

Updates about Roman mosaics in Oxfordshire, UK

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Abstract:

There is a multitude of publications about Roman villas in the UK and some about the creation in mosaics the people of the Roman Empire produced upon their arrival in the British Isles.

I focus here on mosaics found in Roman habitation within Oxfordshire, UK: the pavement at Stonefield discovered in 1712 and reproduced in textile during the eighteenth century, as well as the mosaic floor in room 30 at the North Leigh Roman Villa (fourth century AD).

My paper does not reiterate substantially what other pieces of speciality literature say, but offers an update (up to January 2025) with respect to the two historical vestiges mentioned above.

Updates about Roman mosaics in Oxfordshire

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The process of looking for publications about Roman mosaics within Britain in preparation for my exhibition ‘The Romans and Us’, on display in Wolfson College, University of Oxford between the 3rd of January and the 6th of April 2024, revealed a considerable number of them to me. And, of course, new findings will come to light to supplement their sum. For now I present information that is not well known about the art of Roman mosaic in Oxfordshire; my contribution about a particular object here (the depiction of a mosaic in a textile – I describe it) and some of the conjectures I make are original.

Many of the discoveries concerning the Romans within Oxfordshire area are situated in close proximity to what is known today as Akeman Street.¹ The name ‘Akeman’ was given to it in the Middle Ages. Evidence suggests that this thoroughfare may have been an older track, which the Romans surfaced with cement and reused either the second century CE or later; the first theory is more popular as some researchers believed it was instrumental in the creation of an imperial estate under Hadrian (76–138; ruled 117–138 CE).² The road discussed here is approximately 117 kilometres (73 miles) long and runs roughly east–west.³

still has, many ramifications,⁴ but the main one was that which linked Watling Street north of Verulamium (near modern St Albans) with the Fosse Way at Corinium Dobunorum (now Cirencester); see the map in **fig. 1** where it is visible that it connected the territories of the modern counties of Hertfordshire and Gloucestershire. For the purpose of this article relevant are parts of the A41 (specifically the road between Berkhamsted and Bicester), which includes the connection Oxford-North Leigh Roman Villa (it is a little more than 30-minutes’ drive between the city and the archaeological site). Also the public footpath between Tackley and Stonefield that is a part of the Oxfordshire Way (10 kilometres; 6 miles) can be used to reach North Leigh.⁵

¹ The name Akeman comes from its connection with the Roman town of Aquæ Sulis/*Aquamannia*, today Bath. Since a part of it went to this town, the name the road received was ‘the Roman road to Aquamannia’. Aquæ Sulis means “the waters of Sulis”, and the name element *mannia* come from “to man, to garrison”.

² L.F. Salzman, “Romano-British remains: Roads”, *A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 1*, London: Victoria County History, 1939, pp.271–281. Retrieved 10 2024.

³ Max Adams, *Aelfred’s Britain: War and Peace in the Viking Age*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing/Head of Zeus, 2017, pp. 44–45.

⁴ See, for instance, in southern England where Akerman Street runs roughly north-northeast: from Cambridgeshire to the north coast of Norfolk. Its length here is approximately 75 miles (120 km) long. That Akeman Street joined Ermine Street near Wimpole Hall, then ran northeast to the settlement at Durolipons (now Cambridge), where it crossed a Roman road, which is now (from the eighteenth century on) known as the *Via Devana*. (Prof. Charles Mason from Cambridge named it as such around 1734 in his compiled map of Cambridgeshire published in 1808). Within north Cambridge, the road followed the present-day Stretton Avenue, Carlton Way and Mere Way running northeast past Landbeach before joining the present A10 and on towards Ely and The Fens. It then reached Denver and the coast at Brancaster.

⁵ In the south-east of England the course of Akeman Street goes through towns and villages including Hemel Hempstead, Berkhamsted, Tring, Aylesbury, Alchester (outside modern Bicester), Stonesfield, Chesterton, Kirtlington, Ramsden and Asthall. Parts of the A41 road between Berkhamsted and Bicester use the course of the former Roman road, as did in the eighteenth century the Sparrows Herne turnpike road between Berkhamsted and Aylesbury. A minor road between Chesterton and Kirtlington also uses its course



Fig. 1. Roman roads in south east England; Akeman Street, between the north of Verulamium and the Fosse Way at Corinium Dobunnorum is marked in red. Source: Akeman Street – Wikipedia

Today from Oxford the villa can also be approached following the itinerary shown on the map in **fig. 2**.

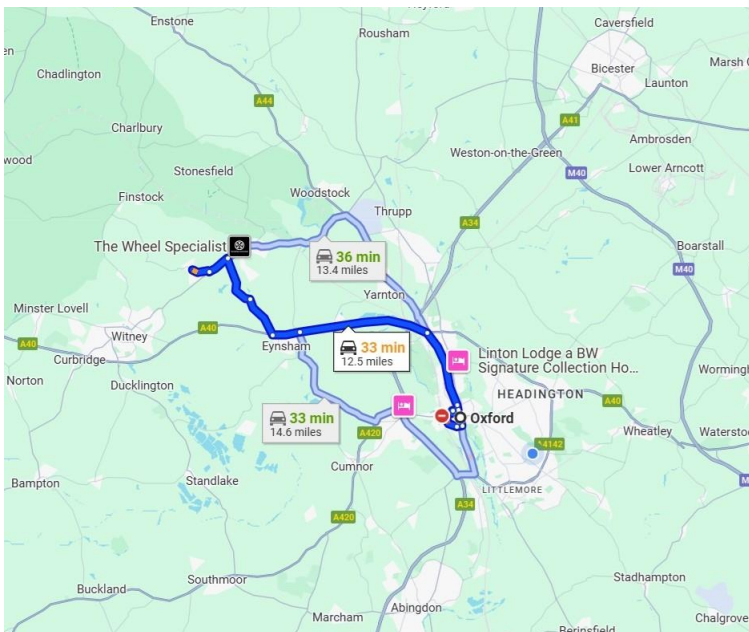


Fig. 2. A map representing one of the easiest way of reaching today North Leigh from Oxford (by car). Source: Oxford to North Leigh - Google Maps

The Roman archaeological remains I refer to within the article concern an object that has a connection to Stonefield, where vestiges of a Roman building (or buildings?) were

discovered around 1712,⁶ and the Roman Villa at North Leigh. Substantial literature exists especially in connection with the latter. I will update it with some pieces of information about the new developments (from 2024) at that place.

The mosaic at Stonefield Roman site

What is known in literature and among specialists as the pavement at Stonefield⁷ is a mosaic piece that presumably constituted the floor within the Hall of a Roman officer or a Roman Briton in the fourth century. Since neither the pavement, not its reproductions in art have survived, I show in **fig. 3** the copy on paper of an engraving reproducing it.⁸

⁶ Margerie Venables Taylor, "The Roman Tessellated Pavement at Stonefield, Oxon", in *Oxoniensia*, vol. VI, 1941, pp. 1-10.

⁷ Stonefield is 8 kilometres/5 miles from Oxford; 3 kilometres/1.860?? miles west of Woodstock, Oxfordshire, The museum in which remains of the mosaic pavement exist today, Museum of Oxfordshire, is in Woodstock.

⁸ M. V. Taylor, "The Roman Tessellated Pavement at Stonefield", plate 1 [p. 9].



STONESFIELD, OXON. : mosaic pavement found 25 January, 1712.

Fig. 3. The only copy on paper of an engraving reproducing the mosaic found at Stonefield in January 1712.⁹

The pavement was discovered on the 25th of January 1712 by George Handes or Hanner. It measured 35x20 feet/c.11x6.1metres. The mosaic and the small pieces of construction materials (mainly red bricks) around it made academics – mainly from Oxford – to debate if

⁹ Taylor, “The Roman Tessellated Pavement at Stonefield”, Plate 1 [p. 9].

these are the remains of a house or of a building (or more) from a military Roman camp.¹⁰

Margerie Venables Taylor summarized a part of the controversy; she personally believed these to be the remnants of a house that belonged to a local that lived during the Roman occupation.¹¹ A few tesserae from the pavement discovered at Stonefield are today within the Museum of Oxfordshire, Woodstock, UK, **fig. 4**.



Fig. 4. Tesserae from the mosaic pavement discovered in 1712 at Stonefield. Museum of Oxfordshire, Woodstock; photo EED-V, 20th November 2024.

Within the same institution in Oxfordshire there is a colour reproduction of the mosaic in an unexpected form: embroidery. Since the reproduction on paper is in black and white, I introduce here the latter, which is a multicoloured work; **fig. 5**.

¹⁰ Taylor, “The Roman Tessellated Pavement at Stonefield”, p. 4.

¹¹ See the details of the controversy within Taylor, “The Roman Tessellated Pavement at Stonefield”, pp. 1-10. Her map of the Roman villa at Stonefield is on p. 3.

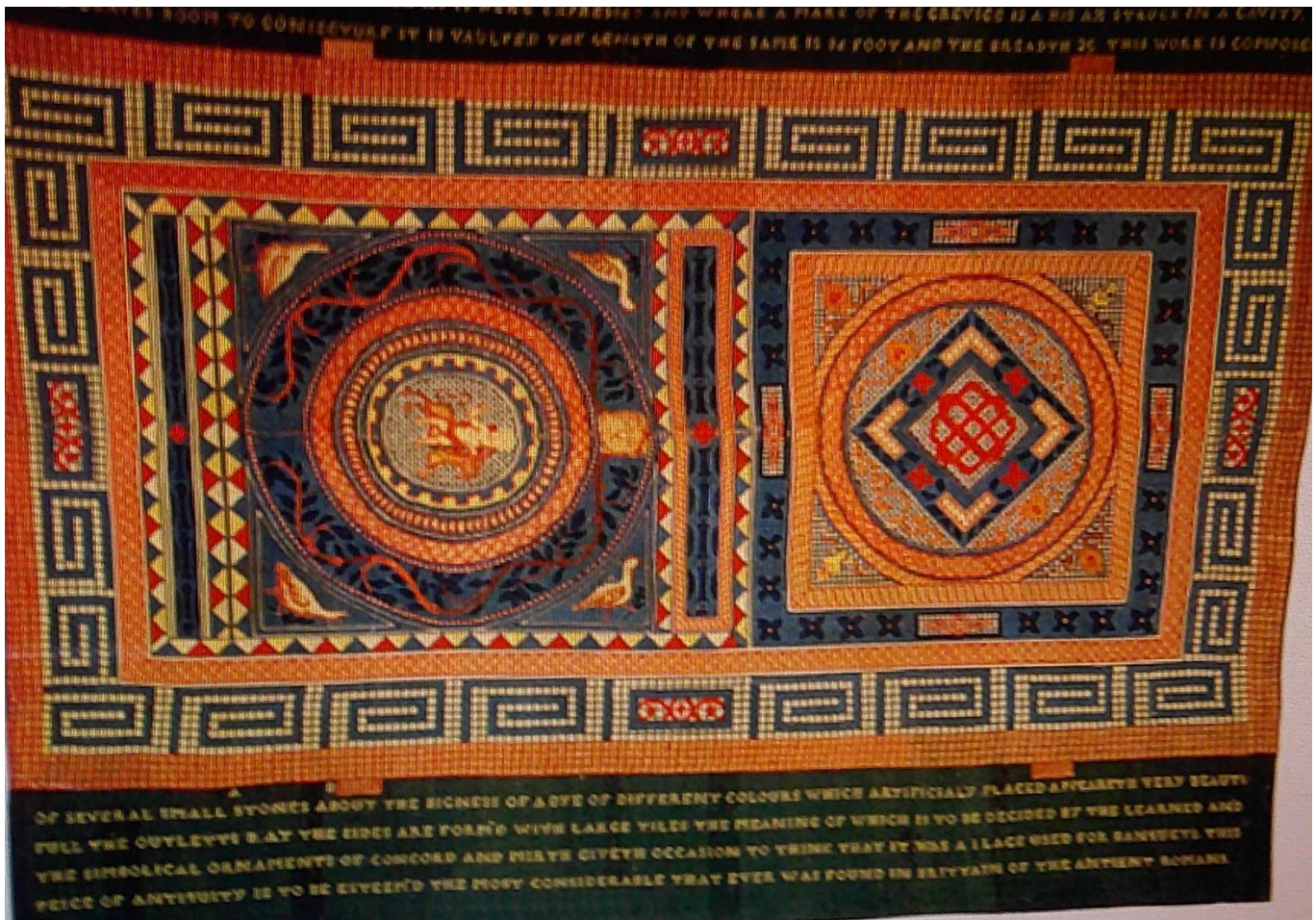


Fig. 5. The embroidered reproduction of the mosaic found at Stonesfield in January 1712; width 2. 08 metres; length 2. 57 metres; eighteenth century, eighteenth century. The Museum of Woodstock, Oxfordshire; photo EED-V, 20th November 2024.

What the museum calls an embroidery is a needle work that presumably copies one of the drawings of the mosaic that circulated in Herefordshire before 1735 (I need to mention that the literature suggests that not all sketches were accurate). As one can see, the canvas has a stitched frame with an explanatory text that gives details about the mosaic and its discovery, thus (the original formatting of the lettering on this historical piece has been kept):

“An exact delineation of the pavement in mosaick (*sic*) work lately discovered at Stunsfield near Woodstock by an husband... man whose plough hitt (*sic*) first against an urn whereupon he had a curiosity to dig and found the said pavement three foot under ground in the manner as here expressed and where a mark of the crevice is A. His ax struck (*sic*) in a cavity. Which leaves room to connecturef (*sic*) is vaulted the length of the same is 36 foot (*sic*) and the breath 25. This work is composed Of several small stones about the bigness of a dye of different colours which artificially placed *appeareth* (*sic*) very beauty-

full the outlet*B. Att. The sides are form'd with large tiles the meaning of which is to be decided by the learned and the symbolical ornaments of concord and mirth giveth occasion to think it was a place used for banquets. This piece of antiquity is to be esteem'd (sic) the most considerable that ever was found in Brittain (sic) of the Antient (sic) Romans."¹²

There was a debate as to who the figures depicted within the mosaics represent: Apollo and a tiger, python, griffin, etc. , as well as Bacchus riding a panther were proposed; the latter hypothesis has been accepted.¹³ After examining the piece in Woodstock a few times, I incline to say that the figure might be Bacchus. But he is not riding – he is rather sitting on the animal. His face is looking at the viewer.

The discovery of the mosaic in Stonefield produced scholarly interest, especially after an engraving of it was included in the first edition of the *Lexicon Antiquitatum*, Leeuwarden, 1713 (an early classical dictionary of antiquities) by Samuel Pitiscus (1636-1727), Rector of the Ecole Superieure at Zutphen in the Low Countries and later of the Gymnase S. Jerome at Utrecht.¹⁴ Another version of the engraving appeared in Venice in 1719, in The Hague in 1737, and in London within the English translated version of the above-mentioned *Lexicon*. The latter was contained within Bernard de Montfaucon's dictionary of antiquities. It was

¹² The text on the textile mentioned above is in capital letters and here I keep the **precise** form, position, and arrangement, as seen on it: "AN EXACT DELINEATION OF THE PAVEMENT IN MOSAICK WORK LATELY DISCOVERED AT STUNSFEILD NEAR WOODSTOCK BY AN HUSBAND... MAN WHOSE PLOUGH HITT FIRST AGAINST AN URN WHEREUPON HE HAD A CURIOSITY TO DIGG AND FOUND THE SAID PAVEMENT THREE FOOT UNDER GROUND IN THE MANNER AS IS HERE EXPRESSED AND WHERE A MARK OF THE CREVICE IS A. HIS AXE STRUCK IN A CAVITY. WHICH LEAVES ROOM TO CONIECTURF IT IS VAULTED THE LENGTH OF THE SAME IS 36 FOOT AND THE BREADTH 25. THIS WORK IS COMPOSED OF SEVERAL SMALL STONES ABOUT THE BIGNESS OF A DYE OF DIFFERENT COLOURS WHICH ARTIFICIALLY PLACED APPEARETH VERY BEAUTIFULL THE OUTLETT* B. ATT THE SIDES ARE FORM'D WITH LARGE TILES THE MEANING OF WHICH IS TO BE DECIDED BY THE LEARNED AND THE SIMBOLICAL ORNAMENTS OF CONCORD AND MIRTH GIVETH OCCASION TO THINK IT WAS A PLACE USED FOR BANQUETS. THIS PEICE OF ANTIQUITY IS TO BE ESTEEM'D THE MOST CONSIDERABLE THAT EVER WAS FOUND IN BRITTAINE OF THE ANTIENT ROMANS.

¹³ Idem, p. 5.

¹⁴ Idem, pp. 5-6.

titled *The Supplement to Antiquities explained and represented in sculptures*.¹⁵ By 1858 “the pavement had been totally destroyed”.¹⁶ It is also worth mentioning that in 1779–1780 two other pieces of mosaics were unearthed at Stonefield. Their images are reproduced in black and white within Taylor’s above-mentioned article.¹⁷

North Leigh Roman Villa

i) The first dwellers at the place known today as North Leigh

Another Roman place, much more known than Stonefield, is the Roman Villa at North Leigh, 13 miles (21 kilometres) from Oxford (**fig. 6 a**). The ruins of what can be seen today (**fig. 6 b** and **6 c**) date to the early fourth century (327 AD?), when the villa consisted in three bath suites, at least 19 mosaic floors, and 11 rooms with underfloor heating.¹⁸ As mentioned above, a rich literature concerning this place exists. This fact makes me explain that the chief reason for which I write about it is to provide the newest information and images from there.

¹⁵ Bernard de Montfaucon, *The supplement to Antiquity explained, and represented in sculptures*, translated into English by D. Humphreys, London: J. Tonson And J Watts, 1725, vol. I, Pl. 34, p. 153.

¹⁶ Taylor, “The Roman Tessellated Pavement at Stonefield”, p. 8.

¹⁷ Idem, Plate 2 [p. 10].

¹⁸ Joseph Skelton, *Engraved Illustrations of the Principal Antiquities of Oxfordshire. From the original Drawings by Frederick Mackenzie Accompanied by Descriptive and Historical Notices*. Skelton, 1823; Martin Henig, Anthony King, and Grahame Soffe, “Roman villas in Britain and beyond. New discoveries and new interpretations of their role in culture, religion, and landscape” (Chapter 1), pp. 1-13, in Martin Henig; Grahame Soffe; Kate Adcock, and Anthony King (Eds.), *Villas, Sanctuaries and Settlement in the Romano-British Countryside. New Perspectives and Controversies*, Oxford: Archaeopress Roman Archaeology 95, 2022, p. 5 (within the table that exists on pp. 4-6: Table 1.1. Select list of villa excavations reports and studies from Roman Britain 1990-2020).



Fig. 6 a. The contemporary to us model of the original Roman Villa at North Leigh; photo of the image on the site EED-V, 10th September 2023.



Fig. 6 b. Remains from the villa in November 2023; photo EED-V, 20th November 2024.



Fig. 6 c. Remains from the villa in January 2025; photo EED-V, 20th November 2024.

I remind the readers the most important moments in the history of the site, commencing with its establishment; the context in which it happened is of great historical significance. During the Iron Age the tribe of Dobunni that lived in the British Isles prior to the Roman conquest of Britain, had a farm with a few buildings at the present location. Various historians and archaeologists have examined the Dobunni, including Stephen J. Yeates in his book *The Tribe of Witches* (2008), where he suggests that the latter **part of the name possibly** derives from the word **bune*, which designates a cup or vessel. The name of the object has a similar meaning to ‘Hwicce’, which the appellation of the tribe also has. Both names are supposed to be related to the largely known cult of a Romano-British goddess.¹⁹

¹⁹ Stephen Yeates, *A Dreaming for the Witches. The Recreation of the Dobunni Primal Myth*, Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2009, pp. 162-163.

Several archaeologists disagree with this genealogy of the Dobunnis' name.²⁰ For instance, Miles Russell suggests that their original name may have been 'Bodunni', which has a connection with the Celtic word *bouda*, which means 'Victorious'.²¹ In this case the name of the tribe would translate as 'The Victorious Ones'. Dio Cassius referred to the tribe as 'Bodunni', a name which could be a misspell of the word 'Dobunni'. He states that when the Romans invaded (and when other groups, as Catuvellauni and Trinovantes, fought) the leaders of this people did not oppose any resistance, but made peace with the Roman emperor Claudius (10 BC– 54 CE; ruled 41–54 CE).²²

There are seven known references to this tribe in Roman history and in inscriptions.²³ Even though at times their territory have extended into parts of what are now Herefordshire, Oxfordshire, Wiltshire, Worcestershire, and Warwickshire, Dobuni lived mostly in central Britain, on the confluence of the Severn and Avon rivers, in an area that today broadly coincides with the English counties of Bristol, Gloucestershire, and the north of Somerset.²⁴ After the Roman conquest, the Dobunni quickly adopted the Romano-British lifestyle. The conquest by Claudius happened in 43 CE, but probably the Dobunni's lands were not constituted into Roman political units until 96–98 CE, during the reign of the emperor Nerva (96–98 CE).²⁵ The tribal territory was divided into a *civitas* centred on *Colonia* at Gloucester

²⁰ Jeremy Harte, "Review of The Tribe of Witches", *Time and Mind: The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture* 4(1), 2011; Simon Rodway, "Review of The Tribe of Witches", *Britannia: A Journal of Romano-British and Kindred Studies* 40, 2009; and Della Hooke, "Review of The Tribe of Witches", *British Archaeology* 104 (York: Council for British Archaeology, January–February), 2009.

²¹ Miles Russel, *Bloodline: The Celtic Kings of Roman Britain*, Stroud, Gloucestershire, England: Amberley Publishing, 2010.

²² Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 60.20; Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, volume VII: Books 56-60 (Loeb Classical Library 175), trans. Earnest Cary, et al., 1989.

²³ Albert Lionel Frederick Rivet and Colin Smith, *The Place Names of Roman Britain*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1979, pp. 339-340. See also Robin George Wright Collingwood and Roger Tomlin, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, vol. 1, no. 621, 1995: 2250.

²⁴ Derek Allen, "The Belgic Dynasties of Britain and their Coins", *Archaeologia*, vol. 90, 1944, pp. 1-46, and Robert D. van Arsdell, *The Coinage of the Dobunni. Money Supply And Coin Circulation in Dobunnic territory*, Studies in Celtic Coinage, Number 1, Oxford: Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, Monograph 38, 1994.

²⁵ Henry Hurst (ed.), "The Coloniae of Roman Britain: new studies and a review", *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, Supplement 36, Portsmouth, 1999.

(of which founding is documented to the years 96-98), and especially on their capital, *Corinium Dobunorum* (today Cirencester).²⁶ *Corinium* was the second largest city in Britain, after Verulamun.

At the beginning of the fourth century, Britain was reorganised into, initially four and then five provinces. Dobunni's territory became a part of *Britannia Prima*, as documented by an inscription found at the base of a column dedicated to Jupiter.²⁷

ii) The excavations at the Roman villa North Leigh and its mosaic

In the year 43 what was a farm at today North Leigh passed to the Romans. For about 300 years the Romans (or the Roman Dobunni?) expanded the place and made it a flourishing villa. The area around it remained a Roman *civitas* until approximately 409.

In modern times, the villa at North Leigh, which since 1984 has been in the care of English Heritage, constitutes an object of intense interest for archaeologists. It underwent excavation in various stages – three very important between 1813 and 1970. The first was carried out by the rector of Hanborough, Rev. Walter Brown (who discovered the site) and later by Peter Ellis.²⁸ None of these uncovered the entire surface of the site at once. I personally believe that, in addition to the above, at least one excavation was effected there before 1813. That would have happened in or around 1712, after the first mosaic at Stonefield was found, or in 1779-1780, when the other two mosaic pavements were discovered there, or at both these times. The evidence that some activities were undertaken at the site is the fact that in 1783 “a

²⁶ H. Hurst (ed.), “The Coloniae of Roman Britain”.

²⁷ R. G. Wright Collingwood and R. Tomlin, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, 1995, vol 1, no. 103.

²⁸ Peter Ellis, “North Leigh Roman Villa, Oxfordshire: a report on excavation and recording in the 1970s”, *Britannia* 30, 1999: 199–245; accessed 25 November 2024. See also English Heritage, “The Rise and Fall of the North Leigh Roman Villa”, in *History of North Leigh Roman Villa*; accessed 15 September 2024.

spreading tumulus consisting of rubbish fragments of Roman brick and cement in a field near North Leigh” was mentioned by Thomas Warton.²⁹ In any case, after the main works of excavation, the discoveries were covered with earth again for the purpose of preservation.

As I mentioned above, at least 19 mosaic floors existed in the ‘courtyard’ of the Roman Villa in North Leigh, where the archaeologists have identified 60 rooms.³⁰ These pavements protected the heating system under them and formed a part of the decoration of the house. What has survived until now consists in a well-preserved mosaic pavement, which decorates the floor in what the archaeologists assigned as Room 30, **fig. 7a, b**.³¹



Fig. 7 a. The well mosaics preserved at North Leigh Villa; photo EED-V, 13th November 2023.

²⁹ Thomas Warton, *Specimen of a history of Oxfordshire*, London: J. Nichols, 1783. For the update on some of the information in his book see Richard Hingley, *The Recovery of Roman Britain 1586-1906: A Colony So Fertile*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, online 2020.

³⁰ English Heritage, “Situation and History”, *History of North Leigh Roman Villa*, on-line. Accessed 21 January, 2025, p. 11.

³¹ English Heritage, “Situation and History”, p. 11.



Fig. 7 b. The mosaics at North Leigh Villa. Photo with the colours enhanced (photoshoped?) by the English Heritage. Source: [North Leigh Roman Villa | English Heritage](#)

Today the piece is hosted by a large solid shed built for this purpose initially by the Duke of Marlborough in 1816 and renovated from time to time since, **fig. 8** (2023).



Fig. 8. The building that protects the mosaics; photo EED-V, 13th of November 2023.

Another improvement to it was effected in 2024 (a new roof and probably new windows; what is known as French windows in that building looked better in January 2025

when I saw them last than they did in 2023, therefore I assume that renovation work took place), **fig. 9 a, b.**





Fig. 9 a, b, c. The same building on the 20th of January 2025; photo EED-V.

The mosaic (**fig. 7 a, b**), on which I have particularly focused my research at North Leigh Villa since this medium is central to my long-time professional interest, underwent major maintenance work in 1929, when it was lifted and treated; reconstruction of the floor was carried out in 2023, **fig. 10** shows that activity was in progress at that time. In January 2025, when I visited the place for the third time, I could see that further work on the mosaic is being carried out; **fig. 11 a, b, c, d, e**.



Fig. 10. Stage within the re-creation of the missing sections of the mosaic at the North Leigh Roman Villa; photo EED-V, 13 November 2023.



Fig. 11 a. The work for the protection and conservation of the pavement mosaic at the North Leigh Roman Villa; photo EED-V, 20th January 2025.



Fig. 11 b. The work for the protection and conservation of the pavement mosaic at the North Leigh Roman Villa; photo EED-V, the 20th January 2025.



Fig. 11 c. The work for the protection and conservation of the pavement mosaic at the North Leigh Roman Villa; photo EED-V, 20th January 2025.



Fig. 11 d. The work for the protection and conservation of the pavement mosaic at the North Leigh Roman Villa; photo, 20th January 2025.



Fig. 11e. The current conservation work on the mosaic at the North Leigh Roman Villa; photo EED-V, 20th January 2025

The surviving mosaic at North Leigh Villa is made of red, grey-blue, and white tesserae. The colours have faded, especially those on the tesserae in red. Conservation work is needed for the mosaic to regain its original shades and for the missing tesserae to be replaced by new ones. (Complex technical issues are involved in the latter since the composition of the original material and the technique involved in producing the new tesserae might not be identical to those used by the initial masters who decorated the villa).

The decorative programme of the mosaic floor, in addition to a central medallion, includes squares filled with knots (Solomon's, witches', trefoil shaped, etc.) and a variety of 'ropes', interlaced lines, labyrinths, as well as vegetal and geometrical artistic motifs. Romans used to celebrate the beauty and diversity of the natural world, *intel alia*, through their mosaics and that is visible at the North Leigh villa.

By means of **conclusion**, it needs to be emphasized that the Romans left in Britain not only their famous roads, but also other elements of their rich culture as architectural pieces: villas, military buildings and other constructions, as well as some of their decorative art (perhaps also artists and craftsmen – as, for instance, mosaicists).

The work on the Roman historical objectives in Britain, specifically in Oxfordshire, is a continuing process. The statement is valid, as we have seen, with respect to both the textile reproducing the mosaic pavement from Stonefield and to the North Leigh Roman Villa, especially to its best preserved mosaic floor.

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