

A Roman Site at Asthall, Oxfordshire

By P. M. M. COOK¹

THE well-known Roman site in Asthall parish, on the south side of the crossing of the R. Windrush by Akeman Street² (1-inch O.S. Nat. Grid 42/285112), was examined by the writer in the spring and summer of 1947 on behalf of the Ministry of Works, before houses were built on it by Witney Rural District Council. It was only necessary to disturb a part of the field (FIG. 10) which lies on a shelf above flood level, protected to the S.E. by the steep escarpment on which the present Oxford-Gloucester road runs. This part of the field lay wholly north of Akeman Street, and, having been long under the plough, structures were in a very ruinous condition, especially on the south-west. Stratification was further made difficult by the soil creep down the slope. The subsoil was a bright yellow clay, overlying river gravels. The main structures found were :

1. Two wells and a rubbish-pit.
2. Two floors or courtyards at different levels, mortar pit and hearths.
3. A length of 120 ft. of a dry stone wall, incomplete at each end.
4. A possible kiln.

1. *The Wells and Rubbish Pit.* One well (I) (PL. II, A) $5\frac{1}{2}$ ft. in diameter, was dug down through the yellow clay and gravel to a depth of $11\frac{1}{2}$ ft. without any trace of shoring or timbering, though the bottom was paved with flat stones (still 2-3 ft. above the present water-table). In the lowest level were found a first-century 'poor man's' brooch, and the best part of a coarse hand-made grey-black Belgic-type pot with other fragments apparently of the same date. Above this, in a layer devoid of potsherds, were the skeletons of five dogs (of what seemed to be terrier breeds), together with a horse's jawbone and many other animal bones. Higher up were numerous sherds, dating from the mid-second to the third century (e.g. FIG. 11, no. 8), and associated with the debris of the wall, the main wall-debris being a little higher at $3\frac{1}{2}$ ft. from the surface ; above the debris fourth-century types predominated. In the top two feet was an eighteenth-century seal.

The second well (II), 10 ft. east of Well I, though only $9\frac{1}{2}$ ft. deep and

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² *V.C.H. Oxon.*, 1, 330.

P. M. M. COOK

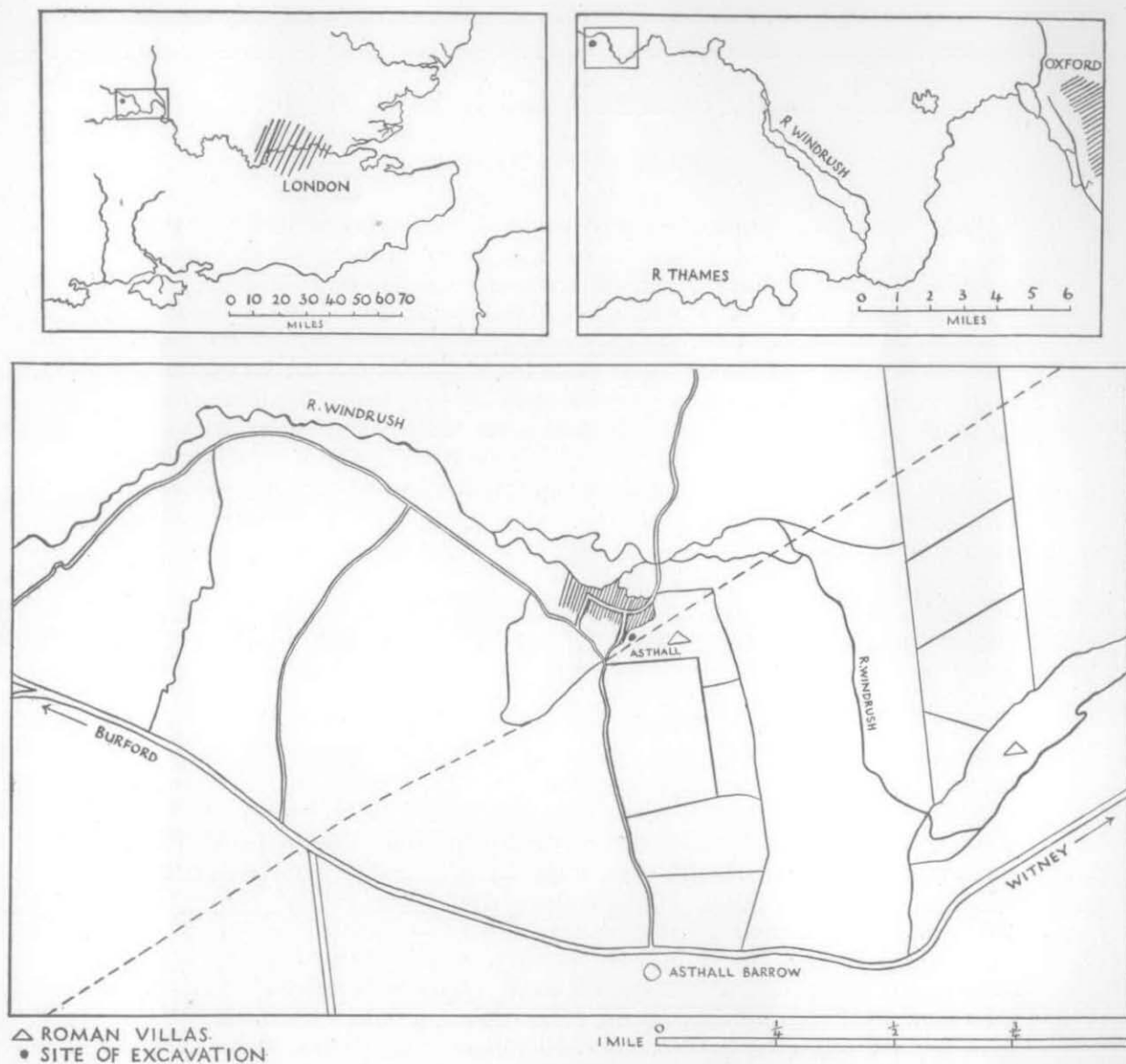


FIG. 10
ASTHALL, OXON.

Maps showing site of excavation

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

A ROMAN SITE AT ASTHALL, OXFORDSHIRE

4½ ft. in diameter, reached the same level in the gravel as Well I, and it is doubtful if it remained long in use.

At the bottom was pottery of Belgic or early first-century type, with later first- and early second-century pottery above it. At 7 ft. from the bottom large loose stones were found with carbonized wood above, which may represent the collapse of the wall or shelter into the well. Above the stones and wood were potsherds, dated to A.D. 120-210 from parallels found at Verulamium and Richborough; they were covered by a foot of sandy soil with no potsherds, above which again was a large quantity of fourth-century types, possibly indicating that the well was then used as a rubbish-pit.

The rubbish-pit, 10 ft. south-east of Well I and the same distance south-west of Well II, and about 1 ft. south-east of the wall, measured 5 ft. by 2½ ft. and was 4 ft. deep, outlined at the lip by large stones bedded on the virgin soil. It contained much pottery ranging from the first century at the bottom to third- and fourth-century wares at the top, also bronze and bone pins, fragments of glass vessels, iron objects, including the broken haft of a knife, and, in the upper part, fragments of charcoal and burnt kiln material.

2. *Floors, Mortar-Pit and Hearths.* The lower floor (I) extended 50 ft. north-west from Akeman Street; its north-west and south-west limits were not determined, but probing to the north-east and a trench to the south-west gave indication that it was laid down for at least 120 feet. It was composed of small stones firmly cemented together with mortar. Slightly to the west of the north-west end of the floor a mortar mixing pit was found, the lower half of which contained slaked lime, and the upper part mixed lime and potsherds of the whole Roman period, suggesting that it was used as a rubbish-pit. A patch of laid flat stones on the same level as this floor and some 5 to 6 ft. north-west of it but detached, probably belongs to it. Some fourth-century pottery was found lying on this patch. Beneath the floor a hearth laid on the old, original turf containing, in its ashes, potsherds of the second half of the first century gave the *terminus ante quem* for its construction; on the floor itself was pottery dating from c. A.D. 120 to the early fourth century, showing that it continued in use for a long period; numerous small objects including a bronze needle were also found here.

Part of this floor was covered by a 6-inch layer of earth, almost sterile, over which was laid a second floor (Floor II) of large stones closely packed and presumably cemented and covered by earth. The full extent of Floor II could not be ascertained, although it was found in trenches for 85 ft. roughly from south to north. To the south-west and north-east not more than 25 ft. was uncovered. Some of the pottery lying on it dated from about A.D. 120-160, while a series lasting into the late fourth century showed that it was in use

simultaneously with Floor I. Almost all the Samian found in the excavation as well as some glass rims, coins and a bronze pinhead with iron shank occurred here. Since no walls were found in connection with the floors it can be assumed that they belonged to an open courtyard connected with a building on Akeman Street and protected by the wall described below.

Another hearth on flat stones, like that under Floor I, was found some 12 ft. to the north-east of Floor II and, though no objects are recorded from it, it is assumed to be of the same date.

3. *The Wall.* A stretch of dry stone walling 2 ft. wide (PL. II, B) was found to extend 100 ft. from south to north with a possible extension to the north, found in probing, for another 20 ft. ; it was much robbed at its southern end. Two detached, very fragmentary and much robbed walls running south-east may originally have joined the main wall. Otherwise no trace of any return or of any wall running parallel was found in the trenches expressly dug for the purpose nor in the many trenches made by builders to the north-east and south-west. It had survived for only 1 ft. in height, and the absence of wall-debris and roof tiles, and the presence of fragments of wattle-and-daub suggest that it represented the foundation of a wattle-and-daub wall. Since it seemed to stand isolated, it is suggested that it formed the back of an open shelter facing the rising slope of the hill to the east. But no post-holes to support even a pent roof were found, though posts might have rested on stylobates or stone 'cheeses' which would leave no trace behind.³ A considerable burnt area, extending 15-20 ft. beyond the robbed southern end, with apparent traces of burnt timbers, may have some connection with the roof-lines of pitched stones, and two lines of firmly bedded rounded pebbles also occurred at this southern end.

Evidence of date was given by a pottery jar and other fragments of A.D. 80-120 which were sealed by the wall, and by the fact that the wall itself had been built across Well I (dug at the end of the first century, see p. 29), which had been filled in for the purpose, and into which the wall had collapsed (PL. II, A). It thus seems that it was built in the second century and continued in use during the next century, numerous second- and third-century potsherds being associated with the wall-debris. The main wall-debris was covered by fourth-century types. It would seem, therefore, that there was a partial collapse in the third century but that the wall remained in use to the middle of the fourth century, possibly in a ruinous state.

Pottery was also found to the west of the wall, where a considerable dump of fourth-century wares occurred, and also to the south-east where a large

³ Cf. Iwerne, Dorset, *Arch. Journ.*, CIV (1947), pp. 55-7.

A ROMAN SITE AT ASTHALL, OXFORDSHIRE

quantity of second-century grey wares was found lying on a thin scatter of burnt debris which itself lay on a two-inch layer of decayed mortar, possibly to be connected with Floor II (above, p. 31).

4. *The Kiln.* A section across the line of the wall at its southern, robbed end, showed evidence of very fierce heat, the earth being very burnt and interlaced with burnt stones and pieces of pottery, as well as large lumps of kiln material. This, coupled with the finding of wasters in Well I, and unfired pottery 25 feet south-east of the wall, seems to indicate the presence of a small kiln.⁴ Unfortunately it was not possible to complete the examination of this area, but as it lies well outside the area of the new houses, it might be explored at a future date.

CONCLUSION

The site was obviously connected in some way with the Roman road known as Akeman Street which ran from Verulamium (St. Albans) to Corinium (Cirencester). The wall and the floors may represent a shelter for traffic or the outbuildings connected with a house or *mansio* yet to be found.⁵ They first appear to have been occupied soon after the middle of the first century A.D., when the hearth under Floor I and possibly the second hearth were made and the wells were dug, though these latter were not used for very long. Other sources of water supply must have been found. At the end of the first or early in the second century, Floor I was laid down and the rubbish pits were in use. Next came Floor II and the building of the wall, part of which collapsed into the well late in the second or early in the third century and was not rebuilt at this point; the site was not, however, then deserted, though occupation appears to have been slight. With the fourth century activity was renewed, especially around Floor I and in the area at the southern end of the wall. Here and elsewhere a thin layer of burnt matter suggests a conflagration which led to diminished occupation though hardly desertion; various late types of pottery and a fairly large number of barbarous radiates and a *minimissimus* indicate some occupation towards the end of the Roman period.

It would appear, in fact, that Akeman Street was in use soon after the mid-first century, was much used in the second century and the early fourth century, and little in the third century. Further investigation may throw more light on the problems of the site.

⁴ A distinctive light orange-red ware, and some unusual sharp-edged splayed-rim vessels found during the excavation may indicate a local pottery industry.

⁵ Tesserae and inhumation burials (unpublished) were found further to the west many years ago by Dr. A. E. Peake.

THE FINDS

A. THE POTTERY

Samian Ware

Most of the pieces came from Floor II, the upper levels and area around Well I and the pottery dump west of the Wall. The preponderant forms noted were Drag. 33, 36, 37 and 38. Five potters' stamps were found of which only two were identifiable: (i) PATER . . . (probably Pateratus of Lezoux, Hadrian-Antonine) on a vessel of Drag. 33 associated with fourth-century ware.⁶ (ii) LLEDV (Malledo of Lezoux, Trajan-Antonine) also on a vessel of Drag. 33, from Floor I.

A number of imitation Samian sherds were found including, among fourth-century coarse wares, many imitations of Samian dish and bowl types.

The most interesting find was from Floor I, —a lead rim fragment—(Fig. 11, no. 1) which fitted as a repair on to a sherd of Ludowici type Tg., mid-second century.⁷ The repair had been carried out with careful attention to the details of the dish's rim shape. Another example of such a repair occurred at Alfoldean on Stane Street in Sussex, apparently the site of a posting station.⁸

Coarse Wares

Over 3,000 sherds were found representing probably about 1,000 different pots. Grey wares predominated; black, buff, red, and creamy white were also found.

FIG. 11.

2. Straight-sided dish of medium coarse black ware: apparently white painted but now with pink and blue patches as a result of burning. Fourth century A.D. Burnt layer.
3. Shallow two-handled dish of medium coarse grey ware with simple clay band, handles attached separately to the pot before firing (Whittington Court Roman Villa, *Trans. Bristol and Glos. Arch. Soc.*, LXXI, fig. 5, no. 3). Fourth century A.D. From burnt area.
4. Rim of mortarium of medium fine off-white ware with short narrow flange developing into a bulbous lip, second century A.D. Floor I.
5. Rim and side of a small jar of thin fine buff/grey sandwich ware with rouletting. Third century A.D.
6. Rim of small beaker, very thin fine white ware, with dark brown slip, fourth century A.D.
7. Rim of small jar, medium fine buff ware. Third-fourth century A.D.
8. Rim of a small jar, medium fine-light red ware. Second-third century A.D.
9. Rim of a small jar or bowl of thin coarse white/pink sandwich ware. Third-fourth century A.D. Floor I.
10. Lid of medium coarse black ware. Floor II.
11. Rim of jar of medium coarse, fine calcite-gritted black ware, flat-topped rim.
12. Rim of jar, widely flaring, of medium coarse, slightly burnished black ware. Fourth century A.D.

⁶ Compare a similar stamp from Stanton Harcourt on Drag. 18/31, above, p. 14.

⁷ Oswald and Pryce. *Intro. to Terra Sigillata*, Pl. LX, No. 1.

⁸ *Sussex Arch. Coll.*, LXIV (1923), p. 103.

A ROMAN SITE AT ASTHALL, OXFORDSHIRE

13. Rim of jar, widely flaring, of medium coarse black ware, pink on outside through burning. Fourth century A.D.

14. Rim of storage jar, thick, calcite-gritted grey ware. First century A.D.

15. Base of jar of light red thick fine ware, decorated by two banded zones of slanting strokes made by a blunt stick. Associated with second-century wares. Well I.

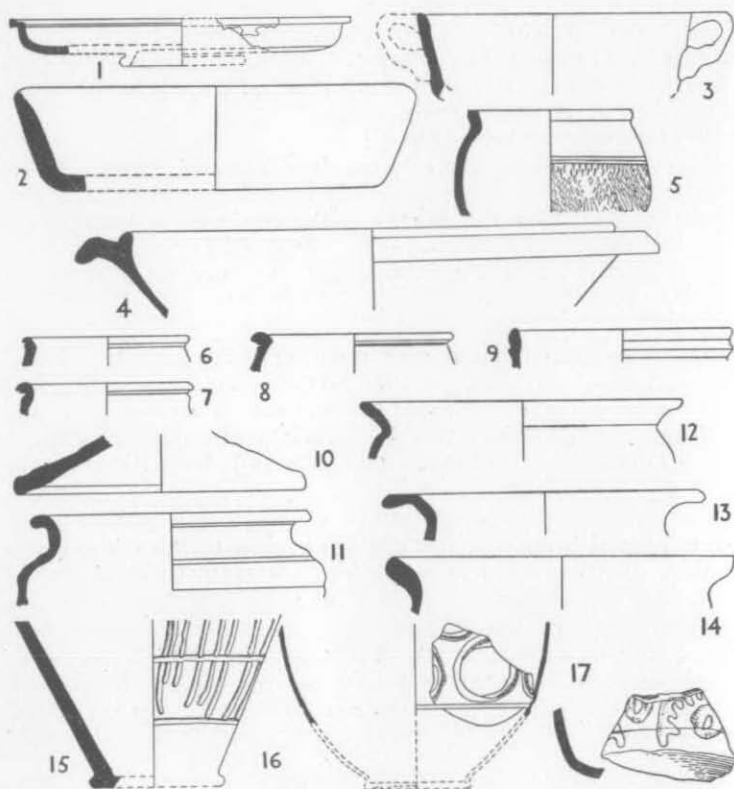


FIG. 11
ASTHALL, OXON.
Samian and coarse pottery
(Note the lead repairs on no. 1)
Scale : $\frac{1}{4}$

16. Side of a bowl of thin fine white ware with raised design in circles of dark yellow clay fired on the pot. Second century A.D.

17. Side of a bowl of medium fine light red ware with a red slip and white-painted decoration. Fourth century A.D. Burnt layer.

P. M. M. COOK

B. SMALL FINDS

Bone

- 1-3. Three fragments of pins, two associated with fourth century pottery from the rubbish pit and one from Floor I.
4. Pin, with simple knob head, roughly carved. Sandy layer in Well II.

Bronze

5. Pin, ornamented with a spiral grooved line terminating in two circular knobs, separated by a grooved ridge; associated with bone pins in the rubbish-pit.
6. Head of a pin, originally with iron shank. Parallels to the heads of nos. 5 and 6 occur in the later levels at Verulamium.
7. Needle, the point broken. Floor II.
8. Brooch, simple "poor man's" type (Collingwood, Group A) first century A.D.;⁹ Well I.
9. A bronze seal found in the upper levels of Well I carried a device of a horned goat, with bar beneath, and surmounted by a leopard's head. Mr. L. F. Salzman, who kindly examined it, thought it to be of eighteenth century date.

Iron

The majority of iron objects were too fragmentary to be identifiable, but they included 3 heavy oval links, possibly part of a horse-harness, from Floor II; two hafted knives, incomplete; a hexagonal plate with a rivet-hole, and 3 smaller rectangular plates, perhaps from a shield; several hooks and fragments, possibly of a Celtic type of latch-lifter; and many nails, especially from the two floors.

Glass

Fragments ranged from very fine yellowish glass to thick blue-green common glass. Few were datable, being mainly rims from small bowls or jars.

Animal Bones

In addition to the skeletons of the five dogs from Well I (see p. 29), the site produced bones of horse, cow, sheep, goat, boar, rabbit and chicken, mainly from the two wells, the rubbish-pit and the area round the shelter. Cow and sheep bones were most numerous.

C. THE COINS.

By C. M. KRAAY

1. Vespasian : *as*, mint of Lugdunum, A.D. 72.
Obv. Hd. r. laur., globe at point of bust. IMPCAESARVESPASIAN
AVGCOSIII
Rev. Eagle with spread wings, standing on globe. S C
RIC 747 *var.* Very worn.
2. Hadrian : *sestertius*, A.D. 119-121.
Obv. Hd. r. laur. IMPCAESARTRAIANVSHADRI ANVSAVGPM
TRPCOSIII

⁹ *Archaeologia*, xcii (1947), p. 142, fig. 7, no. 1.

A ROMAN SITE AT ASTHALL, OXFORDSHIRE

- Rev.* Libertas std. l., holding branch and sceptre.
LIBERTASPVBLICA S C
RIC 583(a). Slightly worn.
3. Antoninus Pius : *sestertius*, A.D. 143-4.
Obv. Hd. r. laur. ANTONINVS AVGPI VSPPTRPCOS[III]
Rev. Fides stg. r., holding corn-ears and basket of fruit.
[IMPERATOR II] S C
RIC 716(a). Very worn.
4. Faustina II : *sestertius*.
Obv. Hd. r. bare, bust dr. [FAVSTINA AVGVSTA]
Rev. Venus stg. l., holding Victory and shield set on helmet.
[AVGVSTI PII FIL] S C
RIC (Ant. Pius) 1367. Very worn.
5. Barbarous copy of Tetricus I : diam. 15 mm.
Obv. Radiate hd. r. IMPTE[]ICVS PIV
Rev. Stg. figure holding sceptre in l. hand and raising r. (Pax?).
No legend.
6. Barbarous copy based on Claudius II, altar reverse : diam. 13 mm.
Obv. Radiate hd. r. (double struck).
Rev. Rectangular pattern : no legend.
7. Barbarous radiate, uncertain prototype.
Obv. Radiate hd. r.
Rev. Stg. figure holding sceptre in l. hand and lowering r.
8. Barbarous radiate, prototype Victory : diam. 11 mm.
Obv. Radiate hd. r.
Rev. Victory moving l., carrying wreath and palm.
9. Constantine I ; mint of Siscia.
Obv. Hd. r. laur. CONSTANT INVS AVG
Rev. VOT in wreath : around, DN CONSTANTINIMAX AVG
XX |
 BSIS*
10. Helena : mint of Trier.
Obv. Hd. r. : legend uncertain.
Rev. Pax stg., holding branch and transverse sceptre.
PA XPV BLICA |
 TRP
11. Constantius II, Caesar : mint of Trier.
Obv. Hd. r. laur., bust cuir. [FLIVLCONSTANTIVS] NOBC
Rev. Two soldiers with two standards between them.
GLORIAEXERCITVS TRS^U

P. M. M. COOK

12. Constantine II, Caesar : mint of Trier.
Obv. Hd. r. laur., bust cuir. CONSTANTI NVS[NOBC]
Rev. Two soldiers with one standard between them.
 [GLORIAEXERC]ITVS
 |
 TRP.
13. Urbs Roma : mint of Lugdunum.
Obv. Hd. of Roma l. helmeted, bust dr. VRBS ROMA
Rev. Wolf and twins ; above, two stars.
 |
 PLC
14. As no. 13, but mint uncertain.
15. Constantinopolis, barbarous imitation : diam. 12 mm.
Obv. Hd. of Constantinopolis l. helmeted ; no legend visible.
Rev. Victory stg. on prow.
16. Constans : mint of Trier.
Obv. Hd. r. diademed, bust dr. CONSTAN SPFAVG
Rev. Two Victories stg. facing each other.
 VICTORIAEDDAVGGQNN
 €
 TRP
17. As no. 16, but emperor and mint uncertain.
18. Constantius II : mint of Lugdunum.
Obv. Hd. r. diademed, bust dr. DNCONSTAN TIVSPFAVG
Rev. Legionary attacking horseman. FELTEMP REPARATIO
 |
 RPLC
19. Constantius : mint of Arelate.
Obv. Hd. r. diademed, bust dr. [] IVSPF []
Rev. Legionary attacking horseman. FELTEMP []
 |
 SCON
20. Uncertain barbarous types overstruck upon a coin of Constantine II, Caesar.
Obv. Barbarous hd. r. Part of original legend]INVSIVNNOBC
Rev. Uncertain type overstruck upon GLORIAEXERCITVS
 (2 standards) type.
21. Barbarous copy of legionary and horseman type.
Obv. Hd. r. [] VS []
Rev. Legionary attacking horseman : traces of legend.
22. Barbarous copy of legionary and horseman type.
Obv. Hd. r.
Rev. Legionary attacking horseman.
 |
 TAO ?

A ROMAN SITE AT ASTHALL, OXFORDSHIRE

23. Valens : probably mint of Arelate.
Obv. Hd. r. diademed, bust dr. [] SPF [].
Rev. Emperor stg. r. holding labarum and dragging captive.
 GLORIARO [$\frac{OF}{?}I$]

24. Gratian : mint of Arelate.
Obv. Hd. r. diademed, bust dr. DNGRATIANVSAVGGAVG
Rev. Emperor stg. holding labarum and shield. GLORIANO-
 VISAECVLI $\frac{N}{TCON}$
RIC ix, p. 66, no. 15.

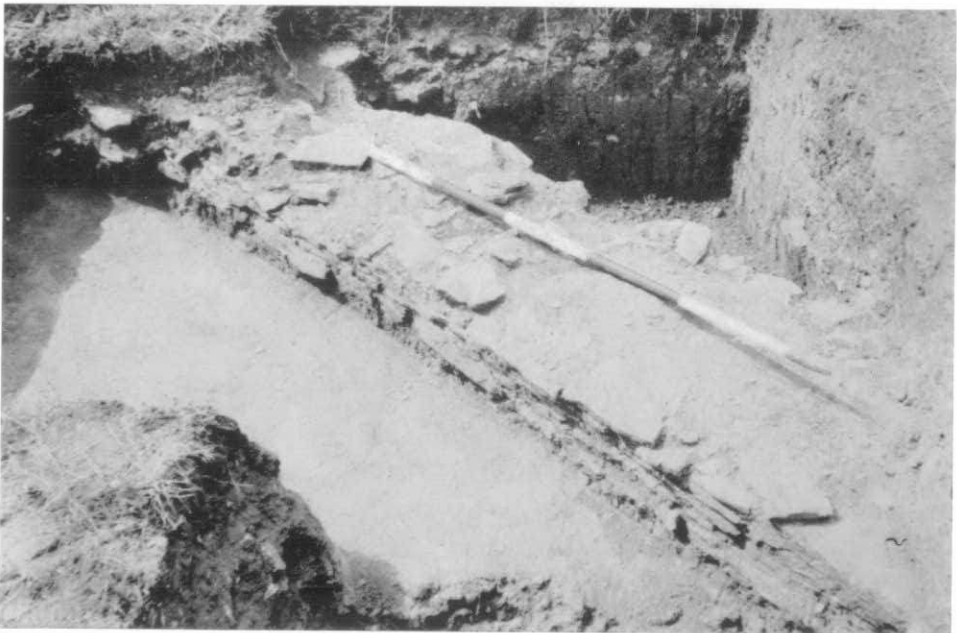
25. Uncertain cut fragment : diam. 10 mm.
Obv. Hd. r.
Rev. Uncertain type.

26. Uncertain coin : diam. 12 mm.

PLATE II



A



B

ASTHALL, OXON.

A. Well I partly excavated and showing collapsed wall (p. 29).

B. The Wall, looking south (p. 32).

Phh. : R. J. C. Atkinson