

Discovery of Mediaeval Walling in Broad Street, Reading.

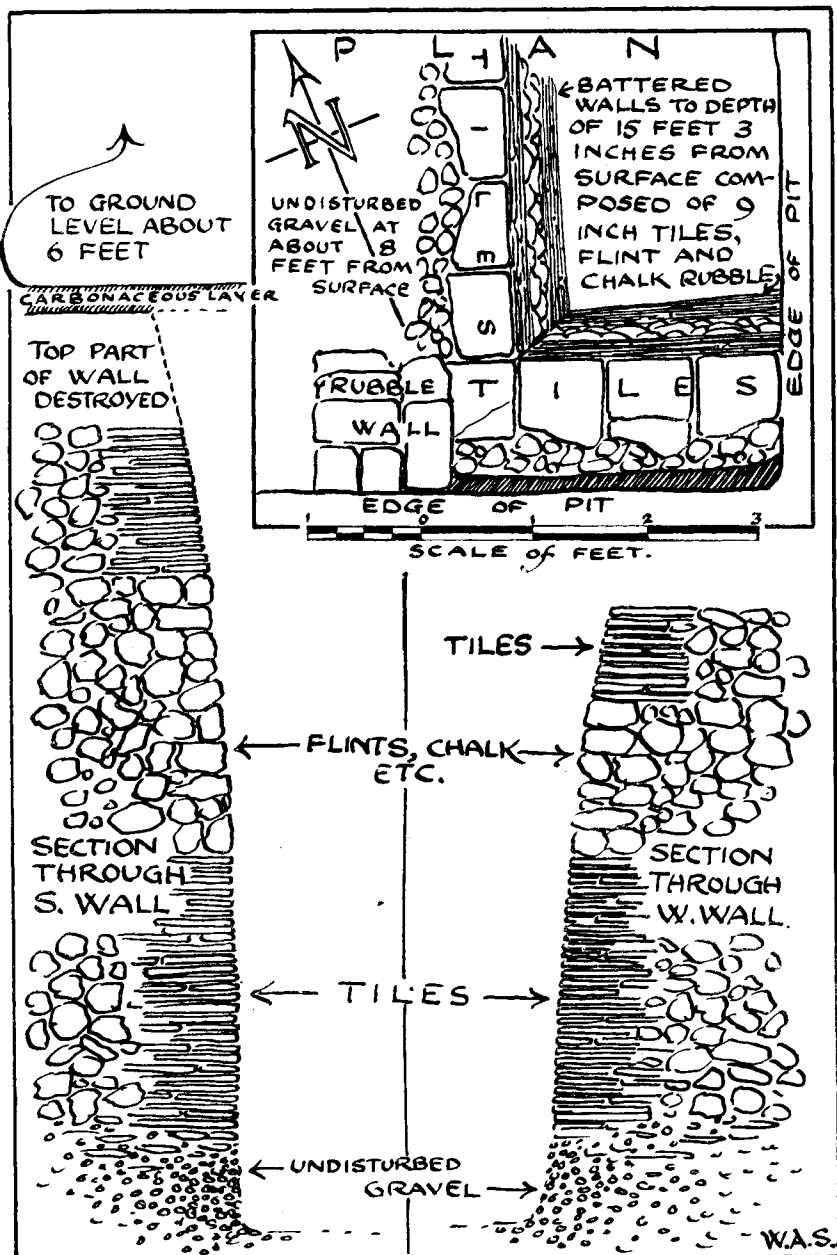
By W. A. SEABY.

On October 12th, 1933, workmen engaged in digging a pit for a concrete foundation on the site of the Royal Oak, 14 Broad Street, Reading, where Messrs. Marks and Spencer are erecting a new building, uncovered foundations of walls and a cellar, and below these, at a depth of six or seven feet from ground level, the top of a wall of tiles.

An examination of the pit was carried out by the Curator of Reading Museum and his assistants, when the following observations were made :—

The pit was against the wall of the present Marks and Spencer buildings, the S. face being just under 26 yards from the pavement in Broad Street. In size it was approximately 10 feet N.-S. by 6 feet W.-E. In the N.W. quarter of the hole, about seven feet from the surface, were the remains of a cellar with bricked floor and archway (possibly 18th century). Opposite this in the middle of the E. side there abutted the foundations of a wall above ground level. On the S. side could be seen the remains of a rubble wall to a depth of at least 6 feet below the surface. It was composed of bricks, calcareous stone, flints, etc., and was constructed in a very haphazard fashion. In the N.E. corner the undisturbed "terrace gravel" was met with at a depth of about 8 to 9 feet, while in the S.W. corner it had appeared a little higher.

In the S.E. corner of the pit the excavators had discovered, at a depth of about 6 feet, a black carbonaceous layer. Beneath this, running from the eastern face of the pit in a W.N.W. direction, a section of wall, composed of, or at least faced with large tiles, horizontally placed, bonded and mortared, had been disclosed. At a depth of $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet below the black layer the men had met with a similarly constructed wall running at right angles to the first in a N.N.E. direction. Both walls showed a batter.



*Mediaeval Walling in Broad Street, Reading :
plan and Section of walls.*

The filling in the space between these walls and the side of the pit consisted of an accumulation of dirty-looking humic silt with loam apparently forming the basis. In this filling some fragments of glazed earthenware were found.

At the time when the examination of the pit was made about 3 feet 6 inches of the south wall had been uncovered and nearly a foot of the N. wall. The filling was still of a loose nature, so it was decided that the firm gravel must be reached before the concrete could be laid down. The workmen were given injunctions to save anything of interest they should come across. While clearing out the rest of the filling that afternoon, more shards of glazed pottery, the neck and base of a mediaeval glass bottle and a pierced oyster shell were recovered. The walls went down 15 feet 3 inches below the present ground level at which depth the firm undisturbed gravel was reached. It was soon noticed that the walls were not faced with tiles the whole way down, but that the middle portion of the surface in both walls was composed of dressed chalk blocks and flints (see diagram Plate). The exact stratification was as follows:—

	<i>S. Wall.</i>	<i>W. Wall.</i>
Bonded Tiles	2 feet 4 inches (upper 12 inches demolished)	10 inches (perhaps higher).
Flints and Chalk	2 feet 7 inches	1 foot 5 inches.
Bonded Tiles	2 feet 4 inches (approx.)	2 feet 4 inches (approx.).

It was observed that the W. wall was built *against* the S. wall and that there seemed to be no cross-bonding at the angle of the walls. Owing to the position of the walls their width could not be determined.

It was found impossible to extract a whole tile, even if one could have been located, owing to the structure of the walls. Most seemed broken or had been reduced in size for purposes of bonding. Large portions of two were secured, however, which give the dimensions, $8\frac{3}{4}$ inches wide by 10 or more inches long by $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in thickness. There are two large peg holes, rather close together, at one end of each tile, suggesting that their original

purpose was for roofing. A nearly perfect tile, very similar in size and shape, which however is 15 inches long, bearing a label stating that it was the first kind of tile to be used in towns after the prohibition of thatching, is in the Reading Museum. It is probably not much earlier than 16th century, and may be later.

In the cellar of St. Mary's Vicarage, Reading, two portions of one wall are built with about eight alternating bands of bonded tiles and flints, but in this case there are only 6 or 8 inches of each. Although described in the Victoria County History¹ as being probably of Roman date, the tiles appear very similar to those from the Broad Street site. As there is evidence for the foundations of the vicarage going back to an early historical period it is not at all improbable that the two series of tiles are approximately of the same age. When so little is known about the history of tile and brick-making in the Middle Ages² it is wiser, if a date for the wall is to be arrived at, first to consider the age of the pottery.

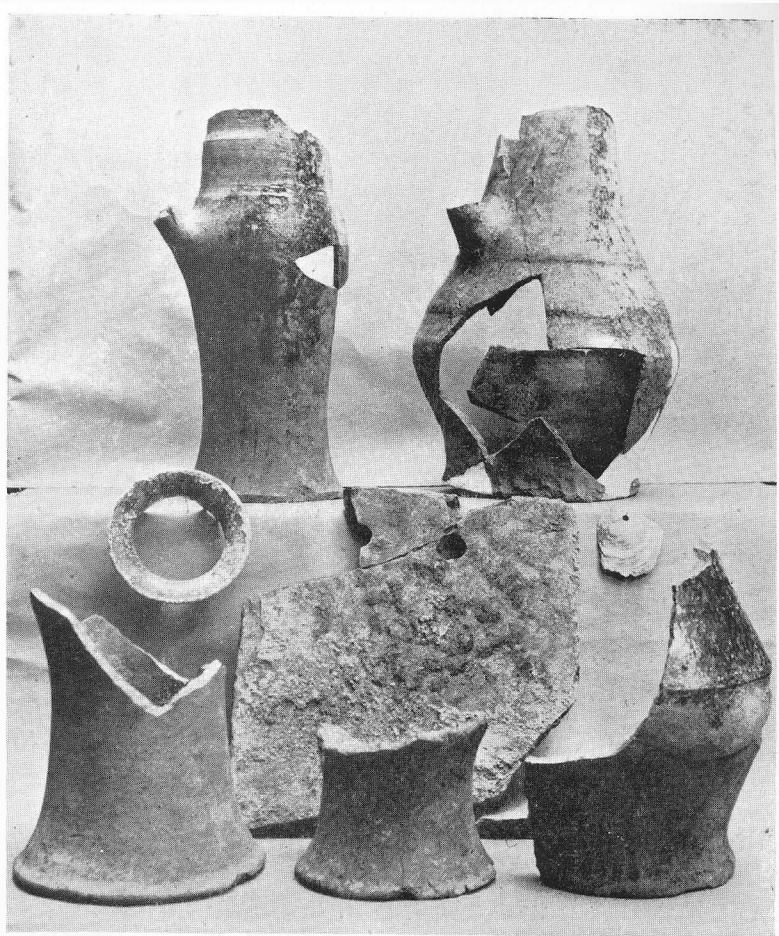
When the fragments were put together it was found that they formed portions of five vessels. Two of these, tall jugs or pitchers, one half complete and the base of a larger one (Nos. 1 and 3 on Plate) seem to be late 13th or 14th century. The smaller jug (No. 1) is of hard red pottery and has a brown-green glaze running half-way down one side. A similar jug of the same coloured ware and same sized base, with faint traces of greenish-brown glaze, was found in Blagrove Street, Reading, and is now in the Museum. This vessel has been attributed to the 12th or 13th century. Others of the same type, found in excavations near Trinity College, Oxford, are in the Ashmolean Museum and are dated to the late 13th century.³ Several more found with pennies of Henry III. and Edward I. in Friday Street, London, are in the British Museum.⁴ Parts of three mottled green lead-glaze jugs with bulge two-thirds or more down the side and thumb-pressed foot at the base (Nos. 2, 4 and 5) are certainly

¹ V. C. H., *Berks*, vol. III. p. 337-8.

² See for instance the available data given by Nathaniel Lloyd in his "History of English Brickwork."

³ *Archaeological Journal*, vol. lix. p. 8.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 7.



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4.

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*Mediaeval pottery, tile, etc., from excavations in
Broad Street, Reading.*

later, and may be roughly ascribed to the 14th or 15th century. Jugs of much the same design are to be seen in the case of mediaeval pottery at the London Museum and have been similarly dated.

From the position of the pottery in the silting between the walls it is safe to assume that it must all have arrived by process of accumulation at a period later than the building of the walls. As some of the pottery has been tentatively assigned to the latter part of the 13th century, the date for the walling cannot be much later, unless we assume that the pots were not thrown away till long after they were "out-of-date." Tiles and bricks are not found in Saxon or early Norman buildings unless they are the re-used material from Roman structures. The tiles from Broad Street are certainly not Roman so the wall cannot be much earlier than 12th century. This limits the period of its construction down to a century and a half between 1100 and 1250.

One explanation that has been put forward as to the origin of the tiles is that they may have been surplus or broken roofing tiles from the Abbey. If it were certain that such tiles had been employed on the Abbey roofs one might say with tolerable accuracy that somewhere about 1200, at a time when roofing was being carried out, "wasters" were sold to local builders, and that it was then the underground walling off Broad Street was built.

There are records that by the end of the 12th century and early in the 13th century Flemish brick and tile makers were in this country. The Editor of this Journal in an article published in the *Reading Mercury* on the 21st January, 1933, brought forward the suggestion that a colony of Flemings, which is known to have settled at Bob's Mount, Whitley, in the 12th century, probably made encaustic and roofing tiles for the Abbey; indeed it is unlikely that the quantities of tiles needed for roofing and paving the monastery should have come from any great distance, when such excellent clay for tile-making was so near at hand. The name "Tilehurst" also is suggestive of a very early manufacture of local pottery.

It is extremely unlikely that the underground walls below the old Royal Oak, so carefully and laboriously constructed, so high and yet so far below ground level should not have been put there for an important and definite reason. Where further excavation is impossible it is difficult to conceive their purpose or to date them with any real degree of accuracy. One may imagine, however, a bear pit, or a dungeon where some luckless prisoners have been cast to their eternal gloom.

[NOTE : An exceedingly interesting article by F. Stevens, O.B.E., F.S.A., upon a very important group of pottery found at Old Sarum during the excavations of 1910-1916, appears in the Wiltshire Archæological and Natural History Magazine for June, 1933. (No. CLVIII. Vol. XLVI.) The pottery dates from the late Norman and Angevin period, that is from the XIIth to the XIVth century and several of the pieces bear a close likeness to the examples referred to in the above article. *Ed.*]