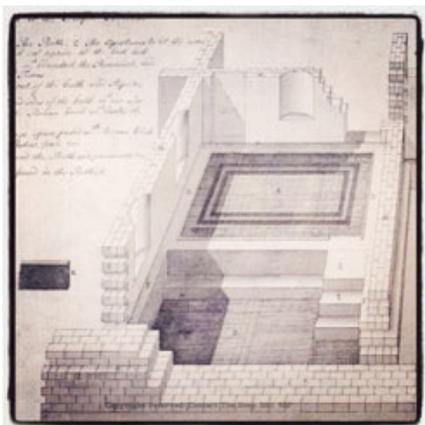




For the week of 17th – 21st October 2016 a team from Heritage Eastbourne and Bournemouth University Centre for Archaeology and Anthropology were given permission to excavate on part of Eastbourne's iconic Carpet Gardens in a search for a lost Roman Villa.

Since 1717 there have been reports of Roman Remains being periodically found in the vicinity of what is now Grand Parade and Queens Gardens, the last time being around 1880. These discoveries consisted of walls, tessellated (mosaic) corridors and even a grand bath house all now lost beneath later buildings or demolished at the time to provide rubble for building foundations (nothing stood in the way of Victorian progress!). From the drawings, plans and few material finds that remain we can say that this Villa must have been very large, perhaps even palatial in scale on a par with other important Roman buildings such as Fishbourne in West Sussex.



For some time we have been interested in seeing if any of the Villa or indeed any Roman buildings still survive deep beneath the seafront, but the only really tangible piece of relatively undisturbed land now consists of the nationally famous Carpet Gardens, home to stunning floral displays for well over 100 years. However, there are two brief windows of opportunity to investigate this area, one for just a day or so in late May and then for slightly longer in mid-October when the bedding plants are stripped out and replanted.

So in May our team, alongside our partners at Bournemouth University carried out unintrusive radar and resistivity surveys looking for structures buried beneath the manicured lawns and borders and, though not conclusive, it was apparent that something was lurking underneath the Carpet Gardens.

The October window is slightly longer as the grounds usually undergo further improvement following the removal of the bedding plants and thus for 5 days we were given the opportunity to open up a number of small test pits within the borders to test the results of the earlier survey.

In total four test pits were dug and the team did an incredible job shifting huge amounts of soil as it would become clear that any surviving archaeology was buried over a meter deep.



At this stage we have to say that the Villa itself remains elusive though we did get tantalising hints of its presence nearby and believe that we have uncovered at least part of the quarry that may have

been used to provide greensand for its substantial walls. We also found evidence of the evolution of the Carpet Gardens from pre-C19th fields to their formal grandeur around 1900 and parring back during the war years of 1939-45 where wrought iron lamp-posts were removed and presumably melted down. It is amazing that precise snap shots of moments in history can still be directly traced in the soils beneath our feet.



Until the final day of the excavation the lack of any definite Roman material was a little worrying, but a seemingly unimportant cut in our first test pit actually held a relative wealth of Roman evidence, though mixed with medieval and Victorian finds. Although we were only able to look at a small part of this feature it was made up of a different soil from others encountered on the site and some of the Roman pottery it contained was relatively fresh and had not been rolled around. For archaeologists this freshness is significant as it means that it may have laid undisturbed for a long time, perhaps

associated with other material of a similar date and thus that we could be close to some Roman layers that have not been destroyed.

So, was this excavation worth it? Undoubtedly, as we have discovered the first Roman material in this area for over 100 years and we now have a good idea of the depth of the potential archaeology for future investigations, of which there will certainly be many, in fact we have already started planning for 2017!

Perhaps the best part of this excavation was the interest it generated among the hundreds of visitors and locals strolling along the prom. It was really encouraging to see the support that we have for discovering the hidden stories of our heritage in Eastbourne and also the interest from everyone in what we were doing and why.

Lastly, just to be clear, no flowers were damaged in this project, though we have to admit to the demise of many weeds....much to the Gardeners delight!

Our thanks go to Dr Miles Russell, Paul Cheetham and students (past and present) from Bournemouth University and Heritage Eastbourne volunteers for making this project such a success.

