XXIII.—*Notes on the Discovery of a Roman Villa at Holcombe, Devon. By Captain JOHN SACKVILLE SWANN, F.S.A. F.G.S., in a Letter to AUGUSTUS W. FRANKS, Esq. Vice-President.*

Read February 22, 1872.

Holyshute, Honiton, 30th January, 1872.

MY DEAR SIR,

As you seem to have been interested in the Roman iron tools^a found by me at Holcombe, I think perhaps that some further particulars regarding the find, and the remains of the Roman Villa which has been discovered there, may not be uninteresting to you.

In 1870 the proprietor of the farm on which the remains have been found determined to clear a copse, occupying a space about 400 feet long by 40 feet wide. In this copse a small and very perfect piece of Roman pavement was brought to light some twenty years ago, and in 1870, when the present clearance was commenced, only a few scattered tesserae remained. The work of clearing did not turn out to be so easy as was anticipated, and by this lucky accident only the northern portion was touched. My attention was drawn to this, and on visiting the spot I found enormous heaps of building-stones, roofing-stones, flue-tiles, &c., all over the place, with many small fragments of pottery, which appeared to me to be certainly Roman. The level of this copse was nearly three feet above the level of the adjoining meadows, and being all stone, roots and trunks of pollard trees, &c., the difficulty of clearing was very great, and the progress very slow. Nearly in the middle of this piece the tools to which I have alluded, with some charcoal, were found.

^a The iron tools in question are represented in the accompanying plate, and appear all to be of Roman origin. They may be described as follows :—1. A strong pair of pincers ; length 1 ft. 8½ in.; a somewhat similar pair, from Kingsholm, near Gloucester, is preserved in the British Museum. 2. A thick quadrangular bar, broken into two pieces, and pointed at one end; length 12 in. 3, 4. Two strong wedges ; length 5 in. and 4¾ in. 5. A chisel with a pointed tang ; length 6 in. 6. One of the singular objects which have from time to time been discovered with Roman remains, and are now considered by archaeologists to be horse-shoes ; their use seems to be decisively settled by a specimen in the British Museum, to the under part of which is fixed a thin horse-shoe of the ordinary description. Some excellent figures of these strange horse-shoes have appeared in a Memoir on Roman Remains discovered in London, by J. E. Price, Esq., F.S.A., published in the Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society (vol. iii. p. 517). Besides these objects there was found an imperfect Roman knife or *cultrum*, and another fragment.

IRON TOOLS FOUND IN THE ROMAN VILLA AT HOLCOMBE.

PLAN OF FOUNDATIONS OF ROMAN VILLA AT HOLCOMBE.

SECTIONS OF FOUNDATIONS.

From what I saw I thought that further clearing in so wholesale a way would be undesirable, for much I am sure was lost in moving away many cartloads of earth, and spreading it over neighbouring fields. I therefore persuaded the proprietor to rent me the rest of the copse at £5 per annum, and at the same time exposed a small portion of the pavement on the north side of the bath. By the way, I must not forget to say that the bath was opened about twenty years ago, and left unprotected, and is therefore not in a good state of preservation.

Last autumn I set to work for about nine weeks, and sometimes with three, but mostly only with two men, cleared out about 64 feet by 35 feet to an average depth of about 4 feet 6 inches from the existing level of the copse, uncovered about 10,080 cubic feet of stone and earth, and laid bare the foundations shown in the Plan of Foundations (Plate XXXVIII.) Owing to the extreme age of some of the pollard-ash trees our progress was very slow and work very hard; but we found the bottom of the bath without a tessera missing, as well as the pieces of pavement on north and south side of bath, and a large piece in a room which I have called N. E. Room, and is that in which the letter "H" is in the Plan of Foundations. The heaviest work was in that room or chamber through which the line E. F. passes, and here were the principal finds of bones, &c. The bones consisted (as kindly determined for me by Mr. Boyd Dawkins) of *Bos longifrons*, sheep, goat, roe-deer, pig, dog, horse, rabbit, and hare. There are also a few bones of birds and a bone or two of fox. The generality of the bones appear to have been those of flesh used for food, except those of the dog and fox, and many of them appear to have been gnawed by dogs.

Of shells there were oyster, mussel, limpet, periwinkle, and snail; the limpet shells in great abundance, as also the lower or hollow valve of the oyster. Two oysters had never been opened.

The pottery was all in fragments, of which there were very great quantities, and it is generally of black or red ware, but principally the former.

Two or three fragments of very thin glass were also found, and of such a shape as to justify the belief that they were portions of a small vessel. Quantities of nails and one key were also found, and a small piece of hard wood, I fancy ebony, which might have been the portion of a frame of a looking-glass, and one small fragment of a bronze buckle. I believe some coins were found in the vicinity some time ago; but on this occasion only two were met with, a small copper coin of the Second Constantine, and a brass coin utterly beyond all identification.

A large square stone was found in 1870, which appears to me to have been a sort of bracket or table let into a wall. Two sides are moulded. One side, I think the front, is ornamented, and the other side plain: by side I mean *edge*.

I must not omit to mention that in the chamber where the bulk of the bones, pottery, shells, &c., were found, very large quantities of charcoal were also brought to light.

I may add that I at first much doubted the octagonal hole being a bath, but had an idea it might be the impluvium; but I have discarded that idea, as the principal rooms were, I think, in the portion destroyed. The piece of pavement destroyed was, I believe, 20 feet by 15; and, judging by the enormous quantity of material removed from the portion cleared in 1870, there must have been some important part of the building to the north-east of the portions which I have excavated.

The accompanying plan and sections (see Plate XXXVIII.) will explain the details and give some idea of the nature of the excavations.

The whole appearance, as one works on, is that of buildings that have gradually decayed; and the roofing-tiles are invariably at the bottom of the *débris*, as if the roof had fallen in first in the ordinary course of decay.

I have omitted to notice a very well-preserved pillar of oolitic limestone

Pillar of Oolitic Limestone, found in Roman Villa at Holcombe, Devon.

Height, 2 feet 10 inches.

found close to the spot where the square stone or bracket, I have already mentioned, was discovered. It was in a remarkably good state of preservation, and so well finished that it gave the idea of its having been turned in a lathe rather than worked by hand.

Its total height was 2 feet 10 inches, and perhaps in its original state it may have measured 3 feet. The appearance of the stone is identical with that from the lower quarries in the island of Portland, from which place there would have been no difficulty in transporting it, but I am not able satisfactorily to establish the fact that the Portland Quarries, from which the fine-grained oolite is obtained, were worked at so early a date as the building of the Villa at Holcombe.

Believe me, my dear Sir,

Very truly yours,

JOHN S. SWANN.

A. W. FRANKS, Esq.