

A Roman Coffin found at Kelston, nr. Bath

BY MARJORIE CROOK, M.B., CH.B.

ON October 2nd, 1945, Mr. Bees, the foreman to Messrs. J. Perkins & Sons, while digging a trench in a field near Kelston, came upon what proved to be the capstone of a Roman coffin. The site was a grass field, which sloped steeply downwards from south to north, on Mill Farm, part of the estate of Capt. W. Neeld.

The exact position was lat. $51^{\circ} 24' 31''$ N. ; long. $2^{\circ} 25' 30''$ W. (6" O.S. Map, Somerset, Sheet VII S.E.).

The capstone was in five pieces when found, but was further broken up by the workmen during removal, as they did not at first realise its significance. The five pieces were not arranged on the coffin in what was considered to be their original position. The thickness of the capstone varied from $3-4\frac{3}{4}$ in. The edges of the upper surfaces of some of the pieces showed tooling, and a funnel-shaped depression about 1 in. in diameter almost pierced one piece.

The coffin itself lay north to south—the head being towards the south. It sloped downward from head to foot, but not so steeply as the ground, so that while the rim of the coffin at the head was 2 ft. below ground level, the rim at the foot was only 10 in. below ground level.

The measurements of the coffin, which was round-headed, were as follows :—

External length at rim	- - - -	6 ft. $4\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Internal " " "	- - - -	5 ft. $11\frac{1}{2}$ in.
External width at shoulder (maximum)	- - - -	2 ft. $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Internal " " "	- - - -	1 ft. $6\frac{1}{2}$ in.
External " " foot	- - - -	1 ft. 1 in.
Internal " " "	- - - -	9 in.
Width of rim at head and foot (average)		2 in.
Width " " " sides	- - - -	$3-3\frac{5}{8}$ in.
Internal width of floor at shoulder	- - - -	1 ft. 4 in.
" " " " " foot	- - - -	$6\frac{1}{2}$ in.
" depth at head	- - - -	11 in.
" " " foot	- - - -	$10\frac{1}{2}$ in.

The walls of the coffin were vertical at head and foot. The sides were slightly concave, and the coffin appeared somewhat asymmetrical. A crack extended right across the coffin, and part of the rim of the

PLATE 4.



A Roman coffin found at Kelston, near Bath.

right-hand side was fractured, but all the pieces were in their correct position. The coffin was of Bath freestone.

On removing the pieces of capstone, the coffin was seen to be filled with yellowish clay to within 3 in. of the rim. Protruding through the clay was the right side of a human skull, unfortunately broken by a pickaxe during removal of the capstone. The yellowish clay was very stiff, and only contained a few very small stones, indicating that it was probably washed in. The skeleton measured 5 ft. $1\frac{1}{2}$ in.

The top of the skull was several inches from the head of the coffin, but the bones of the feet were right against the lower end. The head was turned towards the left side.

The spinal column stopped short at the level of the 6th dorsal vertebra, and the vertebræ below it were displaced; for instance, one

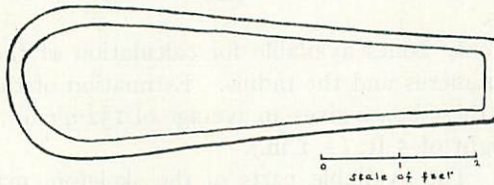


FIG. 7.—A plan of the Roman Coffin found at Kelston, nr. Bath.

lumbar vertebra was found on the left elbow and two more between the legs. This displacement, together with the positions in which the pieces of capstone were found, indicates previous disturbance.

Apart from the skeleton remains, traces of charcoal were found, and on the floor of the coffin was a thin layer of grey material, representing the organic remains of the body. At the extreme foot was found a quantity of iron nails which had been clinched over. These were probably from sandals and are similar to those found in other Roman coffins in the district.

Our thanks are due to Capt. Neeld, Messrs. J. Perkins & Sons, and Mr. Bees for their helpful co-operation, and to Dr. Baxter, who kindly examined the bones.