

Jan Emerson introduced Lisa Tupper at the June meeting, who was speaking about the History of the Bignor Roman Villa. Interestingly, she has very close ties to The Villa as she is married to Will Tupper and lives on the farm there.

The Villa was discovered on the morning of Thursday, 18<sup>th</sup> July, 1811 when George Tupper hit what appeared to be a large stone whilst ploughing in Bury Field near the village of Bignor at the foot of the Sussex Downs. He cleared a small area and found the tessellated face of a young man. Further excavation revealed a scene depicting Jupiter in the guise of an eagle abducting the shepherd boy, Ganymede. This is a beautiful mosaic employing white limestone, red, orange and yellow sandstone and black marble.



*Ganymede & Jupiter*

George Tupper's landlord John Hawkins, who lived at Bignor Park, invited the antiquarian and amateur archaeologist Samuel Lysons to supervise and record the excavation. Lysons was meticulous in his work presenting three papers to the Society of Antiquaries between the Villa's discovery and 1818. As more and more mosaics were discovered, barns were erected over them for protection. These barns themselves are rare examples from the late Georgian period and are Grade II listed. Subsequently, ten of the finest mosaics in Europe have been found. The Venus mask, discovered in 1812, was considered to be the most important discovery. Venus is known as the Roman goddess of love. However, she is also associated with Spring, gardens and fertility. These qualities made her popular with farmers, horticulturalists and landowners throughout the Roman Empire. Local people would initially have done some of the mosaic work, then workmen came from the School of Bath and later from Europe. There is an extensive hypocaust underfloor heating system in the Venus Room and a 24 metres long mosaic in the North Corridor.



*Venus & the gladiators*

The reason why the Villa was built around 250AD was that this was good farming land, there was a water supply and it was near to Stane Street, which linked London with Chichester and would have been an excellent source for obtaining goods and services. A small nuclear family would have settled here and they would have grown grain; arable crops, pulses and vegetables. By 300AD, it would have become a very busy homestead. There were 6,000 acres to farm and there would have been between 300 and 400 slaves doing domestic chores and farm work. The slaves would have lived in hovels around the farm. There would have been no need for defences as there were no incomers. Suddenly in 350AD the family left the farm. Sadly, the place went to rack and ruin and became forgotten. The water supply was never found and also no sign of a burial ground.

The Villa has a good relationship with the National Park Authority which provides funding for the Bignor restoration.

Lisa and Will are the fifth generation of the Tupper family to be custodians of this remarkable historical site. They work closely with William's father, Tom and their grandparents, Jack and Jill Tupper. Lisa says that "for our family the Roman Villa stands for longevity, a sense of place and family". The Villa site has remained in the Tupper's ownership for centuries and the family still farms 2000 acres today. They grow crops – wheat, barley, oilseed, linseed, peas, beans and stubble turnips (for grazing sheep during the winter months) sheep and beef. It's amazing to think that the Romans were farming there some 2000 years ago - but they were farming 6000 acres – a huge estate. These remarkable mosaics can still be seen, are open to the public and are amongst the finest in the country. Well worth a visit.

The next meeting will be held on Wednesday, 3<sup>rd</sup> July at 2.30pm and the speaker is Louise Peskett on 'Pioneering Women from Sussex'. All visitors will be made welcome and for further information, please visit the website [www.boshamwi.co.uk](http://www.boshamwi.co.uk)