

The Roman Temple on Brean Down, Somerset

An Interim Report on the 1957 Excavations

By

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Brean Down is a limestone headland projecting into the Bristol Channel on the south side of Weston-super-Mare Bay. The Roman temple is on the eastern of the two summits of the Down, 265 ft. above sea level. (N.G.R., ST 29355885.) The first indication of the presence of the temple was the discovery of fragments of Romano-British pottery scratched up by rabbits. A small excavation in 1956 proved the existence of a building, and the full excavation of this was begun in 1957, when about four weeks' digging was carried out. It is hoped to complete this work in the 1958 excavations.

Full acknowledgement to those who have helped with the work will be made in the final report. I must, however, record my indebtedness to the Axbridge Rural District Council for their help; to Weston-super-Mare Borough Council, for their assistance which included the provision of two workmen, tools, equipment, and other services, and to Messrs. J. Moore & Co. for the loan of a hut. On August 16th, 1957, the excavations were photographed from the air by a Bristol Sycamore helicopter. This was probably the first occasion on which such photographs have been taken from a helicopter in Britain. We are much indebted to Bristol Aircraft Limited (Weston-super-Mare) for providing us with copies of these photographs. Finally, the interest shown in the excavations by members of the public was most gratifying and their donations helped to meet much of the cost of the excavation.

The natural approach to the temple is from the east. The Roman trackway to it probably ran up a narrow gully which runs obliquely up the south face of the Down. This gully crosses the modern tarmac road nearly half-way up and reaches the crest of the ridge just east of the modern coast-watcher's hut. From this point the temple could have been seen directly ahead. The gully is probably too steep and narrow for carts, but would be quite passable for pack animals and men on foot, or even perhaps for horse-litters.

The actual summit of the hill is roughly triangular. The remains of the temple are at its broad eastern end, with a Bronze Age round *barrow*, or burial mound, T 343, immediately to the south. To the west and north

of the site low banks mark off old fields, showing that the summit of the Down has been cultivated in the past.

So far three Roman buildings have been found on the hill top (see *Plan, Fig. 25*). The principal building is a Romano-Celtic temple. This has a central, square *Cella* or sanctuary, surrounded by a verandah and entered through a porch on the south-east side. The front part of the

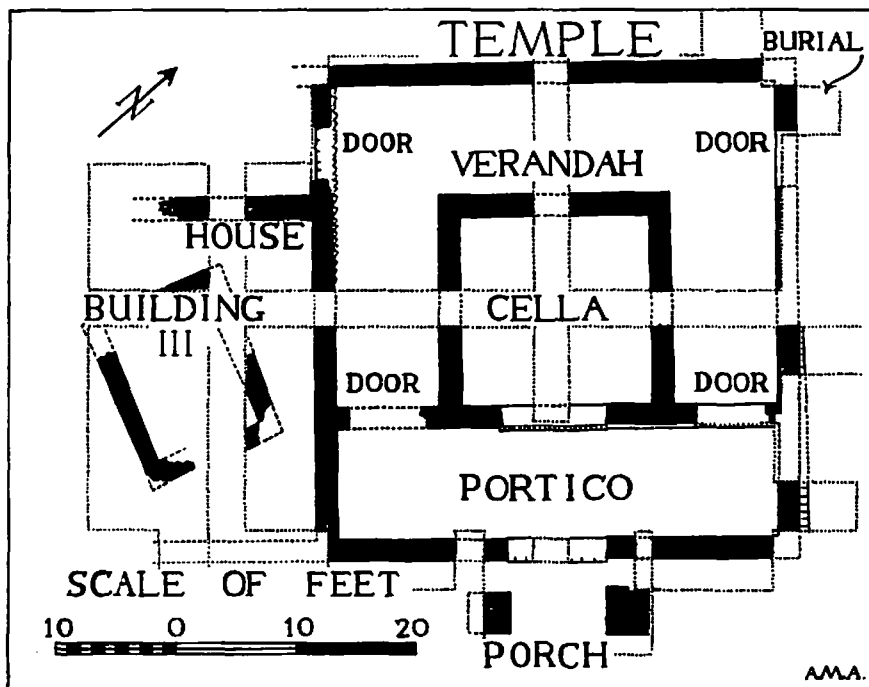


Fig. 25.—The Brean Down Roman Temple. Plan of the 1957 excavations.

verandah (*Portico*) is separated from the rear by two doors, and there are two more doors in the side walls of the verandah. On the south-west side of the temple is accommodation for a priest, built as part of the original temple and probably consisting of two rooms. This part is not yet fully explored. The walls of the buildings are of Carboniferous Limestone, quarried on the hill. One of the quarries can be seen 75 yards north of the site. The roof was covered with Pennant Sandstone tiles, perhaps brought from the Somerset coalfield, or from near Clevedon. Bath freestone, as well as Lias Limestone, possibly from the Uphill-Hutton area, was used for arched windows, and hipped roof junctions were finished with Bath stone coping. The floor of the *Cella* was made of hard pinkish concrete,

but the verandah had no more than a layer of limestone chippings to level up the floor on the sloping ground.

The outer walls of the temple were covered with a thick layer of stucco, inside they were decorated with painted plaster of which a great quantity was found. The jambs, sills and lintels of the doors were probably made of wood and covered with red plaster moulding. The 8-ft. wide main Portico and Cella doorways are splayed to allow the two leaves of the doors to be folded back. Door nails more than 3 in. long show that very strong doors were fitted.

At the west corner of the Cella was found a large block of fallen masonry, which included part of an arched window with a span of about 5 ft. This

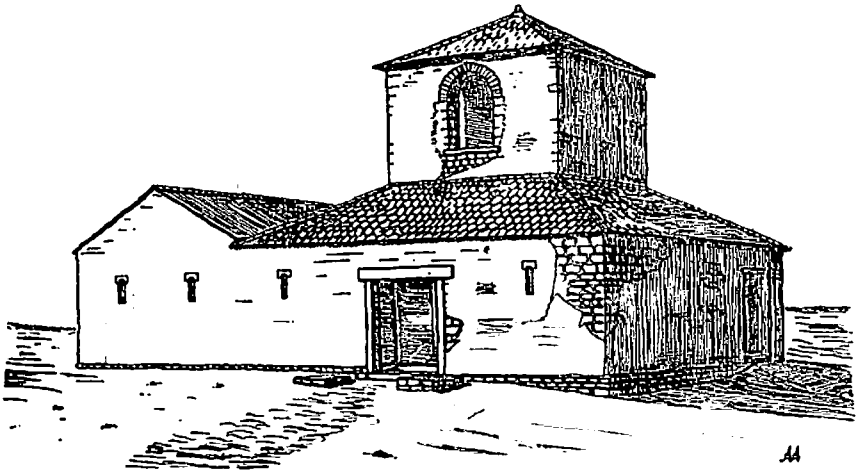


Fig. 26.—Imaginative reconstruction of the Brean Down Roman Temple viewed from the south-east.

must have fallen from the north-west wall of the Cella and it gives valuable information, unique in Britain, about the architecture of this kind of temple. No window glass was found so that it is probable that the windows were fitted with wooden shutters. The reconstruction drawing (*Fig. 26*) gives some idea of the probable appearance of this building. Some of the features shown are, naturally enough, based partly on guesswork. We are not yet sure of the exact shape of the porch. The verandah wall may have been partly open, though on a windy site such as Brean Down, a closed verandah seems more sensible. The temple is shown at its minimum likely height, the Cella wall may have stood about 25 to 30 ft. above floor level.

The finds from the temple included a small amount of Romano-British pottery of fourth-century A.D. type. Also found were about 150 Roman coins ranging from Faustina II (A.D. 145-6) to Valens (A.D. 364-78).

Ninety-two of these coins belonged to the period A.D. 337-61, and four coins found in the material of the verandah floor suggest that the temple may have been built soon after A.D. 340. The popularity of this shrine seems to have lasted for about twenty-five to thirty years, after which it was allowed to fall into decay. Nothing has been found to give any clue to the deities worshipped or rites practised, but pagan temples of this plan are common throughout the Roman period in Britain and Western Europe, and are thought to be derived from Celtic, pre-Roman, wooden temples.

The nearest known Roman temple is at Pagans' Hill, Chew Stoke, south of Bristol. This was excavated some years ago by Mr. P. A. Rahtz and found to be octagonal in shape and about 65 ft. across. It had been built about A.D. 300 and probably continued in use until the end of the fourth century. At Pagans' Hill there was, in addition to the temple, a large building or buildings, which probably included accommodation for visitors to the temple. The most elaborate temple settlement of this kind was that at Lydney in Gloucestershire, which was excavated thirty years ago by Sir (then Dr.) Mortimer and Mrs. T. V. Wheeler.

The third building at Brean has not yet been explored. It was built in the middle of the ruins of the priest's house, and its position suggests very strongly that both the temple and priest's house were shapeless mounds of rubble when the third building was raised. Both the temple and the priest's house seem to have been robbed of building material for the purpose. This third building has produced the latest Roman coins from the site, one of the Emperor Valentinian II (minted A.D. 383-92), and one of Theodosius I (minted A.D. 388-94). Both these coins were worn, so that the occupation of this building may date from about A.D. 400 or even later.

The skeleton partly uncovered just outside the north corner of the temple was not buried until the temple was in ruins. This burial is another indication that the occupation of the site continued after the end, in A.D. 407-10, of official Roman rule in Britain. Roman coins of the fourth century are also said to have been found in the hill fort on the east end of the Down, now occupied by a derelict army camp. It remains to be seen whether this fort is in any way connected with the Roman or sub-Roman occupation of the temple site.

Finds from the 1957 excavation are on display in the Museum at Weston-super-Mare.