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Architectural & Archaeological Society

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ROMAN VILLA LOCKLEYS WELWYN

FIRST ROMAN BUILDING
 SECOND " "
 SECOND " (ADDITIONS)
 THIRD " "

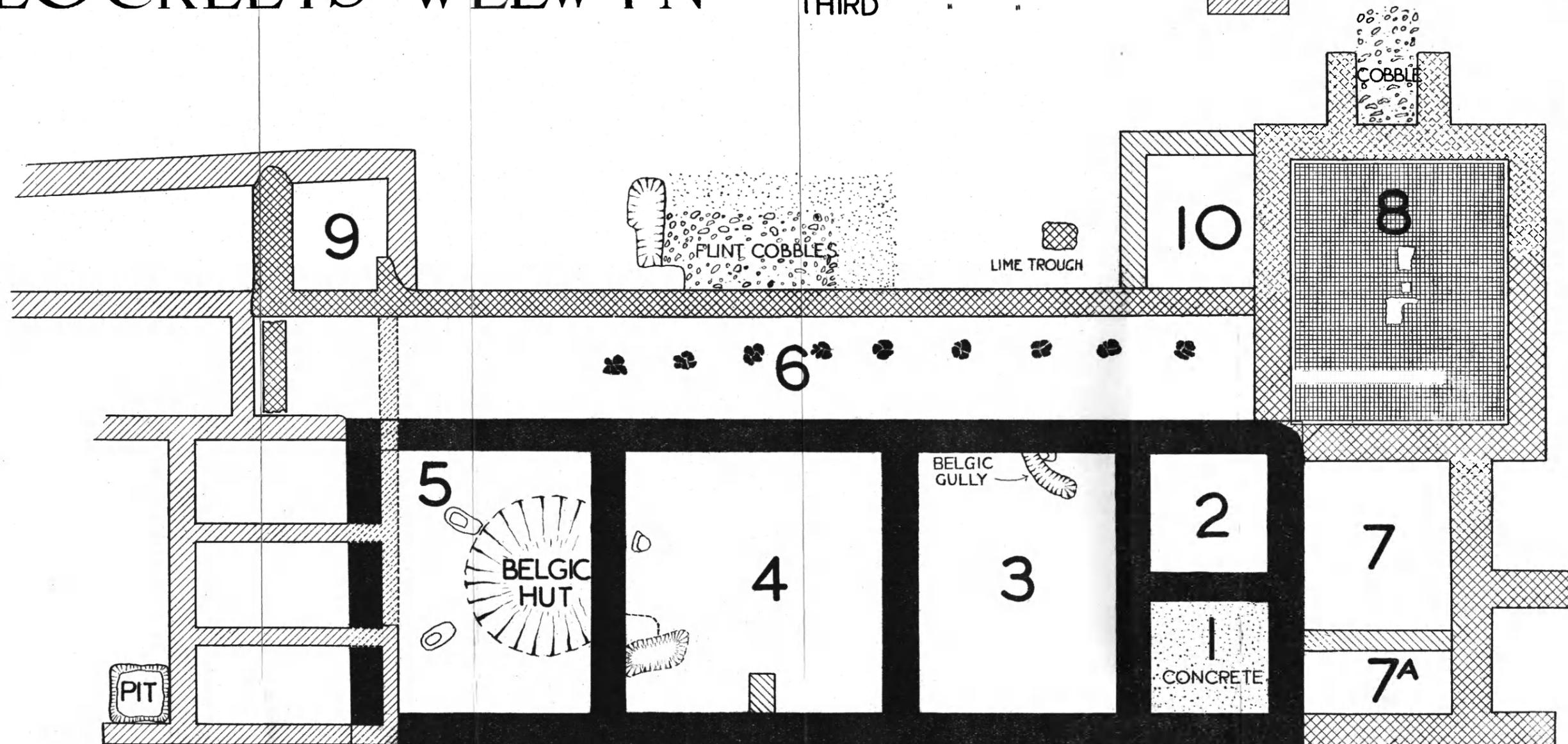
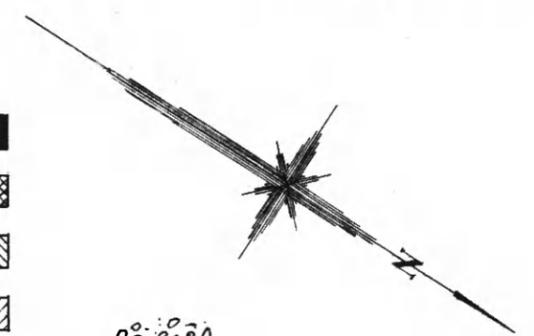


FIG. 1. GENERAL PLAN.
 Surveyed by Mr. G. Clarke.)

The Roman Villa at Lockleys, Welwyn

By J. B. WARD PERKINS.

THE Roman villa at Lockleys Estate, Welwyn, was discovered accidentally in 1931 during the plantation of an orchard by Mr. R. Neall, the then owner of Derings. On that occasion a small portion of it was uncovered; but it was not until 1937 that, by the permission and with the generous co-operation of the Welwyn Garden City Company, it proved possible to examine the site scientifically. An excavation committee was formed and, in response to an appeal for funds, sufficient money was raised for the complete clearance of the building. This was undertaken in June and July, and at the conclusion of the work the Garden City Company undertook to preserve the site. The building was not sufficiently well preserved to warrant exposure, but the lines of the plan have been laid out in turf and will, in due course, be open for inspection.

The excavation committee wish to take this opportunity of recording their thanks to the St. Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archæological Society for its response to the appeal for funds. Thanks are also due in this respect to the East Herts Archæological Society, to the Hertfordshire Historical Society, to the Trustees of the Haverfield Bequest, to the Royal Archæological Institute, to the Warden and Fellows of New College, Oxford, and to the numerous private individuals who so generously contributed towards the expenses of the excavation, as well as to the Welwyn Garden City Company, who in this, as in all else, gave the most ungrudging support. Those whose help in the heavy task of supervision, recording and preservation so materially assisted to ensure the success of the excavation are too numerous for more than a collective expression of gratitude; but it is not possible to pass over the brilliant photography of Mr. A. E. Hick, or the work of Mr. G. Clarke, who undertook the whole laborious task of surveying; while without the energy and enthusiasm of Mr. W. R. Hughes, the secretary of the excavation committee, the work could never have been undertaken.

The finds are now in the care of the Welwyn Garden City Regional Survey Committee, and it is hoped ultimately to provide a small museum where they will be visible. They are not here recorded in detail, but a full report upon them will appear in the *Antiquaries Journal* for 1938.

The villa lies on the south-west slope of the hill which overlooks the Welwyn By-pass at the point where it crosses the River Mimram, nearly half a mile east of Old Welwyn church. The site must have been as desirable in antiquity as it is now. The present park-like aspect is somewhat deceptive, for it is due to transplantations undertaken some sixty years ago by a former owner of Lockleys. Before his time, and within living memory, it ranked as some of the finest barley land in Hertfordshire. The underlying subsoil is chalk; but here, as elsewhere in the neighbourhood, the surface deposits of clay and gravel are as extensive as they are confused, and the whole hill displays a bewildering range of soils, from heavy clay to the lightest of gravels. Thus, while in moister pre-historic periods it probably carried a forest sufficiently dense to exclude settlement, there were lighter patches to encourage the clearance and development which Belgic and Roman agricultural methods made possible. In 1853 a small hoard of late Bronze Age socketed axes was discovered in Danesbury Park, but as yet no objects of the Iron Age previous to the Belgic period have been found in the immediate neighbourhood.

The determining factor in the establishment of a settlement at Welwyn was the presence of a ford. Here the Roman road from St. Albans to Colchester crossed the small but marshy River Mimram; and here before it passed the Belgic road which linked these towns, the successive capitals of Belgic Britain. The celebrated burial vaults,¹ discovered in 1907, whose elaborate contents, dating from the early part of the first century A.D., are now to be seen in the British Museum, attest the presence here of a Belgic settlement of some importance. The site of this settlement has yet to be determined, but every indication points to the spur of land which lies behind the church,

¹ *Archæologia* LXIII, 1-30.

dominating the ford below. The Roman settlement clustered round the actual ford with a substantial scattered occupation of the near neighbourhood. The cemetery, which lay in the grounds of the Grange, has been extensively excavated;² and portions of a large house have been uncovered in the grounds of the Manor House. Elsewhere masonry, coins, pottery and other Roman objects are of frequent occurrence. A detailed account, however, of these finds by Mr. W. R. Hughes, who has done so much for the recording of local antiquities, will shortly appear in the *Transactions* of the East Herts Archæological Society; and it is here sufficient to observe that it indicates the presence of a flourishing community from the earliest years after the Roman conquest until late in the fourth century. Lying as it did upon an important road it must in part have been of a commercial character. But its chief function would undoubtedly be that of market-centre to the agricultural population of the farms which had been, or were being, cleared in the surrounding woodlands; and it was with the remains of one of these farms that the excavations of 1937 were concerned.

The site of the Lockleys villa was occupied almost continuously for nearly four centuries. During that lengthy period building fashions altered radically, and five major constructional phases can be distinguished. But despite the very striking material changes, there can be little reason to doubt that the house remained in character very much what it had been from the beginning—the dwelling-place of a small farmer on the outskirts of a petty Romano-British township. Even if in the second and third centuries a good deal of solid comfort was achieved, there is no trace here of the luxury which characterises the great villas such as North Leigh or Woodchester; and we may probably regard the Lockleys villa as typical of the hundreds of unpretentious farmsteads upon which the economic life of the home-counties was based in Roman times.

The first settlement was of a very simple character. Stratified beneath the debris which represented the

² Some of the material is now in the Letchworth Museum, some in the possession of Mr. A. V. Miller. An interesting grave group was published in *Antiquaries Journal*, II (1922), 24.

second phase, the main Belgic occupation of the site, were the remains of an earlier hut. It was partly destroyed by the builders of the first Roman house (Fig. 1, room 5); but enough remained to show that it consisted of a shallow circular depression and around it four or five small scoops, which served as the sockets of some sort of lean-to tent. Daub was found, but in small quantities; and in the absence of sockets for rigid posts stability was perhaps achieved by the use of skins and turves. The whole structure was clearly of the flimsiest; and if this may be taken as typical of the huts of the earlier Belgic period it is hardly surprising that they have often eluded discovery.

On the floor of the hut and in a small associated pit were portions of several pots. In character they form a group transitional between the pottery found at Wheathampstead and that from Præ Wood; and the pedestal-urns approximate closely to those found at Welwyn in the Belgic burial-vaults. Thus, allowing for the possibility of local survival of early types, the first occupation of the Lockleys site may be assigned approximately to the first quarter of the first century A.D.

Overlying the hut, but preceding the earliest Roman buildings, was a thick layer of dark earth (see Fig. 3). In part it represented the original surface-level; but the greater part consisted of artificially accumulated material containing large quantities of charcoal, a mass of broken pottery and a few metal objects. The presence of daub and of a few fragments of Roman brick within this layer attest the existence of some sort of building; and this was further clear from the fact that the thickly accumulated debris was only found over a restricted area beneath the northern end of the succeeding Roman building (Fig. 1, rooms 1-3). It was, therefore, surprising that, apart from a single shallow gully beneath rooms 3 and 4, no trace of any associated structure could be discovered. It is not easy to see how even so flimsy a hut as its predecessor could have disappeared without leaving any recognisable trace; and it is therefore tempting to suggest that it may have been a rectangular barn-like structure, similar to those which were in contemporary use on the Continent, and that the lines of its walls were

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FIG. 2. GENERAL VIEW



FROM THE NORTH.

[*Photograph, M. B. Cookson.*



incorporated in, and obliterated by, the plan of the later Roman house. There is, however, as yet no parallel for such a house in Britain before the Roman conquest, and pending the discovery and excavation of other comparable Belgic farms, it is hardly possible to arrive at any certain conclusion as to the form of the second Belgic house at Welwyn.

The finds associated with this phase of occupation were numerous; and upon the evidence of pottery and brooches it can be dated with some precision to the period *c.* A.D. 25-65. It thus overlaps the Roman conquest of Britain by some twenty years, and it is singular to observe how little material effect this event seems to have had upon the owner of the villa and his way of life. A few brooches, a little imported pottery, some fragments of Roman brick show that the new material civilization had not passed him by completely. But when we reflect that from his doorstep he looked down upon the traffic moving along one of the busiest roads of South-East Britain, the proportion of such imported objects to wares of a purely native derivation is so astonishingly small as to afford a striking commentary upon the superficiality of Romanization in the early years after the conquest. We may perhaps be right in this connection to recall the picture which Tacitus paints of the conditions which led up to the revolt of Boudicca.

Somewhere in the decade A.D. 60-70 the house was completely rebuilt in the Roman style. The plan was of the simplest, four rectangular rooms, of which the northernmost was subdivided into two, and along their western face a timber verandah. The clusters of flint nodules which supported the uprights of the verandah are visible in plate 2. The walls were solidly built of dressed flint, probably with brick bonding-courses; and the upper portions seem to have been timber-framed, for the remains of a beam were found among the debris of the fire which eventually destroyed the building in a position which indicated that it was probably not a rafter. The internal partition-walls were entirely wooden above foundation-level. The floors had been largely destroyed by ploughing, but it is probable that those of rooms 4 and 5 were of

brick-flagging from the first, while those of rooms 1, 2 and 3 were tessellated. The walls were covered with painted plaster.

The Welwyn villa in its first Roman form is a fine example of "corridor-villa." This type of house-plan was very common in Roman Britain, but in the great majority of examples the lay-out is complicated by the addition of two projecting wings—as was that of the Welwyn villa in the succeeding phase. Here at Welwyn, in its original form, we have, however, a house of the basic corridor-type as it was before development.

About the middle of the second century A.D. this early building was rebuilt and enlarged. The reconstruction was extensive. The timber verandah was replaced by a substantial masonry-built corridor, in the centre of which was the main entrance to the house. A wing was added at the northern end; and to balance it, at the southern end of the corridor, a projecting room, of which the barest foundations now remain beneath those of the fourth-century house. The original house was at the same time re-decorated, its walls re-plastered, and its pavements re-laid, that in room 1 being replaced by an *opus signinum* floor at a level considerably lower than before.

Of the new north wing the foundations only of room 7 remain. Room 8 is better preserved. Since Roman times ploughing has considerably altered the slope of the ground, and originally the north-west angle of the house stood at a much lower level relative to the rest of the building than it does now. It was perhaps to meet this that the architect adopted the ingenious expedient of building here a two-storeyed tower, the floors of whose upper and lower rooms lay respectively about five or six feet above and below the floor levels of the adjoining rooms. The lower room had no entrance directly from the main building, but was approached from without through a gaudily plastered porch.

Late in the third century the building was destroyed by fire. The upper storey collapsed into the room beneath; and, lying as it did well below the surrounding

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[*Photograph, Mr. A. E. Hick.*

FIG. 3. SECTION E.-W. ACROSS ROOM 3, SHOWING THE DARK BELGIC LAYER UNDERLYING ROMAN FLOOR-FOOTINGS



ground-level, there it remained undisturbed until excavation. It is, therefore, possible to obtain a good idea of this part of the building as it appeared in Roman times.

The lower room, measuring 20' × 16' 5" internally, was the largest and best in the house. Its walls were of good flint-and-brick masonry up to a certain height, and above this they were timber-framed; it seems further that clay played some considerable part in the structure of the upper part of this tower. The walls were covered with painted plaster and the floor tessellated with roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ " square cubes of brick, red, yellow and occasionally green. The upper room, with heavy concrete floor and ceiling and plastered wooden walls, covered only the eastern half of the lower room. It was presumably entered by a short flight of wooden stairs from room 7 or from the corridor.

The architecture of this wing was to some extent determined by the slope of the ground. Nevertheless, it is possible that it may also reflect an architectural tradition that was widespread in the western provinces of the Roman Empire. The plan of the house, the winged-corridor type, is one of the commonest British villa-plans.³ It is also a recurrent feature of the smaller German villas, and of these it has been suggested that the corner projections may have been two-storeyed towers.⁴ There does not seem to be any German site where the presence of an upper storey has been archæologically proven. But in mosaics and in other representations of Roman country houses corner-towers projecting from an arcaded façade are a common feature; and it may well be that both in the German and in the comparable British villas, even if the second storey was not usual, these projecting wings regularly formed a separate feature, separately roofed and distinct from the body of the building behind.

It was towards the close of the third century that the corner-tower at Welwyn collapsed in flames. The date was well indicated by the mass of pottery contained

³ R. G. Collingwood, *The Archæology of Roman Britain*, Figs. 28 and 30.

⁴ Kropatscheck, "Das römische Landhaus in Deutschland," *Bericht der römisch-germanischen Kommission*, 1908, 59-60.

in the debris. The other end of the building was also destroyed by fire, and here again there was a large group of associated pottery to which a late third century date could be assigned. The two groups were thus fairly certainly contemporary, and it is of interest to record that there was hardly a pottery-type common to the two. The distinction between the best dinner service and the ordinary kitchen crocks was evidently perfectly clear in the farm houses of third-century Britain.

For some time after the fire the site lay desolate and the ruins were used as a quarry for building materials. But between A.D. 330 and 340 it was once again occupied, and across the south end a new house was erected. Unfortunately the walls have in part been ploughed entirely away, and elsewhere one or two foundation-courses alone remain. From these it is hardly possible to say more than that the building was probably of a very simple rustic character with thin walls and small rooms. Of the sixteen coins recovered during the excavations, nine belong to the fourth century, and these all fall between the years 330 and 378. It was during the third quarter of the fourth century that the villa-system was breaking down everywhere in South-Eastern England owing to the increasing insecurity of the countryside, and it is presumably not without significance that the extensive series of coins from the Manor House site at Welwyn also closes at this date. Both houses were abandoned round about 375, and that abandonment marks the end of the story of the Lockleys villa.

It remains very briefly to indicate the wider significance of the facts which have here been recorded of the history of this unpretentious farm house. Undoubtedly the most interesting aspect of the story is that which illustrates the development of a Belgic farmer's hut into a full-fledged, if simple, Romano-British villa. The theory has been advanced by Mr. Hawkes,⁵ and developed recently by Professor Collingwood,⁶ that

⁵ Kendrick and Hawkes, *Archæology in England and Wales 1914-1931*, p. 264.

⁶ Collingwood and Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, 1937, pp. 212-214.

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[*Photograph, Mr. A. E. Hick.*

FIG. 4. THE CORNER-TOWER, ROOM 8, FROM THE WEST.



the Romano-British villa system had its roots in the social conditions which were already prevailing in the Belgic territory, and that many of the earliest post-conquest villas of this country will prove to have begun life as Belgic farmsteads. In the case of a few villas already excavated, pre-Roman occupation has been found or suspected; but in no instance can the succession of pre-Roman and Roman occupation be said to have been proved. Here at Welwyn there can be no doubt of the sequence of events. If only for this reason and for the light which it throws upon early post-conquest conditions the Lockleys villa may fairly claim an importance out of all proportion to the intrinsic interest of the remains discovered.