

# Brislington Community Museum News

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## News & events

Following on from our previous newsletter which focussed on a wide variety of artefacts dating to the Roman Period (mostly excavated from Brislington villa) this edition examines ceramics from that period and, again, mostly from that site.

The public enquiry over a proposed

housing development at Brislington Meadows, where evidence of Roman activity was found during excavation, has decided in favour of the developer.

Our first Annual General Meeting (AGM) is due to take place in May.

Ken Taylor, chair

## Contact us

Email us - [secretary@brislington.org](mailto:secretary@brislington.org) - to enquire about any of our community museum's exhibits, or to suggest ideas to add to or improve them. Please use the same email address to contribute feedback or items for inclusion in this publication.

We aim to produce this quarterly, but our schedule is flexible so we can react quickly to inform our members of changes or important events. It also means during quiet times we can focus our attention on other matters such as out-reach activities and sourcing and researching new exhibits.

# Ceramics from Brislington Roman villa

These Romano-British ceramics were excavated from Brislington villa in 1899, and are a small selection of those in Bristol Museum and Art Gallery.

The villa was built around 270 AD and lost to fire about a century later. The remains of the villa were destroyed by the housing development

and construction of Winchester Road (ST61647097). There is more information on the structure is in our previous issue (2022 Oct).

The text accompanying each exhibit below in this section was written by Dawn Witherspoon in 2012.

## Amphora handles

Amphoras were large 2 handled pottery vessels mainly used for transporting wine and olive oil in bulk. The standard capacity was 3 modii which is a bit over 26 litres but the sizes did vary. Amphoras of different types and styles were used throughout the Roman period. To a lesser extent other preserved commodities; grape, olive and fish products, fruits and vegetables and non-food items were also transported in amphoras.

Exhibit contributed by Bristol Museum and Art Gallery (reference number Fb6952).  
Acquisition number: 120316c4



## Black burnished ware

Although black burnished ware is usually associated with Dorset, there are several varieties including a South West type which this appears to resemble more closely due to its smaller and less abundant grains of sand.

Exhibit contributed by Bristol Museum and Art Gallery (reference number Fb6954).  
Acquisition number: 120316b6

## Samian

Samian pottery (or Terra sigillata) was imported fine tableware with distinctive brick red colour and very smooth burnished surface. It was originally produced in northern Tuscany in the 1st century BC, with production expanding to other areas of Italy and France and Spain. During the 1st to 3rd centuries the main source of Samian ware was Gaul. Some was produced in small potteries in SE England but was poorer quality. This sherd (right) is from a bowl.

Exhibit contributed by Bristol Museum and Art Gallery (reference number Fb6951).  
Acquisition number: 120316b2



The mortaria (left) was an essential kitchen utensil for creating Roman recipes. The shape was hemispherical or conical often with a flanged lip for pouring. The rough inner surface of grit was used to grind or puree foodstuffs such as fruits or herbs, and may have been used during dining rather than in the kitchen. Mortaria appeared in Britain even before the Romans arrived, suggesting that Roman style food was already on the menu for some people. Possibly 2nd century.

Exhibit contributed by Bristol Museum and Art Gallery (reference number Fb6951).  
Acquisition number: 120316c3



## Oxfordshire ware mortaria

The pure white clay of Shotover Hill was used to make high-quality, durable wheel-thrown domestic ware for kitchen and table (right). The pottery was fairly fine textured and was white or cream or sometimes light brown with a pink core and pale slip; the grinding surface made up of clear and coloured quartz sand. The kilns clustered around the Roman road linking Dorchester-on-Thames and Alchester. Production was from 2nd to late 4th century but distribution to the South West of England did not happen till 4th century. The potteries ceased production in the early 5th century.



Exhibit contributed by Bristol Museum and Art Gallery (reference number Fb6936).  
Acquisition number: 120316c2

## Oxfordshire red ware

These three exhibits are all thought to be Oxfordshire red ware, which was made from the middle of the 3rd century until close to the end of Roman occupation in the early 5th century. It was made in a range of forms and imitated Samian ware.

It is a hard, fine textured fabric often decorated with stamped pattern or moulded figures with a high gloss finish on the best examples. It is wheel thrown and the colour ranges from orangey to reddish brown. Forms include jugs, with and without handles, beakers, bowls, jars, bottles and flagons. It was widely distributed throughout Britain in the 3rd and 4th centuries and with the improved road network distribution increased and expanded in the 4th century.

Upper. This strainer was a kitchen utensil that would have been used in the same way as we use a colander.

Middle. This is the base of a goblet-shaped cup; a wide base narrowing to a short stem and then bowling out to form the cup part. It is in three pieces which fit beautifully together but has been crudely reconstructed (with the white material) at some time in the 20th century. It was probably made in the 3rd century.

Lower: The base of a vessel.

Exhibits contributed by Bristol Museum and Art Gallery (reference numbers: Upper Fb6908  
Middle Fb6913  
Lower Fb6917).

Acquisition numbers: Upper 120316b1  
Middle 120316a9  
Lower 120316b8



## Castor ware

Roman Castor ware (aka Nene Valley ware) is named after the Roman settlement on the north bank of the Nene, 4 miles west of Peterborough where it was made, probably by immigrant craftsmen, from late 2nd century until the end of the Roman occupation. It was widely distributed throughout Britain and to the Continent by the Roman road system and from wharves on the river Nene.

Castor ware is fine table ware made from white clay. It has a colour coat, ranging from grey to reddish black often with barbotine (raised decoration) of hunting scenes or human figures or scroll and berry design, also grooving, rouletting and sometimes moulding. Some forms imitated samian ware. Course ware forms were also produced. Forms include cups, beakers, jugs, flagons and bottles, bowls, dishes, jars, and boxes complete with lid.

Upper: This appears to be a sherd from a round vessel and shows a decorative pattern of repeated dashes, probably done by rouletting. The outside has a reddish undercoat with darker topcoat, the rouletting indenting into the red.

Middle: This appears to be a sherd from a large bowl or dish and shows a decorative groove and wavy line pattern and a bold scroll pattern around the circumference, it is pale creamy grey.

Lower: This appears to be a sherd from a round vessel and shows a decorative groove and wavy line pattern around the circumference, it is dark grey/reddish colour wash.

Exhibits contributed by Bristol Museum and Art Gallery (reference numbers: Upper Fb6964  
Medium Fb6944  
Lower Fb6941c).

Acquisition numbers: Upper 120316b5  
Medium 120316b4  
Lower 120316b3



## Severn valley ware



As its name suggests, this sort of Roman pottery was made in the Severn basin, to the north of Bristol. It usually has a fine-grained fabric like this exhibit, and was manufactured in numerous separate sites - at least four kilns have been identified and all are associated geologically with deposits of Keuper marl (which also occurs in Brislington). It was produced from the 1st to the 4th centuries, and was abundant during the time of Brislington villa.

Exhibit contributed by Bristol Museum and Art Gallery (reference number Fb6914).

Acquisition number: 120316b9

## Jug

This jug was excavated intact from the well to the north of Brislington villa.

Exhibit contributed by Bristol Museum and Art Gallery (reference number F1256).

Acquisition number: 120316a1



# Other Romano-British ceramics

## Grey ware

This fragment of Roman pottery sparkles with glittering mica inclusions, and other inclusions in the clay make it feel rough to the touch.

It has been identified by Kurt Adams (Finds Liaison Officer at Bristol Museum) as Roman grey ware and, although it's not easy dating such a small (27x38mm) piece, he estimates it's from the first half of the Roman period. As such, this could easily pre-date Brislington's Roman villa (built around the year 270) by a century or more.

The archaeological excavations at Brislington Meadows (where this was found, lying on top of one of the backfilled trenches), in November 2021 found evidence of agricultural activity dating to the Roman period, and also Roman pottery including more micaceous grey ware and Samian sherds, both associated with cooking and dining. Samian wares are fine but aren't rare



although they are among the more high status pottery types, used at table to add a little elegance and prestige to every occasion.

Find spot: ST62557105, Brislington Meadows.  
Acquisition number: 220228a2

## Coarseware



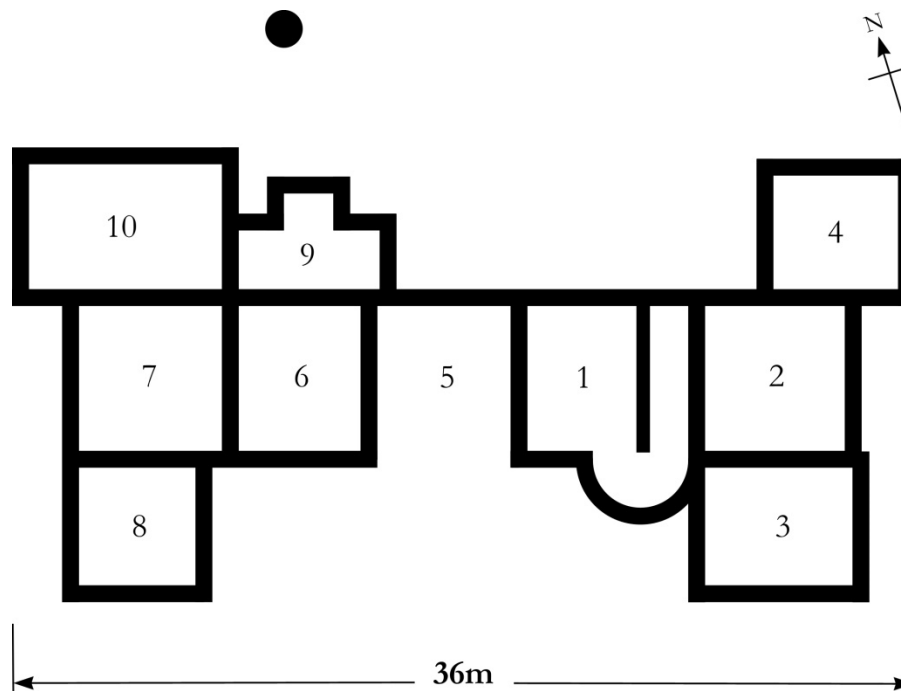
The fabric of this potsherd of Roman coarseware is very sandy, and includes innumerable tiny glittering specks that, although they don't show well in photographs, give an element of elegance and charm to this otherwise crude pottery. The edges of this sherd are very abraded, and prevents identification of its type, but it may be from the long, narrow neck of a flagon. The left-hand image is the interior (concave) surface, the right-hand is the exterior.

This exhibit underlines the idea that the more boring a piece of pottery looks - the more interesting its story is likely to be.

Find spot: Hampstead Road, Brislington, Bristol. ST612710  
Exhibit contributed by Ken Taylor  
Acquisition number: 110618a6

# Brislington's Roman Villa

Due to the destruction of Brislington's Roman villa by a housing development in 1899, we lack the ability to reinvestigate the site with more modern methods. We are fortunate though, both in having a contemporary account of the archaeological excavation (Barker 1901) from which much of the information below has been drawn, and also in having some of the mosaics and other artefacts preserved and donated to Bristol's museum.



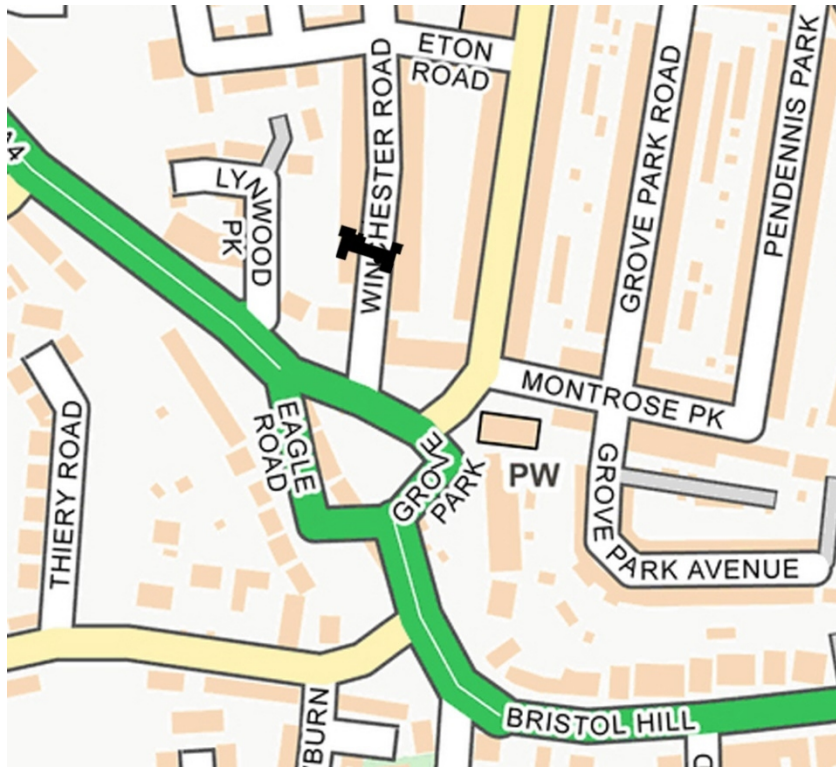
Simplified plan of surveyed rooms, with the well to the north (the numbering system is taken from the 1901 publication).

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One of the joys of historical mystery solving is that a lack of evidence leaves space for conjecture to fill. Helpfully too, the challenge of putting Brislington's villa into context with the Roman settlement of the area is frequently refreshed by discoveries elsewhere. The

excavations at Brislington Meadows in 2021, for instance, found evidence of both domestic and industrial Roman activity, with finds ranging from the 1st to the late 4th centuries (some of which predates the villa). The following, however, for reasons of time and resource is not a reappraisal of the evidence but merely a presentation of some foundations on which further research may stand.

Fifty years before its discovery this villa lay in a field where livestock grazed, nearly 1.25 hectares in area, this field enjoyed the peculiar name of Chezel (Bristol Archives 1846). There was a local tradition that walls were visible above ground, but they weren't explored and the site became a dumping ground for rubble.



Map showing approximate location of Brislington Roman villa (OS 2022).

It was the groundworks for the new road - Winchester Road - and its planned rows of terraced housing that first revealed the villa. When news of the discovery reached the Clifton Antiquarian Club, they promptly organised themselves to archaeologically record what they could before the housing development destroyed it all. As the extent of the find was revealed though, the task of completing this rescue dig and recording and preserving what they could, was given over to Bristol Museum.

## Structure

The plan shows the villa is oriented so the approach from the south toward the central courtyard is heading slightly east of north (a bearing of about  $017^\circ$ ), so the façade would bask in the early afternoon sunshine. The overall width of the building was 36 metres, the front being slightly narrower.

The foundations were broad, measuring up to 0.75m or more, but not deep (around 0.3m) and

were of pennant sandstone slabs laid in a herringbone pattern. The walls themselves - what little remained - were mostly limestone. It's likely the villa grew in size, with rooms being added on to the original structure.

Although no road was identified, the main approach to this villa, which Historic England describes as being of the winged corridor type (Historic England, 2023), seems to have been from the south, with the visitor arriving at an open central court paved with large slabs and flanked by wings (this area is marked 5 on the plan above). The plan, though, is incomplete because the area immediately north of the central court was too badly affected by the housing development to permit a survey of its remains.

Room 1 lies immediately east of the central courtyard had an apse whose width also spanned a passageway. This room had an elaborate geometric mosaic design on the floor, edged with a broad boarder of white lias tesserae. Within a frame of triangles, are a series of panels - diamonds with a stylised water lily (which has supposed to be the blue lotus flower), and

squares with a design of four leaves. Between these panels are smaller rectangles containing knots. Colours were mainly orange, blue and white, with some brown and grey. This mosaic has been re-laid inside a modern building at Kings Weston Roman Villa (BS11 0LP) where it may be viewed by arrangement or on occasional open days.

Room 2 lies immediately to the east again, and has been interpreted as the dining room. Its mosaic is the finest found in the villa, and is very different in character to that in room 1. This too has a plain outer border, and within it is a narrow frame of right-angled patterns creating a square canvas for the mosaic maker to show their skill. Inside, at the corners meandering braids (guilloche) enclose four-leaved designs, and between those panels, more guilloche-bordered frames house dolphins, and a variety of other curving designs fill the spaces (including a curious semi-circular double-crescent design known as pelta) around the centrepiece. At the heart of it all is a square with a border of blue and white spiralling waves (known as a scroll pattern), which is a type of optical illusion that can be seen either as light-coloured waves on a dark background, or dark waves on a light background. Within this is a finely worked image of a two-handled cup (cantharus), in blue, orange and white (this has long been on view at Bristol Museum & Art Gallery). The banqueting goblet is a traditional emblem of Bacchus, god of wine and intoxication, and this and the blue lotus flowers are suggestive of the villa's residents having an interest in mystery religions (Taylor 2005, 52-4). Such an interest wouldn't be surprising as the villa was built while the Roman Empire was pagan - Christianity didn't become its official religion until 380.

The passage between rooms 1 and 2 had a broad, plain white border, enclosing a repeated design of a cube viewed as three identical lozenges, each containing a knot motif.

Adjoining rooms at the northwest of the building (9 & 10) had the underfloor heating system known as hypocaust, with the floor supported on piles of pennant slabs around 0.3m square, around which heated air would

circulate. Particularly fine tesserae were found here, like those in room 2, suggesting the presence of high quality mosaics, now sadly lost. These chambers are interpreted as being the villa's bath suite.

To the north lay a circular well, some 1.5m in diameter, with walls 0.45m thick, and 11.5m deep. The water in the fully excavated shaft was found to be around 4m deep. Excavation showed the well to have been filled with a variety of material, and the archaeologists noticed there were distinct layers each containing different sorts of finds.

Naturally, the first items dropped into the well sank to the very were at the bottom, and these included part of a wooden comb, a copper alloy pin and a decorated spoon of similar metal. Above these was a layer almost 2m thick of mud and building rubble, which included some pottery and the remains of wooden buckets.

The metre above contained finds whose interpretation remains controversial. Seven pewter jugs were put into the water, some in perfect condition, along with two pottery jugs, of which one was slightly damaged and the other, a small black specimen, was completely intact. Then, the remains of four people were put into the water - examination of the skulls determined these individuals were two men and probably two women (at least one).

The next metre or so contained bones and teeth of a variety of animals including some skulls and the leg bones of at least a dozen cattle. Scattered among these were fragments of Roman ceramics.

Above those distinct layers, tons of building rubble had been tipped into the well shaft. This presumably came from the remains of the villa, and it included more sherds of ceramics, including Samian - high quality imported Roman tableware. The only coin found in the well was on a ledge of the masonry about 7.5m from the bottom - it was minted for the emperor Constantine II whose reign dates from 337 to 340.

Half a dozen coins were found during the excavation of the villa: the earliest dates to the reign of Victorinus (c.268 to c.270), and the most recent to the reign of Constantius II (337 to 361).

The excavators noted widespread signs of burning at the villa, and the implied violence suggested by the skeletal remains in the well has led some to suppose the destruction of Brislington villa occurred as the result of one of the sea-borne raids by tribes outside the Empire, in 367 (Branigan 1969, 24). A human jawbone found near but outside the well could indicate the human remains were already bare bones when they were deposited in the well.

Another interpretation of the layers and contents in the well - as ritual activity arising from a survival of the Celtic tradition - has been advanced following a study of the deposition of Roman pewter in Britain (Poulton & Scott 1993, 115-132).

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