

## THE EXCAVATION OF THE HYPOCAUST ON PARKER'S PIECE, LITTLE CHESTER, DERBY, 1924-1926

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In September 1924 council workmen commenced clearing an area of ground on the Derby School playing fields (Parker's Piece), prior to the erection of a new sports pavilion. The site was situated close to the railway embankment some 450ft. (137m) and 190° from the assumed position of the south gate of the Roman fort. Mr. C. B. Sherwin, the surveyor superintending the work, observed that the foundations were being dug in 'made ground' and that several thin bricks and tiles were being uncovered. The following paragraph is an extract from his report (Sherwin, 1925).

"These bricks varied from 1¼ inches to 1¾ inches in thickness and several were of larger size than 9 inches by 4½ inches, and it was at once suspected that Roman work was close to hand. During the following two days the foundation of a stone wall 35 feet long and 3 feet in thickness, as well as a cross wall with Roman bonding brick *in situ* and a concrete floor, were exposed. A careful examination of the excavated material brought to light innumerable fragments of bricks, roofing tiles (*tegulae*), hypocaust tiles of the flanged type with combings in many patterns, scratched on the back to provide a 'key' for the mortar, fragments of pottery (both Samian and Upchurch ware) and small pieces of wall plaster coloured red, black and yellow in the typical Roman manner. Excavations were carried on for several days sufficient to establish the fact that what had been found were the remains of a Roman building. The weather turning wet, further excavations became impossible for the time being, a new position was chosen for the pavilion and the site was left for further examination during the following summer."

The December 1924 issue of *The Derbeian*, the magazine of Derby School, stated that glass was also found and that "part of the site yielded fragments of painted plaster bearing a decorative line that apparently formed part of the frescoed wall of a room; while two fragments of Roman brick bore the imprint of a dog's foot" (*The Derbeian*, December 1924: 2, 12). R. G. Collingwood was also informed, and he inserted a note on the find in the *Journal of Roman Studies* (Collingwood, 1924: 224). In the December 1925 issue of *The Derbeian*, Sherwin's original report was reprinted with the following addition: "further excavations were carried out by members of the Fuller Club, under the Headmaster, during the summer of 1925. The concrete floor, mentioned above, was found to be the bottom floor supporting the columns of the hypocaust, a number of which were found in position. As a general rule these columns are built of brick, but in this case they were of sandstone about twelve inches square; the action of the heat has, however, rounded off the corners and the columns are now roughly circular" (*The Derbeian*, December 1925: 15). A further note stated that a bronze coin and a "quantity of much-mutilated potsherds" was found, together with "nearly a cartload of broken tiles" (*The Derbeian*, December 1925: 9).

The only evidence that excavations were continued in 1926 is Sherwin's note to that effect in an article of his printed in the *Derby Mercury* (September 3rd, 1926) and the publication of two coins recorded as found in that year (Knight, 1927). The first coin, an *As* of Domitian (under Vespasian) (RIC 873. C. 455), AD 77-78, was found in a trench on the outer side of the east wall of the hypocaust chamber.

Obv: [CAE]SAR [AVG] FIL DOMITIANVS COS [V]

Rev: [S.]C. Spes (Hope) draped advancing left

The second coin was an *Æ3* coin of Gratian (RIC IX. C. 23), AD 367-383, which was found lying on the hypocaust floor.

Obv: D. N. GRATIANVS P.F. AVG.

Rev: GLORIA ROMANORUM Gratian standing on the right, holding in his left hand a Christian standard marked with the 'Chi-Ro' monogram; his right hand grasping a kneeling captive by the hair.

A shed of weatherboard construction was erected over the remains of the hypocaust chamber; because the foundation rested on the Roman walls, the building appeared sunk into the ground. Photographs taken on Whit Tuesday in 1933 (kindly supplied to me by Mr. C. H. Burton) indicate that it lay some 25-30ft (8-9m) to the southwest of the cricket pavilion (Fig. 1). Mr. J. Chapel, a former pupil at Derby School c. 1928-1932, well remembers this shed and recalls that lying on the floor were three or four lengths of lead piping; these were pointed out to him as Roman. They were some fifteen inches long and two inches square in section (he particularly remembers that they were square), the pipe wall being an eighth of an inch thick.

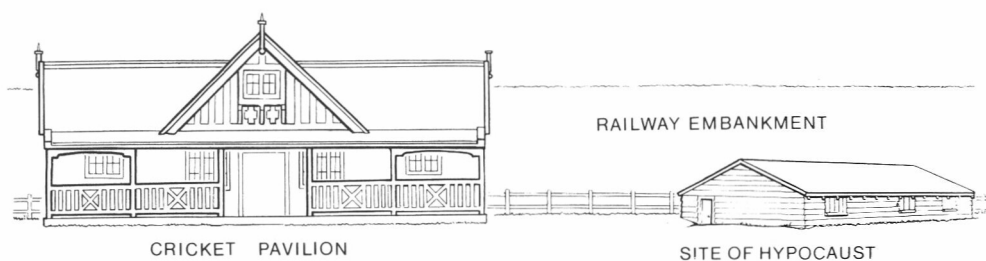


Fig. 1 Drawing taken from 1933 photograph showing relationship of hypocaust shed to pavilion.

The only published drawing of the Roman building is Sherwin's sketch plan, reproduced in Cockerton's account of Roman roads in Derbyshire (Cockerton, 1939). This plan indicates a long narrow structure aligned north-south, the southern end running under the railway embankment (presumably the hypocaust chamber lay at the northern end). Mr. A. G. Grime, a former master at Derby School, recalled that there were originally twenty hypocaust pillars in all; the most likely configuration for this number is four rows of five. The inset in the railway embankment which appears on the Ordnance Survey map SK 3537 (1965; 25 inches to the mile) apparently accommodated the southeast corner of the shed. When the embankment was reduced in height a new concrete boundary fence was erected which ignored this feature (Fig. 2).

No photographs of the excavations are known to the writer. The display of pottery in the library at Derby School (St. Helen's House) apparently was dispersed when the school was evacuated to Overton Hall at the beginning of World War II. Mr. J. P. Gillam recalled that in 1939 there were three tea chests full of potsherds from the site stored in the pavilion; these also have since disappeared. Due to deterioration the shed overlying the hypocaust chamber was dismantled and the site covered over. In 1952 a new groundsman levelled the site.

In February 1968 a ramp was constructed at the entrance to the sports ground to carry the access road over the newly-erected flood defensive wall. While excavating the foundation trench for the northern retaining wall, a concrete floor assumed to be Roman was encountered and cut through at a depth of one foot below the surface. The floor lay at the western end of the trench; no trace remained of any associated walls, but it was evident that the floor continued westward and southward and that only its northeast corner had been encountered and an area ten feet by four destroyed. The concrete was 2½ inches thick and lay on a layer of red clay 1½ inches thick, set in a layer of sand one foot thick.

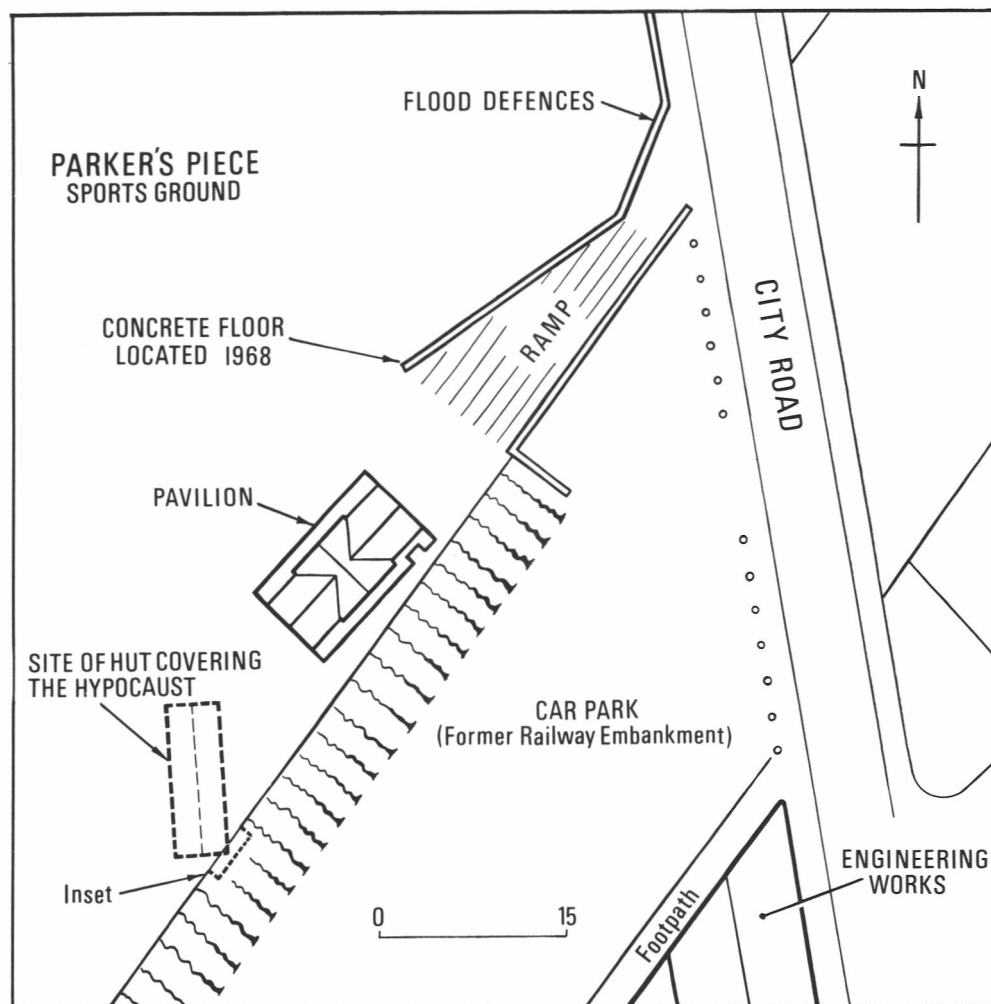


Fig. 2 Position of the hypocaust building on Parker's Piece. Scale in metres.

Two phases of occupation could be discerned, for beneath the sand and partly underlying the floor was an extensive deposit of burnt clay and charcoal some five to seven inches thick. This deposit, which also lay in sand, extended northeastwards along the foundation trench for a distance of some forty to fifty feet. It contained no artifacts other than a few fragments of an amphora.

#### REFERENCES

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