

A ROMAN VILLA AT WHATLEY COMBE, NUNNEY, SOMERSET

BY I. M. STEAD

The Roman villa at Whatley Combe is a scheduled site, and when the farmer gave notice of his intention to plough part of it, the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, Ministry of Works, arranged an emergency excavation and invited the writer, with the assistance of A. L. Pacitto, to supervise. The excavation lasted for five weeks in August and September, 1958, and the labour-force was limited to six workmen.

The Roman building (ST745470) had been partitioned by a modern field-boundary, and the area to be ploughed included a single range of rooms immediately south of the hedge-line (Fig. 1). Surface indications suggested that the Roman buildings were ranged on at least three sides of a square, with the rooms excavated in 1958 central, on the southern side. A trial trench in the field to the north proved the existence of a building along the western side, but the supposed eastern range was not examined.

The rooms on the southern side had been partially excavated in the nineteenth century, but the records of this work are very inadequate. However, two of the areas previously excavated were clearly visible. The first was where a mosaic pavement had been uncovered, protected, and displayed. Unfortunately the nineteenth century shed over the mosaic had been neglected and long since collapsed, but its position was marked by ruins and heavy undergrowth. The second visible area of disturbance started some 50 ft. to the east where slight hollows over old trenches were covered by beds of nettles. No plan of this earlier work had been published, but the mosaic was illustrated on a rare print, and the other excavation was recorded in a model cut in stone.

In 1958 work was concentrated on that part of the building between the two nineteenth century excavations (Fig. 2). This small excavation succeeded in linking the work of previous excavators, and in providing a date for at least one part of the building; otherwise its main outcome was to raise problems which could be solved only by a major campaign.

A. THE TRICLINIUM

The *triclinium* had been uncovered in 1838¹ and the mosaic pavement found there had then been protected by a stone building constructed on the foundations of the Roman walls. But this building had been allowed to fall into ruins, and nearly all the tesserae had been either disturbed or removed by souvenir-hunters.² The 1958 excavators were informed by local residents that some of the pavement, towards the centre of an apsidal room, remained intact, but a trench across the room at the point indicated failed to locate any tesserae *in situ*. Part of the apse was then cleared, and here the border survived, but all figured work had been destroyed. In view of the limited resources available and the condition of the pavement then exposed it was decided to concentrate the excavation on another part of the site.

Judging from the measurements of the surviving nineteenth century walls the *triclinium* had been 20 ft. wide and 34 ft. long to the centre of the apse. On the west side

¹ *The Gentleman's Magazine Library: Romano-British Remains: Part I*, 1887, 297.

² In 1906 F. Haverfield, *V.C.H., Somerset*, I, 317, note 1, recorded that the pavement was "still open to view, but less perfect than when originally found."

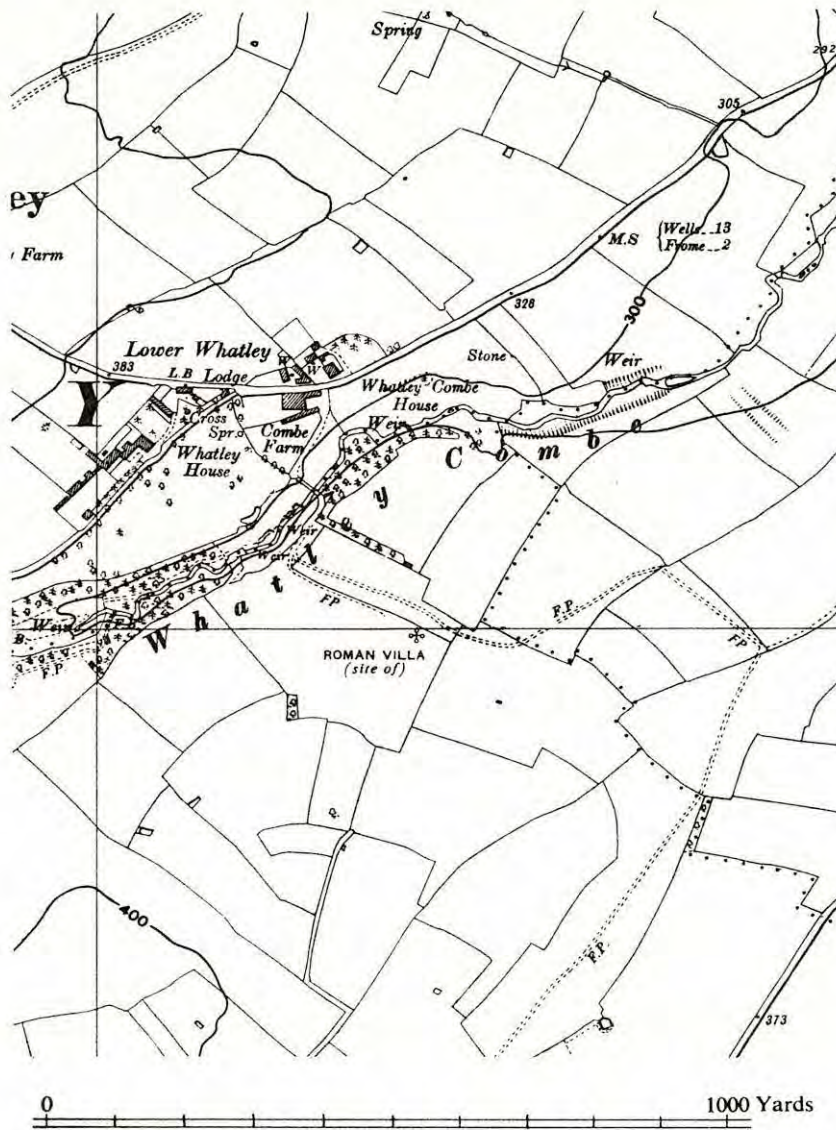


FIG. 1

Ordnance Survey map (6 ins. to one mile) showing the site of the Roman villa.
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was an annex which measured 18 ft. by 14 ft. The excavation across the room uncovered a wall foundation at the point from which the apse sprang, but there was no evidence that this had ever supported an earlier wall, and it seemed to have been constructed at

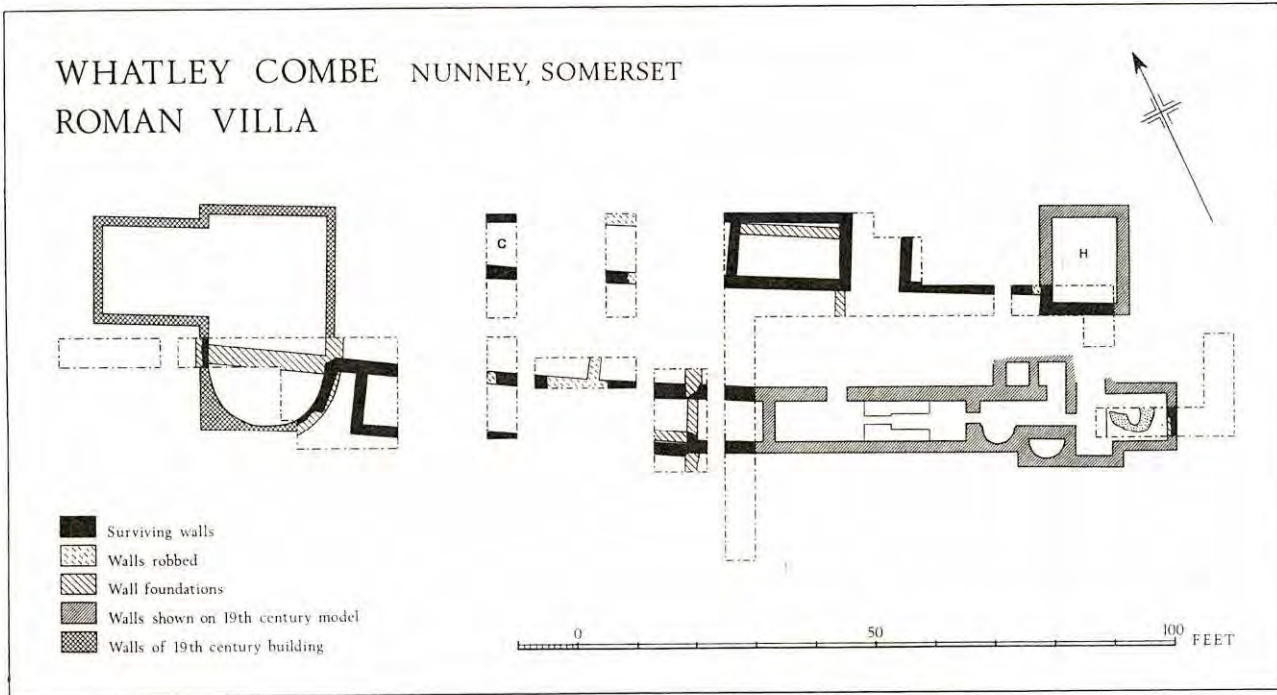


FIG. 2
Plan of the south wing of the villa, showing areas of nineteenth-century excavations and the trenches excavated in 1958. (C: concrete floor; H: hypocaust).

the same time as the apse. The wall round the apse had been curved on the inside, but polygonal outside.

The surviving tesserae in the apse (Pl. I) formed a border 3 ft. 6 ins. to 3 ft. 9 ins. wide, composed of a wide band of grey tesserae, then three 5 ins. wide bands of white, grey and white (see p. 00). Within this had been a figured design, but although some small tesserae survived, they had been completely disturbed. The larger tesserae of the border were some 1 in. to $1\frac{1}{4}$ in. square, and had been laid in a layer of pinkish mortar varying between $\frac{3}{4}$ in. and 2 ins. thick, which itself rested on the natural clay. The smaller tesserae were on top of two successive mortar layers, the lower one of yellowish mortar some 1 in. thick, and the upper of pinkish mortar about $\frac{3}{4}$ in. thick.

The only record of the design on this mosaic pavement seems to be on a rare print, a copy of which is owned by Major Shore, of Whatley. The print is inscribed: "A sketch of a Roman tessellated pavement lately discovered at Whatley, near Frome, Somerset, on the property of John H. Shore, Esquire: sketched by Jno Hill, Whatley: Bedford's Lithography, Redcliff St., Bristol".³

B. THE BATH-SUITE

The nineteenth century excavation at the east end of the southern rooms had been uniquely recorded in a model, chiselled from a solid slab of stone (Pl. II). The stone is preserved in the Museum of the Literary and Philosophical Society, at Frome, and it measures 12.5 ins. by 27.5 ins., whilst the model was executed at a scale of $\frac{1}{4}$ in. to one foot. In detail the model is not clear, because it is possible to confuse both baulks and the edges of cuttings with walls, but the general outline is obvious, and there can be no doubt that the area excavated was a bath-suite.

The position of these rooms on the ground was fairly clear because the land had not been ploughed since the earlier excavation, and the line of trenches was emphasised by beds of nettles on the uneven surface. In 1958 trenches were excavated at three points in order to correlate the position of walls marked on the model, and as a result it was possible to indicate the outline of the rest of the bath-suite on the plan (Fig. 2).

In the south-east corner of the building the baths seem to have been added to, or inserted in, the back corridor of the villa. Two small apses may well have held plunge baths. No pilae are indicated on the model, but further west along the corridor there was clearly a furnace and boiler-stand, and it seems certain that at least the western apse had been heated. In the corner of the building there was presumably a changing-room, and a cold-bath, but this is not obvious on the model. In the end room was a pit with a channel leading from it — both lined with stone and cut down to the natural limestone. In plan this feature looks like an oven or corn-drying kiln, but there was no sign that it had ever been heated.

To the north of the bath-suite was a rectangular room, 11 ft. by 14 ft., heated by a hypocaust. This, too, appears on the model, but there is no reason to suppose that it was connected with the baths — it seems more likely to have been a heated domestic room.

³ F. Haverfield, *V.C.H., Somerset, I*, 1906, 317, note 1, refers to this lithograph (he had only seen a copy), but his fig. 77 was reproduced from a coloured drawing lent to him by Mr. J. H. Shore.

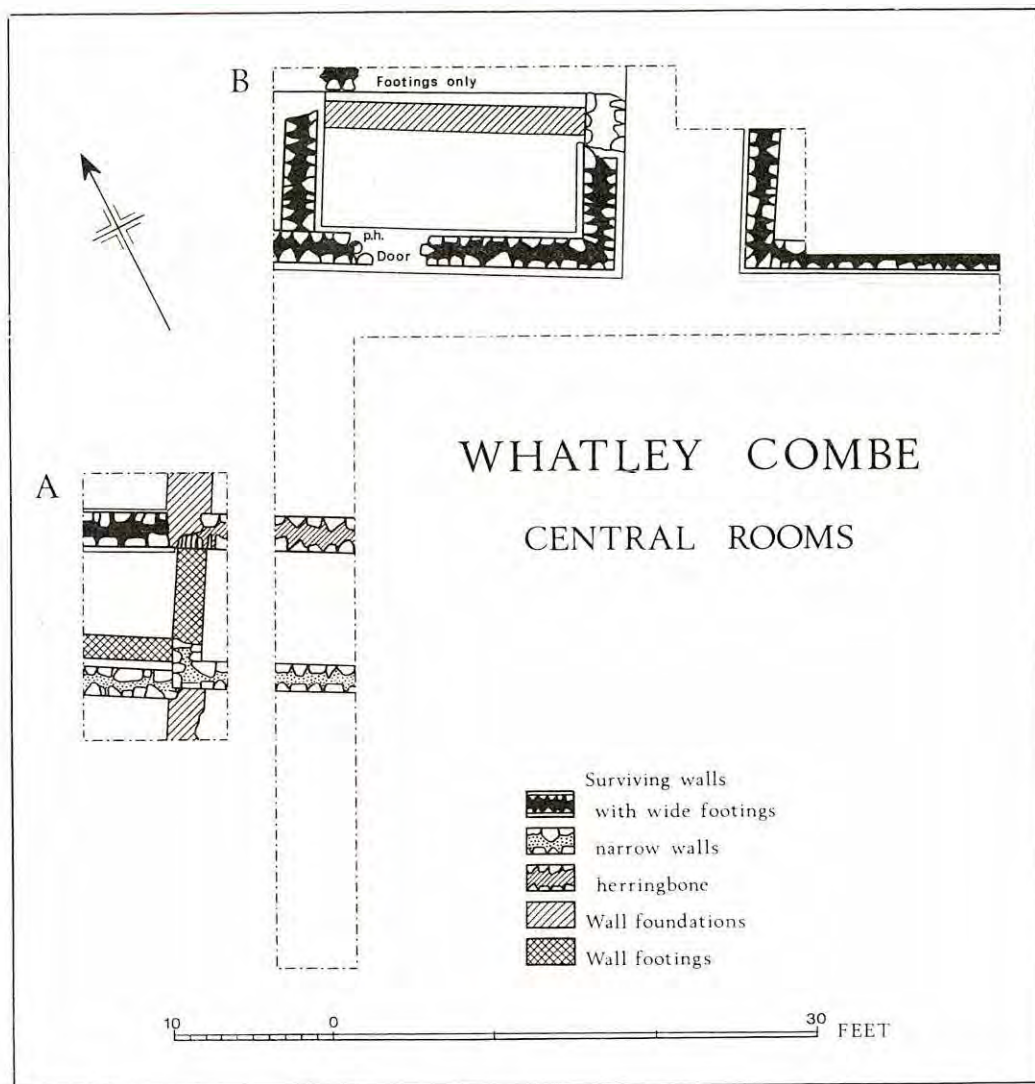


FIG. 3

Plan of the area excavated in 1958 in the centre of the south wing.

C. THE CENTRAL ROOMS

The 1958 excavation was concentrated in the central rooms of the building in the hopes of discovering a part of the site undisturbed by nineteenth century excavations (Fig. 3). These hopes were only partly fulfilled, for the central wall in our main section through the building had been exposed by previous excavators, and their trenches along both faces had isolated the wall from the stratification of floors. The masonry of this

wall was arranged in a herring-bone pattern, and it survived immediately below the turf. As the previous excavation here clearly continued to the east, a trench on the west side was opened in an attempt to locate an undisturbed stretch of the herring-bone wall (Fig. 3, A). Unfortunately this small trench exposed a complex of walls belonging, perhaps, to four or five different building phases, and the entire area had been previously excavated.⁴ The wall of herring-bone masonry extended only 3 ft. into the second trench, but its line was continued westwards by a wall with stepped footings. The junction here was further complicated because two other walls crossed at the same point (Pl. III). Of the four walls, that to the north had been robbed to its foundations, which could have been contemporary with either the west or the east (herring-bone) walls. The south wall, represented only by narrow footings, was clearly quite different in construction from the other three. The position here was quite ambiguous, and it would be unwise to suggest a sequence of building phases on this evidence alone.

In the main section north of the herring-bone wall there were traces of two floors, each a patchy layer of mortar and clay. In this area of the villa subsoil, either limestone or clay capping the limestone, was found between 2 ft. 6 ins. and 3 ft. below the turf.

At the northern end of this excavation, immediately within the hedge-line, was an area quite clear from recent excavations (Fig. 3, B). The earliest phase was represented by two walls, at right-angles to one another, and robbed down to their foundations which survived under the later floors. One of these early walls ran more or less parallel with the modern hedge-line, and it had been replaced, nearer the hedge-line, by a wall on a slightly different alignment. These may have been two outside walls marking the northern side of the building in successive phases. The later of the two front walls had been robbed down to its footings, but elsewhere in this area the walls survived immediately below the turf.

One room here was completely excavated. It measured 16 ft. 6 ins. long by 9 ft. wide, and two successive floors, like those to the south, survived as patches of clay partly supplemented by thin layers of mortar. Indeed, all floors excavated were similar to this, except for the mosaic and a single red concrete floor on a stone foundation (Fig. 2, C). In the south wall of the excavated room was a doorway, and on its western side a post-hole survived centrally in the wall.

To the east of this room there appeared to have been, in the final phase at least, a major entrance into the building. This took the form of an 8 ft. wide and 13 ft. long passage-way partly paved by two large slabs and partly cobbled (Pl. IV). In the final phase the paving and cobbling had been covered with gravel.

The stratification of coins in these central rooms is of considerable interest. Sixteen coins were found here, of which four were illegible, but the others covered the full range of coins recorded from the whole site. Below the earliest floor in the central section through the building was a coin of Carausius (A.D. 287-93), and below a mortar floor higher in the same section was one of Constantine I (A.D. 313-17). The only other legible coin below a floor was also Constantine I, found below the solid concrete floor (Fig. 2, C). In the room completely excavated (Fig. 3, B), several coins were found, but unfortunately the only one below any floor was illegible. However, above the latest floor was a burnt

⁴ The area is shown on the model (Pl. II), but this model was not located until the 1958 excavations had reached an advanced stage, otherwise the trench on Fig. 3A would never have been opened.

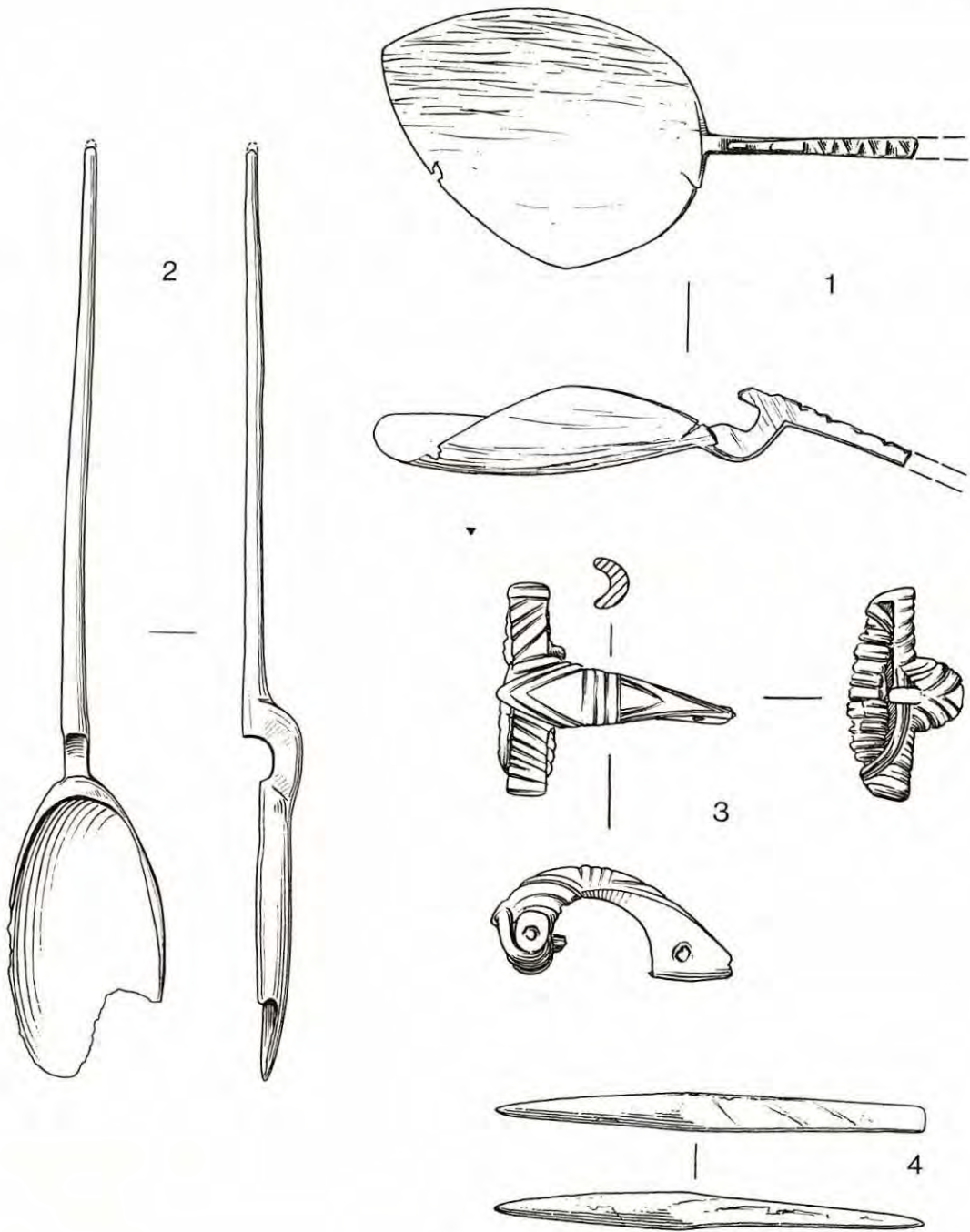


FIG. 4
Bronze objects (full size).

layer, and on top of that masses of roofing slabs — clearly a destruction-level. In the burnt layer was an Urbs Roma coin (A.D. 330-35) and two of Constans (A.D. 341-46); in the destruction above, a coin of Constantine I (A.D. 317-20) and a small “hoard” of five coins deposited *circa* A.D. 350. The “hoard” and the coins from the burnt layer do seem to provide firm evidence for destruction *circa* A.D. 350, but that was not the end of occupation, for there were five Valentinian coins from higher levels.

One cannot generalise on the history of the entire villa from such a small excavation, but the area where stratified coins were found was in the centre of the living quarters, and the dozen identified coins there do form a consistent picture. From this it would appear that the villa was built *circa* A.D. 300, and some of the buildings were destroyed *circa* A.D. 350. After that there was no attempt to remove the rubble in the centre of the main building, but occupation on the site seems to have continued until *circa* A.D. 370 at least.⁵

THE FINDS

(a) POTTERY: No stratified groups of pottery were excavated, and none of the pottery warrants publication.

(b) SMALL FINDS (Figs. 4 and 5):

1. The bowl and part of the handle of a tinned bronze spoon, 3 ins. long. The bowl seems to have been modified — the end and part of one side has been cut and the new edge worn.

2. Bronze spoon, 5.3 ins. long. The tip of the handle has been broken, and there is a piece missing from the bowl.

Spoons are not particularly common discoveries on villa sites, so it is curious that yet a third example has been recorded from Whatley Combe, *The Gentleman's Magazine Library: Romano-British Remains: Part I, 1887, 297.*

3. Small bronze ‘dolphin’ brooch, 1.3 ins. long, with a circular perforation in the catch-plate. The spring, its supporting pin and external chord are more corroded than the body of the brooch.

4. Bronze rod, 2.4 ins. long. Circular in section at one end and terminating in a rather stubby point; rectangular in section at the other end, with a chisel-like edge.

5. Lead disc, 2 ins. diameter and 0.8 in. thick. Possibly a weight, *cf.* T. May, *The Roman Forts of Templebrough near Rotherham, 1922, 77-9, and pl. xviii.*

6. Part of a thin shale bracelet, with grooves on the outer surface. The fragment is 1.6 ins. long, and the bracelet has been some 2.4 ins. diameter.

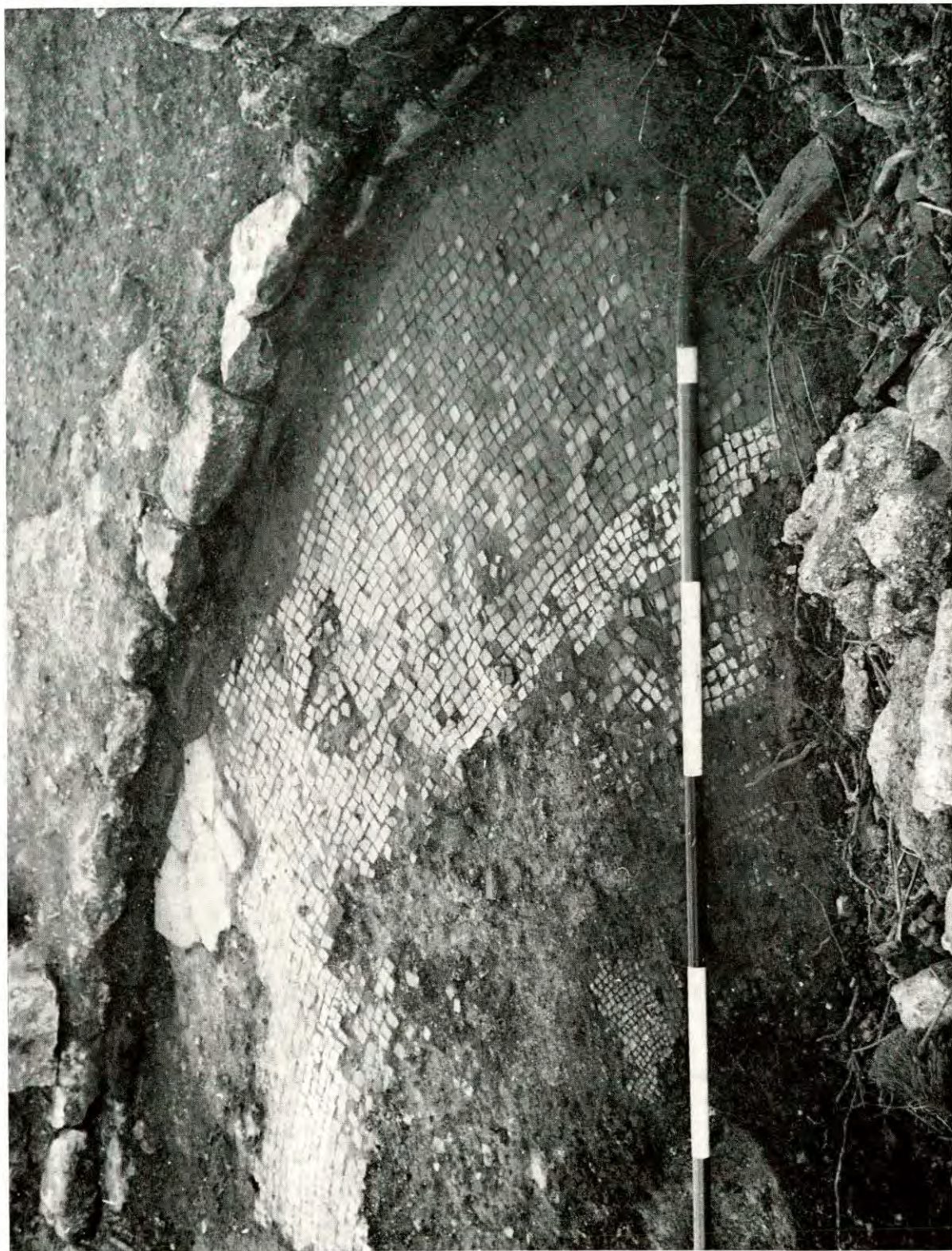
7. A shale spindle-whorl, 1.55 ins. diameter. Another from the site has been shaped from a grey potsherd, 1.3 ins. diameter.

8. Small bead of greenish glass, 0.18 ins. diameter.

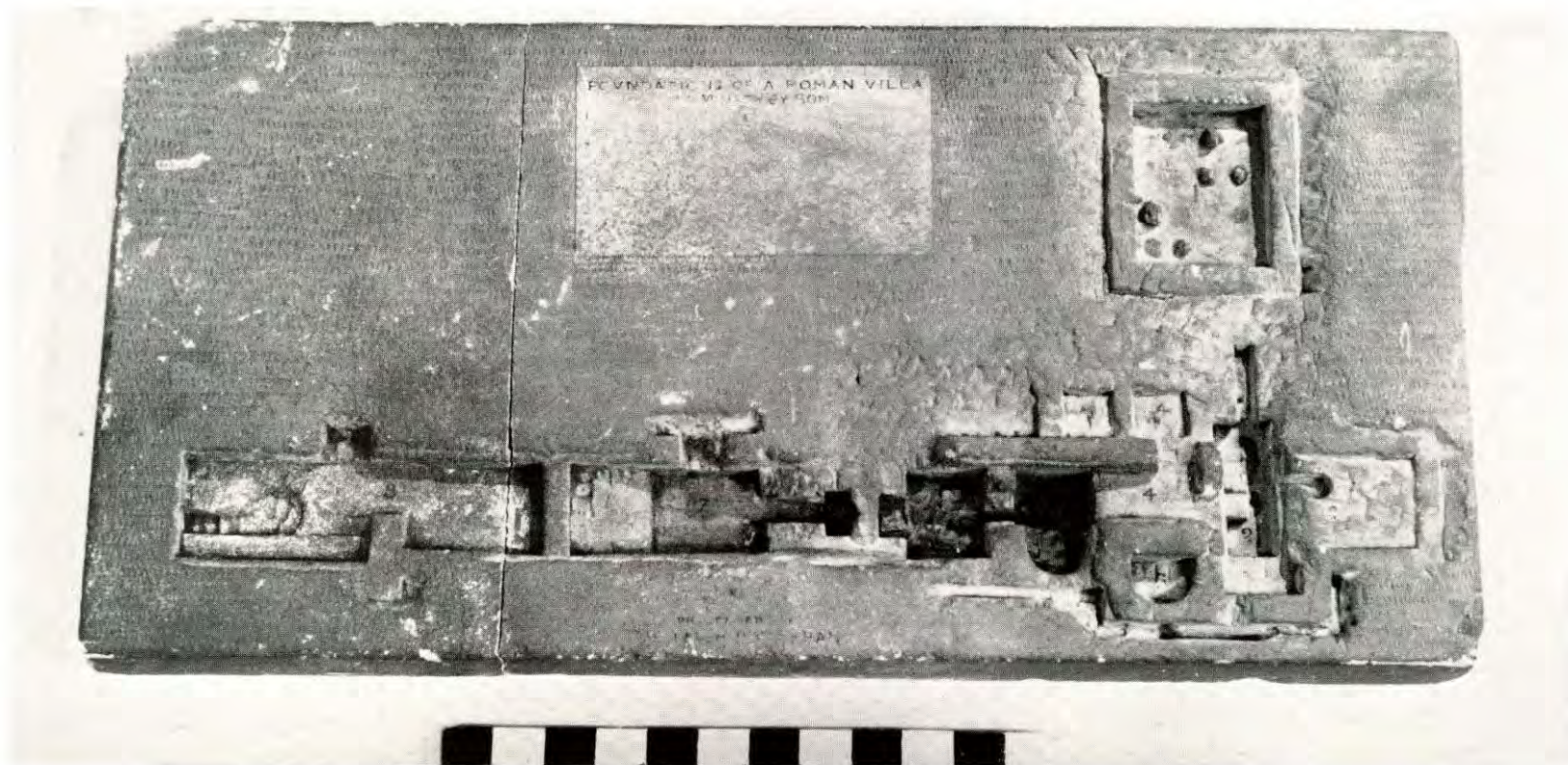
9. Iron key, 4.75 ins. long.

10. Iron knife, 5.4 ins. long.

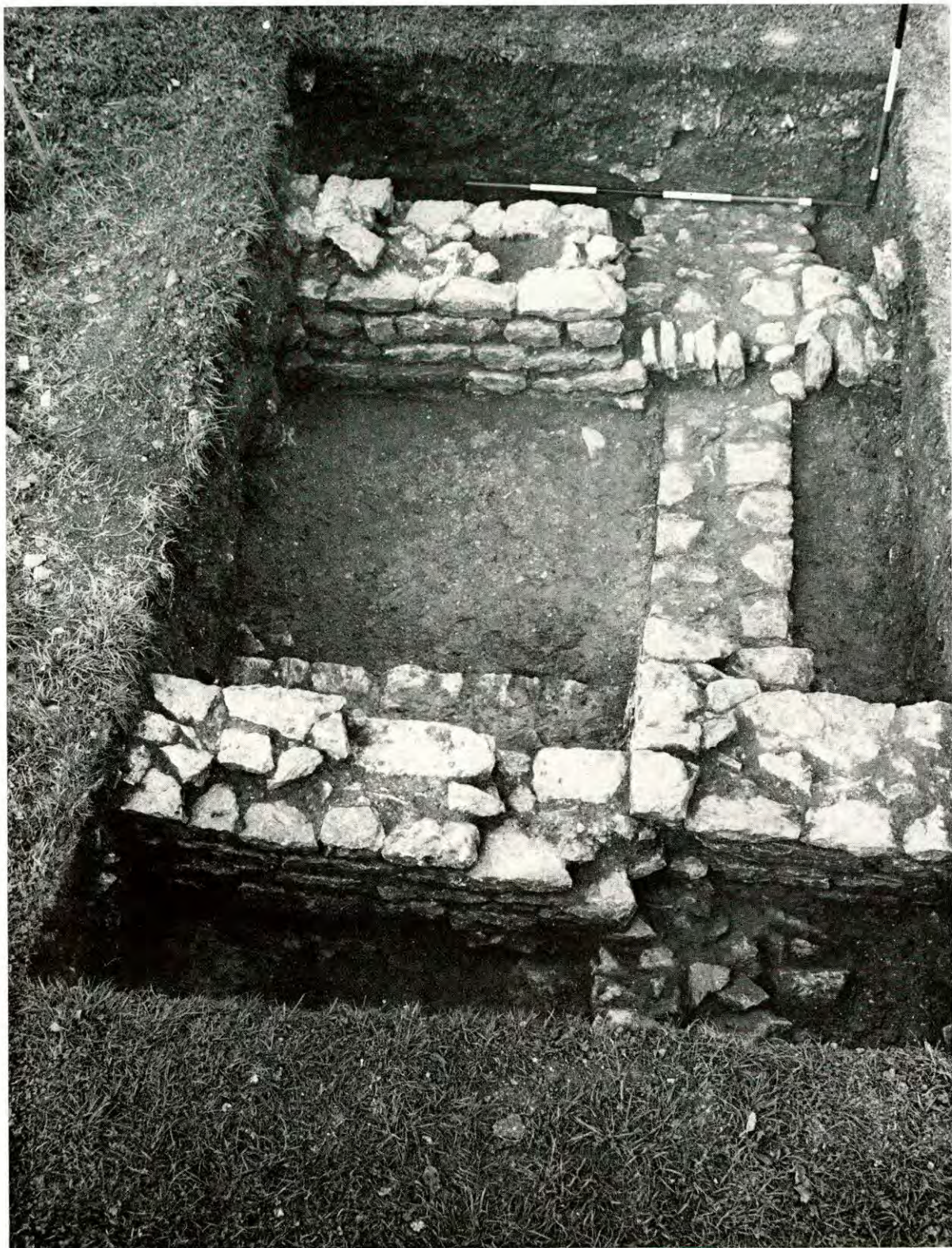
⁵ Shortly after the Ministry's excavation a semi-circular structure, 4 ft. 6 ins. diameter, was found in the bed of a pond in an adjoining field, 500 ft. south-east of the villa. It was constructed of fitted masonry, round a spring, and it had every appearance of being Roman work. This feature was discovered and excavated by Miss E. D. Overend (*Somerset Standard, 14.10.60*).



PL. III WHATLEY COMBE VILLA.
Surviving tesserae in the *triclinium*.



PL. IV WHATLEY COMBE VILLA.
Stone model, giving the plan of nineteenth-century excavations.



PL. V WHATLEY COMBE VILLA.
Complicated wall junctions (see Fig. 3, A).



PL. VI WHATLEY COMBE VILLA.
Wide entrance at the centre of the south wing.

Photographs by A. L. Pacitto.

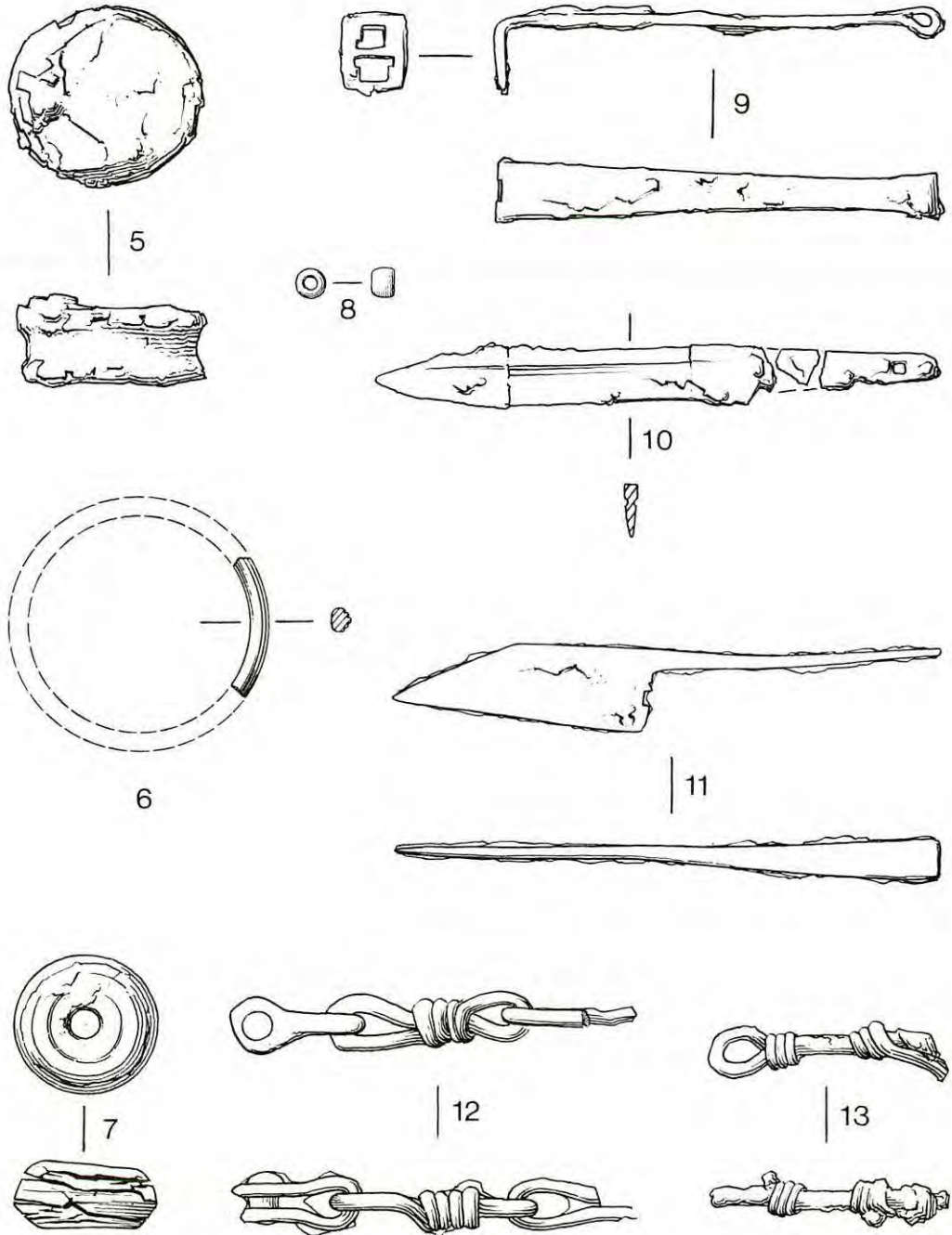


FIG. 5
Objects of lead (5), shale (6 and 7), glass (8), and iron (9-13).
Scale ($\frac{1}{2}$), apart from (8 full size).

11. Iron blade, from a pair of shears, 5.9 ins. long.
12. and 13. Iron chain-links, including a rivetted terminal.

(c) COINS: by Marion M. Archibald, Department of Coins and Medals, British Museum.

No.	Reverse Type	Date	Mint	Reign	Reference
1.	SALUS AUG	270-273		Tetricus	<i>R.I.C.</i> 126
2.	"	"		" II	" 266
3.	PAX AUG	287-293	unmarked	Carausius	" 880
4.	SOLI INVICTO COMITI	313-317	London	Constantine I	Kent, 67 (v)
5.	VICTORIAE LAETAE PRINC PERP	317-320	"	"	" 78
6.	"		illeg.	"	
7.	Victory on Prow			CONSTANTINOPOLIS	
8.	Wolf and Twins	330-335	Arles	URBS ROMA	<i>L.R.B.C.</i> , I, 355
9.	VICTORIA DD AUGG Q NN	341-346	Rome	Constans	" 638
10.	"	"	Arles	"	" 456
11.	"	"	Lyons	Constantius II	" 260
12.	FEL TEMP RERARATIO (barbarous)				
13.	GLORIA ROMANORUM	367-375	Lyons	Valentinian I	<i>L.R.B.C.</i> , II, 324
14.	SECURITAS REIPUBLICAE	"	"	Valens	" 319
15.	"	"	"	"	" 340
16.	"	"	Arles	"	" 492
17.	GLORIA NOVI SAECULI	367-375	"	Gratian	
18-25.	Illegible				

The following five coins were found together (see p. 43):

1.	Wolf and Twins	330-337	off flan	URBS ROMA	
2.	GLORIA EXERCITUS	337-341	Aquileia	Constans	<i>L.R.B.C.</i> , I, 694
3.	VICTORIAE DD AUGG Q NN	341-346	Arles	"	" 456a
4.	FEL TEMP REPARATIO	348-350	Trier	"	<i>L.R.B.C.</i> , II, 35p
5.	Illegible				

References: *R.I.C.* *Roman Imperial Coinage*, H. Mattingley and E. A. Sydenham.
Kent. *Numismatic Chronicle*, 6th ser., xvii, 1957, 17-77.
L.R.B.C. *Late Roman Bronze Coinage*, I (P. V. Hill and J. P. C. Kent)
and II (R. A. G. Carson and J. P. C. Kent).

(d) HUMAN REMAINS: The burials of three infants were found below floors: one in the room marked 'M' on Fig. 2, and the others in the adjoining room on the south-west side. The bones were examined by C. B. Denston, Duckworth Laboratory of Physical Anthropology, Cambridge University, who comments: "The bones of Skeleton I, the most complete, are probably the remains of a new born or a few weeks old baby. Those of Skeletons II and III are fewer in number and more fragmentary, but the ages are similar. The bones of Skeleton III are a fraction longer and more robust than the others."

(e) WALLPLASTER: Surprisingly little painted wallplaster was found. There was crude yellowish plaster with traces of red paint, some in fairly large pieces and some still on the walls, from the room completely excavated (Fig. 3, B). Elsewhere a few finer fragments were found, with traces of red paint on a white surface, but these pieces were mainly small with abraded surfaces.

(f) TESSERAE: Samples of stone tesserae examined by Miss H. A. H. Macdonald, Petrographical Department, Geological Survey and Museum, South Kensington, are all from rocks which occur in north Somerset. The stones are coloured blue-grey (micaceous sandstone, comparable to Pennant sandstone), blue-grey to reddish grey (reddish micaceous sandstones, like specimens from the Old Red Sandstone), and white (fine-grained limestones similar to specimens from the White Lias). The only other colour found was red, cut from bricks or tiles.