

LULLINGSTONE ROMAN VILLA

I visited Lullingstone Roman Villa on 7 March 1978 to look at the monument, which I had not visited before and the showcases, prior to the return of the objects which have been withdrawn from exhibition for drawings and conservation. I also inspected the lead coffin and the mosaic floor.

The Lead Coffin

This is at present being supported by pieces of artificial board to which the ends and the top are firmly nailed and screwed. The coffin stands on a sheet of artificial board but the long sides are unsupported apart from one piece of angle iron at the front. One fragment is now detached, and one long side has started to split as it bulges outward, unable to support its own weight.

This reconstruction is a disgrace and should be redone using modern methods and without resort to nails, screws, and artificial boards which are probably very acidic. However, it will be a long job and should wait until the show cases are finished so that visitors have something to see apart from the monumental remains. The causes of the decay of the coffin appear to be more physical than chemical at present.

The Mosaic

My attention was drawn to the lines on the mosaic allegedly caused by drips from rafters in the roof. These lines, however are not directly below any of the rafters. There were also bird droppings on the mosaic and several birds flying around. I understand that the mosaic is occasionally swept with a soft broom, and washed about twice a year with water and a little detergent.

The Show Cases

The case up on the gallery furthest from the entrance has extensive mould growth in it. Paint is peeling off the top of the front of the case and the back and base boards have large white spots of mould growing on or through the hessian. Mould is also growing through cracks in the varnish on the "wood" of the reconstructed barrel. The custodial staff have been wiping off the spots but they always return indicating that the case is still damp and not drying out. As none of the other cases appear to be affected I do not think that this is a problem of ventilation unless this case differs from the others. It is true that the case is beside the window which leaked badly but this fungal growth appears to be alive. The source of the dampness must be identified and removed, and the case dried out thoroughly before any objects can be restored to it. (It is true that neither the barrel hoops nor the shoe-sole show signs of decay, but that is probably our good fortune!)

There are very few objects in the cases but I noticed that some of them had patches of blue plasticine on them left over from the Drawing Office. I do not know whether this material is corrosive but it looks awful.

The Shed

There are two or three boxes of pottery, bone and tile fragments in the shed. If they are of any interest they should be removed and stored elsewhere (? Dover?) as I understand from the custodial staff that one box of iron has been emptied into a skip on the orders of the charge hand.

In conclusion, I understand that the moss is sprayed by industrial staff now and then to kill it off. I would like to know what this spray is made of, and whether it gives off any vapour likely to attach chalk tesserae, the lead coffin, or any other of the artifacts. I would also suggest that the Relative Humidity in the Museum be monitored to see if the standing water in the well and the dampness of parts of the surrounding area are raising the RH of the whole area to a level which will harm the objects, or whether the fans and louvres are able to deal with it adequately.

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