

The Roman Villa at Great Wemberham in Yatton.

BY REGINALD COLEBROOKE READE, M.A., ARCHT.

IN the month of March, 1884, a labourer employed in laying agricultural drains at Wemberham found his course impeded by some stonework set in mortar, which proved to be a portion of a regular well-built wall; the position is marked *X* on the plan. Further examination brought to light pieces of mosaic pavement; and the owner, H. Cecil Smith-Pygott, Esq., being informed of the fact, directed the walls to be laid bare, and the soil removed from the spaces between them. From that time the work of excavation has been continued from time to time, and the plan herewith shows the extent of the buildings unearthed up to the present date. This paper was written in June, 1884. Certain passages, which treated of points mentioned in Mr. Scarth's paper in the present volume, have been omitted to avoid repetition.

The first room exposed to view was that marked *E* on the plan. It is paved with uniform one-inch tesserae of white lias, with the exception of the space marked *e*, which appears to have had a floor of rough stone pitching. The room *K* was next opened, and showed paving of a far finer quality, the tesserae being worked smooth or perhaps even polished, and having border patterns with ornamental scrolls at the angles, formed in blue lias. The hypocaust in the chamber *I* was next brought to light, and from this beginning the work has gradually been extended on no particular system, but by following now one wall, now another, the greater part of the

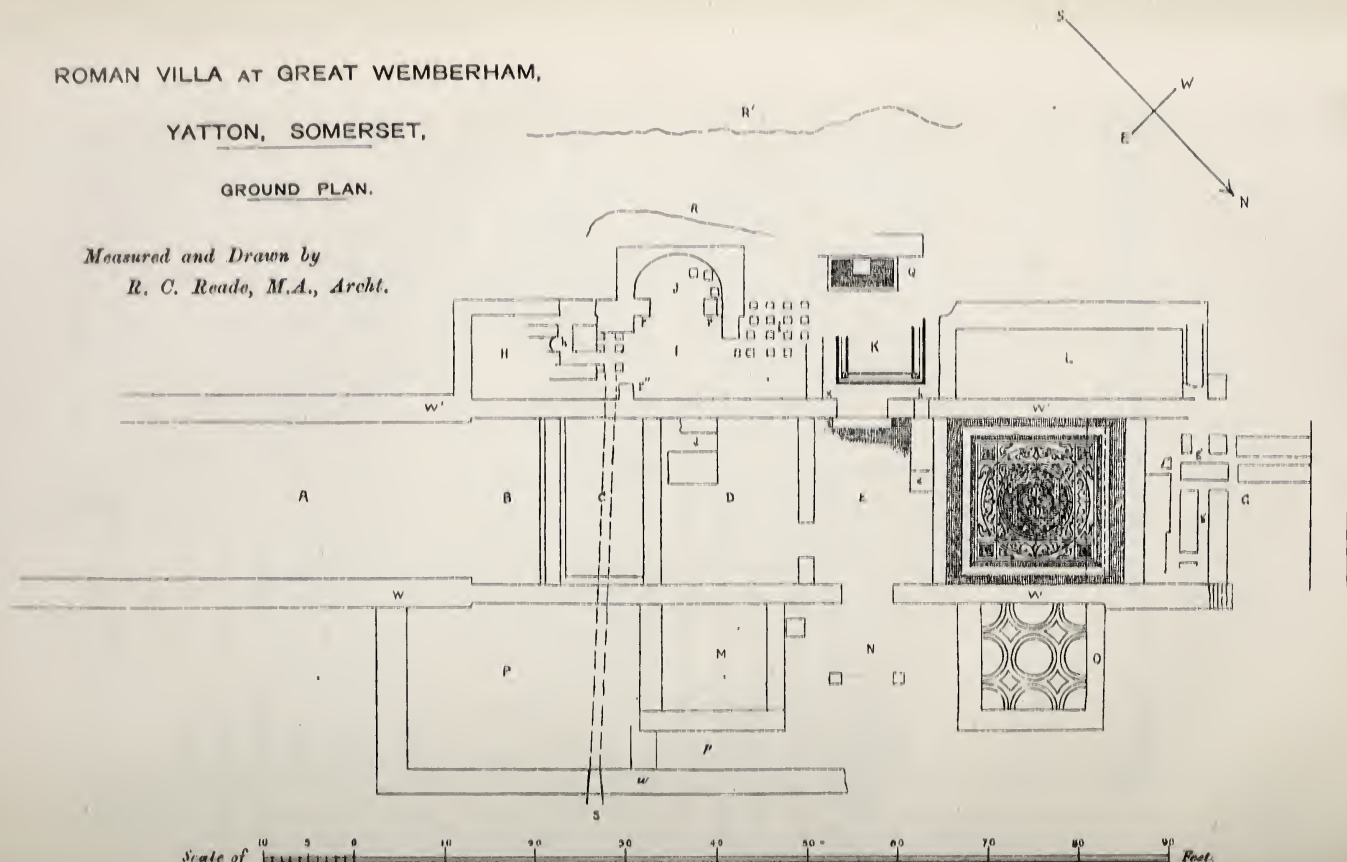
ROMAN VILLA AT GREAT WEMBERHAM,

YATTON, SOMERSET,

GROUND PLAN.

Measured and Drawn by

R. C. Reade, M.A., Archt.



building would seem to have been laid bare. About the beginning of April the beautiful pavement in the room *F* was discovered, and about six weeks later, that in the room *O*. Both of these I have drawn out to scale.

Perhaps the first fact that strikes a visitor is the close proximity of the Villa to the bed of the river Yeo. This stream is here tidal, and its overflow, which would probably take place at every spring-tide, is prevented by the "sea wall," which, being drawn along the whole of the open coast-line, follows up both banks of the river as far as the first weir at the village of Congresbury. In spite of the sea wall, frequent inundations, extending many miles inland, take place; and the statement by Rutter, when noticing the discovery of an ancient sepulchre in this field in 1828 is not unreasonable, except for the word "modern," viz., that over this moor "the waters of the Channel frequently flowed, previous to the *modern* embankments." Not two years since almost the entire valley was submerged to a distance of perhaps nine miles from the sea; and within the present century the salt waters have penetrated the neighbouring moor beyond the Mendips as far as Glastonbury, the quondam Isle of Avalon. The ancient Corporation, known as the Commissioners of Sewers, whose care it is to maintain the sea-walls and to battle with the floods, date the existence of their Court back to King Alfred. Does not the discovery of this Roman Villa indicate their claim to an even more remote origin? Before such a building as the one before us would be planted on a site liable to monthly inundations, it is clear that the coast-line and river-banks must have been protected by embankments at least equally efficacious with those at present existing.

In following the two principal walls *W W'*, which run from end to end of the building in a south-easterly direction, they were found to become thicker at the commencement of the chamber *A*, from whence they appeared to be running direct into the river-bank. So, in fact, they proved to do, and the

point at which they are terminated in my plan is that at which they strike obliquely into the bank or wall of that august body the Court of Sewers. In this direction further progress was impossible ; but from the position and tendency of these walls, I conclude that the space marked *A* was a dock or boat-house. The increased thickness of the walls, and the position, aligned with one of the reaches of the river and facing up stream, confirm this view : and it appears to me probable that the whole position and aspect of the Villa was determined by that of this dock. It should be noticed that the sea-wall is here double, and that the wall which intercepts the walls of the chamber *A* is not that which actually forms the river-bank, which is some fifty feet distant. I do not think it rash to assume that the water-way of the Yeo was the chief channel of communication for the occupants of this Villa, by means of which it was easy to reach the open waters of the Severn-sea, and thence the important stations at Lydney, Bristol, Bath, etc.

Next to the dock *A* we find two narrow chambers, marked *B* and *C*, with the first of which the dock must have communicated, unless it was a mere open basin between wharves, and not (as I fancy) a covered boat-house.¹ Perhaps the room *B* was a passage, by which the fuel and stores were brought into the house proper, and the chamber *C* a store house for these commodities. There is some apparent reason for this view, in the fact that the neighbouring chamber *H* contained the stove or furnace which heated this portion of the building ; the actual stove seems to have been at *h*, which hollow space was filled with a black substance, apparently ashes. The hypocaust extends under the whole of the room *I*, though the piers which support the pavements are only found in one part of it. Perhaps the flue passed round the apse marked *J*, through the narrow opening behind the pier *p*, and thence

(1). When the above was written there appeared to be traces of a wall between *A* and *B*. No such wall, however, exists ; and I think it hardly doubtful that the thick walls of *A* indicate the limit of the water, *B* being the wharf or landing-stage, opening into *H* and *P*.

expanded into the space beneath the floor at *i*. Here were found several pieces of flue-tiles scored with lines, so as to key to the mortar; also some roofing-slabs of thin stone, bored for iron pins which in some cases remain in position. A few bones were also found here, and a nest of egg-shells packed closely one within the other and compacted with soil into a firm mass.

The apsidal structure *J* appears to be so indispensable an adjunct to a Roman Villa, at least in this country, that it is somewhat surprising its nature should be a matter of conjecture. The prevailing impression appears to be that it was intended for a bath: but if it were a bath, we should probably see traces of drains to remove the water, but nothing of the sort is apparent. Perhaps it may not be amiss for one of the unlearned to hazard a guess. I think most architects will agree with me that the apse *J* was covered by a semi-dome, and that the piers *p p'* supported two columns, "distyle in antis," from which arose the arch which formed the entrance to the apse. Such apses certainly exist in some houses at Pompeii, and in some cases form the *encadrement* for the statue of a divinity. Is not it possible that this invariable form was retained, perhaps from some pre-historic model, as that of the domestic chapel; as the Penetralia, or inmost and sacred recess of the house; as the Lararium, where the figures of the family gods and heroes were ranged around the central altar; as the Focus, or spot where that altar, successor to the primitive hearth, glowed with unextinguished fire? Such is my suggestion. What may be its value I leave for general consideration.¹ In this room was found a broken piece of

(1). Since writing the above I have discovered in Mr. John Edward Price's account of the pavement found at Bucklersbury the following statements: 1—That the semicircular recess is invariably found in the Roman villas of this country; 2—That in a villa discovered at Leicester "a short pillar was found lying on the tessellated floor, which seems to have served as an altar, or to have supported a small statue; and it has been conjectured that this recess served as the 'sacarium,' a place of domestic worship where the image of the patron god of the family was placed."

paving, representing the "Svastika," or Runic cross 卐 , said to be the oldest and most wide-spread religious symbol in existence. Judging by other instances, I have little doubt that it occupied the centre of the apse *J*.

The chamber *K* is paved with a border of tesserae in two colours formed of blue and white lias, arranged in a simple but elegant pattern. From the absence of all indication of paving within this border we are irresistibly reminded of the open Atrium of the Italian villas, with the Impluvium or fountain in the middle; if that eminently Italian arrangement were ever employed under the inclement sky of Britain.

The room *E* appears from its coarser paving, its position, and other indications, to have been the entrance hall or vestibule. This would indicate that it was approached through the ante-room *N*. There is also a well defined doorway into the chamber *D*, and a broad opening, probably without doors, but half closed by a portière, through which the visitor ascended by two steps into the Atrium *K*. A small opening alongside of the one last mentioned, marked *k* on the plan, needs explanation. Here I would mention a suggestion, which will commend itself to the architectural mind, if not to the archæological. It will be observed that the space marked off and lettered *e* is not paved with the one-inch tesserae, which are found in their original completeness throughout the rest of the room, but with a rough pitching, similar to that in the chamber *N*. With some boldness it has been suggested by Mr. Hilton Price, the learned explorer of the Villa at Brading, that this space *e* might have been the site of a staircase. The hole *k* is thus at once accounted for; it must have been the opening into a cupboard under the stair. I believe this interpretation will come with convincing force to all with whom it is not an article of faith that Roman villas were built entirely on one floor.

I have omitted the room *D*, to which I now return. It appears to have been paved with pink cement, but has no



ROMAN VILLA, YATTON, SOMERSET
Scale $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 foot.

R. C. Reade, del. 1885

traces of tesserae. The structure *d* appears to have been another furnace, a considerable quantity of black ashes being found in the hollow between the two masses of masonry. Was this another hypocaust, or may it have been a kitchen or domestic forge?

It is in the room *F* that may be seen the pavement shown in the large coloured drawing. More than half of this pavement when uncovered, was nearly perfect; but on removing the soil from the remainder, it was found to be almost entirely wanting. It is composed of the usual materials, viz., half-inch tesserae of white and blue lias, with cubes of red earthenware of the same size. Although devoid of figures or inscription, as a mere pattern design it exceeds in beauty any that I have seen in the works I have examined upon the subject. At the same time it must be owned that the likeness between this and other specimens of Roman designing is very noticeable. The intersecting squares which form so prominent a part of the design occur in many other examples, and are supposed to have a mystic signification. Whether this be so, or whether they are merely adopted as having a pleasing and crisp outline in the midst of so many curves, is a question I do not presume to answer. But I think it not easy to explain away the well-marked cross in the centre of the pattern, except upon the supposition that this Villa was the residence of a Christian, however natural it may appear that the intersecting lines of a square pattern should fall into a cruciform arrangement.

An underground wall indicated by the dotted lines runs parallel to the north-west wall of this room, apparently forming a hot-air flue for heating purposes.

The long, narrow chamber *L* would seem to be of the nature of a passage or corridor, by which access was obtained to the rooms *F* and *G*. The latter is one mass of channels, *g g*, which also formed a hypocaust; and quantities of mosaic paving were discovered, of a similar character to that in the room *F*, but in too fragmentary a condition to admit of re-

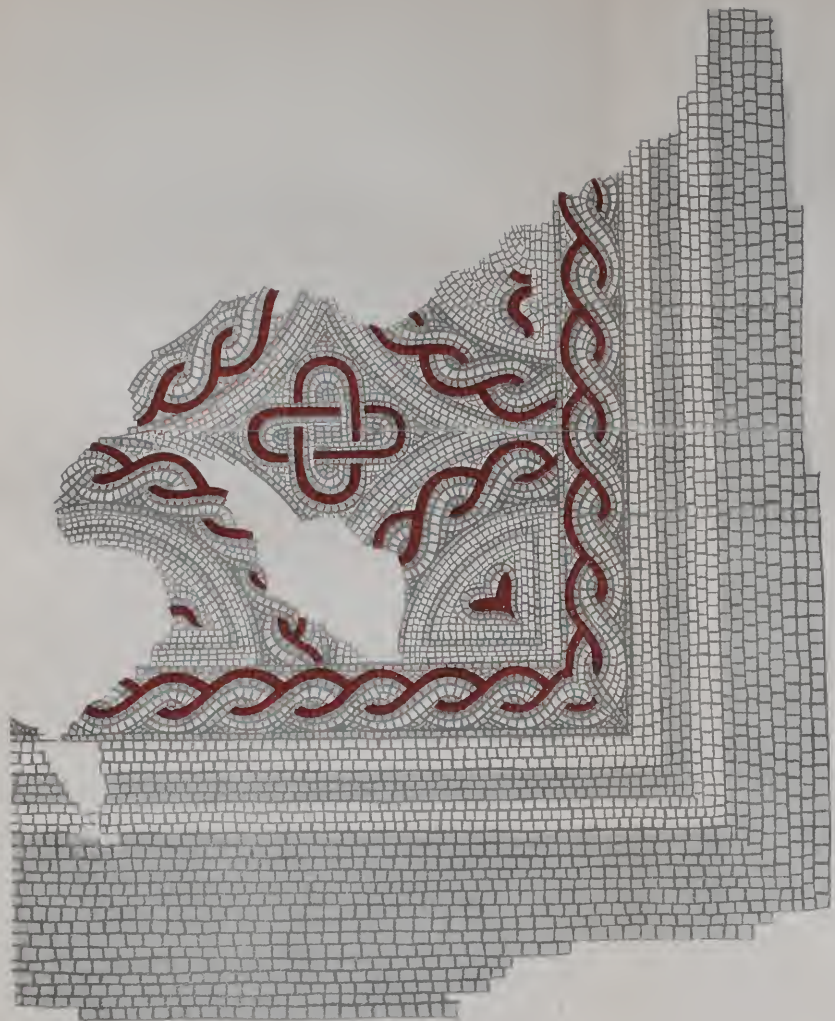
storation. The termination of this room, and of the building on the north-west side is not very intelligible. The walls *W* and *W'* come to an end as shown, the former being finished with regular footings or set-offs; and on the open side runs a broad band of pitching, which may possibly have been the foundation of a wall, but certainly does not look like it.

The chamber *O* must, from its ornamental floor, have been one of the state rooms; possibly the library or office of the owner, in which he could receive his outdoor dependents, and others, without their passing through the house. This suggestion of course depends upon the idea that the room *N* was the Prothyrum or porch, and *E* the Vestibulum. This idea was subsequently confirmed by the discovery of squared stones (shown in plan), which appear to have been the foundations of columns; also by the excavation of the wall *W*, which would appear to form a passage from the boat-house round to the front entrance. The rooms, *O*, *F*, *G*, etc., to the right of the entrance will thus be the family apartments; those to the left, *M*, *D*, *C*, etc., the servants' department.

It may be worth while to sum up the supposed purpose of the various chambers in a tabular form; premising, however, that the arrangement is of no more value than may be supposed to attach to the guess of an inexperienced person, who is more capable of judging of the nature of a building by architectural than antiquarian rules:—

LIST OF ROOMS.

<i>A</i>	...	Dock	...	Navale.
<i>B</i>	...	Passage or Landing		
		Stage.		
<i>C</i>	...	Store-room	...	Apotheca, Proma, Promptuaria.
<i>D</i>	...	Kitchen or Forge	...	Culina, Coquina, Caminus.
<i>E</i>	...	Entrance Hall	...	Vestibulum.



ROMAN VILLA, YATTON, SOMERSET.
Scale 1' to 1 foot.

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<i>F</i> ...	Dining Room ...	Triclinium.
<i>G</i> ...	Women's Apart- ment	Gynæcæum.
<i>H</i> ...	Furnace ...	Hypocaustum.
<i>I</i> ...	Antichapel or Lobby.	
<i>J</i> ...	Chapel or Hearth ...	Focus, Sacellum.
<i>K</i> ...	Hall ...	Atrium.
<i>L</i> ...	Passage ...	Fauces.
<i>M</i> ...	Servants' Hall or Porter's Lodge.	Cellula Janitoris.
<i>N</i> ...	Porch ...	Prothyrum.
<i>O</i> ...	Library or Office.	
<i>P</i> ...	Small Court, leading through passage <i>p</i> to front entrance.	
<i>Q</i> ...	Bath ...	Balneus.
<i>R R'</i> ...	Traces of walling.	

Most of the rooms show the remains of a cement skirting of a pink colour, about six inches in height, bevelled on the upper surface, and from two to three inches in thickness. It has been fixed after the laying of the floor, as traces of it are to be seen on the mosaic cubes.

It may be noticed that the steps from *E* to *K* are still in position and perfect. The room *C* has a similar step, or it may be a low seat, on one side. Another point not mentioned is that the pier *p''* in the room *I* supports my theory of the division into family and servants' departments; it being intended to separate *I* from *H*, so as to throw *I* and *J* into the "gentlefolks'" side.

The system of heating employed in the Roman Villa has never been satisfactorily explained. My impression is that the central hall was thoroughly warmed by means of flue-tiles conducting the heated air upwards from the hypocaust; and that from the hall the warm air penetrated the surrounding chambers. The chambers *G*, and perhaps *F*, seem to have

had their own separate hypocaust; which is natural enough, these being the best rooms and the most distant from the furnace *h*. The smoke-flue from the latter can be plainly traced, and makes its exit from the building just above the footings, at the point marked *S*.

Outside the Villa there is a piece of wall at *R*, built apparently on the most irregular plan, but roughly following the outline of the apse *J*; and a mass of stones, hardly to be called a wall, being too rough and irregular for the rudest rubble masonry, follows the line shown at *R'*. This may perhaps consist of the *débris* of a boundary wall, the foundations of which have not yet been excavated. At *Q* was discovered a small chamber, which from its size, about seven feet by three, can hardly have been anything but a bath. It has a thick skirting of salmon-coloured cement, and is neatly paved with white tesserae, except in one portion, where there was probably a flagstone pierced with holes for drainage.

Other walls exist in different parts of the field: one of them runs from east to west, at a distance of about eighteen yards due north of the building. This may be a fence, or may perhaps indicate still further habitations, as yet concealed beneath the turf. It is to be hoped that all these indications, however slight, may be carefully followed up.

I now come to the objects of interest discovered in the progress of the excavations: and here I wish to anticipate all disappointment, by stating at the outset that these are chiefly conspicuous by their absence. Fragments of pottery there are, some of the so-called Samian ware; the greater part of a common quality. One jar, about four inches high, was found in the chamber *L*, in a tolerably perfect state. It contained portions of a human skull, and a dark mould which may have consisted of cremated human remains. Roofing slabs have been found, bored for iron pins; some of the pins remain: also, I am told, some pieces of glass, which I have not seen. Of coins, some sixteen have been found. Some pieces of iron

have been unearthed, one piece appears to be a key, another would seem to be a hinge—a spiked ring for fixing in a post (*valva*), to turn or hang upon a hook, just as our field and other gates are hung. This, with a few small articles of bone,—probably hair pins,—completes the short list of articles hitherto discovered.

The drawings here given are the truthful representation of facts; the notes, I fear, can only be valuable so far as they serve to render the drawings intelligible.

