

EXCAVATIONS AT GATCOMBE, SOMERSET, 1954

BY T. W. J. SOLLEY

(WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY C. M. SYKES)

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1954, at the invitation of Mr. John Butler, owner of Gatcombe Farm, trial excavations were carried out by the Clevedon and District Archaeological Society with interesting results. Chief of these was the discovery of the so-called "Great Wall", the base of which is 15 ft. thick.

No further excavation was carried out until the summers of 1965-66, when Mr. B. Cunliffe of the University of Bristol, as he then was, directed two short student "digs" on the site.¹

Much of this Romano-British settlement is covered by the farm and its outbuildings and by Gatcombe Court. Part lies under the Bristol road and part, possibly the southern boundary, was destroyed when the railway was built in 1838-9.² South of the deep cutting, the Rev. G. S. Master, rector of Flax Bourton, found Romano-British potsherds in his trenches in 1897 but, to his disappointment, no trace of any building.³

It is probable, then, that the full extent of this walled settlement will never be known.

THE SITE (Fig. 1)⁴

Gatcombe lies on the north side of the A.370 road, about 7 miles W. of Bristol (ST526699), and rests in a gap between the ridges of Failand and Barrow Gurney. The valley is watered by the river Yeo which some five miles further west passes close to the Romano-British Villa at Wraxall.⁵ Just south of the site a short section of Roman road points towards the Mendips where there were lead workings (ST498563) and a settlement which is now beneath the Chew Valley Lake (ST568594). Connections with the Roman site at Sea Mills (*Abone*) (ST552759) are possible via the small site at Abbots Leigh (ST537738) which was found by the Clevedon Society in 1957, when following a trace on an aerial photograph of what seemed to indicate a track from the Somerset side of the Avon.

Carboniferous limestone occurs both in the hill behind the Gatcombe site and in the fields on either side, but in the main the underlying material is millstone grit, passing into red marls in the

¹ B. Cunliffe, "Excavations at Gatcombe, Somerset, in 1965 and 1966". *Proc. Univ. Brist. Spel. Soc.*, **11**, No. 2 (1967). Mr. Cunliffe is now Professor of Archaeology at the University of Southampton.

² See Appendix A.

³ See Appendix C.

⁴ The writer acknowledges the kind hospitality of Mr. Butler and the late Mrs. Butler, and also the contributions of Mr. C. M. Sykes, of Mr. Gray Usher, who rediscovered the site, and of Mr. K. Gardner, who was responsible for much of the organization and recording.

⁵ *Proc. Som. A. N. H. S.*, **105** (1961), 37-51.

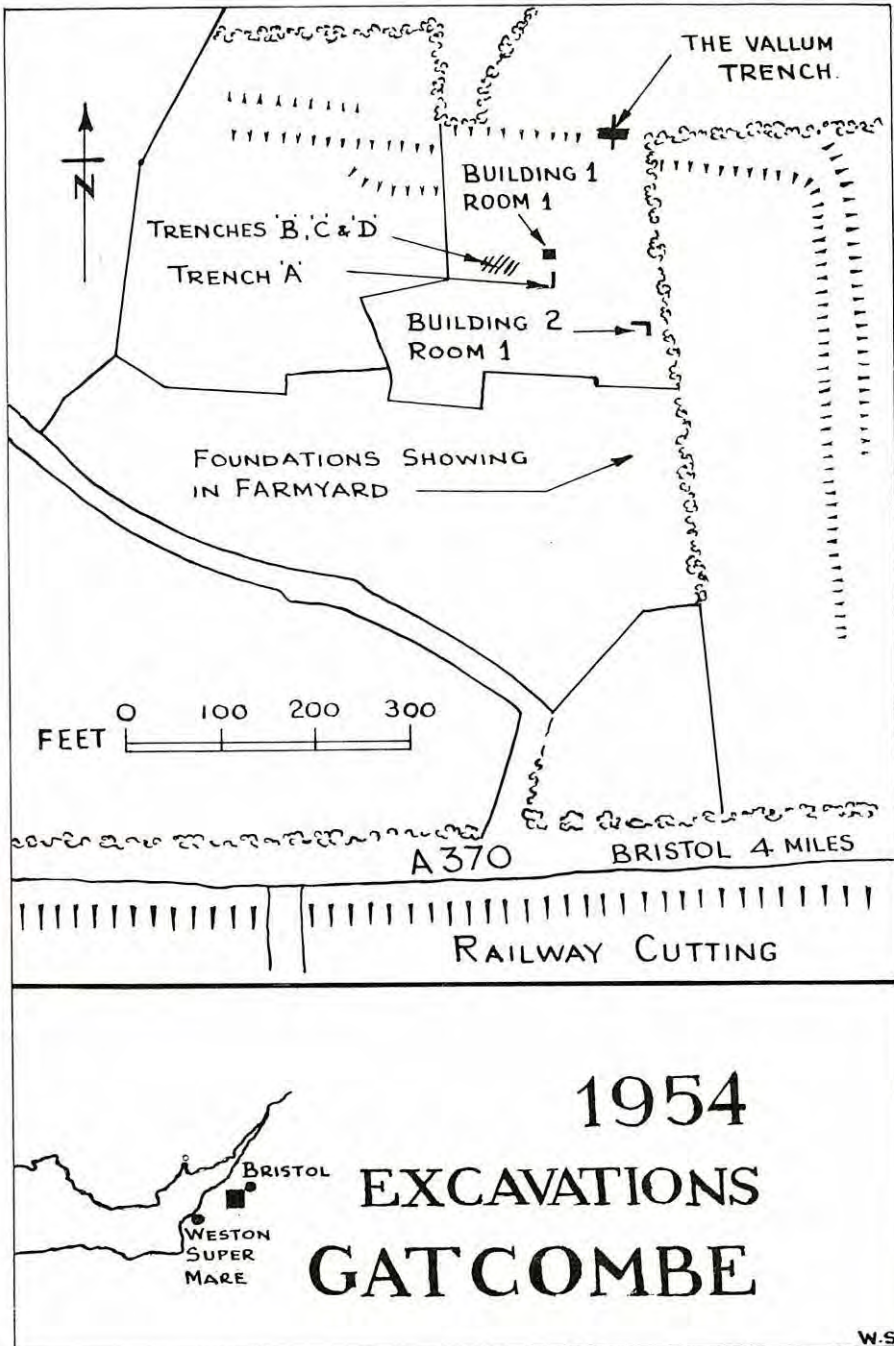


FIG. I

lower part of the valley. The walls uncovered were constructed of white lias, probably from the south of the valley, and the roofing slabs were of Pennant stone known to be available in the Nailsea area.

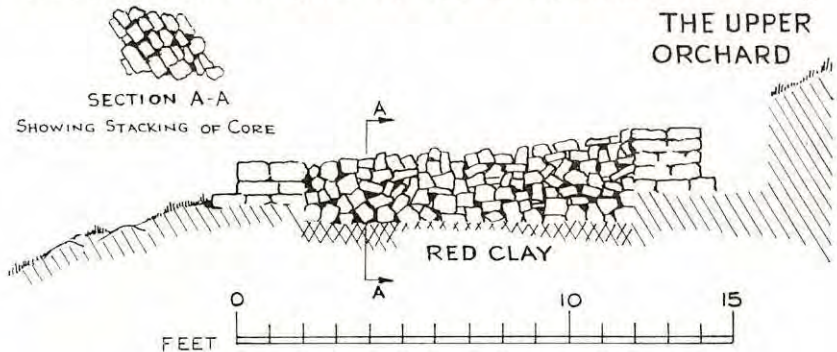
THE VALLUM

A low grass-covered mound flanking the site on the N. and E. had already been observed by Mr. J. A. Davies in 1928 (*Bristol Times and Mirror* — 1 Dec. 1928) though not in its entirety.⁶

Mr. Butler pointed out a course of dressed stones in the south face of the 'terrace' in the orchard and it was at this point that a trench was cut (Fig. 2). This revealed the base of a wall no less than 15 ft. thick, 10 ft. of which consisted of a core of large blocks of undressed lias, contained between two walls of which the outer faces only were dressed. On the north side of the wall is the upper orchard which is levelled off with made-up earth. The core was packed with red clay and the wall stood directly on solid rock. No dating evidence was found during the cutting of this section.

BUILDING I, ROOM I

The north, east and west walls of this room are bonded into each other and are well constructed, with hard mortar. They have no offset, but rest on solid rock which had been quarried away so that the building could be set back into the slope. The wall at the north-east corner was thickened to bring it up against the rock face. The south wall is a later insertion — of the same date as the cement floor, probably Constantinian — and incorporates a door opening and the remains of slots, no doubt for a doorstep. Openings had been left about 2 ft. above the floor in the north-east corner by



SECTION THROUGH THE VALLUM - LOOKING EAST TO WEST

FIG. 2

w.s.

⁶ For finds see *V.C.H.*, 1, 305; *Journ. Rom. Studies*, 18; D. P. Dobson, *Archaeology of Somerset*.

omitting a stone in each wall. There is a gap in the south wall just below floor level, possibly intended for drainage. The room measures 18 ft. 6 ins. from E. to W. and 13 ft. from N. to S. White plaster from the walls lay round the room. A patch of this remained *in situ* on the east wall.

Contents of Room I (From turf level downwards)

(1) 10 to 12 ins. of humus. As elsewhere on the site sherds occur at 6 to 9 ins.; this spread may be the result of attempts to level the ground in the post-Roman period.

(2) From 12 ins. down to about 52 ins. there was the normal sequence of collapsed walling overlying fallen roof tiles. This contained a few fragments of box-tiles as well as the carved stones (pp. 29, 30 and Fig. 4), also 2 coins described later (1B and 2B, p. 34).

(3) The floor level was at 54 ins. and the south side of the room had a layer of ash and household rubbish up to 2 ins. thick. In two corners the last occupants had broken up the cement floor and lit fires. Ash was piled up in and around these holes. The occupation layer contained many coins (*see* coin list p. 34). The north half of the room was surprisingly clear of ash and rubbish, except for a few animal bones and several large fragments of pot found near the wall.

The Finds:

Coins as listed.

Bowl of bronze spoon.

Bronze finger ring, with 'ripple' marking.

Iron spearhead.

Upper stone of rotary quern (Half).

Bowl of bone spoon.

Bone comb with circle and dot decoration

(*cf. Lydney*). Fragments.

Animal bones including tusks of wild boar.

Charred oak. Fragments.

Pottery (*see* report — p. 31).

The Floor, Room I

This was of rough reddish cement containing fragments of stone and broken box-tiles. Part of an older cement floor had survived at a level 3 ins. lower in the area west of the doorway and appeared to continue under the inserted wall. The surface of the later floor was level with the offset of the inserted wall and was probably contemporary. On coin evidence the inserted floor was late 4th century. An area of the broken floor was taken up and oyster and mussel shells and the 3 coins (25-27B, p. 34) were revealed.

TRENCH A

This exposed intermittent sections of flagged flooring covered by random roof-tiles and resulted in the following finds:

Bones in some quantity, including the lower jaw of a dog.

Wall plaster (white) in quantity.

Finial of Bathstone (weathered) (Fig. 3).

Pottery sherds including parts of the base of a red mortarium.

There was no dating evidence.

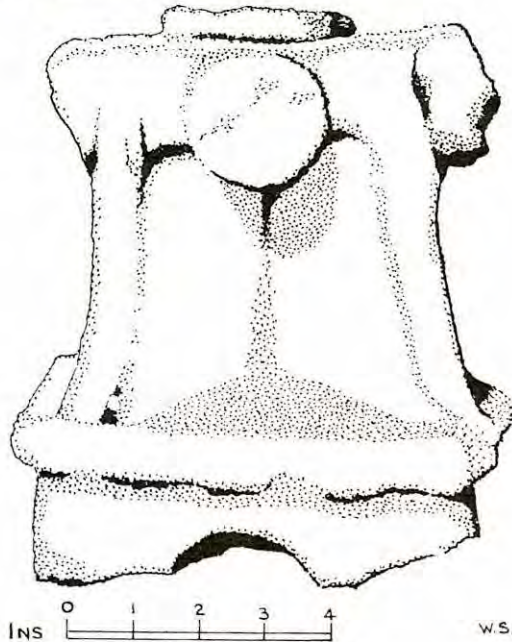


FIG. 3 Stone Finial

TRENCH B

At the north end of this trench was found a wall which does not appear to belong to Building I. This wall has no offset and its base rests on large undressed stones laid rather irregularly. These stones rest on solid rock. The floor in this trench is of large irregular flagstones of Pennant sandstone. No dating evidence was found, either above the floor or in the filling between the flagstones and the natural rock.

TRENCH C

In this trench the floor level was built up of burnt material — brick dust, red soil and black ash with large stones the surface of which had been decomposed by intense heat, suggesting the use of material from a burnt house or hut built partly of stone, partly of wattle and daub.⁷

⁷ G. Home, *Roman London*, 232.

Potsherds and bones were found on the floor. They included a fragment of rouletted New Forest Ware and part of the jawbone of a dog.

No coins were found in Trenches A, B or C.

TRENCH D

A persistent layer of large stones and black soil extended down to bedrock at about 23 ins. This was a rubbish layer, unfortunately not stratified. It was probably turned over more than once during the occupation, and contained part of a samian bowl and the neck of a bottle (light blue glass with blue shoulder decoration extending on the body of thin clear glass) of the type described as belonging to the latter half of the 2nd century or to the early 3rd.⁸ The coins include one of Commodus (180-92) three of the 3rd century and three of the 4th.

BUILDING II, ROOM I (TRENCH E)

The east side of this trench contained the base of a wall of yet another building. Examination was not taken below a damaged flagged floor at offset level. The soil between the flags had a reddish appearance similar to that found in Trench C.

The coins were all of the 4th century and include two of Valens (364-78) found 8 to 9 ins. below the turf. Most of the pottery was found well above floor level and included the complete jar — Ref. 25. Also found in this trench were (a) a clay cube of 2 ins. sides, each face being penetrated centrally by a hole $\frac{3}{8}$ ins. in diameter, and (b) parts of the rim of a New Forest beaker.

THE CARVED STONE SLABS (*from Room I*) (Fig. 4)

The first slab, which was in several pieces when found, is rectangular, 40 ins. by 27 ins. by $3\frac{1}{2}$ ins. thick. It is bevelled on three sides apart from the corners, which are left square, and a similar square block mid-way along the longest bevelled side. The inclined faces are decorated with simple patterns of chip-carving contained between an upper and lower band of 'rope' or 'cable' decoration. The vertical faces of the square blocks have a 'wheel-spoke' decoration. A protruding rim runs along the under-side close to the edge, apparently to prevent the slab from moving off its support (or supports).

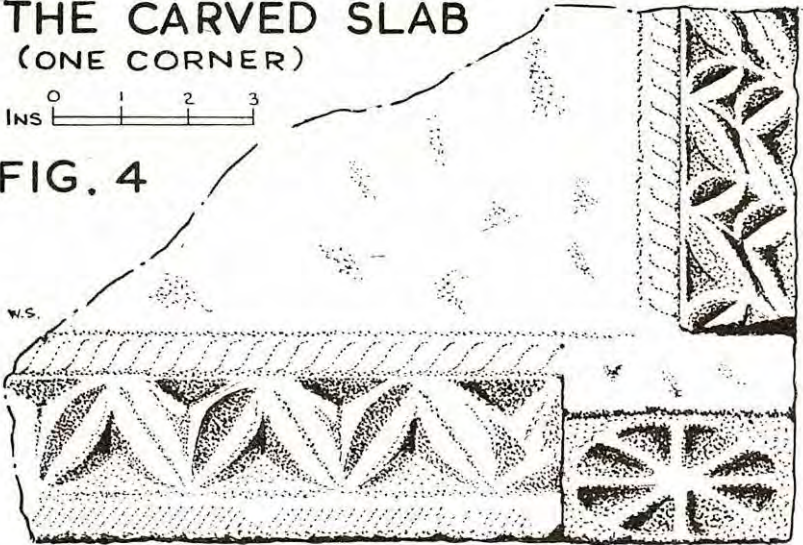
The second slab is only a fragment about 15 ins. long. Although styled as above it has one edge which is not only bevelled but also curved and this probably indicates that it is part of a bow fronted example.

⁸ G. Home, *op. cit.* Pl. facing p. 81, item 2.

THE CARVED SLAB (ONE CORNER)

INS 

FIG. 4



There is little evidence of the use to which these 'table tops' were put. They have been described as altars and gaming tables and may have been supported on dwarf columns or a made-up stone base.

A 4th century date is probable and a comprehensive report is being prepared to list and compare all known examples, the best recorded being those at Tockington Park Villa, Gloucestershire and at the West Park Villa, Rockbourne, Hampshire.

Part of the first slab was found at the south side of Room I, above the fallen roof-tiles, in a level which contained many coins of the 4th century. A smaller fragment was, however, found at the back of the room below the roof-tiles. The fragments must therefore have been thrown in when the room was in a state of only partial collapse. (*see* also coins 1.B. and 2.B.).

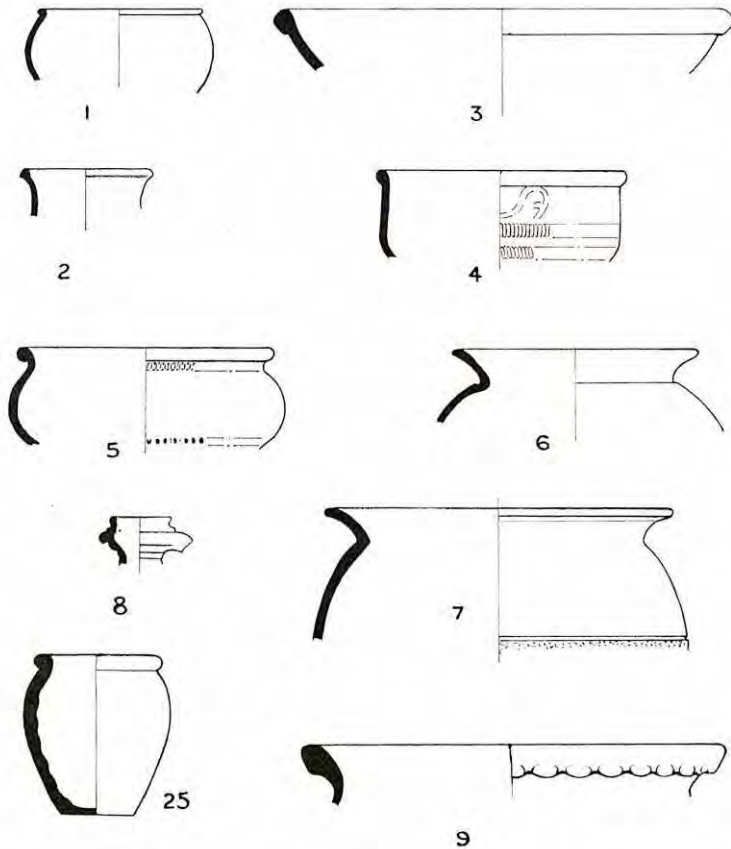
THE SAMIAN WARE

- (a) Fragments comprising almost half of a flanged bowl (Form 38). Good gloss. Undecorated.
- (b) Fragments of mortarium including part of base ring and signs of 'ungritted' internal band $\frac{3}{16}$ ins. wide.
- (c) Fragment of heavy dish or bowl with lead insert as means of repair. Undecorated.
- (d) Several sherds of plain bead rim dish. Good gloss.

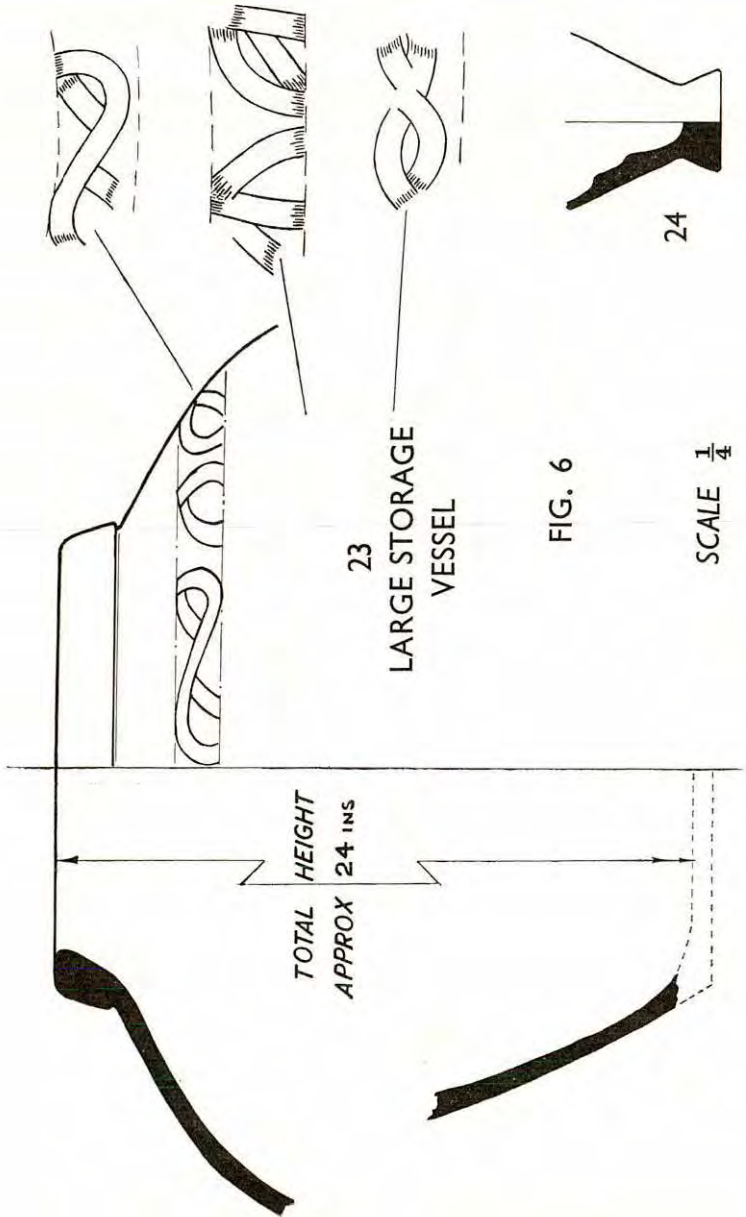
THE COARSE POTTERY (Fig. 5)

Abbreviations: r. Rim sherd; b. Body sherd; f. Base sherd.
m.g. Mica gilt

- 1.- r. b. buff and dark grey outside. Part of small globular bowl with thin bead rim. Undecorated.
- 2.- r. dark grey, hard fabric with black finish outside. Undecorated.
- 3.- r. b. orange fabric with darker core and traces of red slip. Part of shallow bowl with thickened rim. Band of rouletting just above base on inside.



COARSE POTTERY SCALE $\frac{1}{4}$ FIG. 5



- 4.- r. b. orange fabric with m.g. and traces of red/brown slip. Part of straight-sided bowl with bead rim and upper section painted with white scroll pattern. Two bands of vertical rouletting. *Richborough*, 1, Pl. XXVIII, No. 113.
- 5.- r. b. Fabric as 3 and 4 with red/brown slip. Part of globular bowl with bead rim and bands of rouletting under rim and on lower part of body.
- 6.- r. grey fabric — hard, gritty and m.g. with traces of black on rim. Part of cavetto rim jar.
- 7.- r. b. black — coarse fabric with burnished finish and groove round body with signs of rustication below. Part of large cavetto rim jar.
- 8.- Neck of ringed flagon with handle junction. Orange fabric with dark gritty particles and dark cream slip.
- 9.- r. grey 'soapy' fabric, with black core including white 'shell' particles. Heavy rim, 'thumb' impressed.
- 10.- b. buff with m.g. and trace of brown slip. Thin sherd which has traces of rouletting.
- 11.- b. cream fabric with large particles embedded on inner face. Probably mortarium fragment.
- 12.- b. buff fabric with black slip. Part of shouldered beaker with vertical line of small rectangular rouletting.
- 13.- b. 'pink' hard gritty ware with banded decoration.
- 14.- b. grey gritty sherd.
- 15.- r. coarse black ware — plain rim.
- 16.- b. orange fabric — thin, with overlapping 'scale' decoration.
- 17.- b. orange fabric with scale decoration and band of rouletting, outside showing dark grey-brown.
- 18.- r. f. b. oval 'pie-dish', black ware.
- 19.- r. f. b. flanged rim, black ware.
- 20.- r. f. b. mortarium, red ware.
- 21.- r. b. large fragments of 'olla' — everted rim, black ware.
- 22.- b. thin brown ware with rouletted decoration. (New Forest?).
- 23.- Large storage vessel.⁹ (Fig. 6).

Some fragments of this large vessel were found in Room I of Building I. The heavy bead rim is 1 - 1¼ ins. deep and the neck diameter about 10 ins., sufficient pieces being found to establish the height as being about 24 ins. The fabric is hard grey, smoothed externally between the bands of combing, which is 9 point work. From the rim downwards a black 'slip' covers the smoothed bands but leaves the lower part in its basic grey colour. Two bases were found close together and although the fabrics are similar, it is apparent that the vessel described above had the larger one.

24.- The smaller base mentioned above. (Fig. 6).

⁹ Other examples of this type of vessel have been found at the Romano-British kilns at Overway Tilford (near Farnham, Surrey) (*Surrey Arch. Coll.*, 51 (1949) and near Verulamium (*Journ. Rom. Studies*, 32 (1942), 113).

- 25.— Small complete bead rim jar of dark grey fabric, the base perforated by a small hole.

THE COINS

The coins are listed in the areas where they were found. For convenience the legends have been given in full although the lettering on the coins is not necessarily fully legible. After the legends the sequence is as follows:

date / exergue / size – mm. / site code / ‘p’ if photographed

BUILDING I.

From the south-west corner above the fallen roof-tiles:

- 1.B. VRBS ROMA. Wolf & twins. c.330/–/14/c23.

In the rubble filling of Room I, 8 ins. above floor level:

- 2.B. ARCADIVS P F AVG – VICTORIA AVGGG. 395–408/CON/13/c22/p.

In the final occupation level, mostly opposite and on both sides of the doorway:

- 3.B. IMP CAES M OPEL SEV MACRINVS – FIDES MILITVM.

c.217–18/–/30/c24.

(The ‘FIDES MILITVM’ reverse usually occurs on the silver denarius).

- 4.B. VRBS ROMA. Wolf & twins. c.330/CON/16/c56.

- 5.B. As above. /TRS/17/c70.

- 6.B. As above but ‘Minimus’ /–/7/c88/p.

- 7.B. CONSTANTINOPOLIS – Victory on the prow. c.330/TRP/15/c92/p.

- 8.B. FL IVL CONSTANTIVS NOB C – GLORIA EXERCITVS.

323–37/PLG/16/c25.

- 9.B. HELENA – PAX PVBLICA. c.340/TRS?/15/c60.

- 10.B. FL MAX THEODORAE AVG – PIETAS ROMANA. c.340/–/15/c49.

- 11.B. As above. /c57.

- 12.B. CONSTANTIVS P F AVG – VICTORIA D D AVG. 337–61/–/15/c45.

- 13.B. D N GRATIANVS P F AVG – GLORIA ROMANORVM.

367–83/TCON/16/c35.

- 14.B. As above but no mint mark. /–/17/c36.

- 15.B. D N THEODOSIVS P F AVG – VICTORIA AVGGG. 379–95/–/13/c34.

- 16.B. to 19.B. Two victories. ?/–/13–15/c26;c30;c55;c67.

- 20.B. 21.B. 22.B. Single victory. ?/–/c31;c32;c51.

- 23.B. Single standard & two soldiers. ?/–/15/c38.

- 24.B. As above. /c91.

Unidentified: c27–29; c33; c37; c39–44; c46–48; c50; c52–54; c58; c59; c61–66; c68; c69; c71–87; c89; c90.

Below floor level, in SE. corner:

- 25.B. IMP CARAVSIVS – PAX AVG. 287–93/–/20/c94.

- 26.B. CONSTANTINVS IVN NOB C – GLORIA EXERCITVS.

317–37/PLG/17/c95.

Under the floor:

- 27.B. Unidentified.

TRENCH ‘D’

- 1.D. L AVREL COMMODVS – Seated figure, Salus? 180–92/–/31/c96.

- 2.D. IMP CAES ANTONINIANVS (ELAGABALUS) –

SALUS ANTONINI AVG 218–22/–/18/c98/p.

- 3.D. JVLIA MAMAEA – VESTA? c.230/–/18 coin broken /c102/p.

- 4.D. IMP C P LIC VALERIANIVS P F AVG – ORIENS AVG.

254–60/–/19/c99/p.

- 5.D. D N VALENTINIANVS P F AVG – GLORIA ROMANORVM.

364–75/–/18/c101.

6.D. CONSTANTIVS – Fallen horseman. c.360-/13/c103/p.

7.D. Two victories. -/14/c104/p.

Unidentified: c97; c100.

TRENCH 'E'

- 1.E. CONSTANTINVS MAX AVG – Two soldiers & two standards.
306–37/TRP/17/c135.
- 2.E. CONSTANTINVS AVG D N CONSTANTINI MAX AVG – VOT XX
in wreath. 308–37/TSC?/17/c114/p.
- 3.E. FL IVL CONSTANTIVS NOB C – Two soldiers & standard.
323–37/TRP/14/c123.
- 4.E. CONSTANTINOPOLIS – Victory on prow. c.330/P—/14/c110.
- 5.E. As above. /TRP/17/c129.
- 6.E. VRBS ROMA – Wolf & twins. c.330-/16/c122.
- 7.E. As above. /PLG/15/c127.
- 8.E. CONSTANS P F AVG – VICTORIA D D AVGG Q NN.
337–50/TRP/16/c108.
- 9.E. CONSTAN? – As above? /TRS/16/c137.
- 10.E. FL MAX THEODORAE AVG – PIETAS ROMANA.
c.340/TRS/15/c106.
- 11.E. As above. No mint mark. /c143.
- 12.E. FL HELENA AVG – PAX PVBLICA. c.355-/14/c117.
- 13.E. D N VALENTINIANVS P F AVG – GLORIA ROMANORVM.
364–75/LV—/17/c107.
- 14.E. D N VALENS P F AVG – SECVRITAS REPUBLICAE.
364–78-/17/c105.
- 15.E. As above. /LVG?/17/c109. Also 'Shop mark' OF I.
- 16.E. As above. /SMRO/16/c112. Mint mark also includes 'leaf'.
- 17.E. D N GRATIANVS AVG – Gloria Novi Seculi. 367–83-/18/c126.
- 18.E. Two soldiers & standard. -/P—/15/c134.
- 19.E. As above. -/14/c132.
- 20.E. As above. -/14/c125.
- 21.E. Two soldiers & two standards. -/16/c111.
- 22.E. As above. -/16/c139.
- Unidentified: c113; c115; c116; c118–21; c124; c128; c130; c131; c133; c136;
c138; c140–42; c144.

FOUND BY MR. J. H. BUTLER PRIOR TO 1954:

1. HADRIANVS – Salus feeding snake? 117–38-/25/JBcI.
2. IMP C CARAVSIVS P F AVG – PAX AVGG. 287–93/S?/23/JBc2.
3. FL IVL CRISPVS NOB CAES – PROVIDENTIA CAES.
317–26-/18/JBc7.
4. VRBS ROMA – Wolf & twins. c.330/PLG/16/JBc14/p.
5. As above. -/15/JBc20.
6. CONSTANTIVS P F AVG – VICTORIAE D D AVGG Q NN.
337–61/LON?/16/JBcII.
7. MAX THEODORAE AVG – PIETAS ROMANA. c.340-/15/JBc13.
8. —CAE MAGNENTIVS AVG – Figure standing. 350–53/TRP/22/JBc15.
9. D N GRATIANVS P F AVG – Figure standing with spear & shield.
367–83/TCON/17/JBc17.
10. Two soldiers & standard. -/14/JBc4.
11. As above. -/KON/15/JBc9.
12. As above. -/15/JBc8.
13. As above. -/12/JBc12.
14. Two soldiers & two soldiers. -/—P/17/JBc3.
- Unidentified: JBc5; JBc6; JBc10; JBc16; JBc18; JBc19; JBc21.

The coins and pottery are with Mr. J. H. Butler.

APPENDIX A

FELIX FARLEYS BRISTOL JOURNAL (17 November 1838)
BRISTOL & EXETER RAILWAY

In the deep excavation of these works near that part where the turnpike road to Weston-super-Mare crosses the line, some remains were discovered about 3 ft. below the surface of the ground which appear to be the foundations of some Roman buildings, as several coins of the reign of the Emperor Constantine were dug up. One of these, a small copper piece, is in very excellent preservation. Some time since in cleaning out a drain at Congresbury some coins of the same monarch were found in beautiful condition. Constantine died A.D. 337.

Ibid. (9 February 1839)

Since the last notice taken of the interesting remains which have been discovered in the deep cutting near Ashton Waters, numerous coins of the reign of Constantine have been dug up among which are a Julius Caesar in excellent preservation and a Diocletian. Sufficient has been seen to show that this must have been a settlement of no mean importance, established as soon as the Romans had gained possession of this part of the country and remaining in existence until they abdicated Britain. The foundations which are extremely well built extend a considerable distance to the south of the line and will therefore remain untouched, but there is no doubt that many coins and other valuable relics are buried there which could throw considerable light on the history of those times. Two small bronze spoons of elegant shape; several pieces of pottery; a jar, perfect except the handle; a quantity of bones; part of the capitals of two columns; a well faced in the interior with worked stone; a stone trough and two coffins containing skeletons have been found. The coffins were of rectangular shape made of oak planks about 3 ins. thick, roughly hewn and nailed together. The skeletons crumbled to dust on exposure to the air. They were of gigantic size, one being 7 ft. long and the other 6 ft. 5 ins.

APPENDIX B

COLLINSON'S "HISTORY OF SOMERSET"

Attention was drawn by Mr. A. F. Devonshire of Bristol University to the following marginal note in the University copy of Collinson. This copy was once owned by the late T. W. Williams of Flax Bourton and he appears to have transferred it from another copy once owned by a certain Stephen Jarrett:

Opposite a farmhouse called Gatcombe near Cambridge Batch in this parish was discovered in 1839 during the excavation of the Bristol & Exeter Railway an entire Roman Village with an outer wall 15 ft. thick, two bodies in wooden coffins, two shafts of pillars, beads, coins, silver, gold and copper of Trajan and others, a lachrymatory and various remains (note by Stephen Jarrett in his copy of this work).

APPENDIX C

BRISTOL TIMES & MIRROR (17 September 1897)

Bourton Grange,
Flax Bourton.
16th September, 1897.

Sir,

It may possibly interest some of your readers to know that in my capacity as President of the Northern Branch of the Somerset Archaeological Society I have lately been engaged in a tentative excavation in a plantation belonging to Sir Greville Smythe Bt. and by his kind permission, in search of Roman remains not far from the Batch adjoining Flax Bourton.

Sixty years ago during the construction of the Bristol & Exeter Railway and the digging of the deep cutting at that point there were found and necessarily destroyed some little regarded relics of Roman occupation, which it was then stated seemed to extend further towards the south. The tradition of their discovery has well nigh faded into oblivion, preserved only in two brief notices in Felix Farley's Bristol Journal 17th November 1838 and 9th February 1839. In the latter of these mention is made of the articles found including bronze spoons, pottery, portions of capitals of columns, a well faced with masonry, a stone trough and two coffins of thick oak plank (an unusual material) containing skeletons of a gigantic size. No information is now obtainable as to what became of these relics nor of some coins which accompanied them, but I have interviewed an old labourer who was at work upon this line at the time of their discovery and remembers having seen them. With his assistance and that of some platelayers who found more recently some fragments of bronze armorillae carried down the steep embankment by the rain, the probable site was indicated, and, at the lowest attainable level of the adjoining plantation, unfortunately encumbered with huge hummocks of heaped up clay and ballast from the cutting, trenches were driven parallel to and at right angles to the line in the hope of intercepting the foundations of walls of buildings. In this I have been disappointed; my trenches yield nothing beyond sherds of typically Roman pottery of coarse black and grey ware with a fragment of Samian and of a mortarium faced internally with angular grit for the abrasion of grain. The presence of these however shows that the desired villa could not or cannot be far distant, and for the present I reluctantly abandon search for it, defeated by the serious if not insuperable accumulation of heaped up material on every side which burying at a greatly increased depth below the proper surface whatever may exist below it renders the task of excavation one beyond my power. Abortive as my attempt has been, it may nevertheless be desirable to place it upon record if you do me the favour to give insertion to this brief letter in the Times & Mirror.

I remain, Sir,

Your Obedient Servant,

George S. Master.