From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

**Kingsweston Villa Revisited: The East Wing Murder and other burials**

by G. C. Boon
1993, Vol. 111, 77-83

© The Society and the Author(s)
Kingsweston Villa Revisited: The East Wing Murder and other Burials

By GEORGE C. BOON

It was in November, 1947 that my friend John Brown and I discovered in the course of our fieldwork on the new housing-estates then springing up in the Shirehampton–Henbury area of north-west Bristol the first traces of Roman buildings at the landward edge of the alluvium bordering the Severn estuary. Excavations in 1948–9 exposed substantial remains of a winged courtyard villa, the main (north) block of which, however, had already been obliterated by the passage of the main access-road, Long Cross, of the Lawrence Weston estate. The remaining parts were deemed worthy of permanent preservation by Bristol City Council in February, 1949, at the urging of the Ministry of Works and with the support of the Lord Mayor, Alderman Charles Gill. Since 1956 the site has been open to public inspection, and in a room of the west wing, where the original floor had disappeared, a mosaic pavement from the Brislington villa may now conveniently, if a trifle disconcertingly, be viewed.

It was fortunate that the building was well-preserved where still accessible, for the excavation was scarcely of a character which would be tolerated today. Under the twin threats of inexperience on our part, and of unrelenting pressure throughout 1948 to complete the work, only a clean site and a very simple stratification allowed its history to be unravelled satisfactorily. It is worth, perhaps, recalling the absence in the Bristol area, at that date, of active amateur or professional excavators of experience and standing; that was to be remedied only later. The periodical visits of B.H.St.J. O’Neil, Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments, and the one visit of Dr. Ian Richmond (as he then still was) were accordingly of the very highest value, and transformed the efforts which we had made.

Adjacent, about 50 ft away, were further walls (the ‘Western Building’), which appeared to belong to an earlier structure than the late third-century house with its mosaics (the ‘Eastern Building’), and were of a totally different appearance. Part had been rebuilt on the old lines in the fourth century, when a ‘corn-drying’ flue was inserted, and the whole enclosed within a courtyard. A small square lodge was identified in what was thought to be the south boundary-wall, and produced from its earthen floor a badly-preserved coin, seemingly a Valentinian Securitas type. It was intended to open the Western Building completely, as the subject of a second report, and some further exploration was done in 1950; however, Mr. Brown’s way and mine parted, and nothing more was achieved. One of the ubiquitous Dobunnic small silver coins, incorporated into the sandy mortar of one of the Eastern Building walls, may perhaps point to a considerably earlier origin of settlement, of which another trace may possibly be claimed in the cleanly-filled ditch traversing the Porticus and necessitating a reconstruction of its façade upon an inner court.

This exordium will, I hope, on the one hand set the Kingsweston buildings in perspective; and on the other explain, if not excuse, the defectiveness of the record as to what follows, the subjects of which were, again, to have been treated in detail over forty years ago, when memories, if not notes, were fresher.
The Kingsweston Murder (Figs. 1–2)

By June 1948 the excavations had traced the outline of the wings of the Eastern Building, the bath-suite, and the Porticus. The projecting room XI of the east wing, unlike the west wing, had been fitted with a hypocaust of composite pattern, secondary to the structure. There were four L-shaped baulks and eight pillars in the central space to support the bridging-slabs of the mosaic floor above, which was laid on a prepared bed some 6 in thick. The greater part of the floor had subsided into the cavity, which was thoroughly filled with rubble and earth, and fragments of mosaic, in consequence. About half-way down this filling, and lying as flat as could well be upon such a rough bed, was the skeleton of a man, later examined summarily by the late M.A.C. Hinton, F.R.S., and pronounced to be of an individual aged fifty or more, and just over 5 ft in height. The body was found bent at the waist, its legs extending along the central south–north flue between two of the L-shaped baulks, and the head and trunk lying in narrow northern east–west flue, the skull being sheltered to some extent from later damage by a slab of flooring which had lodged at an angle. It will be seen from the photographs that much of the upper part of the left side of the head was sheared off by a tremendous blow, and the clean edge of the bone showed minute corrugations answering to nicks on the blade. On turning over the skull, a second savage cut, inflicted above the left mastoid process, was observable. No other wounds were detected on other bones, and no object was found which had belonged to this individual. It is assumed that he was left where he fell, to be covered by further falls of stone.
The report suggests that this murder took place in the late fourth or early fifth century; but on an earlier page it was wisely pointed out that this part of the house had been inhabited for 'a lengthy period'. This remark arose from the existence, outside the doorway into Room XI from the Porticus, of a landing made from six Bath Stone slabs, including a column-capital, from the façade itself, the ruined state of this structure being further illustrated by two Bath Stone voussoirs, still mortared together, found beneath. The landing was considerably worn by tread in the centre, showing that both leaves of the door were kept permanently open (as had not previously been the case), or, more probably, had been removed. The report maintains on the evidence of the occurrence of Valentinianic coins in occupation-layers of Rooms XII and XIII adjacent to XI, but only in rubble overlying the floor of the Porticus, that even the rebuilt Porticus had collapsed before such coins had entered circulation, aducing by way of explanation the supposed effect of the raids of 367–8. These it is now less easy to adduce; there is no clear evidence that the Severn estuary region was attacked on that occasion, though it may have been, and the coin-lists from other villas do not match each other or parallel Kingsweston except at Woolaston near Lydney, though in general the lists are too short for much reliance to be placed on them. Demolition, in any case, is not likely to have been the work of raiders bent on rapine and plunder.

The latest coin from Kingsweston, commemorating Gratian's third quinquennium in 381, came unstratified from the Porticus. In a list of 88 specimens one might well have expected to see Theodosian pieces, if coin-using occupation had continued beyond that date. One may on
the whole concede a squatter occupation in the east wing when the Porticus was in ruins, but one must also concede on the grounds of the wear visible on the central block of the landing outside the doorway into Room XI that it continued coin-less for 'a lengthy period' after the loss of that last coin. It seems very unlikely, too, that the room would have been much frequented if its floor had collapsed into the cavity below. A later period altogether seems to be indicated for the murder, when the building was coldharbourage indeed, its walls mere stumps, its floor gaping.10 We have the account by Giraldus Cambrensis of his visit to Caerleon in 1188, and of what he saw, or imagined he saw, there: even so late, substantial buildings everywhere could hardly have been less prominent in ruin.11

This note was prompted by an entry of 1012 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, when the Danes, having taken Archbishop Ælfheah (Alphege) prisoner, pelted him to death, 'and one of them smote him on the head with the iron of an axe, so that with the blow he sank down, and his holy blood fell upon the earth... The scene was London. But if one considers the character of the great wound on the Kingsweston skull, in particular the total flaking-off of such a large area of bone, one is led to conclude that it, likewise, was the effect of an axe-blows rather than a sword-cut. The type of war-axe used by the Viking raider had a convex cutting-edge, the blade itself being quite thin, but expanding like that of a hollow-ground knife or razor-blade of today into an almost diamond-shaped cross-section. Examples abound.13 The manifest razor-sharpness of the cutting-edge is witnessed by the skull itself: this was no woodman's chopper of the 14th century, when walls north of the Porticus were widely robbed for stone.14 There were Viking raids up the Severn, notably in 918;15 it is submitted that the discovery of 1948 may well be a mute testimony to the habitual savagery of those onslaughts.

Proof might well be in a Carbon 14 test. But the remains do not appear to have been received at the City Museum, Bristol, with other materials from the villa; and it can but be hoped that this tardy discussion may bring them to light once more.

A Human Burial at Kingsweston Villa (Fig. 3)

The upper part only of a human skeleton, lying approximately NE–SW, was found in 1948 below the red clay surfacing of the courtyard to the east of the east wing of the Eastern Building.16 The remainder of the skeleton had been destroyed in a contractor's mechanically-cut trench. As can be seen from the photograph, the remains were in an exceptionally shattered and comminuted state, which I venture to think arose from Roman, rather than modern, traffic above them, the cracking of the bone being throughout permeated by the red clay.

Burial in a Bath Stone Coffin, West Town Lane Housing Site (Fig. 4)

The coffin was found about 900 yds west of the villa, about 30 in deep, in 1948 during building operations; it lay approximately SE–NW, and had a half-hexagonal head; it was 63 in long, and contained the much-decayed remains, few bones indeed remaining, of what was thought to be an elderly person; though that seems to be a guess, and from the size of the coffin a child's burial should perhaps not be ruled out. There was nothing with the skeleton, apart from sandal-nails.17 A search was made at various times for traces of a Roman presence between this point and the villa, parallel with the somewhat frequent traces east of the building;18 but no positive connexion was observed. The burial is, perhaps, rather far from the villa to have had a connexion.
Fig. 3  Remains of skeleton, East Courtyard, Kingsweston Roman Villa, 1948.

Fig. 4  Interment in a Bath Stone coffin, West Town Lane, Shirehampton, 1948.
Foundation-Burial at the Eastern Building (Fig. 5)

Just inside, on the left or west of the main entrance into the Porticus (VIII) from the exterior porch (IX), and close to the west edge of the column-base foundation on that side, articulated bones of a young pig, lacking the skull and other parts, were found at subsoil-level in 1948. There are many instances of such foundation-deposits.19

Notes and References

1. G.C. Boon, *TBGAS 69* (1950), 5–58. The primary walls produced three important finds: the Dobunnic coin (n. 3 below) and part of a proto-zoomorphic penannular brooch (*TBGAS 86* (1967), 195–6) were probably in sandy earth used for the mortar; a coin of Claudius II (*TBGAS 69*, 40, no. 8) was presumably dropped by the masons.
5. Ibid., 18, 58, and diagrammatically on the folding plan.
6. Ibid., 17–18.
7. A.M. ApSimon, *Proc. UBSS 10.3* (1965), 230 rightly remarks that direct evidence is missing in support of my contention that the Kingsweston evidence pointed to an interruption arising from the raids. This notion was based on the belief, since shown to be erroneous, that Valentinianic coins of the
earliest period, 364–7, are not common in Britain. They are proportionably as common as might be assumed without recourse to external crisis (cf. Coins and the Archaeologist (ed. J. Casey and R. Reece, 2nd ed. 1988), 141 with n. 215). The skulls, etc. from Brislington (Branigan, loc. cit. n. 2, 82–4) are not reported as displaying wounds, and the date when the well was filled is wholly obscure; the human remains may be of an altogether later date, as hinted by J. Beddoe, TBGAS 24 (1901), 288–9.

9. TBGAS 69, 45 no. 79.
10. The small mammalian jawbone visible with other bones a few inches in front of the skull in Fig. 2 belonged to a Pine Marten (TBGAS 69, 58). This shy creature, long extinct in the district, seems to have lived in the rubble at a later date than that at which the murder occurred.
11. Cf. my commentary in J.D. Zienkiewicz, The Legionary Fortress Baths at Caerleon (1986) i, 269–71. At Verulamium, ‘subterranean crypts’ and ‘vaulted passages’ were used as dens by ‘thieves and strumpets’ in the 11th century (cf. T. Wright’s interesting paper in Archaeologia 30 (1844), 438–57, esp. 441).
14. TBGAS 69, 10.
16. TBGAS 69, 57.
17. Western Daily Press, Tuesday March 9, 1948, 3, col. 3.
18. TBGAS 69, 5, 9. Records in City Museum, Bristol. For further work cf. A.J. Parker, Bristol & Avon Archaeology 3 (1984), 27–35. A hoard of 596 denarii (plus two Lycian drachmae) running from Antony to Antoninus Pius, A.D. 156–7, found at NGR 553788, was nowhere near the villa, but is an important addition to our knowledge of the character of Roman settlement at the edge of the alluvium (I. Carradice in R. Bland and A. Burnett, The Normanby Hoard and other Roman Coin Hoards (British Museum, 1988), 23–31, pl. 2) before the Eastern Building was erected.

Penarth
April 1993