

Leicester and thrice mayor thereof. He always writes to his brother with the warmest affection, combined with an evident respect for one who had become a London citizen, a knight, and a courtier; but at the same time he discusses every subject as it arises with perfect freedom and familiarity,—“as though (he writes on one occasion) I was walking with you at Beaumanor,” or (at another time) “as though I was walking with you in Paul’s, a turn and a turn.” His letters are continued until within a year of his death, which occurred in 1618, at the age of seventy-eight. You have his monumental stone still remaining in S. Martin’s church, and his portrait in the Mayor’s Parlour at the Town Hall.

MR. JAMES THOMPSON next read a Paper intituled

ROMAN LEICESTER, AS ILLUSTRATED BY RECENT DISCOVERIES.

FROM fourteen hundred to eighteen hundred years ago, a populous town was standing on the site which modern Leicester occupies. In its origin nearly coeval with the establishment of the Christian faith among mankind, it existed during the reigns of those celebrated emperors with whose names every schoolboy in Europe is familiar. At first merely a military encampment, by degrees it became an important city or station. Being formed in the midst of a native tribe called the Coritani (or as some scholars name them, the Coritavi), and designated by the Romans Rataë, it was known to that people as the Rataë of the Coritavi.

The researches of military and other antiquaries, and the remains which have from time to time been discovered, enable us to infer with tolerable certainty, that the camp at Rataë was designed on the plan of castrametation invented by Polybius, made use of up to and before the time of Julius Agricola. It was a parallelogram in outline, many acres in extent, and capable of accommodating two imperial legions, numbering together from 10,000 to 15,000 men, including infantry, cavalry, and others.

Rataë soon became one of the principal places in the island, and through it one or two of the great roads passed, connecting it north and south, east and west, with other populous centres of internal commerce and local government. After the custom of the age, it appears to have been fortified, being surrounded by high and thick walls, and entered by gates, facing the points of the compass.

Within the walls stood public edifices—the residence of the governor, the court-house, the temple, the bath, the circus, and the theatre—and many private mansions. In all the latter were numerous apartments. The floors of the principal of these were covered with tessellated pavements, composed of designs carefully

executed and gracefully arranged. Sometimes the subjects were mythological (as in the case of the pavement now preserved in our museum); at others they exhibited floral and mathematical patterns (as in the case of the pavement in Jewrywall Street). Beneath the floors were low chambers, called "hypocausts," by means of which the apartments above were warmed. The walls were covered with plaster, whereon were painted in fresco and distemper, designs far superior to many of the bewildering and tasteless patterns of the modern paperhanger—designs incomparable for their chaste and rich effect; the art of wall-painting possessed by the ancient house-decorator having decayed, and being now almost unknown. And these rooms, thus ornamented, were lighted, it is believed, by glazed windows in the daytime, and by oil-lamps in the dark hours. On the tables at which the inhabitants dined, were set jars and vessels of elegant shapes and proportions, made of glass and earthenware. At their banquets they drank rare wines, and they ate the delicacies found in the river and the forest, and by the seashore. On tablets covered with a coating of wax they wrote with pointed implements the messages forwarded to intimates at a distance.

In their leisure, they frequented the amphitheatre, the bath, and the tavern. They periodically sacrificed at the temples of the gods in whom they believed. When they offended the laws of the empire, or disputed with a fellow-citizen the right to property, they attended in the Basilica of Ratae before the local administrator. When they died, they were buried in a suburban cemetery, and over their remains were placed tablets on which hope breathed its fond prayer, and love sobbed its sad farewells. In short, for four hundred years the Roman or Roman British inhabitants of this locality lived a civilized life on the very site over which we walk daily, though time has covered it with a thick carpet of earth, through which the stifled voice of antiquity is only occasionally audible in mysterious and subdued accents. It is one of the objects of archæology to interpret these, and I am making the attempt to do so this evening.

In fulfilment of this purpose, it is necessary to explain that within the last few months the laying down of culverts in the streets of Leicester has been carried on extensively, in completion of the scheme adopted by the local authorities for the drainage of the town. The lines of trenching have been along those streets where the local antiquary would look with great expectation for discoveries—for example, along the Southgate Street and the Highcross Street, and the streets passing at right angles by the Jewry Wall, namely, Bath Street and Blue Boar Lane. Nor have the results been wholly unprofitable; though they have been far from correspondent with the wishes of those who take an interest in archæological enquiry.

All persons who have visited the Roman pavement in Jewrywall Street, know that it lies under a house standing at an angle formed by the junction of the ends of Bath Street and Jewrywall Street. It was in Bath Street that excavations were made about Midsummer, 1859, for the purpose of laying down the culverts. When the workmen had arrived about half-way up the street, they found their progress obstructed by a wall four or five feet thick, which took an oblique direction across the street. The wall was constructed of stones laid in cement. On the side of the street opposite to that on which the well-known Roman pavement lies was another, composed of large tessellæ, exhibiting no pattern. Near the wall, also, lay fragments of roof-tiles. There can be little hesitation felt in assuming this wall to have formed part of a mansion, the magnificent pavement adjoining having been the floor of its principal apartment; and it is probable the plain pavement was that of its courtyard, the roof-tiles indicating that it was open and near to the covered part of the building. As these town-houses were of one storey, they usually extended over a considerable area, around one or more courtyards.

In September last the excavators were engaged in Southgate Street. When they were taking out the earth at that part of the street lying between Mr. Collier's and Mr. Johnson's malt-offices, they found a coarse pavement and a portion of a stone column. The latter is about two feet high, one foot and one inch in diameter, and three feet two inches in circumference. It lay about twelve feet below the surface. Further up the street, in the direction of the High Cross, near the premises of Mr. Warren, fragments of plaster, which had formed the sides of a room, coloured in deep red, were taken out of the ground: they were mistaken for portions of a floor.

Two hundred years ago on the self-same spot, we are assured by Throsby, a local historian, traces of pavements and painted walls were revealed. "In 1667," he says, "some workmen having occasion to dig where Mr. Johnson's buildings now stand, found at the depth of twelve feet a beautiful floor of Mosaic work; there were also side-walls standing, beautifully painted."

These remains were unquestionably those of another mansion equal in extent to that in the Jewrywall Street.

Not far from this locality approaching to the site of the High Cross, a "thick, almost impenetrable wall of forest stone," was discovered in 1791 at the depth of sixteen feet: it was apparently the foundation of some building. It crossed the street in a north-westerly direction. When the house opposite to the Nag's Head was rebuilt by Mr. Stephen's, a tessellated pavement was found. Under the parlour of the house now occupied by Mr. Collier, in Southgate Street, a similar pavement was once exposed. These details prove that almost the entire length of the street from the

High Cross to the South Gate, at the end of Friar Lane, the ground was anciently covered with buildings of some pretension to solidity of structure and ornamental character. The road must, therefore, have been carried over and through their ruins after the demolition and desertion of the Roman town, and in the dark period intervening between the fifth and the tenth centuries.

In the street lying between the High Cross and the North Gate, the case is different: pavements have not been laid bare along its course. That known as the Diana and Actæon pavement was found on one side of the street. Now, if the present line of road here follows the line of that of the Roman station (as would appear likely), then the absence of pavements is what would be expected. But recent excavations have brought to light, at four feet below the surface, a walk constructed of granite and sandstone, five feet thick, extending from a point near All Saints' Church to another near the Borough Gaol.

This line of masonry is too long to be considered that of one building, and I therefore assume it to have been that of the street frontage of the *Via Principalis* of *Ratæ*. Its existence in the middle of the street does not furnish an objection to the theory, as the streets in the Roman-British towns were often little wider than passages, and there would be space enough left for the remainder of the avenue between the subterranean wall and the opposite frontage now standing.

It may be stated for the benefit of those who have not bestowed attention upon this subject, that the reason why walls and pavements are found many feet below the present surface is probably this:—In the case of the Roman-British houses the stonework only rose, in the first instance, a few feet above the ground, the superposed structure being composed of a framework of wood, and the interstices being filled in with plaster. As there was only one storey the superstructure was necessarily light and insubstantial. When, therefore, the buildings were overthrown by hostile hands—the woodwork being consumed by fire, and the charred materials all falling down in a mass—it is not difficult to perceive how the stonework might in great part remain *in situ* and the earth and rubbish be roughly levelled over by succeeding occupants, who thus by degrees raised the surface of the streets and of the entire intramural area.

In September last, while the sewerage excavations were being prosecuted in Blue Boar Lane, the labourers came in contact with a wall following the same direction as the street. The upper part of the masonry was five feet below the surface, and it was exposed to the depth of five feet lower; six feet below which the lowest course had not been reached. The wall was six feet long and constructed of Roman tiles, similar to those visible in the Jewry Wall. At one end of the masonry was found a portion of a stone

column, 2 feet 9 inches high, on its plinth or base. The latter was about 12 inches in depth; the column was about 5 feet 8½ inches in circumference. At the other end of the wall a second fragment, without the plinth, was discovered. It was 1 foot 5 inches in diameter, 4 feet 7 inches in circumference, and 2 feet 1½ inches high. The two pieces were of millstone grit.

It will be remembered that a portion of a shaft like those described was found a few years ago at the lower end of S. Nicholas Street. The capital of a column of Byzantine character (now preserved in the town museum) was also turned up on or near Talbot Lane. In the same locality, in the year 1793, were discovered numerous fragments of columns. This part of Leicester has evidently, therefore, been covered at some remote period by a building, with substantial walls, and adorned with colonnades. The ground has obviously been greatly raised by artificial means about the Jewry Wall, and the *debris* of a large edifice have contributed to the result.

On looking at the map of Leicester, it will be noticed that an area of oblong shape lies included between Highcross Street and the Jewry Wall, and S. Nicholas Street and the Blue Boar Lane. If we also examine the outline of such a Roman encampment as those were which were commonly formed in the first century of our era—of the period in which Leicester was founded—we shall perceive that it was usually crossed by two roads. One of these was the *Via Principalis* or High Street; the other intersected it at right angles. At the point of intersection was the Prætorium, or quarters of the general. The oblong area just defined corresponds with this part in Leicester. When the encampment passed into a town, the probability is that the Prætorium was converted into the Prefecture, or governor's residence, with the Basilica, or courthouse, and other buildings of public utility, attached. Sometimes public baths formed a portion of the various edifices which in time clustered round the principal one as a centre. Now this is the kind of block of buildings which occupied the oblong area, and of which the fragmentary columns recently brought to light, and the Jewry Wall, are probably the suggestive remains.

Other discoveries have lately been made in Talbot Lane, very near the locality here alluded to, but they require further attention and investigation before they can be satisfactorily described.

I here conclude these observations and explanations. If they be but vague and general—if we are yet unable to construct a map of Roman Leicester in its leading outlines—you may, perhaps, have been convinced that many feet below the Leicester of to-day lie the traces of a once opulent, populous, and well-built town—the eloquent memorials of the luxurious Roman, who was surrounded by his frescoed halls, who trod on his tessellated pavements, and who indulged in the pleasures of the bath and the

theatre. Thus, locked in the slumbers of oblivion, the Spirit of the Past may be said to repose beneath our houses and our marts—that Spirit which lived when painting, statuary, and sculpture laid their products before the vulgar eye—when law was recognised in the city while force ruled in the forest—when the municipal organization was witnessed in vigorous operation—long before our Teutonic ancestors had learned to lisp the syllables of civilization; and if the Buried City beneath us be not wide and marvellous as are those which are scattered over the plains of Assyria—nor complete and startling in its apparent freshness as the lava-engulfed cities of Italy—yet do its many vestiges appeal more directly to our everyday sympathy and local associations.

On independent grounds the minutest relics of antique social life have a charm for the intelligent mind; for even the rusty fibula affords almost a concentrated history of the Roman art, and the shattered urn often tells a vivid story of Roman customs; but when at ten, fifteen, or twenty feet below the surface of modern Leicester, the excavator brings to light massive fragments of masonry, held together in the bonds of a tenacity which defies assault, are we not disposed to ask whether there were not “giants in those days?” And, as the fossil geologist finds in the perishing bone a relic of the mastodon of the early world, are we not in like manner reminded by these subterranean walls of the stately fabrics of the primeval Britain? Does not that grim and misshapen ruin, the Jewry Wall, seem to us like a plesiosaurian monster of Archæology left stranded by the receding tides of time on the shores of eternity?

VOTES OF THANKS to the Readers of Papers, and to the President (the latter proposed by the Worshipful the Mayor of Leicester, and responded to by the President, Lord John Manners. M.P.) closed the proceedings.

31st December, 1860.

THE REV. J. H. HILL in the Chair.

The following Gentlemen were elected Members of the Society: Mr. H. Lankester, Leicester; Mr. William Allen Kendall, Humberstone; Mr. Thomas Mercer, Leicester; Mr. John Hunt, Thurnby; Mr. Alfred Russell Donisthorpe, Leicester; Mr. H. D. Dudgeon, Leicester; Dr. Day, Wymondham; The Rev. Augustus Packe, M.A., Walton on the Wolds.