

Notes and Field Reports

The Institute of Archaeology Field School 2025: new light on the Roman villa at Alpheton, Suffolk

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Murray Andrews, Stuart Brookes and Kris Lockyear

Abstract

This article reports on a new field project exploring the pattern of Roman settlement in the landscape of Suffolk. It presents the results of the first season of fieldwork at the site of Alpheton.

Keywords: Roman period; villa; field school

Introduction

Fieldwork is a core part of the undergraduate curriculum at the UCL Institute of Archaeology, with all students expected to undertake at least 50 days of hands-on training on excavations and in museums, archives and laboratories as a requirement of their degree. For most students, the bulk of this work is undertaken in the first and second years of study through enrolment in summer field schools, which include a number of residential or commutable options delivered by staff from the Institute of Archaeology, Archaeology South-East and partner organisations. These projects provide critical opportunities to deliver intensive hands-on training in modern archaeological methods and techniques, and enable students to develop their professional and personal skillsets in the context of real-life research projects undertaken at a high scholarly level.

In 2025, one of the Institute's field schools was based in East Anglia, where more than 80 undergraduate, master's and graduate diploma students participated in archaeological excavations on the site of a Roman villa at Alpheton, Suffolk (Figure 1). These investigations form the latest in series of planned studies of villa sites in West Suffolk, which aim to better understand their economic, social, administrative and cultural roles and legacies in the Roman period and beyond.¹ While further work at Alpheton is scheduled in 2026 and subsequent years, the 2025 season has already proven fruitful, and has generated important new evidence for the character, layout, and dating of the villa buildings and associated features in the Roman and pre-Roman landscape.



Figure 1 North-facing aerial view of the excavation site (Source: Kris Lockyear)

The site

Set within the rolling countryside of the Stour Valley, the villa at Alpheton lies immediately west of the Roman road (Margary 33a) that links Caesaromagnus (Chelmsford) and Pakenham/Ixworth via Long Melford. The latter is a small town with possible military origins established in the mid- to late first century AD and lies 4 km south-west of the villa site (Brooks and Plouviez 2019, 361–4). This region forms a border zone between the suggested territories of the Iceni and the Trinovantes, two British tribes centrally involved in the Boudican rebellion of AD 60–61, and has long been distinguished by its relative lack of villa-type settlements, only a handful of which have been subject to modern excavation and publication (Evans 2021).

First identified by the landowner, Trevor Rix, who recognised parch marks from walls on the ground, and subsequently from aerial photographs and surface finds, the site extends across more than 15 ha of farmland in the south of Alpheton parish, much of which formerly belonged to the historic Melford Hall estate. At least one focal area in the east of this complex is now identifiable within an 8.67 ha field on the south-west side of the Chad Brook, and lay at the centre of the Institute’s investigations in 2025 (Figure 2). This area has seen several phases of investigation since the 1980s, mostly by teams from Suffolk County Council, and latterly by local heritage groups, which have identified rectilinear enclosures surrounding a series of apparently high-status buildings, including a bath house and large post-built structure (Dodd 2018; Martin et al. 1990, 157; 1993, 91; Minter et al. 2020, 672; Tester 1994). Metal detecting in the vicinity of these buildings has produced finds spanning the mid-first to mid-fourth centuries AD but concentrating in the second and third centuries AD, a chronology in keeping with other East Anglian villas (Smith 2016, 221). By far the most important of these finds is a 0.3 m+ long chain of blue, red, white and yellow enamelled copper alloy links (Figure 3). This object has few direct parallels in the western Roman Empire and has been provisionally interpreted as a form of elite dress or regalia designed to be worn suspended from the body or head, possibly with religious connotations (Pearce and Worrell 2022, 493–4). Seen as a whole, this evidence is suggestive of a large and regionally distinctive villa complex occupied

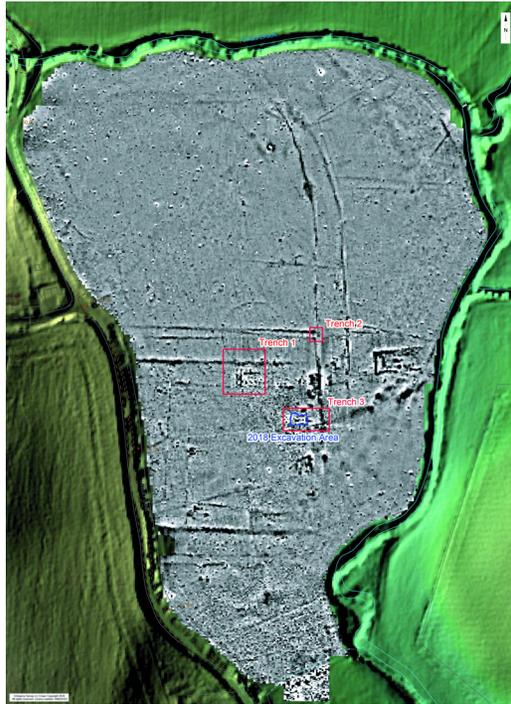


Figure 2 Site plan incorporating the results of earlier geophysical surveys (Source: John Rainer and Ellen Heppell)



Figure 3 Enamelled chain found during metal-detecting at Alpheton (Source: Portable Antiquities Scheme, CC BY 2.0)

for at least two-and-a-half centuries, which may have formed the centre of a prominent agricultural estate or religious centre associated with the adjacent watercourse.

The excavations

The Institute's first season of investigations at Alpheton was undertaken over seven weeks in June and July 2025, and involved a programme of geophysical prospection and excavation within the eastern part of the villa complex. This work aimed to clarify the nature and significance of the Roman structures previously identified at the site, and to identify and characterise potential evidence for precursor and/or successor occupation in the later prehistoric and early medieval periods. In line with these aims, three open area trenches (0.12 ha) were opened across key structures and anomalies identified through geophysical survey that were excavated and recorded in plan and section by UCL staff and students using a combination of manual and digital techniques.

Trench 1

Trench 1 was located towards the centre of the field and was the largest of the trenches excavated in 2025, covering an area of 840 m². It was positioned above a series of linear and discrete anomalies detected through geophysical survey, which appeared to relate to a large east- to west-oriented aisled building measuring roughly 30 m long and 16 m wide. This structure was bounded to its north and south by a series of parallel ditches, which extend beyond the limit of excavation into a field to the west of Aveley Lane.

In the event, the geophysical results mapped onto the archaeological features with a remarkable degree of accuracy (Figure 4). Post pits show as a line of strong magnetic features, whereas, as would be expected, the flint foundations do not show at all, nicely illustrating the dangers of relying solely on the results of magnetometry survey.

The remains of the aisled building were traced through the foundations of flint and mortar walls and three rows of post pits, which were recorded in plan and extend beyond the eastern edge of the trench. These features had been heavily truncated by later farming activity, including the installation of a network of post-medieval field drains in the west and south of the trench. The building was monumental in scale, possibly with a colonnaded exterior on the south side, and appeared to replace an earlier post-built timber structure laid out on a similar alignment but somewhat smaller footprint of approximately 9 m x 15 m. It seems likely that this building constituted the main villa farmhouse, which would have borne a close resemblance to other Suffolk villas at Exning and Stanton Chair, where similar building sequences from timber to part-masonry have previously been recorded (Maynard and Brown 1936; Webster 1987).

Further archaeological features were recorded in the north and west of the trench. Excavation of a slot through the northern enclosure ditch produced a large quantity of Roman pottery, ceramic building material (CBM) and animal bone, which dated mainly to the second and third centuries and hint at a core phase of occupation for the villa

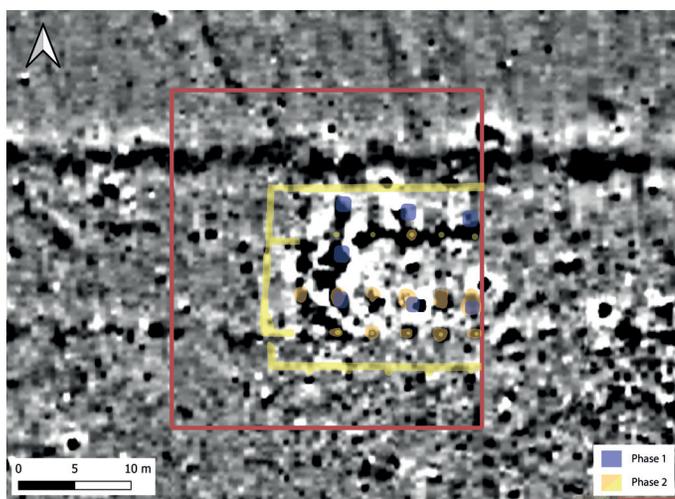


Figure 4 Overlay of geophysical and excavation plans of the aisled building in Trench 1 (Source: Kris Lockyear and Stuart Brookes)

farmhouse. Several post-built structures, probably outbuildings, were also identified within the enclosure, together with a kiln or hearth that may have been used for processing agricultural materials. The dating of these features is currently unclear and will be a focus of attention at the post-excavation stage.

Trench 2

Trench 2 lay to the north-east of Trench 1 and spanned a total area of 99 m². This trench sought to examine a series of linear geophysical anomalies, which seemed to follow near perpendicular alignments and may define the boundaries of Roman field systems or trackways. Excavations in this trench identified a complex sequence of intercutting ditches and cut features. The earliest was an east to west oriented ditch, which measured 7 m+ long and 2.95 m+ wide and ran across the north of the trench. It contained a small quantity of probable Late Bronze Age pottery and was cut in the east of the trench by a north to south oriented ditch measuring 11.5 m+ long and 2.2 m+ wide. These two ditches probably define the eastern edge of a later prehistoric field system, which appears to cut across two probable Bronze Age ring ditches detected to the north and east of Trench 1 by the gradiometer survey (Figure 2). This may reflect a period of prehistoric landscape reorganisation, and echoes processes seen during the Middle Bronze Age on the Wessex chalk downland and locally at Flixton (Suffolk), where at least two field systems cut directly across earlier Bronze Age barrows and ring ditches (Woolhouse 2024, 299).

The prehistoric enclosures were evidently still visible at the time of the villa occupation, as both ditches were recut on near-identical alignments in the Roman period. Their intersection may have formed a focus for boundary rituals, as represented by the digging of shallow pits and placement of a 'structured deposit' of animal bones in the north-east of the trench. This deposit had an unusual composition, consisting of the apparently fleshed upper limb bones of at least two subadult cattle, which had been placed together in the ditch as a discrete group, possibly as part of an offering or sacrifice (see Roberts and Rainsford 2024). The north-east corner of another rectilinear enclosure was also recorded in the south-west of the trench, and contained a rich fill of Roman pottery, CBM and animal bone.

Trench 3

Trench 3 was positioned to the south of Trenches 1 and 2 and extended over 300 m². It was positioned to examine a cluster of strong geophysical anomalies to the south-east of the aisled building, which had been partially investigated in 2018 and provisionally identified as a Roman bath house. This was verified by the 2025 investigations, which identified walls, floors and other features relating to a multiphase bath house complex (Figure 5). The earliest bath house was 15 m+ long and 3.5 m+ wide and followed a linear arrangement in the north of the trench. It consisted of a series of masonry rooms running west to east, which included a cold room (*frigidarium*), warm room (*tepidarium*), hot room (*caldarium*) with apsidal plunge pool (*piscina*) and an adjacent stoke room. This layout is well known from other Roman bath houses in East Anglia and has close affinities with the third- to fourth-century bath house at Stonham Aspal, Suffolk (Smedley

and Owles 1966). The early bath house had been heavily robbed, but retained some key architectural features, including traces of hypocaust tile stacks (*pilae*) and fragments of mosaic floors. This building was demolished during the Roman period and was replaced immediately to the south by a two- or three-phase bath house built on flint foundations. Unlike its predecessor, the later bath house was probably laid out on an L-shaped plan, which extends beyond the southern limits of the trench. It was represented by significant structural remains, including a cold plunge pool with incomplete mosaic floor, and associated rubble deposits contained evidence for high-status interiors including red and white painted wall plaster and mosaic floor fragments (Figure 6).



Figure 5 Aerial drone orthomosaic of the Trench 3 bath house (Source: Kris Lockyear)



Figure 6 Mosaic floor fragment found during excavations in the bath house (Source: Kris Lockyear)

The finds

The excavations in 2025 produced a large quantity of artefacts and environmental material, which is scheduled for analysis in the coming years. However, initial observations provide some insights into site chronology and offer glimpses of the wider economic and socio-cultural setting of the villa complex.

Like most rural settlements in the western Roman Empire, the villa at Alpheton was founded on an essentially agrarian economy and probably formed the centre of a discrete countryside estate farming the well-drained loamy soils of the Stour Valley. The arable dimensions of the villa economy are reflected by finds of rotary quernstones and archaeobotanic remains, while a strong pastoral component is evident from the animal bone assemblage, which consists mainly of domestic mammals (cattle, sheep/goat, pigs) and chickens supplemented by wild taxa, including deer and wetland birds. This pattern of mixed farming is typical of Romano-British rural settlements (Allen and Lodwick 2017, 145), and echoes practices at other East Anglian villas such as Castle Hill, Ipswich (Suffolk) and Rectory Farm, Godmanchester (Cambridgeshire) (Lyons 2019, 422–3; Moir and Maynard 1933, 255). In addition, the presence of timber buildings and a fuel-hungry bath house may hint at access to managed woodland in the vicinity of the villa, some of which could survive in scattered tracts of ancient woodland to the north and west of the site and may have been exploited by the villa's residents.

The sale of farming outputs like cereal, meat, wool and leather would have provided a fundamental source of income for the villa at Alpheton, and probably had a critical role in the provisioning of nearby small towns like Long Melford throughout the Roman period. Exchanges of this kind are reflected in the site's coin assemblage, which consists mainly of lower-value denominations spanning the late first- to mid-fourth centuries (Figure 7), and also in its pottery assemblage, which is dominated by second- to fourth-century East Anglian grey coarsewares supplemented by finer Colchester whitewares and imported Samian tableware. These objects hint at a regionally focused commercial hinterland centred on southern Suffolk and northern Essex, the ancient heartland of the Trinovantes, but with some connections extending further into Britain and neighbouring Gaul. Wealth generated through this trade was clearly reinvested into both the villa's buildings and the lifestyles of its inhabitants: finds of decorative brooches and belt-mounts, ear scoops and wax seal boxes speak of classically 'Romanised' modes of living in the second and third centuries, and relate a corner of rural Suffolk to wider cultures of fashion and literacy mediated at the provincial level.

Who, then, is likely to have owned the villa at Alpheton? While we cannot know for certain, a few clues may be scattered among the corpus of small finds. One item stands out in particular: an incomplete copper-alloy horse harness pendant (Figure 7, top centre), found placed within one of the post-pits for the rebuilt villa farmhouse in Trench 1. Objects of this kind were typically used as decorative adornments for military horse gear, and the particular form and mode of suspension suggest that it may date to the first or early second centuries AD (Bishop 1988, 147; Nicolay 2007, 55–6). Its deposition within a post-pit is therefore of dual interest, not only providing a *terminus post quem* for the rebuilding of the villa farmhouse, but also raising questions about its origins: was this a foundation deposit made by a retired soldier, marking a life-stage transition from former cavalryman to newly minted villa owner? Though highly speculative, scenarios like these may well lie behind some villa foundations



Figure 7 Selected finds from the 2025 excavations (left to right, top to bottom): enamelled disc brooch, second century AD; horse harness pendant, late first to early second century; enamelled belt mount, second to third century AD; *dupondius* of Trajan, AD 98–102; *nummus* of Magnentius, AD 350–353 (Source: Murray Andrews)

in East Anglia, where the practice of rendering land grants to veterans was common in the years preceding and following the Boudican rebellion (Mann 2002; Webster 1993).

Conclusion

The investigations at Alpheton have cast new light on the origins, development and afterlives of a relatively large and sophisticated Suffolk villa – one of only a small number to have been excavated to modern standards within East Anglia. While the final interpretations are liable to change, initial study suggests that the villa complex was laid out in the late first or early second century on fertile land first exploited in later prehistory, and underwent several phases of rebuilding, repair and modernisation throughout the second and third centuries. In its heyday, the villa lay at the centre of a wealthy farming estate embedded within the regional economy, whose owners and inhabitants – perhaps the descendants of military veterans – were well-accustomed to the modes of dress, communication and hygiene practiced by Romano-British elites. Yet, like many other villas in the east, the site went into decline in the late Roman period, and was probably abandoned at some time in the mid- to late fourth century; the following millennium saw its reversion to farmland and a convenient source of building rubble, some of which ended up in the walls of the nearby fifteenth-century parish church of SS Peter and Paul.

This emerging story is one of several outcomes from the Institute’s 2025 field school and should be seen in parallel to its pedagogical results: the delivery of fundamental practical training for a new generation of archaeologists. More than 80 students, most with no prior background in field archaeology, became active participants in the investigations, gaining hands-on experience in excavation, landscape survey, finds analysis and public outreach (Figure 8). The skills, knowledge and connections generated through their involvement in the project are wide-reaching and provide an essential basis for professional and personal development throughout the duration of their studies and in the years that



Figure 8 More than 250 members of the public learn about the UCL excavations during an open day on 12 July 2025 (Source: Darius Laws)

follow. We look forward to building on these achievements during a further season of excavations in 2026, which will be undertaken in partnership with Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service as part of the Romans Unearthed: Suffolk's Hidden Villas project, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this article.

Note

- 1 The first phase of the investigations was undertaken at Norton, near Bury St Edmunds, in 2023–5, and involved field survey and excavation of multi-period structures, enclosures and other features associated with a probable villa at or near St Andrew's Church (see Andrews et al. 2024).

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