

Romans were here...

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HISTORY proved it has more than a limited interest in West Norfolk this week when thousands of visitors turned out to see the re-excavated Roman villa at Gayton Thorpe.

Archaeologists who have been painstakingly uncovering the site for the first time in 80 years opened their findings to the public on Bank Holiday Monday – and were "pleasantly surprised" when more than 2,500 came to take a look.

"There were people throughout the day and at one point there were around 300 people at once," said Michael de Bootman, managing director of the project's co-funder, Heritage Marketing and Publications.

"It just goes to prove the huge amount of interest there is," he said.

The spectacular villa, dating from 160 to 180AD – around the reign of the emperor Commodus – was originally excavated in 1922 by local man W. Charlton.

Following his death, it was finished in 1923 by Donald Atkinson, who was the first to discover its main mosaic, now the only recorded one in situ in Norfolk.

For many years it was partially exposed until a hut that had been protecting it fell into disrepair in the 1960s.

Covered with concrete and left largely forgotten until now, the villa has been re-excavated following three weeks of hard graft by a team of archaeologists.

Not only have they re-exposed the mosaic, they also found previously unearthed rooms and artwork and discovered the villa was much larger than anyone had first thought.

Intricate mosaic tiling is believed to have occupied a large area in the villa's reception hall, with a large roundel in the middle and geometric patterns surrounding it.

The walls of the room would have been further adorned with exotic wall paintings.

At the open day on Monday, visitors were given guided tours of the excavations and the chance to see some of the Roman objects found.

They could also wash some of the loose bits of the mosaic, watch living history displays from the Time Tarts Roman re-enactment group and browse stalls with traditional Roman crafts.

Collection buckets on the day also raised 220 for the Swaffham and Litcham Home Hospice support group, donated to the charity this week by Henry Birkbeck, of West Acre Estates, which owns the villa site.

Mr de Bootman, who as a ten-year-old once scoured the same field for clues of Roman existence, said the whole project has really brought the community together, and assured it will continue to do so as material from the dig is put together.

A programme of fieldwalking is being planned around the site and surrounding area this winter, and a film is being produced to be used as an educational tool in local schools.

For more information on the dig visit: www.heritage.mp.com/gaytonthorpe.asp