



### *A GUIDE TO ROMANO-BRITISH MOSAICS IN HULL*

Hull and East Riding Museum is famous for its superb collection of Romano-British mosaic floors. They include some of the most interesting mosaic pictures and figures in Britain and illustrate craftsmen's skills ranging from basic and crude to neat and accomplished. But how old are they? Where did they come from? Who commissioned them? What do they represent?

#### VILLAS IN HUMBERSIDE

Some 15 Romano-British villas are known to have been built in Humberside, reflecting the prosperity of the area. Villas were centres for agricultural communities, where owners' houses nestled alongside workshops, storerooms, barns, animal sheds and farm-workers' accommodation. Each estate produced its own food, cloth, leather, tools and building materials, selling excess production in market towns, and buying in luxuries and goods that were not available otherwise. Prosperous villa estates were at their zenith in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, encouraging demand for impressive and colourful mosaic pavements.

#### VENUS MOSAIC FROM RUDSTON

This early to mid-4<sup>th</sup>-century CE mosaic was discovered during ploughing in 1933. It was laid down in the principal wing of a major villa 6 miles west of Bridlington Bay, which was built over a former Iron Age site. The design consists of a square with rectangles at two ends, containing a central circle surrounded by semicircles and quadrants. In the circle is **Venus**, the goddess of love, shown nude and holding the golden apple that she won in a beauty contest against the other goddesses; next to her is her mirror. Looking at her is a **Triton** with a human upper body and a fish's tail, who rather dangerously holds a burning torch. The animals in the semicircles and the figures in between represent the beast-hunts staged in the amphitheatre. The **lion** pierced by a spear has the inscription [LEO] F[L]AMMEFER, possibly meaning "*the lion that is fiery*". The **stag** is surrounded by shapes like stylised trees. The **leopard** has black spots and looks at a shield-like disc. The red **bull** is labelled **TAVRUS OMICIDA**, "*the bull called Man-Killer*"; the crescent on a stick above it was an emblem used in the amphitheatre, which is shown on mosaics in north Africa. The three hunters seem about to net the wounded lion, spear the approaching stag, and gaze after the bull (the fourth hunter is missing). In each corner quadrant, a **bird** pecks a pomegranate. In the rectangle at one end, **Mercury**, the messenger of the gods, carries his *caduceus*, a serpent-entwined staff. On either side, a vine with grape bunches grows from a *cantharus* (cup). Overall the workmanship is crude, with fairly coarse *tesserae* (cubes) and shows up local craftsmen, who had probably never seen a leopard or a lion. The humans have long bodies and too-short legs, and Mercury has leaves in his cap instead of wings. However, the lively, humorous forms created with a dozen colours create a wonderful mosaic. The villa owner must have enjoyed showing off his classical learning and wealth while at the same time cajoling cheaper local workmen to do their best!

#### AQUATIC MOSAIC FROM RUDSTON

This fragmentary mid-4<sup>th</sup>-century CE mosaic was also discovered in 1933, in the same villa near Bridlington Bay. It belonged to the *apodyterium* (dressing-room) of the bath suite. The design is square, surrounded by borders of **lotus flowers**, with a rectangle at each end. The main panel shows **sea creatures**, a **dolphin** and a **bivalve** swimming round a central feature which was possibly a bust of **Neptune** (now lost). The rectangles at either end originally contained a **cantharus** (wine-cup) flanked by birds and trees. The workmanship is finer than the Venus mosaic, but it has four or so fewer colours.

#### VICTORIOUS CHARIOTEER MOSAIC FROM RUDSTON

This early to mid-4<sup>th</sup>-century CE mosaic was excavated in 1971 on the site of the same villa. It was in a house on the north side of a courtyard, and was part of a large room divided into two areas. The design consists of a square containing a central roundel, surrounded by four circles and four rectangles; at one end is a large border from which the central scene was seen to best effect. The **Charioteer** in the central circle proudly holds up a wreath and a palm-frond, symbols of his victory. Four horses (*quadriga*) draw his chariot, shown in frontal view with no wheels or hind legs. The roundel and the square are bordered by wide bands of *guilloche* (three-strand and four-strand plait). The four rectangles contain various fruits as well as oddly-shaped birds with small heads and thick bodies. **Busts of the Seasons** are shown in the corner circles: **Spring** with a swallow; **Summer** with poppies in her hair; and **Autumn** or **Winter** with a rake (the fourth Season has not survived). Around the whole mosaic runs a border of coarse red T-shaped bands, similar to crenellated city walls. Workmanship on the Charioteer and the Seasons is good, but elsewhere there is untidy and unskilful setting, representing craftsmen of diverse

abilities. One or two fewer colours are used on the Charioteer mosaic than on the Venus mosaic. Some evidence of burning near the Charioteer suggests that the villa may have been destroyed or badly damaged by fire.

### ORPHEUS MOSAIC FROM HORKSTOW

This massive mid-4<sup>th</sup>-century mosaic, originally measuring 15 m by 6 m, was uncovered on a villa site at Horkstow, Lincolnshire, in 1797. It is the second-largest mosaic from Roman Britain (the largest being the Orpheus mosaic at Woodchester, Glos.). The rectangular mosaic is divided into two squares and a rectangle at one end, each containing scenes of people and animals. One square contains a central circle which originally showed **Orpheus** (now lost), the Greek musician who charmed wild beasts by playing his lyre. Surrounding him were 8 segments, like the spokes of a wheel, which contained the creatures tamed by his music — a small animal near the centre, a pair of birds, and a large animal near the perimeter. Only the remains of three segments survive, with a **bear** and a rather unlikely-looking **elephant**, the product of a workman who might not have seen one of the creatures, and the head of a **boar**. In the outer corners are **busts** with a flower or cross on either side, possibly representing the Seasons (two are lost). A second square contains two concentric circles held aloft by four **Titans** with serpent legs. This part may have been intended to imitate the painted ceiling of a dome. The central roundel has not survived, but the outer segments show pairs of naked figures, **Nereids** (sea nymphs) riding **sea-monsters**, and **Cupids** with baskets of fruit. The rectangle depicts a dramatic **chariot race** in a **circus** (race-track), in which one charioteer falls overboard having lost a wheel, another struggles to control his stumbling horses, and others surge forward. At either end of the track are two conical *metae* (turning-posts), although normally there would have been three. This depiction, unique in Roman Britain, is likely to have been taken from a pattern book. Such pattern or ideas books were seemingly used regularly by patrons of mosaics but no real example has yet been discovered. They could have been made of parchment, papyrus or thin pieces of wood, all of which would have perished.

### GEOMETRIC MOSAIC FROM BRANTINGHAM

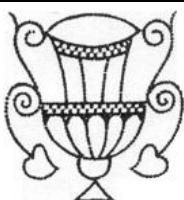
This mid-4<sup>th</sup>-century CE mosaic was found in 1941, in a large courtyard villa at Brantingham, near Brough-on-Humber, north of the Humber Estuary. The unusual geometric design has a wide border of shaded **scale** patterns (reminiscent of bird feathers or fish scales). Inside is a square of scales arranged in pairs; the design is also referred to as an axe-head, and was often used in Greek and Roman art. The mosaic seems to have been dismantled when it was removed from the site, and then re-made for display in the museum.

### "TYCHE" MOSAIC FROM BRANTINGHAM

This mid-4<sup>th</sup>-century CE mosaic was discovered in 1962, some distance from the geometric mosaic but part of the same courtyard building. In the middle of the large central square is an octagon containing the bust of a woman, who is identified by some as **Tyche** (Good Fortune), wearing a crown in the form of a city wall to indicate that she is patron goddess of a town. Around her are eight segments contain large **canthari** (wine-cups), and eight semicircles containing reclining **water nymphs**. In each corner is a crescent-shaped **pelte**, which was a type of shield used by the Amazons, a race of warrior women living near the Black Sea. At each end of the floor are four arched compartments containing **enigmatic female figures** with haloes and up-do hair-styles. Around the outside of the floor are borders of **decorated lozenges** (diamonds) and **interlaced circles**. Differing standards of skill could mean that masters and apprentices worked together on this mosaic. Here also the villa owner wished to impress his friends and neighbours with classical themes, perhaps being influenced in the water theme by the proximity of the Humber Estuary, which might have been important for his estate business interests. For all his ambitions, however, he was still at the mercy of his mixed-ability workers for the successful execution of his choice of designs.

### CONCLUSION

In these and other mosaics in the wonderful Humberside collection, we can see that wealthy Romano-British villa owners even in this northerly part of the country aspired to display the same sophisticated interior decoration schemes that were beloved of their compatriots in the Midlands and south. There are plenty of books and sources of information available if you would like to find out more, including books on sale at this museum. To see a list of other museums and sites displaying Romano-British mosaics, or to find out about joining ASPROM, please visit our website at: [www.asprom.org](http://www.asprom.org).



# ASProm

Association for the Study and Preservation of Roman Mosaics

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