



ON A ROMAN VILLA AT LITTLE
LIPPEN WOOD, NEAR WEST MEON.

[EXCAVATED 1905-6.]

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That the *Villa* system of Romano-Britain was confined practically to the southern half of the island is a sufficiently attested fact, for which any student of the period can readily account. That the County of Hampshire is one of the richest in the possession of traces of this system is also a fact, which the careful records of Mr. Haverfield, in the 'Victoria County History'—added to the increased amount of excavation in this district of recent years—are gradually causing to be realized. To quote the list of all the sites of Romano-British dwelling houses that have been unearthed or noted down in this locality does not come within the scope of a paper which is intended solely to summarize the main features of that one of them which has most recently been excavated. Such a list would doubtless be of interest, but it will be sufficient to refer those who wish to get a clearer idea of the position of this West Meon House, and its relation to the rest, to the map and pages of the County History itself.

Lippen Wood stands on a hillside which slopes sharply to the west, about half a mile from the village of West Meon. This wood is divided by a road, and it is in the eastern half that the *villa* lies. Here the presence of

Roman *débris* had been for some time noticed, and duly reported, but although diggings which yielded Roman potsherds were made some years ago, the site has never previously been excavated. It is no isolated site. In the immediate vicinity, at Bramdean, East Meon, Corhampton, Droxford, Twyford—all along the Meon Valley in fact—traces of Roman occupation have been found, and, in some cases, more or less adequately explored.

In the Autumn of 1904, I examined the site and determined to attempt excavation, and in the following summer—thanks to the kindness and generous help of Mr. D. Meinertzhagen, of Brockwood Park—I was able to uncover some part of a substantial house. Further excavation this year has enabled me to complete the plan, and although the finds made in connection with it comprise nothing of a startling nature, yet the somewhat curious features which the accompanying plan presents must stamp the excavation—however imperfectly carried out—as an important one.

Villas of the Romano-British period conform, as a rule, to one or the other of two main types, which have been termed respectively by Archæologists the 'Corridor' and 'Courtyard' types. The former—and these are generally quite small houses—consist of a row of rooms opening on to a common corridor, the latter of three such systems arranged round a courtyard. The West Meon house is typical of neither. It is one of those small irregular houses of which, so far, only a few have been discovered, consisting of an arrangement on the 'Courtyard' system, but without the flanking corridors. Such a house occurs at Carisbrooke, another at Clanville, both in this region.¹

It is built on ground which rises gently from the east but falls away somewhat irregularly towards the west, where the foundations of chalk, rubble, and flint show, consequently, a varying depth. On the south side the fall is more abrupt and the building here, in consequence, is terraced, a sloping bank surmounted by a thick retaining wall dividing

¹ *Victoria County History, Hants*, i., pp. 296 and 316.



Forward, East.

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Forward, Author.

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the upper rooms of the eastern wing from those below. This slope is hardened with a mortar face, and, doubtless, steps at one time gave access from the one level to the other.

Upon this summit, then, adapted to receive it, this small country house was built, covering an area of no more than 130 by 55 feet, and consisting of three small wings, north, west, and south, surrounding a courtyard, which is closed on the east by a wall. In the middle of this wall is the gateway, fronted by two square sandstone blocks, ten feet apart (see plan), which may have supported columns, indicating, in that case, an entrance of some architectural pretensions. North of this courtyard is the main wing of the house—a block of ten dwelling-rooms, some of them somewhat elaborately floored. Room No. 1 is probably the vestibule, leading west into a long hall (2 and 3), measuring 33 feet by 10 and paved with coarse red *tesserae*, and south and north into two important chambers (4 and 5), each of which has a mosaic floor. The partition on each of these three sides consisted probably of folding doors or curtains, for the *tesserae* run on over sleeper walls. What I have called the hall (2 and 3) is similarly subdivided. Between rooms 1 and 2 the doorway may have been more elaborate, for on one side (see plan) an oblong mortar base of a door-post, with the red paint adhering, still remains *in situ*. Room No. 4 (11 by 21 feet) contains a fine mosaic pavement, which is very perfect. It consists of a system of contained geometrical figures in white on a red ground, centring in a knot-work pattern in red, black, white, and blue. (Plate I.) The margin of red at the south end is considerably wider than at the north, the object of this being to keep the furniture clear of the mosaic design. On the other side of the vestibule is another room (No. 5), measuring 10½ feet by 21, also paved with mosaic, a more elaborate design than the other, but in this case badly broken up. (Plate II.) It consisted of three compartments, surrounded by braidwork and of conventional ornamentation.

Continuing along the north side of the hall, we come to Room No. 6 (18½ by 20 feet), the largest in the house. It

must have been an important chamber, but all traces of its flooring have disappeared. No. 7, next to it, in the north-west corner of the house, is the Winter Room of the establishment, measuring $10\frac{1}{2}$ by 20 feet. Its mosaic floor, which seems to have been of much the same design as that of No. 5, was found fallen into the hypocaust which lay beneath it. This latter is of the composite type, *i.e.*, made up of channels diverging from a small central chamber of brick *pila*. At the south-west corner of this Winter Room the outer wall is supported by a fine buttress, $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet square (see plan), built of brick with a sandstone course. (Plate III.)

Of the two rooms which flank the hall on the south side, No. 8 has lost its flooring. Its south wall has also gone. As regards the others there is evidence to show that they were 'dwarf-walls, supporting slighter masonry of the 'lath and plaster' description. Rooms Nos. 9 and 10 are small, and their flooring has disappeared.

Along the west wing of the house, the outer wall is very thick ($3\frac{1}{2}$ feet) and well built for a distance of some 23 feet, at which point it somewhat abruptly ends. But it probably once joined up with Rooms 11 and 12. These were two chambers, side by side, each fitted with a hypocaust, and having an apsidal termination. (Plate IV.) A thick transverse wall, which cuts across the two apses obliquely, seems to be a later insertion. It is very hard to conjecture the purpose of these two rooms. The lower floors (*i.e.*, of the hypocausts) alone remain, and no trace of fallen *tesserae*, or of *opus signinum* was found in them. They may represent the bath-rooms of the establishment. There are traces of a stoke-hole north of them. The last room of this wing (No. 13) measured 11 feet by 7. Its west wall, which is of an enormous thickness, is faced with mortar. I am inclined to think that this room also was a bath-room, and that the thickness of the wall represents the base of a former system of steps leading down into it. But this is pure conjecture.

East of these three rooms (11, 12, and 13) is a bank faced with mortar and surmounted by a wall 32 feet long and 5 feet thick, dividing the baths below from the stables or



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BUTTRESS SUPPORTING WEST WALL.

outhouses above. The position and purpose of this wall perhaps explain its thickness. The plan of the buildings east of it, on the upper terrace, is very incoherent, the masonry being broken up by the roots of a large oak tree which stands here, and all that is left being of a somewhat rough description. One of the rooms (No. 14) had a tiled floor. No. 15 was perhaps a yard—an extension of the main central court. It contains a small paved area, some 3 feet square, of large tiles (16 inches by 11) which show signs of fire, as also does the soil surrounding them. But there is no other indication that this was a hearth. Room No. 16, which is possibly a later addition, could not be traced to its full extent. Its north wall was faced on the inside with a white stucco ornamented with thin red lines.

In the excavation of this house very few smaller objects have been found. Of these the most interesting are a bronze bracelet, an ivory hairpin, and a fragment of tile with the impress of an animal's (perhaps pig's) foot. Other finds comprise the usual painted stucco, roofing stones, iron nails, oyster and other shells, animal bones, &c. Pottery fragments were found in abundance, but in no single instance is it possible to reconstruct a whole vessel. The commonest is the coarse black ware, but many pieces of Upchurch, New Forest, and Caistor pottery were found; a few also of Samian and its local imitation. Mention also may be made of a deposit of rude potsherds and iron-slag some hundred yards away, which may or may not be connected with the house itself. Not a single coin turned up during our excavation, or anything dateable. Mr. Haverfield inclines to put these villas late—not earlier, as a rule, than the 3rd century A.D. For our own part we can do no more than record it as another relic, of somewhat curious plan, of the Romano-British period—a good house, though a small one, owned doubtless by some rich Roman or Romanized native, who in a time of peace and, perhaps, prosperity, farmed the surrounding land.

In conclusion, I would express my gratitude to all those who have helped in the work of uncovering this house. The time involved has been considerable, owing to the

nature of the site. To all these my thanks are due, as also to the Hampshire Field Club and Archæological Society for a vote of funds towards a future undertaking, to Mr. H. M. Gimson for the large amount of time and trouble he has spent on the plans and drawings, and in particular to Mr. and Mrs. Meinertzhagen, without whose very kind help and continued interest the work of excavation could never have been carried out.





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