

THE BURIED ROMAN CITY AT SILCHESTER.

THE FOLLOWING EXTRACTS ARE TAKEN FROM A LECTURE DELIVERED BY JOHN PARKER, F.S.A., TO THE HIGH WYCOMBE MUTUAL IMPROVEMENT SOCIETY ON THE DISCOVERIES MADE AT SILCHESTER UP TO THE YEAR 1895. THE INFORMATION WAS DERIVED FROM PAPERS WHICH HAVE FROM TIME TO TIME APPEARED IN *THE ARCHÆOLOGIA*.

CAMDEN has called this city *Vindolun*, but it is generally accepted now that its name was Calleva Atrebatum—that is to say, Calleva, the city in the midst of the Celtic tribe of the Atrebatæ, a tribe which occupied the present County of Berks. If a traveller were passing from Londinium to the West he would go through the present towns of Brentford and Hounslow to Staines, crossing the River at a place called Pontes, and would continue his way till he reached the great town of Calleva, the walls of which as they still remain are three miles in circumference and enclose an area of 120 acres. These walls have been remarkably preserved, particularly at the south eastern boundary of the city.

Discoveries had been made at Silchester many years ago, but I must confine myself to those that have been made within the last six or seven years.

The excavations were carried out under the direction of the Society of Antiquaries—Mr. G. F. Fox and Mr. W. H. S. John Hope, the Assistant Secretary of the Society, being amongst the most prominent of the excavators. The system that has been adopted has been to map out the whole area of the city, and to divide that area into particular portions called “*Insulæ*.” Each *Insula* has been dealt with separately, and within its boundaries careful and complete excavations have been made. This plan enabled the excavators to carry out their work systematically, and at the same time to interfere with the farmer as little as possible in his agricultural arrangements. For instance, when the completion of the excavation of an *Insula* has been made, the surface of the ground has been covered up and the land has been left to the farmer for tillage purposes.

In a pit in *Insula* I a most remarkable collection of antiquities was found. A mass of iron objects, with a few others of a different material, formed such a find as is known to have occurred only once before in Britain. At a depth of five feet from the present surface of the ground lay what appeared a sword blade broken in two, also a perfect bronze Roman scale beam—in all, there were nearly sixty objects, including hammers, chisels, blacksmith’s tongs, lamp, carpenter’s plane, and other objects. It is remarked by the discoverers that the museums of Europe contain but few examples of the plane in use in Roman

times. Two specimens are preserved in the National Museum at Naples. A few other examples may be found in the different museums near the Rhine. The British Museum cannot show any scale beam so absolutely perfect as the bronze one from this pit.

Encroaching upon the present Churchyard of the Parish Church of Silchester were discovered two rectangular buildings that were supposed to have been temples.

In 1892 *Insula* 4 was excavated. This perhaps is the most important of all the *Insulae*, because in it stood the Forum and Basilica, and the examination has brought to light at the south east angle evidence of exceptional importance. The Forum was the central feature of every Roman town—central for judicial and commercial purposes. As to the Forum proper, it consisted of an open area about 142 feet long by 130 feet wide. On three sides this area is lined by ambulatories or open passages, and outside these passages lies a line of chambers. Both the Forum and Basilica were also surrounded by another ambulatory or public passage. The roofs of these passages were, it is supposed, supported by columns—the bases of these columns have been found, and specimens of them are to be seen (*Archææ*, Vol. LIII., Plate XXXVII.).

It is believed that the height of the columns, including the base shaft and capital, could have been scarcely less than 15 feet 6 inches. The width of the inner passage was 16 feet, and the outer passages had an average width of 12 feet 6 inches. A spacious vestibule appears to have been constructed between the two ambulatories, and was supposed to be surrounded with columns and to have formed a handsome entrance to the Forum on the east. The chambers surrounding the Forum were probably used by the governing body of the city as offices or courts connected with the Forum, and some of the chambers were probably used as shops.

The Basilica next calls for our attention. It adjoined the Forum on the west. It was a vast building occupying the whole width of the Forum. It had the form of a long rectangular hall 233 feet 6 inches in length by 58 feet in width. At each end was a semi-circular apse, and the total length amounted to upwards of 293 feet. It is believed that the building was on the usual plan, a central nave divided by colonnades forming aisles on each side.

By a careful measurement the conclusion is arrived at that the height of the Basilica was about 57 feet. There were three apses to this building, one at each end, as I have before mentioned, and the other on the west side of the building, and it is clear from this that the Basilica was never devoted to one purpose only. One portion might have been used for Courts of Justice, another as the Curia or Council Chamber for the governing body of the city, and the nave would have been used as a place of assembly of the citizens on occasions of political importance. Evidence from the excavations shows that there has been on the site of the Forum an earlier and a later building. There are found fragments of marble wall lines and of colour, certainly largely used upon the walls, which will give an impression that the interior of the building was richly decorated. The entire block of buildings was surrounded by streets, and here I may mention that the city itself was honeycombed with numbers of public thoroughfares. A significant discovery was made, near the Forum entrance, of a great bed of oyster shells. A learned antiquary deduces from this deposit that one of the shops was the favourite luncheon bar of the Forum, and the favourite food was oysters. Antiquaries, however, are not agreed as to what this find of oyster shells may signify.

I now come to a discovery which may perhaps be the most interesting of any in the excavations of Calleva, and here I will follow the account of the excavator. On the 10th of May, 1892, when driving a trench on the

southern boundary of the Insula, the foundations of a small square chamber were uncovered, and next to it a semi-circular apse with mosaic floor of good character. The building consisted of a central portion, 29½ feet long and 10 feet wide, with semi-circular apse at the west end. North and south of this were two narrow aisles, only five feet wide. The central division retains considerable portions of its floor—coarse red tile, with just in front of the apse a panel five feet square of a fine mosaic (Archææ, Vol. LIII., Plate XL.). About 11 feet eastwards of the building is a small shallow pit lined with flints. From giving attention to the plan and surroundings of the buildings of this and similar characters in Italy and in other parts of the Roman empire, there seems to be little, if any, doubt that we have here a small Church of the Basilican type. It was truly Basilican, but too small for the purposes for which a Basilica, in the *secular* sense, would be used. It could not be a building used for domestic purposes, nor could it have been a temple of any kind. The excavator says there can be no reasonable doubt that the Altar or Holy Table stood upon a panel of fine mosaic, in front of the apse, as shown in Archææ, Vol. LIII., Plate XL. This Basilica stood having the apse at the west end instead of the east, but in very early Churches it is well known that the celebrant at Holy Communion stood behind the Holy Table or Altar, facing the congregation, and the clergy were arranged in a semi-circle round the apse. It is supposed that the nave and apse were reserved for the clergy, and the aisles one side for the men and the other for the women, and that those who were not in full communion were admitted only in the chamber forming the east end of the Basilica, known as the Narthex.

The pit, 11 feet to the east of the Church, is of tiled foundation, about four feet square. This is explained to be the Labrum or Laver, in which the faithful used to wash their hands and faces before entering the Church.

Nothing, unfortunately, has been found in the building or its surroundings to throw light on its date. Mr. S. John Hope says that despite the scanty evidence of its date, the building may be safely assigned to the period between Constantine's Edict of Toleration, issued in 313, and the withdrawal of the Roman legions about a century later.

If doubt is aroused as to the character of the building because no Christian symbols were discovered—for instance, in the mosaic floor—it should be understood that at that early period there were no images, and if there were any emblems used in the building they were rather in the form of paintings upon the walls.

In Insula 4 there were, besides, the Forum and Basilica buildings at its four corners, with more or less open ground between them.

It is considered that the space to the south of the Forum, which is of considerable area, might well have been used for the cattle market.

There is in Insula 7 a Polygonal building, which has been considered to be a temple. The total diameter of the building is about 65 feet.

Conjectures have been made as to the God to whom this edifice was dedicated. An inscription found in Silchester in 1754 discloses that a local Deity was identified with Hercules, who was worshipped here. It may be, therefore, that this was a temple to the honour of Hercules. It may have been in later times converted into a Christian church, but on this point we cannot go beyond conjecture.

We now come to Insulæ 10 and 11. It is only from the south side of these Insulæ, and facing the street, that remains of buildings were found, and these prove certainly not to be houses, and there are strong reasons for believing they were workshops and storerooms. In some of the buildings in these Insulæ, and in Insula 9, circular furnaces were found, specimens of which are illustrated in Archææ, Vol. LIV., Plate XLVII. There are six blocks of these buildings in Insulæ 10 and 11.

Much attention was given to these circular furnaces, to ascertain to what use they had been put, and the solution of the difficult question has been believed to have been found in a house within the walls of Pompeii, where the furnaces at that house agree in dimensions with those at Silchester. It is known from an inscription, and from a painting now faded, that the house in Pompeii had been converted to the use of a dyer's workshop.

The furnaces it contained were, consequently, constructed to serve the use of the dyer's trade. Looking, therefore, to the similarity of the remains of the furnaces at Silchester with those at Pompeii, the conclusion is arrived at that the occupation of dyeing was practised during some period at Calleva, and that the excavations in Insulae 9, 10 and 11 have revealed very considerable traces of the means by which the trade was carried on.

Our next reference is to Insula 14. This Insula seems to have been the aristocratic portion of the town. It was almost entirely covered with the foundations of two large and important houses. The first house to be referred to is called the Court Yard type, that is, it had a central Court Yard round which the various corridors and chambers were disposed. The plan of this house is given in (*Archæol.*, Vol. LV., Plan XI., p. 220). The most important part of the mansion was at the eastern wing. It is of special interest, not only from the size of the rooms, but on account of the large and handsome mosaic pavements which were found in four of them. This wing was about 128 feet long and $47\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide, and consisted of a central row of chambers placed between two corridors. Apartment 22 on the ground plan of the mansion was the largest, and measured $22\frac{1}{2}$ feet in width by over 23 in length. It was paved with ordinary red tile tesserae, with central panel, 15 feet square, of fine mosaic in white, black, red and yellow (*Archæol.*, Vol. LV., Plate XII.). This fine pavement was unfortunately much damaged, the north-east part having been completely destroyed. What remained was so perfect as to justify its removal, and on being removed it was ascertained that beneath it lay a Hypocaust. By referring to this Plate XII. and the following plates we are reminded that there is nothing new under the sun, for the house decorator of the present day has borrowed the pattern of these mosaic floors for the oilcloths which are now so generally used in modern residences.

The next department southward, 23 on the ground plan, measured 23 feet from north to south and $22\frac{1}{2}$ feet from east to west. It was paved with the usual tiled tesserae, with a central panel of fine mosaic entirely black and white (Plate XIII.). When uncovered this pavement was almost in perfect condition, but it has sustained damage in two places while the house was inhabited. The next chamber, No. 24, was $22\frac{1}{2}$ feet from east to west and 18 feet 4 inches from north to south. It was paved with tiled tesserae, with a large central panel of fine mosaic measuring 15 feet by 14 feet. This unfortunately had been almost destroyed, and only enough was left to show that the design was made up of sixteen octagonal panels, with bright borders set in a white ground, with a long and narrow white panel on the western side.

We now come to Chamber No. 27 on the plan. This was of a large size, measuring $22\frac{1}{2}$ feet by 20 feet $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The floor was largely of the coarse red tile tesserae, with a central panel of finer mosaic 14 feet square (Plate XIV.), which is in very fair condition, it was therefore carefully taken up for preservation. These pavements are now to be seen at the Reading Museum.

I think enough has been said to show that in Calleva there were imposing structures, which must have been the residences of the wealthy citizens of the place, and where ample accommodation was afforded for their retainers and slaves. There is just one discovery in house No. 2 of

this *Insula* that I should mention, and that was an *ædícula* or shrine, intended to contain the images of the household gods, together with an altar. The room which contains these might therefore be considered the *Lavarium* or domestic chapel. The question arises, what were the divinities worshipped at Silchester? There has been a singular absence of effigies of the gods in the explorations.

The only characteristics found have consisted of a headless statuette of a female figure seated in a wicker chair and nursing two infants, and three fragments of statuettes of a Venus of a well-known type. The figures resembling a seated female effigy are called by some the Goddess Mother, by some images of Latona or Juno Lucina.

The absence at Silchester of images of the gods, publicly or privately worshipped, may be accounted for by the fact of the continual existence of the city during the Christian period of Roman rule at least a century, during which the images of the pagan deities were destroyed or hidden away. Next to the mosaic floors in the houses to which we have been referring, some of the mural paintings of these houses have been discovered, and with which, it should be mentioned, Romano-British houses were profusely adorned. A number of pieces of wall plaster from Chamber 22, house I, are of special interest. They were turned up from a heap of rubbish. The pattern of these fragments may be seen in *Archææ*, Vol. L.V., p. 250, Fig. v. The design is very beautiful—series of rings and hollow squares of grey colour above a dark claret-red ground, linked together by lines of ears of barley, with centres of blue rosettes. The whole band of ornaments probably constituted part of a dado of a chamber. It is supposed that the corn fields around the Roman city would have suggested to the painter the use of the ears of barley in his decorations, just as the painters of Southern Europe drew their decorative forms from the flora around them—from the vine, myrtle, and the acanthus.