

THE 'ROMAN' BATH IN STRAND LANE, WESTMINSTER

CAROL N. COLBEAR

IN VIEW OF the interesting discoveries, including Greek and Roman marbles, made during the recent archaeological excavations carried out on the site of the old Arundel House,¹ the following few notes on the National Trust property at No. 5 Strand Lane are worth recording. The land on which the bath is built, was once part of the large estate surrounding Arundel House, a mansion which was demolished in 1680. The bath is built of brick and measures 15½ft. x 6¾ft., with an apse at one end and the remnants of a stone stair into the water at the other. When full, the water would have been about 4ft. 6in. deep.

The date of the building of the Strand Lane bath has always been something of a mystery. A type of brick or thick tile has been used in the construction of the bath, which past antiquaries have described as Roman, a theory which appears to have been based entirely on the superficial appearance of the bricks. The average size of brick is 9in. x 4¾in. x 1¾in., but one published description gives the measurements as being 9½in. x 4½in. x 1¾in. The guide book records them as being 9in. x 5in. x 1¾in. Although Roman 'bonding tiles' have a similar thickness and texture to these bricks, their other dimensions (c. 16in. x 10in.) are at variance with them.

In the 1840s, part of the floor was taken up and observers recorded that it was constructed of 'a layer of brick, covered with stucco, and resting on a mass of stucco and rubble'. The most widely accepted date for the building of the bath is 17th century and, although the thin bricks used do not fall into any well-known dateable type or shape, many odd sizes and shapes were manufactured in the brickworks of that period. One has only to measure at random a few bricks in any 17th century house, barn or farm cottage to learn just how many variations of brick-size exist, despite a supposed standardisation throughout the country.

The suggestion has been made that the bath could have been a reservoir built to serve the domestic offices of the Earls of Arundel. This is, of course, a possibility but seems unlikely. The surround of the bath is some 4ft. 6in. below ground level, making the base of the bath 9ft. underground. The fact that 'vaults' and 'a vaulted passage' were adjacent to the bath in the 19th century suggests that the bath was always below ground level, regardless of the occupation build-up which went on around it. This would mean that some form of mechanical device would have to be employed to raise the water and conduct it to where it was needed in the somewhat distant Arundel House, a seemingly senseless expense in an area where natural springs abounded and the water table was high. Also it is unusual, though not

unknown, to have spring water flowing directly into a domestic reservoir. The usual practice was to direct the spring water by conduit through a series of settling tanks before allowing it to accumulate in a reservoir.

A more likely hypothesis is, that during the lifetime of Thomas, second Earl of Arundel (a 17th century collector of antiquities and works of art), the bath was built in a 'Roman' style² to blend harmoniously with the 37 statues, 123 busts, 250 inscribed marbles, assorted sarcophagi, altars and fragments, collectively known as the Arundel Marbles, which were arranged around his extensive grounds. Although the majority of these objects are in the Ashmolean Museum, a number were rediscovered during the 1972 excavation.

After the demolition of Arundel House in 1680, streets of small houses were built over the site and probably over the bath. The first known definite reference to the bath is by John Pinkerton who in 1784 refers to 'a fine antique bath'.³ An earlier reference, however, may possibly be inferred in the Floyer and Bernard books on cold bathing.⁴ In their early books, circa 1700, frequent mention is made of 'Mr. Bayne's Bath in Town' (i.e. at Clerkenwell). In the slightly later editions several passages refer to 'Mr. Bayne's Baths in Town'. From this wording it could be assumed that there was now more than one bath available for Mr. Bayne's clients.

A study of the rate books for the years 1699 to 1707 show that there was a William Bayne living in Eagle Court, which was a small group of houses close by the Strand Lane bath. It was during the first decade of the 18th century that Mr. Bayne's bathing facilities were at the height of their popularity and it is possible that he, or a relative, took over, built round or converted the Strand Lane spring of water into the structure we see today.

The bath house and bath has undergone several changes in the last hundred years. A marble lining was added, removed and partly put back again, and the feed and discharge pipes have been altered so that it is no longer possible to trace their original positions with any certainty.

In the early 19th century another public bath, now destroyed, was built in an adjacent room. Many famous people bathed in it, including Charles Dickens whose newspaper office stood nearby in Wellington Street. Though Dickens makes his character David Copperfield plunge into the 'Roman Bath' to cool his ardour for Dora Spellow, it was in fact only on view to the public at that time; bathers used the nearby later bath.

The bath house and bath are open to viewing' by the public for a few hours each day on most days of the year.

1. Short note in *Mosaic, London Archaeol* 1 No. 16 (1972) 384; full report to be published in *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc.*
2. A suggestion by Mr. F. J. Collins — see Ralph Merri-

field *Roman London* (1969) 140.

3. *Gentlemen's Magazine* (1784).

4. Sir John Floyer and Dr. Edward Bernard, *History of Cold Baths, both Ancient and Modern* (1707 edition).