

Outskirts of Stroud from the road up to Minchinhampton Common.

A BURIED TREASURE

by Michael Brown

THE WOODCHESTER PAVEMENT IS TO BE DISPLAYED FOR THE FESTIVAL



STROUD, a busy Gloucestershire industrial town, disguises its industry by straggling pleasantly over the western face of the Cotswolds; from Minchinhampton Common—a summit of short turf and whatever wind is blowing, and magnificently spacious—it presents a study in human activity. If you stand up there looking north towards Gloucester, Woodchester lies below on your left hand.

We dropped out of the wind's buffetings by descending one of the steep lanes to A46; turned left through Nailsworth and left again towards Tetbury, in order to sample the surroundings, and reversed our tracks high above the lake at Balls Green.

It is splendid country, hilly and wooded. The cottages are grey, and if they lack the yellowing of the stone elsewhere in the Cotswolds they are still a mightily refreshing change from home counties red brick (which is none the less likeable). Before we reached Stroud we diverted to the left for Woodchester, along a narrow lane in which the 1¼-litre M.G. fits to a nicety (overall width 4ft 11in—bless you, Abingdon). The problem of parking outside the Rectory called for some judgment, and your correspondent—to borrow that felicitous expression from Printing House Square—faced the dilemma of the Rectory door, for a card pinned thereto read "Back shortly—Rector." Was the Rector out, or had he returned and forgotten to take the card down?

Things Long Ago

My guess proved correct, and the Reverend H. D. Woolcott took me into a sunny south room, where, inside five minutes, we were back across the centuries. But wait; come with us another couple of hundred yards down the road from the Rectory, into the old churchyard.

It is a sad little square of rough and yellow turf. Ancient tombstones throw sharp shadows when the sun beatifies the soil; two Scots pines and some columnar yews are there to grieve with the winds of winter. Fragments of the old church remain, one a Norman arch of perfection in a semicircle, the other graced with a reddish brick amongst the stone that immediately strikes the eye as outlandish. So it should; it is 1,800 years old and is the key to the

rough square shape that is imprinted on the turf of the churchyard. Two feet under that turf lies what has been described by antiquarians as probably the finest Roman tessellated pavement in the world.

One is conscious of shame that such a treasure should lie buried, and the fact that it is being opened up for Festival year—the first time since 1935—adds to the feeling. As I studied the beautiful engravings in the volume by the original excavator, Samuel Lysons (1796), I thought of the South Bank Festival site with its Skylon and coloured balls, and they seemed suddenly tawdry by comparison with the Roman half-inch *tesserae* buried below the Gloucestershire soil. It is disgraceful that such a work should not be permanently displayed. Money flows like water on foolhardy projects these days. How much would it cost to reconstruct the covered hall of the Woodchester villa, of which the pavement was the floor, and to maintain it for permanent exhibition? Is not this something for the Office of Works, or the National Trust?

The great square of nearly fifty feet has not survived undamaged. Whereas the poor were content to lie shallowly, the rich in past centuries insisted that their family corpses should rest more deeply, and there are holes where the gravediggers plunged through the pagan beauty. Yet a wealth of detail remains, as the photographs show. The border is a wide labyrinth, fret-edged with a key pattern and plaited braidwork (I quote A. A. Laporte Payne, M.A.), within which are twenty-four compartments about the centre space. The central square, except for the spandrels at the corners, is occupied by a series of concentric circles, forming the principal design. The outer circle is of Vitruvian scroll, proceeding from a mask of Pan. The middle circle contains various beasts (originally twelve), of which the lion, tigress, stag, leopard, bear, gryphon, horse, boar and lioness have been identified. The elephant has been destroyed. Birds and a fox are depicted in the inner zone—peacock, dove, duck, hen and cock pheasant. The cock pheasant is shown scratching his head, and the porch of the Rectory is floored by a facsimile of this section. And very beautiful it is, too.

The central design was an octagonal compartment, the south side of which was open to admit the central figure, Orpheus, playing the

Originally printed in *the Autocar*
magazine April 20, 1951

lyre. The legend came originally from Greece, and was much favoured by artists for mosaics, especially in Britain, perhaps, says Laporte Payne, because the design introduced strange beasts and a form of nature worship.

What are the constructional details of this work, no doubt done by British slaves, in those far days, for the British citizens of Rome who were almost undoubtedly the owners of the villa? There were a million and a half *tesserae*, about half an inch square, of local stone and fine brick laid in a rough state and then highly polished. The cubes were set in hard cement laid upon a coarser *nucleus* eight inches thick. Undemeath is a *substratum* of gravel, three feet in depth, upon a foot of rubble. Several flues, large enough for a man to crawl through, crossed under the pavement and communicated with box tiles placed in the walls.

There are other, coarser, mosaics remaining of the villa, which was enormous, much greater than that at Chedworth, and, of course, much of interest has been found at various times. A particularly beautiful statue of the goddess Luna, with a sacrificial bull at her feet, is in the British Museum, as is a part of a group of Cupid and Psyche. But the pavement itself is the attraction this Festival year, and as a result of the keenness and enthusiasm of Mr. Woolcott—a young ex-R.A.F. chaplain—there is no doubt that visitors to Woodchester are going to find that the most has been made of the display. As a measure of British culture, not yet submerged in the tangential splashing of the Later Distortionists and Cacophonists, it may be recorded that, in 1935, 30,000 visitors came in five weeks.



Pavement detail. Note the loving cup (left), reclining figure, Vitruvian scroll and the feet of the gryphon.

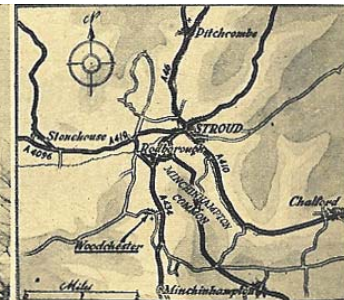


Animals in mosaic: Stag, tigress, gryphon, leopard; also the cock pheasant, scratching its head.

The opening ceremony will be performed by the Duke of Beaufort and the Lord Bishop of Gloucester at 3 p.m. on July 10. The pavement will be on view until August 18, daily from 10 a.m. until 8 p.m., and on Sundays 2 p.m. until six. Opening day will cost 2s 6d, other days 1s (schoolchildren 6d); there will be refreshments. All proceeds will go to the church funds.

Why, asks the puzzled observer, not leave the pavement exposed after August 18? The answer is a simple one. Unless properly protected, the frost would speedily disintegrate it. So as the Festival

visitors depart the kindly soil of England must go back over this treasure of Rome until a new generation returns to the ancestral respect of earlier centuries and evaluates it properly. Decline and fall? There is a lesson to be learned for modern civilizations in the history of Rome. It is a pity that the pavement cannot serve as a permanent reminder to statesmen to turn up Gibbon's work. It might be more instructive than *The Age of Elegance*.



The old churchyard. The Rector is standing at the corner of the pavement area.