



<http://kentarchaeology.org.uk/research/archaeologia-cantiana/>

Kent Archaeological Society is a registered charity number 223382

© 2017 Kent Archaeological Society

Archæologia Cantiana.

ON THE RECENT DISCOVERIES OF ROMAN REMAINS AT PLAXTOL, IN KENT.

BY MAJOR LUARD, R.A.

THOUGH the sites of most of the principal cities and stations of Roman Britain are pretty clearly defined, there are some the position of which is still a matter of dispute.

Such is the station called Vagniacæ. The only datum we have for the position of this place is to be found in the second Iter of Antoninus, who there tells us, that from London to Noviomagus was ten miles, Noviomagus to Vagniacæ eighteen miles, and Vagniacæ to Durobrivis nine miles; and though from these distances (Noviomagus being at Hollwood Park, and Durobrivis at Rochester) we may infer that it stood not very far to the south of that part of the Watling Street that lies between London and Rochester, antiquarians are not agreed as to its exact locality.

Gale places it at Maidstone; Horsley finds it at Northfleet. Latterly Southfleet seems to have been generally received as the site of Vagniacæ, and were I now arguing in favour of the latter place, I might advance that the road from Hollwood Park to Southfleet, at the present day, probably on the line of a British way, as it is not very straight, would pass near Farthing Street, near

or through Green Street Green, on the London and Sevenoaks road, through Clement Street, and Green Street Green, near Darent. The term 'street' being generally looked upon as evidence of an ancient way, might not Green Street be considered still stronger evidence?

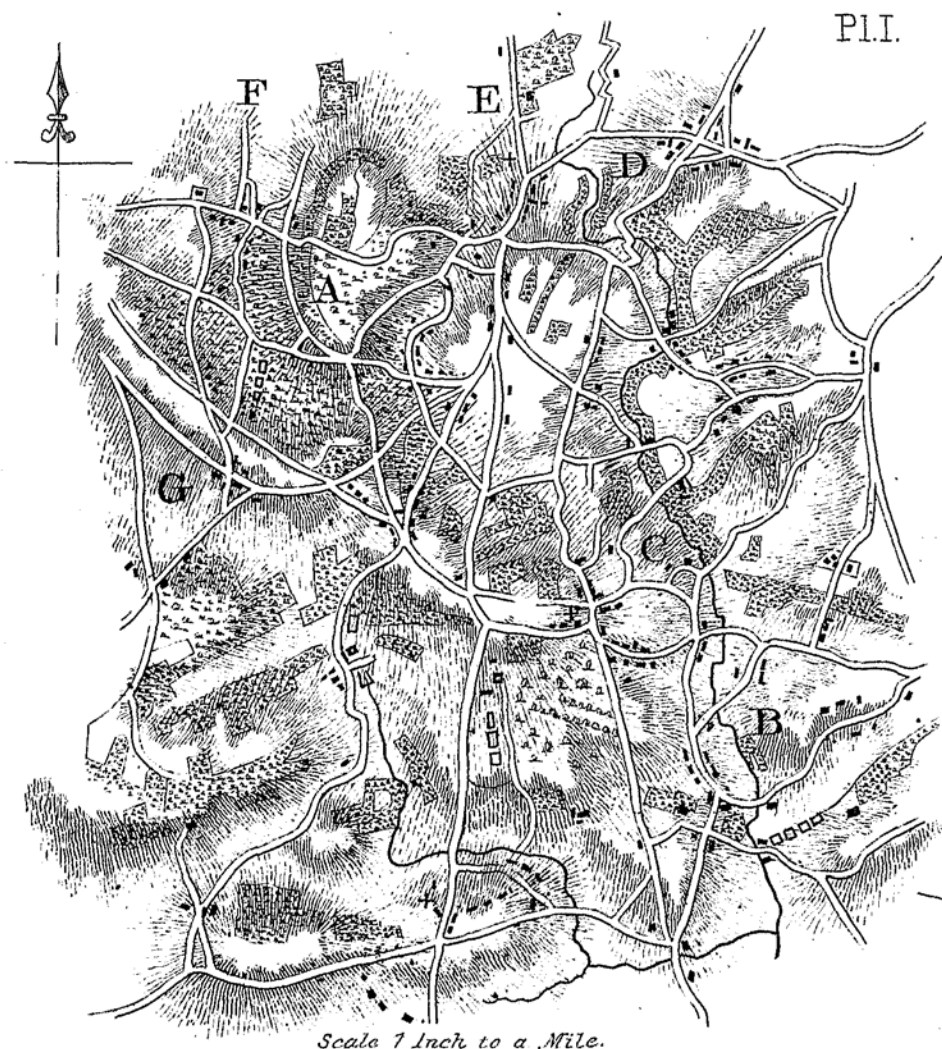
But such is not my present object, especially now that numerous evidences of Roman occupation have come to light in the parishes of Ightham and Plaxtol. By being allowed a little latitude as to distance, we might bring Vagniacæ nearer to those localities: the decision of this point, however, I must leave to those possessed of more antiquarian research than I can pretend to.

Plate I. is a copy from the Ordnance map of the district in question, and I append it, not only to point out to the reader the exact spots of these discoveries, B, C, D, E, F, G, but to show their relative bearing to the Camp at Oldbury, A, which from its size (enclosing an area of 127 acres*) and highly commanding position, must have been a station of some importance amongst the Romans; and we may infer that their occupancy of the Plaxtol valley was the result of the security afforded by the proximity of the strong garrison at Oldbury Camp.

I do not moot the question of its Roman origin; it is probable that it may have been a British earthwork, and the Romans, seeing the advantage of the position, established themselves there.

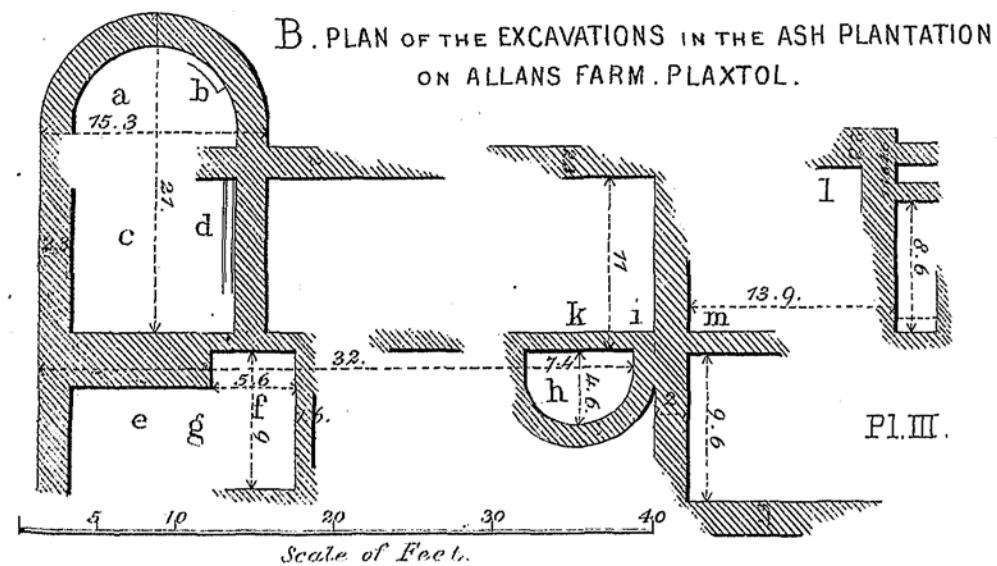
Allen's Farm, B, in the parish of Plaxtol, is the property of Mr. Martin, a respectable farmer of that village, who has taken great interest in these discoveries on his land, and is most anxious to preserve them. He is an antiquary at heart, well deserving the thanks of the Society, and mine in particular, for the kind and liberal way in which he has allowed me to go to and fro over his land, and dig when and where I pleased; and I am as-

* The area of Silchester (*Calleva*) is but 102 acres.

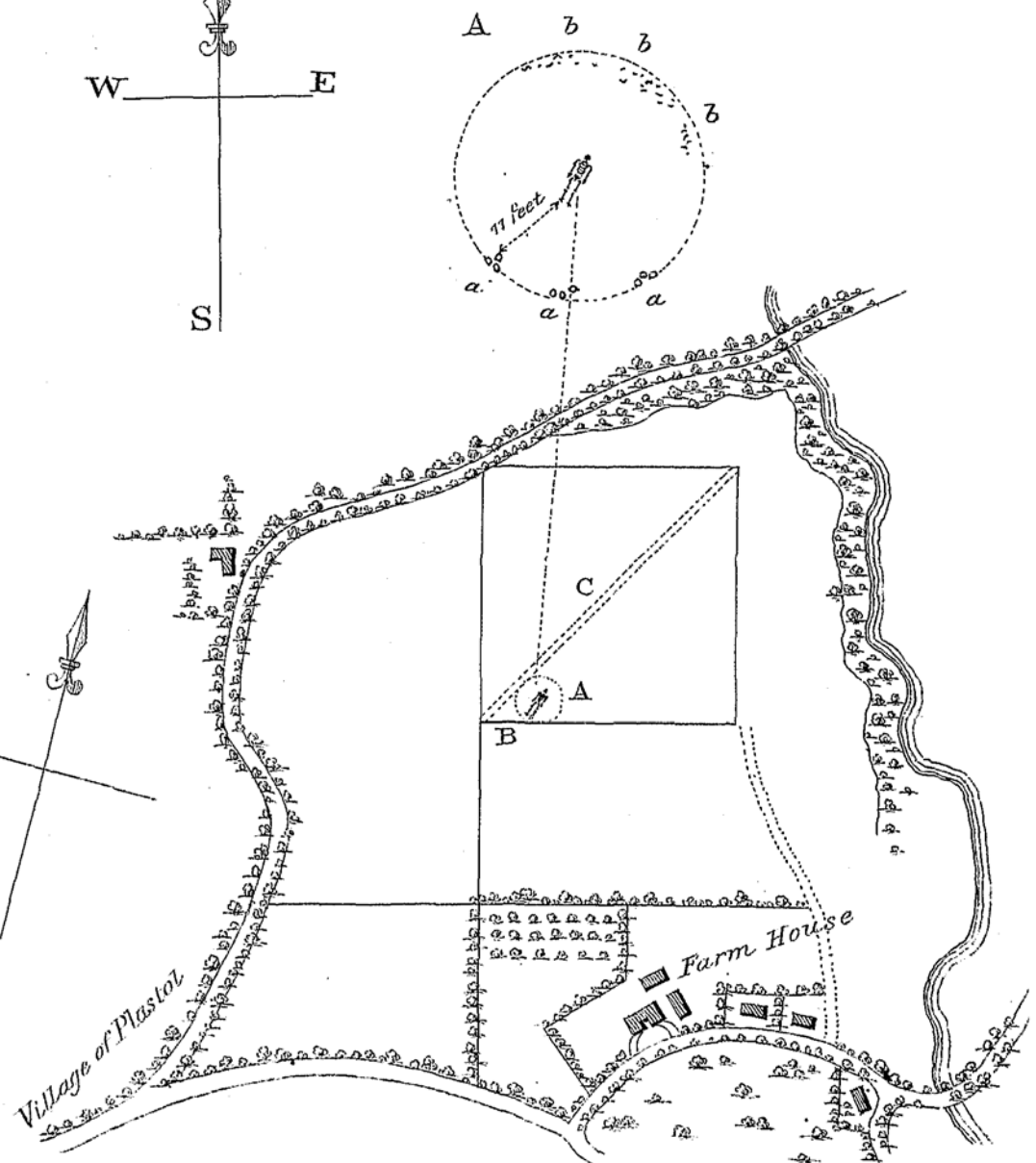
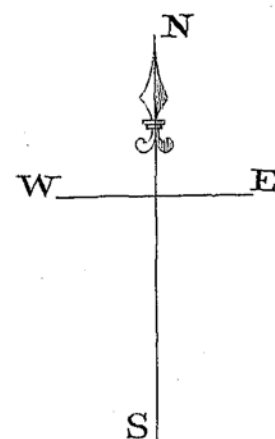


Scale 1 Inch to a Mile.

A. PLAN OF THE DISTRICT BETWEEN OLDBURY CAMP AND PLAXTOL.



PL.III.



PLAN OF PART OF MR THOMPSONS FARM

IN THE PARISH OF PLAXTOL.

sured that we shall find in him and Mrs. Martin able co-operators in our future proceedings.

On that farm there is a small field of about two acres, now in hops. It is bounded to the east and south by arable fields, and to the west by an ash-plantation, which divides it from a stream that, rising in the parish of Kemsing, to the north-west, after running through the parishes of Ightham and Plaxtol, pursues a south-easterly course till it joins the Medway near Little Mill, in the parish of East Peckham. The ground falls gradually from the north-east corner towards the west and south till it meets the stream, and it must have been a pleasant site for a residence in former days, when the valley was better wooded, and the stream unpolluted by paper-mills. This piece of ground had been arable for some years, and in ploughing, the labourers had constantly turned up bricks and tiles, and fragments of pottery; but they saw no difference between these and the rubbish of the present day, that finds its way to the dung-hill and from thence to the field, and no notice was ever taken of the circumstance. At length (1857) Mr. Martin determined to plant hops, and the land had to undergo a process of deep ploughing; when not only was the plough obstructed by stone foundations upwards of two feet thick and four feet deep, but the beautiful bronze statuette of Minerva Victrix, that through Mr. Martin's kindness was exhibited at the local Museum at Rochester, at the last meeting of the Society there, and an inscribed tile, were turned up. Then curiosity was awakened, and in process of time I heard of it, but too late to watch proceedings and take a plan of the foundations, for by the time that I visited the place they had been dug up, and were lying in heaps by the side of the village road awaiting the hammer of the stone-breaker. Still, from the description of the labourers, I was led to believe that the form of the buildings had been rectan-

gular, and their direction parallel to the building subsequently discovered in the adjacent plantation.

I found the ground covered with fragments of Roman tile and pottery of every description. The various materials for making hypocausts* strewed the ground in every direction, and were in such quantities that the use of hypocausts in the buildings that once covered that field must have been very general. Amongst the fragments of pottery were some highly ornamented, of Samian ware: one with the usual subject of a gladiatorial combat, and the moulding so common to that ware. On one spot was found a considerable deposit of remains of bones of animals.

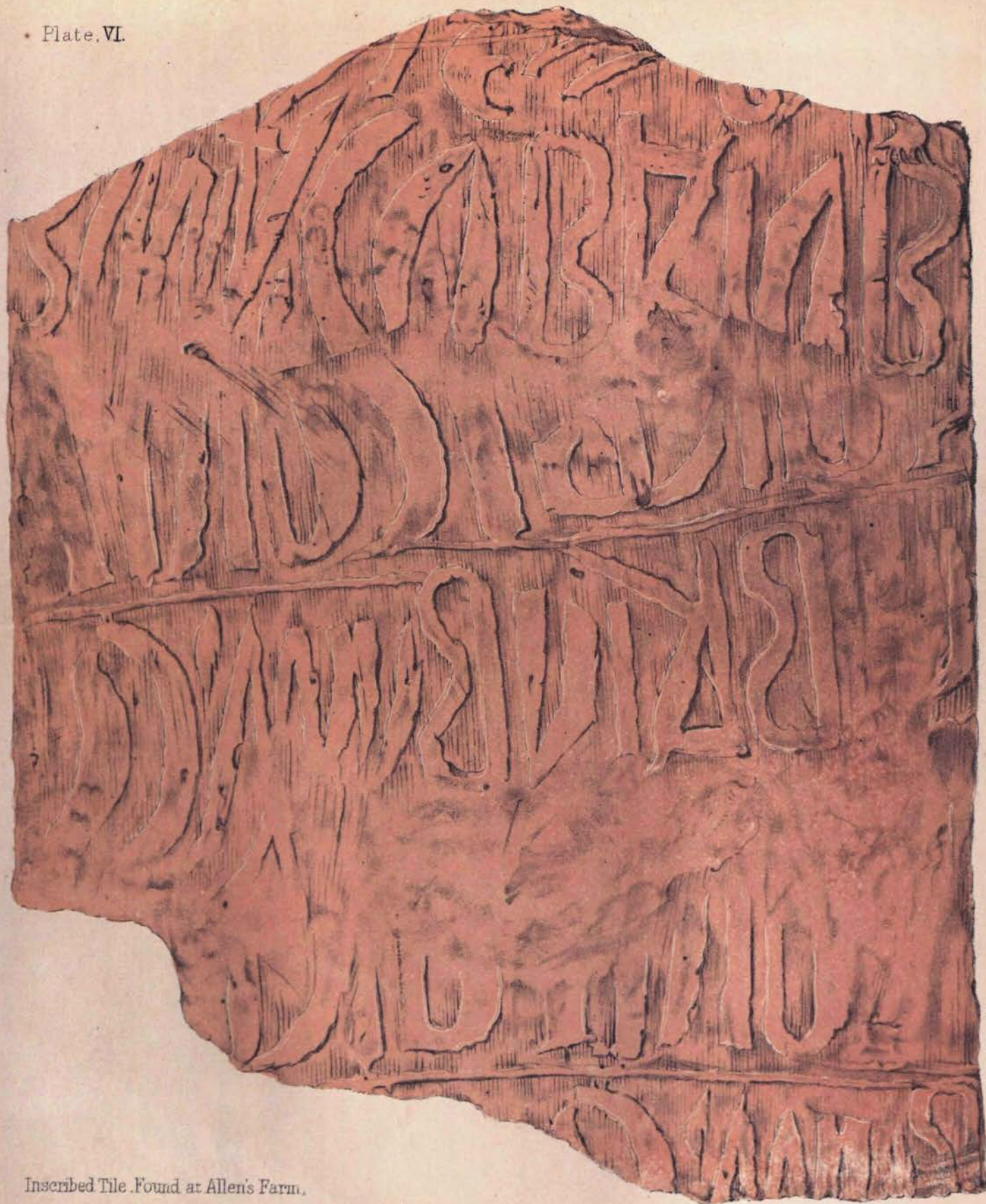
My impression, founded on the information I collected from the labourers, combined with my own personal observation is, that the field had been covered with buildings, either of Roman occupation or of a Roman type.

Of the statuette a lithographic drawing, from a photograph kindly furnished by J. Mitford, Esq., is given in Plate VII. The goddess appears to have been armed with a spear and shield. The height of the figure is 8 inches. The tile, inscribed with the letters CABRIA-BANTI, is represented in Plate VI. and Mr. Roach Smith's remark in his interesting work on the Roman Castrum at Lymne, when speaking of stamped tiles found there, is applicable here, for the formula of all the fragments—and they were many—which we found was unvarying. His observations are well worth perusal, and may help to elucidate the tile before us.

Last spring, on grubbing up some of the ash-stubs in the adjacent ash plantation, Mr. Martin came to more foundations, of which he has kindly allowed me to superintend the excavation. Our progress has been necessarily slow from the closeness of the stubs. I trust,

* For a clear explanation of the construction of tessellated pavements and hypocausts, vide Professor Buckman's 'Corinium,' p. 63.





Inscribed Tile. Found at Allen's Farm.

Full Size.

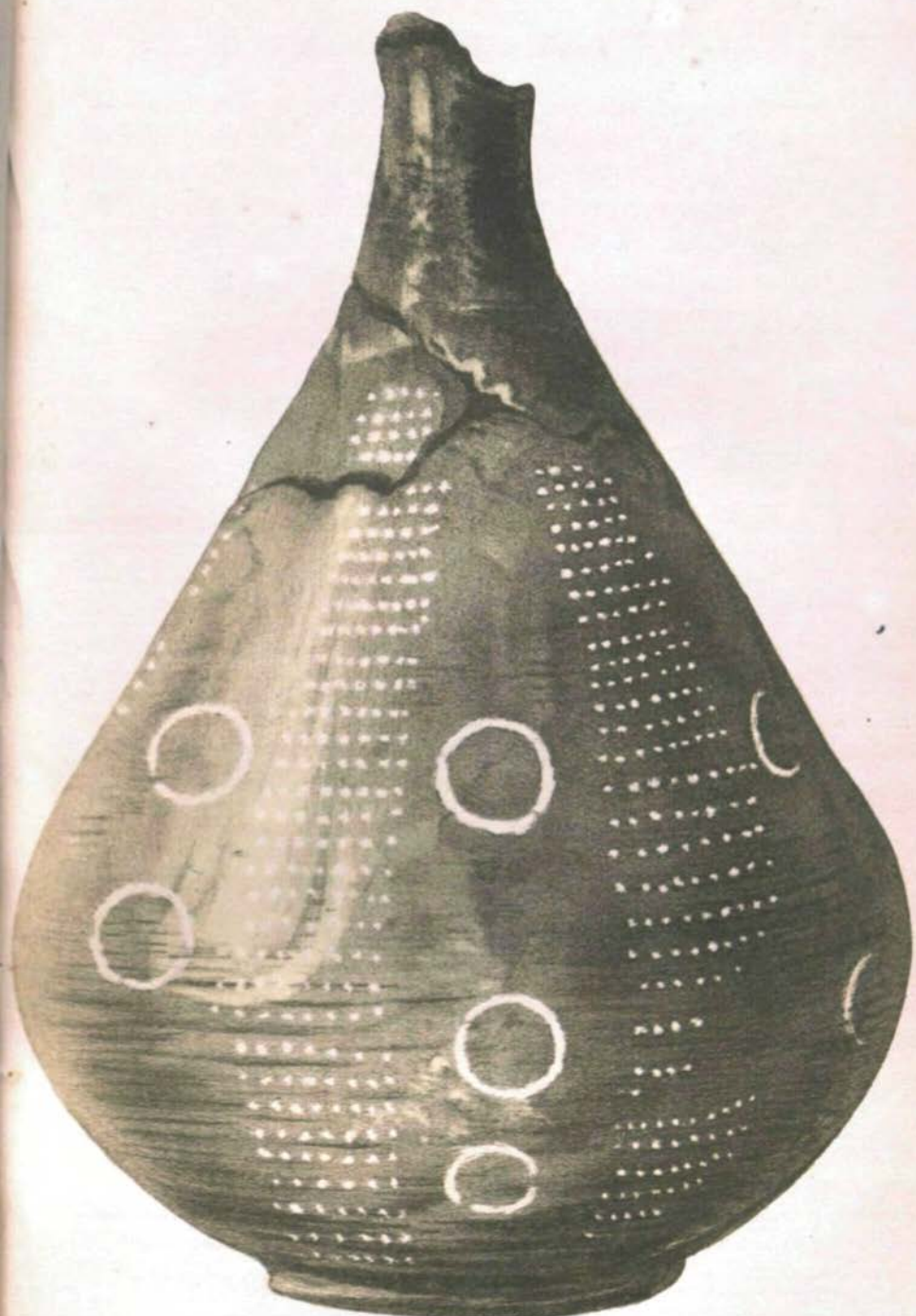
however, with Mr. Martin's goodwill and assistance, that by the next annual meeting of the Society, I shall be able to lay before them a perfect plan of the building, or rather, I should say, of the foundations, and possibly, by analogy, of the construction of the floors. More we cannot hope for, as from the ruthless way in which all aboveground seems to have been destroyed, and the rooms filled up, the hypocausts are all compressed into a confused mass of solid *débris*.

Plate III. shows a plan of the present state of these excavations. The walls are of strong masonry, varying from 1 foot 6 inches to 2 feet 3 inches in thickness.

In the semicircular room, *a*, *b* is a step or seat 1 foot wide, of tile laid in concrete; *c* is paved with stone on the solid; *d* appears to be a drain, it is 1 foot wide, and made of flanged tile; *f* is a room 5 feet 6 inches by 9 feet, paved and faced with tile, the facing being laid in a 6-inch coating of concrete; the floor of this room is 2 feet below the surface of the drain, *d*. May it not have been a bath, and *d* the drain for conducting the water to it? *e* is a mass of brickwork laid in concrete; I conjecture it to have been steps; there has also been brickwork at *g*. The semicircular wall at *h* is built in alternate courses of Roman tile and stone; its present depth is 3 feet 6 inches. On its flat side the wall is of solid stone for 18 inches from the angles and for a foot from the bottom; the remaining space is filled up with concrete, in the centre of which a flue, made of tile, passes through the wall into the room *k*. On opening the flue I found it full of soot, that smelt as if a fire had been but recently burning there. The room *g* is still a heap of rubbish, with the exception of the south-west corner. There are here indications of a hypocaust, and at *i* I came to a paved floor of tile, 32 inches below the present surface; which floor I conceive was for the support of the pilæ. At *l* there were wood-ashes and charcoal,

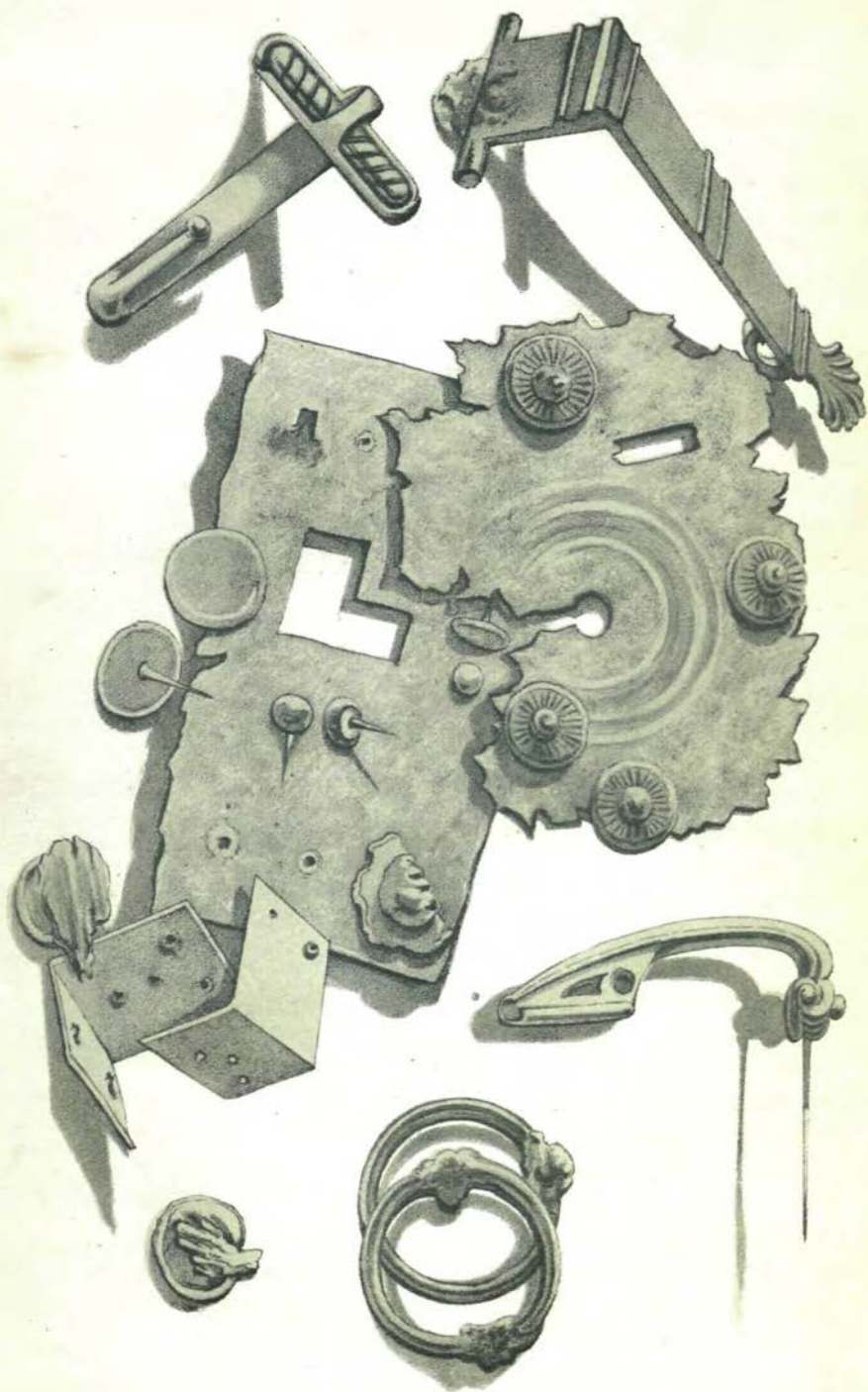
also several broken 8-inch bricks, flanged tiles, and concrete. At *m* I found a mass of brickwork, consisting of four layers of tiles, the surface of which is 18 inches from the present surface. Of the arrangement of the walls at the south-east corner I am still in the dark.

Soon after these discoveries in 1857, a cemetery was found on a farm rented by Mr. Thompson, of Plaxtol, and belonging to Mr. Golding, of East Peckham. Mr. Thompson's labourers, being employed in removing the ragstone that cropped out near the surface, dug up a large urn, 10 inches in height by 38 in circumference, containing a skull. They broke it to pieces, expecting to find gold; what became of the skull I know not, but the fragments of the urn we carried home, and by means of cement have partly restored it. I have several fictilia in the same condition, especially a beautiful bottle made of a kind of biscuit-ware (see Plate IV.). The sight of this induced us to search further, and the result of our labours is shown in Plate No. V., and from the description of one of the labourers belonging to the farm, that there had been a shaw partly covering the place where we were digging, and a large hillock at the very spot, which hillock was levelled when the shaw was removed, it was evident that we had been working on the base of a tumulus, the skeleton being at the centre, and the groups of pottery round the circumference. The body had been carefully laid out, with the head to the north-by-east. There was not a vestige of arms or ornament, and from the length of the tibia, which I measured at the time (but my note of which I have mislaid), it must have been a person of short stature, possibly a female. A large, rude, semicircular stone was laid across the breast. The deposits at *a, a, a*, were either entire, or the respective fragments were found together; not so on the other side, at *b, b, b*, where they were broken and dispersed. Doubtless the shaw, having covered the groups on the south



FULL SIZE.

BOTTLE FROM THOMPSON'S FIELD.



FIBULÆ, FOUND IN THOMPSONS FARM.

side, was the means of preserving them ; whereas the rest, extending further into the field, came more under the action of the plough, and suffered accordingly. The articles found consisted of Samian ware of various shapes, black, brown, and red pottery, a glass lachrymatory, two bronze fibulæ, two bronze locks, hinges, clamps, studs, nails, fragments of wood, leather, chipped flints, pieces of glass, etc.

The vases, urns, and Samian vessels, were filled with bones, burnt and unburnt, some apparently of birds and animals.

On digging to the west of the cemetery, we came to the foundations of a wall (Plate II.-B), so close to the deposits of pottery that we concluded the cemetery had been surrounded by one.

We were told that about twenty years ago a paved road (Plate II.-C), about 4 feet wide, or thereabouts, was found running from the tumulus across the field in a diagonal direction towards the north-east.

Fragments of "crops" were described as having been found in or near the sides of this roadway. The hedges have now all been removed, but by pacing, I estimated the original field in which this cemetery was found to have been a square of 100 yards. It is marked C on the Map (Plate I.).

On the spot marked D, Plate I., which is on a farm in the occupation of Mr. Biggs, of Borough Green, about twenty years ago some labourers came to a cinerary deposit. Many of the urns are now in the possession of Mr. Biggs, of Strood, and I was glad to see them at the local Museum, at the late annual meeting of the Society.

An old man at work on the spot at the time of this discovery carried home some of the urns. This act being succeeded by bad luck or ill health, his conscience either pricked him, or he came to the conclusion that it was "no cannie" to have such things in his possession ;

he buried them in his garden, and died soon afterwards, and the spot of their re-interment is now lost.

At E, Plate I., near Ightham Court Lodge, a cinerary urn, about 8 inches in height, was dug up. It was filled with burnt bone and ashes, and had a Samian patera reversed over the mouth. The stamp on the patera is DIVIXI.

Nearer to Ightham church several Roman copper coins have been found. They are now in the possession of Mr. Benjamin Harrison, Jun., of Ightham.

At F, Plate I., is a field belonging to the St. Clere estate. Some years since, Mr. Children, who then held the farm, broke it up to plant hops, when groups of pottery, equidistant, each deposit being accompanied by a glass vessel (lachrymatory), were discovered extending diagonally across the field from the south-east to the north-west corner. Some of this pottery went into the possession of Mr. Evelyn, of Wootton, the possessor of the soil, some to the British Museum, and some Mr. Children took home, where they were converted into toys for the children, and feeding-vessels for the chickens, and between children and chickens but two are now left!

I stated at the beginning of this paper, my conviction that these several spots which I have now pointed out had a relative bearing to the Camp at Oldbury. I trust the reader will consider that opinion not lightly advanced, but rather borne out by the evidence adduced. That there must have been considerable occupation of these parts by the Romans is evident; whether it is sufficient to rob Maidstone of its honour and bring Vagniacæ into the Plaxtol valley, I must leave to the learned in antiquarian lore to determine.