

# **GREAT STAUGHTON AND ITS PEOPLE**

**HOW A HUNTINGDONSHIRE VILLAGE LEFT ITS MARK ON ENGLAND'S  
HISTORY**

by

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## A Roman *mansio*?

I had long known that there was a settlement of the Roman period near the village of Great Staughton. On ploughland alongside the footpath about 1 mile south of the village, Roman pottery lay scattered over the field. Furthermore, two barrow-like mounds occurred on the hill above, suggesting burials from a more sumptuous household somewhere in the area.' Thus, in the late 1940s, the indefatigable local historian C.F. Tebbutt had his attention drawn to fragments of pottery that were being revealed at Rushey Farm in Great Staughton as a result of ploughing and drainage work. His investigations revealed what appeared to be a substantial Roman building. The then Ministry of Works was brought into the case and two sites were excavated by a team led by Ernest Greenfield: Site 1 was excavated between June and August 1958, followed in May and June 1959 by site 2.

The sites lie one mile south of the Highway over a medieval ridge and furrow field system, across the river Kym and thence over the sixteen-acre Rushey Meadow. Some 150 yards to the west of the site runs Whitley Brook, a tributary of the Kym. In Roman times, the area was well-wooded, particularly with oak and hazel, providing fuel for the hypocaust heating system and timber for building. Rushey Meadow itself, watered by the river Kym, was an ideal pasture. As the excavation proceeded it quickly became apparent that there had been two villas on the site; the original substantial building dated from the second century AD, to be replaced a century or so later by a smaller winged corridor villa. The Roman buildings seemed to have been in continuous occupation for some 300 years and intriguingly, the archaeologists uncovered evidence of a Stone Age building, dating from c. 500 BC, under the Roman foundations.

Site 1 revealed a substantial Roman winged corridor villa; site 2 was a bath house. The buildings were of substantial size; the first measured 150 ft in length (from east to west) and 105 ft in width (north to south); the second, slightly smaller, at 120 ft in length by 90 ft in width. The stone to build the villa came from a variety of sources: from Barnack (twenty-five miles north of the site), Yorkshire, and the Hitchin area. The villa itself consisted of six rooms, aligned east to west. The front of the house faced south and the east room was linked to its western counterpart by a corridor, hence the description of the villa as 'winged corridor'. The north side of the villa, overlooking Rushey Meadow and the river Kym, consisted of a large central room with a smaller room on either side.

Both the villa and the bath house were equipped with a hypocaust, the Roman underfloor central heating system. The main reception floors in the villa were supported on a series of pillars called *pilae*, creating a hollow basement through which hot air from the outside furnace circulated. Feeding the furnace was a costly and laborious task requiring a slave to stoke the fire continuously. Hypocausts were the preserve of the wealthy, testifying to the importance of the Staughton villa. It is said that the hypocaust system was invented by a talented hydraulic engineer named Caius Sergius Orata who lived around 95 BC. Central heating systems were not his only talent, as we shall see; he acquired a vast fortune breeding and marketing oysters, a staple for Roman citizens.

As with all the Roman villas excavated in Britain, the interior decoration of the public rooms was lavish and colourful. On the walls of the Staughton villa, fragments of painted wall plaster were discovered and unlike many of the finds, these can be precisely dated to the fourth century AD. The fragments are unfortunately tiny, but traces still remain of the colours used. The

predominant colour was a vibrant purple and this would likely have formed the background onto which panels were painted. A fragment of a white floral pattern, on a background of deep purple, survived for 1,500 years buried under the ground. Red and yellow patterns were also uncovered, but so fragmentary that it is impossible to know what was pictured. There is evidence that the panels were bordered by red, yellow and blue bands. One of the most striking features consisted of swirls of purple, mauve and pink paint, which may have been a colourful covering of a bare wall or a window decoration.

Painted panels were not the only decoration. Numerous fragments of mosaic were recovered, which enabled the archaeologists to establish five distinct patterns that were used in the important rooms where guests were received. Only two surviving similar examples exist in England, at Lullingstone and *Verulamium* (St Albans). These mosaics were almost certainly created in the fourth century by the same craftsman and it was possible for the archaeologists to re-create the design. In the east wing of the villa itself, Room 1, measuring 17 ft by 17 ft, revealed a motif consisting of a 'star', formed of eight lozenges (essentially a square, rectangular or polygonal pattern), repeated sixteen times in four rows on a white background.

Whilst the public rooms of the villa featured elaborate, vivid designs, the 58-foot-long corridor linking the east and west rooms was decorated throughout its length by plain grey mosaics or, as the excavating team put it, 'decorated to a much more workaday standard'. Although, as noted above, the mosaics were of a relatively uncommon design for Britain, they were a common feature of villas excavated in Roman Gaul, *Gallia Belgica* and the German provinces and this led archaeologists to speculate that the owner of the villa belonged to a Romanised Belgic tribe who had migrated to Britain following the Roman invasion.

A more precise dating of the villa and its occupation came from the coins and other artefacts excavated at the site. The main villa yielded a substantial hoard of 850 mainly low-value coins originating from mints widely spread in the Roman Empire: Trier (Germany), *Lugdunum* (present-day Lyons in France), *Arelate* (Arles), Rome, *Siscia* (Sisak, near Zagreb in Croatia), Thessaloniki (Greece) and Amiens (France), a striking indication of the extent of Roman power and how it permeated down to even modest settlements such as that in Great Staughton.

Several coins bore the image of Constantine the Great I (AD 306–337), who decreed, by the Edict of Milan in February AD 313, that the Christian religion should be tolerated throughout the Roman Empire. Twelve years later, in AD 325, Constantine was instrumental in convening the first Council of Nicaea which led to the adoption of the Nicene Creed: 'I believe in one God'.

A number of artefacts, decorative, culinary and utilitarian, were uncovered by the excavations. Copper alloy ornaments and accessories included a bracelet, finger ring, pin and interestingly, a thin folded sheet decorated with an incised 'feather' or 'leaf' pattern. This was part of a votive plaque or leaf used for religious purposes and it is conceivable that the substantial quantity of coins may also have had a religious significance, as offerings to the gods. Iron objects uncovered by the excavation consisted mainly of tools or hardware: a complete knife, of a design that was common in Roman Britain, and a socketed instrument, which could well be a form of hammer and a chisel.

Other finds included fragments of Rhenish glass and a significant hoard of pottery, mostly Samian ware imported from south Gaul, more specifically from the vast pottery manufactories at La Graufesenque, near Millau, Lezoux and sites around Clermont-Ferrand, in Central France. Samian ware was also manufactured in eastern Gaul in Trier, Sinzig and Rheinzabern. From the second century AD in particular, Samian ware, prized for its quality and stylish design, could be found on every prosperous Roman's table. The dishes, bowls and other vessels were often painted in vivid red and decorated with mythic or pastoral scenes.

Not all the pottery was imported. The Nene Valley, close by, boasted an important centre of pottery production. For one pottery fragment, a mortarium, a kitchen vessel used for pounding or mixing foods, we even have the name of the maker. The bowl found in Staughton bears the stamp of Cattanus whose work is known from other examples in Northamptonshire, Hartshill and Mancetter and can be dated to AD 150–180.

The sites yielded an array of animal and bird remains. Birds were particularly well represented at the villa, with many unusual finds, including four peacocks, four geese (including merganser), six domestic fowl, two stock doves, one widgeon, one quail, one partridge, as well as more common varieties. Two of the above, quail and merganser, seem to be the first records of the species on Roman sites in Britain. The peacock was probably the most interesting find; for the Romans, the bird had a mythological and a religious significance.

The most numerous culinary remains in quantitative terms belong to shellfish and in particular oysters of which 1,544 shells had been discarded on site. Oysters were found all over the empire and it was one of the many foods enjoyed by the Romans, who believed that eating the molluscs increased their prowess on the battlefield and in the bedroom. Indeed, 300 years earlier, in 95 BC (according to the historian Pliny in his *Historia Naturalis*), an enterprising Roman called Gaius Sergius Orata (he of hypocaust fame), established a large and successful oyster cultivation bed in Lake Lucrine near Naples to exploit these riches of the ocean.

When they finally conquered Britain and established their capital in Colchester (*Camulodunum*), the Romans were delighted to discover that the estuary of the river Colne produced oysters of a quality to rival those of Gaius Sergius Orata. The fabled Apicius, reputedly the first cookery writer, *De re coquinaria* ('On cooking'), who is said to have flourished in the first century AD, had a recipe for oyster sauce containing pepper, lovage, egg yolk, vinegar, liquamen (a fermented fish sauce), oil and wine. Apicius helpfully suggested that 'you can also add honey if you like'.

Oysters, stored in barrels of fresh seawater, would have been transported the eighty miles from the river Colne to the villa in Staughton on the *Via Devana* (the road that ultimately led to the Roman fort at Chester). At *Durovigium* (Godmanchester) the oysters would be taken via Alconbury on the 173d road, which historians have suggested linked that settlement to Staughton.

One of the most surprising discoveries made during the course of the excavations was of the bones of up to twenty-four individuals, including seven complete human burials, which were not contemporary with the Roman occupation of the villa. They are thought to have been buried several centuries after the departure of the Romans in AD 410.

What was the purpose of the villa and what was its ultimate fate? One of the first tasks that the Romans undertook when Claudius' army invaded Britain in AD 43 was to construct a network of roads that would both facilitate the movement of troops and provide rapid communication links between their administrative locations, thus promoting trade and commerce. Typically, the roads were straight, avoiding hills and marshy ground and were anything from 20 ft to 100 ft wide. By the time of the construction of the villa in Great Staughton, some 2,000 miles of road had been built by the Romans. Thanks to an anonymous author of the second or third century AD, we know a considerable amount about the Roman road network in Britain. The work is entitled, *Itinerarium Antonini Augusti: The itineraries of the Emperor Antoninus* and is a comprehensive account of all the roads in the Roman Empire; the section devoted to Britain is called the *Iter Britanniarum*. Dorchester-upon-Thames was one of the hubs of the Roman network and it was from this centre that roads radiated to the north, south and east. Two historians have postulated the existence of road 173d, running from Dorchester-on-Thames in the west, to Alconbury in the east. The road,

if it did indeed exist, would have passed close to the Roman villa in Staughton and would provide an explanation for the location of the villa.

All Roman roads were equipped at regular intervals with staging posts (*mansio*) where soldiers, merchants and traders and messengers of the imperial postal service (*curus publicus*) could pause for refreshments and lodging, or the more elaborate *mutatio* (a changing post) where fresh horses could be secured if official, often military, business required urgent communication between far-flung military outposts. The official in charge of the *mansio* would have been designated as a guardian of the roadways (*curator viarum*), responsible for the good order of his section of the road and for providing food and lodging for travellers and officials of the empire. The cost of repair and maintenance was borne by the local population. It is highly likely that the villa in Great Staughton was such a *mansio*, and that its *curator viarum* was originally from a Belgic tribe in what is now Belgium or Northern France.

The Staughton *mansio* was also conveniently located for access to Ermine Street, the principal north–south thoroughfare linking London and York (*Eboracum*) and nine miles from *Durovigutum* (modern Godmanchester), a strategic crossing point of the river Great Ouse and an important junction of north–south and east–west roads, where a *mansio* has been fully excavated.

This brings us to the question: what was the ultimate fate of the *mansio*? The evidence of burnt areas and the discovery of a number of inhumations might at first suggest a violent end to the building but careful examination of the remains indicates that the villa was deliberately demolished or simply abandoned after falling into disrepair sometime in the fourth century AD. A further clue as to its fate is that in AD 296, little more than sixty years before the Staughton villa fell into ruin, the *mansio* at *Durovigutum* was raided and completely destroyed by fire, an act that was historically attributed to Saxon or Angle raiding parties, which were becoming an increasing threat during the early fourth century. It is likely that after the withdrawal of the Romans, the villa was dismantled and all the useful materials, such as bricks, timber and tiles, were salvaged and used to build new dwellings by local Romano-Britons.

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