

# Discovering and Excavating the Roman Painted House

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Way back in 1970 my team was excavating four major sites on the line of the intended York Street bypass. Everything on that line was due to be totally destroyed. Then we suddenly heard that a nearby site off Market Street was earmarked for an underground carpark., so I had to switch my best team onto that site. We had to trench down two metres through debris and rubble. Suddenly the top of a substantial Roman wall appeared. A glimpse of its inner face showed slight traces of surviving painted plaster.

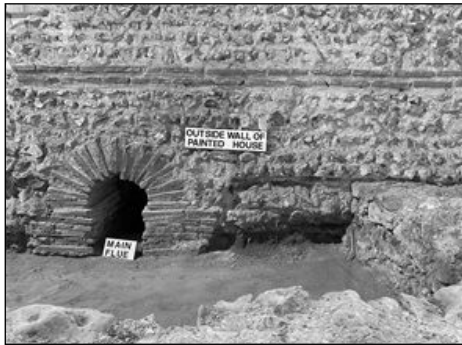
But its outside face was accessible and stood almost three metres high - staggering. Far more important was that our single trench hit a point where the outside wall contained a complete tiled arch. But it was now getting dark. I sent off Gerald Clewley for a torch. We could then



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see a tunnel at least 6-7m long and we realised that this was part of an underfloor hypocaust heating system and still complete. This certainly meant that the floor above would be intact and that any walls would still stand 1-2 high and also be extensively painted.

Time ran out and we quickly covered and reburied. We returned in 1971 fully equipped and this time erected two large metal-framed tents and opened up a wide area. By the end of eight weeks three rooms of the Roman House, complete with over 300 sq. ft. of painted plaster were revealed. The most complete Roman painted plaster surviving in Roman Britain! Soon BBC Channel 2 appeared to broadcast on its Chronicle Programme and then the Sunday Observer gave up three pages.- clearly a major discovery, but soon to be an underground carpark.



*Roman Painted House*

Our campaign then began. We had already forced the York Street Bypass be raised two metres to save three Roman forts we had found buried there. Hence another battle, all too familiar to our rescue teams across Kent and S. E. London and even the Roman Forum under the City. But in the end, we won, and it was agreed in principle that the Roman House might be a useful visitor attraction. Needless to say, this idea was soon overtaken by inertia, and I was left to provide 24-hour protection for the next four years. Finally, in 1975 we

launched a fund-raising campaign, reopened the site for a last opportunity and 16,000 visitors turned up and were given guided tours. I had to think up a popular name and chose the Roman Painted House, which my wife Edna, as one of our site supervisors, approved! We were off.

Having already raised several thousand pounds we encouraged both Dover Council and KCC to offer £25,000 each. Planning consent next, design and construct invitations to four sets of contractors with a target of £90,000. At the same time, we set up an umbrella trust, meeting mostly twice a year and with no staff, but with brilliant honest trustees, George Ruck, John Dennard and Jane du Boulay. Alarming, the best bid was £30,000 over this figure and the scheme lay dead in the water. There was only one solution.

My archaeological team would have to be the main contractor, and I would have to be the full-time project manager, all unpaid. This was enough and the work started. It took 404 days of non-stop work, and I had to live in a cold elderly caravan on site. Living 70 miles away I only managed to get home for one day for the birth of my first son (Christopher - now Shadow Leader of the House at Westminster) and two days at Christmas. The building programme completed the next included the complete presentation of Dover's buried archaeology heritage. Finally, we had a grand opening day when 600 friends attended and were delighted, but I had to stay in bed exhausted after weeks of 16-hour days. George Ruck and Edna did the honours that day.

Soon our work and the project won four national awards. This included a silver trowel from (then) Prince Charles for "The Team with the Greatest Initiative." Streams



*The Roman Painted House*

of visitors followed from many countries and these eventually totalled some 700,000. Many famous visitors including the Queen Mother on a private visit and the Russian Ambassador. In spite of no DDC management funding we always stayed solvent and in the Covid years I was able to attract £18,000 in grants, still largely unspent. Some 200 of our staff and volunteers, many local, joined this grand adventure. The latest accolade was the Queens Award for Voluntary Service for our work on the Painted House, presented by her Lord Lieutenant. But a loud silence from Whitfield and the Maison Dieu House.

All this brilliant success was torpedoed in July, 2023 when the locks were changed whilst I was in hospital, allowing a period of internal and external neglect and then the surrender of the lease back to DDC although it still had 17 good years to run. Then followed the destruction of our total presentation and the removal and retention of large amounts of our Kent Unit's equipment, tools, records and artefacts, still hidden away and access denied. Even so, it is good to see our Roman House reopened for a brief period, but not to admire our critical contributions excluded, replaced by a lot of white paint.