

# Box Roman villa goes public

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**F**orty-five years ago my Wiltshire village raised enough money, with the support of a wonderfully generous-spirited vicar, Tom Selwyn Smith, to build a new hall and library. With this Box set out on a new era of community activities, which included the creation of the Box Archaeological and Natural History Society, the youthful dream of two somewhat precocious teenagers of whom I was one. The Society, as it happened, was born from the excavations that Henry Hurst (now Reader Emeritus at Cambridge University) carried out on behalf of the Ministry of Buildings and Public Works in the wet winter of 1967-68. This rescue excavation was my introduction to digging, alongside seasoned workmen and a small band of hippy-esque student volunteers from the Institute of Archaeology.

Box villa had been discovered as early as 1828 and was already well known from Sir Harold Brakspear's masterly report on the excavations at the end of the Victorian age. Tucked next to the village church, overlooking the gentle valley 6 miles east of Bath, Brakspear had revealed a sprawling Roman country house which included a major dining room as well as some splendid mosaic pavements. Seventy years later in the foundation trenches for the new village hall our main discoveries were more modest. During the December dig we brought to light service rooms and an ashlar-lined drain that miraculously still worked. It was my first taste of archaeology: muddy breakneck digging against the clock and a chance to check Brakspear's interpretation using stratigraphic techniques. The following summer Henry Hurst returned to re-excavate part of the main site in the adjacent garden belonging to the 'Wilderness' (a former water

BELOW The idyllic village of Box, nestled in the Wiltshire hills. A Roman villa was discovered here in 1828, in the shadow of the village church (visible in the centre of the picture).



**RIGHT** A scale model of the villa at Box created by Christine Williams. Traces of three wings, mosaic floors and hypocausts are all visible.

mill). Putting his two digs together Henry published a memorable report, meanwhile setting me on a career as an archaeologist. He also became the Vice-President of the Box archaeological society that followed with the opening of the Selwyn Hall.

This society still thrives in Box and now I am its Honorary President. With an eagerness and enthusiasm that village societies in Britain make their own, the members have grown in number and meet regularly, sometimes in the Selwyn hall. As the fortieth anniversary of this Society came, Ronnie Walker, an energetic member of the Society's steering committee proposed that the villa merited fresh promotion for a new generation and from a new angle. Specifically to facilitate this, the Society formed the KOBRA Trust (Knowledge Of Box Roman Archaeology) comprising key members of its committee and with Ronnie as Executive Trustee. Under this banner, funds were raised from local donors and Wiltshire County Council to appoint Mark Corney to write a book putting the villa in its regional context. This book, *The Roman Villa at Box*, not only summarizes Brakspear's and Henry's discoveries, but includes the latest overview of the numerous other southern Cotswold villas that lay within easy reach of Bath, Aqua Sulis. KOBRA also commissioned Christine Williams to build a vividly evocative scale model of the villa. Fittingly this now resides in the Selwyn Hall library helping a new generation to become familiar with the hall's Roman precursor.

Christine Williams model shows that the villa at Box was a major country house. It was far larger, for example, than Chedworth Roman villa, the best-known example in the region. But Mark Corney's fluently written book opens a window on the impact of Rome on the southern Cotswolds. Before the blissful Medieval landscape that surrounds Box today was a Romano-British precursor, mostly distinguished by modest country houses and their imitators rather than villages. These Romano-British country dwellers with their grand gardens, halls, frescoed rooms and finely made mosaics were as different from their prehistoric precursors as chalk from cheese.

Prehistoric finds were found close to the site of Box Roman villa in the 18th century, but no village or major settlement existed in this bucolic setting. Fortified villages, instead, were located at Bury Wood Camp (near Colerne) (four miles to the north) and Old Solsbury overlooking Bath (made famous by Peter Gabriel's song). These hilltop settlements with their powerful earthen defenses belong to entirely different world



abruptly terminated with the arrival of Vespasian's legions. Roman Box and its surroundings were utterly different, harbingers of the era of Jane Austin when fine houses occupied spots close to springs and wells and offered calming vistas to their proprietors and visitors. As Mark Corney shows, the villa at Box was simply the grandest of many such houses dotted around here, but it was far from isolated. Small Roman farms were forebears of fine country houses at Hazelbury and Ditteridge, each a mile or so away. Both, unlike Box, though, occupied niches on the hills overlooking the villa.

As an eager teenager I walked these hills, my eyes glued to the ground, in search of Roman potsherds. At Ditteridge one day I struck lucky, retrieving minuscule splinters of Samian ware. But otherwise Romanitas was stubbornly elusive. This made the dig at the Selwyn Hall all the more thrilling. As if like magic, sealed deep under centuries of garden soil, an elegantly made Roman country house existed, its accompanying artefacts and activity layers perfectly preserved. Our discoveries, given the 19th-century diggings, were not unexpected, yet these simple treasures set me personally on the road to Rome, where I am now.

How unbelievably fortunate I was. In an age of increasingly professionalized archaeology, I look back with immense gratitude to have participated in the 1967 dig as a 15-year old volunteer. With a minimum of fuss I was incorporated into a hardened team that was fresh from Barry Cunliffe's celebrated excavations at Fishbourne and Portchester. Better late than never, thanks to the energetic KOBRA team, it is immensely heartening that Box villa, an iconic Romano-British great houses, has taken its first steps towards being a public monument, albeit while being buried beneath the Norman church and adjacent Victorian houses here. It is a step that makes me personally very proud. @

#### FURTHER READING ↗

Mark Corney, *The Roman Villa at Box*, (Hobnob Press, East Knoyle, 2012) (see [www.hobnobpress.co.uk](http://www.hobnobpress.co.uk)).