

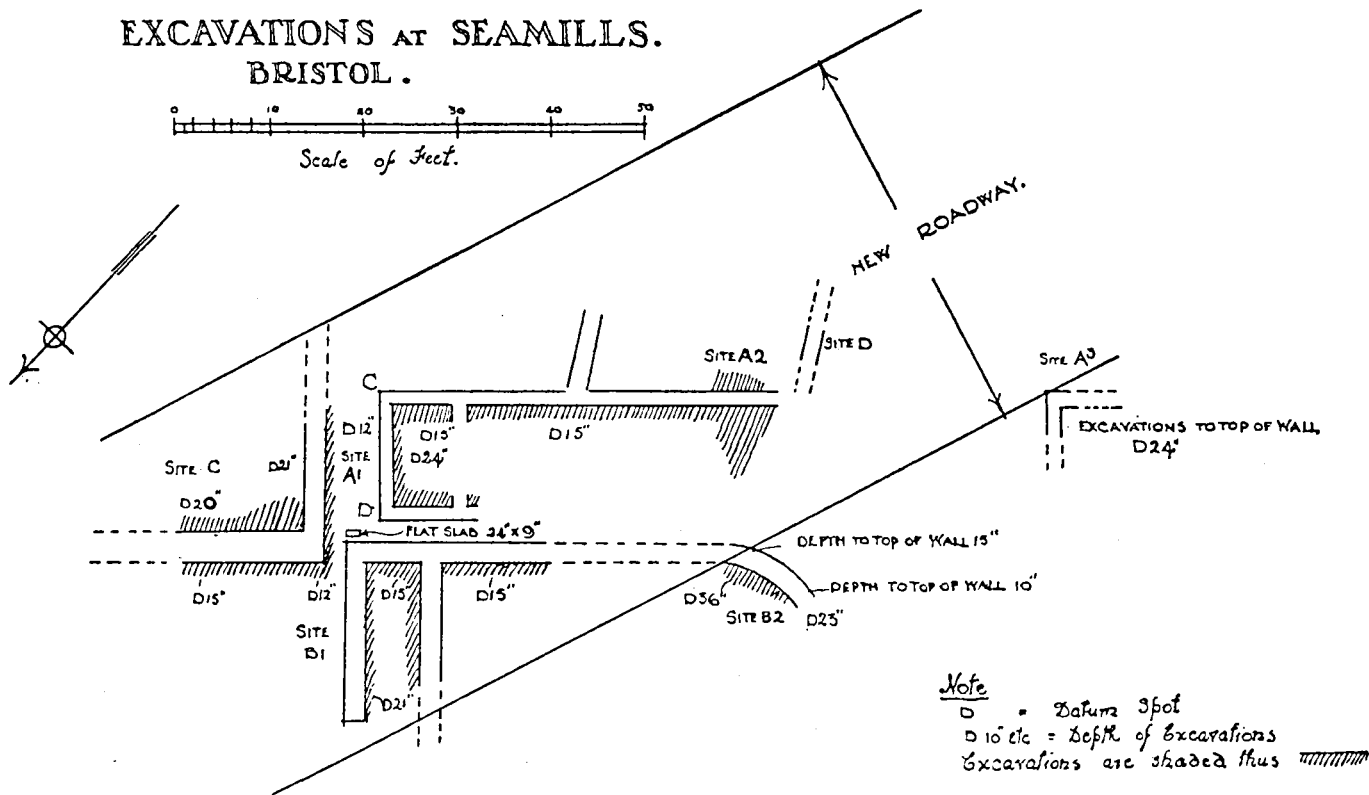
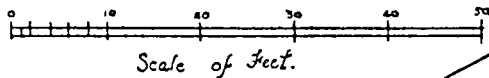
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Excavations at Sea Mills

by A. T. Martin, with a report by E. K. Tratman
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EXCAVATIONS AT SEAMILLS. BRISTOL.



Note

⊙ = Datum Spot
 D 10' etc = Depth of Excavations
 Excavations are shaded thus

EXCAVATIONS AT SEA MILLS, BRISTOL,
20TH-28TH AUGUST, 1923.

I.—Note by A. TRICE MARTIN. M.A., F.S.A.

THE excavations that have been going on at Sea Mills have not brought to light anything that strikes either the eye or the imagination. They are, however, by no means without interest as they tend to confirm the theory that Sea Mills was a Roman station which owed its importance to its position as regards the place where the Roman road from Caerleon to Silchester crossed the Severn. This road is numbered XIV in the so-called Antonine Itinerary and the stations and distances between Caerleon and Bath are recorded as follows:—

Isca Silurum (Caerleon to Venta Silurum— Caerwent)	9 miles
Venta Silurum to Abone	9 „
Abone to Trajectus	9 „
Trajectus to Aquae Sulis (Bath)	6 „

The identification of the two stations Abone and Trajectus obviously presents a difficulty and some writers have solved it by identifying Trajectus with the crossing of the little brook called the Boyd at or near Bitton. In view, however, of the relative importance of the Severn this seems impossible, and an ingenious conjecture has been made by the late Professor Haverfield that the real name of the second station was Abone Trajectus and that the name of the next station having dropped out its place was supplied by separating Abone Trajectus into two names.

The record of the route would run as follows:—

Venta Si.urum to Abone	9 miles
Abone to some unknown place	9 „
From this place to Aquae Sulis (Bath)	6 „

Abone would then be, as one would expect, some place on the Avon, and the actual distances would fit in well with this theory except that the distance between Caerwent and Sea Mills is somewhat too little. It may, however, be noted that there is obviously more chance of an error in calculating distances by water than there is by land.

Barrett in his "History of Bristol" records the finding of an arched gateway and walls and foundations when the dock was made at Sea Mills in 1712. Seyer in his "Memoirs of Bristol" records other finds of a similar character, and it is to the latter writer that we owe the first attempt to identify Sea Mills with Abone.

It is worth noting that there is a curious resemblance in the situations of the three stations at Isca, Venta and Sea Mills. No one of them is on the open Severn Sea but all three are near the mouth of smaller streams flowing into the Severn. Caerwent is now some way from the sea, but in Roman times the Nedern, or Troggy, which flows under the walls of Caerwent, must have helped to form part of what is now Portskewett and Caldecot Pills.

The whole question has been discussed at some length in papers,¹ read to the Clifton Antiquarian Club in 1885 and 1894, and it is not too late to hope that fresh discoveries may yet be made either in the fields south and east of the Trym, or possibly under the south wall of Caerwent, which may throw fresh light on this question. These pills in Roman times must have formed one pill and must have been navigable for vessels of light draught as far as Caerwent.

¹ On the Roman Road between Bath and Caerwent. *Proc. C.A.C.* i, 58-66. Caerwent, *Ibid.*, iii, 41-55.

As far as Sea Mills is concerned nothing has yet been discovered to support the view that there was ever a Roman villa on this site. Foundations of walls which have been found seem clearly to indicate that the buildings of which they were a part were Roman in origin, but it is more likely that these buildings were in some way connected with the business of working the ferry across the Severn. They may possibly be the remains of offices or even the residences of officials connected with this work.

II.—Report by E. K. TRATMAN.¹

DURING the construction of the new low level road to Avonmouth a cutting had to be made at Seamills; this cutting commences immediately after the road crosses the railway and ends about 100 yards from the left bank of the river Trym. The number of sherds of pottery tiles and coins, and several fibulæ found in the course of excavating clearly indicate that a fairly extensive Roman site probably existed here, especially as for years past Roman pottery has been picked over a considerable area in this region.

A human skull found in the cutting was unfortunately destroyed and no information could be obtained as to its exact position or depth, or the presence of the rest of the skeleton, but the workmen state that it was found in a trench which ran across the whole width of the road. The workmen also informed me that while digging they encountered a number of ridges and the question at once arises as to whether or no these ridges were walls built of the stone of the neighbourhood.

It is possible that the trench in which the skull was found formed part of a defensive system, but I do not

¹ The Society is greatly indebted to Mr. Tratman for kindly undertaking this excavation.

think it was of sufficient size to warrant this assumption, as I visited the cutting on a number of occasions before the sides were grown with grass and did not observe any trench shewing in section. I feel confident that had there been a trench for the purpose of defence its size would have made its section so conspicuous that I could not fail to have noticed it.

At the Trym end of the cutting, and where the embankment for the bridge over that river commences, the foundations of some pieces of walling were discovered and it was with the object of determining what these were that the excavations were undertaken.

EXCAVATIONS.

I. METHOD. The method of excavation was to dig a trench sufficiently wide to take a shovel comfortably and of sufficient depth to reach the bottom of the wall; these trenches were dug alongside the wall and in cases where it was possible to decide which was the inner side the trench was dug on that side; this having been done any top soil still on the wall was removed and the other side of the wall traced out with the point of a pick.

II. RESULTS. On tracing out the various pieces of walling it was at once apparent that three types existed.

Type I. Sites A1 and A2. In this type the wall was only 15 ins. wide and was constructed as follows: at the base, and sloping slightly outwards, were a series of flat stones of medium size with all the interstices filled in with the earth into or on which it had been built. Above this was another series of flat stones rather smaller than the first, while the centre was filled in by small stones and earth which is here of a decidedly clayey nature. From the slope of the lower series one would at once suggest that the foundations of the wall were made by digging a trench with slightly sloping sides and placing the flat stone along the side, the centre being then filled in as described above.



Roman Wall Foundations at Sea Mills

This can, however, hardly be the case, as Roman pottery, including Samian ware, was found at all depths, sometimes in contact with the wall and sometimes several inches away.

Owing to so much of the top soil having been removed while making the road, in this case, as in the others, the bottom of the wall was reached at a depth of 18 ins.

Type II. Sites A3, B1, and B2. This type of walling consisted of fairly large irregular masses of the stone of the neighbourhood (conglomerate) with the spaces between the masses and the centre filled in with smaller pieces of the same stone; no clay or earth was included in the walling and no definite finds of mortar were made, but it must be noted that the wall was by no means easy to dig through. Its width was 27 ins. on the average and its bottom was reached at a depth of 15-18 ins. The most north-westerly wall of site B1 ended abruptly at a point 16 ft. 5 ins. from the north-east corner.

In this case, as in the former, an attempt was made to pick up the walling on the far side of the road way and the top of the walling was found at 6-12 ins. below the surface. At site A3 instead of the first type of walling re-appearing the second type appears, as at site B2, where the wall was traced for a distance of ten feet and was found to be following a curve. The bottom of the wall was at first 3 ft. below the surface but as the curve was followed this decreased until it was only 2 ft.

Type III. Site C. Here the wall was wider than in either of the two preceding types and was built of roughly dressed blocks of old red sand stone placed so as to give a smooth face on both the inside and the outside of the wall. The width of the wall varied between 27 and 38 ins. In places it rested on masses of small stones resembling the walling of type I. It is interesting to note that in order to reach the bottom of this wall the trench had to be dug to a depth of 27 in. on the inner side (which is also into the

slope of the ground) and considerably less on the outer side. The accompanying plan shews the area excavated.

At site A2 a hearth was discovered extending over a considerable area. Its extent to the west and south could not be determined owing to the presence of a light railway track, but it does not extend so far as site A3.

III.—NOTES ON FINDS.

The hearth at A2 was composed of flat stones placed as close as possible together and with the spaces between them filled in with black earth containing much charcoal. Above the stones, owing to previous excavations, were only 3-6 ins. of black earth remaining; this contained many fragments of pottery, and as a matter of fact the greater part of the pottery found throughout the excavations came from this site. The black earth broke up easily and was readily sorted, being quite unlike the clayish soil excavated elsewhere.

Throughout the excavations finds were made at all depths not only of pottery but also of bones and oyster shells. The position and depths of the more important of these are given below.

BRONZE.

A bronze fibula from site A1 found at a depth of three inches touching the wall at a distance 3 ft. from the N.W. corner of the trench. The fibula is of the well-known hinge-pin type and has on the upper side of the bow close to the head three depressions which might originally have contained enamel; it is in poor condition and has no pin—1.5 in. long.

Another small fibula, in poor condition, and without pin, from site B1, found at a depth of 12-15 ins., at a point 10 ft. from the N.E. corner of the site.

Two small bronze wire rings, and various small pieces of bronze.

COINS.

Third brass: CLAVDIVS II. (A.D. 268-270) Rev: FIDES EXERCI.

Third brass: CARVS. Consecration after death in A.D. 283. Obv: DIVO CARO PIO. Rev: CONSECRATIO. An Eagle.

Six others including CONSTANS and VALENTINIANVS; two minimi—inscriptions illegible; and some worn modern coinage.

METAL.

Various iron nails, pieces of lead and some metal slag.

STONE.

Half of the lower stone of a quern from the hearth site at A2. It was found at the northern corner of this site at a depth of 4 ins., lying flat, with its plane surface upwards.

BONE.

A portion of a bone pin from the hearth site at A2.

GLASS.

A few fragments.

POTTERY.

Fragments of vessels of Samian ware were found at all depths at all the sites. Of the fragments recovered, nearly all appear to have belonged either to hollow based shallow dishes or to small bowls with double curved sides and a hollow base.

A portion of a small bowl of Samian ware from the trench at the foot of the embankment for the bridge over the Trym. It has double sides and a hollow base and stands about 2.5 ins. high with a lip diameter of 5 ins. The inside of the base bears the maker's stamp, the letters being OFNGRI. The mark OF. NIGRI has been found at Cirencester.

A portion of the hollow base of a fairly large vessel from the same site. On the inner surface a portion remains of

the maker's stamp, the letters being OFMV. The mark OF.MVRRANI has been found at Cirencester.

A small fragment of Samian ware from site BI bearing a portion of the maker's stamp, the letters being ROPP.

The mark ROPVVS.FE has been found at Cirencester.

Numerous other fragments of Samian and pseudo-Samian, and a large number of sherds of all types and makes of pottery; also fragments of amphorae handles, and tiles.

Finds of similar relics on the far side of the railway and right down to the left bank of the river Trym tend to prove that the site was by no means a small one.

A number of pieces of a reddish plastic material came from the surface of the walling at site C.

A very cursory examination of the animal remains shews the presence of the following: Pig, sheep or goat, roe deer, red deer (?) ox, horse (?) and dog.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.

The site at Sea Mills must cover an appreciable area as finds have been made, to my knowledge, over the whole of the area outlined on the map, and from their nature it is clear that it must have been inhabited in Roman times.

Finally, the walling exposed cannot be other than Roman, as Roman pottery, glass work, fibulæ etc., were found in the soil above, and alongside the walls and in some cases in close contact with them. These were found at a site that had been used as a hearth.

It is impossible to say what building or portion of a building the walling uncovered represents, but from the nature of the walls themselves one might suggest, with some degree of certainty, that one is in the area allocated to servants.

The absence of any discovery of tessellated pavement is worthy of note, especially as a large number of tesserae

have been found at one time or another quite close by, over the area between the new road and the railway.

I am indebted to Mr. D. J. Simpson for help in the surveying of the excavation, and for the preparation of the plan illustrating this report; and to members of the University of Bristol Spelæological Society for help in the excavation of the hearth site at A2.