

# NEW LIGHT ON THE ROMAN BATH BUILDING AND VILLA AT BEDDINGTON

AN INTERIM REPORT

BY

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EARLY in 1871 a Roman bath building was discovered during the construction of the Sewage Farm at Beddington and this was hurriedly excavated so as not to interrupt the building operations. Reports of this excavation appeared in several journals,<sup>1</sup> by far the most detailed being that in the *British Archaeological Association's Journal*, but like most nineteenth-century excavation accounts they gave little indication of the date of the building or the length of its occupation.

In order to try and remedy some of these deficiencies in our knowledge of the site, a small-scale re-examination of the Roman levels was undertaken about 30 feet outside the south wall of the building in the hope that here the layers would not be disturbed by the 1871 excavation. Fortunately the Roman levels had remained intact despite frequent ploughing on the site since mediæval times. The following section describes the results of the two small trenches that were recently dug.<sup>2</sup> As the stratification in both trenches was identical, the layers described refer to either trench.

## *Period I*

This phase is represented by layer 4, which was the original top soil or plough soil during the three centuries before the metalling of Period II was laid down. Some early activity on the site is attested by a first-century rim of Belgic type found some way down in the layer,<sup>3</sup> but most of the pottery came from higher up and is second, third or fourth century in date. A scatter of tile fragments occurred just beneath the Period II cobbling, strongly suggesting that building operations took place on the site shortly before the

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<sup>1</sup> *J.B.A.A.*, XXVII, 514-9 (this includes a carefully drawn architect's plan); *P.S.A.*,<sup>2</sup> V, 150-4 (this contains a drawing of one of the sherds discovered); *Sy.A.C.*, VI, 118-21 (this includes a rather rudimentary and less reliable plan).

<sup>2</sup> 26-8 August 1959 and 6-12 April 1960. After these two trenches had been completed an attempt was made to relate the Roman stratification to the south wall of the bath building, but unfortunately the 1871 disturbances had removed everything down to subsoil, including the wall itself.

<sup>3</sup> A few small pieces of Samian ware found in 1871 may also possibly indicate some early activity on the site.

laying down of layer 3; this appears to mark the construction of the bath building.<sup>4</sup>

### *Period II*

Layer 3 was laid down in this phase to form either a metalled yard surrounding the bath building or more probably a cobbled surface connecting the baths to the villa which seems to have existed to the south.<sup>5</sup> In the construction of this yard an opportunity seems to have been used for clearing up the debris left lying about after the building operations at the end of Phase I: broken tegulae

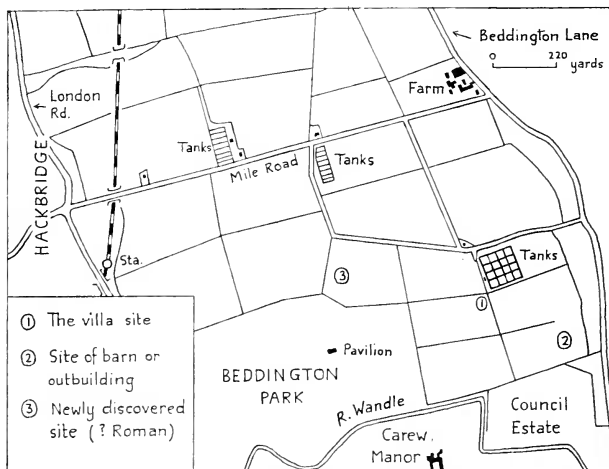


FIG. 1.—PLAN OF BEDDINGTON SEWAGE FARM SHOWING ROMAN SITES.

and imbrices, pieces of unmortared scored flue-tile, bones, residual pottery and earth thrown out in digging the bath building foundations, and flint and chert pebbles from the subsoil—all were packed tightly together to make up the metalling. A fairly unworn coin of Constantine the Great of A.D. 321<sup>6</sup> was the latest dateable object

<sup>4</sup> There are very few hints in the 1871 excavation reports as to when the bath building was constructed. The only definitely dateable object mentioned as coming from within the building, apart from a late Saxon penny, is an VRBS ROMA coin of A.D. 330–5. Had it been built very much earlier than this date, it seems likely that third-century coins would have been found.

<sup>5</sup> The evidence for supposing that a villa may lie just to the south of the bath building is discussed on pp. 41–42.

<sup>6</sup> I am greatly indebted to Dr. John Kent, F.S.A., of the British Museum, for contributing the details of this coin. He says that coins of this type did not circulate much after about A.D. 335.

found in layer 3 and suggests that the cobbling was laid down not much earlier than about A.D. 330; in fact a date rather nearer A.D. 350 is suggested by the worn rim of red colour-coated flanged bowl found in layer 4.

### Period III

Overlying the Period II cobbling was layer 2, a deposit of darkish soil containing neither stones nor pottery. This must represent the

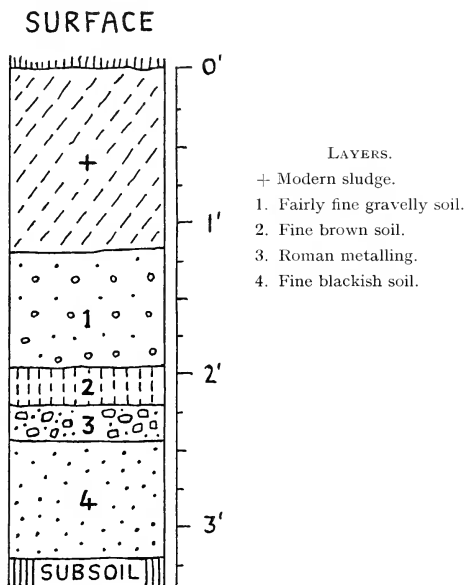


FIG. 2.—SECTION.

soil accumulation on the derelict site after occupation had ceased, probably some time after the middle of the fourth century judging by the late cavetto-rim lying on the cobbled surface.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> There is hardly any evidence in the 1871 excavation-reports to suggest that the bath building was occupied in the latter part of the fourth century. The latest coin found, one of Constans (A.D. 337-50), came from some distance to the south of the bath building.

## THE FINDS

*Pottery* (Fig. 3)

From layer 4:

1. Rim of storage jar in reddish-brown ware with grey porridgy core and traces of black surface. This example is a Belgic one, but fourth-century parallels are known.
2. Rim of pie-dish in coarse grey ware. Cf. *Jewry Wall*,<sup>8</sup> Fig. 19, 14, second to third century.
3. Rim, perhaps a local imitation of narrow-mouthed Castor ware beaker. Coarse brown-grey ware. Third century.

Also from this layer: rim of red colour-coated flanged bowl, surface very worn, fourth century; cavetto-rim jar in black-burnished ware, cf. Gillam,<sup>9</sup> type 144, A.D. 200-80; rim of pie-dish, cf. 2.

From layer 3:

4. Rim of pie-dish in coarse grey ware with slightly-polished surface inside and out. Second to early third century.
5. Rim of flanged bowl in hard light grey ware. The rim hardly projects above the level of the flange. Late third to early fourth century.
6. Cavetto-rim jar in coarse grey ware. Cf. *Sy.A.C.*, LVII, 59, Fig. 4, W5, third century.
7. Square rim of narrow-necked globular jar in coarse light grey ware. These plain rims are second- or third-century predecessors of the more ornate square rims of early fourth-century date found in Kiln III at Overwey, Tilford.<sup>10</sup>

Also from this layer: small fragment of a folded beaker in colour-coated ware. Coarse buff paste, chocolate-brown colour-coat inside, slate colour-coat outside with rouletting, third to fourth century; several small fragments of colour-coated ware in white paste with slate colour-coat inside and out, probably Castor ware, third to fourth century; rim of pie-dish, cf. 2, but with black burnished surface. All the other sherds from this layer are small and worn and include fragments of several second-century cavetto rims.

From the surface of layer 3:

8. Cavetto rim of jar in coarse brown-grey ware with traces of external black burnished surface. Fourth century.

Also from this layer: straight-sided rim in coarse light grey ware—possibly of pie-dish, possibly of flanged bowl—fourth century; small fragment of black colour-coated beaker in soft pink ware, third to fourth century.

<sup>8</sup> *Excavations at the Jewry Wall Site, Leicester*, by Kathleen M. Kenyon. Report of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries No. XV.

<sup>9</sup> "Types of Roman Coarse Pottery Vessels in North Britain," by John P. Gillam. *Arch. Ael.*,<sup>4</sup> XXXV, 180-251.

<sup>10</sup> *Sy.A.C.*, LI, 29-56.

*Coin:*

Obv. CONSTANTINVS AVG with laureate bust of Constantine I facing right.

Rev. BEATA TRANQVILLITAS with altar inscribed VOTIS XX and mint mark  $\overline{\text{PTR}}$ . (Trèves) A.D. 321.

This AE coin was found in layer 3, together with a half of a pair of bronze tweezers of the usual pattern. Two iron nails about 3 inches long were found lying on the cobbled surface. Oyster shells occurred in layers 3 and 4, and in layer 3 were found many sheep's teeth together with a bone of a cow or ox.

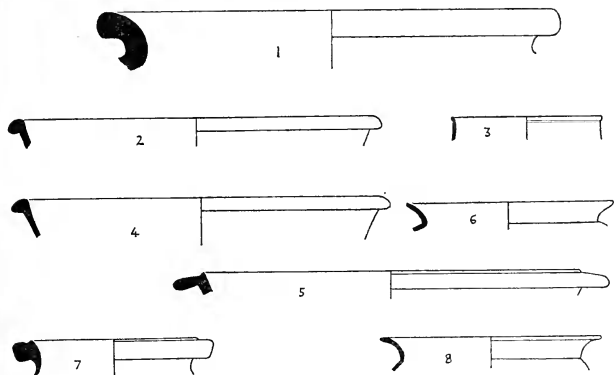


FIG. 3.—THE POTTERY. (all  $\frac{1}{4}$  except No. 1, which is  $\frac{1}{8}$ )

## CONCLUSIONS

The Beddington bath house has often been considered an example of the problematical "isolated" kind of bath house, assumed to have been devoid of any surrounding buildings. As a result of the investigations of the last few years, much evidence has accumulated to suggest that this bath building was in fact part of a villa complex, the main house of which was probably built of timber and has not yet been positively identified.<sup>11</sup> It appears to lie to the south of the bath building, separated from it by a cobbled yard. On the plan of the bath building (Fig. 4) two stumps of walls are marked on the south side, which seem to indicate the beginning of what may well have been a corridor leading across the cobbling to the main house.

<sup>11</sup> *Archæological News Letter*, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 30. Mr. A. L. F. Rivet points out that "isolated" bath houses are most common in S.E. England where building stone is short. They are usually interpreted as relating to a timber villa, the baths alone being built of stone because of the high fire risk.

From the amount of earlier pottery beneath the cobbling it may be deduced that the site was occupied in some way during the first, second and third centuries A.D., and it seems reasonable to associate this occupation with the main villa rather than with the bath house which appears to have been added later. Nothing definite is yet known about the villa itself, but a small trial trench dug on its presumed site some 75 feet to the south of the bath house produced tegulae, fragments of plaster and a couple of red tesserae with traces of adhering mortar.<sup>12</sup>

Situated as it is on the Taplow terrace gravels which were lightly wooded but inclined to be rather infertile, the villa more probably kept sheep and cattle than grew grain; the bones found in the recent excavation tend to support such a conclusion. Doubtless the large and growing commercial centre of Londinium not far distant proved a good outlet for meat, hides, wool and lard.<sup>13</sup>

A 20-foot square structure or shed found some 300 yards to the south-east of the bath house in 1871<sup>14</sup> appears to have been one of the outbuildings of the villa estate. The coins<sup>15</sup> found in and around this building suggest that it was in use from the end of the third century to the beginning of the fourth. This seems to imply that the villa itself must have been in existence at this time.

A structure consisting of two hypocausted rooms about 6 feet wide is reported to have been discovered a mile away from the bath building in 1889.<sup>16</sup> The find spot is not precisely known but seems to have been near the northern edge of the Sewage Farm close to the boundary with Mitcham Common. The references cited in the footnote below are so brief and ambiguous that it is impossible to deduce anything from them about the nature and purpose of this structure or its relationship to the villa estate.

The bath house itself appears to have been a late addition to the villa buildings, and was evidently constructed towards the middle of the fourth century. The walls were made of flint rubble and mortar, but bonding tile courses were added in the exterior walls. It is not easy to ascertain the functions of the various rooms chiefly because there are no hints in the excavation reports as to the position of the stoke hole or holes. If the entrance to the baths was at the end of the presumed corridor leading from the villa, then all the rooms on the west side of the large one must have been introductory, including a changing room, latrine and perhaps a cold plunge bath which might have been room 1 (see Fig. 4).

<sup>12</sup> This trench was dug in June 1962.

<sup>13</sup> On p. 133 of *Roman Britain* (Penguin edition, 1955) Professor Richmond states that lard was required in large quantities by the Roman army, so it may well be that in the economy of villas more or less devoted to keeping livestock the production of lard was of vital importance.

<sup>14</sup> *Sy.A.C.*, VI, 121. This site is marked (2) on our Fig. 1.

<sup>15</sup> A coin of Claudius II (A.D. 268-70) was found within the outbuilding and two coins were found outside it, one being of Carausius (A.D. 287-93) and the other of Allectus (A.D. 293-6).

<sup>16</sup> *J.B.A.A.*, XLV, 200; *Arch. Rev.*, IV, 68.

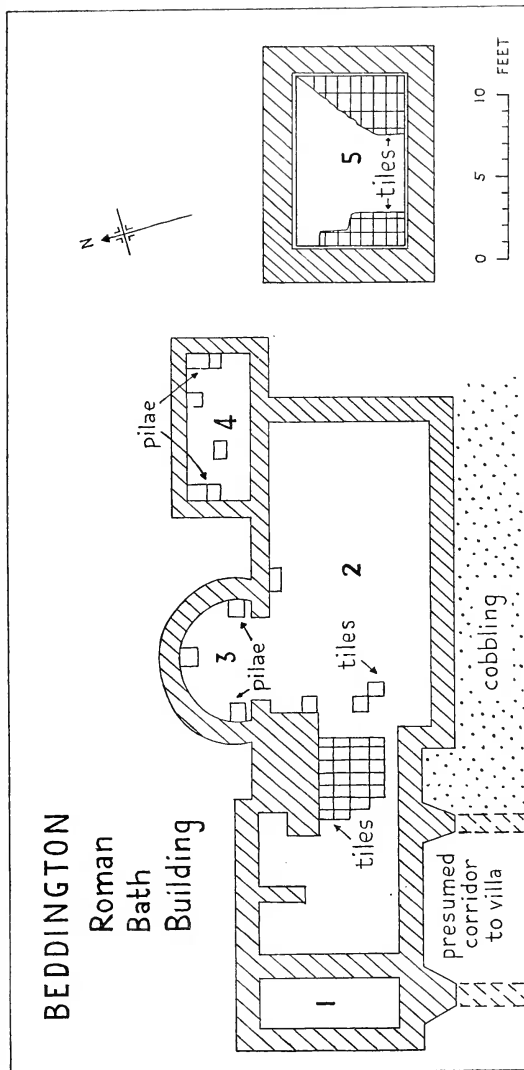


FIG. 4.—PLAN.

The large room 2 must have been heated, and may be interpreted as a warm room despite the fact that no *pila* appear to have been found in it. It is inconceivable that the apsidal hot bath (room 3) should have opened off an unheated room. Room 4 also opened off the large room—it may have been either a hot room or another hot bath.

The main problem is the so-called “detached” room 5 lying to the east of the remainder of the building. Undoubtedly it appears to have been a cold bath as it had a tiled floor set in *opus signinum* and plastered walls, but it occupies a most unusual position for such a function. It might have been possible that the 1871 excavators failed to notice robbed walls joining this room to the rest of the building, but in fact the walls of the detached chamber are completely out of alignment with the others.

The bath building did not have a long life. Some time after the middle of the fourth century the site seems to have been abandoned. It is interesting to note that the fortified Iron Age enclosure on the site of Wallington County School, less than a mile away, was reoccupied at some time during the second half of the fourth century.<sup>17</sup> It is tempting to associate this renewed occupation with the Beddington villa inhabitants who might possibly have sought refuge there, but this can be no more than a fanciful surmise.

The villa and bath building either collapsed or were burnt down and the site must have been robbed extensively for tiles and flints in the succeeding centuries. The late Saxon coin found within the bath house in 1871 may well have been dropped by someone searching the remains for building materials or treasure and the amount of Roman tile incorporated into the mediaeval fabric of St. Mary's church close by is ample proof of the activities of stone robbers.

#### *Acknowledgments*

The author wishes to express his gratitude to Mr. E. Hodgson, B.Sc. (Manager of the Sewage Farm), for so readily granting permission to excavate and for showing such patience with the excavators. The staff of the Farm were also very helpful and took a great deal of interest in the work. Especial thanks are due to Mr. Sheppard Frere, M.A., F.S.A., who gave much encouragement and advice in the writing of this report. It is also a pleasure to acknowledge the help of Robert Balchin, Martin Bradley, David Crawley, Malcolm Crockford and David Mason, all of whom were at the time the author's fellow pupils at Bec School, Tooting. Finally, the excavation would never have been completed without the enthusiastic interest and assistance of Mr. John Buckell of Aristotle School, Stockwell.

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<sup>17</sup> *Sy.A.C.*, LVI, 134. All the Roman pottery found on this site is of fourth-century date and includes New Forest ware and a rosette-stamped sherd.