

From the *Transactions* of the  
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

**Notes On the Roman Basilica at Cirencester, Lately Discovered**

by W. J. Cripps  
1898, Vol. 21, 70-78

© The Society and the Author(s)

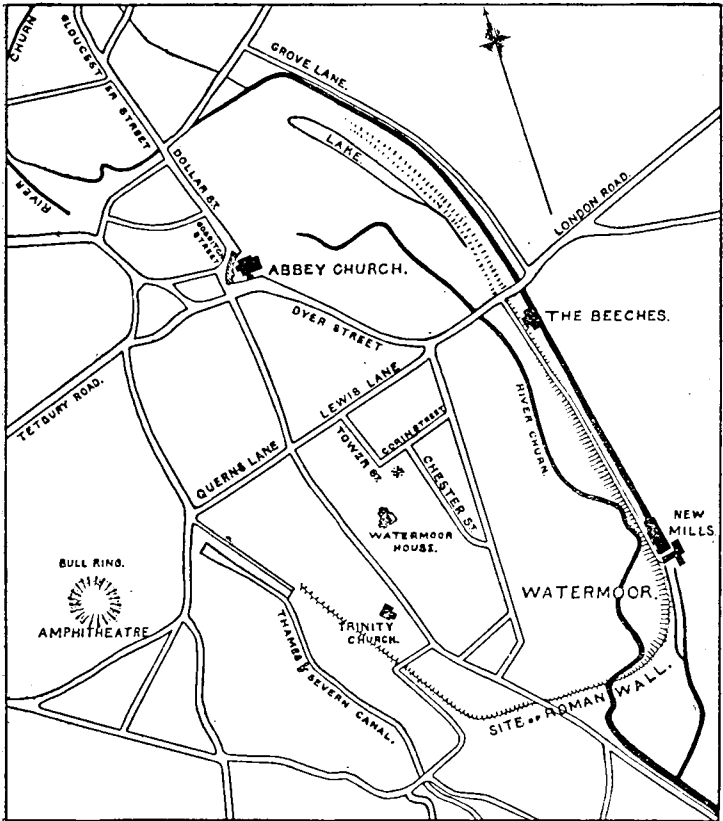
NOTES ON THE ROMAN BASILICA  
AT CIRENCESTER, LATELY DISCOVERED BY  
WILFRED J. CRIPPS, ESQ., C.B.

THOSE members of the Society who attended the Autumn Meeting at Cirencester in 1896 (see *Transactions*, vol. xx., p. 33) will no doubt remember the extremely interesting collection of Romano-British antiquities which were exhibited by Mr. Wilfred Cripps in the museum which he has built for the purpose of preserving the remains of the ancient city of Corinium. The plan of the streets and the arrangement of its buildings has been to a very great extent obliterated by the more modern town which has grown up within the ancient boundaries, and it has been hitherto only possible to conjecture where the forum and the centre of the Roman city was situated. At Silchester, on the other hand, where the site has never been inhabited since the destruction of the Romano-British city, excavation has been everywhere possible, and the plan and ichnography of a great part of the site has been clearly ascertained. At Corinium the theory which has hitherto been most generally adopted is that the centre of the town was near the church at the crossing of the Bath and Gloucester roads.

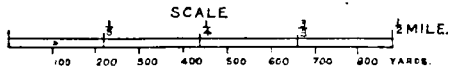
Mr. Cripps, on the contrary, has held that the more probable centre of Roman municipal life was where the road through the town from the east or London gate cut the same great thoroughfare from Gloucester at right angles. This would be at the point where the modern Tower Street leaves Lewis Lane.

It is certain that if any modern street coincides better than another with a main Roman way it is the thoroughfare carried through the town from east to west, from the east gate near the Beeches straight for the Roman Amphitheatre

outside the town on the west, and now known as Lewis Lane and Querns Lane. The main street which once connected the north gate near Powell's School in Gloucester Street with the south gate close to the railway bridge over the Watermoor



\* SITE OF BASILICA.



CIRENCESTER.

Road, does not exist in these days except as far as the parish church, which stands athwart the Roman thoroughfare. Up to this point it is represented by Dollar Street and Godditch Street, but it then crossed the middle of the parish church,

as it now stands, and the Market Place, and went on southwards, where no modern way exists, except for the 150 yards of Tower Street, much further on. It then proceeded across Watermoor House grounds to the south gate. It did not even exactly correspond with Tower Street, but ran down its west side, partly on Tower Street itself and partly on the Nursery premises, which form one side of that street. All this has a great deal to do with the recent discoveries; for it was the fact that the two great crossing ways, as now suggested, would divide the area included within the city walls almost exactly into four quarters, which suggested to Mr. Wilfred Cripps that the forum and great municipal buildings were hidden in that neighbourhood.

At Silchester the *Forum* and *Basilica* lie to the south-east of the intersection of the two great roads, and as some property similarly situated with regard to the point which Mr. Cripps conjectured to be the point of intersection in Corinium came into his hands, he determined to test his theory by excavation, strengthened by the hope that if any results were obtained they would probably be on an even larger scale than at Silchester, which was a smaller city than Corinium.

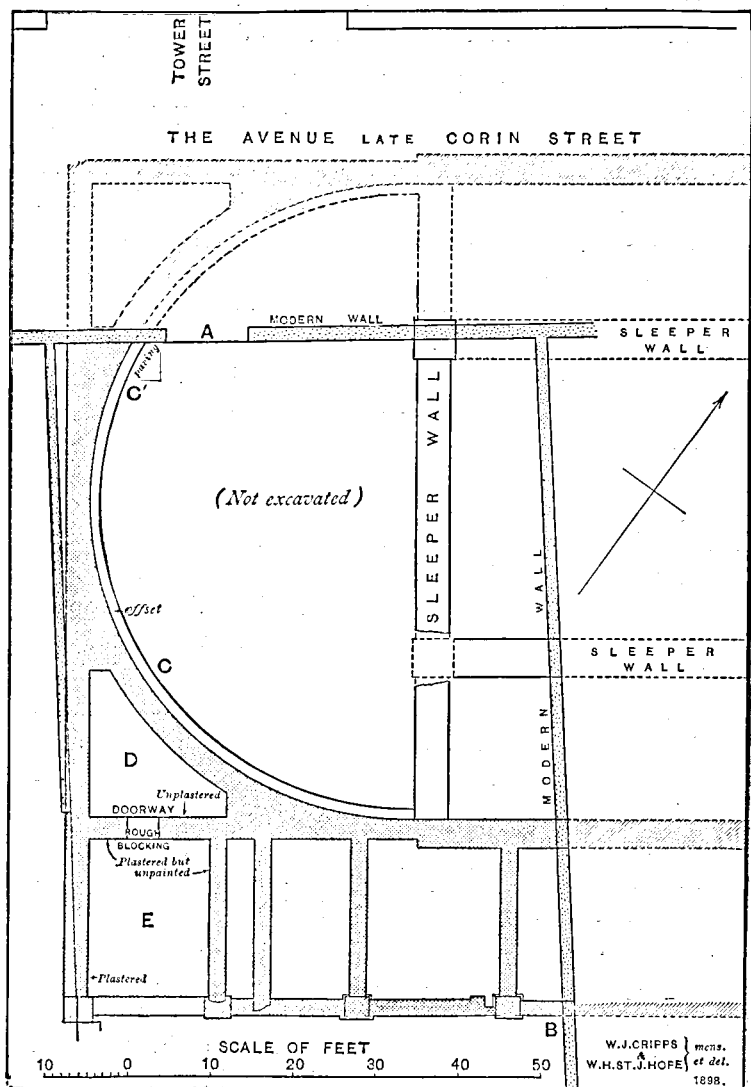
Excavations were accordingly begun in November, 1897, in the garden of Watermoor House, and the accuracy of Mr. Cripps's calculations was proved at once by the finding of the important wall, marked B on the plan, within a few hours of starting work. (See Plate I.)

First one huge stone, like the base of some great column, was found, set in the solid masonry of the wall; a little further on, another, and then a third and a fourth followed, to give an increasing assurance that buildings of consequence had been discovered. These stones are about 3 feet long by 2 ft. 3 ins. or more wide, and are about a yard or more deep, and each stands upon a lower stone some six inches larger in plan and about a foot thick, the two together forming the base apparently of a column imbedded in the wall. Both upper and lower stones are in their places in



PLATE I.

THE BASILICA, CIRENCESTER.  
THE SOUTH WALL, LOOKING TOWARDS THE EAST  
(TOWARDS B • ON PLAN, page 73.)



REMAINS OF THE APSE OF THE ROMANO-BRITISH  
BASILICA AT CIRENCESTER.

the case of the two columns first found, but the upper stone has been removed in the case of the other two columns further west, the larger lower stones alone remaining *in situ*. A curious piece of projecting masonry is built round the most westerly stone, which is the corner of the building, which may possibly have been a guard or curbstone. It was observed, too, that whilst no walls ran south from this great wall, at every pillar a cross wall originated, pointing for Tower Street. The most easterly of these was followed up till at some 18 or 19 feet a second and more massive wall ran parallel with the first, but without columns in it. The spaces between consisted of chambers not very large; and of these the most westerly one, which proved to form the corner of the whole building, showed the remains of coloured plaster on its walls. From this second wall springs a great curving wall, c c', which was found to form a portion of a true circle, and was followed till it left the garden and ran under the Victoria Avenue near the gate A, where it was impossible to follow it farther; but when the sewer was constructed in Corin Street a massive wall was encountered, which had to be removed by blasting, and there is little reason to doubt that this was the north wall of the basilica. At its centre the curved wall bedded itself into a straight wall which formed the end wall of the building, and the junction of these two structures leaves two sort of triangular areas, one next to the chamber E, and the other (not explored) under the footway of the public street. The portions of the building not actually dug out are indicated by dotted lines on the plan. A doorway, roughly walled up with large stones, opened from the chamber E into this small area or courtyard D, in one corner of which was found a heap of Roman oyster shells, the bones of a small dog, and a lot of fragments of coarse earthenware, red, grey and black; in fact, it was a sort of rubbish corner for refuse. On measurement it was found that when completed the curve of the wall formed a semi-circular apse of about 78 feet in diameter. This would give a radius of 39 English feet, which is almost exactly



PLATE II.

PART OF THE APSE OF THE BASILICA, CIRENCESTER,  
SHOWING FOOTING OR OFFSET.



equivalent to 40 Roman feet. The curved wall, as shown in Plate II., rested on a kind of double footing or offset, and on the north side of the curve some slight remains of stone paving were found, no others being discovered anywhere in the building. One large stone, 5 ft. 8 ins. by 2 ft. 6 ins. by 13 ins., was found close to the south-west part of the apse, which may have been the lintel of a doorway.

The next step was to follow up the wall, which was found to run from the south side of the apse towards Corin Street, forming the diameter of this semi-circular structure. It was one of the excessively wide walls which are called "sleeper walls," usually erected not to be carried up as partition walls, but to support columns. Something in the way of columns would obviously be required to support a roof of 78 feet span and great weight, for it was tiled with massive stone tiles of the micaceous sandstone, known as Pennant-grit. Ordinary Roman buildings at Cirencester were roofed with native stone, but for so grand a building as this they went to Yate and Iron Acton for a material that would be of superior quality. Well, to support this roof, and if this really were a *Basilica*, it might be expected that these supports would take the form of two arcades of columns dividing the structure into a nave and aisles. The sleeper wall was accordingly followed up from the south end of the semi-circle just where it finishes into a straight continuation wall running east, and at 17 ft. 3 ins. it was found to disappear and at the same time to throw off to the east an equally strong "sleeper wall." Here was the site of one of the great columns, the base stone of which had been removed, a circumstance which accounted for the disappearance of the wall. After a gap of about five feet it re-appeared, and ran on again northward, the removed base accounting for the interval.

Here was an opportunity for a little speculation. If a south aisle of 17 ft. 3 ins. wide had really been discovered, and if the cross wall running east gave us a width of 4 ft. 6 ins. wide between that aisle and a nave, it would be possible to

set off equal spaces towards the north and to ascertain by a not very difficult piece of arithmetic the width left for a nave. This would of course be 34 ft. 6 ins., on the estimate that the whole building was 78 ft. wide, and that it contained two aisles each of 17 ft. 3 ins., and making allowance for the two sleeper walls, each of 4 ft. 6 ins. wide, which carried the columns and arches separating the aisles from the nave.

It was felt that the credit of the whole exploration depended upon the base of the north column being found in the position expected, or if not, at least the gap occasioned by its removal; and as good luck would have it, at exactly the estimated distance of 34 ft. 6 ins. an immense stone 4 ft. 10 ins. square and 18 ins. thick, weighing by estimate between  $2\frac{1}{2}$  and 3 tons, presented itself, resting on the sleeper wall as level as the day it had been placed there by the Roman architect. (See Plate III.) A second sleeper wall, parallel with that for the south arcade, also started eastward at this great stone, and the problem of the whole building was determined. The Cirencester *Basilica* had, in fact, been discovered, and consisted of a building standing lengthways from east to west, its west end of an apsidal shape and 78 ft. in diameter, and continuing to the east in the form of a nave and aisles, the former 34 ft. 6 ins. and the latter 17 ft. 3 ins. wide, measures according well with the symmetrical rules of Roman architectural work.

This central block was flanked on the south side, and very probably on the north side also, throughout its whole length from east to west by a series of chambers about 18 feet each in length, but of no great breadth.

It now only remained to endeavour to trace out the eastern portion of the *Basilica*. The sleeper walls running eastward were uncovered as far as the limits of the garden allowed, but no other foundations of columns were found. It would appear then that the interval between each pair of columns must have exceeded 13 feet,—a large, but by no means impossible span when the size of the building is considered. The north wall being hidden under Corin Street, and the two sleeper walls mentioned above running under the foundations

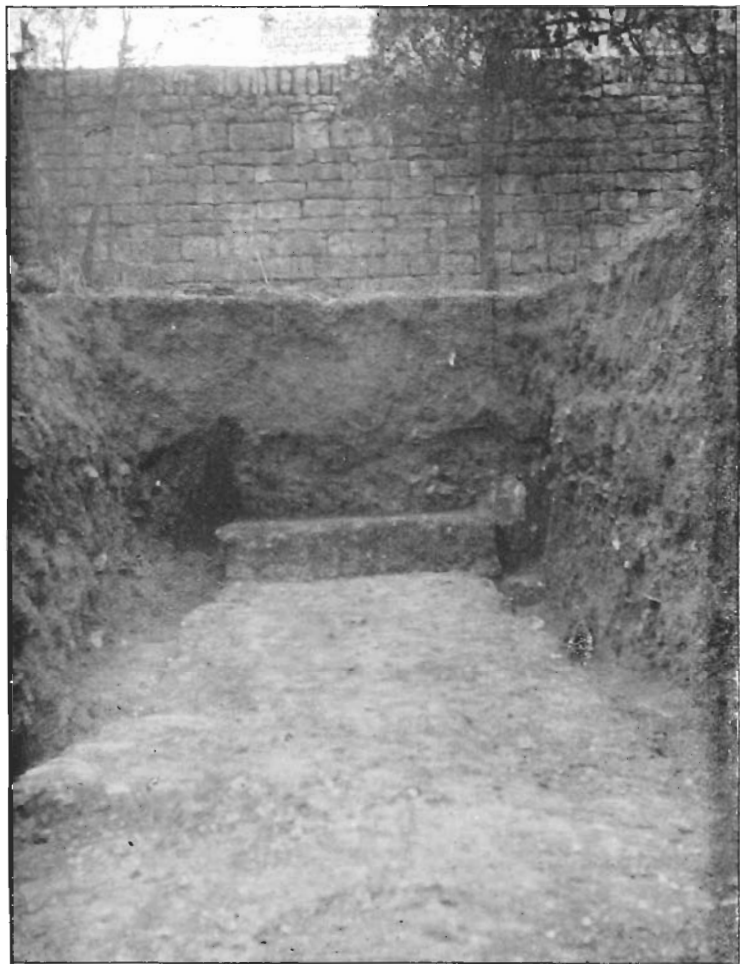


PLATE III.

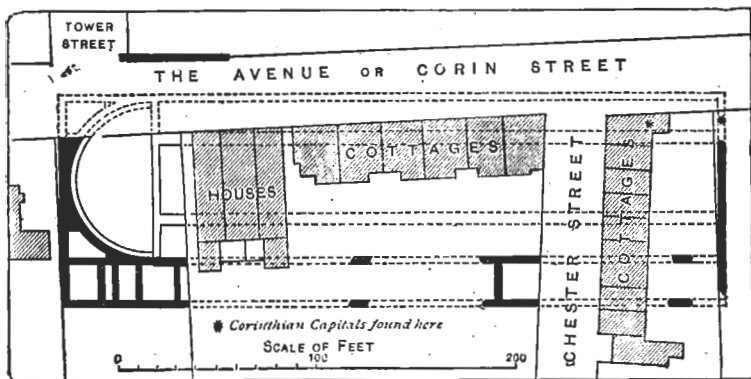
THE BASILICA, CIRENCESTER.  
THE SLEEPER WALL, LOOKING NORTHWARDS TOWARDS  
CORIN STREET.



PLATE IV.

CORINTHIAN CAPITALS FOUND ON THE SITE OF THE  
BASILICA, CIRENCESTER.

of houses and cottages, the only resource left was to search under the gardens of these houses for the continuation of the two main southern walls. Permission was in all cases most readily granted, and the walls were found in the gardens of Mr. Duffin, Mr. Hicks, and Mr. Smith, of Chester Place. There was every sign of their crossing Chester Street, and that they terminate in a north and south wall underlying the western end of the three new houses erected by Mr. G. Crook is almost certain. This would give a length equal to about four times the breadth of the nave and aisles, a very likely Roman proportion, and the fact that two great portions of Corinthian capitals were found just here points to the



PLAN OF ROMANO-BRITISH BASILICA AT  
CIRENCESTER.<sup>1</sup>

probability of the building having been finished with an eastern portico supported on Corinthian columns. One of these capitals was found exactly on the west wall of Mr. Crook's property, and the other was discovered at the corner of Chester Street many years ago, and has lately been presented to Mr. Cripps by its owner, Mr. P. Trouncer, of Chester House. They are figured in Plate IV.

It seems probable that the walls of this *Basilica* had been violently battered down from the outside, and had not

<sup>1</sup> For the use of these two plans of the *Basilica* the Editor is indebted to the Council of the Society of Antiquaries.

perished gradually. The whole centre of the apsidal space was filled some three or four feet deep with a chaotic mass of fallen masonry. Great wall stones lay heaped upon each other, chiefly edgeways, and intermingled with masses of mortar, and this could hardly have been the case if Time had with its gentler hand brought about the ruin of the building by slow decay. Besides these stones and many broken roofing-tiles, the only architectural fragments that were found were part of a slightly tapering oolite column with a maximum diameter of two feet (found near the walled-up doorway), two pieces of the base moulding of a column of some similar diameter, some small portions of mouldings of Purbeck marble, and of a thin strip of Italian marble (*cipolino*) such as would form wall lining. And last, but not least interesting of all, was the finding in the apse of a human eye and eyelid in bronze, a broken portion of the head of some bronze statue of almost more than life size, which indicates that such a statue graced the Cirencester *Basilica*. Great search was made for other fragments of the statue, but unfortunately in vain, and we are left to guess whether it was a figure of Justice or some local tutelary deity of the place. A goddess's face in fine red pottery was also found, and a few coins of no interest or importance.

The position of the *Basilica* being thus clearly determined, it seems now fairly certain that the centre of the Romano-British city was where Mr. Cripps guessed it to be, and in this case the *Forum* would lie to the north-west of the *Basilica*, and would fill the space between Corin Street and Lewis Lane. It is greatly to be hoped that some fresh discovery may absolutely settle this interesting point.

The only open land forming part of the site of the suggested *Forum* is the garden attached to Chester House; and it may perhaps be hoped that its owner will some day undertake an investigation which will be of great interest and importance, *not* only to Cirencester and the County Archaeological Society, but to the archaeological world.