

HANTS FIELD CLUB, 1892.



PHOTO BY F. MASON GOOD, 1892.

EARLY CHURCH, SILCHESTER.

THE PHOTOGRAPH BY F. MASON GOOD

THE ANCIENT CHRISTIAN CHURCH
AT SILCHESTER
(*CALLEVA ATTREBATUM*).

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The site of the Roman city at Silchester has been visited more than once by the Hants Field Club, but some notice of its situation and history has been deemed necessary to accompany our illustration, which shows, perhaps, the most important and interesting result brought to light by recent excavations.

Situated within the borders of our county, about three miles from Mortimer station, on the Basingstoke and Reading Railway, Silchester has been called the "Pompeii" of Hampshire. Its walls, 10-ft. thick, in places 21-ft. high, and 2,670 yards in circuit, enclose an area of 102 acres (about two-thirds that of Pompeii). Its irregular outline, a sort of heptagon, unlike the rectangular plan usually adopted by the Romans, has led to the idea that the site was originally a Celtic settlement, probably of the Segontiaci,¹ who inhabited Hants, and were conquered by the Atrebatæ dwellers on the banks of the Thames, who named their settlement or *oppidum* CALLEVA² ATTREBATUM, which name was retained by the Romans, and the place is now identified as the CALLEVA of their Itineraries. Silchester (the Castle in the Wood) has come down to us from Anglo-Saxon times. The Roman city occupied an important position, standing at the point of junction of main roads leading, to *Londinium* by *Pontes*

¹ Nennius includes *Cair Segont* in his list of thirty-three cities in the island of Britain.

² In connection with the Celtic occupation of Silchester, coins inscribed CALLE and SEGO are known. Doubts exist as to the meaning of these legends, and no examples of such coins have been found at Silchester.

(Staines) to *Venta Belgarum* (Winchester), to *Sorbiadunum* (Old Sarum), and to *Aquæ Solis* (Bath), and was third in extent under the occupation of the Romans. After their retirement (A.D. 410), it was probably taken by the Saxon Aella, extending his invasion westward, having conquered Anderida (c 490). The city afterwards fell a prey to uncontrolled barbarians and suffered by fire¹ in the work of destruction. It was finally deserted, and fell well nigh into oblivion, the only traces of its existence being the massive walls marking the enclosure, the mounds of earth which formed the amphitheatre outside the north east gate, and indications of masonry beneath the wide extent of arable land, showing by the various tints of verdure, especially visible in dry weather, the regular lines in which the city was laid out.

Our older antiquaries Leland,² Camden,³ and Weever have noticed the site, and an inscription to the Segontian Hercules was discovered in 1742. Some researches were made by Stukely in 1744, and in 1833 the remains of baths⁴ were exposed, but no important exploration was attempted till 1864, when excavations were begun and carried on for several years under the direction of the Rev. J. G. Joyce, F.S.A.,⁵ Rector of Stratfieldsaye, at the expense of the second Duke of Wellington. These resulted in the discovery of the Forum (276-ft. $\times$ 313-ft.), a basilica (276-ft. $\times$ 60-ft.), a circular edifice, supposed to be a temple; the great east gate, a smaller gate leading to the amphitheatre, some private dwellings; a Roman eagle; various mosaic pavements; baths; hypocausts

¹ There is reason to think that the town was burnt in the time of Constantius Chlorus (305), when it was stormed and afterwards destroyed.

² Leland speaks of Silchester wall being "about two miles compass with four gates," according to Weever "containing within four score acres, where our first Christian worthy king Arthur was invested with royall diadem."

³ Camden says in his *Britannia* "The people who live hereabouts mentioned to me a circumstance they had long observed, that though the soil is very rich and fruitful corn will not grow in certain places, intersecting each other in little lines which they suppose were formerly the streets of the city. Stukely in the *Itinerarium Curiosum* 1722, speaks of the streets being visible in the corn.

⁴ These baths were afterwards completely dug out and are fully illustrated and described in *Archæologia*, vol. I.

⁵ A detailed history of Mr. Joyce's excavations will be found in *Archæologia* vols. xl. and xlv., and a Memoir on Silchester in the Journal of the Archæological Institute, vol. viii., pp. 227-243.

or warming apparatus; coins;¹ shops of various trades, *e.g.*, butchers, in which were found hooks and steelyards, dealers in poultry, and a fishmonger, as is supposed, from the proximity of an abundance of oyster shells. The relics brought to light have been mostly of a fragmentary character, the work of the destroyers having been too complete to allow of the survival of any important architectural remains.

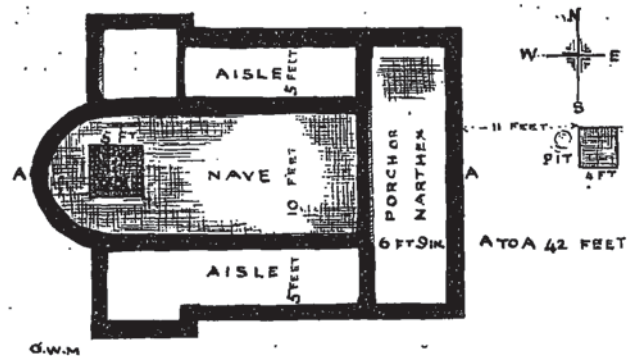
A proposal for a more complete and systematic excavation than had been hitherto attempted, was made to the Society of Antiquaries in Feb., 1890, by Mr. G. E. Fox, F.S.A., and Mr. W. H. St. John Hope, their acting secretary. The difficulty which usually attends the exploration of Roman remains, owing to the sites having been built over, did not here exist, Silchester offering a broad extent of land for exploration within the original boundary walls, and free from any impediments. The permission of the present noble owner was obtained and arrangements made with the tenants. The Society of Antiquaries gave their sanction and help to the proposed excavations, making a grant for the purpose, with further help from private individuals, one of whom gave £500, and the contributions of kindred societies, the Hants Field Club subscribing £5, a fund was raised and operations were commenced in 1890, and have been continued annually. Important discoveries have been made, and the hope that there might be some chance of finding the remains of a building dedicated to Christian worship has probably been realised. The subject has created some controversy, and there is much evidence to favour the idea. Before discussing this question we will describe the building, around which there centres so much historical interest, some claiming for it a Christian purpose, while others regard it merely as a structure of civil or pagan origin.

The general view of the site, from a photograph by our member, Mr. G. Mason Good, gives a faithful idea of the surroundings and appearance of the works in progress. The building, of basilican arrangement, lies to the south-east of the Forum, and is situated in the same *insula*² or block,

¹ Mr. Joyce says the number is surprising. They commence with the reign of Caligula, A.D. 37, and end with the Roman evacuation of Britain in the reign of Arcadius, A.D. 410-415.

² *Insula*, the squares formed by the streets.

nearly in the centre of the city. Its walls, about 3-ft. beneath the surface, are formed of rough flint 3-ft. thick, not always rectangular or parallel, and the plan with measurements is as here given—

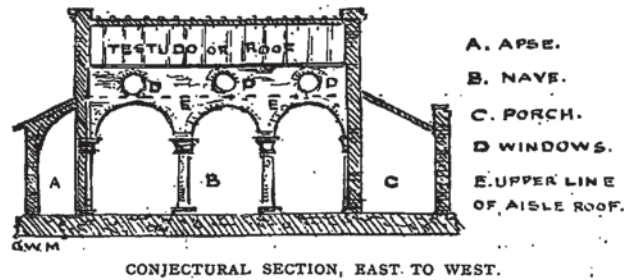


GROUND PLAN.

It consists of a central nave with apse at the west end, two side aisles with transverse walls at each end, and a portico or *narthex*. The nave and porch had a flooring of red tessellated pavement, a portion of which still remains indicated by the shaded lines. The apse was paved in like manner. In a line with the chord of the apse, and extending into the nave, is a square pavement of more ornamental character, composed of black and white tesserae, with a border of lozenge pattern, alternately red and grey on a white ground, enclosed with lines of black. In a line with the entrance is a rough pavement of flints, in the centre of which is another, about 4-ft. square, of red brick; beside it is a pit or well, three or four feet deep. At the back of the apse is another well.

The arrangements without due investigation of historical facts, would lead us to assign a secular use to this interesting building, in support of which opinion the eminent antiquary, Mr. T. Wright, F.S.A., has been quoted, viz., "that Christianity was not established in Roman Britain, a conclusion totally at variance with preconceived notions into which we have been led by the ecclesiastical historians." This point we will discuss later on. An idea of the building, as it probably existed above ground, may be formed from the accompanying conjectural section which shows the mode

of construction usual in a *basilica*, the only other purpose to which a building of this character can be assigned.



A BASILICA.¹

As to its original purpose, whether judicial or religious, we cannot pronounce positively, but the arrangement was probably something of this kind—At one end was a semi-circular apse, the back part of which was raised and approached by a range of steps. In the centre of the platform was the raised seat of the *quaestor* or other magistrate who presided. On each side upon the steps were places for the assessors or others engaged in the business being transacted. In front of the apse was placed an altar where sacrifice was performed before commencing any important business.

Vitruvius informs us that the Basilica ought to be constructed on the warmest side of the Forum. The roof or *testudo* rose above the other parts of the structure. Light was admitted between the spaces formed by the underline of the architrave of the *testudo* and the upperline of the lean-to roof. The most perfect example of antiquity and one which best corresponds with that described by Vitruvius is the Basilica at Pompeii, constructed on the south-west and warmest side of the Forum. The *testudo* is carried on columns. At the farthest end is the tribunal, raised on a platform, to which the ascent on each side is by a flight of stairs. On each side of the tribunal are two small square rooms, which have been considered as *Chalcidica*. At the end opposite the tribunal is a vestibule.

¹ *Basilica*, lit. "The King's House." The word, adopted from a Roman Court of Justice, was, at an early date, not before the time of Constantine applied to buildings consecrated to Christian worship.

A glance at our plan and the conjectural section, will show that the building under consideration fulfils the conditions required. We have the apse, and the enclosed spaces at the end of the aisle which may have been *Chalcidica*,¹ or the site of the stairs leading to the bema. The square of ornamental *tesserae* would mark the site of the altar, and at the east end is the portico.

A CHRISTIAN CHURCH.

Is it not possible that the original purpose of this building may have been secular, but that in later times it was used for Christian worship? In carrying out the change, the floor of the apse and nave was levelled, the steps removed, and the space occupied by the square of ornamental pavement was occupied by the Christian altar. It is remarkable that at this point, including the apse, the pavement is in good condition, and not worn; as if it had been covered with a mat. The holy table which stood upon it was probably square, as in the Eastern Church at the present day, behind in the centre of the apse was the chair of the *Praeses*. The orientation would cause the celebrant to look east, facing the congregation.² The flint pavement, to the east of the entrance, has in its centre a platform of red brick, which probably marks the site of a fountain or lavatory for the use of the faithful before entering.³ The pit or well beside it would receive the overflow water; while at the west of the apse is the well from which the water was drawn.

The portico would form the *narthex*,⁴ the name given by

¹ *Chalcidicum*, an apartment separated by a partition from the body of a basilica or other building. The name, Festus says, is derived from the city of Chalcis. Vitruvius directs that *Chalcidica* be constructed at the ends of a basilica.

² "The celebrant therefore stood on the west side of the Holy Table, facing east, and facing the people—the apse being at the west end of the Church. No doubt the custom of the celebrant turning his back to the people must have come into general use at the time when the apse began to be placed at the east instead of the west (which, was not generally done till the early part of the 5th century), the principle being that he should *still* face the East." *The Buried Church in Silchester, a witness to primitive worship.* J. Golden, Reading, 1892.

³ In front of a Christian basilica, both in the East and the West, there was a forecourt, surrounded by colonnades, and containing a fountain where the faithful washed their hands.

⁴ *Narthex*, a ferula, a rod, in architecture a porch or entrance passage, so called from its narrow oblong shape.

Christian writers to the vestibulum in front of a basilica, to which the catechumens and penitents were admitted. Whether any purpose other than that of a porch was here contemplated may be doubted, for although it is held that British Christianity was derived from the East from Asia Minor to Gaul, and thence by way of Gaul to Britain, it is a question whether the arrangements of the Eastern Church prevailed to any extent among us. Sufficient has, however, been adduced to show that there is no reason why the building under consideration may not have served the purpose of a Christian Church, and much evidence exists in favour of the notion.

ROMANO-BRITISH CHRISTIANITY.

Since Mr. Wright expressed the opinion above referred to,¹ many facts have been brought to light which refute his conclusions, that the establishment of Christianity in Roman Britain may be questioned because, as he alleges, "not a trace of Christianity is found among the innumerable religious and sepulchral monuments of the Roman period found in Britain." The idea that "St. Augustine introduced Christianity into England," which was commonly taught in school histories, has long been abandoned. The historical researches of Bishop Stubbs, Mr. Haddon, and Professor Bright have thrown much light on Early Christianity in Britain, and there can be no doubt but that during the earlier part of the Roman occupation Christianity crept silently into Britain, and before the legions left it certainly was the religion of the Roman State.

After the conquest of Britain, Roman governors were sent in almost uninterrupted succession, and with them would come, of course, legions or cohorts, possibly some of the Praetorian soldiers, in whose company the Apostle St. Paul lived for a considerable time during the reign of Nero. British chieftains were taken prisoners to Rome, and their sons sent there as hostages, by whom reports of Christianity would be brought over in the first century, and what more likely than that there were individual Christians, either among the

¹ The second edition of his book, "The Celt, the Roman, and the Saxon," to which reference is here made, bears the date 1861.

numerous soldiers quartered here, or among captives who had returned from Rome?"

There may be no evidence that St. Paul visited these islands, as some have alleged, or for the Glastonbury tradition with regard to Joseph of Arimathea, though Glastonbury is of ancient foundation, and one of the earliest British settlements. The legend that we owe our Christianity to Lucius, King of the Britons, who, in the second century, sent an embassy to Eleutherius, Bishop of Rome, asking for Christian teachers, rests on a note inserted in the Catalogue of Roman Pontiffs in the year 530. The probability is that the Christian Church in Britain did not assume any importance, if it existed, until about the middle of the third century, and that it passed over from Gaul. It is certain that a few scattered churches were planted in Gaul, from 150 to 170, of which Lyons was the chief and most northern. About A.D. 250 there was a new impulse to spread the Gospel throughout the north of Gaul, and it is conjectured that about this time the spirit of missionary enterprise crossed the Channel, and planted the Church in Britain. It is a fact in the history of the British Church that at the Council of the Western Church, which Constantine summoned at Arles in the south of Gaul, A.D. 314, there were present three British Bishops, viz., Eborius, Bishop of York, Restitutus, Bishop of London, and Adelfius, Bishop of Colonia Londinensium. From this fact we may conclude at this period, Christian Churches existed in the cities of the British province, that they had Bishops and were in full communion with the rest of Christendom. We may also assume that a church thus spread over the land from York to London, and from London to Caerleon, must have been the work of years, if we say of fifty or sixty years, that will bring us to the period of the planting of the churches of northern Gaul, and the supposed extension of the Church to Britain, about the middle of the third century, as above suggested.

The story of the martyrdom of St. Alban, outside the City of Verulamium, in the first year of the Diocletian persecution (A.D. 303), may be accepted as authentic in the main features, and helps to fill up the outline.

We know from historical notices that there were British Bishops at the Council of Sardica, A.D. 347, and at Ariminum, A.D. 360.

In the latter part of the fourth century, the writings of Chrysostom, Sozomen, and Jerome indicate there was a branch of the Christian church in Britain having Altars, Scriptures, and holding intercourse with the rest of Christendom, and at the beginning of the fifth century it was fully established. Geoffery of Monmouth, whose history, though not to be relied on, has a traditional interest, mentions the Bishopric of Silchester, and that it was conferred upon Manganus.

There seems then to be ample historical reasons in support of the idea that the building under consideration may have served the purpose of a Christian church, and the objection that we have no evidence of Roman Christianity supplied by monumental and other remains, is certainly a premature conclusion, which evidence may be brought to confute.

There are a number of Churches in Britain, of which history attests, and structural traces show their connection with the Roman occupation. Bede records that over St. Alban's grave at Verulam, a church was built of wondrous workmanship; and he also mentions three churches at Caerleon, two of which were dedicated to Julius and Aaron, Martyrs in the Diocletian persecution.

Roman remains still exist in the church of the Castle at Dover, at Lyminge, at Brixworth, at Stone, at Reculvers, situated in the Castrum, and at St. Martin's, Canterbury.¹ Sepulchral monuments of a Romano-Christian period are enumerated by Messrs. Haddon and Stubbs. The Chi Rho monogram (formed from the two first letters of the Greek word Christos), has been found in the pavement of a Roman villa at Frampton, in Dorsetshire, and again at Chedworth, in Gloucestershire; also on two silver bracelets at Fifehead Neville, in Dorset. Pewter plates have been found in the Thames bearing the same monogram. The sign of the cross has been found on a Roman pavement at Harpole, in Northamptonshire, and at Horkstow, in Lincolnshire, also on

¹The History of St. Martin's Church, Canterbury, by Rev. Canon Routledge, contains an admirable chapter on Early Christianity in Britain, from which the writer has gathered some important facts.

a coin of Decentius (A.D. 350-353), on the reverse of which are the letters Alpha and Omega. A leaden seal of Christian character was found in the basilica at Silchester belonging, as supposed by Mr. Joyce, to the reign¹ of Magnentius, and finally at Silchester was found a ring of undoubted Christian origin and sentiment, inscribed

SE NI CIA NE VI VA SI NDE

doubtless the gift of some Christian, of Roman times, to his friend Senecianus, the legend conveying the pious aspiration commonly found inscribed on Christian graves in the catacombs at Rome and may be rendered *Senecianus may you live in God.*²

SENECIANE VIVAS IN DEO.

Enough has been said to shew that they who claim for the building at Silchester the discovery of what is believed to be the earliest Christian church existing of Great Britain, have at least much evidence on their side. It is thought that the remains of other churches may be found in the city—an expectation not improbable from the result of similar excavations of a smaller Roman city at Thamugas in Numidia, where several churches have been discovered. For its preservation, the remains of the building at Silchester have been again covered up, but the site has been reserved and a careful model made of the building and its surroundings. The excavations yielded a large number of objects, such as coins, articles in bronze, pewter, iron and bone, vessels of pottery all more or less fragmentary, which are placed in the Silchester Museum, at Reading. The Committee intend to renew operations, and it is hoped that subscriptions will be forthcoming to enable the work of excavation to be carried out on the same scale as the past three seasons. The Treasurer of the excavation Fund is Mr. F. G. Hilton-Price, 17, Collingham Gardens, South Kensington.

¹ Mr. Kempe in *Archæologia*, xxvii., 417.

² Mr. R. Blair announces the finding of a Christian Roman tombstone at one of the stations on the Roman wall, quite upsetting the previously accepted opinion that nothing of the kind existed in England. *Athenæum*, Nov. 9th, 1889, p. 642. See also *Monumental History of the British Church*, by J. Romilly Allen, F.S.A., Scot.

Since this paper was written the eight hundredth anniversary of the consecration of Winchester Cathedral (Walkelin's church, 1093) has been celebrated, and the Dean, Dr. Kitchin, no mean historian and antiquary, preaching at the commemorative service, April 9th, 1893, made the following allusion to the Christian Church at Silchester :—

"It so happens that we are enabled by a fortunate discovery in this diocese to realise vividly for ourselves what were the usages of a Christian church sixteen hundred years ago. Last summer was uncovered at Silchester what is, I believe, the most precious relic of early Christian architecture now extant in the world. This was the perfect ground-plan of a church standing alongside of the Forum of that Roman city. Those who are experts in the subject of Christian antiquities tell us that this is one of the most perfect, unspoiled, and ancient relics of the early Church. Nor has anything ever thrown more light on the usages of Christian worship in the third and fourth centuries of our era; for this priceless relic has suffered no damage, and transports us at one step across the sixteen centuries of the history of the Church of Christ. And what do we find there? First, a tiny church—of which the ground plan is perfectly delineated by a simple and almost untouched tessellated pavement. The semi-circular apse is at the western end of the building; the entrance doors are at the east, for in the Primitive Church, though there was no rule on the subject, and churches were often built with no regard to the points of the compass, it was more common to place them west and east than east and west, so that the Narthex and the Beautiful Gates, as the early Christians loved to call the gates through which they entered in to share in the blessings of worship, stood at the east end of the building. It was as though these early Christians discerned in this arrangement of the structure a sweet symbolism; for those newly born in the laver of regeneration (the font was placed just outside the building) came into the church with the rising sun, as it streamed in through the eastern doors, and bathed the whole floor with the glory of its level rays.

The arrangements at Silchester enable us to understand clearly the chief points of divine service in these early times. Exactly on the diameter chord of the semi-circle formed by the apse is an oblong piece of tessellation in colours, distinct from the brick-red of the rest of the tesserae, which are the ordinary cubes of about an inch square; and this special pattern marks the exact spot on which the Holy Table stood. In the third century of the Christian era (as Bingham tells us in his *Antiquities*) altars of stone were altogether unknown in Christian Churches; and even in the fourth century, till after Constantine's adhesion to the faith, they are very seldom to be found. And this tessellated carpet at Silchester is quite perfect, showing no sign of having had any structure built on it; it was clearly the place of a table, not of a stone altar. And this table was on the level of the rest of the church. According to ancient use, the Bishop and clergy sat on seats ranged round the apse, and at the Communion the officiating priest served from behind. There he stood, facing east, the worshippers, who also all stood up during the service, looking towards the west, the outer courts and galleries being open for the reception of strangers; and through the "beautiful gates" at the east end catechumens and penitents peered in, to get a glimpse of the sacred mysteries."

CHRONOLOGY OF ROMAN BRITISH PERIOD.

B.C.	55, 54	Cæsar's expeditions to Britain.
CENTURY		
A.D. I.	43	Conquest of South Britain by Claudius
II.		
III.	211	Emperor Severus died at York
	250	Probable foundation of Church in South Britain by mission from Gaul
IV.	303	Martyrdom of St. Alban
	306	Emperor Constantius died at York, and Constantine was elected there as Emperor
	314	Three British bishops, a priest and a deacon at the Council of Arles
	347	British bishops at Council of Sardica
	360	" " " of Ariminum
	397	Ninian founds Candida Casa
V.	410	The British Province abandoned by Honorius
	429	Synod at Verulam, Germanus and Lupus present, on the Pelagian heresy
	432	St. Patrick in Ireland
	446	Beginning of the Saxon Conquests
	447	Germanus and Severus in Britain, about the Pelagian heresy