

Roman Villas in Sussex: Cartographic Conundrum

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As a by-product of the research undertaken by Roger Cordiner and myself into Roman Building Stones, I assembled a consecutive series of maps showing the distribution of Roman villas in Sussex. These cartographic contributions to Roman research were published in various publications by Ernest Black in 1987 (1); by David Rudling in 1998 (2) and again in 2003 (3); and, finally, by Miles Russell in 2006 (4). We will examine each of these publications in turn, looking, in particular, for two aspects: the definition of the term Villa, and the search for common ground; and the classification of Villas used for the cartographic expression of their distribution, and the resultant variations.

The initial attempt to portray the distribution of Roman villas was published by Ernest Black in his 1987 magisterial monograph covering the whole of Southeast England. In his Introduction (pp.1-2) he immediately tackles the thorny issue of definition. His opening sentence reads: *'Writers in the 20th century have customarily recognised an obligation to say what they mean by the term villa'*, and decides that *'the definition adopted here will reflect my belief in the value of studying villas as the homes of the wealthy (in substantial country houses); to that extent, it will be arbitrary. It is also a local definition, applying to Southeast England. It is very broad, deliberately; nor have I used size to define different categories of villas'*.

He then provides two specifications: *'To qualify as a villa in this study, a house must possess at least 3 rooms that have been conceived as a whole---an integrated house, or else a hall with at least one additional domestic room. A second stipulation is that the house must have stone foundations; building with stone foundations indicates permanence of the building. Walls with stone foundations generally encourage the use of durable flooring materials, not requiring constant renewal'*.

At the back of this substantial monograph is his Villa List (pp.144-60), with Sussex villas found on pp. 152-57 and 159. Black states that *'This List is confined, with a few exceptions, to sites for which some published reference exists, serving to establish the existence of a villa, or a possible villa. A site is included as a possible villa if it has produced bonding-tile or flue-tile fragments or tesserae from a Roman context'*. So, prior publication and specific Roman artefacts are his pre-requisites for inclusion.

Black's cartography was a marvellous first attempt to show the distribution of villas in the whole of Southeast England: only the Sussex section of the primary map concerns us here. He indicates, on all his series of maps of Roman sites in Southeast England, the river systems and higher ground (over 122 metres, 403 feet), and Roman roads, which are shown by a broken line. Every Roman site has a number for his Villa List. He employs a simple dual classification: black triangles identify 'Villas', of which there are 19, but that includes Fishbourne (no.130) which should be excluded as a special case, giving a total of 18; and white triangles represent the site of 'Possible Villas', of which there are 39, making a total of 57 in Sussex.

Later still (pp.214-15), he states that *'the distribution of villas is very important; they are concentrated in certain areas, e. g. the coastal plain of West Sussex, and on the Greensand Ridge just to the north of the South Downs [the Scarpfoot Zone]. In all areas river valleys, or locations with easy access to major roads, were particularly popular locations'*. He points out that *'the large early villas of the Sussex coast plain are exceptional and clearly derived from Italianate-style villas: they represent a deliberate policy of encouraging aspects of Roman culture [during the Roman protectorate of the client kingdom]'*.

He emphasises that the *'economic basis of most villas was mixed farming: many were situated at places suitable for the exploitation of several environments, including good arable*

and pastoral lands. Various villa complexes have revealed ancillary farm buildings-----barns, granaries and corn-drying ovens. Some villas were involved in other economic activities’.

In addition, the prosperity, significance and relative longevity of the various Roman villas in Sussex-----and Southeast England, for that matter, were related to their general location and specific site, as illustrated by Black’s series of chronological maps.

In his 1998 publication, David Rudling states (p.46): *‘There are many definitions of the term ‘villa’, but most would probably agree that it refers to a rural house which significantly reflects the Roman style of life. In practical archaeological terms this assessment is usually determined by the finding of masonry footings; clay tiles/bricks; window glass; painted wall-plaster, and sometimes hypocaust heating systems and bath-suites. One or more of these criteria have been used to select the sites of Roman villas and probable villas in Fig.2. Most of these establishments are presumed to have been the centres of farms, but other [economic] functions are occasionally possible, e. g. iron-working at Hartfield [in the High Weald]’.* His criteria would seem to be a rural property showing the Roman way of life that was the centre of a farming estate, plus numerous Roman artefacts.

The base map of Fig.2 shows the outline of the geological strata and the river valleys of West Sussex and part of East Sussex; and, also, the ‘various Roman sites, including all villas and probable villas’. He presents a three-fold classification: 1st century Large Villas, of which there are 7, but that includes Fishbourne Palace, so it should really be only 6 (Pulborough; West Hampnett; Tarrant St., Arundel; Angmering; Southwick; and Eastbourne); Villas, 17 with numbers and 12 without, making a total of 29; and 27 Probable Villas, giving a grand total of 62 in that area.

Rudling also provides a geographical commentary on the cartography, by stating, on p.51, that *‘the distribution of villas is very important. In Sussex, they concentrate in three main areas: the very fertile Coast Plain, the chalk Downs, and on or near the Greensand Ridge to the north of the Downs [the Scarpfoot Zone]. In all areas, river valleys, or sites with easy access to major [Roman] roads, were particularly popular locations. Communication by road or water, and access to suitable markets, were clearly major considerations, and more important than the quality of land upon which they were built’.* He emphasises that *‘the economic basis of most of the villas was mixed farming; many villas were situated at places chosen for the exploitation of several environments’.* Evidence for farming at the villas comes in the form of corn-drying ovens and farm buildings.

In his 2003 chapter, Rudling states, on p.118, that *‘the term Villa is often used to refer to a domestic house or complex which significantly reflects the Roman style of rural life. In terms of archaeological evidence, this assessment is usually determined by the discovery of one or more of such features as masonry footings, multiple rooms, clay tiles; mosaic or tessellated floors, painted wall plaster, window glass, hypocaust (underfloor) heating systems and bath-suites. Most of these sites are assumed to have been the centres of farm estates, although other [economic] functions are also possible’.*

There is no reference to his map of the ‘various Roman sites in Sussex’ in the text, which is unfortunate, because this map is the most effective cartography of the whole series. It clearly shows the fundamental topography of Sussex, by shading land over 60 metres (c.200 feet), thus emphasising the Chalk Downs and the High Weald. He employs the same three-fold classification of Villas as previously used, so this map and his 1998 map are comparable, in what they indicate about the number and distribution of Roman villas in Sussex. This time there are only 5 Large Early Villas: that at West Hampnett, east of Chichester, has gone completely, and Fishbourne Palace should be omitted, as it is a special case. There are also 28 Villas and 17 Probable Villas, making a total of 50.

It will be noticed that there were 27 'Probable Villas' in 1998, but only 17 in 2003, which means that 10 'Probable Villas' were downgraded in only 5 years. Was this due to re-assessment using a tighter definition of what constitutes a Villa.

In his 2006 book on Roman Sussex, Russell makes the general statement, on p.164, that *'the majority of [Roman] villas in Britain were at the centre of a working, successful agricultural estate, the profits generated from selling farm surplus presumably providing the necessary funds for home improvements'*. He continues, with a most interesting analogy: *'Villas possessed elaborate bathing suites, ornate dining rooms, and a generally high level of internal décor. The Roman villas of Sussex can perhaps be better compared with the grand estates, country houses and stately homes of the landed gentry of England, Scotland and Wales [in Victorian and Edwardian times]. These houses represented monumental statements of power designed to dominate the land and impress all passers-by. As the home of a successful landowner wishing to attain a certain level of social status and recognition, the stately home or country house was the grand, architectural centrepiece of a great agricultural estate. The Roman villa was probably little different'*.

His next paragraph provides specific criteria: *'The Roman villa is an easy enough type-site to identify archaeologically in Britain. Villas were high-status, Romanised houses.....[they] possessed a broadly-rectangular plan, comprising a range of rooms connected by a corridor or veranda. Walls, especially those in public areas, were often decorated, whilst the provision of solid floors allowed the opportunity to invest in mosaic pavements. Architectural details, such as ornate columns, glazed windows and tiled roofs embellished the whole, whilst major structural additions, such as integrated bathing suites and underfloor heating, were often brought in as and when funds allowed'*.

As well as this historical analogy, Russell also supplies another revealing concept in the form of an evolutionary sequence for Roman villas in Sussex (p.166). He proposes that *'four basic types of villa building are identifiable from Sussex: Cottage House; Corridor House; Aisled Building; and Courtyard House.....which represents the final evolutionary phase of Romanised rural building map of Roman Sussex'*.

Russell's map of Roman Sussex has a base map of the county of Sussex, upon which he has shown the rivers and the Roman roads, and a series of symbols to identify the different major sites. Diamonds indicate the location of 'early villas/palaces', of which there are 9, minus the special case of Fishbourne, equals 8; and Triangles, which indicate the site of 'Villas', 6 of which are numbered---3 east of the Adur valley (Beddingham, Barcombe and West Blatchington) and 3 north of Chichester (Bow Hill, Chilgrove 1 and Chilgrove 2); and 34 without a number, making a total of 40 Villas; and a grand total of 48. What is clearly evident from this distribution pattern is the clustering of Roman Villas in the southwest sector of Sussex, west of the Arun valley and south of the West Rother, within the accessible hinterland of the Roman civitas of Noviomagus Reginorum, otherwise Chichester.

Only Rudling (1998) makes a textual reference to the accompanying map. Otherwise, the cartography is incidental to the text, standing on its own merits or faults. Three different classifications for the cartographic portrayal of the Roman Villas in Sussex are used, providing results that vary from 48 to 62, which is quite a disparity (see Table 2). Of these 4 maps, Rudling (2003) is probably the best: his archaeological criteria for inclusion are very specific, and the uplands of Sussex clearly demarcated. Also, his triplicate classification of Roman Villas in Sussex most accurately reflects historical circumstances. Unfortunately, his map is crowded out by so many other symbols for other types of Roman sites in Sussex that 'Roman villas' are overwhelmed, and not easily discernible. That is a pity, but only to be expected, since the cartographic objective was to show the location of all Roman sites in Sussex, not just villas. Rudling's eight archaeological specifications for defining a Roman

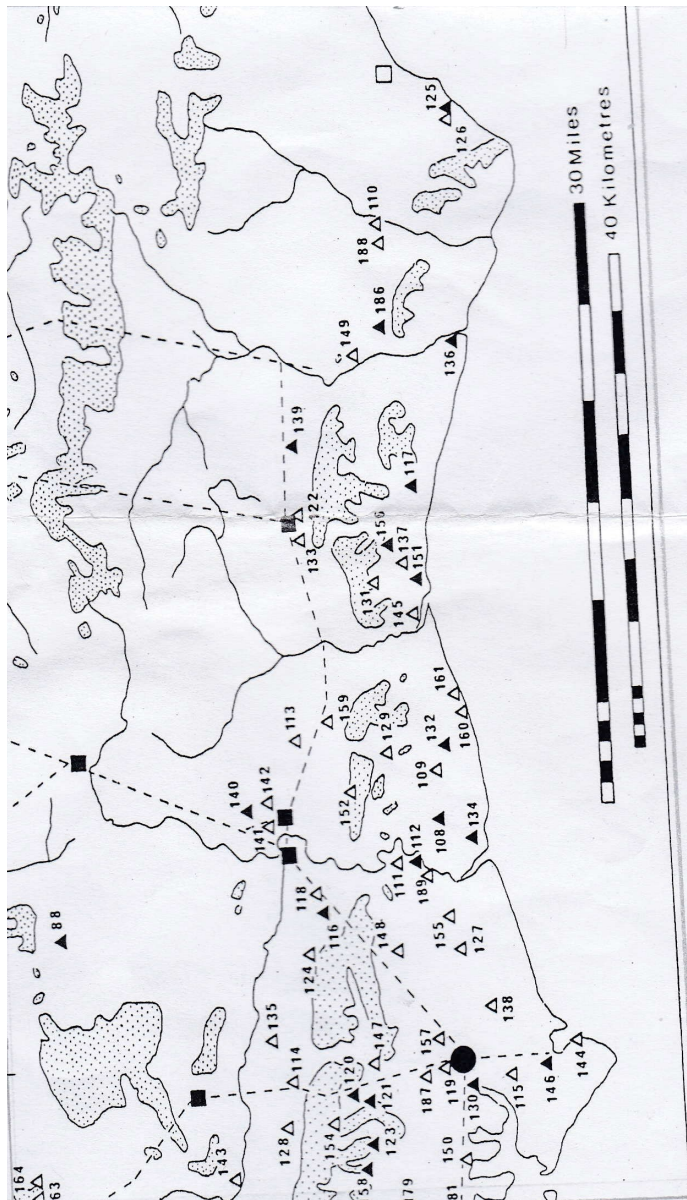
villa suggest a bipartite division of Roman villas in Sussex into Basic and Elaborate, those with hypocaust heating systems and bath suites, which would be constructed as and when funds and circumstances permitted, by the larger and more prosperous villas in the most propitious locations. This inherently involves a temporal dimension.

It would seem that the spatial pattern of Roman villas in Sussex relates to the personal definition of a Roman villa employed by each author, as also does their cartographic classification: so, although the maps are very similar, they are not strictly comparable. One of the principles of scientific enquiry is general agreement on the terms of reference, hence Standard Units of Measurement, e. g. the meter, the volt and even the light-year. If Archaeology wishes to be considered a Science, it should apply the same principle on what constitutes a 'Roman Villa', with clear and easily-recognisable criteria in terms of its socio-economic status and archaeological specifications. Rudling (2003) comes the closest.

General agreement on specific criteria for a Roman villa, and a standard cartographic classification, would enable definitive maps to be produced, which would be comparable for different times during the Roman overlordship of Sussex, thereby enabling their evolving distribution pattern to be accurately analysed. New sites will, undoubtedly, be discovered, and old ones re-interpreted, producing only minor variations in the general pattern, as the geographical environment and historical events interacted during Roman times in Sussex.

Roman Villas in Sussex 1

Black 1987



Black triangles – villas

White triangles – possible villas

Rudling 1998

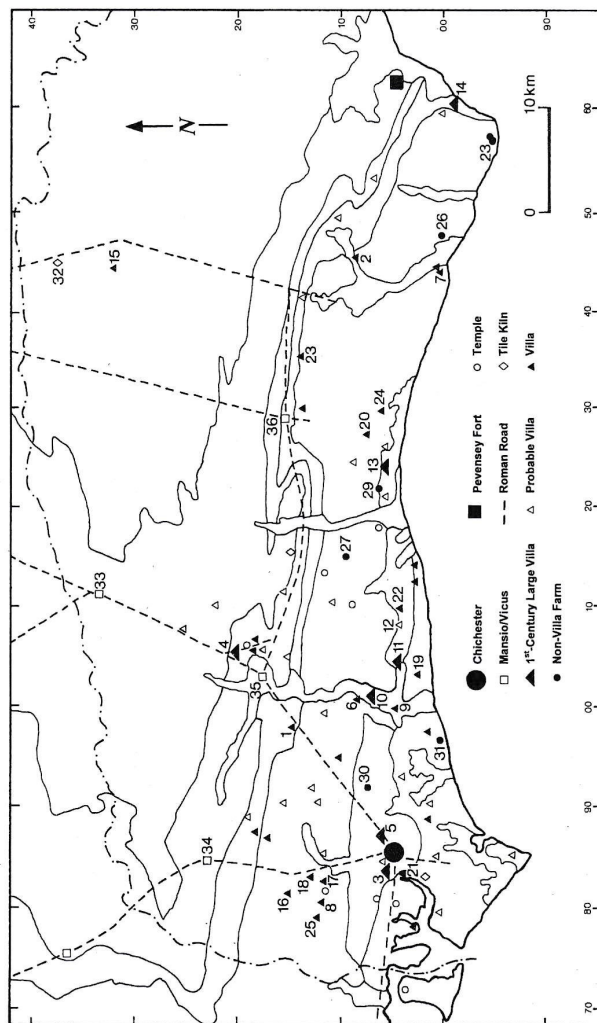


Fig. 2. Distribution map of various Roman sites, including all villas and probable villas, in West Sussex and part of East Sussex. The numbered sites are - villas: Bignor (1); Beddingham (2); Fishbourne (3); Pulborough (4); Westhampnett (5); The Shepherds Garden, Arundel (6); Newhaven (7); Up Marden (8); Tortington (9); Tarrant Street, Arundel (10); Angmering (11); High Down, Angmering (12); Southwick (13); Eastbourne (14); Garden Hill, Hartfield (15); Batten Hanger (16); Chilgrove 1 (17); Chilgrove 2 (18); Littlehampton (19); West Blatchington (20); Fishbourne Creek (21); Goring (22); Plumpton (23); Brighton (24); Watergate (25); - 'non-villas': Bishopstone (26); Park Brow (27); Bullock Down (28); Slonk Hill (29); Boxgrove (30); Middleton-on-Sea (31); - other sites: Hartfield Tile Kiln (32); Altoldean (33); Iping (34); Hardham (35); and Hassocks (36).

Roman Villas in Sussex 2

Rudling 2003

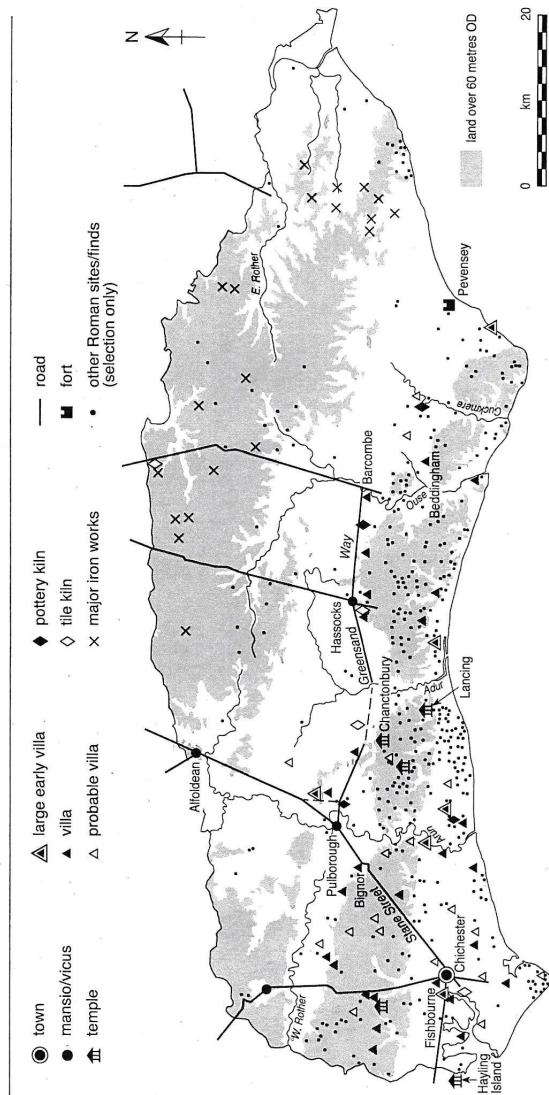
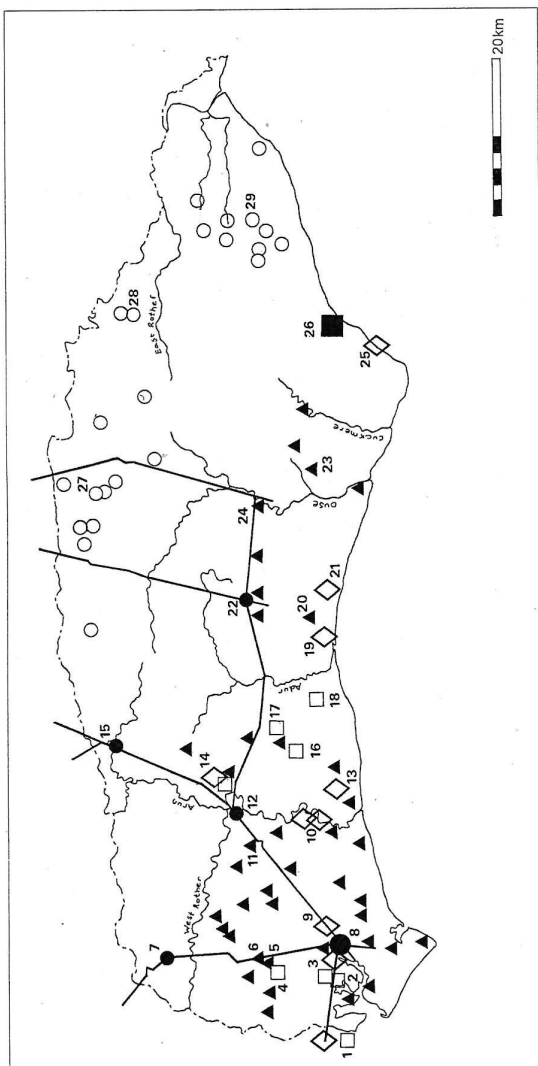


Figure 9.1. Distribution map of various Roman sites in Sussex.



4 Roman Sussex: distribution of major sites. Blocked circles represent roadside settlements, open circles represent ironworking sites, squares are temples, diamonds are early villas/palaces, triangles are villas: 1 = Hayling Island (Hampshire); 2 = Bosham; 3 = Fishbourne; 4 = Bow Hill; 5 = Chilgrove 1; 6 = Chilgrove 2; 7 = Iping; 8 = Chichester; 9 = Westchamptnett; 10 = Arundel; 11 = Bignor; 12 = Hardham; 13 = Angmering; 14 = Pulborough; 15 = Alfold; 16 = Muntham Court; 17 = Chancetonbury; 18 = Lancing; 19 = Southwick; 20 = West Blatchington; 21 = Brighton; 22 = Hassocks; 23 = Beddingham; 24 = Barcombe; 25 = Eastbourne; 26 = Pevensey; 27 = Carden Hill; 28 = Bardown; 29 = Beaumont Park

Table A **Criteria for a Roman Villa in Sussex**

Author	Socio-Economic	Archaeological	Other
Black 1987	Substantial country house. Farmhouse of profitable estate. Home of the wealthy socio-economic elite.	Minimum of 3 integrated rooms. Stone foundations Durable flooring materials – mosaics Specific artefacts: Bonding-tile Flue-tile fragments Tesserae from Roman context	Often at intersection of different environments. Prior published reference.
Rudling 1998	Rural House, with Roman style of life. Centre of Farm estate.	Specific features: 1. Masonry footings 2. Clay/tiles/brick 3. Window glass 4. Painted wall plaster 5. Hypocaust heading systems 6. Bath-suites	Sites for the exploitation of several different environments.
Rudling 2003	Domestic house/complex. Roman style of rural life. Centre of successful Farm estate.	As above, plus 7. Multiple rooms 8. Mosaic/tessellated floor.	
Russell 2006	High-status, rural Romanised house. Centre of successful Farm estate.	1. Rectangular plan, with range of inter-connected rooms 2. Decorated walls 3. Solid floors/mosaic pavements 4. Ornate columns, glazed windows and tiled roofs 5. Bathing suites and underfloor heating	

Table B **Classifications of Roman Villas in Sussex**

Black		1987	
	1. Villa (black triangle)	18	
	2. Possible Villa (white triangle)	39	
		Total 57	
Rudling		1998	2003
	1. Large Early Villa	6	5
	2. Villa	29	28
	3. Probable Villa	27	17
		Total 62	50
Russell		2006	
	1. Early Villa	8	
	2. Villa	40	
		Total 48	

References

- 1.E.W.Black ‘The Roman Villas of Southeast England’
British Archaeological Reports, British Series 171, 1987 (Map: Fig.5, 199)
2. David Rudling ‘The Development of Roman Villas in Sussex’
Sussex Archaeological Collections 136 (1998) 41-65, especially 49-51. (Map: Fig.2, 43)
3. David Rudling ‘Roman rural settlement in Sussex: continuity and change’
in The Archaeology of Sussex to AD2000: Edited by David Rudling
Published by Heritage Marketing and Publications on behalf of the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Sussex, 2003 Chapter 9, 111-26, especially 118
(Map Fig.9.1, 112)
4. Miles Russell Roman Sussex Stroud, Glos., Tempus Publishing, 2006
Chapter 8 Villas and Rural Settlement, 163-206
(Map: Roman Sussex: distribution of major sites, 13)

