

ROMAN HOUSES IN THE CASTLE PARK, COLCHESTER.

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DURING the dry weather of the summer of 1906 a series of lines were observed by Mr. A. G. Wright, curator of the Colchester Museum, in the grass of the Castle Park, below the band stand. The dried and faded condition of these rectangular forms, extending over an area of 100 yards by 50 yards, raised a strong presumption that they covered important remains, existing at no great depth, and that this was the cause of the early fading of the grass in these places. As the supposed buildings were so distinctly outlined, a measured plan to scale was made by Major Bale and, from the design thus revealed, there was little doubt the lines seen in the grass marked the foundations of, at least, two Roman houses.

The subject being mentioned at a meeting of the Corporation, the owners of the Park, it was agreed that an investigation should be made and that the remains of the supposed houses should be excavated when circumstances were favourable.

After waiting some time for suitable weather, a commencement was made, on Monday, February 18th, 1907, to explore the remains which might exist under the turf, by finding one of the apparently indicated walls and laying it bare and so following all that had shown their position in the dried grass of the summer. On removing the superincumbent soil the workmen came on a large quantity of broken brick, tile and stones, mostly in small pieces, but not set in mortar, although there was a considerable amount of lumps of mortar intermixed. These conditions existed wherever the lines in the grass had been observed, and in every instance it was found that the original trench for the foundations down to the virgin soil, which is sand, had been filled up with this brick rubbish, therefore fully accounting for the drying up of the grass which had been noticed. This clearly shows that when the masonry of the walls of these Roman houses was removed by the Norman builders, they having made a quarry of Roman remains throughout the town, for their castle, churches and other building, the rubbish, consisting of bits of brick and masonry, as before

mentioned, which was of no service to them, was thrown into the trenches and thus disposed of. In only two places, each about 4 feet long, did the original walling exist, the whole of the rest having been destroyed. The same fate befell the tessellated pavements, which, judging from the number of tesserae found, must have been there at the time of the destruction of the ruins of these houses. These had all been broken up for the sake of the stones forming their foundations.

Although we were disappointed at not finding any remains which might have been worth leaving exposed, as an attraction to visitors to Colchester, it was satisfactory to find that the original opinion expressed of the meaning of the lines seen in the grass was correct, and that they were the remains of the walling of at least two Roman houses. Their situation, in close proximity to the Forum, and commanding a full view of the wall, the Colne and the wooded country to the north, indicates buildings of some importance in Camulodunum. There can be little surprise at the destruction of the remains of Roman buildings in Colchester, when it is considered what an enormous mass of material was required by the Norman masons in completing the castle, where the foundations are 31 feet thick, besides the quantity used in erecting the churches and other buildings of the town and district.

Previously to the destruction by Norman builders much damage had been done in the later years of the Saxon period, as this people also made a quarry of the remains of Roman buildings.

The tower of the church of the Holy Trinity is an example of this fact; and we also read that king Edward the Elder, in A . D . 921, rebuilt or, more probably, repaired the town wall. His work may be seen in the wall on the eastern side of the town, carried out with Roman materials, the entire absence of stone in the county apparently leaving no other alternative.

A reference to the accompanying plan will show the junction of the two houses, and from the position and shape of the rooms and corridors, it will be clearly seen that the design is peculiarly Roman. The dotted lines are those which were put on the plan to enable the walls to be found when the grass had again become green and so obliterated the marks of the summer.

