

Notes on Roman Remains at Box by the Rev. E.H. Goddard

In the Gentleman's Magazine, 1831, part I., p. 595-6, in a topographical account of Box, occurs this passage:-

“ I ventured (in your number for September last) to call the attention of your readers, and particularly that of the learned author of *Hermes Britannicus* to a remarkably shaped hill overlooking the village of Box, called *Taut-ney Hill*, and suggested whether it had not been anciently dedicated to the Celtic Mercury, *Tot*, as a presiding deity to a British settlement in the valley beneath. I mentioned the probability of the site of the parish Church being formerly the seat of Druidical rites, and alluded to the fine spring of water which bursts out beside the Church, as being probably ‘the sacred Druidical spring, so intimately connected with the Celtic worship of the God Taut’; and that the tradition of the place was, that there had been formerly found baths supplied from this ‘sacred spring’ which had been considered to have been Roman. I mentioned reasons why the Romans would probably be induced to venerate this spot, and stated that remains had very lately been discovered which verified the tradition. I am not aware that this village had previously been pointed out as having any remains demonstrating that the Romans once were resident here, which appears, however, undoubtedly to have been the case; for it is said, besides the baths above-mentioned, that several beautiful tessellated pavements had formerly been found in the churchyard and gardens adjoining, but no spot could be pointed out where the same might with certainty be found, and the tradition was considered therefore as vague and unworthy (of) attention. It is reasonable to suppose that lamentable ignorance occasioned, or at least did not prevent, their destruction as soon as discovered; for a year or two ago, in a garden belonging to Mr. Mullins, adjoining the churchyard, in making some additions to a very old building, the workmen in sinking for a foundation struck upon the mutilated remains of a tessellated pavement about two or three feet below the surface of the ground. It appeared to have been part of a large square, and the part now discovered was evidently one of its corners. It had a wide ornamental border of no remarkable beauty, but what I particularly recollect (the few moments I had opportunity of seeing it) was that there were evident effects of repeated fires having been made apparently about the middle of the square; for the tesserae toward the centre were burnt from their original colours to a brick red, and the redness diminished in intensity as it approached the border, near which the colours were again all perfect. This pavement must have been discovered when the old building was erected, for it appeared to run under its foundation, and if so, the remainder must have been then destroyed. The portion of it lately found, however, was considered worthy of preservation, and has been, it is hoped, safely secured from injury by means of large flagstones carefully placed over it. In the adjoining garden, belonging to the same individual, is an ornamental fishpond, in the middle of which many years ago was a small island, and communication with it was effected by planks supported on long stones, set upright in the water. Though the island has long since been removed (by the grandfather of the present owner), one of the stones was left standing upright in the water, and so remained till a late summer, when the water being let out of the pond, the stone was pushed down, and immediately under it (embedded in the soil on which it had for so many years stood) were found very many Roman tesserae of different colours and sizes, some of which I have now by me. This pond had been for some centuries back a mill-head or dam to an overshot wheel; and ‘Boxe Mill’ mentioned in the ‘*Monasticon*’ as belonging to Farley Monastery, I have no doubt was situated near this spot, and driven by water from this pond. Little remains of a mill are now visible here, excepting the place of the overshot wheel, and the circumstance that very many old-fashioned millstones are to be seen in the pavements about the premises. To the protection of this stone from the effect of the continual washing of the water must be ascribed the preservation for so long a period of these Roman tesserae in so singular a situation, and which contribute not a little to the support of the traditions above-mentioned.”

This was succeeded in 1883, part I., pp. 357-8, by a fuller notice:-

“ We have been favoured by the Rev. George Mullins, the Vicar of Box, with the following description of some Roman antiquities recently discovered at that place: ‘In the supplement to the first part of your vol. ci., p. 596 a correspondent in speaking of the antiquities of the village of Box, mentions the existence of some Roman remains in my garden. The discovery which he alludes to was that of a tessellated pavement found there a few years ago. I believe that until that discovery no site of Roman remains could be pointed out in the village, although tradition spoke of their existence. I have now to announce a further and more important discovery, which has taken place within the present year. In excavating some earth at the distance of forty-three yards north from the pavement before alluded to, evident traces of another, but in a

state of destruction, presented themselves; and in a line leading from this immediately to the former I found seven stone pillars, of rough workmanship, and near them is an altar-like erection, consisting of several stones, and a piece of stone of a semi-circular shape, about a foot across and eight inches thick, partially excavated on each side as if for the purpose of holding something. This stone bears evident traces of fire. Distant twenty-eight yards to the west were the mutilated remains of a tessellated pavement of blue stones, ornamented with two red borders, the tesserae nearly an inch square, and the blue stones entirely decomposed. This pavement in its original state must have been at least 10 or 12 feet square. The remains of a wall on the south side were covered with several flues, made of whole bricks, supported by iron cramps; and underneath the bed on which the pavement was laid, made of coarse gravel and mortar, were large flags, supported by pillars of stone forming a regular hypocaust. The discovery of this pavement induced me to make an opening at a point where I might conjecture from the direction of the hypocaust where remains would be found; and at a depth of four feet below the surface of the earth I discovered a third tessellated pavement, very nearly perfect, apparently forming a passage from some other part of the building. It is nine feet wide, twenty-eight feet long, and turns at a right angle, six feet, where it is broken up; but it evidently extended much further in both directions. In one corner is a curious stone cut in a form as though intended for a seat, but now only eight inches high. The pattern of this passage is particularly elegant. The ground colour is white; the exterior tesserae coarse; the blue lines of smaller cubes form the borders, six feet about, and the intermediate space is filled with semicircles, forming waving lines, blue, crossing each other at right angles; these are again intersected by others of half the diameter, with their extremities united in the centre, and terminating in small crosses shaded with red and yellow, white and blue, and producing the most beautiful effect. I have preserved several specimens of the plaster from the walls, the colours of which were very bright when first exposed to the air. The patterns were principally imitations of Egyptian marble, with elegant coloured borderings, but I have not been able to discover a decided figure on any of the pieces. One small vase, holding about a pint, apparently of British workmanship, was taken up near the pillars, but unfortunately damaged by the spade. Numberless fragments of earthen vessels, small pieces of pavements, tesserae, and Roman bricks, are now in my possession. One room was evidently paved with square red bricks quite plain. One small coin only has been found, and this was so far corroded as to be wholly illegible. There is another piece of pavement (which, however, I have never yet seen), in a distant part of my garden; and the whole of the original buildings, if square, must have covered a considerable portion of ground, the most distant of the pavements being at least 50 yards apart."

The photo-print which accompanies these notes is reproduced from photographs taken when the pavement and bath were discovered at Box, and whilst they were still in situ. For permission to reproduce these I am indebted to the kindness of Messrs. Stier & Son, 19, New Bond Street, Bath, to whom the pavement belongs.

For some time past the pavement and the small semicircular bath itself have been on view and for sale at Mr. Stier's house, 14, Sydenham Terrace, Bath, near the Midland Station, having been taken up in sections and secured in strong wooden cases, so that they could be moved from place to place. In this process it has evidently been much restored, and apparently the tesserae have been re-polished.

It was discovered in 1881, during some building operations, on a bit of land just opposite the Church, and after being photographed was removed bodily. It seems difficult to decide whether this is or is not one of the pavements spoken of in the letters to the Gentleman's Magazine given above. The present Vicar of Box, the Rev. W.E. Gardiner tells me that Mr. Mullins was never Vicar of Box but that he lived just opposite the Church, at a house known as "the Wilderness," and rented also the piece of ground adjoining - which was the spot on which the remains in question were found in 1881. His son, the Rev. George Mullins, was Rector of Ditteridge.

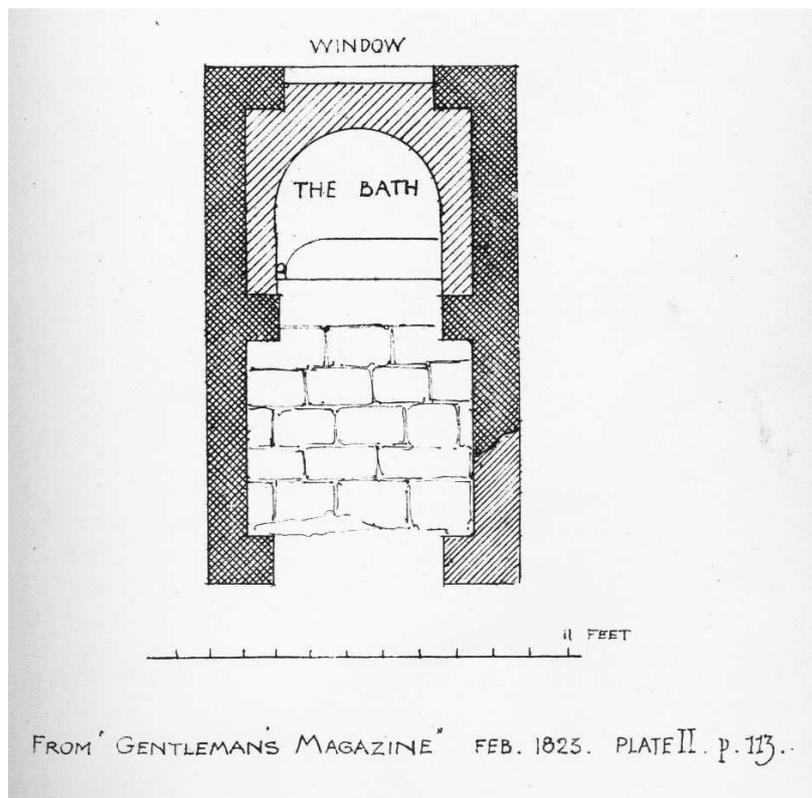
No accurate measurements or plan seem to have been preserved of the remains as they were found. At present the pavement is about 24ft. long by 5ft. broad, but this probably does not quite represent its original dimensions. As will be seen from the illustration, it seems to have been the floor of either a corridor, or two small rooms. It is said that considerable remains of hypocausts and hot-air flues were found connected with it.

The most remarkable portion still existing is a semicircular sunk space 2ft. 9in. deep and 3ft. 4in. across the chord, which is said when discovered to have shown the channel by which the water entered - on the south-west side of the bow - and still retaining the thick lead pipe, 3in. in diameter, from which the water escaped in the north corner. Both the floor and the sides of this well are covered with tesserae. As to its purpose, Mr. Haverfield, to whom I submitted the photo, writes:-

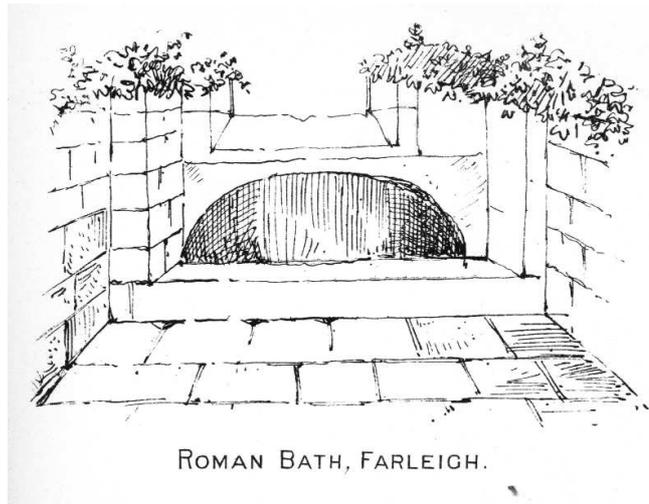
"I think the thing may well be a bath. There is something in Vitruvius about a similar shaped bath; at the moment I cannot find the passage. There is also a similar room, probably a bath, at Chesters, close to the N. Tyne. The arrangement of pipes in your Box instance is also greatly in favour of a bath."

The plate of a bath at Farley is copied from one in the Gentleman's Magazine, February, 1823, p. 113, (*see diagram*) and is accompanied by a letter from Sir R. C. Hoare, in which he says:-

"The site of the once celebrated Castle at Farley, the residence of the ancient family of Hungerford, is too well known to require any local description. Gibson, in his edition of Camden, mentions the discovery of a Roman pavement at this place, part of which was taken up and deposited in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, but from the recent discovery of a Roman bath in the most perfect preservation (*see Plate 2*) it is evident that this villa has not been explored. We are at this time engaged in tracing its limits, an account of which, with the ground plan, shall be sent to you when our researches are terminated. The dimensions of this little bath are given accurately in the annexed ground plan, The pipe to let off the water is denoted by a small circular mark".



As will be seen, the Farley bath is very similar in shape to the Box example. (*see sketch next page*).



Another, semicircular bath occurs in the Roman villa at North Leigh, Oxon. See Morgan's *Romano-British Mosaic Pavements*, p. 118; and in 1881, at Wingham, in Kent, a bath with walls and floor of mosaic was discovered, *ibid*, p. 151.

More than one fountain of semicircular shape, with coved head, and lined with mosaic, have been found in a perfect state at Pompeii.

The tesserae at Box are of three colours - the outside groundwork cream-coloured, the borders of the central panels and the Labyrinthine fret which forms the pattern, a dark slaty blue, and the groundwork of the pattern itself an ivory-white, a good deal lighter than the cream of the outside margins.

All three of these seem to be formed of very hard close-grained limestones, capable of taking a high polish. some of the cream-coloured tesserae, for which I am indebted to Mr. Stier's kindness, have been submitted to Mr F. W. Rudler, of the Jermyn Street Geological Museum, who writes as follows:-

"The two tesserae which you have sent me are similar to others which I have seen from Roman pavements at Cirencester and at Silchester. - They are a fine-grained limestone such as might well be derived from some of our secondary strata. I have submitted your specimens to my colleague, Mr. H. B. Woodward, who has made a special study of all the Jurassic and Triassic rocks of Great Britain, and he is satisfied that the rock of your tesserae might be obtained either from the White Lias (Rhaetic) or more probably from the White Limestone of the Great Oolite, which is well developed near Cirencester and was used according to the late Professor Buckman for Roman mosaic pavements in that neighbourhood."

[In Buckman and Newmarch's *Remains of Roman Art in Cirencester* it is stated that the hard white or cream-coloured stone used for tesserae at Cirencester, which was formerly supposed to be "Palombino" marble from Italy, is really from a compact bed of fine-grained stone in the freestone quarries round Cirencester itself from the middle of the Great Oolite.]

This Box pavement is not mentioned amongst the Wilts examples in Morgan's *Romano-British Mosaic Pavements*, nor has it, so far as I can discover, been noted elsewhere. Its date, from coins said to have been found with it, is probably the fourth century. It has, as will be seen from the facts mentioned above, evidently formed part of a considerable villa.