Landscape Archaeological Report

Roman Oakham

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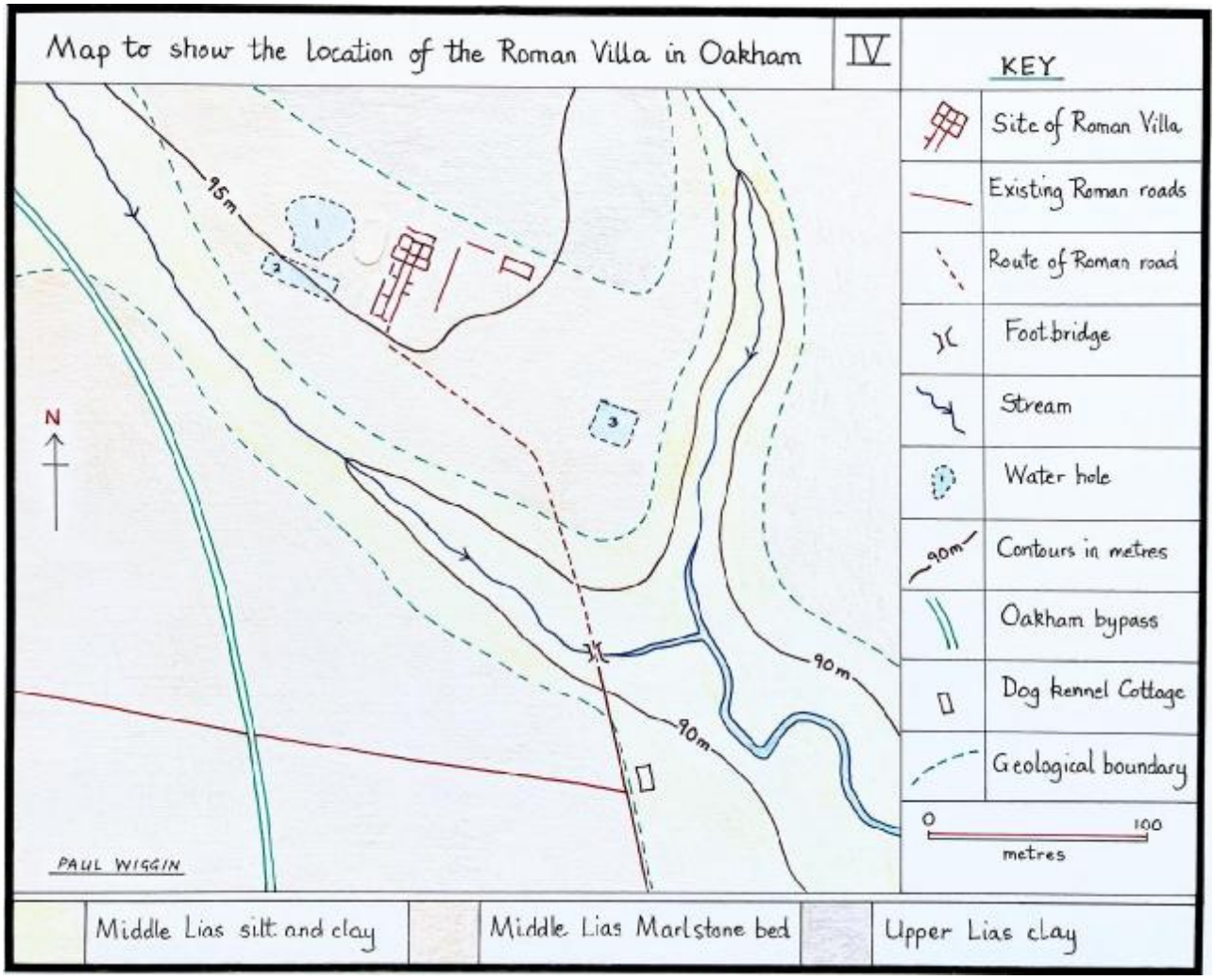
A recent geophysical survey and archaeological trench have confirmed the discovery of a Roman Villa in Oakham orientated in a NNE to SSW direction. The geophysical survey shows a long building, about 40m in length, with several rooms and a corridor. Initial interpretation of the features suggests there is an atrium entrance hall leading to an internal courtyard with rooms coming off either side. There are three large waterhole features associated with the Roman Villa as shown by LiDAR and vegetation change.

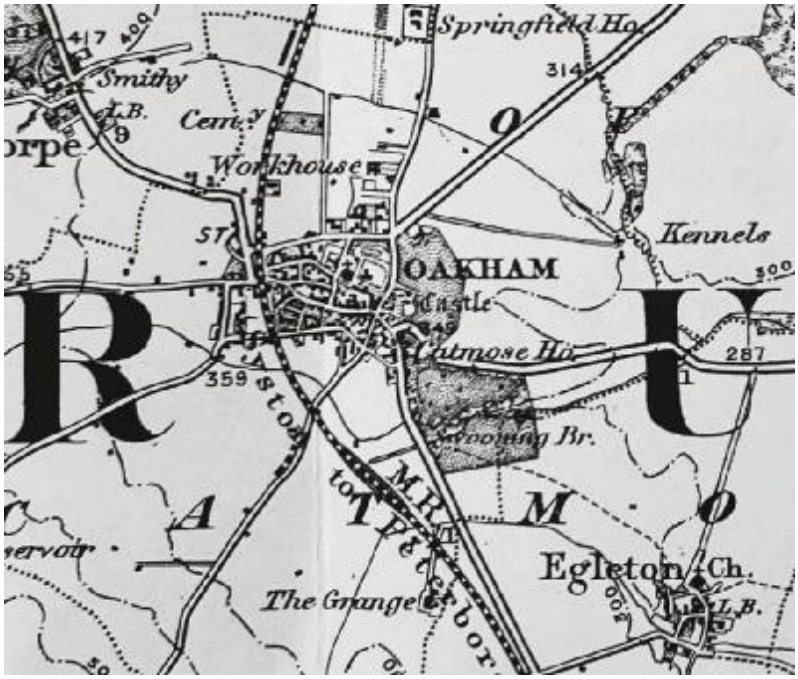


The photograph shows the location of the Roman Villa. It lies to the east of the Oakham bypass, on a plateau ridge above present-day Dog kennel cottage. The villa is strategically located on a spur of the Jurassic Marlstone rock layer with commanding views of the lands to the south, and it is bordered by steep muddy valleys with fast flowing streams.

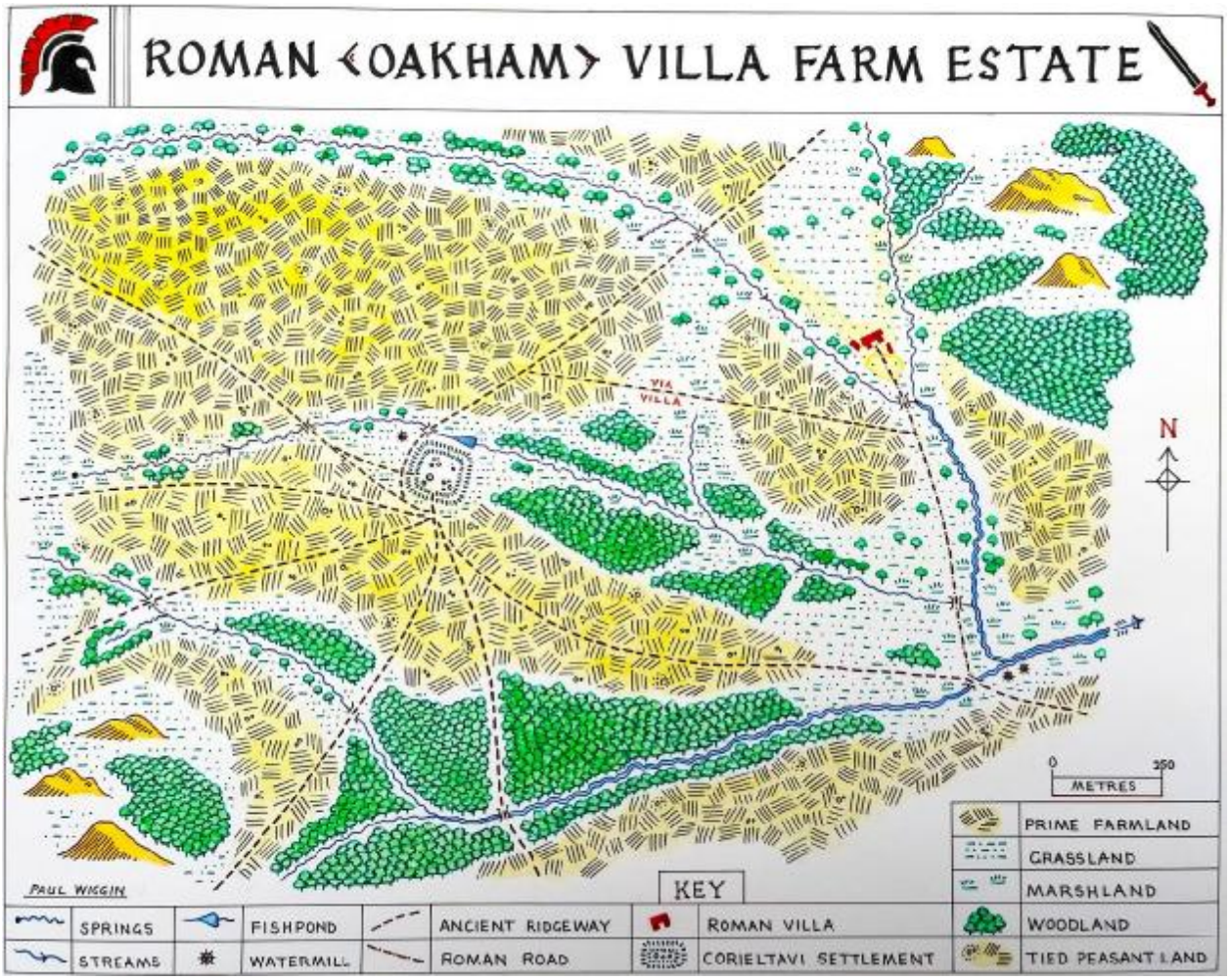
The painting shows a depiction of the Roman Villa in Oakham that is based on: geology, geophysics survey, LiDAR, landscape archaeology, mapping, and comparative analysis.

A depiction of how the Roman Villa might have looked like today.

The 1906 map of Rutland shows a straight Roman Road that runs from Burley Road towards the dog kennels of Burley, and then mysteriously stops. Due to the recent discovery of the Roman Villa, we now know this was the ‘Via Villa’, the important Roman Road to the villa from the ancient ridgeway (Burley Road) that joined Ermine Street – present day A1.



The discovery of the Roman Villa in Oakham confirms the geological prediction that 1700 years ago, Oakham was a very prosperous Roman Villa Farm Estate served by Corieltavi people from the nearby palisade hill fort (Oakham ‘castle’ today). The estate had two watermill sites that ground the grain from the crops growing on the fertile Marlstone Rock layer. The Old School building near Oakham ‘castle’ today is located on the site of the watermill which had a leat channel from the stream that flowed by the palisade hill fort. The southern watermills were located at the confluence of the rivers to the east where the most water power was provided (near the road turning to Hambleton Peninsula today).



The Via Villa can still be walked along today. For most of the length of the Roman Road, Via Villa has been changed into a tarmacked residential street – Woodland View.

Continuing to travel east, the Roman Road then becomes a tarmacked public pathway.

The Via Villa is then cut by the Oakham bypass. However, the section of the Roman Road from the Oakham bypass to Dog kennel cottage is still intact, allowing people to walk along the original Roman Road to the Villa and gain a sense of history from the contextual landscape archaeology of the area.

The photograph below shows a view from the Roman Villa, looking south, down towards the Roman Road today (gently sloping to the left in the mid-ground).

Hereward Way is a 110-mile-long distance walk, starting from Oakham and finishing near Thetford. From Oakham's Corieltavi hill fort, the walk takes people down Woodland View (the Roman Road) to Dog kennel cottage. At the T-junction, just before the cottage, the path turns right and follows the second straight Roman Road to the southern watermills. (The Roman Road has a slightly raised foundation bed and follows to the right of the stone wall in the photograph.)

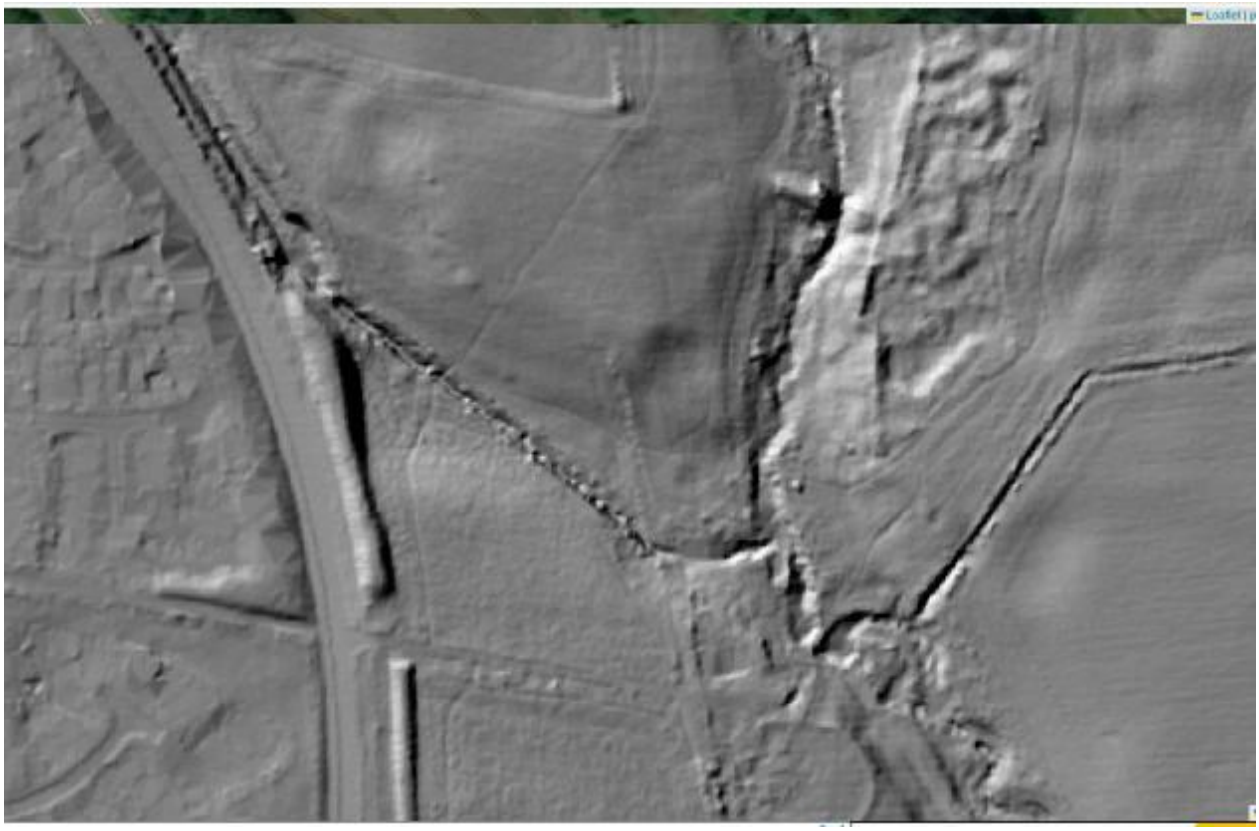
The Roman Road then continued SE to the Roman Shrine near present day Egleton.

Marlstone

The unique Jurassic Geology of the area was an important element to the success of the Roman Villa farm estate. The Middle Lias Marlstone Rock bed (180 – 175 Mya) gave Oakham estate a plateau-like appearance due to it being more resistant to erosion than the underlying silty clays.

The Marlstone is a sedimentary rock composed of carbonate minerals, clay, and silt which has an earthy texture and is rich in mineral content. It is also characterised in Rutland by being an aquifer, its water-carrying quality providing additional irrigation to any crops. The soils are lighter and more granular than the surrounding heavier clay soils which make them better for cultivation and less likely to become water-logged. It is highly probable therefore, that the Roman Villa Farm Estate focused farming on the areas of Marlstone to maximise the yield from crops to supply grain to the nearby military bases such as Casterton.

Ancient trackways used the marlstone for easier passage, providing drier, harder ground for the traveller. The Via Villa used the same principle, and its route continued right up to the edge of the Marlstone boundary before heading north to the Roman Villa. Where the road had to cross the boggy silty clay to cross the stream, it is highly likely that a long wooden bridge was created to span the gap and join the outcrops of Marlstone on either side of the river. The Roman Villa itself sits on a spur of marlstone which provides a hard base for the buildings and provides good drainage.



The three waterhole features can be seen on LiDAR. They are all located within the Marlstone layer which has a very slight slope to the SE. The Romans used the aquifer property of the Marlstone to create waterholes that continually refilled themselves naturally from the slow gravitational movement of the water through the Marlstone. An additional method of using the Marlstone to great effect was to create an embankment

around the top edge of the Water hole 1. When it rained, water would flow down the impermeable Upper Lias clay to the north of the Roman Villa, through the Marlstone embankment and into the water hole. All three waterholes are still working today as shown by the change in vegetation and wetter soils in these areas.

The aerial photograph shows the wider context of the area: Roman Villa with waterhole features, Roman road to the Villa (Via Villa), stream crossing point for the long wooden bridge, Roman T-junction at the edge of the Marlstone layer with another straight roman road heading south to the Roman Shrine near Egleton.

This Landscape Archaeological area is unique and of National Heritage importance.