

Learning to Look

Exhibition tools

Mosaic space



The Berryfield Mosaic
Roman, c.200AD

The Berryfield Mosaic gives its name to the space at the heart of firstsite. It is the only artwork on permanent display, and connects the building and the contemporary art exhibitions to Colchester's Roman heritage.

Berryfield is the historical name for the land on which the gallery is built, and the mosaic is displayed close to the location where it was unearthed in 1923, by a gardener who was digging a hole to bury weeds. When the excavation was first made, the skeleton of a young woman was found lying diagonally across it.

The mosaic dates from around 200AD and would have been

a floor covering in the dining room of a Roman family home, which would have been used for formal entertaining, displaying the wealth and status of the owners. At more than four metres square, it is one of the largest Roman mosaics in the UK, and most of the materials from which it is made were found or recycled locally.

The design features popular Roman motifs of mythological animals around a central floral pattern. Creatures include a marine bull, a sea gryphon and a sea leopard. The damaged panel may be a *Pistrix* – a sea monster with a dragon's head, the neck of a beast and the body and tail of a fish. The step designs around the four main panels are called dentrils. The interlaced rope design is known as a three-stranded guilloche.

Though the mosaic is very precious to us as modern-day viewers, and has important historical significance, it would have been an everyday feature in a Roman home, and something commonplace in similar houses at that time.

firstsite

The architect Rafael Viñoly, who designed firstsite's building, took inspiration from the mosaic and designed the building in a way that allowed it to be positioned at its heart.

The mosaic and its links to Colchester's Roman heritage also influenced the engineering of the building. firstsite is built on Scheduled Ancient Monument ground, which may contain remains of Roman buildings. This means that it could not have foundations dug into the soil. Instead, the building is supported by a giant concrete ring-beam around its perimeter, so that it effectively 'floats' like an upturned boat on water, protecting the ancient treasures that may lie beneath.

Conservation and relocation

Following its discovery in 1923, the mosaic was lifted and donated to Colchester Castle Museum by the landowner Douglas Round. For more than eighty years it was displayed propped vertically against the wall in the Castle's well house.

The crude backing material on which the mosaic was laid had begun to crack, and the construction of firstsite provided the ideal opportunity to clean each of the tiny tiles (known as *tesserae*) and re-display this beautiful artefact horizontally, as it would originally have appeared.

The project to move the mosaic was a collaboration between firstsite and Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service. Restoration specialists Cliveden Conservation carried out the work with the generous support of The Heritage Lottery Fund.

The team from Cliveden Conservation began work at Colchester Castle Museum in September 2010, where they removed the mosaic by cutting it into sections. The pieces were taken away to Cliveden's workshops to be conserved and were re-installed during late February and early March 2011.

Themes, discussion points and activities

Past and present

- What do you think the dining room looked like in the house in which this mosaic originally featured?
- Who do you think was the young woman whose body was found lying across it? Perhaps you could write a story about her.
- If you designed a mosaic, which motifs would you feature?
- What stories might you find if you dug down and explored the ground around your school or home?

Key words for this part of the building

ceramic – recycled – archaeology – mosaic –
Roman – conservation – mythological – tiles –
excavation – motif – pattern – tesserae