

On a Roman Villa recently discovered at Grimston, Norfolk.

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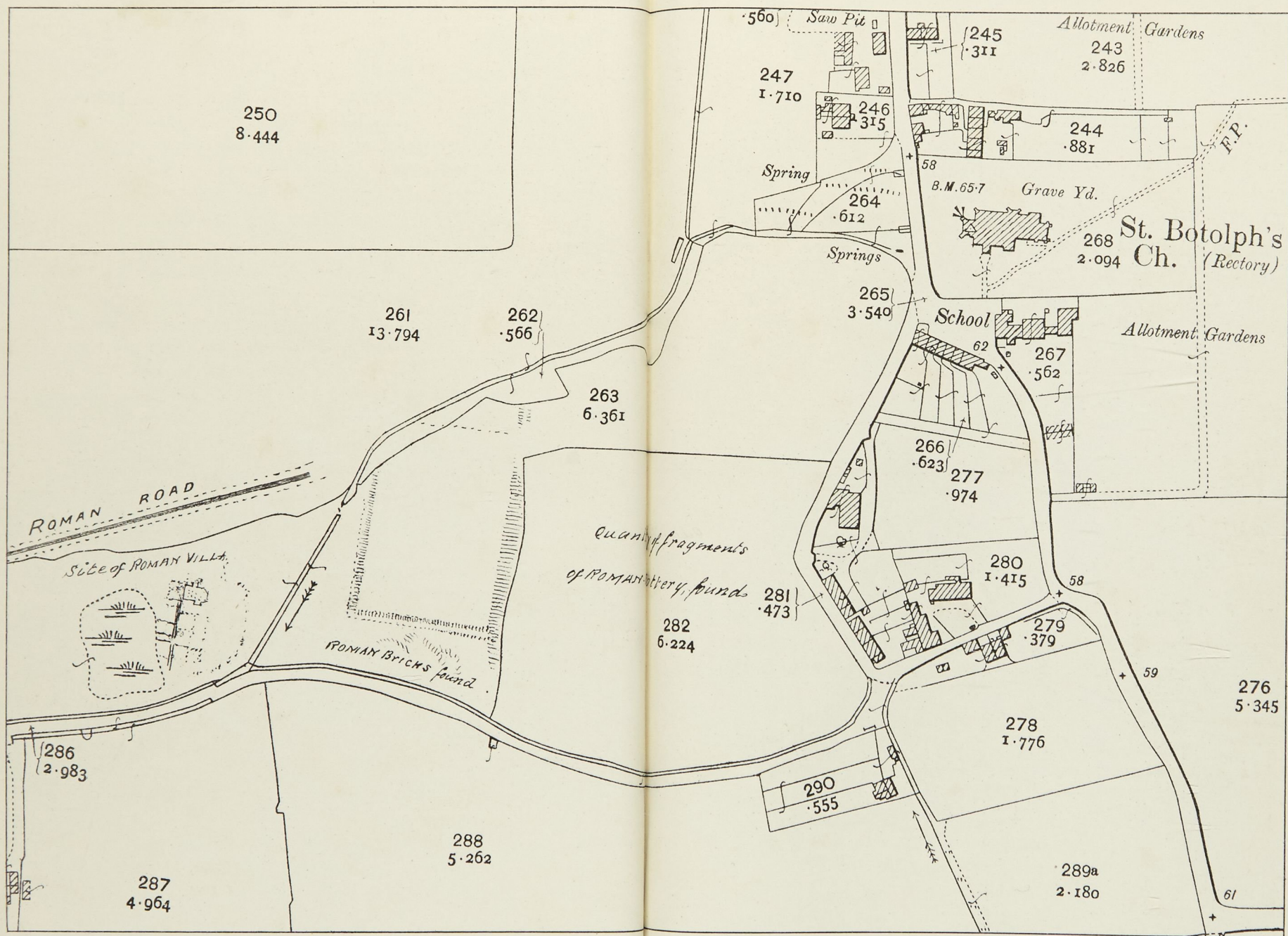
HENRY LAVER, F.S.A.,

President of the Essex Archaeological Society.

NEARLY opposite to the south-western corner of Grimston churchyard is a gate leading into a grass field, and on passing through this field into the next one, it will be noticed that there is, in the middle of this field, a square area surrounded by a low bank. In the Ordnance Map of 1905 this field is numbered 263. Whatever may be the origin of this bank and ditch is not evident, but any way it must be passed over for the present.

In the next field an old gravel or clay pit comes into view, and is marked as such in the Ordnance Map before mentioned.

It was in looking round this pit that Dr. Philip Laver and his wife, of Colchester, whilst on a visit to his brother, Dr. J. W. Laver of Grimston, during the spring of 1905, discovered some Roman tesserae of both the ordinary red and coloured forms, and from his knowledge and experience of what these tesserae indicated in the district surrounding Colchester, he came to the conclusion that probably the remains of a Roman villa existed in the immediate vicinity, a most favourable



MAP OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD OF ROMAN VILLA AT GRIMSTON.

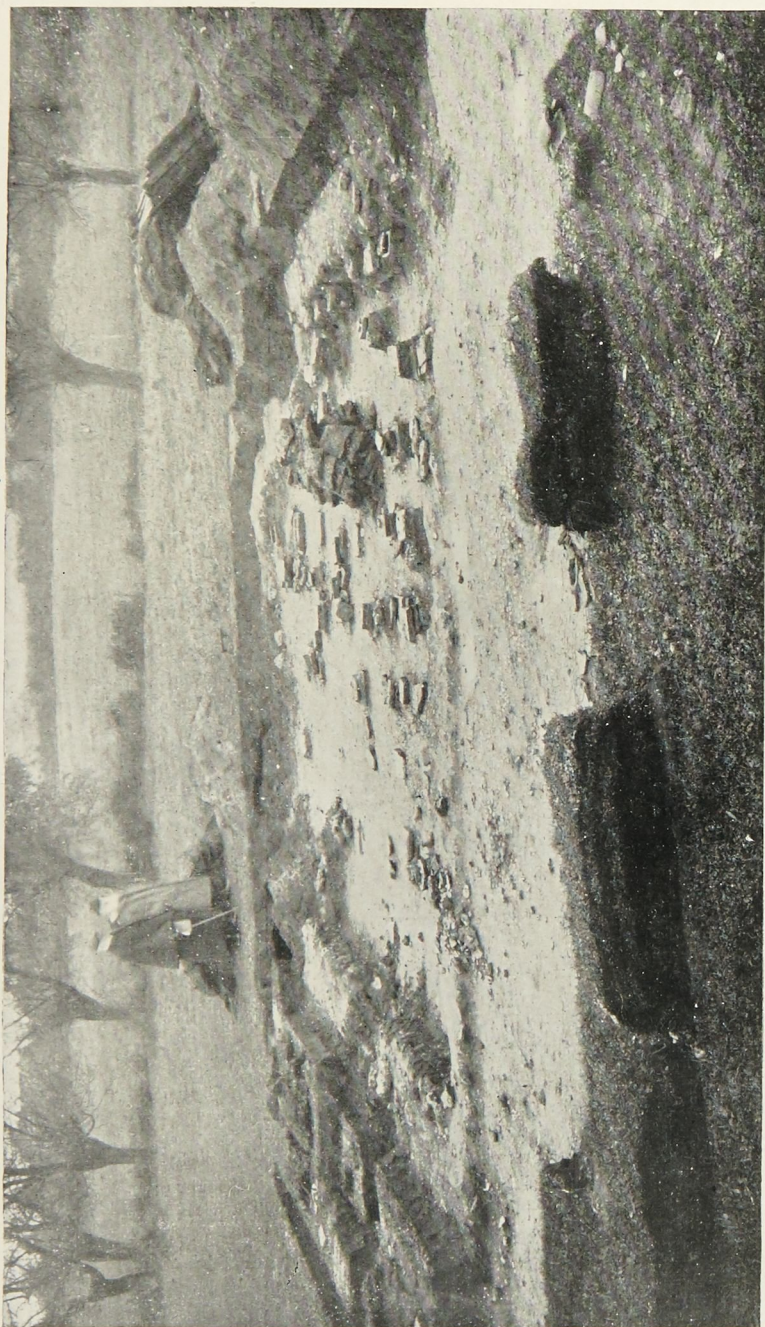
position with such good springs of water near by. Further investigation confirmed his first impressions, that there had been a villa here, and that it was probably of considerable dimensions.

Dr. Laver also noticed that to the northward of this field where these remains were discovered, and forming its boundary in this direction, was a large and perfectly straight bank, with a ditch on either side, indicating very clearly a Roman road. The direction of this bank was towards Grimston Church, where it ceases, but in following on in the same line it was found it fell into other roads and could be apparently traced in a direct line as far as the Peddar's Way. All these circumstances confirming the original suppositions, I advised that information should be given of these facts to the Norfolk and Norwich Archæological Society.

After some little delay, caused by difficulties in the arrangements for proceeding with the excavations, it was decided by the Society to endeavour, with the kind consent of the Marquis Cholmondely, to explore whatever relics might exist under the surface of this grass field, and to make such records, by plans and otherwise, as might best conduce to one of the objects for which the Society existed.

It was hoped that some tessellated pavement might be discovered—an object of considerable interest—as up to that date none had been found in the County of Norfolk, a matter of considerable surprise when it is considered how numerous are the other evidences of the Roman occupation of East Anglia.

To carry out the desire of the Society to explore these remains, Major Bale of Colchester, a native of Norfolk, a most excellent draughtsman, was asked to take charge of the work, and to make note of and to preserve every object of interest which might be brought



SITE OF EXCAVATION.

to light, and to make such sketches as might be desirable. All needful arrangements being settled, work was commenced in October, 1906, by excavating and laying bare all the foundations of walls which could be discovered. Work had not proceeded far before it was apparent that a considerable part, perhaps the larger part, of the villa had been destroyed and removed in making the pit before mentioned, and as the work progressed a still further loss appeared, as it was found that all stone worth removal had been taken out of the walls and other parts of the building, the pavement over the hypocaust even being broken up for the tiles and bricks it had contained.

Although so much had been destroyed there still remained many relics of great interest and importance, amongst them many pieces of wall plaster, which showed that the walls of the rooms were decorated in beautiful colours and designs.

From the damage the building had received, and from the destruction it had undergone in excavating the clay pit, most unfortunately a plan of the entire villa could not be traced, a not uncommon event in rich agricultural districts, especially if there is a scarcity of good building stone, when any ancient walls are considered to be most desirable quarries, and the walls disappear in consequence. The excavations were commenced by laying bare all walls which could be found, and when any pavements were seen the whole of the overlying soil was removed, a not very difficult operation as the walls were covered by only ten to eighteen inches of soil, and the pavements by only a few inches more. After uncovering all existing walls and pavements, it was found there was a central corridor running north and south, and having at the northern end a square room. Thirty feet from north to south and twenty-five feet from east to west nearly

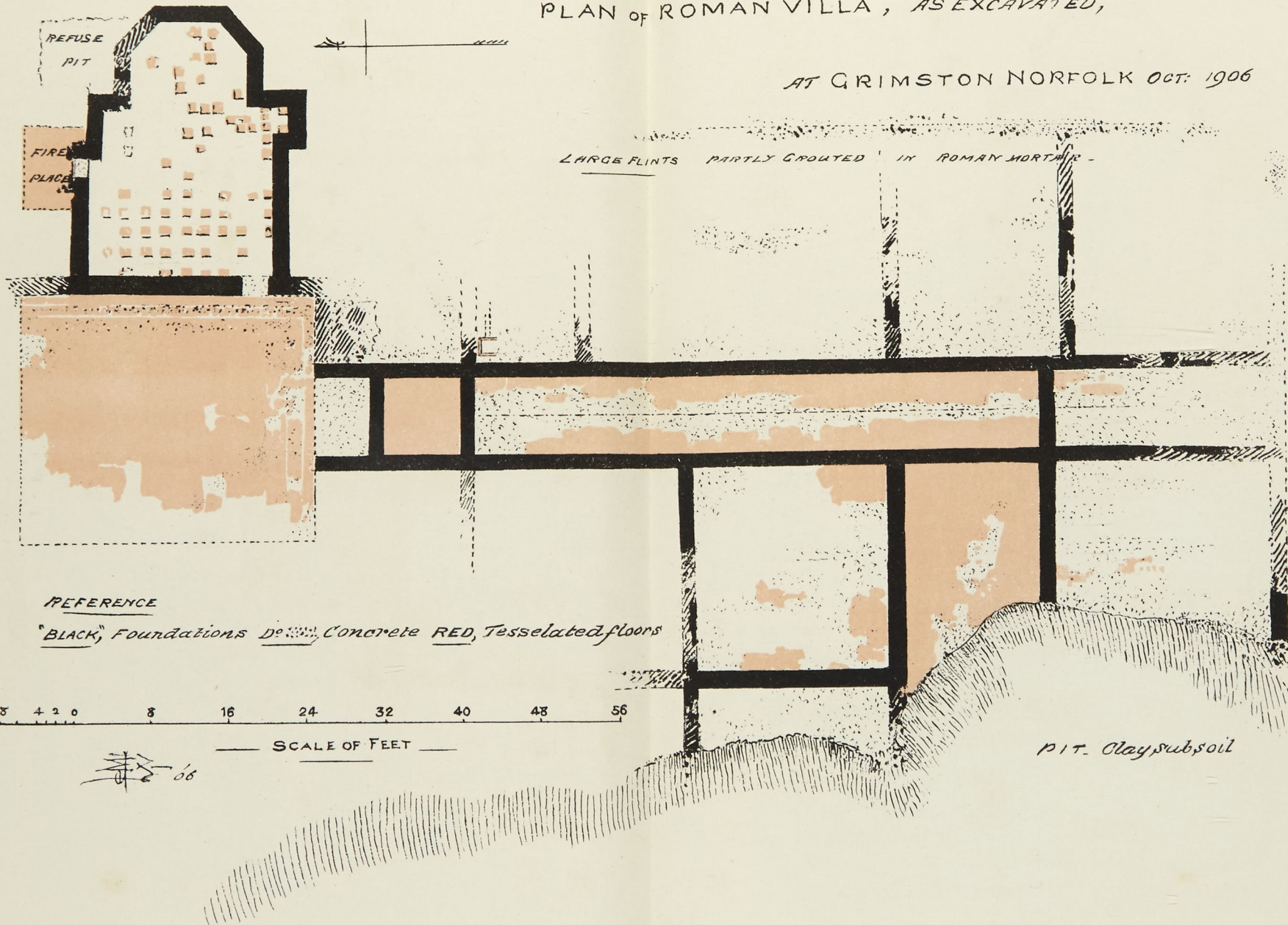
the whole floor of this room was perfect, the tesserae of which it was composed were about an inch square, cut out of red tiles and laid without forming any pattern, excepting that at about a foot from the wall there was a white line formed of two rows of white tesserae, and at eighteen inches from this line was another parallel line formed in the same manner, the space between them and all the rest of the floor being formed, as before stated, by common red tesserae.

The corridor was eight feet wide, and if two square divisions at the north end and a longer one at the south are included in the measurement, it was one hundred feet long, and like the room mentioned the pavement was of red tesserae, and in a fairly perfect condition. On the east side of the corridor, commencing at the south end, were the remains of five walls. These were the inclosing walls of rooms, the first was twenty feet square, the second sixteen by twenty-four feet, the third thirty-two feet by twenty-four, the fourth twelve feet by twenty-four, and then next to it a space in which walls were not apparent. There were vestiges of red pavement in all these rooms, but of the outside wall, parallel to that of the corridor, there were traces only.

Between the corridor and the clay pit there were distinct evidences of five rooms, the first at the south end of the corridor was twenty-four feet wide, but as the western wall of this and the next had disappeared, the lengths cannot be given. This room had traces of a red pavement. The next room was fourteen feet wide and had a fairly complete pavement of red tesserae. The next room had only traces of a red pavement and was twenty-two feet wide and the same long, but to the west the walls were continued about eight feet up to the edge of the clay pit, and it was here the first appearances of the building were discovered. This room

PLAN OF ROMAN VILLA, AS EXCAVATED,

AT GRIMSTON NORFOLK OCT. 1906



LARGE FLINTS PARTLY COATED IN ROMAN MORTAR -

REFERENCE

BLACK, Foundations Dotted, Concrete RED, Tessellated floors

8 4 2 0 8 16 24 32 40 48 56

SCALE OF FEET

10/6

PIT. Clay subsoil

like the last had only traces of red pavement. Following the line of the corridor to the north, there were traces of two other rooms, the first being twenty feet square, and the next about fourteen feet wide. No traces of pavement remained in these two last. To the east of the first room described, and apparently opening out of it, was a large room with an apsidal end towards the east. This apse did not extend the whole width of the room, the opening of the apse being only twelve feet, and the room measuring at its widest part twenty feet, with a length of about eighteen feet to the opening. The apse was octagonal in form, with a projection of eight feet and a width, as before stated, of about twelve feet. This form of apse is most unusual, as the apse as constructed by the Romans was almost invariably circular in form, if we may judge by the examples discovered in Britain.

Towards the north there was an opening about two feet wide for the furnace of the hypocaust, and considerable traces of the walls of the furnace remained. Charcoal was plentiful both here and in a refuse pit adjoining the furnace. This room was the only one remaining in which there were any traces of a hypocaust. The floor of the hypocaust was of concrete, without any paving. On it remained a large number of the bases of the pilæ, or columns to support the floor of the room above. Some of these were of much interest, as they were irregular sections of a tessellated pavement from an earlier building with the tesseræ still in position. These slabs had most frequently their tessellated face turned downwards. Others of these pilæ were formed of stones, tiles, brick, or apparently anything which came first to hand. Many of these bases of columns had in the mortar of their upper surface the impress of the stone columns which supported the floor. These supporting-columns were unusually small, only some five inches in

diameter. It is needless to say that none remained, as all the stone and useful material had been removed, not only from here but also throughout the building. It is much to be regretted that none of these round columns were left. Had any remained there would have been an opportunity for identifying the stone used. The carr stone which occurs in this district is often in thin slabs, and it may be these round columns were cut from this local stone. As before stated, the floor above the hypocaust had been so broken up that it would have been impossible to have restored the design, a matter for much regret, as although the design was formed of geometrical figures only, it was probably a very good example, as the colouring of the tesserae was brilliant, and so many were of such small dimensions. Many of the cubes were cut from the remains of Samian vessels. All the tesserae and other relics found were handed over to the agent of the estate.

In some parts of the walls of the hypocaust the flue tiles stood in their original position for heating the walls of the room above. The space left after the floor above the hypocaust had been broken up was filled with the remains of the building, broken pottery, bits of bricks and tiles, and oyster shells. There were also found a considerable number of the shells of the so-called Roman snail, better known perhaps as the apple snail—a species which does not appear to exist anywhere at the present time in Norfolk. There were also found in the rubbish several articles like little bricks or tiles, which, as mortar is adhering to them, must have been somewhere in use, though how or what for is a puzzle to all who have examined them. They are about the thickness of an ordinary plain tile of the present day, and are from four to four and a half inches long, an inch and a half wide, and in the centre is a round hole, about half an inch

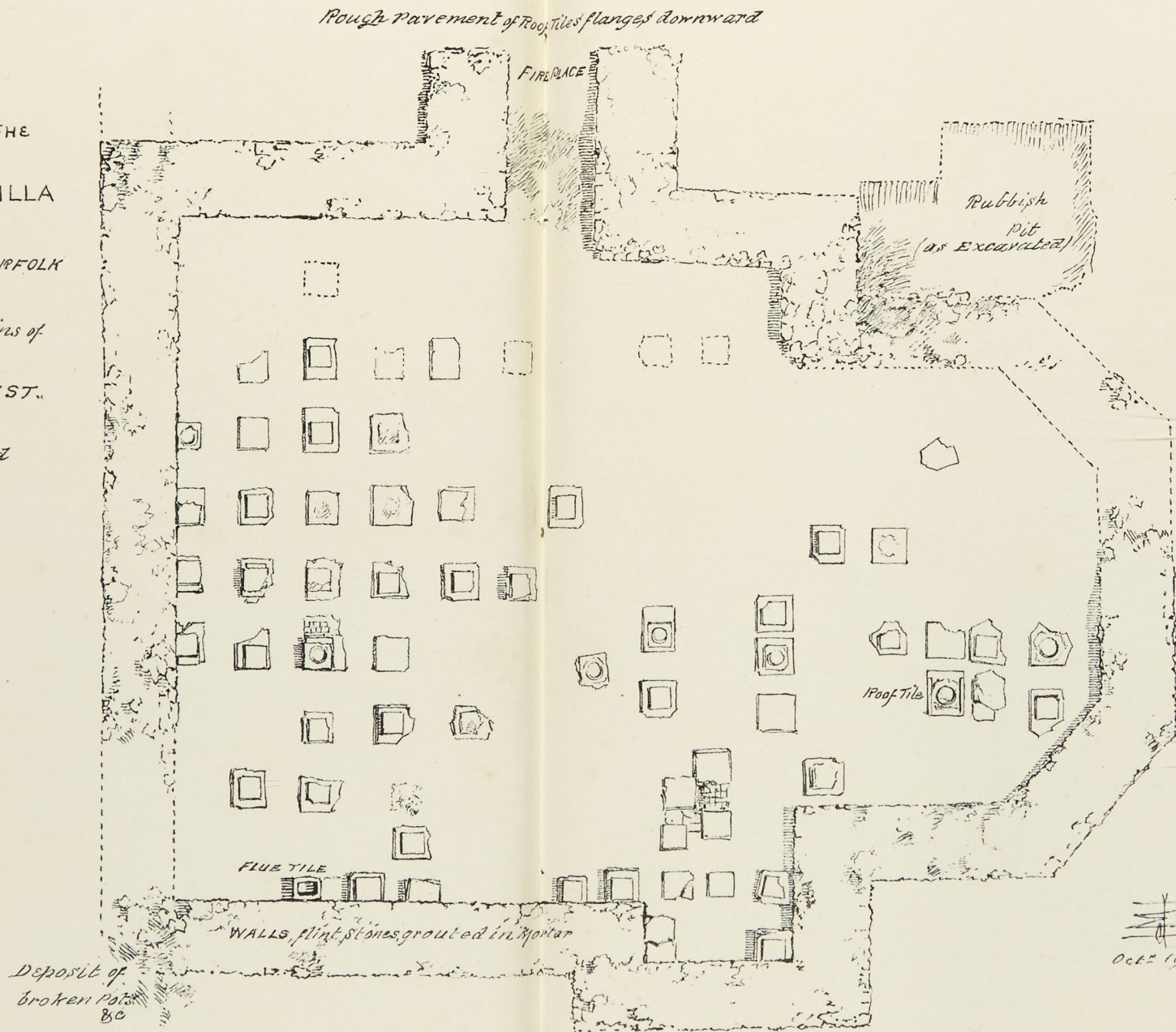
PLAN OF THE
ROMAN VILLA

GRIMSTON NORFOLK

Showing remains of
HYPOCAUST.

Discovered

Oct 1906



Rough Pavement of Roof Tiles flanged downward

FIREPLACE

Rubbish Pit
(as Excavated)

Roof Tile

FLUE TILE

WALLS, flint stones grouted in Mortar

Deposit of
Broken Pottery
80

2 4 6 8 10 12 14 ft
SCALE OF FEET

Oct 1906

GRIMSGON, NORFOLK.

DRAWING of FRAGMENTS of PAINTED WALL PLASTER ON SITE of ROMAN VILLA.



Scale about two-thirds of original size.

in diameter. They have not been chopped out of any tile, as they are carefully made, and the hole was bored through previously to the baking.

The height of the walls as we found them rarely exceeded eighteen inches, and there was but little variation in their thickness; those around the hypocaust measuring nearly two feet, the rest a little over eighteen inches. All were composed of a rubble, in which flint predominated; but there were numerous fragments of Roman bricks, tiles, and stones, and on some of these, which had evidently been re-used, were portions covered with red mortar, and with these exceptions red mortar did not appear to have been used in building the walls.

In no part could we find any doorsteps or ground-sills. Nor could we find any marks indicating either their position or the substance of which they were composed. Amongst the rubbish filling up the hypocaust and other parts of the ruin were large quantities of coloured wall plaster, in a fragmentary condition; so broken, indeed, that the designs which once decorated the rooms could not be restored. The colours were, when first uncovered, very brilliant. An examination of the fragments did not show any cases of re-colouring—a rather unusual circumstance, as it is often found that a coloured and carefully painted wall has been re-plastered and re-painted.

No important finds occurred in articles of metal or bone. In iron, nails were rather numerous; and there were some examples of knives, but these were small and mostly imperfect. In bronze, the finds were of no importance, a few fragments of brooches were discovered, but there were no coins or spoons in any shape. There were a few pieces of lead found, but no vessel or implement of this metal. Bone in a finished state was rare, nothing being found except a few ordinary

hairpins. But of animal bones a very large quantity were turned out from the ruins and from the refuse pit, all the usual domestic animals being represented. There were numerous bones and teeth of the horse, ox, sheep, pig, and dog; also of the common fowl, and another bird—probably goose. Portions of the antlers of the red deer and roebuck were not rare, and there were some horn cores of the goat. In glass, there were numerous fragments of both window and bottle glass, but no perfect vessel. Shells of the apple snail, oyster, cockle, winkle, clam, and mussel were common. Fragments of pottery were present in large quantities, but no perfect vessel was found. Half a mortar in Samian ware was the nearest approach to a perfect vessel of this ware.

Although no great finds occurred in excavating the remains of this villa, the results were satisfactory, as it is clearly shown that Norfolk, like most counties in England, had a population during the period of the Roman occupation, highly advanced in the arts and conveniences of life, and that they were not confined to the fortresses and towns only of the county.

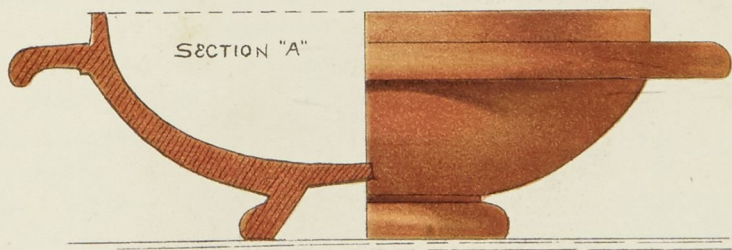
The discovery of this villa has led to attention being called to some Roman remains at Gayton Thorpe, near by, where it is reported there is another mosaic pavement, if not more than one. From the rarity of Roman remains in Norfolk it must be most desirable to have this find uncovered and examined, and as the pavements are only under a thin layer of earth it would not be a very expensive matter for the Society.

There is another spot very near to the Grimston villa which it would be very desirable to investigate, as several fields have large quantities of fragments of Roman pottery scattered over them; and there is also the square area surrounded by a bank and ditch, previously

PORTION of MORTAR of SAMIAN WARE.



PLAN of SOFFIT RESTORED from FRAGMENT "A".



BRICK OR TILE

p. 224

Scale about two-thirds of original size.

mentioned in this report. This certainly should be examined, and more especially an adjoining field, called Temple Field, should not be neglected, for the name is very suggestive, especially as there is a tradition in the district, amongst the labourers, that it received that name from there having formerly been a Roman temple there. This tale could not have arisen in consequence of the present discovery of a Roman building, as the tradition of a Roman temple having originally been in this field has existed in the district from time immemorial.

The plan of the remains of the villa, and the drawings of the colouring of the fragments of wall plaster, and the position of the ruin on the map of the Ordnance Survey, are from drawings made by Major Bale during the progress of the work of excavation, which he at my request superintended, and as he is so careful a draughtsman, their correctness may be absolutely depended on.

Should these finds result in attracting increased attention and interest in the Society to the numerous Roman remains throughout the County of Norfolk, much good may result. A county in which the site of the great Arsenal and Naval Station of Brancaster, and also of that of Venta Icenorum, a town of sufficient importance to be named as the final station of one of the Antonine Itineraries, besides many other interesting Roman stations, must have a very large number of remains of buildings and other relics of this period well worthy of consideration and investigation by the Society, from the light they would shed on the history of the County during its occupation by the Roman garrisons.