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The Preliminary Excavations of Verulamium, 1930

BY MRS. R. E. M. WHEELER, F.S.A.

A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY writer once described Verulamium as "a forgotten Citie, sometimes neere Saint Albones." Both in more ancient and in more modern times, Verulamium has been better known to fame. Many years ago, the Society of Antiquaries considered actively the possibility of exploring it; but the opportune moment did not, in fact, arrive until last year, when the inspiration came from an altogether different source. It came from the Mayor and Corporation of St. Albans who, having acquired about a half of the ancient Roman city, proposed, through their Parks Committee, to lay it out for recreational purposes. The Corporation, however, were fully alive to the historical and archaeological value of the site they had acquired. They rightly regard themselves not only as the Fathers of the modern city and its interests, but also as custodians of its unrivalled antiquities. Before entering upon any action with regard to the new park scheme, they approached the Society of Antiquaries for advice and collaboration; and from the subsequent meeting of delegates from that Society, from the Corporation and from the St. Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society, sprang the Verulamium Excavation Committee under the Presidency of the Marquess of Salisbury, and the Chairmanship of the President of the Society of Antiquaries (C. R. Peers, Esq.).

No other Roman site in Britain provides more important contacts between written history and archaeology than Verulamium, and a brief survey of its recorded story will serve to show the magnitude of the task which lies before the Excavation Committee.

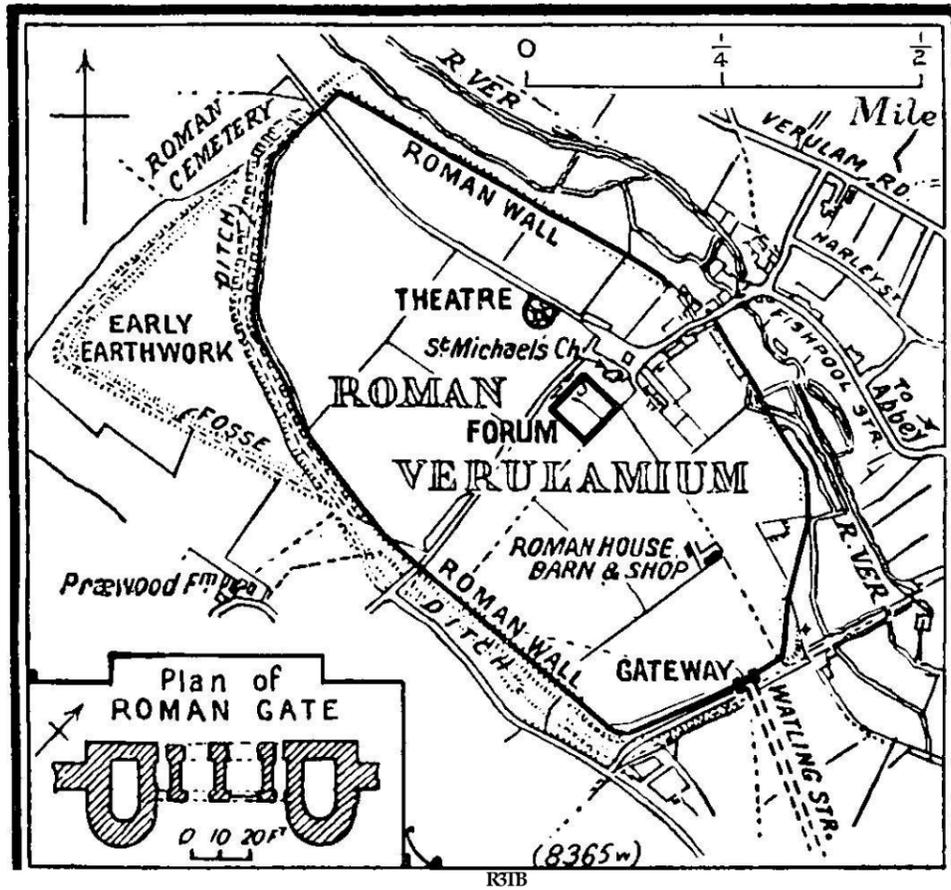
The earlier episodes in the story of Verulamium are woven into the fabric of our national history. Every

schoolboy knows how Julius Caesar, in the year 54 **B.C.**, after crossing the Thames at some spot, the identity of which still exercises the ingenuity of the *savant*, pursued the British chieftain to his woodland lair. That chieftain was the famous Cassivellaunus, king of the Catuvellauni and overlord of south-eastern Britain. The site of his stronghold is less certain; but the conventional identification of it with Verulamium is probably correct. There is in any case no doubt as to the prime importance of Verulamium at this time. Although later rivalled by Colchester, it was then the nearest approach to a metropolis in southern Britain, and from its mint issued the first inscribed coins known to have been struck in the island.

It is significant that these coins bore inscriptions in the Latin manner. For if Caesar's invasion of the year 54 **B.C.** was a failure from the military standpoint, it at least, as Tacitus expressed it, "showed" Britain to the Roman world. During the 97 years which elapsed between the departure of Caesar and the arrival of the conquering legions of Claudius, elements of Roman civilization found their way increasingly into the native cities of southern Britain. Among them, Verulamium flourished so exceedingly that, within 10 or 15 years of the Roman invasion of **A.D.** 43, it had received the highest civic status that Rome could bestow upon it. Before **A.D.** 61 it had become a *municipium*, or "municipality," and, so far as we know, remained the only city of that rank in Roman Britain.

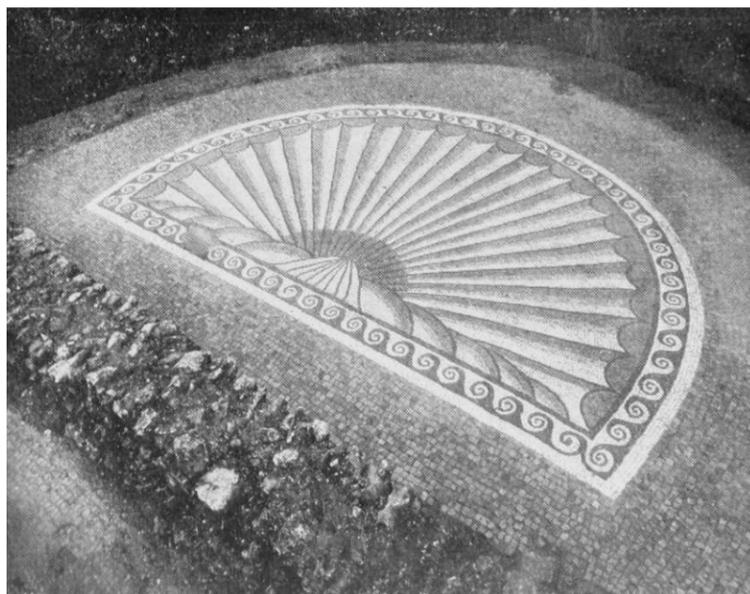
The grant of municipal status to Verulamium is in the highest degree significant. The rank carried with it the rights of Roman citizenship, and was awarded only to those native cities which had, of their own accord, achieved a degree of size, wealth and civilization worthy of the Roman name. It is evident that the ancient capital of Cassivellaunus had maintained something of its civic prestige continuously into Roman times. While London, as it seems, was still an upstart trading town, Verulamium had already achieved a rank to which Roman London seems never to have attained.

In the year 61, Verulamium lay in ashes. Again we are dealing with the major history of Britain and need



SKETCH-PLANS OF VERULAMIUM AND OF THE SOUTH GATEWAY.
{Reproduced by permission from "The Times."}

FIG. 2.



ROMAN MOSAIC PAVEMENT (Excavated in 1930).
(Reproduced by permission from "Discovery.")

not linger over the well-known details. It will suffice to recall how in that year the Roman army was busy in the difficult hill-countries of the north and north-west; and that, left largely to its own devices, the minor Roman officialdom of the south-east had begun to indulge in petty tyranny. Thus goaded, the native tribesmen of East Anglia, under their Queen Boadicea or Boudicca, rose in revolt. The new Roman colony at Colchester was put to flames and the sword. The Roman Governor, hurrying back from North Wales, found the unwallied cities of London and Verulamium indefensible, and fell back upon the main body of his army which was hastening towards him through the Midlands. Across London and Verulamium swept the maddened tribesmen, slaying and burning as they went. But in the ashes of Verulamium lay the last hopes of British independence; for, within a few days of the destruction of the city, the rebels were scattered with such a slaughter as to shock even the hardened susceptibilities of Rome.

The century which followed Boudicca's rebellion, if less full of dramatic incident, was probably the most prosperous in the whole existence of the city. Of the buildings which rose within the new Verulamium, something was known before 1930. Mr. William Page and others have explored a part of a large colonnaded courtyard which, near the centre of the Roman town, was probably the principal *forum*, or market-place. Nearby await discovery the main *basilica*, or town-hall, and the other official quarters where the town council, the municipal officials and the two senior magistrates, who shared a sort of mayoralty between them, carried out their administrative functions. Not far off, though outside the Corporation's property, are the buried remains of a theatre—the only Roman theatre at present known in Britain. Its semi-circular auditorium, approached by three staircases and overlooking a nearly circular "orchestra" wherein the wealthier citizens had their chairs, and its oblong stage backing upon one of the main thoroughfares of the town, are preserved to us in a plan made in 1847.

Then there is the intriguing but elusive problem of Christianity in Roman Britain. Here also we may hope

for something from Verulamium. Indeed, it is in this context that during its latter days Roman Verulamium comes twice into the light of history.

As early as the second century **A.D.** we have hints of the presence of Christianity in Britain. Nevertheless, the various periods of persecution which ended with the Edict of Milan in **A.D.** 312, produced few British martyrs. Chief amongst the few was that Alban whose tomb is known to have been venerated as early as the fifth century, and was to form the nucleus of the medieval and modern St. Albans. The story of Alban's conversion by a Christian to whom he offered shelter, of his surrender to the authorities in the guise of the refugee, of his refusal to offer sacrifice to the pagan " devils," and of his subsequent martyrdom on the hill which lay half a mile away across a river—the familiar story told by Bede with a wealth of picturesque detail, accords perfectly with the topography of our site.

The second episode is of more general historical significance. At the beginning of the fifth century a certain Pelagius, a monk of British origin, propounded a heretical doctrine denying the existence of original sin. In the year 429, Germanus, Bishop of Auxerre, sent perhaps by the Pope himself, came to Britain to confute the heresy, and an account of his visit is fortunately preserved to us in a nearly contemporary Life by Constantius of Lyons. Germanus went to Verulamium where, in medieval times, the traditional scene of his disputation was marked by a small chapel dedicated to him outside the Roman town walls.

The whole episode possesses an importance which may not at first sight be apparent. One of the most vexed problems in our national history is that of the fate of urban civilization in Britain during the days of pagan Saxondom in the fifth and sixth centuries. Did urban life during this dark period come utterly to an end in Britain? Or were there, here and there, especially in the south-east, a few surviving vestiges of "urbanity" amidst the tide of barbarian invasion? It is clear that, when Germanus came to Verulamium, twenty years after the political severance with Rome, urban life was still a reality in south-eastern Britain.

PLATE 2.



THE SOUTH GATEWAY OF VERULAMIUM (Excavated in 1930.)

{Reproduced, by permission from "Discovery."}

In the right foreground is the stump of the city-wall. Beyond that, are the foundations of the eastern gate-tower; whilst in the middle distance two men stand on the two main roadways within the gate.

The mere existence of Christian congregations there, with leisure to indulge whole-heartedly in disputation, is in itself a sufficient evidence of this, and colour is added by the mention of a man of "tribunician" rank and wealthy magnates in connection with the visit. At Verulamium alone can archaeology combine with history to throw new light upon the interaction of civilization and barbarism in fifth century Britain.

Of the subsequent story of the Romano-British city we have at present no hint, until the curtain is lifted for a moment in later Saxon times. If there is any thing in the story of Matthew Paris, the whole site had fallen by the year 793 into such neglect that, when King Offa came to found a monastery on the hill-top he had some difficulty in finding the resting-place of the saint. Be that as it may, the building of the Abbey on or near the site of the church which had long before been erected to St. Alban's memory finally sealed the fate of Verulamium and determined that medieval and modern St. Albans should, instead, crowd about the Abbey precincts. Thereafter the ruins of the old city became a quarry for the monastic builders and a lurking-place for malefactors. We are told how, in the early part of the eleventh century, two successive abbots overthrew and filled up the "subterranean crypts" because they had become refuges for thieves. At one point, the Saxon workmen, in digging up the Roman walls and foundations of a vast palace, found a hollow in the wall in which were a number of books and rolls written in ancient characters that could only be read by one learned monk. He declared that they contained "the invocations and rites of the idolatrous citizens" of Verulamium with the exception of one which contained the authentic life of St. Alban. This was preserved until it had been copied, but the other books were committed by the Abbot to the flames. It may be that, in spite of a certain ingenuousness in the account of the St. Alban manuscript, some chance had in fact preserved a collection of Roman documents such as have not yet been found elsewhere in Britain. Other relics were found in abundance by these medieval excavators.

Such are the recorded facts, and the problems to which

they give rise—all of them problems of primary importance—are the special justification for the excavation of Verulamium. They range over a period of five or six centuries and cover some of the most intriguing and elusive periods in British history—the transition from Celtic to Roman culture and that from Roman to post-Roman civilization. Both historically and geographically, the task of elucidating these problems is a large one. The extent of the task may be indicated by the fact that the areas enclosed by fortifications alone exceed 250 acres. The complete excavation of this large site is not, of course, contemplated. But the range of the historical problems already outlined demands a correspondingly-wide range of carefully distributed exploratory work.

The preliminary excavations of 1930 were, therefore, planned with a view to attempting to solve the more obvious of the questions which present themselves both to the historian and the archaeologist.

Foremost amongst these was the date of the visible defences of the Roman city. The building of two miles of wall, bank and ditch, must represent a cardinal point in the history of the town, indeed of the province itself. Accordingly, it was upon the defences that the first excavations were undertaken.

Secondly, it was equally desirable to investigate, and so release eventually for the Parks Committee's scheme, a level area within the town, with an expectation of the discovery not only of an epitome of the history of the town under Roman rule but of vestiges of pre-Roman and post-Roman occupation.

Further steps were necessarily contingent upon the results of the first two, and these will be described later in their proper context.

To return to the defences. The outline of Roman Verulamium can still be traced without difficulty by the least instructed visitor. Time-worn though they be, the defences of the Roman city are still amongst the most imposing in Britain. Approaching from the modern city across the Causeway (a mediaeval dam), and entering that southern part of the ancient site which the Corporation have acquired, the visitor finds before him a great fosse, over 80 feet wide and 25

Plate 3.



VERULAMIUM : cellar of Roman shop, seen through one of the doorways.
In the furthest wall are the sockets for shelf-brackets.

feet deep. The modern path follows the margin of this fosse and is flanked, on the other side, by the remains of the Roman city wall, built of flints with courses of tiles, and 10 Roman feet wide at the base. Behind this wall runs a reinforcing bank, now known to have been 45 feet wide and 13 feet in height. The whole defensive system is over 165 feet broad, and indeed, at one point where, owing to the tactical weakness of the position, a second fosse was added, the total width exceeds 260 feet. The evidence of coins and pottery found during the excavations show that these massive defences were built not earlier than the reign of the Emperor Trajan, and that they are not likely to be later than the reign of his successor, Hadrian. In other words, they were erected, we may now suppose, during that period of lavish imperial consolidation, about **A.D.** 120 to 140, which has left us Hadrian's wall in the north, the civic basilica at Wroxeter, and town walls at Alchester and elsewhere.

The main axis of the Roman city was the Watling Street. Outside the city walls, the excavators uncovered a section of this street at a point which the diversion of later traffic towards the Abbey on the neighbouring hill-top had left derelict since Saxon times. At the earliest period, the Roman road was found here to have been only 10 feet wide, but to have been mortared into a hard concrete which seems to have served its purpose well. In later Roman times, the road was gradually enlarged until, in the fourth century, it was three times its original width, with a well-cambered but loosely metalled surface. At its entry into the Roman city, the road was spanned by a gateway, which was likewise excavated during 1930 (Pl. 2). It was designed on an ambitious scale by the builders of the Roman defences, and ranks now amongst the major town gateways of the Roman provinces. It was 100 feet in breadth, with boldly projecting, round-fronted towers flanking a four-fold entry, the two central openings being for wheeled traffic and the two lateral openings for foot passengers. When complete, it must have resembled the great continental gateways at Nimes, Autun and elsewhere. Its wide foundations, driven five feet into the natural soil,

were laced below the ground level by straining-walls of concrete, and the immensity of the whole substructure brought home to the spectator, with a rare vividness, the almost extravagant assurance of the Roman empire in its prime. Like the equivalent Balkerne gate at Colchester, the "London Gate" of Verulamium may be regarded less as a military defence than as a sort of monumental arch of triumph.

Beneath the gateway were found the remains of an earlier Watling Street and of Roman houses which stood on the site before the gate was built.

In the interior of the town other Roman buildings and streets were also uncovered in 1930, notably the foundations of a dwelling-house set at an angle between two of the minor streets of the city. The house had been re-built at least thrice during the Roman occupation, and the story of these reconstructions may, as the excavations proceed, be found to epitomize the economic history of the Roman town. The earliest building was a comparatively crude structure with clay or gravel floors. Later, at the beginning of the second century, the house was entirely rebuilt, with well-laid floors of mosaic. One of these floors (that of a projecting apsidal room) bears a well-preserved scallop-shell pattern (Pl. 1, fig. 2), and is a good example of the bold technique of the earlier Roman mosaic-worker.

This prosperous and efficient phase eventually gave place to one of less distinction, which represents a decline (at least on this site) of wealth and skill. At the end of the third century the mosaics were destroyed or covered up, and a new building with poorly-laid tessellated floors, was built upon them. Alongside this rebuilt house was constructed a long timber barn or warehouse, with nave and aisles upwards of ten bays in length—a structure which must have resembled many of our medieval timber barns. This type of structure appears in various parts of southern Britain in the third and fourth centuries **A.D.**, and may have been derived from Germany, with which there seems to have been an increasing military and commercial relationship at this period.

The latest phase in the occupation of the site marked

Plate 4



Verulamium: cellar of Roman shop, showing two doorways, blocked window, and millstone on floor.

a further decline in standards of comfort and construction. Rough patches of clay flooring partially replaced even the rough tessellated pavements, and the character of the occupation seems to have approached that barbarism from which it had originally emerged. It has already been suspected elsewhere that this decline in standards of living was widely characteristic of city life in fourth-century Britain.

An adjacent building with a street frontage was probably a shop; a building with a verandah facing the street, and consisting of three small rooms behind which lay a deep cellar, almost intact (Pl. 3 and 4). This cellar, after serving its purpose for some two centuries, was filled up and disused about **A.D.** 300, and to this fact we owe very largely its remarkable state of preservation. It retains the cemented and whitewashed walls appropriate to its kind, and along three sides are the traces of the timber shelving with which it was equipped. Its two entrances were formerly fitted with timber-framed doors; and there are indications also of a massive timber structure which may have been in the nature of a crane for lifting heavy objects to the surface. But the most noteworthy feature of the structure was a window with whitewashed and widely-splayed sill and jambs—a feature which, in view of the rarity of Romano-British windows, is of considerable architectural interest.

At this point, exploration within the walled area of the Roman town has for the moment ceased. Outside the walls lay, as usual, the Roman cemeteries, and, with Lord Verulam's co-operation, one of these was discovered and partially examined near the north gate of the city. Eight inhumation burials were found accompanied by simple ornaments and pottery of late third—or fourth—century date. In most cases the dead had been interred in a crouched position within oblong coffins. In one instance (Pl. 5), a small cup included in the burial had, prior to the interment, been freshly scratched with the name, doubtless, of the deceased (**MAURUSI**, i.e. " This belonged to Maurusius ").

The discovery of this cemetery was incidental to the investigation of a historical problem which brings us

back to our starting-point. The excavations within the Roman town itself, although they revealed traces of a considerable population dating from the earliest years of the Roman occupation in and after **A.D.** 43, showed no clear vestige of the prehistoric city of Cassivellaunus and his successors. Where then was this early British metropolis, and what was its character? This question is not yet solved, but we now have a hint as to its answer. Extending westwards from the northern end of the Roman city walls towards Prae Wood is an extensive earthwork which has suffered much from the plough and is only partially shown on the maps. This earthwork lies on higher ground than the main body of the Roman town, and it was hoped that it might prove to be a relic of the stronghold of Cassivellaunus. Excavation showed that it consisted originally of a bank and ditch, each 50 feet wide, with a vertical wall of turves on the inner side of the bank. Nothing but prehistoric pottery was found within this bank, whilst within the ditch lay Roman pottery of the early period. Tentatively, it may be suggested that the erection of this great earthwork was the fruit of bitter experience, the work of those who suffered but survived the famous sack of Verulamium by Boudicca in the year 61. But further exploration is necessary to establish definitely the date of its construction. In any case, the abundance of prehistoric pottery within the earthwork shows that here or hereabouts lay the prehistoric city.

Amongst the many interesting " finds " of 1930, which include pottery, coins, brooches, rings, pipe-clay statuettes and lamps, perhaps the most notable is a bronze die for striking silver coins of the time of the Emperor Hadrian. It is the upper or " trussel " die used for striking *reverses*. Within the legend **ADVENTVS AVG** is engraved the figure of Rome greeting the Emperor, a *reverse* used in Hadrian's coinage between the years 134 and 138. This is the first and only Roman die ever found in Britain.

(Preliminary articles upon the 1930 excavations, by Dr. R. E. M. Wheeler, F.S.A., have already appeared in *Discovery* for December, 1930, and in the *Times* for March 15th and November 18th, 1930.)

Plate 5.



Verulamium : late Roman burial near north-west gate of city.

