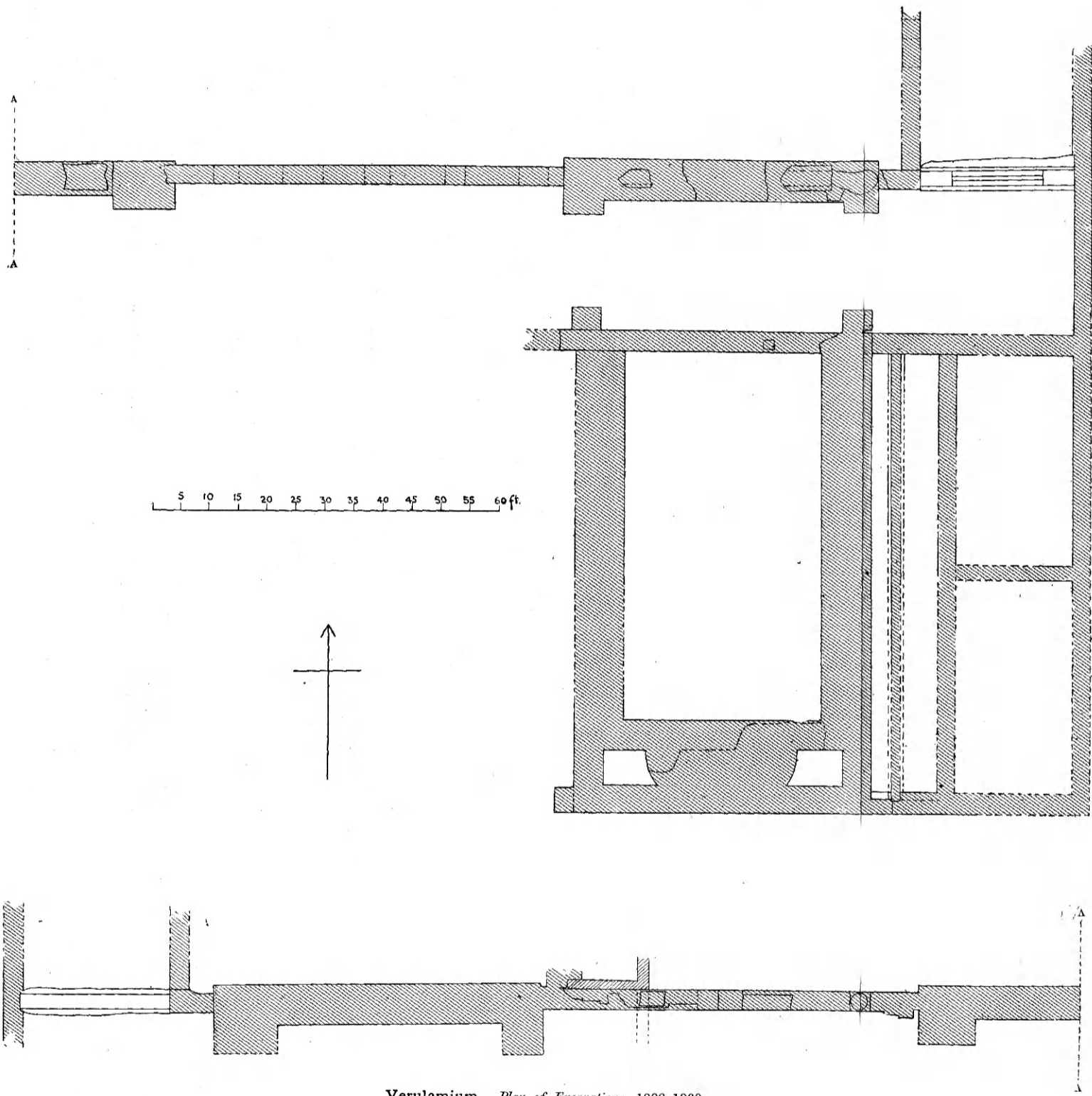


Excavations on the Site of Verulam.

REPORT FOR 1898-9.

BY WILLIAM PAGE, F.S.A.

It is difficult for those who have made no study of the Roman occupation of this country to understand what that occupation really meant. We are generally told in our school histories that Julius Cæsar made this country tributary to the Roman empire about fifty years before the birth of Christ, that Claudius sent an army into Britain in A.D. 43, or about ten years after the death of Christ when he annexed it to the empire, and that the



Verulamium. *Plan of Excavations, 1898-1900.*

Roman legions were finally withdrawn in A.D. 410. The period of over 400 years of Roman influence is treated as a dream of the night leaving to the waker nothing more lasting than some coins, potsherds, and bricks, by which to remind him of the foot-prints of the most wonderful nation which the world has ever known. The influence from the Roman occupation which we received was not distinctive, it was in common with that bestowed on all western Europe, and is therefore not so easy to appreciate as the aptitude for naval affairs which was imparted to us by the Danes or the forms of government which have survived from the Saxon period. As a result of the excavations on the Romano-British site at Silchester it can be definitely stated that Christian Churches existed here during the Roman occupation, and I think it is now quite acknowledged that Roman influence survived in many of the manufactures of this country, certainly till the Norman conquest and probably in some instances down to the present day.

I have digressed thus far in order to refute the idea which I have heard expressed that the history of the Roman occupation has nothing to do with our history and therefore the remains of Roman Britain have little interest for us. This ought not to be the opinion of us whose dwellings adjoin the site of what was probably the largest Roman city in Britain, containing the largest Romano-British building yet discovered. The portions of this building opened during the past winter by the Rev. C. V. Bicknell and myself, I now propose to describe. In digging up the roots of a dead cherry tree in the glebe at St. Michael's, behind the vicarage garden, some foundations were discovered. Mr. Bicknell followed these for some way himself and then asked me to help him in carrying out the work. The extraordinary depth of the foundations, being in some places 8ft. and 9ft. below the surface made the work very slow and consequently expensive, and prevented us from carrying our researches as far as we wished.

Along the line of the wall we found buildings of certainly three different periods, and there were indications of work of perhaps a fourth period. The earliest piece of wall which we excavated was a cross wall 110ft. from the west end, and it is especially interesting as it

retains on the eastern side of it the painted plaster, which, though merely of a plain red colour with a black band and a dado below, is of value as showing the decorative work of an early period of the Roman occupation. Mr. G. E. Fox, F.S.A., was the first to discover that this piece of wall had originally continued to the south and had been cut away to permit the long wall of the second period to pass through it. It had evidently formed one side of a room, but we were unable to find any trace of a corresponding wall on the opposite side. The remains of the building of the second period are very much the most complete. The wall which we uncovered has a total length of 373 feet, and is without any cross wall on its south side, while there are only the foundations of two supposed ambulatory walls, one at each end, on the north side. The masonry of the wall of this period is characterized by its substantialness being largely composed of massive blocks of Barnack stone measuring from four to six feet in length, and a foot in thickness, and the excellent quality of its workmanship. It is evident that this wall was considerably quarried in the Norman period for building St. Alban's Abbey Church, for it may be noticed that the large blocks of Barnack stone at the bases of the early Norman piers of the tower arch on the south side of St. Alban's Abbey Church correspond in dimensions with the blocks which we found in position in this wall. I may perhaps here remark that I have carefully compared the stone of the Saxon balluster shafts in the triforium of the transepts in St. Alban's Abbey Church with a piece of the Barnack stone so largely used in the building we have been excavating at Verulam, and of which the fragment of a column found here, and the five drums of a Roman column recently discovered in St. Michael's churchyard, are composed, and I find them to be identical. The portion we excavated of the building of the second period shows at each end what is apparently an ambulatory, 26ft. wide, and bounded by walls, east and west, 3ft. 4in. in width. We were able to uncover some length of the walls of the eastern ambulatory and found the outer wall both here and at the western end had a perfectly smooth and level surface and looked as though it had formed a bed for a continuous course of large blocks of stone, the outside of which, certainly at the west end and probably

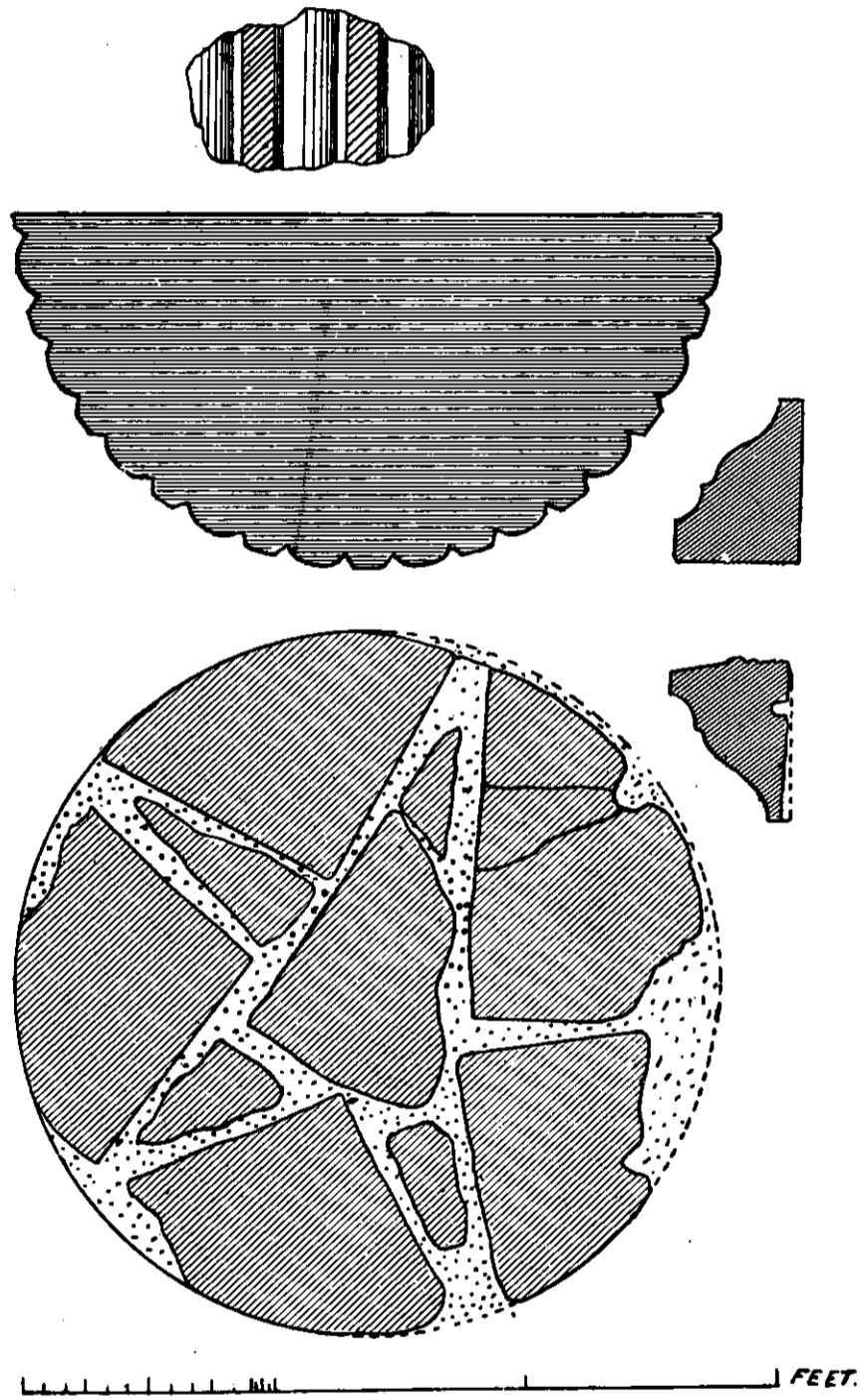
at the east end, faced on to the street. The inner of these walls at the east end had at intervals, beds for stones, 3ft. 2in. to 5ft. in length, evidently for carrying the columns of a colonnade and giving an inter-columniation or distance between the columns of 13ft. 6in. centre to centre. The pieces of wall between the foundations of the columns remain, and rise 1ft. 6in. above the beds before referred to. They are hollow and are very roughly put together, being only intended to carry the *opus signinum* floor of the ambulatory which passes over the top of them. The western face of these pieces of wall was apparently plastered. In excavating at this part we came upon numerous coarse *tesserae*, but the depth of soil was too great to permit of any attempt to ascertain if there was a tessellated pavement here. It was close to the outer of these walls that we found the fragments of an inscription in Purbeck marble, and some mouldings of the same material, and near the inner wall was a quantity of wall plaster of a yellow colour, some pieces of which were apparently painted in imitation of marble. It is impossible to say what there was in the main wall of this period at the southern ends of these supposed ambulatories, as this part of the wall is entirely covered up by the building of the next period. Connecting the ends of the ambulatories was a massive wall broken by two openings which were filled by a colonnade of five columns of peculiar construction. At the east end of these foundations a little to the west of the supposed ambulatories there still remains a portion of the superstructure of this period which was entirely built over by the work of the third period. These remains consist of the lower part of a doorway or small gateway, the opening in which was about 4ft. 6in. The jambs and adjoining wall of this doorway are extremely solid, and of carefully laid brickwork, about 4ft. 4in. thick, the bricks being set in the pink Roman mortar, of the use of which mortar this was the only example found. On the south side of the jambs of this doorway is a very deep chamfer.

In the openings in the solid wall before referred to, we have the sleeper walls, 65ft. and 67ft. respectively in length, upon which rested colonnades, each consisting of five columns. The sleeper wall on the east side shows

the beds for the stones forming the bases of the columns as previously described, from which we get the same inter-columniation of 13ft. 6in. from centre to centre, as we found in the supposed eastern ambulatory wall. The inter-columniation on the western sleeper wall cannot be so easily made out, but it appears to have been the same as that in the eastern colonnade. There is in this wall, however, what is of considerable interest, and that is the circular base of a column in position. It had been entirely built over with the work of a later period, which was with some difficulty removed. The base is 2ft. 10in. in diameter, and composed of Roman bricks, triangular in shape, with one side curved to form the outside of the circular base. A similar base was found loose and not in its position, which has been taken out from the excavations, and will be preserved in the Hertfordshire County Museum. A fragment of a fluted column was also found close to the first base, the diameter of which has been worked out by Mr. Fox, who finds it to be 2ft. 9in., and it may be assumed that it formed a part of one of the columns of the colonnade here.* The height of the columns we cannot calculate, as we do not know whether they belonged to the Corinthian or Doric order. The whole way down the south side of the wall is an *opus signinum* or red cement floor of a very substantial character, being in places 8in. in thickness. Many pieces of coarse *tesserae* were found lying about, but there was no appearance on the floor itself of a tessellated pavement. Along the north side of the wall there seemed to have been rammed gravel.

It was quite evident that the building to which this wall belonged was destroyed by fire, as we found that the whole way round, on both sides and at each end, there was a stratum of charcoal; and numerous flints and bricks were discovered which had been subject to the action of fire. At a spot a little to the west of the middle of the wall we came upon a large quantity of metal, a piece of which I sent to Mr. W. Gowland, F.S.A., of South Kensington, who was kind enough to analyze it, and tells me that it is lead which must have melted at a very high temperature, most probably during a conflagration, and that it must have fallen in a molten state

* See plan of column, for which we are indebted to Mr. G. E. Fox, F.S.A.



Verulamium.

*Fragment of column and diagram of same, showing arrangement of flutes,
Plan of base of column of shaped bricks $1\frac{1}{4}$ in. thick, and Sections of mouldings
of Purbeck marble.*

from some considerable height, being largely intermixed with sand and earthy matter. This is further confirmatory evidence that the building was destroyed by fire.

There was probably an interval between the time of the destruction of the building of the second period and the erection of that of the third, for the accumulation of charcoal and debris upon the floor of the earlier building was apparently left undisturbed, and the floor of the new building raised about a foot over it. The colonnades of the supposed ambulatories on the east and west sides were, it would seem, repaired, for, although we get the evidence of fire here, there is nothing to indicate a rebuilding. At the southern ends of each of these ambulatories there were erected in this third period blocks of masonry, the block on the east side consisting of a piece of solid masonry at each end, 5ft. 6in. in length and 1ft. 2in. in height, between which are two channels, the bottoms being paved with bricks. These channels, on comparison with similar work at Silchester, appear to have contained beams which supported the timber framework of double doors. The block at the west end is similar, except that the channels do not exist, and the wall sags in the middle five inches.

The foundations received a new superstructure of rubble, instead of brick, some blocks of which remain. Of the eastern of the two colonnades there are only the remains of the second period, the upper and later part having probably been destroyed by the Saxon and Norman builders of St. Alban's Abbey, in order to obtain the stones forming the bases of the columns, all of which have been removed. The western colonnade, however, seems to have been taken down, and a solid wall of rubble built over it. The walls at this spot are so complicated that it is impossible without further excavations to ascertain of what they formed a part. The floor on the south side was, so far as could be discovered, composed of coarse *tesserae* about an inch square.

The question naturally arises what was the building of which this wall was part? It is quite clear that the wall of the second period was planned and carried out as a whole at one time, which is shown by the completeness of the design and as the wall was at all events partially open with colonnades and has no cross

wall throughout its entire length, it must, I think, have formed the outer wall of an ambulatory. The two buildings which are most likely to have been so large as this are the forum and the baths. The evidence at present is perhaps in favour of the forum, but I hope this point may be decided by further excavations later on.

At the beginning of last year the Rev. C. V. Bicknell and I made some excavations in the churchyard of St. Michael's Church, when it was being put in order after the rebuilding of the tower. Here we found portions of three Roman walls running parallel to the wall now excavated, but on account of the burials our excavations were necessarily very fragmentary. As it will be impossible to excavate further in the churchyard, I have plotted the walls then found for what they are worth. If these walls formed the opposite side of the forum it would give a width inside of about 330ft. In any case I believe we have the satisfaction of knowing that this is probably the largest Romano-British building yet discovered.

Of objects found there were very few, some bone pins, hones, numerous fragments of pottery, but only one small amphora, which was complete. We also found the usual number of coins. A list of which follows:—

Trajan, dupondius	<i>circa</i>	98-117	
Ælius Cæsar, denarius	„	130	
Septimus Severus,	„	(silver)	„	200
Postumus	„	(copper)	„	260
4 Tetricus, denarii	„	„	„	270
3 Carausius,	„	„	„	292
Licinius II., denarius	„	„	„	315
Constantine	330 &c.,	1 struck perhaps at Alexandria.

A Penny of Burgred, King of Mercia (853-874).

A French Counter of 14th Century.

A Counter of the time of Charles II., struck at Nuremberg.

Several Roman Coins of the 3rd and 4th Centuries, not otherwise to be identified.

There are very many to whom I should like to acknowledge my thanks for kindly assistance during these excavations, but the list would I fear be too long to read. I must, however, express my sincere thanks to the Rev. C. V. Bicknell, for permitting the pasture of his glebe to be dug up, and for his kindness and interest during the excavations, to Mr. Herbert Jones, F.S.A., for kindly

taking charge of the excavations for some days, to Mr. Percy Manning and Mr. Hugh Baker for their excellent practice as navvies, and to Mr. G. E. Fox, Mr. F. Davis, Mr. Chambers, Mr. A. S. Flower, and many others for kind help, and not the least to all those who have so generously assisted by contributing to the Research Fund of this Society.