



BRADING ROMAN VILLA

A History of Brading Roman Villa – Notes for Teachers

The occupation of the site

There is evidence at the site of Brading Roman Villa of occupation prior to the Roman period. However, the substantial remains here are of a villa house constructed in the Roman style. A 'villa' was essentially a farm and the villa found at Brading seems to be one of high status and importance. It began in about AD50 as a small stone building probably occupied by a British or Romano-British farmer. During the Roman occupation the British (or Celts) gradually adopted a Roman lifestyle including building design. By AD250 the site had developed into a large complex which consisted of a house and farm buildings grouped around a courtyard. The villa was abandoned in AD300 perhaps after a fire when the house was no longer lived in.

The discovery and excavation of the site

As the years passed the buildings became buried under the ground and the land became agricultural. The site was then discovered in 1879 by a local farmer and excavated between 1880 and 1884 by a team of archaeologists. Since this further excavations have taken place. These excavations have revealed many features of the site as well as uncovered a vast amount of artefacts, some of which are on display in the exhibition centre.

The villa house

The remains of the villa house are undercover in a new exhibition centre. The remains are substantial – the house consisted of twelve rooms on the ground floor, all of which survive, some of the walls standing over 1 metre high. The house was built of stone and timber. The roof was tiled with limestone and clay tiles. Some of the windows were glazed with green glass. Iron fittings have been found that would have been attached to wooden window shutters. Some of the floors were decorated with mosaics and the walls plastered and painted.

The function of each of the rooms in the house is not known for certain. There is no evidence of a kitchen inside the house; food may have been prepared outside to reduce the risk of fire. The largest room in the house with its beautiful mosaic floor may have been used for special occasions to entertain guests. Artefacts found within the house, such as Samian pottery, jewellery and games suggest that the occupants had a high standard of living.

The mosaics

5 of the rooms in the main villa house have mosaics in situ that can be seen. Some of them depict scenes of Roman fables and characters and reflect the wealth and education of the occupants. Room 9 has a mosaic of a geometric pattern in the shape of a lozenge. Room 6 is the corridor of the house and consists of a red and white chequered floor with a central panel with a picture of Orpheus (a musician). Room 3 has a damaged mosaic with several

panels showing various pictures including Bacchus (God of Wine), a cock-headed man, gladiators and a domed shaped building. Room 12 contains the largest mosaic – it is divided into two parts and contains images of Roman Gods and Goddesses as well as Medusa and scenes reflecting farming and the sea.

Farm buildings

There were a range of buildings on each side of the main villa house. The north wing was a farmhouse probably lived in by the farm workers. Here you can see the remains of a room with a hypocaust (under floor heating) and the remains of a well. The well house was also the site of a bath which does not survive. The south wing consisted of agricultural buildings such as a granary and storerooms now marked out in chalk on the ground.

Garden

There is no evidence at the site of a formal garden here in Roman times. However, a water feature called a 'nymphaeum' has exists which was built outside of the main villa house. This is now undercover in the exhibition centre. There is a reconstructed Roman garden here with a variety of plants, herbs and flowers which could have been grown in a Roman garden.

The environment

The sea played an important role in the life of this maritime villa. There was probably a small harbour to the east of the Villa where a branch of the sea came up from Brading Haven, navigable at high tide. This allowed trade by sea to the mainland of Britain to France and other parts of the Empire.

This site functioned as a farm and there is evidence here of farming animals and growing wheat, barley, rye, oat and beans. Produce farmed here may have been shipped to other parts of Britain and the Empire in exchange for Samian ware from southern France, quernstones from Germany and wine and olive oil from Italy and Greece.