



A ROMAN BUILDING AT BURHAM

A LAYMAN'S VIEW

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BURHAM, KENT
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Cover picture: Courtesy of Kent Archaeological Society

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INTRODUCTION

The year is 1893. Workmen were tasked with digging for sand on the site of a new cement works. They chanced upon the remains of a structure. As it was revealed there were many visits by antiquarians.

We are fortunate that photographs were taken and survive to this day. Measurements were made which differed in small detail. In this article I will attempt to rationalise the information we have and produce my interpretation as a basis for discussion.

All that remained of the building was the ground floor as far as the ceiling. No clues survived as to the upper part of the structure it having been destroyed above ceiling height.

I have disregarded any information which is not supported by evidence. The bulk of the materials used in construction were all available close to the site.

I will use simple analytical drawings by way of illustration.

LOCATION

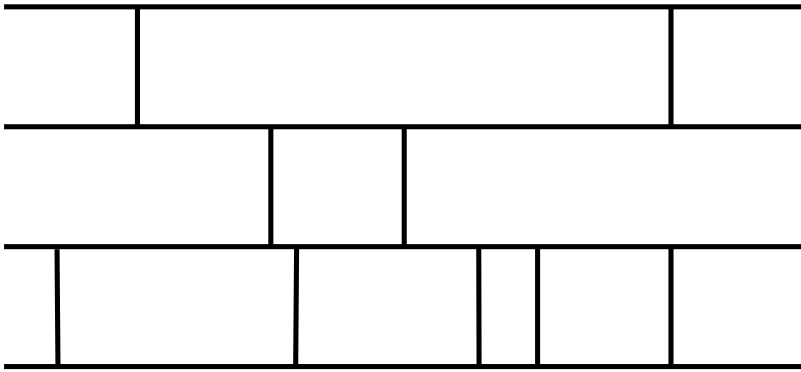
The building was on the eastern bank of the river Medway on a bend in the river. It was 'set in the bank' in sand deposits and located in the parish of Burham close to its boundary with Wouldham.

THE WALLS

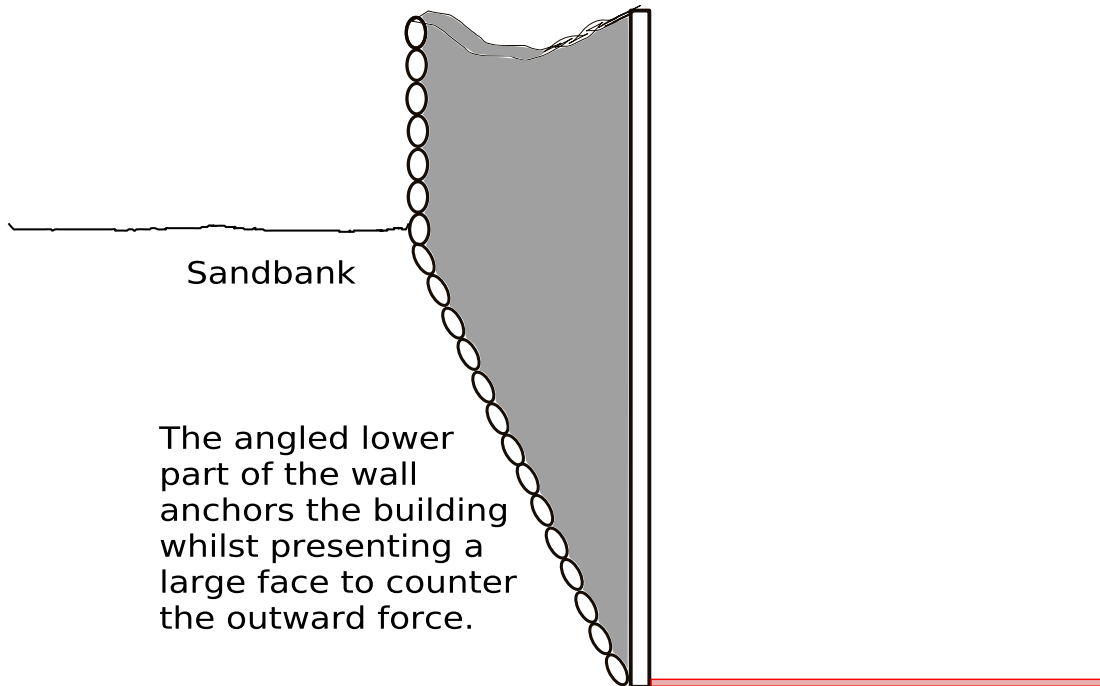
The substantial mortared chalk rubble walls were approximately 3 feet (0.9144 m) thick. They were sufficiently strong to support more than one storey.

The exterior face of each wall was of chalk boulders of similar size, set in hard mortar and laid in a herring bone formation.

The inner face was of a particularly pure form of chalk which is extremely hard. This is derived from a thin seam in the chalk beds and is known as 'Melbourne Rock' or locally as 'curley burr'. The rock was worked to be 4.5 inches (114.3 mm) thick and produced slabs up to 1'4" (406.4 mm) long. They were squared to take the outward appearance of 'bricks'. The face of each block was tooled or dressed with chevron patterns, the smaller blocks had vertical, horizontal or diagonal lines. A hard mortar was used to bond the 'bricks' using a mortar line of 1" to 1.5" (25.4 to 38.1 mm) thick.



In 1956 chemical analysis of mortar found on a museum preserved block 'agreed in physical and chemical composition with other mortars of known Roman date'.

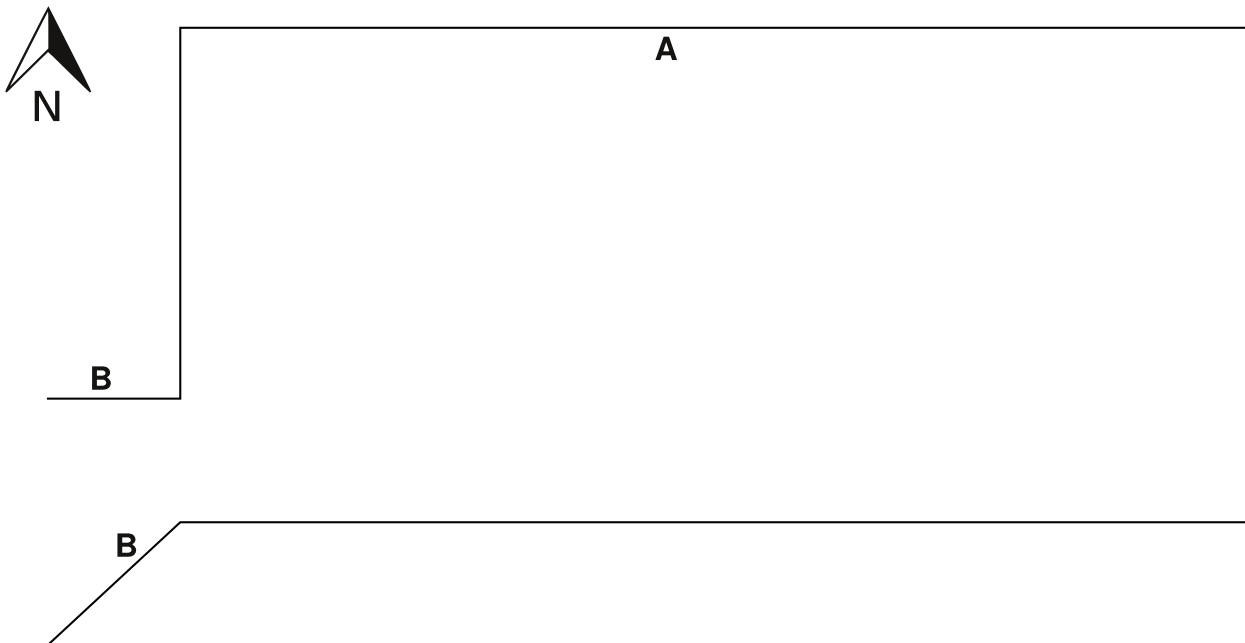


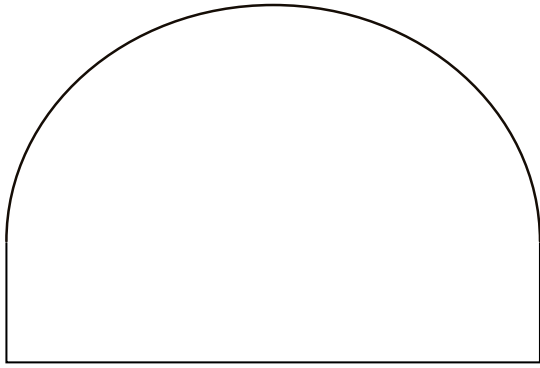
The floor of the building was of opus signinum with crushed tile pressed into the walking surface.

INTERNAL PLAN OF BUILDING

The internal measurements of the building were approximately 40' (12.192 m) long x 20' (6.096 m) wide. At point 'A' was a splay inset some 18" (457.2 mm) into the wall. The upper part had not survived but it was most likely to have been an opening to admit light or perhaps for ventilation.

At 'B' were projecting walls, at first glance to act as retaining walls to hold back the sandbank, but on further consideration they also may have served as buttresses to support that part of the building where there was an entrance with a round arch. The entrance would have weakened the building and the buttresses supported the walls and countered the outward thrust of the building.



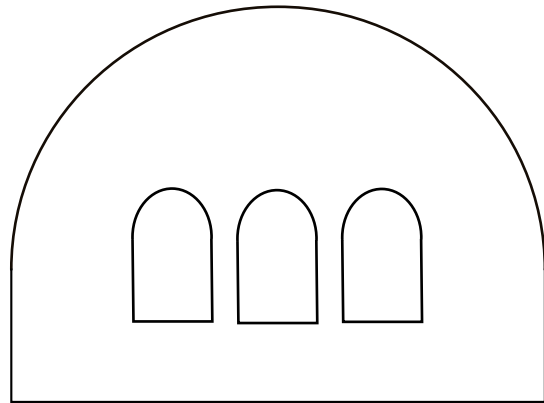


CROSS SECTION OF INTERIOR N-S

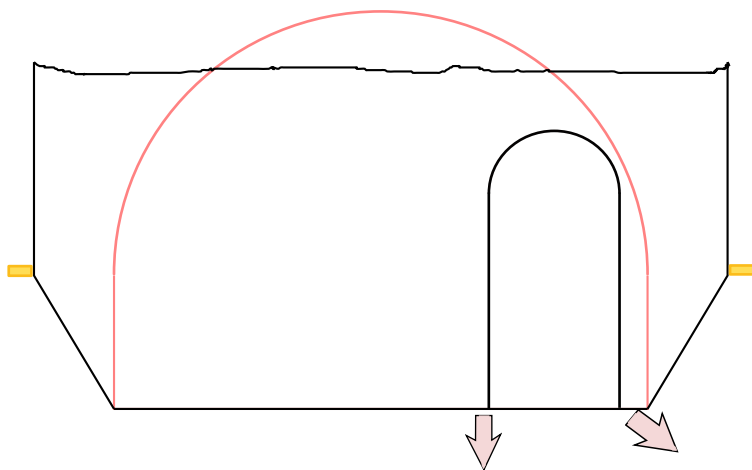
A barrel vaulted ceiling ran the length of the building. The internal measurements were 20' (6.096 m) wide and the height floor to ceiling was 15' (4.572 m).

INTERIOR EAST END

At the eastern end of the building there were three niches some 2' 2" (660.4 mm) deep set into the wall. A relieving arch over the three niches was found within the wall which would have maintained the strength and integrity of the wall.



There are many explanations which can be advanced for the three niches at the eastern end of the building but the most likely is the order of three later found in the Christian 'Trinity'.



WEST END EXTERNAL

The black lines show the outline of the west end face of the building. The yellow lines indicate the top of the sandbank. The red line shows the internal shape of the room. The red arrows indicate the line of the retaining/buttress walls.

Retaining/buttress walls

OBSERVATIONS.

By any imagination this must have been regarded by the builders as an important and high status project.

The building was constructed from materials close to the site. There were plentiful supplies of better building stone within a few miles which could have been transported by river. Does this suggest an early date for the building when there may have been an absence of knowledge of these resources?

The construction indicates a very sophisticated knowledge of the downward and outward pressures in a building of this design and the measures necessary to mitigate them. A deep understanding of building in sand is also evident. Was the builder from the eastern Mediterranean and part of the Roman army?

The only indications we have that this building was for a religious purpose were its positioning on a bend in the river, the west - east alignment and the significant three in number of niches which may have housed statues of gods.

A find on a hillside across the river dated to c250 AD was of a child's lead coffin which was decorated with a fusion of Greek and Roman iconography.

A further find which may be related the site was of a bronze ibis which may have symbolised Thoth scribe of the Egyptian gods. See related article ' Child's Lead Coffin'.

Suggestions have been advanced that the building was a Mithraeum and a store. The questions to be considered are

- (a) for what purpose was the building created and,
- (b) what other uses did it serve at later times before its final destruction.

The use of a building often changes throughout its life.

SOURCES

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The notebook of George Payne and five photographs - Guildhall Museum, Rochester

10 photographs from the collection 'The Photographic Record and Survey of Kent' - Maidstone Museum

6 lantern plates - Kent Archaeological Society.