

# A ROMAN VILLA AT TIXOVER GRANGE, RUTLAND

by

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The villa lies in the parish of Tixover, Rutland, in the grounds of Tixover Grange, and is 250 metres north-east of the Grange.<sup>1</sup> Its national grid reference is SK(43) 982019.<sup>2</sup> The village of Duddington, Northamptonshire is 1.2 Km. south-east (*see figs. 1 and 2*).

Excavations were conducted in 1958 and 1959 by the University of Leicester Department of Archaeology, under the direction of Mr. S. E. Thomas. It was a training dig for students, the writer of this report being one of that number.<sup>3</sup>

The first published reference to Roman finds at Tixover seems to have been the comments of the Reverend Edward Trollope who, when writing about a Roman building at Apethorpe more than a century ago,<sup>4</sup> reported

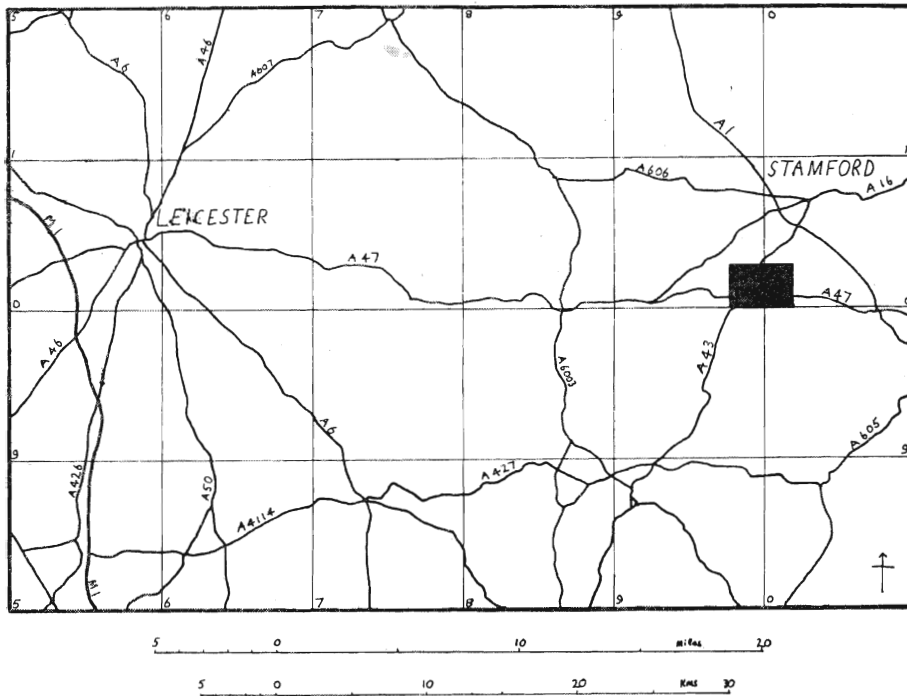


Fig. 1

Based on O.S. map

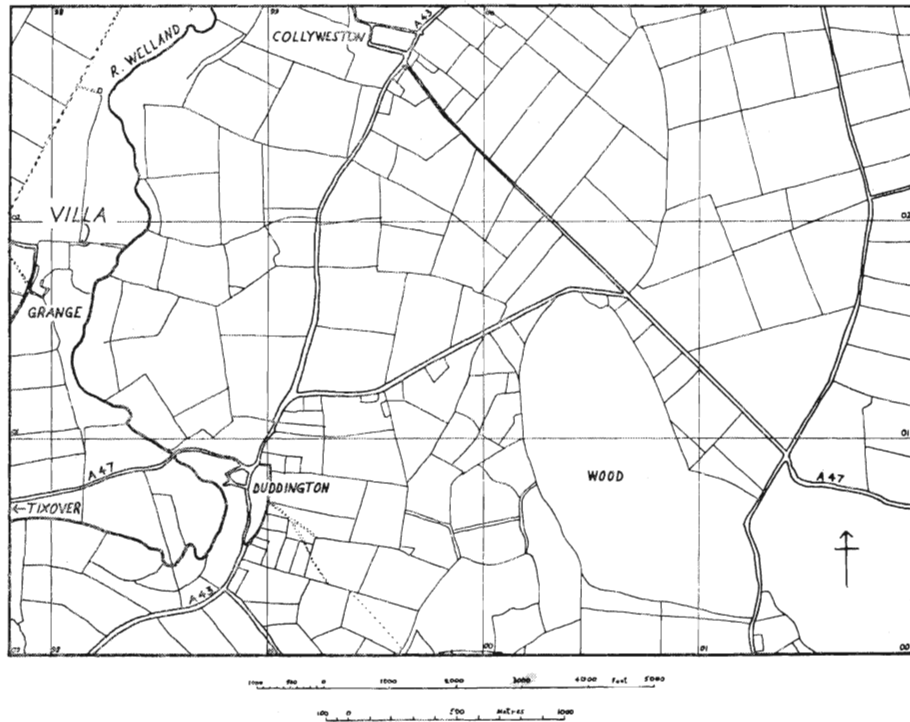


Fig. 2

Based on O.S. map

that part of a hypocaust was found. Much later *tesserae* were found in 1912 in the Grange.<sup>5</sup> In 1932 S. E. Winbolt conducted limited excavations, and found two geometric design mosaic pavements, walls, pottery and coins, but the results of the work were not fully published.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, a teenager, Graham Webster, kept a notebook of what took place, and this included sketches of the mosaic floors<sup>7</sup> (see fig. 4). Further Roman objects were said to have been found during the construction of the sewage disposal plant in the 1940s.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE SITE

The major part of the villa seems to be under the present spinney and on a small area of terrace gravel which overlies limestone of the inferior oolite series. The main axis of the villa lies NNE-SSW and it seems probable that it faced east where the ground slopes gently downwards to the River Welland 200 metres away. One hundred metres south of the villa is a natural spring.

#### THE EXCAVATIONS

Trial trenches were dug in 1958 to locate the villa, and, these are labelled on the plan by the letters A, B, C and D (see fig. 3). Walls were found in A and C and what appeared to be a stokehole in B. Consequently, in 1959, a larger area was examined south of the spinney along with a number of exploratory trenches in, and to the north of, the spinney.

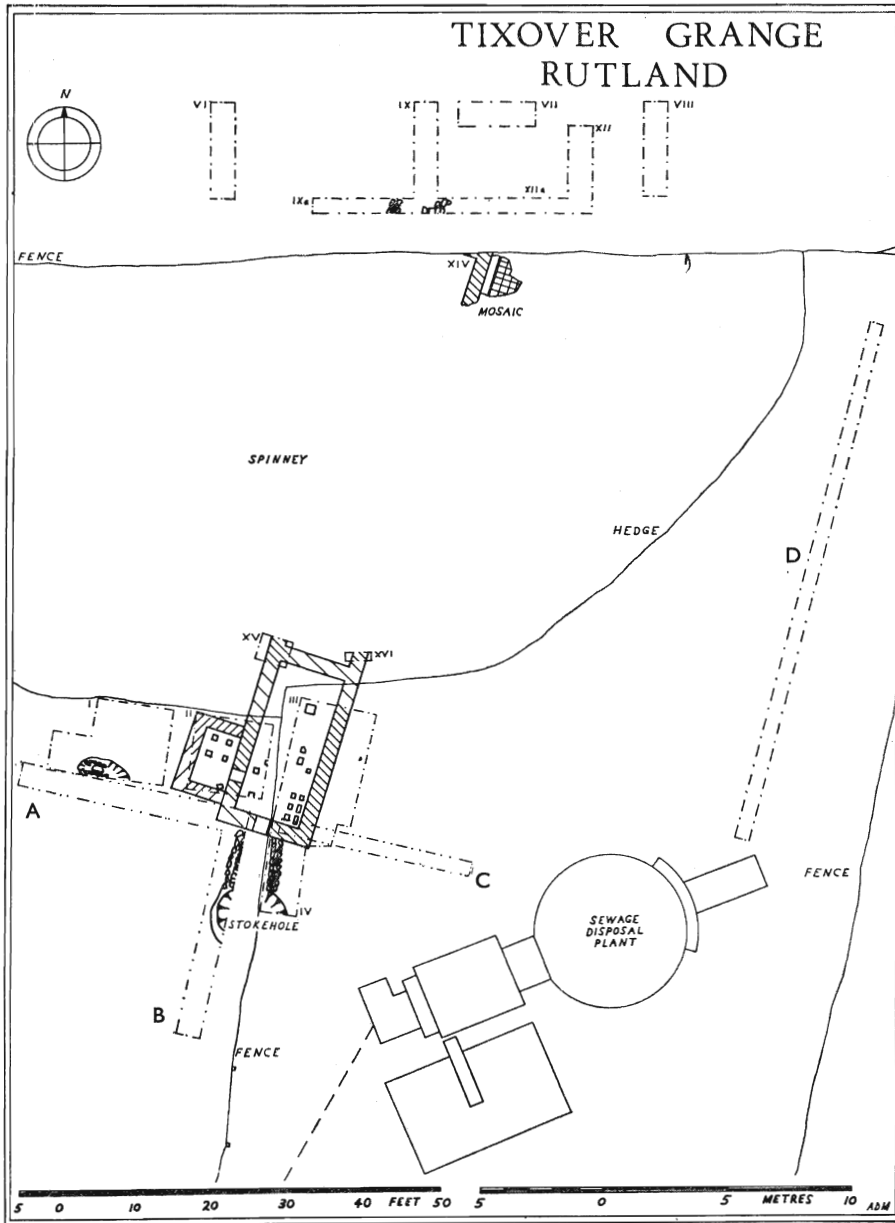


Fig. 3

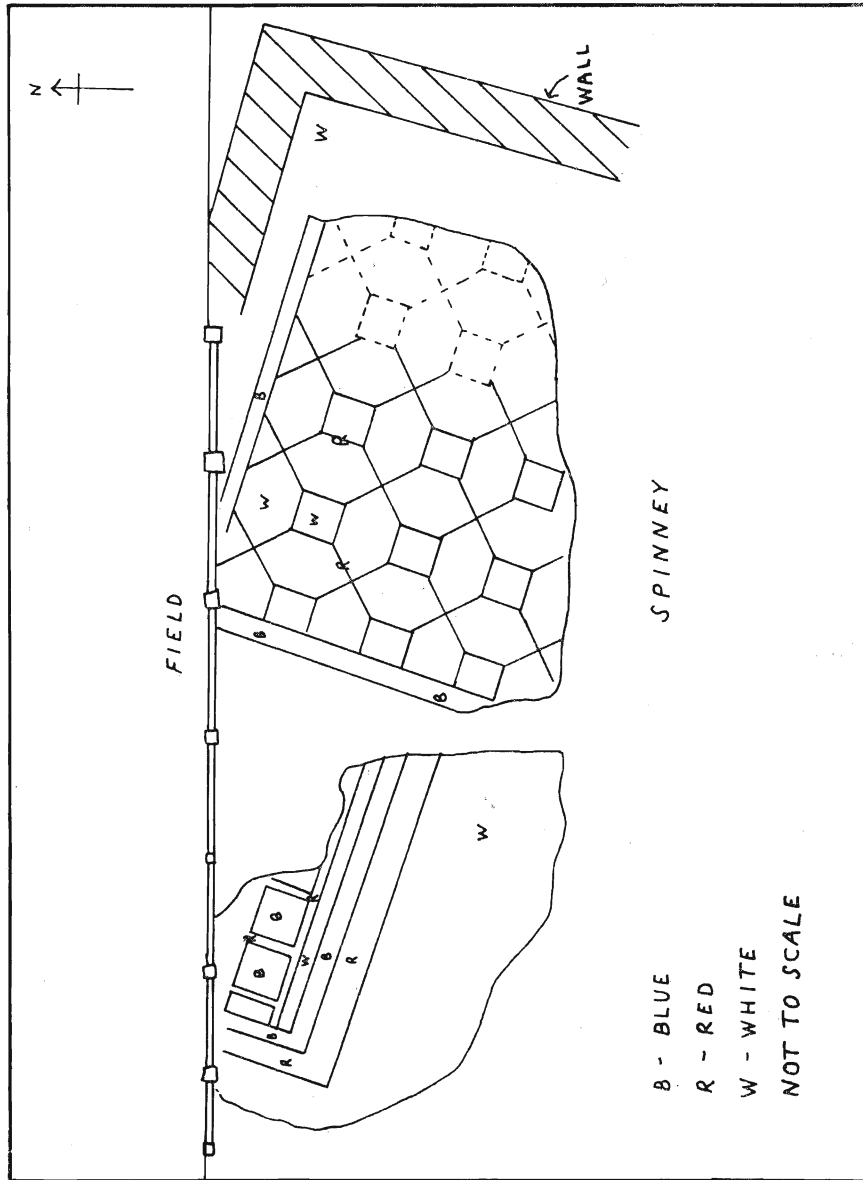


Fig. 4 Outline drawing of mosaics found in 1932 from rough sketches drawn by G. Webster.

Roman floor level can have been only just below the present ground level, and much of the building has been destroyed by cultivation and tree roots. To the north of the spinney this destruction was almost complete, although a number of possible wall foundations, one-course high, were found. It is interesting to note that the only early pottery from the 1958/9 excavations came from north of the spinney in trench VI.

Within the spinney itself, dense undergrowth prevented detailed excavation, but a mosaic floor was uncovered in area XIV. Two mosaics were found in 1932, and sketched by Graham Webster (*see fig. 4*). It is not possible to locate precisely the position of these mosaics, but in a note by Winbolt, now in Rutland County Museum, there is a clue.<sup>9</sup> It says; "Remains of two mosaic pavements were recovered just inside the north fence of the spinney, from about five yards (i.e. 4.5 metres) from the east end of the spinney, extending westward for forty-four feet (i.e. 13.30 metres)". These measurements would take us close to the position of the 1959 mosaic, and yet there are difficulties in connecting them. The detailed designs would not seem to be the same although there are some similarities between the 1959 floor and the western mosaic found in 1932.

The remains south of the spinney were more substantial, due to the fact that this part of the building was heated, and the foundations for the hypocaust were deeper than for the rest of the villa. In trench III the bottom of the wall was 1.50 metres below present ground level, but the wall itself did not survive to this height throughout the trench. Only the bottom courses of the footings survived in trench II.

Robbing of the walls made it difficult to define precisely the chronology of the two rooms found. It seems from the excavations that the small room to the west was an addition to the room in trench III. This larger room measured 6.10 metres by 2.75 metres and was heated by means of a stokehole to the south. Linking the stokehole with the room was a flue lined with tiles laid in herringbone fashion. This stokehole also served the smaller room. In both rooms *pilae* of tiles were found or, in some cases, the impression of the bottom tile on the floor of the hypocaust chamber. In the north-west corner of trench III a most remarkable *pila* was found. This was a huge lump of tile and mortar which tapered outwards from its base, where it was 38 cm. square to 61 cm. square at what must have been floor level. The tiles were laid in course and the *pila* was 84 cm. high. *Tesserae* and wall-plaster were found in the hypocaust.

In trench II a small room measuring 2.10 m. by 1.50 m. was found attached to the larger room, and heated by means of a small flue, which conducted the warm air from the larger room. In trench I a small hearth-like structure was found.

#### DATING

Four coins are recorded from the site. Those mentioned in the published note are Faustina II, Postumus and two mid-fourth century coins.<sup>10</sup> In the same reference the pottery is described as being mostly Castor ware although second-century samian is also said to have been found. Winbolt's note in Oakham Museum gives a date range of c. A.D. 150-350.<sup>11</sup>

Since virtually all the pottery from the 1958/9 excavations is unstratified, and in any case conforms to well-known types, no more than a brief summary is necessary.<sup>12</sup> A settlement situated so close to the great Nene valley factories was bound to have drawn on those prolific sources for most of its common domestic pottery, and this is what we find. Some 70% of the pottery, so far recovered from Tixover, is in colour-coated fabrics, and all of these vessels are presumably of Nene-valley origin. Only three or four sherds of grey ware are present in this admittedly small sample, a situation which does not obtain on sites only a few kilometres away to the north. Where so much is unstratified, we must be content with a definition of the date-range represented by these sherds. The pottery from south of the spinney is all fourth century in date, containing a number of distinctive flanged bowls of the form *Gillam 230*,<sup>13</sup> a very common type which emerged in the early fourth century, and lasted until the end of the Roman period. The other colour-coated sherds from this deposit could *all* belong to the first half of the fourth century, but a date after A.D. 350 cannot be entirely excluded. Trench VI to the north of the spinney, however, produced pottery of a much earlier period. This material includes ring-neck flagons and a few sherds of samian ware. The sample is too small for certainty to be attainable, but the date is likely to be within the period *c.* A.D. 150 - 200.

The mosaics can be dated to the second half of the fourth century (*see* appendix A), but whether these floors were inserted into an already existing building, or were laid at the same time as the building could not be determined.

#### THE FINDS

The material from the early excavations is said to have found its way to the Peterborough Museum, and there is a note in the accessions list to say that tiles and *tesserae* were presented to the museum by Graham Webster in 1932.<sup>14</sup> It is also reported that Oakham School Museum had some material.<sup>15</sup>

Finds from the construction of the sewage disposal tank were said to have been reported to the British Museum, but it has not been possible to trace these.<sup>16</sup>

There were no coins or other small finds apart from a number of badly corroded iron objects of indeterminate date.

All the material from the excavations, including plans, photographs and notebooks, has been deposited at the Rutland County Museum, Oakham.

## APPENDIX A

THE MOSAICS OF THE VILLA AT TIXOVER GRANGE,  
RUTLAND*by*David J. Smith<sup>17</sup>

Remains of two simply patterned pavements were brought to light in 1932,<sup>18</sup> and part of what appears to have been a third was found in 1959 during the excavations which are the subject of the present report.

One of the patterns was a rectilinear grid of red lines, each formed of a double row of tile *tesserae*, with a background of white containing random blue *tesserae* (fig. 4). The white squares enclosed by the grid measured 23 cm. by 23 cm. A coloured sketch made in 1932 shows next to the pattern, a surround of plain bands of white, blue, and red in one side, but it suggests that only the blue and red bands were carried round the other sides. The other pavement, also sketched in 1932,<sup>19</sup> had a pattern of intersecting octagons, each with a central square, executed in red lines on a white ground and surrounded by a band of blue. A sketch of the remains uncovered in 1959 also records a rectilinear grid of red lines on a white ground, with a band of blue *tesserae* three rows wide next to the pattern, and a band of white with random blue *tesserae* ten rows wide between this and the wall of the room.

Identical or similar patterns can be cited elsewhere in England, but in the present context the most significant are those of other sites in the east midlands. Both patterns are recorded at Haceby in Lincolnshire,<sup>20</sup> a grid pattern and an intersecting-hexagon pattern of the same class as that of intersecting octagons, though elaborated with additional colours, are known from Denton, also in Lincolnshire.<sup>21</sup> A grid pattern formed part of the mosaic of Medbourne in Leicestershire,<sup>22</sup> and an intersecting octagon pattern is recorded from the 'Cherry Orchard' villa<sup>23</sup> in the environs of Leicester. A version of the intersecting-octagon pattern may also be noted in one of the pavements of the villa at Great Weldon in Northamptonshire,<sup>24</sup> the best of which was almost a replica of mosaic no. 2 of the villa at Great Casterton,<sup>25</sup> in the same county as Tixover. The mosaic of Great Casterton was dated by excavation to not earlier than A.D. 350/365<sup>26</sup>; those of Denton date from c. 370.<sup>27</sup> It seems reasonable to surmise, therefore, that in this part of Britain such patterns were current in the second half of the fourth century.

## NOTES

1. The parish boundary between Tixover and Ketton runs under the northern side of the spinney and so the villa lies in both parishes. As the major part found is on the Tixover side it is still referred to as being in Tixover parish.
2. The National Grid Reference given in *T.L.A.S.* xxxiv (1958), 84 is incorrect.
3. Mr. S. E. Thomas would like to thank Major R. A. Peddar, Headmaster, and the governors of The Wilfred Pickles School, Tixover Grange, for permission to dig, and Mr. J. N. L. Sellick, County Surveyor for Rutland, for the loan of equipment.
4. *Associated Architectural Societies Reports and Papers*, 5 (1859), 106

5. *The Tenth Annual Report and Transactions of the Rutland Archaeological and Natural History Society*, (1912), 6
6. *Journal of Roman Studies*, xxiii (1933), 198
7. We are very grateful to Dr. Webster for allowing us to make use of this notebook
8. *Ex inform.* G. Webster
9. With a small box of pottery and numbered O.S.579
10. *Journal of Roman Studies* xxiii (1933), 198
11. See footnote 9
12. Malcolm Todd kindly looked at the pottery and provided these notes
13. J. P. Gillam, *Types of Roman Coarse Pottery Vessels in Northern Britain*, Reprinted from *Archaeologia Aeliiana* 1957 by Oriol Academic Publications, 1968
14. In a letter from the late R. D. Abbott dated 6 May 1966
15. This is now in the Rutland County Museum, numbered O.S.156, O.S.151, O.S.579
16. K. S. Painter kindly helped me with this
17. I am indebted to David Smith for providing this appendix on the mosaics
18. *J.R.S.*, XXIII (1933), 198
19. I am indebted to Mr. McWhirr for bringing to my attention Dr. Webster's contemporary notes on the exploration of the site in 1932, with coloured sketches of the remains of the two mosaics then discovered, and also for lending me a coloured sketch of part of that found during the excavation of 1959
20. Wm. Fowler, *Engravings of the Principal Mosaic Pavements etc* (1796-1818), no. 22 (Appendix II). NGR. TF (53) 0136
21. *Ibid.*, no. 10, and J. T. Smith, 'The Roman villa at Denton'. *Lincs Archit. and Archaeol. Reports and Papers* X (1964), 91-92, pl. 7. NGR SK(43)8730
22. *V.C.H. Leics.* I (1907), 214, pl. VII. NGR SP(42)7992
23. *Ibid.*, 196-197. NGR. SK(43)5104
24. Coloured engraving (1739) in the Northamptonshire volume of the 'Topographical Collections' of the Society of Antiquaries of London; hence an inferior copy in S. Lysons, *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae* I (1813), part iv, pl. VII, reproduced in *V.C.H. Northants* I (1902), fig. 22. NGR SP (42) 9290
25. D. J. Smith in *The Roman Town and Villa at Great Casterton, Rutland: Second Interim Report* (ed. P. Corder, 1954), 35-39. NGR. TF (53)0009
26. *Ibid.*, 37
27. J. T. Smith, *loc. cit.*, 86; *J.R.S.*, XL (1950), 100.