



We are grateful to St Albans Museums for their permission to re-publish the photographs of the Verulamium excavations.

While every reasonable attempt has been made to obtain permission to use the other images reproduced in this article, it has not been possible to trace or contact the respective copyright holders. There has been no intention of exploiting such images for economic gain. That said, if you are the owner of the copyright in an image contained in this article, please contact the Society to establish retrospective permission.

[admin@stalbanhistory.org](mailto:admin@stalbanhistory.org)

[www.stalbanhistory.org](http://www.stalbanhistory.org)

May 2013



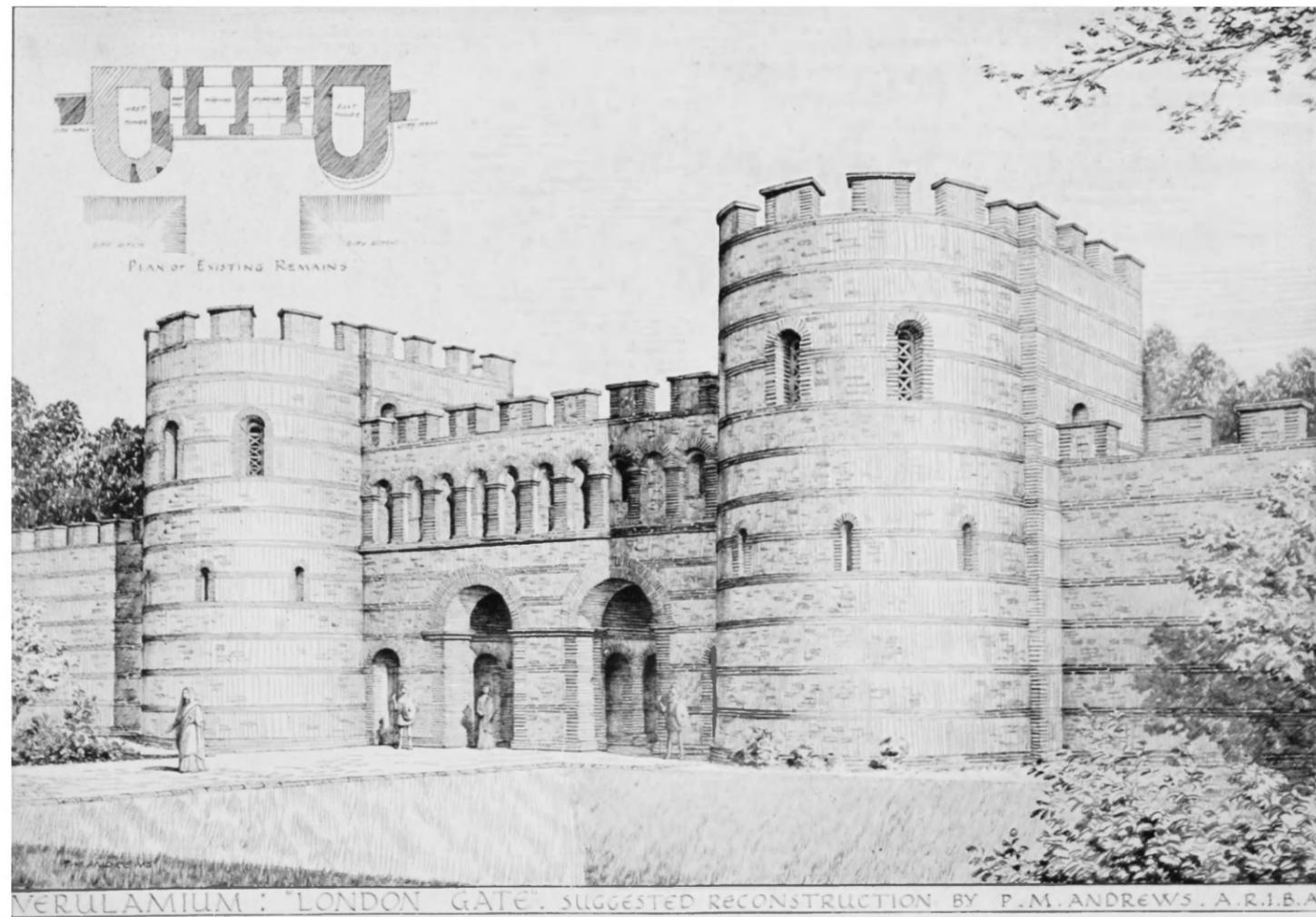


FIG. 1. RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SOUTH OR "LONDON" GATE, by P. M. Andrews, A.R.I.B.A.

## Summary of the Verulamium Excavations, 1931

BY MRS. R. E. M. WHEELER

“**O**LDE Verolam, the ancient seat of Casibelane, which w<sup>t</sup> his owne libertie he lost unto Caius Julius Cæsar: was sometime a citie of great renowne and of the Romanes, held in great regard: who Tacitus tearmeth a free-towne and one of the richest in the land. Wherin hath bene fownd, both pillers, pavements and Romish Coynes, most certaine toknes of their abode. The river Lea (diminished much from the greatness, which once it bare) was her south defence, and meetes the ruines of those down-cast walls, in East and West; whose tract, and trench, as yet apparently remanes, and extends by measure 1,270 pases. Heere S. Albane Brittaines Stephe, under Dioclesian, suffered martyrdome, Anno 293. Whose memoriall great Offa continewd by buildinge in the place of his execution, a most magnificent Abbey: and there also Verolams ruines hath raysed the beautie of now S. Albanes.”

Thus Speed upon his map of “HARTFORD SHIRE described The Situations of Hartford and the most ancient town S. Albons with such memorable actions as have happened.”

No visitor to St. Albans to-day can fail to recognise the truth which lies hidden in Speed’s descriptive paragraph. The great central tower of St. Albans Abbey—indeed every part of the work of Norman hands left to us in the Abbey—is built of Roman brick: “And there also Verolams ruines hath raysed the beautie of now S. Albanes.”

Matthew Paris describes how, in the 11th century, two successive Saxon abbots, Ealdred and Eadmer, overthrew and filled up much of the Roman city. Ealdred, having in mind a rebuilding of the church, carefully preserved from the wreck all unbroken bricks for re-use—(Tegulas vero integras et lapides quod invenit aptos ad aedificia seponens, ad fabricam

ecclesiae reservavit)<sup>1</sup>—but he died before his purpose could be carried out, and nothing of any Saxon work now remains to us. It was under Paul of Caen, the second Norman abbot of St. Albans, that, in 1077, a rebuilding, on a larger scale, of the Saxon abbey was begun, and to him may have been due something of the systematic spoliation again so apparent to the excavators.

The excavations at Verulamium in 1931 were continued in the months of March and again from July to November. The main problems to be investigated included:—

1. A survey of the hitherto uncharted earthworks in Prae Wood and, with Lord Verulam's consent and co-operation, a partial examination of some of them with a view to establishing a relative, if not a positive, date for those examined.
2. Further examination of The Fosse earthwork to establish more closely the date of its erection.
3. A detailed investigation of the Roman walled town, at (a) the south angle, (b) the site of the north gate; and (c) the exploration of a considerable area within that southern half of the Roman town which is, under the Corporation of St. Albans, to be laid out in due course as a public park.

The result of the work on these groups of sites has been to give, for the first time, a clear outline of the main successive phases in the history of Verulamium. We now know that these phases were three in number, and that, indeed, we are faced with the exploration, not of one but of three Verulamiums. The excavations carried out in 1931 may now be summarized in turn.

#### 1. *The First Verulamium; the prehistoric City*<sup>2</sup>

In the village of St. Michael's, which lies on the northern outskirts of St. Albans, the road westward to Hemel Hempstead crosses the River Ver by a ford, now supplemented by a bridge. This ford carried the

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Paris, *Historia Major*, etc., ed. Wats, 1684, p. 994.

<sup>2</sup> For the detailed summary of the work on this site, see R. E. M. Wheeler "A Prehistoric Metropolis; the First Verulamium," in *Antiquity*, June, 1932. Off-prints, price 9d. and 2d. postage, each, obtainable from the Hon. Secretary of the Verulamium Excavation Fund.

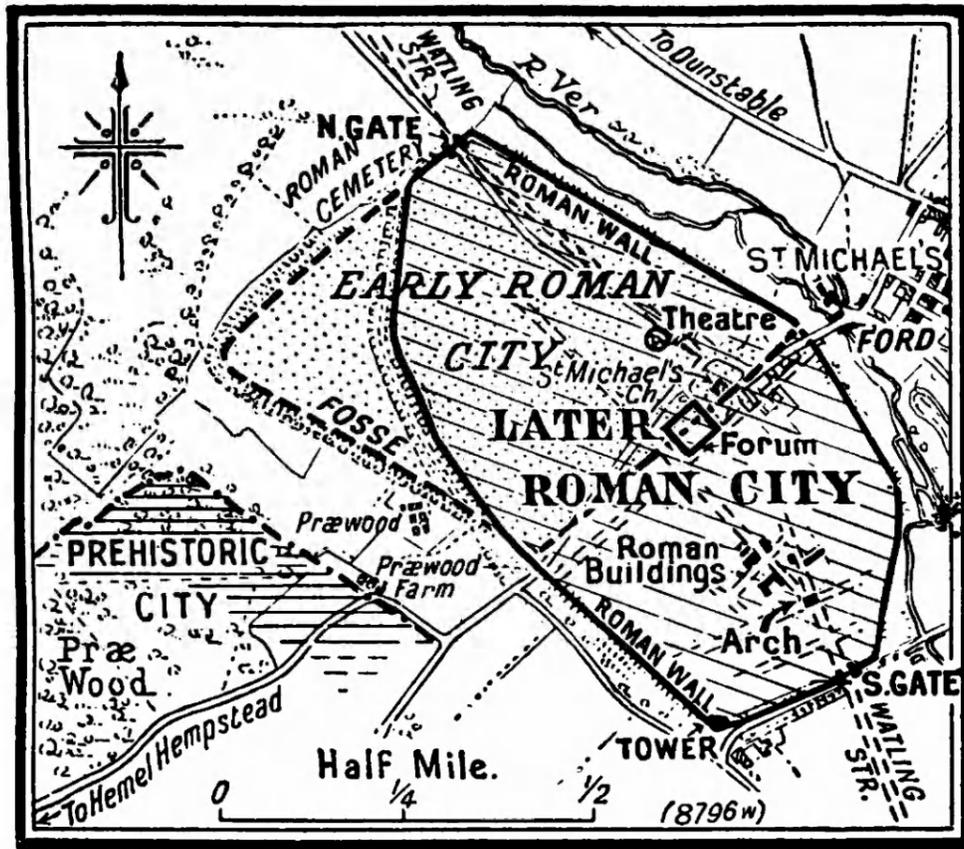


FIG. 2. MAP SHOWING THE SITES OF THE THREE VERULAMIUMS.  
 (Reproduced by permission from "The Times.")  
 (See p. 89.)



FIG. 3. THE MITHRAIC TOKEN.  
 1 and 2 show the token as found; 3 and 4, a similar coin from which 1 and 2 have been adapted; 5, Sassanian seal of the third century A.D., showing Mithras rising from the rocks (for comparison with 2). (See p. 97.)



road which in Roman times went eastwards to Colchester, and probably linked the successive capitals of Verulamium and Colchester before the Romans came. Until the upgrowth of London and the increasing importance of the Watling Street diverted the main traffic on to the north-south line which it has since maintained, this east-west cross-country route to Colchester was doubtless the dominant local factor. It was alongside this route, on the hill-top half a mile to the westward where Prae Wood (a game preserve) thickly covers the plateau, that the city of Cassivelaunus and his successors is now known to have been situated (fig. 2). This ancient city, which was probably attacked and burnt by Julius Cæsar himself in the year 54 B.C., was identified for the first time in March, 1931, and was, later in the year, partially explored. In the summer, the surface-contours in Prae Wood are obscured by an impenetrable tangle of undergrowth; but in the spring it is possible to see that the ground is seamed by a complex of earthworks differing in character and, as even surface-indications show, in date. In March, and again in the summer, these earthworks were planned and partially excavated.

Briefly, it was found that after a short period of occupation, a defensive earthwork was built along the brow of the hill overlooking the river and the ford. This earthwork towards the west ends abruptly, perhaps at the limit of the original clearing. Towards the east and south, as it approaches the line of the old road, it becomes more formidable and consists in part of three lines of defence, of which the innermost line (now represented by a trench) was a timber palisade.

Within this earthwork to the west, the maze of banks and ditches visible on the surface must now be supplemented by others revealed by excavation. In one case, these banks and ditches appear to have formed a subsidiary enclosure; in others they had clearly been intended to drain the soil. No actual remains of houses or huts have yet been discovered in the comparatively small area explored, but some hint of the activities of the prehistoric occupants is given by the exposure of several oval, clay-domed ovens, with soot-

blackened hobs, and fire-bars. Crude, finger-pressed prehistoric bricks indicate an unusual degree of sophistication on the part of the prehistoric population, and it is to be hoped that continued search (which will be as costly as it will be fruitful) will reveal some evidence of the use to which these unusual bricks were put.

The drainage-ditches had been used secondarily as rubbish-tips, and in the closely-packed mass of charcoal and débris which filled them were found large quantities of pottery, ranging in date from the end of the first century B.C. to about A.D. 40. The greater proportion of this pottery is probably of local manufacture, but it included some imported wares, both from Belgium and from Italy.

The most striking discovery, however, on this site was that of wheel-tracks, leading to a causeway and later partially obliterated by a ditch of early Roman date, of a gauge which varied between 4 feet 7 inches and 4 feet 9 inches, and approximates, therefore, to the modern standard gauge. There were some indications of a sporadic occupation (of native character) in Roman times, but the site, as a whole, seems to have been abandoned shortly after the conquest of A.D. 43.

## 2. *The Second Verulamium; the early Roman City*

In his description of the Boudiccan revolt, Tacitus implies that Verulamium in the year A.D. 61, though a city of the highest provincial rank, was without defences. This first-century *municipium* had developed on the slopes between Prae Wood and the river. Doubtless it was this city which was sacked by Boudicca's tribesmen in A.D. 61. If so, it must have been soon after the destruction and doubtless in an attempt to prevent the repetition of such a disaster that the inhabitants raised the massive bank and ditch which to-day are the most obvious vestige of this second Verulamium. Cuttings made through this rampart and ditch at various points show that the ditch (known as the Fosse—see plan, fig. 2) was 30-50 feet wide and 15 feet deep, and that the earthen bank, in part revetted

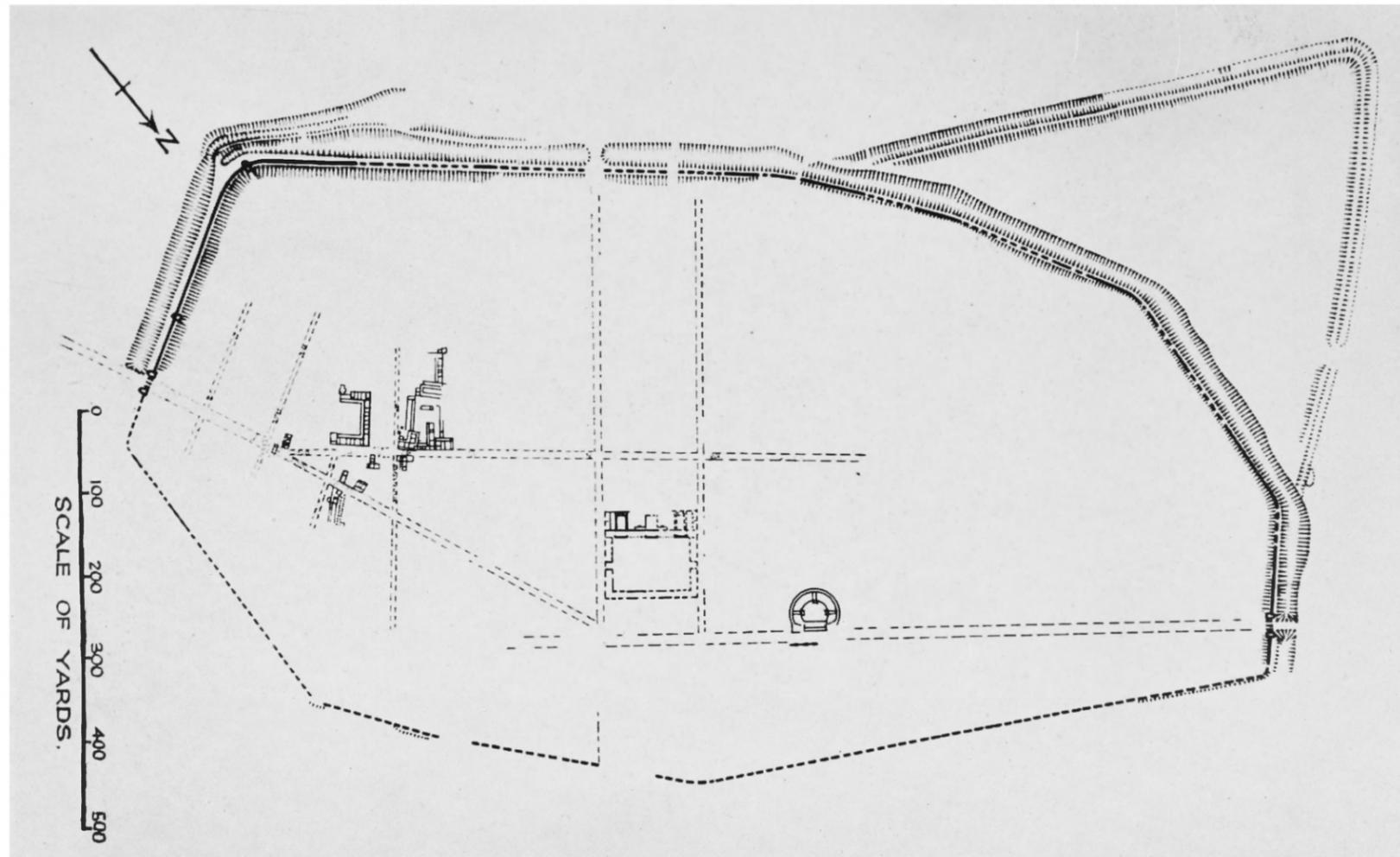


FIG. 4. PLAN SHOWING THE LATER ROMAN CITY, WITH PART OF THE DEFENCES OF THE EARLIER ROMAN CITY (TOP LEFT-HAND CORNER). (See p. 91.)



internally with a wall of turves, overlies Roman pottery of *circa* A.D. 50-70.

The full extent of this early town and the character of its early population have not yet been ascertained, but it is likely that the defences included an area of about 150 acres.

It is more than probable that the main street-lines of this early city will be found to have dictated the street-plan (see below, p. 93 and fig. 4) of its southern extension, which in the second century was to be included within the great defences of the third Verulamium.

### 3. *The Third Verulamium; the later Roman City*

In the great development of urban life in the early years of the second century, to which the great civic buildings at Wroxeter and the like bear witness, Verulamium seems to have taken its final Roman shape.

The upper slopes of the hillside were now officially abandoned, and the new town, which had perhaps already spread ribbon-wise along the Watling Street to the south, was girdled with a system of monumental defences, two miles in length and enclosing some 200 acres (fig. 4). These defences, consisting of internal bank, brick-coursed flint wall, berm and ditch or ditches, was built, as the mass of evidence now available proves, between the years A.D. 120 and 150. During 1931, the two most important sites on the defences to be investigated were the south corner and the north or "Chester" gate.

(a) *The South Corner.* In a far-sighted recognition of the importance of the Roman site of which they are now part owners, the Corporation of St. Albans have placed those stretches of the defences upon their property under the custody of H.M. Office of Works. It was accordingly in co-operation with the Ancient Monuments Department of this Office that an investigation of the problems at the south corner was undertaken. On the south, the wall is fronted by a single ditch. On the south-west side, the ground beyond the Roman city rises and here, against this tactical weakness, the town-defences were strengthened

by a multiple ditch-system. It was accordingly decided to explore the junction (at the south corner) of these two systems.

The removal of something like 30,000 tons of soil from this site opened up the ditches to their original contours and further revealed a feature of architectural interest and importance which, in detail, it is difficult to parallel. Astride the wall at the south corner were the remains of a tower with solid rounded front and a square internal chamber.

The town-wall (now reduced by systematic spoliation to its core [fig. 5]) must formerly have risen to a height of some twenty-five feet to command the ditch-system which lay in front of it. The inner ditch here dwindled in size until it rose to a rounded end in front of the tower. The outer ditch (fig. 6), fifteen feet deep and thirty to forty-five feet wide, swung round the angle to a bottle-neck to meet the single ditch of the southward system. The awkwardness of the junction here suggests that the two gangs of Roman ditch-diggers worked from the south and west respectively towards the corner and adjusted the junction in a somewhat haphazard fashion.

This corner, as opened up by excavation, will be preserved by H.M. Office of Works as a national monument. More recently another tower, apparently similar to that at the south corner (and between it and the south gate) has been identified; others doubtless await discovery.

(b) *The North or "Chester" Gate.* This was in every respect identical with the south or "London" gate excavated (fig. 1) in 1930. Again of the same monumental proportions—100 feet in width—it consisted of two roadways (now almost wholly underlying the drive to Gorhambury) supplemented by two footways, the whole flanked by two round-fronted towers. Of the east tower (fig. 7), considerable remains still survive below ground. Of the west tower, little more than the matrix was discovered. The Roman builders had driven their foundations five feet and more into the natural soil. Later brick-seekers had robbed the walls down to the cement raft upon which they had rested, leaving the



FIG. 5. THE SOUTHERN ANGLE OF THE SECOND-CENTURY DEFENCES, SHOWING THE CORE OF THE ROUND FRONT OF THE TOWER WITH THE ADJACENT CITY-WALL. (*See p. 91.*)



sides of the original foundation-trench and a considerable mass both of the original filling and subsequent occupation-levels of the interior of the tower practically intact. Again, abundant evidence of pottery and coins showed that the date of the building of the north gate could safely be placed between the years A.D. 120 and 150, the latest coin sealed by the constructional material of the gate being a *dupondius* of Hadrian dated A.D. 118-19.

(c) *The Area within the Southern half of the later Roman City.* (i.) *The Watling Street.* The course of the Watling Street to the south of the town-walls had been determined in 1930, when it was traced to the "London" gate which had been set at an angle across it conformably with its alignment. In 1931, its course within the town was found to follow the same line. The earliest surface had been repaired and superseded at various ancient periods; the latest road-surface recovered (of a loosely-textured gravel) was of an imposing street some twenty to forty feet broad.

At a distance of 180 yards northwards from the south gate, the Watling Street entered a "square" or *place* from which radiated three other streets (fig. 8). In the middle of this *place* were discovered the remains of a monumental arch. This structure, comparable in kind if not in scale with the well-known triumphal arches of Italy and France, was at least thirty-five feet across. Denuded though its remains are to-day, it can claim the distinction of being the only triumphal arch yet recorded in Britain.

To the north of this arch the street lines developed unusual features, by forking sharply into two arms. It may be suggested tentatively that these features result from the southward growth of the first century Roman city (fig. 4) and its partial incorporation within the walled area of the later Roman town. It is clear that the more easterly arm of this fork (the "Sandy Lane" of fig. 8) is the Watling Street, and was aligned, presumably, on to a spot conveniently near the ford and that main east-west road which was, as noted above, page 89, of early importance. At this junction near the ford, the Watling Street apparently broke at an angle

to proceed north-westwards. It seems probable that the layout of the first century town will be found to conform with this more northerly stretch of the Watling Street, and that the southward extension of the early Roman city brought the continuation of a subsidiary but important thoroughfare, as the western arm of the fork (fig. 4), to meet the Watling Street at what is now the site of the *place* and the triumphal arch. However that may be, the identification of the course of the street-system (work in itself unspectacular) will be of the greatest importance in elucidating in detail the growth of the city under the Roman régime.

(ii.) *The buildings.* A glance at the plan of the site already excavated (fig. 8) will show that something of the town-plan is now beginning to emerge. Before turning to the buildings in detail, it may be well to summarize the main phases of development.

1. The earliest occupation here (not earlier than the conquest of A.D. 43) is represented sporadically by wattle-and-daub hutments with floors of clay, of a primitive and native character.
2. In certain areas, houses with timbered walls and floors of yellow cement or hard gravel were built during or after the third quarter of the first century.
3. The period of greatest wealth, in which buildings of some architectural pretension were erected, was the second century—roughly between the years A.D. 120 and 180.
4. No great constructions or reconstructions are apparent until the end of the third century. About A.D. 300 certain buildings were renovated or rebuilt in a sound if rather humdrum Roman manner. In one case, a new and extremely large building was constructed *de novo*.
5. No architectural activity of any magnitude has so far come to light after that of the late third or early fourth century. At some undefined period, many of the houses of phase 4 fell into decay and their occupants were content to patch the broken floors with layers of clay. In one case, at least, such a floor was in occupation at the time of the Emperor Gratian (A.D. 367-383). Wherever the



FIG. 6. OUTER DITCH AT SOUTHERN CORNER OF LATER ROMAN CITY,  
SECOND CENTURY A.D. (*See p. 92.*)



wealth of the city was congregated at the time of the visit of St. Germanus in A.D. 429 (and that yet awaits discovery), this southern part of the city at least must have presented an appearance of squalor, if indeed, it was not already entirely deserted.

*Notes on the Buildings, fig. 8.*

*Building VI 1.* Close to the triumphal arch was a small early second-century building which, from the arrangement of its rooms, was probably a shop.

*Buildings I 1, and II 1* were excavated in 1930 and are described in the summary of the 1930 season's work.<sup>3</sup>

*Building I 2* was of late-third or early fourth-century date, and was perhaps a shop or workshop.

*Building I 3* was represented for the most part only by the trench-built foundations of rubbish, very largely gathered from the wreck of earlier structures. It had undergone at least one reconstruction, and though a fragment of a mosaic floor remained, its purpose was obscure.

*Building III 1* occupied apparently a valuable road-frontage. The underlying second-century house, with an open front upon the street, was presumably a shop. Its thin flint sleeper-walls had been robbed below the original floor-level, but they contained, at intervals, the matrices of round wall-posts. This building would appear to have been largely of timber. In a level to the south of it but contemporary with it was found a great quantity of horse bones—parts of five very aged horses, which had been hacked into "uncookable" joints (i.e., not butchered), stripped of their flesh and buried before the articulating sinews had decayed. A suggestion has been made by the palæontologist who examined them that they may represent offal from a sausage factory.

After the end of the third century, rebuilding on this site is represented by the massive brick-quoined flint walls of a rectangular structure. Save in one place,

<sup>3</sup> Reprinted from the St. Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archæological Society's *Transactions*, 1930, and obtainable from the Hon. Secretary of the Verulamium Excavation Fund, price 6d. and postage 2d.

these walls were denuded below the original floor, but they contained one architectural feature of interest—a wide relieving-arch, turned in brick, to carry the footing over a rubbish-pit of earlier date.

*Buildings IV 1, and IV 2* were originally separate dwelling-houses, built not earlier than the middle of the second century. *Building IV 1* was of L-shaped plan, and retained much of its flooring. The corridors were paved with red tesserae, whilst the mosaic of the most westerly room was very largely intact. The design of star, interlace and rose (in red, yellow, white, blue and black) is elaborate if uninspired. *Building IV 2* was a corridor-house, again retaining much of its flooring. The mosaic panels in the entrance lobby and adjacent room show a little more freedom in the treatment of a design which is basically geometrical. The wall-plaster recovered (partly *in situ*) was particularly brilliant in colouring if lacking, as far as could be ascertained, in any artistic merit. Only in one case was there any hint of plant ornament on the walls of the house, though, elsewhere and beyond it, some fragments suggested an attempt at a human figure. The feature of particular interest in this building was the considerable remains of a timber and plaster partition between two of the rooms.<sup>4</sup> Beyond lay outbuildings, one of which, *Building IV 3*, was floored with small red bricks set herring-bone fashion.

At some period in their history *Buildings IV 1, and IV 2* were amalgamated by the addition of a small bath-system (*Building IV 4*) across their eastern end. *Building IV 1* finally collapsed in part into a natural swallow-hole in the boulder-clay below it.

*Building V 1* was remarkable by reason of its date. It was not put up before the end of the third century, when, in many other cases, the adjacent houses were being refashioned on a less ambitious scale. Occupying something like three-quarters of an acre of ground, it consisted of three ranges of rooms which looked inwards to an internal corridor or verandah with a central garden. Attached to the western wing was a small

<sup>4</sup> For description and illustration see R. E. M. Wheeler, *The Journal of Roman Studies*, XXII, p. 118, 1932.



FIG. 7. NORTH OR "CHESTER" GATE, EAST TOWER; IN THE RIGHT FOREGROUND THE TOWN-WALL. (*See p. 92.*)



bath-range. The floor-levels of the house stepped up with the slope of the hill, and at the lower end of the northern range, the buttressed walls still stood to a height of five feet. Several of the rooms (fig. 9) retained the original wall-plaster, decorated in simple panels of black, red and yellow. In one room, the plaster of the wall was brought out to form a true skirting; in another, the moulding up the wall-angle remained *in situ*, and the sudden cessation of the painting of the plaster, about eighteen inches above the floor, suggested that here the skirting may have been of wood.

Late in the season a pavement belonging to a house (Building IV 8) which awaits complete excavation in 1932 was revealed.<sup>5</sup> Within a border of Greek key, which is interrupted by panels containing roses and cups, is the head of a sea-god, from whose tousled hair project two lobster-wings (fig. 10). The drawing is as bold as the execution, in detail, is delicate. The pottery or stone *tesserae* employed are dark blue, red, brown, yellow, light blue and green.

Among the mass of pottery and objects recovered, one calls for special mention. It is a unique silver token or *tessera* made from a *denarius* of Augustus of *circa* 8 B.C. (fig. 3, 1 and 2). It was found under circumstances which suggest that it was lost before the middle of the second century A.D. The head of Augustus has been filed down, and the flat surface bears the incised inscription "MITHRAS OROMASDES" round the word "PHREN." The reverse of the coin, originally representing the figure of Tarpeia overwhelmed by the shields of the Sabines, is thought by Mr. Harold Mattingly of the British Museum to have been selected appropriately by the maker of this token to represent Mithras rising from the rocks at his birth. Mr. Mattingly adds: "As to the use of the *tessera* we can only guess: we have no material for comparison. It might perhaps seem simplest to call it a religious medalet or amulet, worn by a devotee. But against this is the fact that it is not pierced. It may have been a pass showing membership of one of the Mithraic

<sup>5</sup> Both this and the pavement of Building IV 1 (above, p. 95) have been taken up and are preserved, with one of the pavements (Building II 1) discovered in 1930, in the Museum on the site.

degrees or claiming admission to Mithraic worship. In any case, it brings us imaginatively very close to the nearest Pagan counterpart of Christianity."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

*The Times*, November 18th, 1930, and January 6th, 1932.

*Antiquity*, June, 1932.

*Journal of Roman Studies*, XXI, 227 ff., 1931.

*Transactions of the St. Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archæological Society*, 1930 and 1931.

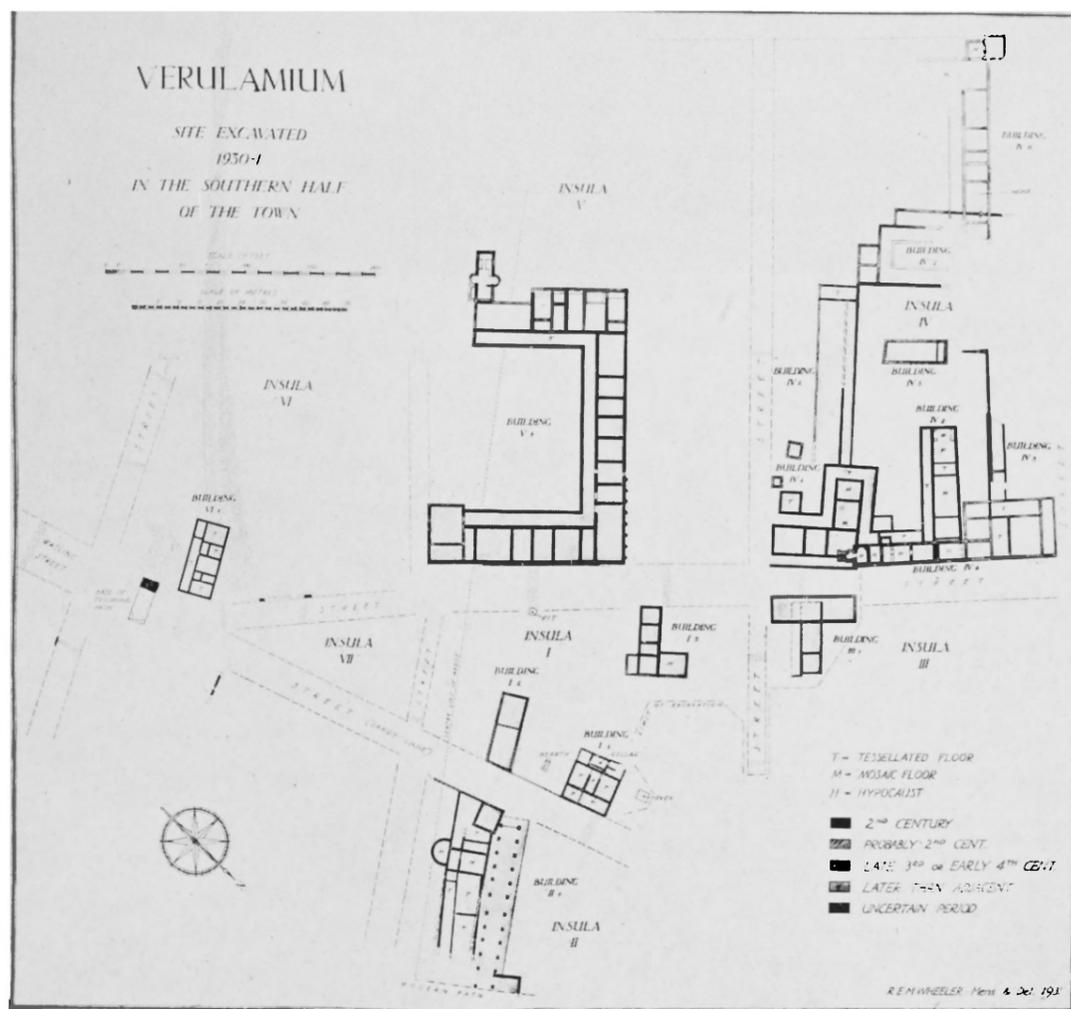


FIG. 8. PLAN SHOWING STREETS AND BUILDINGS EXCAVATED 1930-31. [See p. 93.]





FIG. 9. BUILDING VI, SHOWING BUTTRESSED OUTER WALL AND TWO ROOMS OF THE NORTHERN RANGE.  
THE WALLS RETAINED THEIR ORIGINAL COAT OF PAINTED PLASTER. (*See p. 96.*)





FIG. 10. MOSAIC PAVEMENT BEARING THE HEAD OF A SEA-GOD. (*See p. 97.*)

