HONEYDITCHES ROMAN BATH-HOUSE

PLAN

N

Phase 1
Phase 2

0   5   Metres

*Reconstruction of bath-house as it may have appeared after
the second phase of building in the later third or fourth centuary AD*
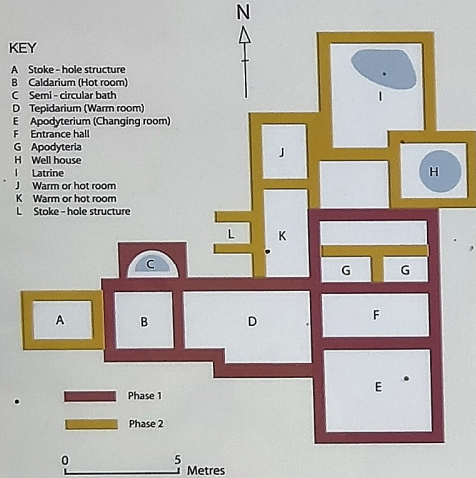
HONEYDITCHES ROMAN BATH-HOUSE

People have been taking advantage of the spectacular site at Honeyditches since prehistoric times. Excavations have unearthed Neolithic and Early Bronze Age pottery (c.3500-1800BC) and round-houses dating to the Iron Age (c.500BC-AD44). Occupation of this 'native' British site continued after the Roman Conquest until the second century AD when a high status Romanised building was constructed, one of only a few examples in Devon.

The main building, about 70 metres long, was probably L-shaped and stood on the western boundary of Cowscars field and extended into the field above. Little structural evidence remains for this building though the associated bath-house, some 100 metres further down the hill was considerably better preserved. Some of the mounds are spoil heaps from archaeological excavations of the Roman buildings. Excavations have, however, revealed a range of rooms with different functions and two phases of building. The first phase comprised an entrance hall flanked by changing rooms which led into a warm room and finally a hot room with a semi-circular bath to one side. It can be seen from the plan that the building was nearly symmetrical at this stage but then a further range of rooms was added on the south-eastern side and a stoke-hole structure on the north-eastern side. The bath-house was likely to have been in use in all between c.AD150-300.

The Roman bathing experience differed considerably from our own and can be likened to a present day Turkish bath. Having left (his or her) clothes in one of a row of niches in the changing room, the Roman bather would have entered the warm room to acclimatise for a while before entering the steamy hot room. Here cleansing with a strigil (scraping implement) would have removed the dirt and sweat before the bath ended with an invigorating plunge in the cool pool.

The heated rooms were provided with underfloor hypocaust heating which worked by filling the space beneath the raised floor with hot air which then dispersed through flues set into the walls. Several pilae or floor supports were found in situ.

The existence of the stone buildings and bath-house make Honeyditches an important site which for many years was thought to be a villa, a large complex of buildings at the centre of a country estate. However recent investigations have suggested that the Roman army were active in the area and there was probably a fort nearby. The Honeyditches site may therefore be a mansio or inn, where government officials and other important people stayed whilst travelling to or from Exeter (Isca Dumnoniorum), the regional capital.

There is evidence that the land above Seaton, as well as across the estuary, was being cultivated and used for pasture in Roman times. There were Iron Age hillforts at Hawksdown Hill above Axmouth and Musbury Castle beyond, the occupation of which may have extended into the Roman period. The landscape would, however, have looked very different 2,000 years ago; it would have been more heavily wooded, the Axe would have been considerably wider and the now eroded cliffs and silted up bay would have extended much further out to sea. This would have provided safe anchorage for ships in Roman times and it is likely that the Axe formed an important trade route to the well-populated inland parts of south Somerset. The nearest fort to Honeyditches is the Seaton Down Inland Promontory Fort.

Given the importance of the site at Honeyditches it has been designated a Scheduled Ancient Monument because of the sequence of periods of occupation, relative rarity of Roman buildings and the quality/condition of remains.

Possible reconstruction of rooms B and C

Devon County Council

East Devon

The Roman Site at Honeyditches

Honeyditches, which lies on the edge of modern Seaton, is one of the most important and puzzling Roman sites in Devon.

This favoured spot had been occupied by successive farming communities between *c.* 4000 BC and *c.* AD 50 — Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age. Just before the Roman conquest of Devon there was an open farming settlement here whose circular houses were of timber with thatched roofs. This continued in use long into the Roman period.
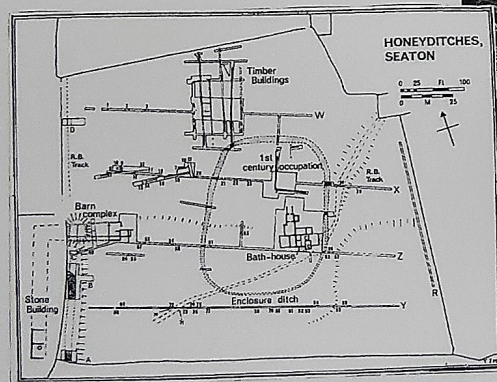
Around AD 150-250 this community was replaced by at least three ranges of long stone buildings which included a small bath-house; in at least one room was a fine mosaic.

Different parts of the site have been excavated since the 1850s although much of the area remains unexplored. They might be parts of a villa, but have recently been reinterpreted as a *mansio* or posting station (something like a modern motel). The site was abandoned by about AD 350, well before the end of Roman Britain around AD 410.

Line drawing of the stamp on the tile of Second Augustan Legion. It reads LEG II AVG backwards. The tile is now in Taunton Museum.

A detail of the excavation of the Roman bath-house: the semi-circular bath beside the hot room, still preserving its plastered floor and walls.

The excavation of the bath-house in 1969 : its walls stood about 1m or more high. The pillars visible within the building supported the raised floor of the hot room.
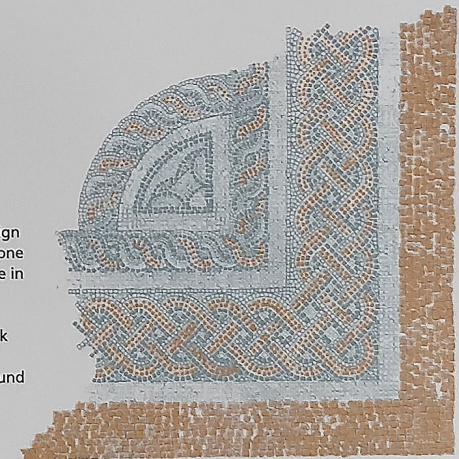

The damaged mosaic, photographed after excavation in 1921.

A drawing showing a reconstruction of the design of the area of mosaic found in 1921. It occupied one corner of a large room. Cubes (tesserae) of stone in three different colours were used.
1) red: fired red tile
2) white: limestone quarried from the chalk around Beer, Devon.
3) dark grey: Grey Lias, such as could be found around Lyme Regis.

The bands of cable-like decoration are known as guilloche.

HONEYDITCHES, SEATON

The plan of the site in 1969 (the timber buildings at the top of the plan are now known to be gullies beside Roman trackways).

A view of the site from the air after 1969: a proposal to display the bath-house to the public did not materialize.

Making a mosaic

The first step involved the cutting of thousands of small cubes of each colour, using a chisel. Complicated elements of the design were laid out in boxes in the mosaic worker's workshop. These could then be transferred to site ready to be laid out.

The Roman Army

Devon lay on the fringe of the vast Roman empire. It was conquered around AD 55-75.

Seaton lay close to the end of the Fosse Way, a road laid out by the invading Roman army to link its many military bases between Exeter and Lincoln. A branch seems to have run south from the road at Axminster to the coast – perhaps to a supply base at the mouth of the Axe.

Photographs of a gold coin of the emperor Nero found at Axmouth; it was probably brought to Devon to pay a Roman soldier.

A Roman legionary at the time of the invasion of Devon.

Peter Connolly

View of the mouth of the Axe. It has silted up greatly in recent centuries; there was a medieval port here, and perhaps a Roman one.

Plan showing Roman military sites known in South-West England. It shows the large number of Roman forts now known in the area. (after Dr Valerie Maxfield)

Cirencester
Fosse Way
Chesterhouse   Bath
Old Burrow   Port Way   Silchester
Martinhoe   Winchester
Wiveliscombe   South Cadbury
Tiverton   Ilchester   Chichester
Hembury   Ham Hill
Bury Barton   Waddon Hill   Hod Hill
Cullompton   Shapwick   Lake
North Tawton   Axminster   Hamworthy
Okehampton   Exeter
SEATON
Nanstallon
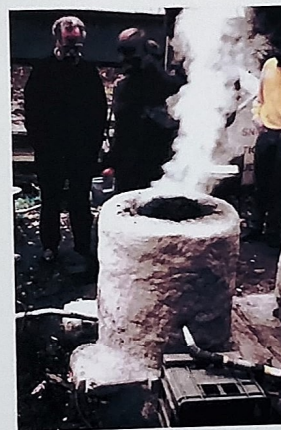KEY — Main Roman Roads
— Roman Forts/Military Bases

Roman Civil Life Around Seaton

The Roman army left Devon to conquer Wales around AD 75-90. Devon and Cornwall became a self-governing part of Britain named DUMNONIA after the prehistoric name of its people — the Dumnonii.

In neighbouring Dorset and Somerset there are many signs of prosperous Roman life – large villas, extensive towns and rural temples. By contrast, in Devon most farmers continued to live in small timber houses, much like their prehistoric ancestors.
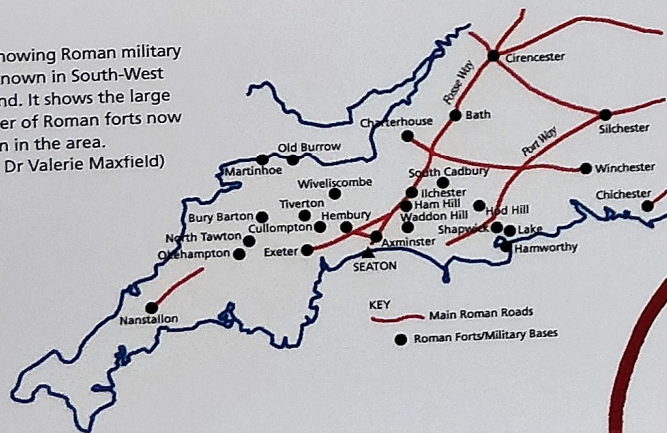

The other well-known major Roman settlement in the Seaton area was at Uplyme, close to Lyme Regis. Here a large Roman villa developed, with mosaics and a fine bath house. The illustration records its finest mosaic.

The hills inland from Seaton were an important iron-making area. This view shows a reconstruction of the kind of furnace which would have been used.

The large stone buildings at Seaton are exceptional in Roman Devon.

Was this Moridunum?

Three late Roman documents name a Roman site called Moridunum, meaning 'sea fort', 15 miles east of Exeter on the road to Dorchester. Seaton, with its probable fort overlooking the sea at Couchill, is a good candidate. Rival claims have, however, come forward for other sites; the recently discovered Roman forts close to Axminster and Honiton, on the Exeter to Dorchester road, are the alternative sites.