

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

Remarks on the Roman Pavement at Woodchester

by C. Playne
1880-81, Vol. 5, 142-147

© The Society and the Author(s)

REMARKS ON THE ROMAN PAVEMENT AT WOODCHESTER.

By CHARLES PLAYNE.

THE uncovering of this fine example of Roman tessellated work, on the occasion of the meeting of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archæological Society at Stroud, in July, 1880, afforded an opportunity of making accurate drawings of it; and the raising of a special Illustrative Fund has furnished the means of placing in the hands of the members correctly coloured chromo-lithographs of the pavement of the hall, and of some of the principal parts of the design.

The first recorded notice of this Pavement is in *Camden's Britannia*, 1695, where he refers to a notice by Edward Shwyd in 1693, of the existence of these remains, and also to a paper by Richard Parsons, Chancellor of the Diocese of Gloucester, in which he says:—"Woodchester, famous for its tesseraical work of painted beasts and flowers, which appear in the churchyard, two or three feet deep, in making the graves. If we may believe tradition, Earl Godwin's wife built a religious house with those pretty ornaments which are yet to be seen. Here, anciently, stood a chapel, dedicated to Bishop Blaise, and in digging up the foundation of it, there were found some ancient Roman coins and other Roman antiquities."

Sir Robert Atkyns, 13 years later, gives us a little more information, he says, "There is a pavement in the churchyard 3 or 4 feet underground, curiously inlaid with tesseraic work, supposed to be the floor of the habitation of some Roman general, which gave name to a castle in this place. The pavement is of some length and breadth, but the true dimensions are not discovered."¹

¹ History of Gloucestershire, p. 848.

The next record is in Lysons' *Antiquities of Gloucestershire*¹ in which Plate 19 represents the fragment of a "Roman Tessellated Pavement discovered about 70 years since, several feet below the surface of the earth in Woodchester churchyard, taken from a drawing by Edmund Brown, Esq., Barrister-at-law, a gentleman who resided in that neighbourhood, and having frequent opportunities of seeing several parts of it, as different graves were opened from time to time, added them to his drawings." Not content with the view of such little bits as were laid open at the interment of any deceased parishioner, Mr. Brown had a considerable portion cleared at his own expense, and drawings made by a Mr. Bradley. Count Cuyllus says, some drawings by Mr. Bradley were made in 1712.²

There are also in the British Museum two reproductions of Bradley's drawing.

Rudder, in 1779,³ describes Woodchester as owing its name to its large and lofty beech woods, and its being a Roman camp, as it is written, "Udecastre" in Domesday, the place is supposed to be one of the Roman "Castra," adding, "but there is good reason to attribute it to the Romans, in particular, from a curious tessellated pavement having been discovered here in the last century, about 4 or 5 feet below the surface of the ground on the south-west side of the church yard. This could be no other than Roman work." He states that "many coffins are placed upon it, but some families have requested that the graves of their friends should be dug to a greater depth."

From this time it was well-known that the churchyard had been most unfortunately laid out on the site of a very extensive Roman Pavement.

In Gough's edition of Camden, 1789, it is stated: "At Woodchester, in the churchyard, about 6 feet below the surface, was partly uncovered a large beautiful Roman Pavement, with figures of beasts, birds, and flowers, still in pretty good preservation, though many coffins lying on it, and more below it, have hurt it."

¹ Lysons 1st edition, Plate 19.

² Record of Antiquities, Paris, 1756

³ History of Gloucestershire,

But the most exhaustive research hitherto made, was by Mr. Lysons in 1793-4¹, the results of which he published in his fine folio work on this Pavement, which contains an interesting picture of the artist sketching the scene, surrounded with mounds of the excavated soil.

He says: "In the year 1793, on digging a vault for the interment of the late John Wade, Esq., of Pud Hill, so considerable a portion of the pavement was laid open that I was able to ascertain that the atrium was a square of 48 feet 10 inches." He goes on to say "The design is undoubtedly superior to anything of the same kind hitherto found in this country; the general design is a circular area, 25 feet in diameter, enclosed within a square frame enriched with a great variety of guilloches, scrolls, frets, and other ornaments. The area is surrounded by a border consisting of a vitruvian scroll enriched with foliage proceeding from a Mask of Pan, having a beard of leaves, within this border are representations of various beasts, originally twelve in number.

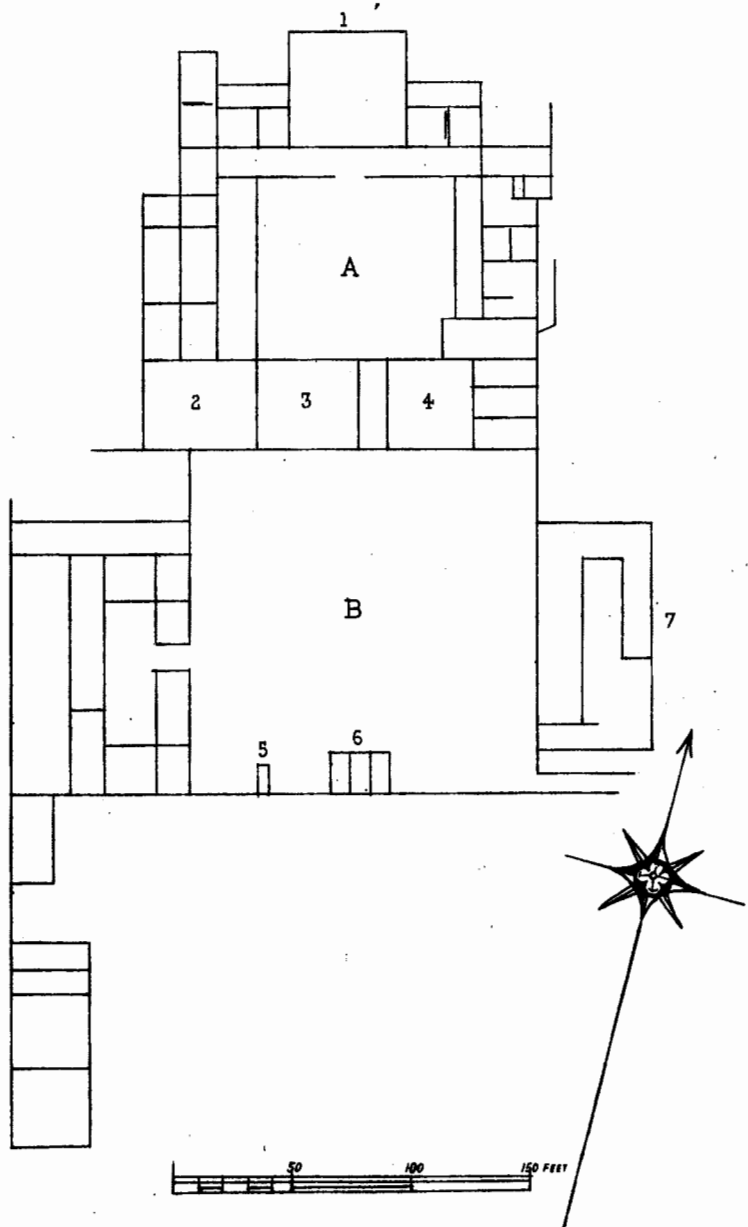
Lysons² states that the pavement was completely opened in 1814, and that several parts then appeared which could not be seen in 1794, and that the circle of animals might be described as a lion, lioness, stag, leopard, bear, gryphon, a tail, elephant, a horse's tail and hind leg. He acknowledges that the elephant, which was opened up and drawn by Mr. Brown, had been left uncovered, that the rain and frost had long since *entirely destroyed it*, and that the representation of it in his "Woodchester," was taken from Mr. Brown's drawing. The woeful empty space, therefore, which was so deplored last summer, has been in this state for nearly a century. The animals now remaining may be described as a lion, tigress, stag, leopard, bear, gryphon, and, passing over the gap, there appear the hind leg and tail of a horse, the snout, fore and hind legs and tail of a boar, and the head of a lioness; these nine animals are all of about the same size, namely, 4 feet in length (*see Pl. XVI.*)

Within this circle is a smaller one, separated from the larger by a guilloche, and a border with leaves on a red ground, which is

¹ Lysons' Woodchester.

² Lysons' Reliquæ Romana, Vol. I.

PLAN OF THE ROMAN VILLA,
WOODCHESTER.



coloured correctly in the picture taken of it by R. Bradley, now in the British Museum. In Lysons it is shewn as a yellowish brown, in Beecham's copy of Lysons it is altered to a dark green, and in the copy of Beecham's it appears as a brilliant green; but when the pavement was exposed it was found that Bradley's was the correct colour, a rather dull red, the leaves on it being delicately tinted. The next space has a white ground on which are depicted an animal, supposed to be a fox, of which the hind legs and tail alone remain, and various birds, which have now dwindled down to five, viz. : a duck, a dove, a hen, and a cock pheasant, the latter is in the attitude of scratching its ear, there is also a peacock, still perfect (with the exception of a part of the back), as it was when drawn by Bradley, who correctly gave the brilliant blue of the breast, whereas in *all* Lysons' drawings blue is represented as black; possibly in order to avoid the difficulty of colouring by hand.

The centre of the pavement was an octagonal compartment, the outline of the south side being broken in order to admit a portion of the principal figure of the design, "Orpheus playing on the lyre," which he rested on his left knee, this was perfect, with the exception of the head, when Mr. Brown's drawing was made; the knee and lyre, with part of a flowing garment, are all that remain.

There may have been in the centre a basin of water, with fountain, as was the case in the Bignor pavement. In the four angular spaces, formed between the square border and the circular compartment, are remains of female figures, of which there were two in each space. Those in the north-east corner are more perfect than any of the others, and are, evidently, designed for Naiades.

The tesserae of which this pavement is composed, are, generally, cubes of half-an-inch; the colours are harmoniously arranged, are dark bluish grey, red, white, and several shades of brown, most of the materials may have been found in the neighbourhood, viz. :—

The white, oolite stone, from the Stroud Hill.

The blue, lias, from the Vale of Gloucester.

The dark brown, from near Bristol.

The lighter brown, from Lypiatt.

The red, are a fine brick.

... The chocolate coloured Tesserae are of Silurian rock, and may have been brought from the Roman station at Cromhall, as there is at Whitfield farm, in that parish, a quarry of that stone.

Lysons gives a very interesting account of how he persevered till he had laid open, bit by bit, the whole building; it would be well if his narrative could be re-published in a small volume, as his folio work is so inaccessible.

He found twelve rooms, with tessellated floors, and he laid bare the whole plan (*see Plate XV.*) It was found to consist of two courts, marked A.B on plan, surrounded by buildings, those to the south of court A, were the three principal rooms, 38 ft. by 38 ft., 46 ft. by 38 ft., 51 ft. by 38ft. In these he found remains of statues, some of marble, some of heavy calcareous spar, also fragments of small statues of parian marble, many bits of pottery and glass, stags' horns, and some human bones, also a considerable number of small brass coins of the lower empire.

At 5 (*see plan*), a considerable quantity of coal ashes was found, though the Romans generally used wood as fuel. At 6, there are remains of a large entrance gateway. Mr. Lysons at last found the baths at 7, without which, the villa would have been incomplete. Knives, daggers, hatchets, and the scabbard of a sword, gilded, were also found, but, apparently, not so many remains as at Corinium.

Lysons says: "The room of which the great mosaic pavement remains, was no doubt the *cavædium tetrastylon* of Vitruvius, and must have been extremely magnificent, for there is great reason to believe, from the elegance of the floor, that the ceiling, and other parts of the room, were richly decorated. It is probable that part of the roof was formed by diagonal vaulting resting on the four columns, the base of one of which still remains *in situ*."

Lysons was of opinion that the villa was erected in the time of Hadrian, or at any rate during the period in which the mosaic art was at its best, as he considered it in every respect, superior to any other example yet found in England. Some repairs executed in it are very rude.

The pavement, or portions of it, have since been opened in 1822, 1834, 1842, 1846, 1852, and lastly in 1880. On this occasion special precautions were taken to preserve it from injury, no one was allowed to walk on it; the edges of the mosaic work and the smaller gaps were filled with cement, and it was afterwards covered up with carefully sifted earth.

No drawings appear to have been made of the pavement since the time of Lysons, but there being now so many facilities for the re-production of coloured drawings, it would have been unpardonable to let such an opportunity pass without correcting the errors in Lysons' map, and making enlarged drawings of the animals so well described by Professor Buckman, "The Woodchester Pavement, the most elaborate in England, a series of circles from the centre, around which the beasts are marching in stately tread and measured pace befitting the solemn strains of the 'Phrygii Cantus,' they are subdued, not maddened, by the musician" (*see Plates XVI.-XXIV.*) It is a matter of regret that the figure of the great musician is now so mutilated as to be scarcely recognizable, we can only judge of his powers by the rapt attention of the animals which are evidently awe-inspired.