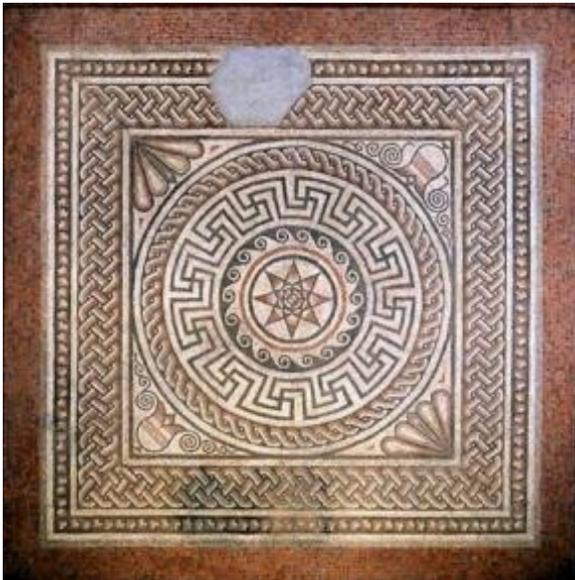


Recreating the Sparsholt Villa mosaic at Butser Ancient Farm, Hampshire

A talk by Trevor Creighton, Project Archaeologist, and Sue Webber, Education and Project Staff, Butser

Butser Ancient Farm is a unique experimental archaeology site, featuring reconstructions of ancient buildings from the Stone Age, Iron Age, Roman Britain and the Anglo-Saxon period. They also grow crops from prehistory and keep rare breeds of animals. Informing visitors and carrying out research are key elements of their work.



The reconstructed buildings are based on real archaeological evidence. The villa at Sparsholt was the model for their villa. There was a mosaic in its central room, now at Winchester City museum. A project was launched to reproduce this at Butser. They aimed to recreate the patterns and colours, not the individual tesserae. At 25 square metres in size, and with 8-10,000 tesserae per square metre, that meant a lot of tesserae, and a lot of work!

A project such as this requires many decisions, trying to maintain authenticity but also doing what is possible in the 21st century. Using local stone, chalk or terracotta would have been very expensive, so they chose to use Italian marble. The selected colours were white, black, red and yellow. Each tile was machine cut on four sides, and hand cut on two. Before laying each was arranged so that the polished side was on top. Some needed to be cut to particular shapes; this was done with a special pointed hammer onto wood, such as it would have been in Roman times. Work started from the middle of the mosaic and moved outwards.

Volunteers worked in two teams, one delivering tiles, and one laying. This saved time searching for each next tile. The process took 1,000 volunteer hours over 3 months; they stopped after September as it was too cold. That was the kind of incidental discovery that illuminated the research – presumably Roman mosaicists worked during the summer.

They had very little knowledge of the mortar required for the mosaic. Sadly modern knowledge of lime mortar is limited and dwindling. The process is understood, but what of the mix, and how to use it? No two mortars are the same, they just have the same components. There is evidence in the writings of Vitruvius that the base layer is porous rock, such as flint, and the tiles are placed on that, and the mortar brushed between them. The Butser team think that was the 'high end' method, and probably not used in a rural setting. They chose to

put down a thick layer of mortar and press the tiles into it, but later discovered that the Vitruvius method was better.

Formwork was needed for curves and other detail, and there is historical evidence for this. They sought advice on how to arrange tiles around figures etc from Lawrence Pain, an expert in recreating mosaics. The first few rows around something specific follow its outline, often needing smaller tiles. Further away the tiles can be arranged in rows.

Planning for regular patterns such as guilloche involved careful measuring in advance. Patterns involving circles involved pi – but that was not known in Roman times so how did they do it? Patterns could not be inscribed onto the mortar, though there is evidence that this was done in the past. The corner patterns were tackled by more experienced volunteers, who used tracing paper with dots. Errors seen in Roman mosaics are mostly explained by poor planning. Rich Romans would probably have made the contractor re-do the work.

No two mosaics are the same, they just have similar elements. Pattern books would not be very useful as sizes vary, so each pattern has to be adapted to fit the space. Geometric patterns are harder to make than those with figures

This was a well presented, informative and thought-provoking talk. It generated many questions as we were led through the research processes and practical work used for this re-creation. The whole process is very interdisciplinary and involved much discussion with specialists. As with other projects at Butser, recreating and recording the processes inform interpretation of existing archaeology. That is very valuable, and so too is the pleasure of seeing the completed work *in situ*. Go and look!

Anne de Potier
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