

DISCOVERY OF A ROMAN VILLA AT CRANHILL, NEAR  
WANTAGE.

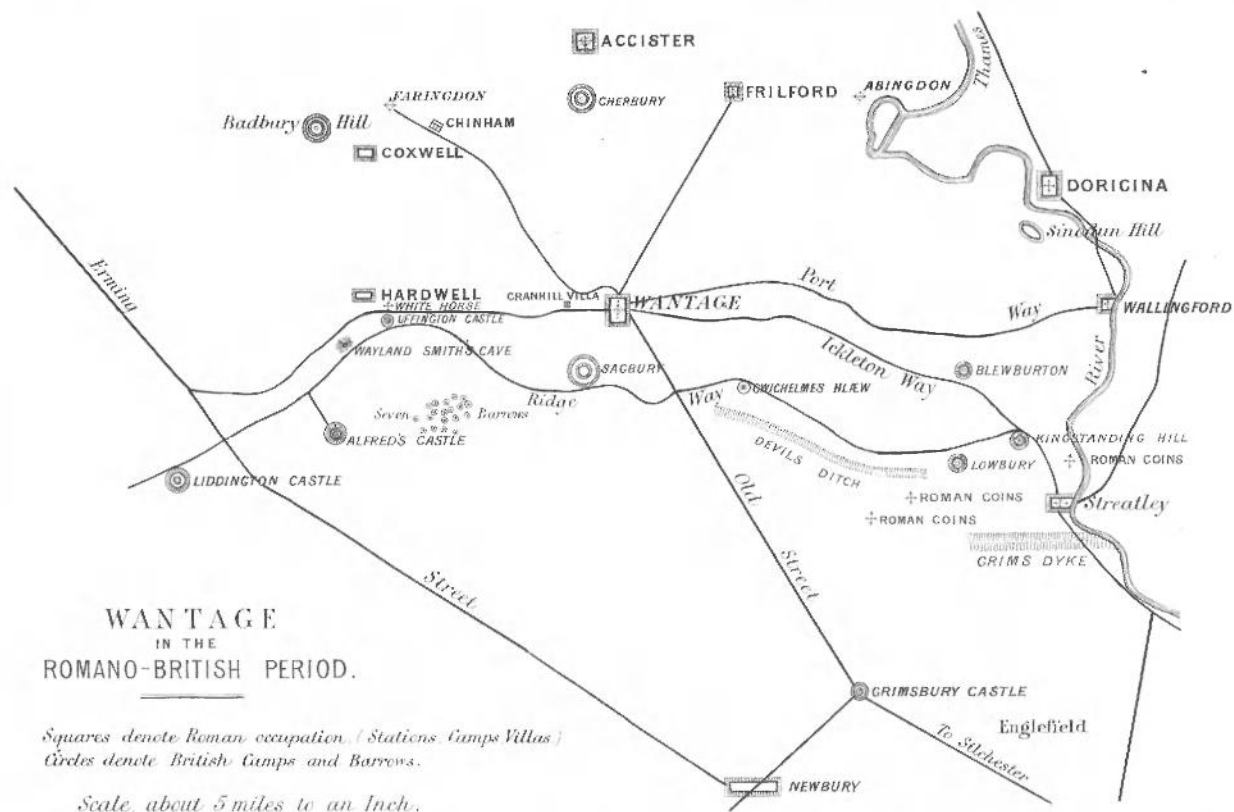
By E. C. DAVEY, Esq., F.G.S.

TOWARDS the end of October, 1876, I received information from Corporal Stephenson, of the Ordnance Survey, that some fragments of ancient pottery and the foundations of a considerable building had been turned up by the plough in an open field one mile and a half due west of Wantage. On proceeding to the spot I found labourers engaged in removing stones, &c., from a long trench about 3 ft. wide and 3 ft. deep. Among the rubbish thrown out at this first visit were portions of square bricks, flanged tiles, and pottery of many shapes and colours, together with oyster-shells in abundance,—all clearly recognizable as the remains and adjuncts of a Roman villa. The excavations were carried on uninterruptedly till the last day of November, and for five successive weeks I visited the scene of work—destruction, I must also acknowledge—almost daily, securing nearly everything of interest that was brought to light.

The site of the villa is on Cranhill farm, the property of Mr. Rowles, of Letcombe Regis, in the occupation of Mr. Dormer, of West Challow. It lies between East Challow and Childrey, but actually in the parish of Letcombe Regis, about half a mile below the Icknield Way, due north of the highest point beyond Windmill Hill.<sup>1</sup> The spot commands delightful views northwards over the Vale of White Horse, and the series of eminences that extend from Cumnor Hill, above Oxford, to Faringdon, Badbury, and Coleshill. The

<sup>1</sup> By the "Icknield Way" I mean the hard road from Wantage to Swindon, parallel with the broad grassy "Ridge Way." In our oldest Anglo-Saxon charters, such as those conveying lands at Blewbury and Compton Beauchamp to the abbey of Abingdon, the *Icenhilde*

*weg* is always distinguished from the *Hricg weg*. See Kemble, *Codex Dipl.* v. 295, 332, and *Abingd. Chron.* i. 111, 158. I mention this because on the old Ordnance maps the Ridge way and the Icknield Way are marked as synonymous.



house stood on the hard beds of upper-greensand, known as "firestone," a thin narrow stratum on which are always found fertile soils and pleasant undulating scenery, such as must strike the observer about Kingston Lisle Park, Spars-holt House, and Milton Hill.

The buildings occupied a rectangular area of about 320 square yards, the longest sides from north to south being 82 ft.; the shortest, from east to west, 36 ft.,—the front facing the north-west. This choice of a northerly aspect is very persistent in Romano-British villas, and I may cite examples at Ashdon and Bartlow, in Essex (Arch. Journ. x. 16, 18), Carisbrooke, in the Isle of Wight (Spickernell's Account, p. 3), Lymne, in Kent, and Woodchester, in Gloucestershire (Wright's Celt, &c., 191, 231). At a distance of 9 ft. inwards from the eastern wall ran a parallel wall from end to end, leaving a passage or corridor 6 ft. in width. Parallel walls in this fashion would render the habitable rooms in the house dry and warm, and at the same time provide a convenient ambulatory. Similar corridors have been noticed at Wheatley, near Oxford, and at Silchester (Arch. Journ. ii. 351—xxx. 9), corresponding to, but not identical with, the *cryptoportici* in the grand villas at Bignor and Woodchester.<sup>2</sup> The house was divided into five compartments of unequal dimensions, the largest in the centre measuring 21 ft. 4 in., by 18 ft., the others diminishing to 21 ft. 4 in., by 11 ft. 6 in., and by 10 ft. It may be useful to compare the dimensions of this villa with those of others that have been described in various parts of England. Carisbrooke was 118 ft. in length by 49 ft. in width; Ashdon, 52 ft. by 17 ft.; Bartlow, 48 ft. by 44 ft.; while the palatial villa at Woodchester measured 550 ft. by 300 ft., and another at Bignor was scarcely inferior.

All the walls, whether inside or outside, were of the uniform thickness of 3 ft., but varied in depth; being in some places carried down 6 ft., and in one angle as much as 12 ft. deep. Mr. Dormer suggested, with a probability of correctness, that the builders had worked down to this abnormal depth for the sake of a soft bed of marl or loam, which would

<sup>2</sup> "The *Cryptoporticus* was an enclosed gallery in which the Romans took the exercise of walking within doors. It is not noticed by Vitruvius, but it is par-

ticularly mentioned by Pliny in the description of his Tusculan villa."—Lyson's Bignor, 17, N.

supply them with excellent material for mortar and concrete. The foundations consisted of blocks of lower-chalk, in which I observed ammonites and pyrites; huge Sarsen stones, which required two horses to drag away; flints; and slabs of oolite from Frilford or Stanford, intermingled with bones of animals, potshards, bits of iron, glass, &c. There were also many large masses of curious reniform and spongi-form concretions,—perhaps natural stalagmites produced by the infiltration of water on softened mortar.<sup>3</sup>

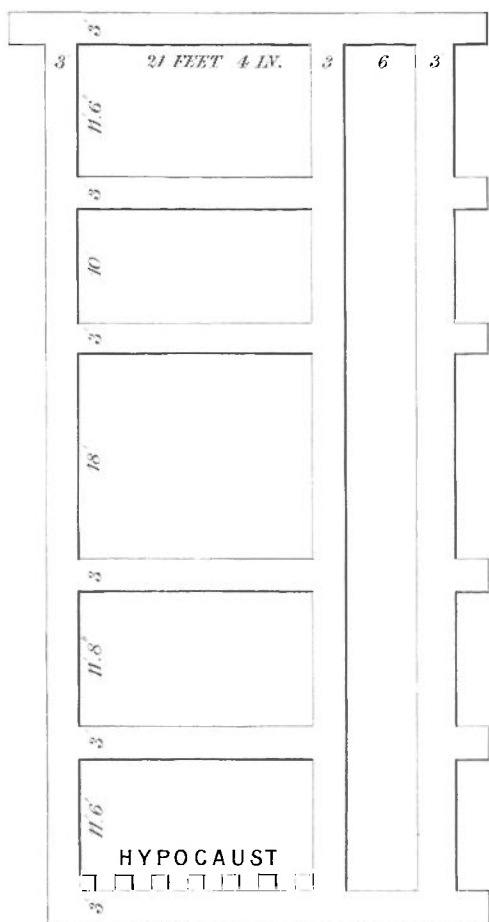
At the southernmost apartment was found a row of eight short pillars, some built of bricks 8 in. square, others of narrow form, like those in ordinary modern use, others 15 in. by 12 in.<sup>4</sup> From a comparison of these columns with similar arrangements at Wheatley, Cirencester, Northleigh, and Carisbrooke, we learn that here existed the hypocaust or apparatus for warming the rooms. “We invariably find that in a certain number of the rooms of a Roman house in Britain the floors were supported not on the solid ground, but upon a number of short thick columns arranged in regular rows, with narrow passages between them. These formed what was called the hypocaust, a Greek compound, signifying literally, *fire or heat underneath*” (Wright’s *Celt*, 195—6; Cf. Lyson’s *Bignor*, 10, N.).<sup>5</sup> Currents of hot air circulated through these passages brought in from an external furnace, and were conveyed upwards by flues in the walls. There are instances in which open fireplaces like our own have been found, but for warming the chief apartments, the *triclinia*, *exhedræ*, &c., answering to our dining and drawing-rooms, this system of hot air circulation seems to have prevailed in this island. The hypocaust at Cranhill was placed at the southern end of the building, and this appears to have been a general rule according to the statement of Wright. “In the larger country villas,” he says, “it has been observed that the rooms with hypocausts lie often on the southern

<sup>3</sup> “Tufa or stalactite,” is mentioned among the materials of Roman foundations in Dover Castle, and said to have been imported from France.—Arch. Journ. i. 311.

<sup>4</sup> According to Dr. Birch, F.S.A., these largest bricks are of the special description employed in constructing the piers of hypocausts. At Cranhill they were

utilised for entire columns, and not merely as plinths.—Arch. Journ. x. 358.

<sup>5</sup> These supporting pillars are technically called *pilæ*, and the upper floor is called *suspensura*. See the illustrations in Buckman’s *Corinium*; Wright’s *Celt*, 197; Arch. Journ. ii. 351, 423; xiii. 216.



CRANHILL VILLA,  
WANTAGE.

part of the building, and it has therefore been assumed that they were the winter apartments, while the summer apartments were placed with a more northerly aspect, and were without hypocausts." (Celt, 198.) Usually a mosaic pavement was laid upon the upper floor of the hypocaust, but nothing of the kind was traceable at Cranhill. Possibly none ever existed there, or more probably it was destroyed twenty years ago, when Mr. Rowles carted away a vast quantity of material from the surface of the villa, little suspecting its history and character.

Of the square tiles or bricks which formed one of the *pilæ* of the hypocaust I brought away two, which are of exceeding interest, because they retain distinct foot-marks. For an explanation I must again refer to Wright's most engaging and instructive volume, *The Celt—the Roman and the Saxon*:—"The tiles were probably made in the neighbourhood of the buildings in which they were used, and the brickyards seem to have been unenclosed, for we find on the surfaces of many of them the indentations, not only of the feet of men, but of a considerable variety of animals which passed over them before they were baked. On bricks found at Uriconium (Wroxeter), we find the footsteps of several kinds of dogs, of sheep, of goats, and of pigs." (vi. 186.) Accompanying this paragraph are illustrations of one tile from Wroxeter which shows a dog's feet, and another tile from a Roman villa, near Bishop's Castle, which shows the impressions of the two shoes of a man who once stood upon it. The two bricks I have mentioned from Cranhill as possessing a peculiar interest, have the impressions of the feet of a sheep or pig on one, and of a boy or girl on the other; probably a boy, as the wearer had nailed shoes. In a villa at Ickleton, in Cambridgeshire,—a villa situated, like Cranhill, near the Icknield way,—the Hon. R. C. Neville met with several tiles bearing imprints of dogs' feet, a human foot, and a cloven hoof, like a deer's foot. (Arch. Journ. vi. 16.)

Besides the square and oblong bricks, there were many flanged tiles connected with the hypocaust and superincumbent floor. Some of them are plain and smooth, but most of them are scored with various simple patterns by means of curved and intersecting lines, "as if drawn by a comb-like instrument," agreeing exactly with specimens from

Woodperry preserved in the Ashmolean Museum, and with others from Wheatley Villa.<sup>6</sup>

Of the painted stucco which once lined the rooms, there were many pieces of a dull red colour, but none bearing traces of scrolls or designs.

#### POTTERY, GLASS, IRON.

There was not one entire fictile vessel dug out of the foundations, nor sufficient pieces of any one vessel to admit of complete restoration. The greater part of the fragments of pottery were of common plain ware, probably representing culinary utensils : some jet black, others yellowish, others red and brown, with intermediate stages of colouring. Occasionally the shards preserved traces of ornamentation effected by the aid of straight and zigzag lines. One piece showed an elegant diamond pattern ; another bore a potter's private mark. (See Wright's *Celt*, 183.) Two other pieces were distinguished by colour and ornaments, said to be peculiar to the "Romano-Salopian" ware. What one antiquarian writer calls the "omnipresent Samian" was not wanting among the débris of fictilia. The Samian ware was thin and brittle ; hence perfect vessels are rare, and hence we are told that "the smallest fragments are carefully preserved." (*Arch. Journ.* iii. 63.) The so-called Samian is a bright red, highly-glazed ware, which Wright aptly compares in appearance to the best red sealing-wax. This was a species of pottery which the Romans were fond of ornamenting with classical designs, and was always highly prized. With two exceptions, however, the fragments from Cranhill were quite plain.<sup>7</sup>

In iron, the articles consisted of nails, clamps, bolts, and hinges, and thin oxidized pieces of no defined shape. All these articles imply the presence of timber, of doors, &c. ; but I saw no traces of wood, except in the form of charcoal, and this leads to the idea that the villa was destroyed by fire.

<sup>6</sup> This villa will compare closely with Cranhill in many respects : in the accidental cause of discovery, in the exact correspondence of tile-markings, of contents and position. Wheatley villa was opened in 1844 by the Bishop of Oxford, Dr. Buckland, Mr. J. H. Parker, and others (*Arch. Journ.* ii. 350-6). The floors and foundations were then covered

over by a building which was deemed "adequate to guard them for a century," but Mr. James Parker informs me that every vestige has disappeared.

<sup>7</sup> For further particulars respecting Samian ware, see Jewitt's *Grave Mounds*, chap. ix. 175; the Hon. R. C. Neville's notes in *Arch. Journ.* i. 116; x. 244 ; and Wright's *Celt*, 269.

Of glass, I possess but three fragments—thick, bluish, and iridescent, like the exquisite pearly glass from Cyprus. Two pieces had been run together, but it is difficult to decide whether the annealing was intentional or accidental.

#### ANIMAL REMAINS.

“Attached to Roman villas and towns,” says the learned antiquary, Thomas Wright, in the work to which I have frequently referred, “we invariably find large heaps of the remains of provisions, consisting especially of the shells of molluscs and the bones of animals. These organic remains are worthy of study in many points of view: they make us acquainted with the various classes of animal food consumed by the Romano-British population of our island, and they are particularly interesting to the naturalist from the circumstance that they show the existence of some animals—such as the *Bos longifrons*—which have long since been extinct.” (Celt, 104.)<sup>8</sup>

I am not sure that the Romano-British occupiers of Cranhill villa captured and devoured the *Bos longifrons*, but I possess undeniable evidence that they were partial to mutton, beef, venison, poultry, and game; and in this respect we are singularly like our predecessors. But they indulged in one luxury in which we have not followed their example:—they were fond of snails! Of empty snail shells I found some few,—not the large “Roman snail,” *Helix pomatia*, which still lives on so remarkably in the hedges round the villa at Northleigh, but the common garden species, *Helix aspersa*, which has also been noticed at Wheatley, Carisbrooke, and other such sites. But snail shells were rare in comparison with oyster shells; and here, again, modern taste coincides with the Roman palate. “The proximity of Roman sites,”—I adopt the words of Wright, —“is almost always shown by the presence of immense quantities of oyster shells, which prove that there was a great consumption of oysters in Roman Britain.” (Celt, 404; Wanderings of an Antiq., 70, 98.) It is said that Dr. Buckland never would believe in the genuineness of a Roman villa unless he found this indispensable accompani-

<sup>8</sup> Bones of the *Bos longifrons* were found associated with Roman remains at Cirencester in 1849 (Arch. Journ. vii.

344, n.), and at Beckley, near Oxford, in 1862, by Mr. James Parker.



ment. (Cf. Bruce, Arch. Journ. xvii. 345.) In Gibson's edition of Camden mention is made of two Roman camps, which both bear the name of Oyster Hill, one near St. Albans, the other near Hereford. (Britannia, 1695 ed., 300, 580.) Camden suggested that these camps owed their name to Ostorius, the General who did more than any of his predecessors to subjugate Britain.<sup>9</sup> But it is much more probable that they derived their tell-tale names from the oyster shells left behind by the Roman epicures. The great place whence the Romanised inhabitants of our island drew their supplies was Rutupiaë, or Richborough, in the Isle of Thanet. The glories of the Rutupine oyster-beds were as familiar to the citizens of Rome as to those of Calvea or Verulamium, and the superiority of the British mollusc was sung by poets of various eras,—by Lucan, Juvenal, and Ausonius.<sup>1</sup> Wright, however, observes that the Roman gourmand, like the modern Frenchman, preferred a moderately-sized species to the smallest "natives" and the shells from Cranhill confirm this statement.

## COINS.

The list of coins from the immediate vicinity of Cranhill villa is very scanty and disappointing; much scantier than would be the case if proper care had been taken of those found in the field at various times before the existence of the villa became known. For the labourer who had the charge of excavating the foundations assured me that in farming operations extending over the last twenty years, he had constantly met with coins near the villa, but had not troubled to collect or preserve them, because they were of small size and inferior metal.

The earliest and finest coin I possess thence is a first brass of Trajan who died A.D. 117.

*Obverse*, IMP. CÆS. NERV. TRAIANO. AVG. GER. DAC. PM. TR.

*Reverse*, S.P.Q.R. OPTIMO PRINCIPI.

Then a complete blank till we come to Julia Domna, second wife of the Emperor Severus who ascended the throne in the year 193.

<sup>9</sup> See Dr. Guest's "Conquest of the Severn Valley," in the Arch. Journ. vol. xxx.

<sup>1</sup> All the passages relating to Rutupiaë are collected in the Wanderings of an Antiquary, 97-8. The best known lines

are from Juvenal:—

————— Circeis nata forent, an  
Lucrinum ad saxum, Rutupinovæ edita  
fundo  
Ostrea, callebat primo deprendere morsu.  
Sat. iv. 139.

*Obverse*, (IVLI)A AVGVSTA.

*Reverse*, SÆCVLI FE(LICITAS).

These coins are the only two specimens of the second century. But if they had been more numerous, it could not be received as a proof of the existence of the villa at so early a period because we are assured by an excellent archæologist that "coins, especially of the earlier emperors, continued in use after the time of the imperial personages whose heads they bore." (Joyce, *Arch. Journ.* xxx. 17. Cf. Kemble, xii. 310.)

The next chronological coin is one of Allectus, and then two of Constantine in second and third brass. These are the only five Roman coins I obtained while the process of excavation was going on; but in the middle of the last century a number of coins were found somewhere between Wantage and Letcombe Regis, and as Cranhill is in this latter parish, we may fairly conjecture that the treasure-trove originally belonged to our Roman villa. The account of the discovery was written by the Rev. G. Woodward, rector of East Hendred, and is dated Aug. 21, 1759:—

"About ten years ago a parcel of coins was dug up in a common field at a place called Letcombe. The owner of the land discovered three or four vessels, one within another, in the shape of a hat. It was full of holes like a cullender, and I think it was brass, for I saw one myself. In this was a number of small coins, most of them silver, and a few gold, of the size of half a guinea, and as bright." (*Bibl. Topogr. Brit.* 29).

Mr. Evans gives particulars of an uninscribed British silver coin from "near Letcombe Regis" (*Coins of Anc. Britons*, p. 104), and I have one uninscribed gold piece from Wantage, and one extremely brilliant Cunobeline from Hanney, midway between Wantage and Frilford.<sup>2</sup> At Wantage also are found numerous Roman coins, of which it must suffice to mention those of Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Severus, and Maximinus in silver: Gallienus, Postumus, Claudius Gothicus, Diocletian, Valens, the Constantine family, Gratian and Valentinian in brass. By far the greater portion of these coins have been found on the western limits of the town, about Limbrough and St. Mary's Home, and these

<sup>2</sup> Obverse: CA—MV. Bearded ear of corn.

Reverse: CVNO. Horse prancing to the right. Cf. Evans, *Pl.* ix. 6, 7, and 10.

sites have been known as coin-bearing localities since the days of Dr. Wise, the author of the celebrated "Letter to Dr. Mead concerning some Antiquities in Berkshire" (1738), by which he had the merit of calling attention to the White Horse, Wayland Smith's cave, Alfred's bath, &c. The same locality (Limborough) has yielded a solitary sceatta, one of the earliest Anglo-Saxon types. (Akerman, *Numis. Man.* 225 & xii. 2.)

#### GENERAL REMARKS AND CONCLUSIONS.

If I have dwelt with a certain minuteness on the various objects brought to light in connection with Cranhill villa, it is not because of their intrinsic value, for, perchance, they would be despised at the richer treasure-hunting grounds of Uriconium, Borcovicus, or Isca Silurum; neither is it because they differ from the *spolia* of other similar sites, or offer anything novel to the antiquary: on the contrary, my object has been to show that the conditions and accompaniments of this villa agree essentially with those described in other districts, in architecture, in aspect, in the "curious assemblage" of pottery and animal remains; and the result is to draw Wantage more closely within the charmed circle of Roman civilisation; to show that Wantage shared its security, its culture, its luxuries; to prove, in fine, that Wantage was a thoroughly Roman station. For Cranhill could not have been an isolated establishment. A Roman colonist, or even a Romano-British citizen would not have ventured his life and property on a lonely hill side had there not been military protection within easy reach, as well as neighbours with whom to associate. I conclude, therefore, that Wantage was in the days of Carausius, or certainly in the Constantine era, a centre of life where families had settled in security. A glance at the accompanying sketch-map of the district will show how intimately Wantage was linked with a chain of various Roman stations. Only six miles to the northward are abundant remains which prove that the now insignificant hamlet of Frilford was a populous place in the fourth and fifth centuries. I possess urns, coins, and fibulæ found there, but my collection is poor indeed compared with what may be seen in the New Museum at Oxford, and what may be read of in Professor Rolleston's narrative of discoveries

there.<sup>3</sup> Six miles to the north-west, traces of another Romano-British villa are recorded at Chinham, near Faringdon, and I can testify that some hundreds of Roman coins have been found in a single field there.<sup>4</sup> Square Roman camps exist at Hardwell, a few miles to the west; at Coxwell to the north-west, and at Hinton (Aggister) midway between Chinham and Frilford. In Wantage itself Dr. Wise fancied he could discern the outlines of a Roman camp;<sup>5</sup> but though I would willingly accept his observations and judgment on this point, I must confess that there are no tangible or trustworthy traces of any such military work, and it would seem that he mistook natural ridges and hollows for artificial mounds and trenches. The camp in Wantage must be abandoned; but we may all the more readily adopt Dr. Wise's assertion—in which he is supported by Dr. Warton (*Hist. of Kiddington*, 70)—that the Romans made themselves masters of the noble British camp on the Ridge Way called Sagbury, or Letcombe Castle, which overlooks and commands Wantage, and thus needed no defensive post in Wantage itself.

The Portway connected Wantage with Wallingford, which—whatever its ancient name—was certainly an important Roman station. "Old Street" ran straight from Wantage to Silchester, formerly the metropolis of a wide district.<sup>6</sup> The Icknield Way and the Ridge Way afforded easy communication with the west, intersecting the great Ermine Street about Wanborough; and the roads that run by Frilford to Abingdon and Oxford no doubt existed then as now. Thus was Wantage connected with the surrounding towns and settlements under circumstances that point to peace and prosperity. For vicinal roads, detached villas, with cemeteries, and coins, are indications, not of warlike conquest, still less of a policy of extermination, but of a tranquil and

<sup>3</sup> "Researches and Excavations carried on in an ancient cemetery at Frilford in 1867-8, &c." *Archæologia* for 1868.

<sup>4</sup> Maine's *Hist. and Antiq. of Stanford*, 4, 5. (Parker, 1866.)

<sup>5</sup> "To an antiquary I believe it will appear that all footsteps of the Roman majesty are not quite lost: the *Castrum* or Fortification discovering itself pretty plainly on the south side of the brook, enclosing a place called High-Garden," &c. Letter to Dr. Mead, 51.

<sup>6</sup> Both Maclauchlan, in his survey of

Silchester, and Dr. Guest, in his essay on the "Belgic Ditches," have omitted Old Street in their list of roads proceeding from Silchester. The former, however, mentions a dike "pointing towards Pangbourne" (*Arch. Journ.* viii. 231); and this may be the commencement of the road in question. Hewett, in his *Hundred of Compton*, pronounces Old Street to be "the most distinctly marked Roman road in the county" (p. 118), but this is the grossest exaggeration.

continuous occupation. Such was the state of Britain during the long reign of the first Christian emperor, and such the period when we may conclude that Wantage, Cranhill, Frilford and Chinham became permanent settlements, and so continued until the advent of the destroying Saxons. But the absence of all valuables at Cranhill, of statuary and unbroken pottery, imply that the villa was stripped and deserted before it was destroyed. What Roman and Saxon spared has now disappeared under the equally rapacious hands of agriculturist and archæologist; and the curious visitor who may be drawn to the spot will find nothing to reward expectations, and will fail to discover, even by a depression in the field, the site of the demolished villa. One word of consolation I can add,—that in all probability the remains of another and a larger villa exist in the same field as yet uninjured and uncovered.