

Verulamium—the first twenty-one years

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THE opening of the Verulamium Museum in 1939 was the culmination of almost a decade of inspired planning and tireless excavation both within the Roman settlement and in the neighbourhood. The museum was to be the centre for future research work and a source of information for both students and visitors as well as a storehouse for the objects discovered. Though the first six years were hampered by wartime conditions, 148,711 visitors came to the museum. In the last three years the figure has varied between 85 and 89,000, a quarter being schoolchildren.

The inspiration which caused the citizens of St. Albans to embark on the venture of laying out one-half of the Roman town as a park for visitors and erecting the museum in the grounds, could not have succeeded without the vigorous work and far-sighted policy of its first Curator, Dr. Corder. He established the administration of the museum, laid out the exhibits, supervised the work of laying out the visible monuments, promoted the status of the museum and defined its function through his writings. In this way he extended and crystallised for the general public the results of the excavations carried out by, the then, Dr. Mortimer Wheeler, the late Mrs. T. V. Wheeler, Miss K. M. Richardson, Dr. Kenyon and others.

When Dr. Corder left, the same policy was followed by his successor, Mrs. Audrey Williams, who carried out much necessary but unspectacular work in the museum, documenting the reserve material from all the excavations. She also did much to promote the interest of schools in the site. But another vital part of her work was the supervision of any operation in the valley of the Ver which produced fresh evidence of its history. Mr. Lunn, who succeeded her in 1952, continued these varying aspects of her work.

But no major excavation from a purely academic point of view was undertaken until 1949, when a

training "dig" was conducted on the west side of the Forum and on a building which stood in Site G. to the south of the Forum. The directors were Professor R. E. M. Wheeler and Mrs. A. M. Cotton. They concentrated their workers on three small buildings or shrines which extended behind the open Forum; no evidence remained of the actual cult lodged in these, though there is little doubt but that they were special features of the Forum. The structure to the south could have been a temple also since it had a verandah.

No further work was carried out until 1955, when fragments of a large inscription were discovered by accident during extensions to the school at St. Michael's. This was dedicated to the emperor Titus and had part of the name of Agricola on it. Dated to the year A.D. 79 it has been established as the date of the basilica restored after the Boudiccan rising. This discovery has caused a revision on the former theories of the "Fosse," or late first-century defence system, which was believed once to run beneath the Forum and Basilica; it would appear that the administrative centre of the town has always been on this spot. Neither has the "Fosse" been proved to turn down the hill on this course as had been supposed. Because of this important chance-find Mr. Andrew Saunders of the Ministry of Works was asked to explore the area on the east of the basilica. He found an entrance 12 ft. wide in such a position that made it clear that there were two entrances and that a portico was added in the third century.

In 1954-55 alterations to the car-park adjoining the museum necessitated an excavation by the museum staff. A very elaborate and ambitious operation was carried out, aided by a large number of voluntary workers under the direction of Mr. Lunn. He is to publish a detailed report on the sequence of buildings found. The stratification extended downwards into a very early ditch. The most remarkable find was a clinker-built fence which had survived due to the peculiar nature of the soil.

In 1955 the threat of a major road widening scheme on the A414 or Bluehouse Hill affected a belt of territory dividing the Roman town. The Verulamium Excavation Committee in conjunction with the Society

of Antiquaries, supported by the Ministry of Works, instituted a series of large-scale excavations which are still in progress. Mr. Sheppard S. Frere was appointed Director and his full report which is to be published shortly will deal with the fresh evidence for the early settlement and give further proof for the dating of the city walls.

One result of all these excavations on the museum is a further vast increase in the collection of pottery of every description and of the usual range of small finds. Two new mosaic pavements have been brought into the museum and a panel of painted wall plaster which is large enough to show the decorative scheme and believed to be a ceiling, has been recovered and restored through the careful work of Dr. Davey. The new techniques in treatment of mosaics and the fallen wall plaster have revolutionised the research into Roman interior decoration.

The excavation of the Park Street villa by Mrs. O'Neill produced evidence of the development of the countryside, the economic background of the Roman town. Lockley's, Welwyn, and Gorhambury villas are other sites which have a bearing on the economic background of Verulamium. Similarly there is on display pottery from the Radlett kilns; this includes pottery rescued from a recent kiln in that region, and also from a kiln site excavated by Dr. Davey in Bricket Wood. Whenever objects of the neighbourhood have a relevance to the town of Verulamium or its pre-Roman site the material will be retained at the museum.

With the marked increase in the number and variety of visitors it is necessary for the museum to widen its activities not only to continue its research work in the future but to ensure that the results of such work are displayed in a lucid and vivid form.

The museum collection, though predominately a storehouse for the objects of the site, also includes pottery from the Radlett and "Black Boy" kilns and the material from the villas at Park Street, Boxmoor and Gorhambury. In this way the museum hopes to build up the evidence for the development of the whole region in Roman and pre-Roman periods.

With the addition of a gallery of almost a third as much display space as at present exists in the museum, adequate provision will be available, for, among other things, some of the wall plaster now being restored under Mr. Frere. The cellars below the gallery will allow increased facilities for considerable and large-scale restoration work which can be conducted for the first time in the museum.

There is also to be a lecture-room which will accommodate approximately sixty people. This will largely be used for the extensive school service which has now become an integral part of the museum service.

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