

The Romans in Southwell
By Peter Latham 10th February 1996

The Roman Conquest of Britain

AD 43: a fleet carrying 4 legions (24,000 soldiers) arrived off Kent, near present day Sandwich, and met with little opposition. Each legion marched in a different direction, the XIth north, roughly along the route of the present A1, eventually reaching Lincoln where they built a fort and the arch still standing today. Gradually they established a presence throughout the area, building many roads: one came from the Peak District, perhaps for the transport of lead, crossing the Trent at Ad Pontem, near East Stoke.

Villa at Southwell

Civilian settlements established including one at Southwell – fertile soil, plentiful timber, good communications and local labour available. Discovered in 1904 when the rector laid out a tennis court in the Residence garden; huge mosaic floor unearthed, but only small fragments kept. 1950s saw a plan for a new Minster School building – Ministry of Works put C.N. Daniels, archaeologist in charge of the excavations. The whole site is 100 by 70 yards, but the dig was confined to two places, A & B on the plan below.

Site A: had superb mosaics and (medieval) human bones

Site B: Roman Bath, 15' x 25', covered with mortar and a thick layer of river stones with plaster fragments beneath them. Over a 10month period these were reassembled into the painting now in the South Choir aisle and 3 other large sections, normally kept in the triforium, but displayed for this talk, (see vol 70 of the transactions of the Thoroton Society). The steps into the bath and the drainage hole were also found.

AD 410: the Roman troops were withdrawn from Britain to defend Rome against barbarian invaders.

The gradual invasion of Britain by Angles, Saxons and Jutes led to the collapse of Roman civilisation and the abandonment of settlements, including our villa, though later Anglo-Saxons found mosaics and re-used the tesserae [small cube shaped pieces of stone] for the floor of their church, now visible under the bread pews.

The Bath House Painting

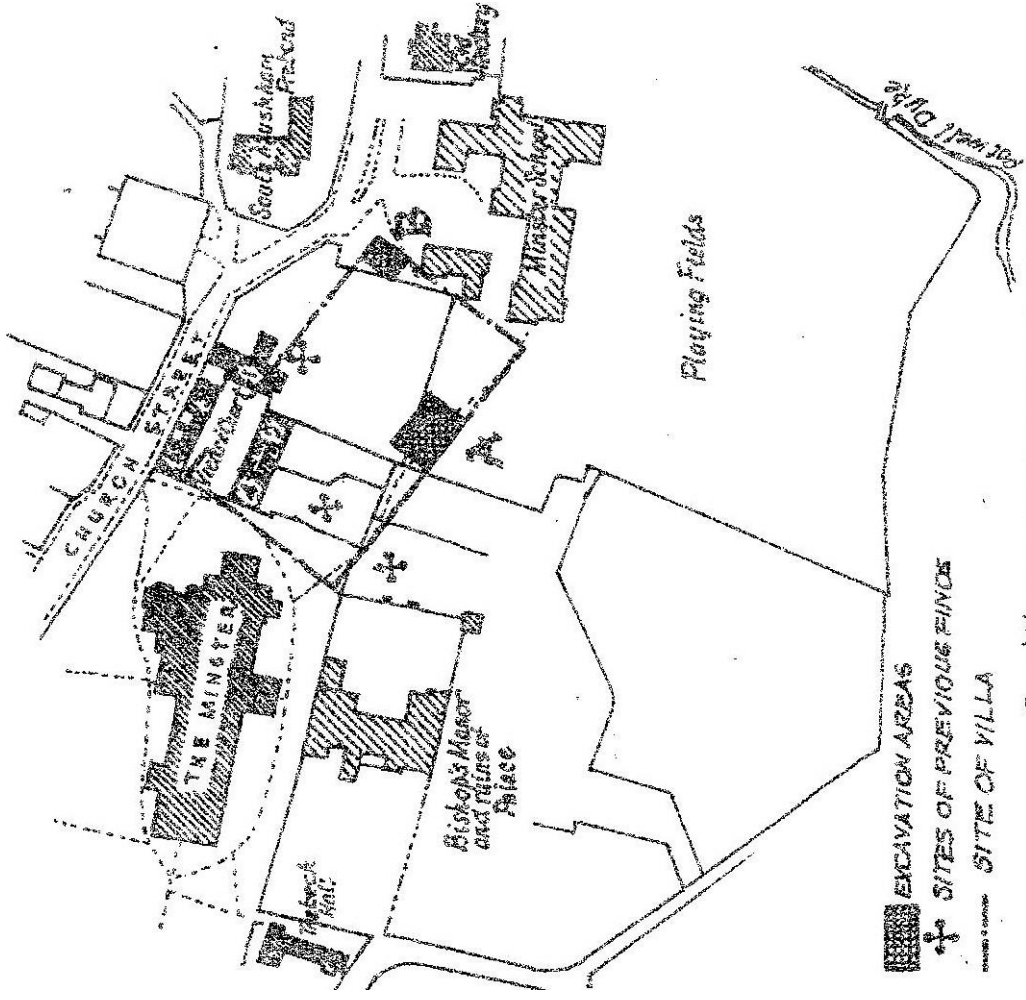
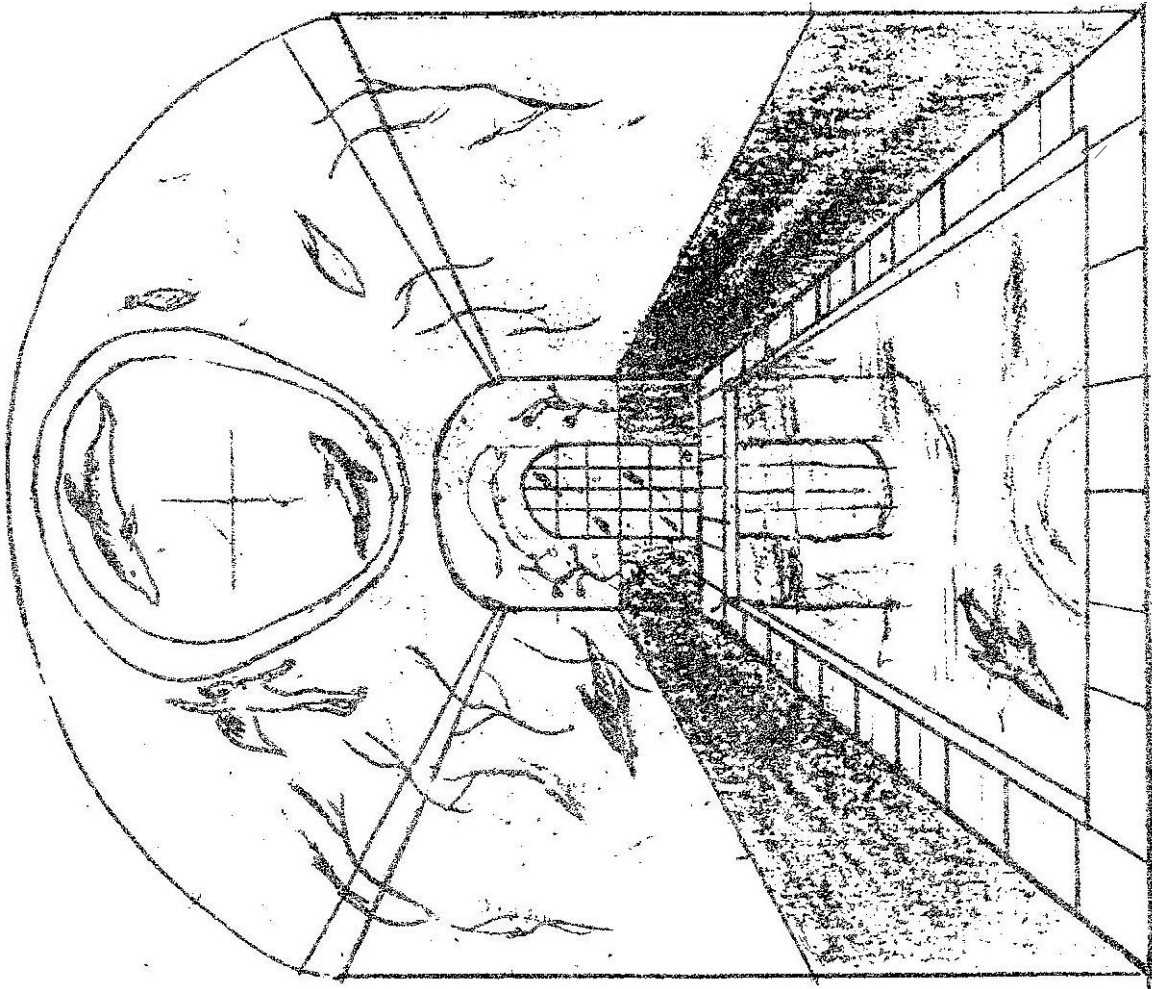
The largest figure is Cupid, to the right of which is a vertical band, bending slightly to the right at the bottom. The same band is found on the sections temporarily displayed.

Various theories have been put forward, but one is that:

- a) The painting was on the bath house ceiling.
- b) The ceiling was curved, giving a stronger construction.
- c) The paintings were intended to be reflected in the water, the curve helping with this through refraction.

If so, the band may have been originally and oval on the top part of the ceiling – see drawing of a possible arrangement below.

Why was the painting broken up covered over? Could it be because the villa owner became a Christian?



SITE 'A' REVEALED THE FOUNDATIONS OF SIX ROOMS, FOUR WITH MOSAIC FLOORS. AT SITE 'B' THE COLD BATH AND FOUNDATIONS OF A LARGER ROOM WERE FOUND.

THE OUTLINE SHOWS THE APPROXIMATE SIZE AND AREA OF THE VILLA.