The Romans of Fane Road
Heritage Lottery Project 2014
A Community Excavation on the Fane Road allotments adjacent to Itter Crescent Iron Age settlement and Roman villa
In 2011-12 the remains of a previously unknown Roman villa and Iron Age farmstead were unearthed by archaeologists from Oxford Archaeology East (OA East) on land at Itter Crescent, Peterborough. The archaeologists were called in to investigate the site by CgMs Consulting on behalf of Bellway Homes (East Midlands), who funded the excavation prior to the redevelopment of the site for housing.

Following on from the excavation, which generated a lot of interest within the local community, a small committee was set up that included OA East’s Outreach & Learning Officer, the City Archaeologist and the Secretary of the Fane Road Allotment Association. With support from allotment holders, local schools, individuals and Peterborough City Council, the committee successfully obtained a Heritage Lottery grant to deliver an extensive heritage project that was focused on finding the southern wing of the Itter Crescent Roman villa.
In addition to a series of heritage talks and guided walks, a Community Excavation took place during May and June 2014 in an allotment area south of the OA East excavation. Over one hundred and thirty volunteers, including young people, supported by professional staff were involved in this quest. During the excavation over 1000 people including students, members of local organisations and residents of Peterborough visited the site.
The Community Excavation

The Community Excavation lasted twenty days and involved the digging of three trenches, which revealed many Iron Age and Roman features and artefacts.

Trench 1 was positioned adjacent to the OA East excavation and here volunteers found a range of Iron Age features including ditches, a pit and part of a drainage gully probably associated with a roundhouse; this contained a mixture of plain and decorated Iron Age pottery and several loomweights. In another part of the trench the remains of Roman wall foundations that had been ‘robbed’ (stone removed for use elsewhere), part of a hypocaust system (see page 13), several cobbled surfaces and a possible garden plinth (perhaps for a statue) were uncovered. These remains may mark the continuation of the main eastern wing of the villa.
Volunteers excavating in Trench 2, close to Trench 1, found a substantial Roman wall foundation as well as two cobbled surfaces. The wall probably initially served to support a terrace during an earlier Roman phase, which may have been re-used as part of the southern wing of the later villa complex. Unfortunately, the presence of a modern gas pipeline that runs between the two trenches prevents us from proving or disproving this theory. Excavations in Trench 3, a small area located away from the main excavation area, found another possible wall and a cobbled surface in addition to Roman pottery and animal bone.
Visitors to the Community Dig

The site was open to visitors every day and also hosted visits by local schools and groups. Visitors watched the excavations, viewed the latest finds and talked to staff and volunteers. Nine schools involving over five hundred and thirty pupils and staff visited the site along with five local organisations. In addition to taking part in a site tour, students and teachers helped with the finds processing. They also learnt about archaeological time periods and the lifestyle of the inhabitants. During two of the four Open Days Roman re-enactors set up camp and gave talks to visitors about life during the Roman period.
As part of the heritage project it was planned to build a ‘Roman’ type kiln on site with firing during one of the four Open Days. At the project launch visitors chose their pottery style and then came on one of the Open Days, along with other visitors to paint a ‘slip’ (a liquid clay) onto their pre-made pots provided by Jon Cane (potter).

Bellway Homes (East Midlands) Ltd. donated the brick and clay needed to build the ‘igloo’ shaped kiln. The kiln took two days of hard work by Jon Cane assisted by Wendy Gamble. The kiln was packed with one hundred and fifty pots, and using wood as fuel was set alight on Saturday 31st May and continued to be stoked until the early hours of Sunday morning when it was finally sealed and the pots left to ‘cook’.

On the afternoon of Sunday 1st June, twenty-two hours after it was fired up, the kiln was carefully opened - watched by an excited crowd, many of them anxious to see whether their pots had survived in one piece! Everyone was thrilled to see that most of the pots had survived the firing and the pleasure shown by those waiting to collect their replica Nene Valley Colour Coated decorated pots was one of the highlights of the Community Excavation. This was a very successful piece of experimental archaeology.
Before the Villa
Iron Age Farmers

Before the villa was built the site was home to a wealthy Iron Age family. Their roundhouses, traces of which were found during both excavations, were built inside a large D-shaped ditched enclosure the size of a football pitch.

The plan below shows the largest roundhouse found in the OA East excavation, which was rebuilt at least once (note the second circular drip gully). Like many similar Iron Age buildings, the entrance of the largest roundhouse faced southwards allowing as much light as possible to enter the dwelling.

A plan and photograph of the Iter Crescent roundhouse

The thatched roof, seen in the photograph of a reconstructed roundhouse, would have been made of local reeds supported by an ash / oak frame. The walls of the roundhouse would have consisted of a simple frame (wattle) plastered with daub (mud, clay, and animal dung) and then painted. An Iron Age family would sleep, eat and entertain in their small home. Why not visit Flag Fen to see both Bronze Age and Iron Age roundhouses?
A range of different animal bones was found during the Community Excavation. These bones can tell archaeologists which animals the inhabitants were rearing or hunting. The animal bones that were found came from cattle, sheep/goats, horses, pigs, chickens and geese. As well as providing meat, fat, hide (leather), wool and milk, the larger animals such as the cattle and possibly horses would have pulled ploughs and carts, while the chickens and geese would have produced eggs as well as feathers. At the OA East Itter Crescent site they also found bones from a dog (perhaps used for hunting), roe deer and badger.

Bones were also made into tools or used as jewellery. A bone awl and a dog tooth with a hole drilled through it were both found during the Community Excavation. The awl would have been used to bore holes in leather while the dog tooth may well have been worn as an amulet.
Fragments of ten loomweights were found close to Iron Age pottery sherds in the same ditch. These finds tell us that the people that lived in the farmstead wove their own clothes of wool using a simple loom like the one in the reconstruction.

Before the cloth was woven it would have been dyed using locally grown plants such as woad (blue), weld (bright yellow) and madder (red). Iron Age clothes were often colourful and not dull as once thought.

The information contained in this booklet will enable you to complete the crossword. The answers to the completed crossword can be found at www.oxfordarchaeology.com/community/fane-road
The Romans introduced new fashions and the Iron Age roundhouse was eventually replaced by a Roman style villa. The first villa was a simple timber-framed building, replaced over time by a two-storey stone courtyard villa, which appears to have had the luxury of its own bathhouse. The OA East excavations showed that the villa faced eastwards and included a number of wells, keyhole-shaped ovens (for baking bread and cooking), a tile kiln and a range of outbuildings. It also had compacted clay and tessellated floors (mosaic), painted plaster walls and an underfloor heating (hypocaust) system.

The reconstruction, mainly based on the OA East excavations, shows what the luxury two-storey Roman villa, made of stone, may have looked like in the mid 4th century (AD 360) before it was abandoned. Most of the original stone was taken away to make other buildings in the local area. Some of this stone may have been used to build All Saints Church, Paston.

The villa had both the northern and southern wing, although the western wing would have been the most impressive. Trench 1 of the Community Excavation may have found the continuation of the open corridor of the western wing, while the wall found in Trench 2 may have been the south wall of the southern wing. The entrance to the villa complex would probably have been through a gate located very close to that of the Iron Age settlement.
The villa building would have been covered with a tiled roof. Hundreds of fragments of roof tiles were found during the two excavations. These were made in a kiln found next to the villa which produced two types of roof tiles: tegula (a flat tile with upstanding edges) and imbrex (a curved tile).

During the OA East Itter Crescent excavations two small areas of tessalated floors were found, although none were uncovered during the Community Excavation. It is also interesting to note that some of the many hundreds of larger tesserae that were found during the Community Excavation had been recycled from either tegula or box flue tiles. In total over 56,000 tesserae were found during the two excavations, made from stone, limestone or recycled tiles.
The Roman Heating System

During the Community Excavation volunteers found hundreds of fragments that belonged to the villa’s under floor heating system and wall heating system which would have only been found in luxury villas. In this system hot air circulates under a raised floor supported by columns of bricks (pilae). It then travels up the wall in hollow bricks called box flue tiles (tubuli) before leaving the building through vents.

Judging by the amount of broken bricks and tiles found by the archaeologists and volunteers, several rooms in the villa must have had both heated floors and walls. This suggests a wealthy family lived here with access to a plentiful supply of wood to keep the furnace fuelled.
During the 2011/2012 OA East excavations archaeologists found what they believed to be the caldarium (hot room) and the tepidarium (warm room). These two rooms plus the hypocaust heating system would have formed part of a Roman bath house complex. Only wealthy villa owners had their own bath houses.

Within the bath house complex there were several other rooms used for entertaining guests. The walls would have been plastered and painted. The Community Excavation found hundreds of fragments of Roman painted wall plaster. These varied in colour from white, yellow, maroon, green and grey to black and red. Several different wall schemes appear to have been used during the life of the villa, although generally there seems to have been a linear scheme with vertical and horizontal contrasting colours.
Roman Dress Accessories

During the two excavations the site was regularly scanned using a metal detector. The aim was to find those small metal objects that are difficult to find when covered in soil. Finds included Roman coins, old iron nails and pieces of lead, and an old knife blade of unknown age. Personal items were also found including several Roman brooches and bracelets and a small glass bead possibly from a child's necklace.

These objects that once belonged to those who lived or visited the villa all those years ago make the story of the site all the more fascinating. Were the owners of these artefacts descended from the Iron Age people that first built the settlement or were they new to the area? We may never know.
Roman pottery vessels found on the Itter Crescent dig

Nene Valley colour coated ware

Roman Samian Ware showing the legs of a lion

A mixed collection of Roman pottery

Roman Pottery Types

Thousands of pottery sherds were found during the two excavations. Most of the pottery was made locally and included types known as greyware and Nene Valley colour coated ware. The Nene Valley pottery was dipped into coloured liquid clay (a slip) which when fired in a kiln turned brown, orange, green or black. This pottery, which dates from the 2nd – 4th centuries, included flagons, cups and beakers. It was widely distributed, having been found as far afield as Hadrian’s wall and the south-west of England.

High quality imported pottery called *Samian* ware from Gaul (France) was also found along with fragments of glass vessels. The villa owners would use such table and glassware to impress their guests as they relaxed and were entertained in the luxurious surroundings. Parts of amphora used for transporting wine, olive oil and fish sauce were also found, showing that the villa residents would have enjoyed imported luxury foods.
Roman Cuisine

The Romans that lived in the villa had a varied diet. They would have eaten meat from animals raised on their land as well as bread made from locally grown wheat. The excavations showed that two types of wheat (emmer and spelt) were consumed and these would have been ground into flour using quernstones. Only the upper part of a quernstone, probably made from Spilsby sandstone, was found and is a type called a beehive quernstone due to its shape. This was worn down on one side, suggesting that it was probably oscillated (turned from side to side) rather than rotated. Grain would have been poured into the top and ground between the two faces of stone.

Besides eating meat (fresh, smoked & salted), vegetables (such as beans & radishes) and fruit (e.g. apples), the occupants of the villa would have also eaten seasonal wild berries. Environmental evidence from the excavations also tells us that they ate eggs, fish and shellfish. Many oyster and mussel shells were found during the excavations, the former were brought from the coast in large quantities. Honey would have been used as a sweetener instead of sugar.

On the very last day of the Community Excavation staff and volunteers were invited to a Roman feast and enjoyed such delicacies as honey and mustard chicken, meat balls in wine sauce, garum and must cake.
The archaeological report produced as part of this community project can be downloaded from the Oxford Archaeology East website at www.oxfordarchaeology.com/community/fane-road

A detailed archaeological report on the Iron Age settlement and Roman villa will be published as an Oxford Archaeology monograph in due course.
The Management Committee of the ‘Romans of Fane Road’ Heritage Lottery Project would like to thank the Heritage Lottery Fund for their generous grant. They would also like to thank Peterborough City Council, Bellway Homes (East Midlands) Ltd, Morrisons and the many specialists who so freely gave of their time and expertise. The Management Committee would also like to thank the hundreds of adults and young people of Peterborough that took part in the many elements of the Project. Besides the Community Excavation there were ten Heritage Learning Sessions, three Heritage Walks, a schools Art Competition as well as visits by OA East archaeologists to local schools and organisations. There will also be a set of teaching resources housed with Peterborough Museum, two Information boards in Itter Park and two popular publications, this publication and a children’s version.