

NO MERE PAVEMENT



JIM IRVINE, excavator of the Rutland *Iliad* mosaic, describes the thrilling moment he made the discovery of a lifetime

ABOVE The complete mosaic within the floor plan of the triclinium with the apse at the bottom of the picture.
© Historic England

Some time into lockdown during 2020, the grandparents were starting to get a little disgruntled at the lack of grandkid time they were getting. After several months of no contact, it was decided that we'd meet up in the field with a river running around its boundary so the kids could have a splash about. My wife, Freya, and our daughters headed out on a Saturday morning to meet up with my mum and dad (the grandparents) at the field.

As we were making our way down the slope to the river, there was a loud yell and my wife rolled onto the ground as if she was on fire. We quickly realised that we'd upset the bees in the nearby beehives, and they'd taken exception to our excitement and furor as we entered the field. A quick dash by all meant we avoided further stings and we eventually made it to the river.

The river was shallow and stony and the girls had a great time wading about and turning over rocks. We decided we

shouldn't return past the bees, so we followed the river along the bare soil where the wheat had not grown due to flooding at the end of 2019. It was during this walk that I noticed some terracotta-coloured broken tiles, oyster shells and unusual black-coloured pottery. As we walked along, we started to notice that it was everywhere.

The finds came home with me, and that's when the research began. I'm an engineer so am naturally inquisitive and like to think I'm observant, but

these finds didn't really align with my view of the location. There's a Victorian farm just across the river, but the pottery didn't look Victorian; it looked much older. Some investigation would be required.

I looked at old maps, Lidar and any aerial photographs I could lay my hands on. Eventually, by some serendipity, I happened to view an image from Google Earth that was taken in June 2018, during a particularly dry spell, when the wheat in the field was in the perfect growth phase to show clear field/crop marks. Visible on the image was the outline of a couple of adjoining buildings, one of which was slightly unusual in that it had turret-like features at each end. At this point, I was hooked, and just had to find out what this was. How could I not have noticed any evidence of this over 30 years of working for my dad on the farm? If I'm honest, I felt very excited, but slightly annoyed that I'd not previously picked up on the vast amounts of out-of-place debris strewn across the field.

BELOW An aerial view of the excavations showing the mosaic room and part of an adjacent building. © Historic England



If it wasn't for the bees, the flood and the drought, the last two years would have been far less exciting.

This was only the first part of the story. I drew up my findings and reported them to Helen Wells, who's our local Historic Environment Records officer. There was a suggestion of some 'Field Walking', but my impatience got the better of me, and I decided that as soon as the wheat had been harvested, I'd take my spade and make sure that the crop marks were actually identifying the location of this turreted building.

During August, the wheat was cut, and the field stood only as stubble. A Saturday morning was chosen, and me, the Irvine girls and my mum and dad arrived at the field, spade in hand. The sunshade was quickly thrown up and I located the spot where I thought I might find this 'wall'. I used the GPS on my phone, in conjunction with other location-identifying landmarks, trees in the hedge, tramlines made by the tractor, and the telegraph poles in the field to help me to locate myself.

I decided that a slot trench, about a spade's width, would suffice and allow me to prove myself right and expose the wall. After some digging, I came upon some unusual powdery material which was very loose at about 18 inches below the surface of the field.

I cleared this out using the spade, and after a few more inches I hit something hard. Reaching down with my hand I cleaned out the powdery material, and exposed about a dozen 1-inch square tiles that were clearly the surface of a floor, or path. At this point I was a little surprised, and somewhat annoyed; I'd expected to find a wall, and instead I had found a path. I guess you can't be right all the time.

Some consternation ensued, and I decided that the next logical activity would be to dig some more, and find out what we'd discovered. At this point, I was working under the belief that I was excavating what must be the path that encircles the building that I'd seen in the crop mark. A few more spadefuls and, yet again, I was proven wrong; not a successful day in terms of making correct assumptions. What we did see, though, stunned us into silence. Adjoining the large tiles were a number of smaller tiles, bright in colour, and forming a pattern. This was clearly a mosaic of some sort, so with extreme care we continued to expose the pavement.

After an afternoon of careful work, we'd uncovered a large area and could clearly see figures, panels, borders and some excellent and delicate mosaic work. Not bad for our first go at archaeology.

Lots of photos were taken, and I filed my report on Monday with Helen Wells over the telephone. The call went something like this; 'Hi Helen, it's Jim!'. 'Oh, hi Jim,' replied Helen, probably wondering why I was calling again. 'I'm going to send you a presentation, and I will talk you through it... but before I do, I need you to know that we were very VERY careful'. 'Oh-kay' said Helen. I sent over the report and described the day to her and talked her through all of the pictures I'd taken; she didn't say very much. At the end of the call, she said 'Ummmm, I'm not really sure what's meant to happen now; let me call you back.' I mentioned to my youngest daughter, Lyd, that Helen wasn't sure what would happen next, and Lyd responded, 'Why? Is she new?'

Within a week, the whole circus arrived, and the professional archaeologists did a superb job of examining the mosaic, surveying the site and planning what would happen next.

Over the last couple of years, I've been privileged to be involved in some very special and unique archaeological work and have learnt an awful lot about Roman history, pottery, coins and buildings, as well as Greek mythology. It's been an absolute thrill. **A**

WHEN TROY CAME TO RUTLAND



JOHN THOMAS, JENNIFER BROWNING AND JANE MASSÉGLIA on the significance and likely origins of the astonishing Trojan War Mosaic in Roman Rutland

ABOVE The middle panel of the mosaic with the victorious Achilles dragging the body of Hector behind his chariot. King Priam is shown on the right-hand side begging for the release of his son. © ULAS

Very occasionally, new discoveries are made that turn existing ideas upside down, transforming our understanding of life in Roman Britain. One such discovery was made on a casual family walk in the period of lockdown in 2020. This led to the uncovering of one of the most significant mosaics ever found in Britain.

After investigating a crop mark on his family's farm and revealing part of a mosaic floor, Jim Irvine contacted local authority archaeologists for professional help, and it was not long before Historic England and the University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) became involved. Initial work concentrated on carefully cleaning and recording the small excavation that Jim had started, but soon led to a larger excavation of the entire area of the mosaic with the assistance of undergraduate archaeology students from University of Leicester.

The excavation team spent two weeks carefully removing soil and rubble

layers that lay above the mosaic. As they got closer to the floor, they had the spine-tingling experience of revealing figures that had not been seen for centuries. As more of the floor was uncovered, it became clear that the scenes represented stories from the Trojan War, featuring a duel between the Greek hero Achilles and Hector, prince of Troy – events that have never before been seen on a British mosaic.

The mosaic is spectacular, measuring around 7 x 11 metres, and illustrating the story over three sequential panels in a highly dynamic, almost comic-book style. It forms the floor of a triclinium, or dining area, at the

northern end of a large villa building, with the images arranged to be viewed from an apse where guests would have been seated.

The story begins in the northernmost panel with a duel between two charioteers armed with spears and carrying shields, racing towards each other at speed. Achilles, on the left, is shown as the larger figure and clearly has the advantage. He is driving a chariot drawn by his immortal horses Xanthos and Balios who wear elaborate red and white 'jewelled' harnesses. The horses of Hector's chariot, to the right, are smaller and both light-coloured with red harnesses, bridles and reins. Hector, dressed in a tunic and with his back to the viewer, is slightly compressed into the right side of the panel. He holds a red shield in his left hand and spear or javelin in his right.

The story continues in the middle panel with Achilles victorious. We can see that he now holds the large red shield, which was probably originally his – in the *Iliad* Patroclus

BELOW The northern panel of the mosaic showing Achilles and Hector in battle on chariots. Note how large Achilles is portrayed in comparison to Hector. © ULAS



borrowing Achilles' armour, only to be killed by Hector, who strips him bare – although this part of the mosaic is heavily damaged. Hector is being dragged behind the chariot, his eyes closed in death, his body naked and with red tesserae marking wounds and abrasions. A shield-bearing figure behind the chariot seems to wave his arm in celebration. Running towards them is a barefoot, bearded figure with his arms outstretched. He wears a long striped, blue tunic and a red Phrygian cap. This is Priam, King of Troy and the father of Hector, pleading for the return of his son's body. Below and to the right are the red three-pronged tails of a sea creature, perhaps indicative of the coastal location or nearby River Scamander, or perhaps a reworking of the agathos daimon ('friendly spirit') of the dead Patroclus which appears as a snake in earlier Greek art.

In the final scene, Priam has begged Achilles to release Hector's body for dignified burial and in this version his weight in gold is the price. Centrally placed in the panel, an imposing figure with red leggings, sandals and a purple tunic holds the scales for the transaction. Hector's body lies on one side of the scales, supported by four red suspension cords or rods. A line of red tesserae may be the wound inflicted by Achilles. The other side of the scales is being filled with gold vessels by King Priam, now wearing red shoes or boots. The head and shoulders of a shield-bearing figure can be seen in the top right corner behind him. The surface of the left side of the panel is unfortunately

badly fire-damaged, but the layout of the tiles clearly forms the shape of Achilles, seated, holding a spear, with his right leg outstretched and left leg bent. There are two possible figures standing behind Achilles, but both are very difficult to see.

The size of the villa complex and the scale of the mosaic make the site highly significant for our understanding of the Roman Midlands. But important, too, are what the images themselves can tell us about the place of Greek culture in Roman Britain more widely. That the villa's owner commissioned an expensive mosaic showing episodes from the Trojan War shows that these ancient Greek stories still had appeal in the 4th century AD and were still culturally valuable enough to impress the neighbours. But their appeal is especially interesting when we consider that these are not scenes drawn directly from Homer.

The most famous account of the wrath of Achilles and the death of Hector occurs in Homer's *Iliad*, but this was not the only version of the story in circulation in antiquity. Each of the three scenes in the Rutland mosaic contains elements which do not strictly align with the Homeric version as we know it. For example, Achilles and Hector are shown fighting from chariots, while in *Iliad* 22 they race around on foot; the body of Hector is streaming blood from the wounds in his stomach, while in the *Iliad*, Apollo protects Hector's body 'completely' from damage (24.18-20); and most extraordinary of all is the depiction of

King Priam offering his son's weight in gold as ransom. This is markedly different from the straight exchange of goods in our text of the *Iliad*.

Could these differences be the result of artistic licence by the mosaicist? The chariots look very dramatic and are visually similar to images of racing teams that were popular in mosaics across the Empire, from Britain to Spain to Cyprus. Perhaps the Rutland mosaicist was channelling popular fashions. Similarly, the red wounds might simply be an artistic flourish to heighten the emotions of the scene. But we cannot explain away the weighing of Hector's body for gold in the same way: this is a story from another source.

Hector's ransom in *Iliad* 24 (lines 228–235) consists predominantly of textiles, with four talents of gold and other bronze objects which have no relation to Hector's weight. But we are very fortunate to know the origin of an alternative version. In two different medieval manuscripts of the *Iliad*, scholiasts (who wrote annotations in the margins) point out something remarkable about Achilles' declaration that he will never return Hector's body to his parents, 'not even if Priam, son of Dardanus, should bid to ransom it for gold' (*Iliad* 22.351–2). They helpfully note that this weighing, while just a rhetorical device in the *Iliad*, was taken literally in the 5th-century tragedy *Phrygians*, the final part of the Achilleid trilogy by the great Athenian playwright Aeschylus.

Phrygians now survives only in fragments, but was evidently enduringly popular in antiquity: it was parodied by the Athenian comic playwright Aristophanes in the 5th century BC, was mentioned by the Alexandrian lexicographer Hesychius in the 5th century AD, and by the Greek commentator Eustathius of Thessalonike in the 12th century – and by many others in between. If Greek writers knew about the weighing of Hector for gold from the time of Aeschylus until the Middle Ages, does that mean that the people responsible for the Rutland mosaic were plugged into Greek literary culture?



ABOVE Marble sarcophagus from Hellenistic Ephesus, showing the weighing of Hector's body for ransom, 3rd century BC. Woburn Abbey. © David Gill

Perhaps they were. Inscriptions from Roman Britain make it clear how multilingual this part of the Roman Empire could be, so it is not impossible that a native Greek-speaker might have been behind the mosaic. Similarly, we know that Greek literary manuscripts were stored in monastic scriptoria in the Western Empire, and that Greek was being taught within its monasteries. Wealthy owners of large villas are highly likely to have been connected with their local Church communities, so perhaps they had access to Greek literature that way. There are also visual clues that the mosaic was influenced by manuscripts. The choice of colours, the framing of the scenes and the way that some figures transgress the guilloche boundaries is strikingly similar to manuscript illuminations. Future excavations might just be able to shed light on these networks of churches and villas in the area that we can only guess at for the moment.

But there is also the phenomenon of Latin-language retellings of Greek stories that made them popular in the Western Empire. By the 1st century AD, it appears that a version of the story which had Hector ransomed with gold (and not the various textiles and objects described in the *Iliad*) was already very common. In the very first book of the *Aeneid*, for example,

Aeneas notices among the depictions of the Trojan War on display at Carthage a scene where 'Achilles dragged Hector round the walls of Troy and was selling his lifeless body for gold' (*Aeneid* 1.483–4). This 'gold' may be a relic of the Aeschylean variant. Both gold and the weighing are more explicitly described in late Roman works such as the *Excidium Troiae* and the *Periochae Homeri Iliados et Odysssiae*, both Latin reworkings of the Homeric epics. In the latter's synopsis of *Iliad* 24, the author describes the goddess Iris 'persuading Priam to weigh his dead son for gold' (444). For a book claiming to summarise the plot of Homer, it is interesting that the author has included the non-Homeric version of the story. Evidently, the 'weighing' version was very familiar in both Greek and Latin literature by this point, so the image in the Rutland mosaic was not the 'niche' choice it may seem to us.

Similarly, the image of Hector being weighed appears in art from both Greek- and Latin-speaking locations across many centuries. We have, among other examples, a marble sarcophagus from Ephesus (3rd century BC), a fragmentary mosaic from Sicily (3rd-4th century AD) and a bronze door plate from Alexandria (6th century AD) all depicting Hector

on the scales, and all from 'Greek-speaking' parts of the Empire. But, on the other hand, we also find the scene on an Italian-made silver jug from the Berthouville Treasure (1st century AD). This was inscribed with the Latin-named dedicator Quintus Domitius Tutus and was found in modern Normandy, a predominantly Latin-speaking location.

The more we try to divide Latin culture from Greek culture in our mosaic, the more difficult it becomes and the more contorted the solutions look. It seems at least secure to note that we have a villa owner with a serious appreciation of Greek culture, enough to commission a huge mosaic focussed on a Greek myth. He may or may not have read or spoken Greek, but he was evidently immersed in contemporary literary fashions that were shared much further afield than Roman Rutland. The same can be said about the designer of the mosaic, who employed motifs and visual flourishes that can be seen in a huge variety of art objects from across the Mediterranean. This person was part of a network of exchange of ideas and artistic influence (through the movement of both people and reference documents) which cannot be confined to Roman Rutland or even to Roman Britain.

The wider context of the mosaic has been revealed through geophysical survey, which shows a large villa complex of aisled barns, possible bathhouses and other buildings contained within a ditched enclosure. Pottery and coins found during the excavation of the mosaic indicate that it was in use during the 3rd–4th centuries AD, towards the end of the Roman period in Britain. The site is of such significance that it has been protected as a Scheduled Monument and, following one more season of excavation this year, the whole area will be managed as pastureland in the future. Our investigations into the mosaic and the people who made it are still in their infancy, but the Rutland villa is already a powerful argument for integrating the Roman Midlands with our idea of the wider Classical world. [A](#)



ABOVE The southern panel of the mosaic showing the dramatic weighing of Hector's body against his weight in gold. Achilles is seated on the burnt left-hand side with two figures in attendance, while Priam places gold vessels onto the scales on the opposite side. © ULAS