

R. Mather, del.

J. Enslie & Sons lith.

ROMAN SARCOPHAGUS DISCOVERED AT LOWER CLAPTON.

IN THE POSSESSION OF THE GUNSTON ESQ.



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BUST AND INSCRIPTION ON ROMAN SARCOPHAGUS

IN THE POSSESSION OF T. D. E. GUNSTON, ESQ.

ON A ROMAN SARCOPHAGUS OF WHITE MARBLE DISCOVERED AT LOWER CLAPTON, MIDDLESEX.

BY BENJAMIN CLARKE, ESQ., F.R.C.S.

[Read at an Evening Meeting of the Society, Jan. 13th, 1868.]

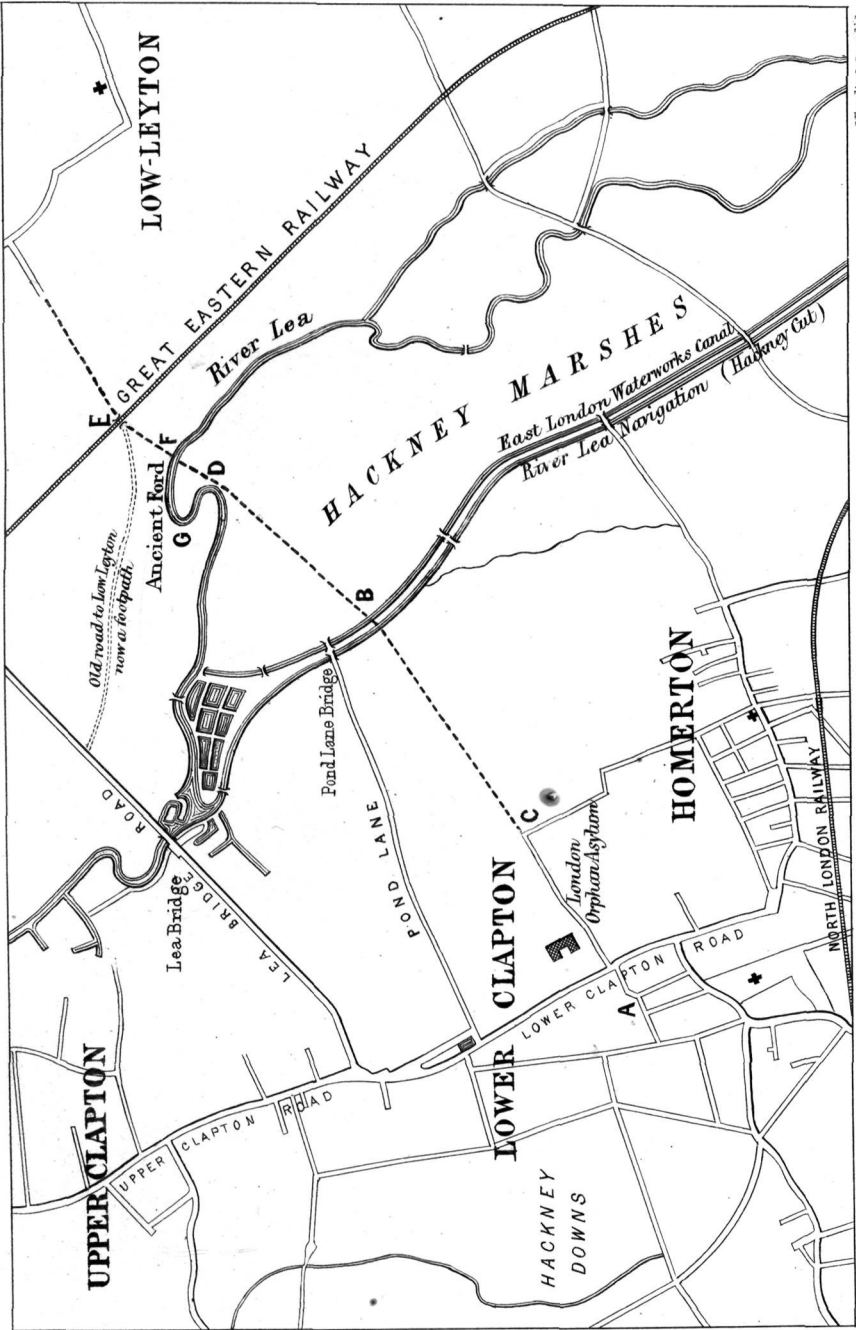
EARLY in September, 1867, a notice appeared in the papers of the discovery of a Roman sarcophagus of white marble in the course of excavations for building purposes at Lower Clapton. I at once proceeded to the spot, and acquainted myself with the facts relating to the discovery, condensing them into a short paper which I now bring under the notice of our Society.

The site is levelled ground, recently meadow land and market gardens, situate at the rear of the London Orphan Asylum, Clapton, on the brow of the hill passing down to the marshes and river Lea, within a few feet of an old path just demolished which ran from Homerton to Lea Bridge, *viâ* Brooksby's Walk, in the direction from south to north, and another way, for many years past but a private road to a farm, running west to east, *viz.* from Clapton Square, *viâ* Clapton Alley or Passage, to the Lea river. These paths intersect each other near the spot; they are very ancient, and, in all probability, old Roman ways. The coffin was found on the natural gravel, 2 feet 6 inches from the surface, lying due east and west, the foot to the east; it is of white coarse-grained marble, and is cut from a solid block. It is about 6 feet 3 inches long, 1 foot 3 inches wide, and 1 foot 6 inches deep; the thickness being about $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The inner surface is smooth, with a rise of half an inch at one end, to serve as a rest for the head. No vestige of a lid or covering has been found, but at each end are evidences of clamp fastenings. It is plain on all sides but the front, which is ornamented with a fluted pattern, the channels being filled to a third of their height with a bead, and is an excellent illustration of cabled fluting. This is well represented in the accompanying plate (3), as is also the medallion in the centre (plate 4), which is deeply cut, about 12 inches in diameter, and

encircles a well-executed bust, possibly a portrait of the deceased. This is much damaged, with the exception of the hair and the folds of the toga about the shoulders. These are as sharp and clear as if just cut. The right hand is supported by the thumb (apparently hooked within the folds across the breast), the fore and middle fingers being stretched to their full length, and in an upward direction. The third and fourth fingers are doubled in. Beneath the medallion is an inscription in Roman letters, but, unfortunately, it has not yet been deciphered. This side of the coffin is finished off by two Corinthian pilasters, as shown in the illustration. I am informed that, on clearing away the superincumbent *debris*, the coffin was found to contain a skeleton, in the position of ordinary Christian burial, with black mould about it. The skull soon fell to pieces, and the bones were much decayed; those remaining comprised portions of the head of a femur (right), middle third of left femur, portions of left tibia and fibula, and two pieces of ribs. I should judge the deceased to have been a small-boned man, about 6 feet high, and rather knock-kneed; and take him to have been a civilian of rank, possibly a jurist, but not a military man. Not far from the sarcophagus a small brass coin of Gallienus was discovered.

The site of the interment indicated in the accompanying plan of the locality (plate 5)* possesses many features of interest. Where the causeway, in a line with Clapton Alley and that from Brooksby's Walk, Homerton, meets, the latter passes on due north-east for half a mile further in a straight line, until it reaches the banks of the river at a point which a hundred years ago was the Lea Bridge Mill Head. On the opposite bank, Mr. Maine, the resident engineer of the East London Waterworks, informs me, that at 6 feet below the present surface they have discovered a hard well-made road, composed chiefly of gravel resembling forest

* The following explanations have reference to the letters marked upon the plan:—A. Clapton Alley. B. Line of Roman road passes here within 184 yards of Pond Lane Bridge. C. Coffin's site. D. Curve point of old River Lea. E. Railway bridge. F. Ancient ford. G. Bend of old river. Line of road 850 yards from B. to F, within 20 yards of point D, and 216 yards of point G.



gravel, and that this road still tended towards the north-east, perhaps to the Old Copper Mills, formerly the Walthamstow Mill, and I believe it is stated in the *Domesday Survey*, "*Here was always a mill.*" Leland would seem to indicate a Roman way in the direction of the coffin's site. Roman coins have at various times been found, and some 25 years ago, when excavating for a wall at the rear of the asylum, a coin of Nero was discovered near the margin of a natural watercourse some 100 yards north of the spot. On more carefully inspecting the direction of the different paths, I became convinced that the Farm Road passing from Clapton Alley to the River Lea Navigation Cut in all probability passed on in an easterly course until it reached the old River Lea (which runs from north to south), and that somewhere at that point a ford would be discovered. I, therefore, have followed the course of the Farm Road from west to east, taking up the line on the other side of the Navigation Cut and East London Waterworks Aqueduct, about 184 yards south of the Pond Lane Bridge. Looking easterly, the bridge over the Great Eastern Railway carrying the Old Marsh Road to Low Leyton appeared to be in a straight line. This line, about 850 yards in length, brought me to the bank of the old river, and at a remarkable spot known for years as the "boys' bathing place," where the bottom consists of a hard smooth material and greyish sand, quite unlike the general bed of the river, which, excepting at fords, is of mud and clay. At this point the river is 64 feet wide, and only from 3 feet to 4 feet 6 inches deep. On the opposite bank, 150 yards in an easterly course, is the bridge carrying the old Marsh Road, this portion of it being in a direct line from Clapton Alley.

Having carefully noted the relative position of the more prominent points along the brow of table-land where the coffin was found, I am sure that no spot (not even excepting that in the grounds of Craven Lodge, Upper Clapton,) commands so extensive a prospect as this particular site. An observer would to the south note the Kentish Hills from Shooter's Hill to beyond Dartford (assuming the absence of the buildings from fifty to a hundred years old now intervening in this direction); the valley of the Thames could be traced to Purfleet; the horizon

itself would be the only barrier to the east, the high lands of Essex over Romford and Brentwood, with the forests of Hainault and Epping being within easy range ; from thence by Chingford and Waltham until the view is closed by the wooded hills of Enfield Chase to the north. From this elevated site at least two historical events may have been observed by our predecessors, whether Roman or Saxon. Some four miles distant, as the crow flies, are seen the wooded heights over Walthamstow. Near the house known as Copt Hall are the remains of a British encampment (said to be about eight acres). At this spot Boadicea, with her daughters, is said to have mustered her forces, and thence marched to London. Her army would then pass in close proximity to this site. In the autumn of A.D. 896, in the reign of Alfred the Great, our then invaders, the Danes, having towed their fleet of war galleys up the Thames, and thence up the Lea, anchored and fortified their positions, entrenching a powerful land army as well. Alfred, knowing that the then ripening corn, the property of the Londoners, and may be of farmers in this very parish of Hackney, would become the prey of the Danish host, determined to overcome them by strategy. He laid his plans well. Within his own camp he had channels cut for the river, so that as suddenly as secretly the Lea became too shallow to admit the return of the Danish fleet to the Thames. The Danes were compelled to quit their ships, which were at once seized by Alfred, the enemy passing across the Midland counties to the Severn, where their reinforcements were stationed, and thence quitting our land. According to Camden, the navigation, thus obstructed, was not fully restored till A.D. 1580, by Lord Burghley.

As no vestige of any lid to this sarcophagus has been discovered, it may during these troublous times have been rifled, and, while the skeleton remained undisturbed, the lid and clasps may have been carried away ; the security of the coffin itself being perhaps due to the pious care or superstitious fears of some Saxon yeoman who probably became the possessor of the land, who, finding a rifled tomb, and not appreciating its value even as sculptured marble, had a superficial hole dug for it in the surface gravel, where, passing from the eye, it soon passed from the memory of man.
