

THE ROMAN VILLA AT DARENTH.



THE account of the Roman occupation of England for four centuries is written not only in the works of Latin authors, but also on and under the surface of our island. Fragments of the walls still remain, whose strength, after nearly two thousand years, laughs to scorn our modern buildings. Roman tiles formed the best material with which some of our early church builders could work. Many of our finest roads leading straight over hill and down dale were the work of the Romans. Under the earth none can say what relics remain as yet undiscovered; but enough has been found to show us much of the way of living of the Italian invaders of our island.

Their great road, Watling Street, from Richborough to London, and so on to the Roman wall, passed through Canterbury and Rochester, and had one of its halting-places at Springhead near Darenth.

One would naturally expect that a settlement would spring up here, and therefore the discovery of Roman coins and other antiquities during the past fifty years, was not a matter of much surprise. The church of Darenth, too, was known to contain large quantities of Roman tiles in its walls, which must have been obtained from buildings in the neighbourhood. A steam-plough which had been employed in a neighbouring field had been broken by the strength of some old foundations under the surface, while the labourers sometimes turned up Roman tiles when digging. It had also been noticed in dry summers, that certain lines

of irregularity in the crop, crossing and recrossing each other, might be seen.

All these things pointed to the likelihood of the old foundations of a Roman villa still existing under the soil. There must have been at the time of the Roman occupation many houses in the neighbourhood whose occupants were engaged in furnishing supplies to the station at Springhead, or else had placed their dwellings so as to be conveniently near to the river Darenth as well as the main road.

Two gentlemen living in the neighbourhood at last determined to put the matter to the test, and obtaining leave from the tenant farmer on whose land the supposed site was, they began to dig. At the depth of a foot they came upon a Roman pavement composed of small pieces of red brick.

The harvest of 1894 had been already cleared, and there was thus an excellent opportunity for making further excavations. A portion of the field was at once enclosed, and a lease obtained from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, who are the owners of the land. Mr. George Payne, F.S.A., a celebrated authority on Roman Antiquities, was asked to superintend the work, and the whole of the subsequent excavations have been carried out under his directions, and in many places, where the work was of special delicacy, by his own hands.

The present appearance of the villa is rather like that of an immense house, where the excavations have been completed, and the foundations brought almost to the level of the ground. There are many things, however, which we should not expect to find in the