

A Romano-British Building at Knowl Hill, Berks.

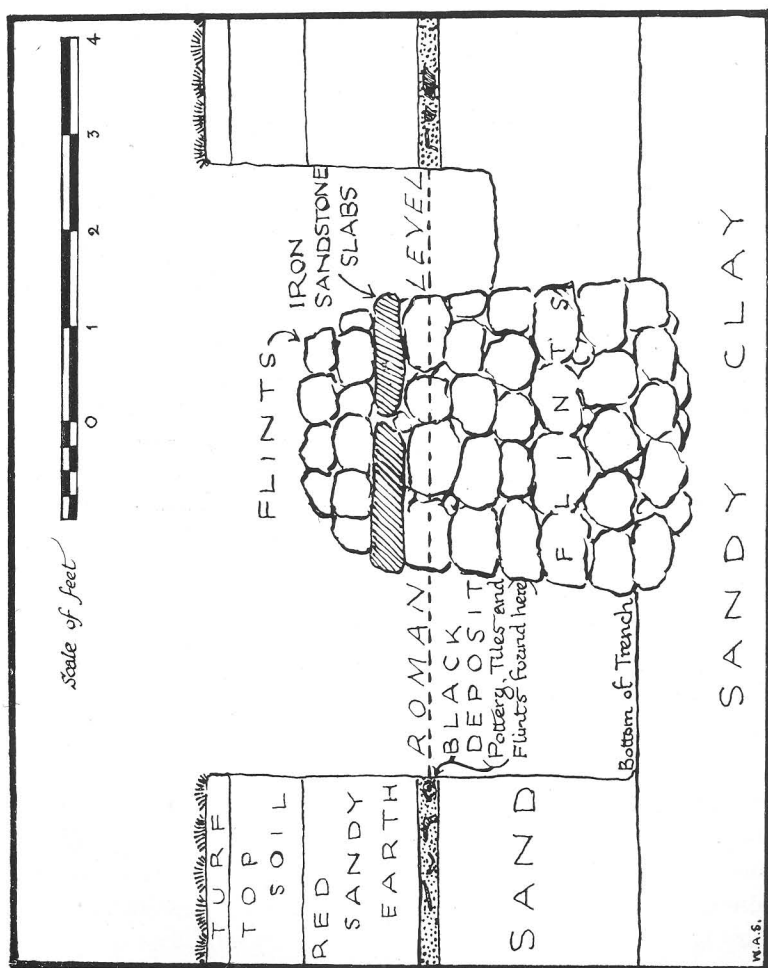
By WILFRED A. SEABY.

In the early Spring of 1929 workmen engaged in erecting a house for Mr. Victor Martin at Canhurst Farm, in the parish of Wargrave, on the southern slope of the hill to the north of the main London Road and close to the brick works of Messrs. Warner, came upon a quantity of Romano-British pottery in a pit that was dug to collect sand for building purposes. During April, May and June in the same year this sand pit was again dug into and part of a quern, two heavily oxidised Roman keys, and many fragments of pots and tiles were turned up. In April, 1931, while cutting a drainage trench through the orchard, several more pieces of pottery were found at a depth of 18 inches, also another fragment of a quern. All these objects have been preserved and a detailed record of their discovery has been made by Mr. Martin.

On October 7th, 1931, the gardener, digging into the embankment of the tennis courts, discovered flints. The following day he unearthed about three feet of flint wall running in a northerly direction. He dug along this on the west side and found pottery sherds and tiles. By the next day seven or eight feet of wall had been exposed, the discovery being reported to the Reading Museum. Mr. Martin having agreed to a thorough examination of the site, he with the writer and other voluntary helpers immediately started excavations which were continued when time and weather permitted until the middle of November.

First a trench was dug along the outside of what has since proved to be the west wall of a three-sided foundation, and it was found that the structure extended about twenty-five feet from the wire fence of the tennis court. Here it turned eastwards, and at a distance of nineteen feet came to an abrupt end. The workers expected to come upon a wall going south, but finding only loose flints the trench was continued some ten feet eastwards beyond the apparent termination of the wall;

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Section of West Wall.

nothing however was discovered save a post-hole filled with rubbish—the remains of a modern fence removed some years earlier.

Meanwhile trial holes were being dug and before the end of the second week flints had been struck a little south-east of the north-east corner of the court. These were tightly packed and there was soon revealed a wall extending eastwards parallel with the north wall and breaking off in exactly the same manner and in line with it. It occurred to the excavators that if the south and west walls were extended they would meet somewhere in the tennis court and that the men engaged in levelling the ground must have completely destroyed the south-west corner. Exactly half way along the west wall on the inner side was disclosed what appeared to be a low wall, a foot wide, which struck off at right angles and seemed to have no foundation. It may have been an internal dividing wall between the north and south walls, to form two small compartments.

The foundation walls were found to be solidly constructed of flint and capped with large iron-sandstone slabs, which probably acted as a bonding course. Above these nothing more than one firm layer of flints now exists, but from the quantity of loose ones turned up in the digging and others lying about the estate there is little doubt that good flint walls once existed above the ground. A section of the west wall shows that the base is roughly three feet three inches across, decreasing to two feet nine inches at the sandstone bonding course, the height at that point being two feet three inches to two feet six inches. The approximate length of the west wall is thirty-two feet four inches. The north wall is nineteen feet and the south wall a few inches longer. It was noted that although part of this wall must have been well below the original surface, the flints had been faced on both sides for some way down. The bottom of the wall is in sandy clay and there are eighteen inches of sand devoid of pottery or flints between this and the "Roman level" (see section Pl. I.).

It should be pointed out that the top of the foundations is under two feet six inches of soil and sand at the north end and

about one foot six inches at the south. The old ground level must have been another six inches below the top of the sandstones. It would seem from this that the ground has risen from two or three feet in the last sixteen hundred years, presumably owing to the denudation of the top of the hill and the deposition of sand on this area ; the displacement of soil by ploughing would also tend to level the slope.

What has been termed the " Roman level " is actually a dark earth or humus deposit, two to three inches thick, in which all the remains other than flints have been found. There is no suggestion of a floor and at times it was impossible to tell just when this layer had been reached except by the pot sherds here and there mostly close to the wall. In digging down by the south wall to discover the depth of the foundations the spade brought up large lumps of soft, wet, marly chalk which seem to have been rammed between or against the flints to bind them together. These lumps of chalk still show deep cuts, made no doubt by the mason's trowel.

The area enclosed by the walls has not yet been completely excavated, the depth to which the excavators have had to dig necessitating the removal of many tons of sand and causing the work to proceed at a very slow pace. With hope of a warm and dry summer, those who have engaged in the excavations anticipate clearing this piece of ground and prospecting for further foundations in the orchard and garden.

THE FINDS.

POTTERY.

The pottery found in the sand pit in 1929 consisted mostly of fragments of Romano-British coarse wares, olla-shaped beakers and urns being especially noticeable. About half of a bowl-shaped urn or jar of white clay was found,¹ and the pinched-in neck with handle of a buff flagon ² (Pl. II. Fig. 1). There are

¹ Owing to the condition of this jar, it has been found impossible to draw a section.

² R. G. Collingwood (*Arch. of Rom. Brit.* 1930, p. 230 assigns such flagons to the first and early part of the second century. Other examples have been found in Leadenhall Street, London, at Silchester and Colchester..

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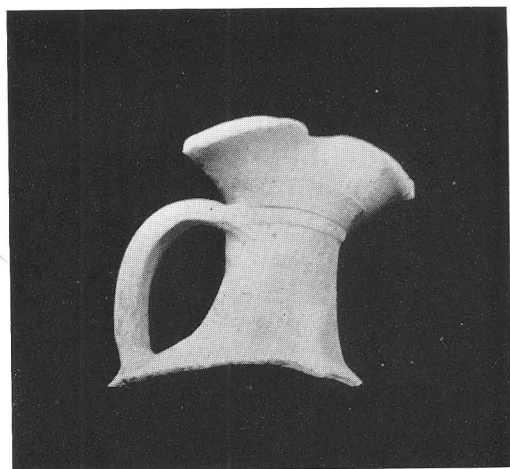


Fig. 1.

Neck and Handle of Buff Ware Flagon with pinched-in rim.

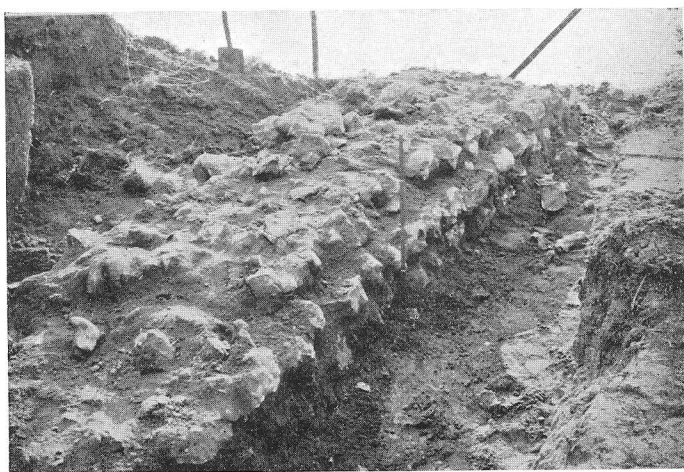
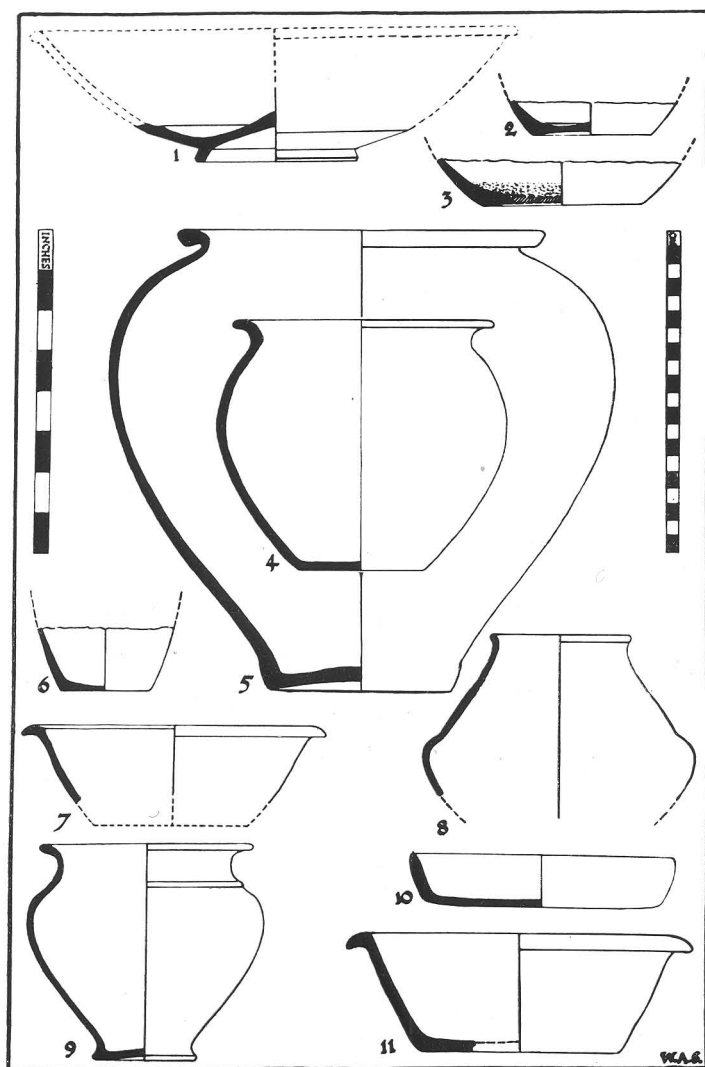


Fig. 2.

South Wall of Building from N.E.

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Pottery Sections drawn from Fragments.

also portions of two urns, one of hard gritty clay with red brown surface (Pl. III. Fig. 5), the other also of gritted paste of dark brown colour with a smooth surface. Besides these there are many fragments of a large vessel of light grey colour with a black coating, several olla-shaped cooking pots (Pl. III. Figs. 4 and 9), the side of a bulbous beaker of buff-coloured clay with smooth surface (Pl. III. Fig. 8), part of the side of a roll-rim bowl of grey ware with red inner slip (Pl. III. Fig. 7), and the complete base of a fair-sized jar with a smooth blue-grey outer surface, all apparently of the second or early third centuries.

The pottery collected from the trenches in 1931 is of a different and more interesting character. Four small sherds of Samian ware have been picked up. A piece from the north-east corner fitted on to another from the south wall and formed part of the base of a similar dish (Dragendorff, Form 31), which it has been possible to reconstruct diagrammatically (Pl. III. Fig. 1). Stamped across the inside of the base are the letters SEÆRIN. Mr. Dunning, of the London Museum, has suggested that SEÆRIN is a mis-stamp for SEVERIM.¹ A potter Severus appears to have worked at Lezoux in Central Gaul during the first half of the second century. Two tiny fragments of white, soft Castor ware with a dark chocolate slip and a foliate pattern in white barbotine were picked up close to the outside of the north-west corner. Enough fragments of two coarse ware dishes have enabled their sections to be drawn. One, a bowl or dish, with heavy rim, came from the outside of the south wall and may be dated to the early or middle part of the second century² (Pl. III. Fig. 11). The other from the inside of the north wall is a flat platter of similar texture³ (Pl. III. Fig. 10). A cream coloured base, the inside studded with tiny stones which must have been part of a small mortarium was found by the south wall⁴ (Pl. III. Fig. 3).

¹ SEÆRIN occurs on form 31 at Silchester (May, *Pottery found at Silchester*, p. 260) and at York (Oswald, *Index of potters' stamps on Terra sigillata* (1931) p. 297 li.).

² cf. Miller, *The Roman Fort at Balmuildy*, p. 90, pl. xlvii. No. 10.

³ cf. R. G. C., p. 226. No. 36.

⁴ cf. May, *Pottery found at Silchester*, pl. lxxv.

Besides the pottery described above several hundreds of miscellaneous sherds including about fifteen different turned-back rims and five or six bases have been taken from the wall-trenches and sand pit. Two pieces of rim with a smooth surface were more than three-quarters of an inch thick and must have formed part of the neck of a very large urn-shaped vessel of soft gritty clay. Figs 2 and 6 on Plate III. are bases of two small black ware vessels from the sand pit.

TILES.

A number of broken bricks and tiles have been picked up. One from the sand pit had the imprint of a cat's foot upon it; while another from the building showed the rough circular indent made by the brickmaker to insure adhesion between tile and plaster. Parts of flanged roofing tiles (*tegulae*) and what appears to be a poorly baked *imbrex*, the half cylinder placed over the flanges of two adjacent *tegulae*, were found in the outer trenches.

SIGNS OF FIRE.

Quantities of lightly fired red clay (it can hardly be called brick) are to be found almost everywhere about the site. To the west of the north-west corner at the Roman level was found a large patch of sandy clay seemingly blackened and reddened by the continued action of fire. Excavation at this point has not been completed, so it can only be surmised that this baked patch may be part of a hearth. Fragments of charcoal or carbonised wood were frequently met with when using the trowel.

GLASS AND BONE.

None of the glass discovered is definitely from the Roman level, though two or three pieces have been picked up while excavating. No bone objects have as yet been found; among the few bones which have come to light, is one that seems to be a piece sawn off from the long bone of a large mammal.

¹ cf. "Excavations at Silchester in 1891," *Archaeologia* liii., 288.

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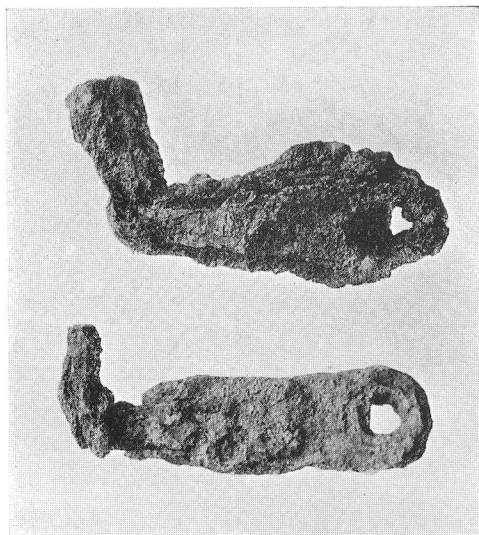


Fig. 1.
Iron Keys from Sand-Pit.

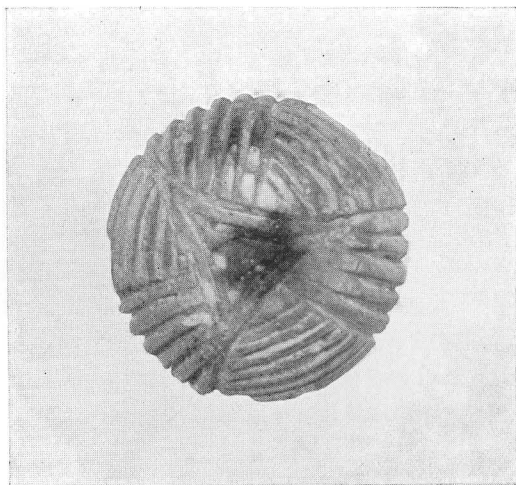


Fig. 2.
Enamelled Bronze Boss.

RUBBING STONE.

Two pieces of hard pink conglomerate or pudding stone showing an abraded surface may have formed part of a quern, and came from the sand pit in 1929.

IRON.

A number of iron objects, now completely oxidised have been recovered from the trenches: in several cases their condition makes it impossible to discover the uses to which they were put. Two or three of the largest, including a curved piece of iron bearing a close resemblance to part of an unfinished horse-shoe, were all found in a trial hole between the north and south walls. Besides these there were some dozen nails of different shapes and sizes, one being quite certainly a Roman staple or hold-fast, such as is to be found in the Silchester collection. One object had the appearance of a punch or boring tool. Two Roman keys alike in type (Pl. IV.) were found in the sand pit in 1929.

BRONZE.

The only coin so far discovered is a small bronze, which is so corroded that it is impossible to say definitely that it is Roman. It is about the size of a second brass of the later third century.

By far the most interesting object was found at the "Roman level" close against the inner side of the south wall—a broken iron nail or pin (?) with a bronze boss-shaped head 31.5 mm. in diameter and 9.5 mm. thick at the centre (Pl. IV. Fig. 2). It is decorated with a series of grooves in a basket-weave pattern in which traces of red enamel may still be seen. A photograph has been submitted to several experts and all have expressed the opinion that the decorative motif is pure Celtic.¹ The shaft is somewhat delicate for the weight of the head. When found there was about an inch of iron shaft remaining but it is obvious that this had once been longer. It is impossible to assign its purpose;

¹ Mr. E. T. Leeds, of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, writes: "I have not the least hesitation in saying it is Celtic work." He thinks it probably belongs to the century or half century before the Roman conquest.

Mr. T. D. Kendrick, of the British Museum, also thinks that it may have been made in the La Tène III. period.

it is too heavy for personal use ; it may have been used for harness decoration. No doubt it was a treasured possession and its life was long.

SUMMARY.

Mr. Underhill, who assisted with the excavations, makes the following observations : " The position of the site one mile due north of the remarkable octagonal building at Weycock Hill, Waltham St. Lawrence, may be of some significance. The walls appear to be similar to the Weycock Hill walls, which were of flint some eight feet in height, and three feet six inches thick without bonding tiles, although at one corner were some thin slabs of stone. There are also sites of Roman buildings at Feens Farm, White Waltham, at Maidenhead (on Castle Hill), and at Berry Grove, White Waltham. Roman pottery has been found at Hurley, at Boundary Elms, Littlewick, at Wargrave, and Ruscombe and on Milley Farm, Waltham St. Lawrence.¹ There is a supposed road at Wargrave from Church Green to the Loddon,² and some vague references to Roman roads in the vicinity of Knowl Hill, are to be found in Wethered's ' History of Hurley.' In 1352 there was a grant by Richard le Grocer ' et regiam viam vocatum knollestret apud lettel Waltham in parochia de Hurle.' and in another grant of about the same date ' land in Hurle lying in le homecroft and extending to Crouch Street ' ; also ' La Pennynggestret ' and ' perpountstrete ' are mentioned. These were in all probability Roman roads linking up the various buildings noted above."³

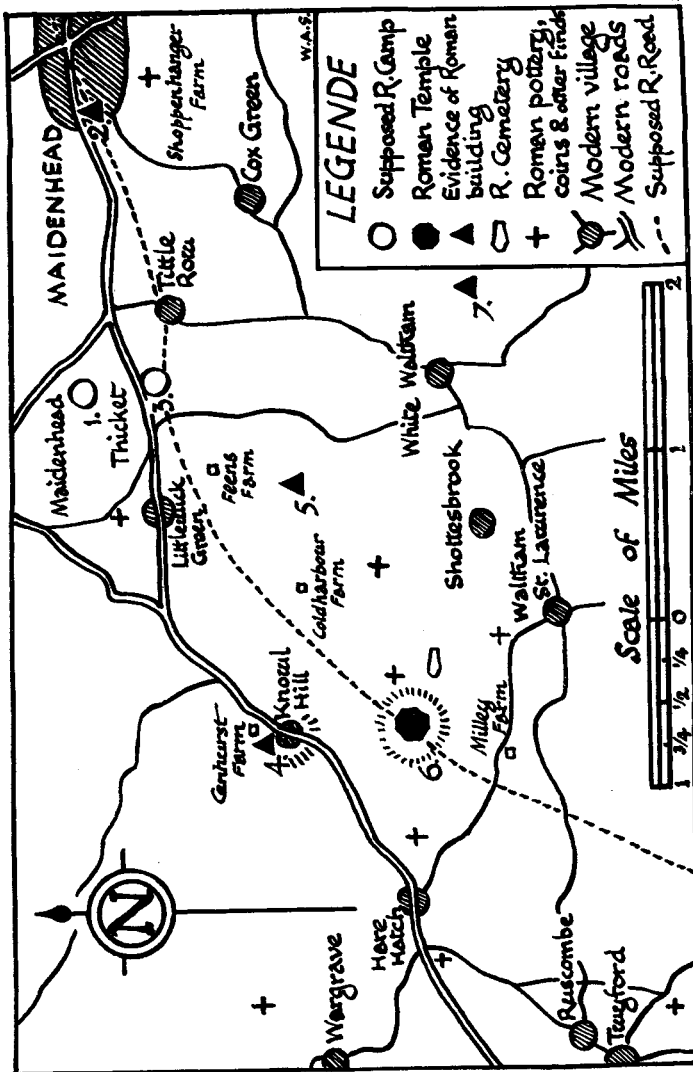
It appears obvious from this evidence that the country around was well settled by Romanised Britons. Besides the villas it would seem that a small community lived in or near Weycock Field. If, as Mr. Bannard has pointed out, the main Roman road from Verulamium to Calleva, the Camlet Way, passed

¹ Peake, *Archaeology of Berkshire*, 1931, pp. 97, 98, and 240, f. and Hearne's Preface to his ed. of *The Itinerary of John Leland* (1710), I., p. ix.

² *Berks Arch. Journal* VII., p. 120.

³ O. G. S. Crawford (*Arch. Journal*, 2nd ser. vol. XXVIII. p. 44) says : " made roads, as opposed to tracks, were called *street* from the Latin *strata*. On this point the evidence of Saxon land-boundaries is quite conclusive."

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1. Robin Hood's Arbour.
2. Castle Hill Villa.
3. Camp on Thicket.
4. Canhurst Farm building.
5. Feens Farm Villa.
6. Weycock Hill Temple.
7. Berry Grove Villa.

through this district it is safe to assume that a settlement near the half way point would be of no small importance to those travelling between the cities.¹

It is interesting to note that the site of the building at Canhurst Farm is a very favourable one. It lies on a gentle slope facing south and is just above the line where springs break out from the hill, so that an almost constant supply of water would be assured. One of these springs has carried water to a cottage at the bottom of the hill, summer and winter, for many years. There is a tradition of a Roman well being found in the orchard many years ago, but the villagers do not seem to know much about it. Also there is a report of a Roman road crossing the large field by the gate of which the building is situated. Here again material proof is wanting, but some reason for credence may be given to such "local legends." This road might well be the "knollestret" mentioned in the charter above-quoted from which it would seem that Knowl Hill gets its name.

The writer of this article wishes to express his sincere thanks and acknowledgements to the following: Mr. Victor Martin for helping in every possible way during the compilation of these notes; the Reading Museum authorities for giving facilities to carry out this piece of work; Commander J. H. Pollen who is carefully grouping and repairing the pottery, and without whose assistance it would have been impossible to draw the pot sections; Mrs. Martin for hospitality at various stages of the work; Mr. A. Cox, of the Borough Surveyor's Department, Reading, for surveying the ground and preparing a plan; Messrs. A. T. Clarke and F. M. Underhill for assisting with photography and in other ways. Special thanks are due to Miss M. V. Taylor, of the Haverfield Library, Oxford, for examining the site, dating the pottery, and for submitting the subjoined additional report.

REPORT BY MISS M. V. TAYLOR

The walling described above seems to be either part of an outbuilding of a larger house not yet discovered or part of a rough

¹ *Berks Arch. Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 1, p. 67.

and poor house, the plan of which has yet to be recovered. The thickness of the foundation suggests that the upper part was of stone. The character of the objects found in it suggests that in any case the occupiers were neither wealthy nor well to do. They were no doubt Romanised Britons engaged in farming; they could not afford to buy much of the best table-ware of the period—the imported “Samian ware.” Most of the pottery is coarse ware made in Britain during the second and third centuries—more perhaps of the second than the third century; there is a marked absence of the characteristic fourth century types. It must be remembered, however, that the whole of the interior of the structure has not yet been opened and the evidence is therefore very fragmentary at present. The extremely interesting bronze-headed nail or pin is no doubt a survival—perhaps even an heirloom.