The Roman Tessellated Pavement at Stonesfield, Oxon.

By M. V. TAYLOR

THE history of the discovery in Chesthill Acre field, Stonesfield,[1] close by Akeman Street (FIG. 1),[2] of a large Roman house with elaborate mosaic pavements, one depicting Bacchus and the panther (PL. I), is interesting though melancholy, and is perhaps worth putting on record if only because this fragment of antiquity from remote Oxfordshire and Britain was used to illustrate one of the early encyclopaedias or dictionaries of Roman archaeology.

The original discovery was made in ploughing by a farmer, George Handes or Hannes, on 25 January, 1712, when ' his Plow-share happen'd to hit upon some Foundation-Stones, amongst which, he turn'd up an URN ' and in searching further he laid bare a figured tessellated pavement measuring 35 ft. by 20 ft. ' not above 2 Foot under Ground.'[3] Though he disowned that he found money in the urn ' as soon as he found it, he immediately ran Home with it . . . leaving his man and Horses in the Field,'[4] whence he was under suspicion that the urn contained something of value; and before a month passed, Handes, on a pretext of having his lease, lately renewed, sealed, asked leave from his landlord, Richard Fowler, of Barrington, Glos., to dig the ground, and, after obtaining his unwilling consent, told him of the discovery, to Fowler's great annoyance,[5] and by 16 March ' Handes is like to be prosecuted by his Landlord for doing more than he was allow'd to do by the Bargain.'[6] Meanwhile the news had quickly reached Oxford. On Friday, 1 February, Hearne, the antiquary, notes in his diary[7] that a fragment of the pavement had been given him and on the following day, Saturday, ' at five Clock in the Morning I walk'd over to Stunsfield, 8 miles from Oxford, and return'd to Oxford in the Evening. I had a full View of the Pavemt. for several Hours, but cannot find yt 'tis Roman, but rather modern perhaps abt. ye. time of Edw. I or later. . . . (Upon a more mature Consideration I am perswaded 'twas a Roman Praetorium, and I can answer all Objections.)'

[1] For a general account see *V.C.H. Oxon.*, I, 315 ff. (13, 2).

[2] For the map which is here reproduced I am indebted to Mr J. J. Leeming.

[3] J. Pointer, *An Account of a Roman pavement lately found at Stunsfield in Oxfordshire* (Oxford, 1713), pp. 1 ff., with a poor outline sketch of the central figure.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[5] *Hearne's Collections*, III (O.H.S. XIII), 400.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 402.

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 297 and 395.

Altogether Hearne walked to Stonesfield and back, frequently on a Sunday, nine times within the next six months[1] and almost as many times he changed his opinion of the date and use of the figured pavement and the interpretation of the picture. His final and published opinion which he says ' should be looked upon as nothing more than the uncertain Conjectures of a mean and obscure Person ' was that

> ' at Stunsfield *was a* Roman Camp ; . . . *that this* Pavement *was the* Pavement *of the* principal *Room of a* Hall, *or* Palace, *that was erected for* a Roman Officer ; *that this* Officer *was* subordinate *to the* famous General Theodosius, *and that the* Hall, *or* Palace, *was put up about the Year* 367, *when* Theodosius *clear'd* Britain *of* barbarous Enemies ; *that the Figures of* Apollo Sagittarius, *and of a* fictitious monstrous Animal *are represented on the* Pavement *on purpose to signify that the* Contrivers *of it attributed all the Success, which* Theodosius *had obtain'd against the* northern, barbarous People, *to the* Providential *Care of* Apollo ; *and lastly . . . that this* Hall, *or* Palace, *was cover'd with* Tiles and Slats, *and continu'd 'till the* Romans *left the* Isle, *at which time tho' they burnt it, yet they took what care they could to secure and preserve the* Pavement *upon Prospect of a* Return.'[2]

It is unnecessary to say that these military conjectures are baseless. The pavements decorated the floor of a large country house no doubt belonging to a wealthy Romanised Briton.

Hearne was not the only person interested. On Wednesday, 6 February, 1712, Dr. Gardiner, Warden of All Souls, brought him ' a Sort of a Sketch of the Roman Pavement . . . his own doing (he having been there himself) and that he took the Figure to be Bacchus, and the Dart . . . to be a thyrsus, but as for the Beast he knew not what to call it . . . The same day . . . Mr. Urry came to me, and brought a Sketch that one Mr. Foord of Xt. Church had drawn. Mr. Urry also said he believ'd it to be Bacchus, and the Dart . . . to be a Thyrsus, and the Animal to be a tyger. There are various Opinions besides abt. this Matter, wch. makes great Mirth in the University and elsewhere.'[3] By May ' a great many People go still to see this Curiosity, especially such as go to Woodstock for the Sake of seeing Blenheim Castle,'[4] then building ;

[1] Hearne records Sundays, Feb. 10, 24, March 16, Apr. 13, Easter Monday, Apr. 21, Thursday, May 29 (Ascension Day), Sunday, June 30. (*Ibid.*, pp. 298, 397, 400, 402, 403, 369, 408).

[2] Hearne, Preface (p. iv) to ' A Discourse concerning the *Stunsfield* tessellated Pavement,' published in his edition of *The Itinerary of John Leland the Antiquary*, VIII (1712). At one time he thought the ' monstrous extremly fierce beast ' was the Dragon in the ' form of a Dog with odd claws ' being run through by St. Michael : *Coll.* III, 396 (2 Feb., 1712).

[3] *Coll.* III, 397 (Feb. 2). Hearne also mentions an inaccurate sketch by Mr. Webb, an Oxford painter, *ibid.* pp. 319, 403.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 369 (May 30).

even Vanbrugh, the architect of Blenheim, was not above carrying off a tile.[1] Already in March Hearne had approached the owner about making a drawing, a request which he was ' not willing to grant without a greater Consideration than I am able to make. I understand there are Draughts abroad ' and ' a Painter in this Place (Oxford) hath one . . . but he asks more than I am either able or willing to give for a Copy . . . and the Ingraver will afterwards insist upon an unreasonable Sum to do his Part.'[2] But by 21 May these difficulties

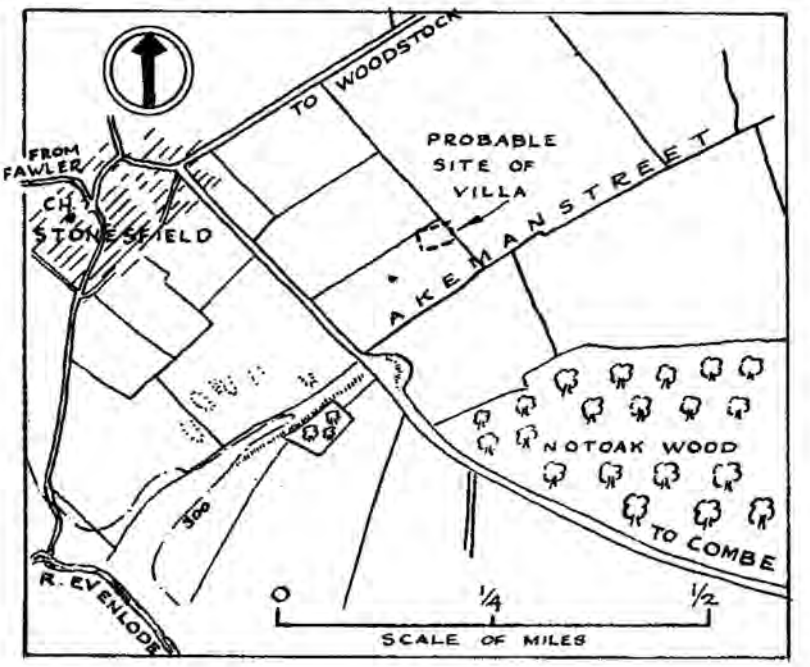


FIG. 1

MAP SHOWING PROBABLE SITE OF ROMAN VILLA AT STONESFIELD, OXON.

Based on the 6-in. O.S. map with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.

had been overcome and Hearne ' carry'd over with me Mr. Burghers the University Engraver, who took sketches of the several Particulars and is to ingrave it to be printed with my Discourse about it at the End of the viiith Vol. of Leland's Itin.' On 29 May he again ' walk'd over to Stunsfield with Mr. Burghers . . . to correct and settle the Draught.'[3] A month later, on Sunday, 30 June, he

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 400.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 324 (March 25). The painter was probably Webb, mentioned above.
[3] *Ibid*, pp. 403 and 369.

' went out at 3 Clock in the Morning ' with Mr. Burghers to revise his ' Plate now almost finish'd ' and on the way back they heard ' an excellent Sermon ' at Bladon by Mr. Tilly and ' when Church was done to dinner. We were very moderate.' They left at 2 o'clock, being taken by the innkeeper, a brother of the head cook at New College, to the earthwork called Round Castle, west of Begbroke Church, ' a noble Fortification ' with a double vallum ' a Roman Camp . . . made about the year 367.' ' Leaving this place . . . we were forc'd by a tempest to stop at Yarnton,' where ' Burghers, staying behind . . . committed an Absurdity ' by quarrelling with another Dutchman, Faber, who was envious of his having ' taken a Draught of Stunsfield.'[1] On 6 August ' the 8th Vol. of Leland is now finish'd and ready to be deliver'd.' ' Mr. Burghers's Plate is mightily approv'd of. For which reason I have had supernumerary Copies wrought off, and 'tis to be sold separate ' at 9d. a copy or 6s. a dozen.[2]

Burghers's engraving is, in fact, very exact, as was recognised in the next account published at Oxford and sold in London in the following year, 1713, for 6d. The author, the Rev. John Pointer, M.A., Chaplain of Merton College and Rector of Slapton, Northamptonshire, makes merry over Hearne in the true pamphleteering vein. He asserts that some coins were found among the rubbish, but, being sold to visitors, a supply of others, including some found earlier at Stonesfield, was obtained elsewhere for visitors. Next he attacks Hearne's date and explanation :

> ' For my part, I must needs confess, that if I had tumbl'd over all the Histories in the *Bodleyan*, or, perhaps, the *Vatican Library*, I believe I shou'd scarce have found out, that *Theodosius* was ever in *Oxford-shire*. . . . I can almost as soon believe that *Faustina* was *Hadrian's* wife, (as our Author, and no body else, but our Author, tells us page 20) as that Allchester was ever the Station of Theodosius, or Stunsfield of his Subordinate Officer.' (p. 13).

[1] *Ibid.*, p. 408, with mistake of date June 30 for July 1.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 424 f. Aug. 6 and 7. In addition to the pavement Hearne records that other stone foundations were discovered close by (p. 395 f., Feb. 2) ; he observes correctly that ' the Holes at each side were passages to convey the Heat up into every Room of the House ' (p. 472, Sept. 4) and was told by Handes, the farmer, of ' a trap Door that gives a passage under Ground to the Pavement. . . . He also shew'd me a Coyn ' found there but since the discovery of the pavement (p. 384, June 29) ; also he is told of ' abundance of Brick found all about the Fields . . . and Pitchers . . . broke to pieces ' which he thought were ' semi-lateres ' (p. 395, Feb. 2), ' a great many Bones . . . all about the floor ' and much burnt corn close by, but he is suspicious of the potsherds and a coin which was ' got on purpose to make a Penny of and to deceive the World.' (*Ibid.*) He mentions a worn brass of Pius and coins of Tetricus II, Maximian, Constantine I and Constans junior (pp. 299, 332, 397, 438). After one visit he says ' The Pavement when discover'd was cover'd with Rubbish, and Pieces of Stones and with Slats, and great broad Bricks, and Coal and Corn ' (*ibid.*, p. 401). The ' coal ' was probably charcoal or calcined matter.

Yet he himself believes on the evidence of the name Alchester and some coins found at Caversfield, that Allectus

> ' was the Chief Governor in these Quarters, and the Original Founder of this Station (Alchester) . . . and that *Stunsfield* Camp was at first erected for an Officer of Allectus. For this you see we have . . . Plain (if not Publick) History back'd with Reason.' (p. 21 f.)

He does, however, show (p. 24), that the pavement, far from being barbarous work, was ' One of the Finest of the *Tesselated Pavements*, that has been hitherto found out in all Britain ' and interprets it more correctly than Hearne as Bacchus holding the thyrsus in his left arm (not hand) and a cup (not *patera*) in his right hand riding on a panther and gives an outline drawing of the central figure by ' *Mr. Benj. Cole* of *Oxford* ' (engraver of two maps of Oxford and Cambridge and 20 miles around). He devotes many pages to ridiculing Hearne's view of Apollo Sagittarius, and as for the beast Hearne made it ' First a *Monster*, then a *Gryffin*, then a *Python*, then a *Dragon*, and in the result, an Anonymous *Monster* again as good as ever' (p. 22=p. 30).

Though we would have preferred less attention to interpretation and more exact details about the actual discovery,[1] yet the prompt publication by Hearne, Pointer and others deserves commendation ; certainly it attracted widespread notice. An incorrect and poor engraving, sometimes coloured by hand,[2] obviously made to be sold to visitors, one copy of which is signed E.L., was sent by one Hadrian Reland, who also had some *tesserae* from the figure of Bacchus in the pavement, to Samuel Pitiscus (1636–1727), a classical scholar of German origin, Rector of the École Supérieure at Zutphen in the Low Countries, and later of the Gymnase S. Jérôme at Utrecht. He was just completing his *Lexicon Antiquitatum*, an early classical dictionary of antiquities, and he inserted an engraving of the mosaic, copied from E.L.'s by his printer, Francis Halmar, as a frontispiece at the end of the author's preface of the first edition (Leeuwarden

[1] Pointer also gives more details of the structure : ' several pieces of Painted Plaistering found upon the Inside of the Foundation Walls,' a great many slates on the floor were ' mixt with pieces of burnt Timber, Mortar and Nails ;' ' Foundation Walls they have discover'd all round it (p. 3) ; the pavement rested ' upon a bed of Mortar, about a foot in Thickness ' (p. 1), supported by 'an obtuse sort of ribb'd Arch-Work and the Bottom cover'd with clean Gravel ' and no sign of ashes, and therefore not part of a hypocaust ; he also misinterpreted the holes (mentioned by Hearne) for hot pipes as made for supporting timbers. Finally he records that ' black, whole, and dried *Corn* (wheat) . . . about half a Foot, and in some places near a Foot deep,' covered the pavement, put, as he thought, by the Romans to preserve it when they left (p. 4).

[2] It is entitled *An exact delineation of the pavement in mosaic-work, lately discovered at Stunsfeild nere Woodstock*, and gives the measurements as 36 ft. by 25 ft. and marks the spot where the plough or axe first struck it. The copies are usually undated and unsigned, but a coloured one, now in the Topham Collection of Drawings (B.M. 9, no. 82) in Eton College Library which was acquired in 1736 is signed ' E.L.' (Haverfield MSS., Ashmolean Museum). Possibly E.L. is one of the painters mentioned by Hearne (*Coll.*, III, 324, March 25), but who paid for the engraving is unknown.

1713.) It also appeared in a later edition published in Venice (the engraving freshly made on a slightly smaller scale by Suor Piccino)[1] in 1719 (and at The Hague in 1737). This was copied for the translation into English (by D. Humphreys) of the *Supplement to Antiquities Explained*, that remarkable dictionary of antiquities, illustrated with innumerable engravings—the father of all such works—compiled by Bernard de Montfaucon, the French antiquary (vol. I, p. 153, pl. 34, published in 1725 in London),[2] and thus became known abroad. Meanwhile in England, George Vertue published an engraving[3] which, though fairly correct, was naturally much influenced by Burghers's drawing, though he does not show the hot-air pipes at the side and the scale is slightly incorrect. Vertue (1684–1758) was engraver to the Society of Antiquaries, visited Ditchley and Blenheim about 1730 and Blenheim again in 1737; he was constantly in Oxford, succeeding Burghers as engraver of the University almanacs from 1725–1751.

Meanwhile the famous antiquary and one of the earliest English field archaeologists, William Stukeley, records in 1724[4] that 'This admirabl curiosity deserv'd a better owner; for the landlord and tenant quarrelling about sharing the profits of showing it, the latter maliciously tore it in pieces,' some being acquired by Mr. Robert Stephens, F.S.A., Chief Solicitor of Customs and Historiographer Royal (1665–1732), who presented them to the Society of Antiquaries in November, 1724.[5] We may recall that already in 1712 differences of opinion had arisen between the landlord and the tenant (Hearne, *Coll.*, III, 400, 402), and 'a stop was put to farther searches, and the place was neglected.'[6] Yet much must have survived, for Daines Barrington, K.C., F.S.A. (1727–1800), antiquary and naturalist and brother of Shute Barrington, said in 1780 that the 'room and pavement engraved by Hearne continue in tolerable preservation and that labourers now excavate a room 12 ft. 5 ins. by 8 ft. 6 ins. with a tessellated pavement.' In fact at this time, 1779–80, two other geometric pavements were exposed and part of the baths.[7] But, unfortunately, no excavation took place and Warton in 1783 says that most 'of these curiosities have been removed from

[1] With a mistake in the measurements of 15 ft. for 25 ft.

[2] Where it is pointed out that the measurements given by Pitiscus do not agree with the scale.

[3] 'Life of Vertue' in Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England* (ed. Wornum, 1862), III, 991, 994, 1006. A copy of the engraving, which is undated, coloured by hand, exists in the Bodleian Library (Gough Maps 26, fol. 62 and 64). The date of publication is uncertain, but it must have been some time between 1730 and 1740.

[4] *Itinerarium* (1724), p. 45. Stukeley remarks that the pavement was 'for bulk and beauty the most considerabl one we know of.' He also said that when found it was covered a 'foot thick with burnt wheat, barley and pease.'

[5] Society of Antiquaries MS. Minutes I, 50, 133 (7 Dec., 1721, 25 Nov., 1724).

[6] Warton, *Specimen of a History of Oxfordshire*, 2nd ed. (1783), p. 58, footnote c.

[7] Soc. Antiqs. MS. Mins. XVII, 163 (16 Nov., 1780).

their proper situations, yet carefully preserved. Mr. Walker of Woodstock, auditor to the duke of Marlborough, has drawings of the tessellations, with large masses of the pavements.'[1] These (PLS. I-II) were made by Wm. Lewington, a painter in Woodstock (perhaps a descendant of the E.L. mentioned above); copies are preserved in the Society of Antiquaries,[2] being presented by Sir Henry England, on 27 March, 1783.[3] They are extremely well done, being the most accurate of the original pavement and the only reproductions of the new pavements.[4] The type of the pavements is of the third or fourth century; many of the motives in the designs reappear in pavements at North Leigh (Oxon.), Chedworth and Woodchester (Glos.) and therefore those in all these houses may have been laid down by the same school of craftsmen.

Soon, however, the pavements disappeared altogether and the reason why we learn from the author of the *Blenheim Guide*,[5] who says:

> 'On the late inclosure of the parish of Stonesfield (1801), by a *tasteless* allotment of property, the site of these venerable remains of the Romans, has been divided among *three* different proprietors [one being the Duke of Marlborough], so that not a vestige of them will soon be left. While the field was inclosing, the writer of this saw a very beautiful border of one of the tesselated areas, uncovered.'

Hence Gough in his new edition of Camden's *Britannia*[6] says that the pavement found in 1712 had been 'destroyed, except some of the borders under the Apollo, and part of the corners' and repeats the Society of Antiquaries account of the 1779 discoveries adding that 'on its demolition by the mob, who refused to pay for seeing it, or by the farmer, whose rent had been raised on that account, large fragments of it were carried off, and dispersed about the neighbouring villages' but that the pavements found in 1779–80 'being on the Duke of Marlborough's ground, are likely to be preserved, and built over,' a hope never realised, for Brewer in the Oxford volume (XII, 2) of *The Beauties of England and Wales* published in 1813 (p. 425 f.) says, 'we observe with regret that these curious remains were also removed and demolished' though some fragments

[1] Warton, *l.c.*, also mentions the 'bath with leaden pipes in the sides, covered with plaister painted red, arcades, and pilasters . . . the foundation-walls went down to the solid rock.'

[2] Red Portfolio, Oxon., pp. 37–42, with notes and measurements, first published in *V.C.H. Oxon.*, I, 315 f. pl. XXIV, fig. 32.

[3] MS. Mins. XVIII, 11, 397; Hakewill, *Roman remains discovered in the parishes of North Leigh and Stonesfield* (London, 1836, extracted from Skelton, *Oxfordshire*), p. 19.

[4] Wm. Fowler published in August, 1803, an engraving of the Bacchus pavement, coloured by hand, in his well-known series. It is apparently based on Vertue's engraving or Lewington's drawing but on a larger scale.

[5] [Dr. Mavor], *A new description of Blenheim* (7th ed. 1806), p. 113 n.

[6] II (1806), 15 and footnote; he adds that 'coins, from Vespasian to the lower empire were found . . . burnt bones of men and animals, melted lead and iron, and various masses of calcined matter.'

of the 1712 pavement still survived. About 1812-3 the Rev. Walter Brown, rector of Handborough, and Henry Hakewill 'began to make fresh researches, with a view of ascertaining the form and extent of the building and of getting an accurate ground plan' but alas, 'the investigation which began at Stonesfield was suspended, in order to examine the remains of the Roman villa . . . in the parish of North Leigh,' but 'the extent of the area was ascertained to be about 190 feet by 152 feet.[1]

By 1858 Akerman can write 'on my visit to Stuntesfield I learnt that it (*i.e.* the pavement) had been totally destroyed.'[2] In 1826 the Ashmolean Museum acquired through Mr. Francis Drake flue-tiles and a pillar-base (probably from a hypocaust) and in 1836 a small brass coin of Valentinian.[3] Mr. C. Faulkner of Deddington in 1853 had some *tesserae*, painted plaster, flue-tiles, charred wheat and vetches, etc.[4]

To-day (1942), 230 years after the first discovery and 163 after the second, it is with difficulty that the exact site of what must have been an elaborate Romano-British house can be discovered from fragments of tile and pottery on the surface of the ploughed field (FIG. 1).[5] The failure of the late Major Allen to obtain an air-view showing the villa plan, though he watched the site for years in all variations of season and of crops, suggests that nothing actually remains of the building or its floors.

Such is the melancholy story of what might have been an important historical monument. The moral is that every discovery of this kind should be reported immediately to a responsible authority such as the Ashmolean Museum or the Ancient Monuments Department of H.M. Office of Works.

[1] Hakewill, *op. cit.* p. 19 f.

[2] *Archaeologia*, XXXVII, 434, where he confuses hopelessly the two sites at North Leigh and Stonesfield.

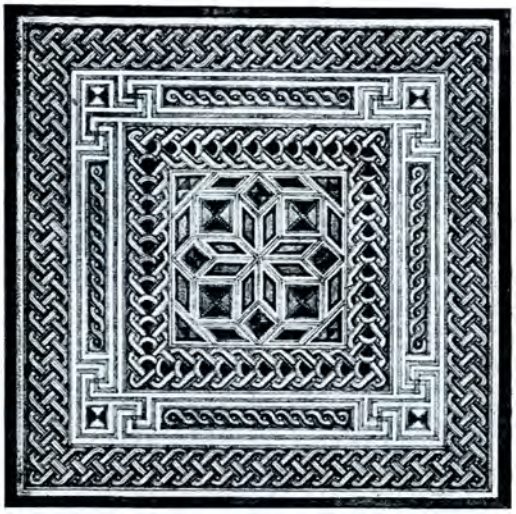
[3] *Ash. Mus. Cat.* (1836), pp. 124, 127, nos. 89a, 186–8.

[4] *North Oxon. Arch. Soc. Trans.*, I, 1853–5, 118.

[5] In 1936, Mr. D. B. Harden and Captain C. Musgrave picked up in the north corner of the field (known in 1865 as 'Roman villa piece'), next to Akeman Street and east of the Combe road, fragments of tiles, slates, Samian and coarse ware, window-glass, *tesserae* and a coin of Sabina, and this undoubtedly is the site of the house—not that marked on the 6-in. O.S. maps.

STONESFIELD, OXON. : mosaic pavement found 25 January, 1712.
The lower panel depicts Bacchus riding on the panther (see p. 1).

After the drawing by Wm. Lewington, now in the possession of the Society of Antiquaries, by courtesy of the Victoria County History.



STONESFIELD, OXON.: two mosaic pavements found 1779–80 (see p. 7).

After the drawings by Wm. Lewington, now in the possession of the Society of Antiquaries, by courtesy of the Victoria County History.