sundry repairs had been done, while the centre of the room had been mostly relaid in cement. Original tesserae remain in the border patterns.

The remaining original tesserae show that the material and workmanship were of the usual type found on the Cotswolds, the stone being the white oolite, blue limestone and red tile.

Rooms 7, 8 and 18 all had hypocausts and it was possible to see a section of the original formation of the floor of Room 8. This consisted of a layer, 4 inches thick, of an orange-coloured mortar laid on stone slabs.

Stress was laid in the contemporary records on the care shown by Mrs Dent in the preservation of the site, but nowhere is there any mention of the substitution of the pavements.

There is no doubt that the repairs and replacements carried out at that time, i.e. *c.* 1885-90, were done with the best of intentions but it remains a most remarkable fact that the true state of the pavements now *in situ* had not been realised before this year (1952). Most of the pavements found during the excavations of the 1880's are stated to have been in a fragmentary state and since the present one in Room 18 (small shed) is complete, although an imitation it very likely represents the one removed to Sudeley Castle.

Since no large-scale work of repair of the site can be contemplated at present, no great harm will be done by leaving the walls as they are. It is known that they are largely restored, while for scientific purposes any evidence that remains, untouched by the original excavations, is safely buried below ground.

#### *Recent observations*

A feature of the site of the villa not mentioned hitherto, is the existence of a substantial bank and ditch running *c.* 60 feet to the east. It runs from the bank of the stream on the north and along the full length of the back of the villa, curving in a wide sweep around the latter's south-east corner. This suggests that at some time of its life the villa needed a defence.

There is also the outbuilding, considered to be a barn, lying beyond the courtyard and north-west of the villa. This building measures 60 feet by 40 feet and has an annexe on its western side, 21 feet wide. Large stones, suggesting the bases of piers, remain embedded in the ground within and along the south side of the barn, these suggest an aisled building.

There is also the remains of stone reveting of the banks at the junction of the two streams that run down on either side to meet a little distance west and below the villa. It seems almost certain that the road to the villa ran in this direction.