



ROMAN VILLA FOUND NEAR ATWORTH

INTERESTING FIND IN WILTSHIRE VILLAGE

For a long time old coins have been found in the vicinity of the village of Atworth, on the main Melksham-Bath road. About 14 months ago a lad took some coins to school and showed them to Mr. Hobday, the schoolmaster, who sent them to a Bath museum. He was informed that they were Roman coins.

Mr. Shaw Mellor, of Box, heard of the find and paid a visit to Atworth, and saw the field on the farm of Mr. J. Rawlings where the coins had been discovered.

He later commenced digging operations and discovered the foundations of what presumably was a mansion of Roman guard or block-house. On this site coins, with pottery, etc. are being found daily. Financial help will be needed if the work is to continue.

Wednesday, September 29, 1937. Western Daily Press and Bristol Mirror.

The remains of an extensive building of the Roman period, usually described as a "villa", have been partially unearthed in the middle of a wheat field, overlooking the village of Atworth, near Melksham. "This villa is an entirely new discovery; there is no record or tradition of the existence of any building on the site" states a "Times" correspondent, who recalls that, as stated in our columns at the time, in the late summer of 1936 a coin was found by a boy on the field; this coin was taken to the village schoolmaster, Mr. Hobday, who, in turn took it to Bath for identification. The coin was identified as a Roman coin of Constantine L.

On visiting the site sufficient evidence of Roman occupation was seen on the surface to justify further investigation, and in August 1937, as soon as the crop was harvested, some trial holes were dug. Very soon the lower courses of masonry walls were found, the tops of which were in many cases a bare 6" below the ploughed surface. When it was evident that the discovery was an important one, arrangements were made with the farmer to reserve a portion of the field for a year, and since then excavation has proceeded when circumstances permitted.

This summer aerial photographs showed crop markings indicating that part of the villa lies under the standing wheat. So far, an "L"-shaped building has been found, built and altered at various periods, of the "corridor" type, containing at least 24 rooms or passages, a suite of baths, 4 or possibly 5 hypocaust chambers, a flight of six stone steps, and three rather inferior tessellated floors.

A good deal of damage has been done to floors and walls, so that many parts of the plan must be conjectural. It seems probable that an earlier building of considerable architectural pretensions existed on this site or in the immediate neighbourhood, for in one of the hypocausts have been found pieces of well-worked stone, with good mouldings, which have evidently formed part of a cornice or plinth of a classical building, used as bases for some of the piles of tiles supporting the suspended floor.

A series of about 40 bronze coins dating from Gallienus (A.D. 253-268) to Valens (A.D. 364-378) has so far been unearthed, as well as a considerable quantity of broken pottery of many types, much of which can be ascribed to the 2nd, 3rd and 4th centuries A.D.

A small, perfect, single-handled wine or oil jar has been found in one of the hypocausts, and a large number of different kinds of earthenware tiles. Some of these, during the manufacture process, when they were soft, came into contact with man and beast, and some bear the imprints of the paws of dogs and of the hob-nailed sandals or shoes of men.

Others are marked with contemporary human thumb and finger prints, and one shows the impressions of four finger tips, with well-shaped nails, of a Roman-Briton who lived about 1600 years ago.

The house was roofed with purplish pointed tiles of sandstone from the neighbourhood of Bristol, and many of these have been found intact, in some cases still retaining in position the iron nails used to support them on the roof battens. Most of the rooms were decorated internally with wall plaster, frequently coloured, and much concrete was used to form floors and wall foundations. Many rooms show evidence of at least one considerable conflagration in the shape of a black deposit, largely consisting of charcoal, immediately above the floor level, mingled with broken roof tiles and iron roof nails.

In several cases there have been later occupations, and as many as three occupation levels can be seen. Sometimes the highest one is a primitive floor of rough flat stones or irregularly fitted pieces of roof tile, in some instances laid on the top of the burnt deposit.

Taking into account the date of the latest coin, the villa may have been sacked and partially destroyed by fire during the period of the terrible raids by the Picts, Scots, Attacotti, Franks and Saxons in the year A.D. 367, when Nectaridus, Count of the Saxon Shore was killed, and Fullofaudes, Duke of the Britons, was taken prisoner.

Many villas in the southern and Western part of Britain were abandoned by their landed owners, to be partially re-occupied by the lower class of Romano-Britons after the raiders had been driven out by Count Theodosius.

The "Times" does not refer to the recent excavations at Nettleton, near Castle Combe. There is a Roman posting station and temple, linking Bath to Cirencester, were discovered. It is extremely doubtful, however, that they had any connection with the Atworth villa.

Since the above notes were written there have been several noteworthy developments. One of the most striking indications of the archaeological importance of the discoveries on this site is the fact that the numismatists at the British Museum, to whom various examples of the coins found have been submitted for examination, have expressed the desire to retain a number of specimens, in view of their exceptional interest.

These coins, which are representative of the period of the Roman occupation of Britain between 250 and 350 A.D., have been submitted to the British Museum authorities by Mr. T. W. Hobday, the headmaster of the village school, who takes a great interest in the finds on this site, and has imbued his scholars with an equal enthusiasm. In the schoolroom may be seen a glass-fronted case, specially provided for the display of representative discoveries and a skillfully designed model, presenting a conjectural reconstruction of the villa in its complete form, the work of Mr. Hobday. From this case the coins were taken which have now found their way to London.

Many of the coins discovered in the ruins of this villa are in a remarkably good state of preservation. In the case of a coin of the Emperor Constantine, very little signs of wear are apparent. This excellent condition is probably due to the fact that it was minted in bronze. Many of the coins bear mint marks. Some came from Colchester, others from Rome, and others from various French towns.

Some of the coins found on this site have been pronounced by experts to be of "unauthorized" minting. Apparently therefore, the coiner plied his illicit industry even in the days of Imperial Rome!

The presence of Roman remains in this neighbourhood was known something like 30 years ago; since ancient coins were frequently unearthed by ploughmen at a considerable distance from the site of the villa.

Excavations on the site commenced about a year ago, and under the direction of Mr. A. Shaw Mellor, of Box House, Box, assisted by a number of friends, are still proceeding. The site has well repaid exploration, and well-nigh each day's work adds in some measure to the store of interesting finds.

One of the most interesting finds is a small dagger, with a well-made hilt of bone or ivory. The white colour of the hilt has well survived the passing of the centuries, and there is ample evidence of skillful craftsmanship. The hilt is adorned with a spiral pattern, and is tapered in such a fashion as to suggest that it was turned in a lathe. The blade, however, has practically rusted away. In view of the delicate workmanship, it is suggested that the weapon may have belonged to a lady of the period.

This dagger was found by James Rawlings, the 12-year old son of Mr. Rawlings, of Poplar Farm, Atworth, the tenant of the land in which the villa is situated. This young antiquarian was also the finder of the coin whose discovery stimulated the present period of archaeological research.

There is every reason to believe that this villa, probably the country house of a distinguished Roman, occupied a considerable area. The apsidal ends of two rooms in the immediate vicinity of the hypocaust vividly recall the design of the suite in the Roman Baths of Bath. Speculation concerning past history is always a fascinating pursuit, though unfortunately, it is seldom profitable! It would certainly be interesting to ascertain if the villa at Atworth and the Roman Baths at Bath were designed by the same architect. The evidence of conflagration on the site of the villa is sufficient to provide one explanation of the fact that so far no specimens of tessellated pavement have been discovered.

A particularly attractive find is a portion of a deer's antler, which has been sawn through longitudinally in order to convert it into an engraving tool. Possibly this implement was used by a Celtic serf, who was not permitted to use more costly tools. A metal implement, too, might have been converted with comparative ease into a weapon of offence, and it is an established fact that in the history of slave-owning communities that servants in a position of servitude took little interest in the care and maintenance of implements belonging to their masters.

Celtic influence in Roman design has often been assumed to exist in sculptured memorials of the Roman occupation. In our own city, the best known example of this real or imagined tendency is to be found in the design of the pediment of the temple of Sul Minerva, still to be seen in the museum in the basement of the Roman Promenade. This design has been the subject of numerous conjectures.

Atworth possesses a strong "folk memory" in regard to the Roman occupation, and old residents still point without hesitation to the situation of the old Roman road, which it is worthy of note, is believed to be not far from the site of the recently discovered Roman villa. Quite close to the site is the Wansdyke, that mysterious rampart ascribed by many to a Roman or Roman-British origin, which stretches for some 60 miles across Wiltshire and Somerset in the direction of Portishead.

The three adjoining counties of Wiltshire, Gloucestershire and Somerset are certainly abundantly rich in material survivals of the Roman occupation, and it is curious to observe that, by comparison, traces of Saxon domination are distinctly rare, with the noteworthy exception of the church of St. Lawrence at Bradford-on-Avon.

The site of Atworth's Roman villa has been inspected by Mr. A. J. Taylor, F.R.I.B.A., architect to the Spa Committee at Bath.

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