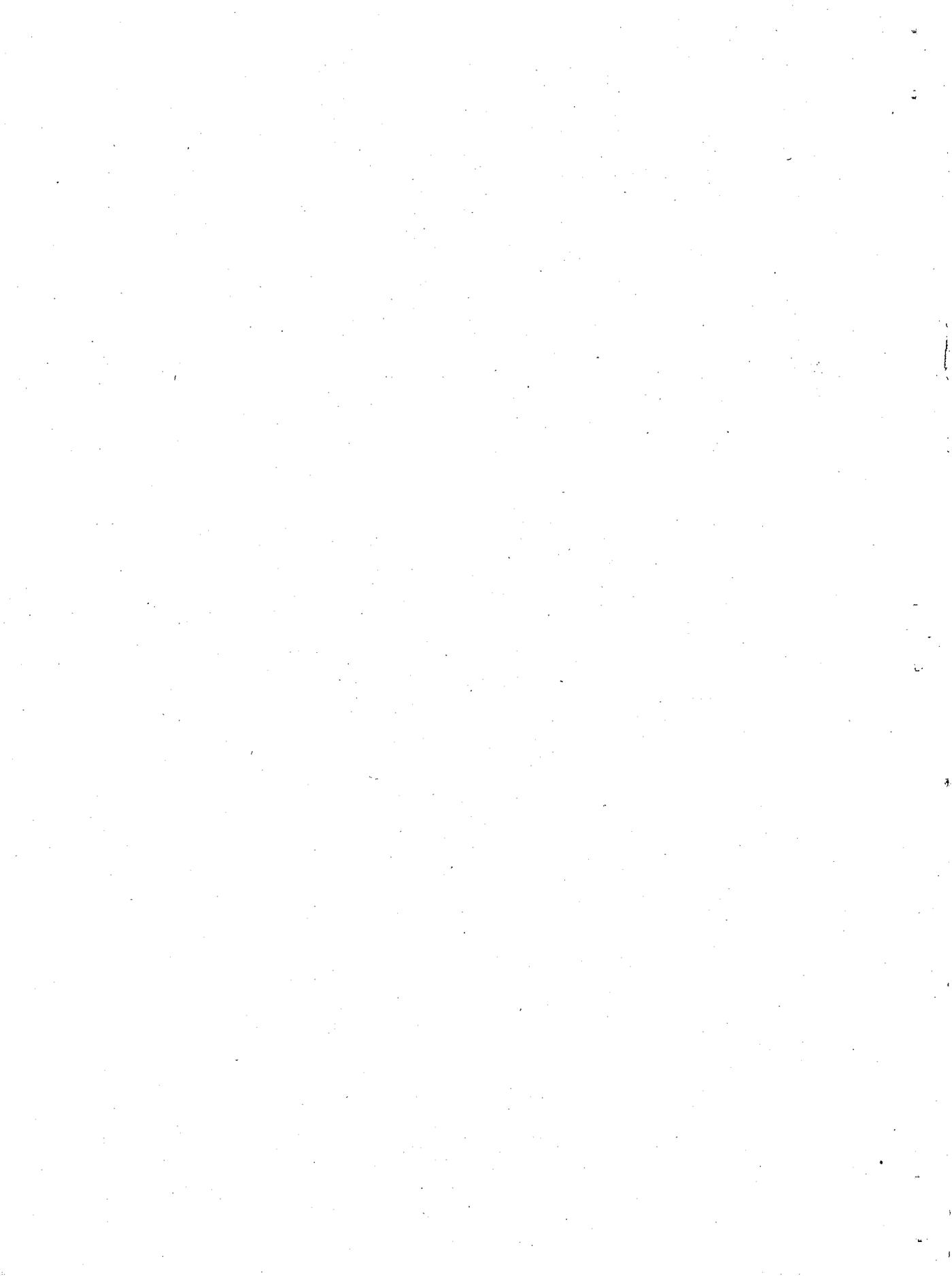


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EXCAVATIONS AT ST NEOTS, HUNTINGDONSHIRE

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DURING 1954 two excavations were in progress in the town of St Neots (which includes the parish of Eynesbury) which threw some light on its history.

The first was a series of deep trenches for sewage mains dug along some of the principal streets in both parishes. The other was the clearance of a number of old buildings on the north side of the Market Square near the bridge. They are Nos. 7, 9 and 11, between the Cross Keys Hotel and Barclays Bank. Only the back parts of these premises were pulled down, the fronts, facing the Square, being retained to preserve amenities. This property, like all others on this side of the Square, extends back to Priory Lane, spanning the line of the south wall of the Benedictine Priory of St Neot. In a survey dated 1757 of the Priory Estate, owned by Sir Stephen Anderson, the line of the Priory wall bisecting these properties is plainly shown, as is the Priory Gatehouse near the present Bridge Hotel (Plate VI). The Gatehouse was not pulled down until 1814.¹

The line of this wall is now only found in excavations as a robber trench from which the stonework was removed, leaving only a residue of mortar, and it was seen in its correct position during the building of Woolworth's and Boots shops some twenty years ago.

It has long been established that a cemetery existed under these properties. Skeletons have been found at the Cross Keys Hotel premises, others under Barclays Bank, Woolworth's, Boots and No. 35. In the case of the two multiple stores I was able to establish that burials occurred on both sides of the line of the Priory wall and that they represented both sexes. No grave goods or associated objects have ever been recorded and all burials I have seen appeared to be buried in the usual east-west Christian fashion and without coffins.

THE SEWAGE EXCAVATION (FIG. I)

The sewage trenches started from the treatment works below the Paper Mill, coming into the town along Huntingdon Street and over 'The Cross' into Church Street to the junction of Cemetery Lane. Opposite the Wesleyan Chapel in Huntingdon Street the edge of a pit or ditch with animal bones was struck and just north of it a large underground brick cistern was broken into. People still living remember being

¹ G. C. Gorham, *History and Antiquities of Eynesbury and St Neots in Huntingdonshire* (London, 1820), p. 90.

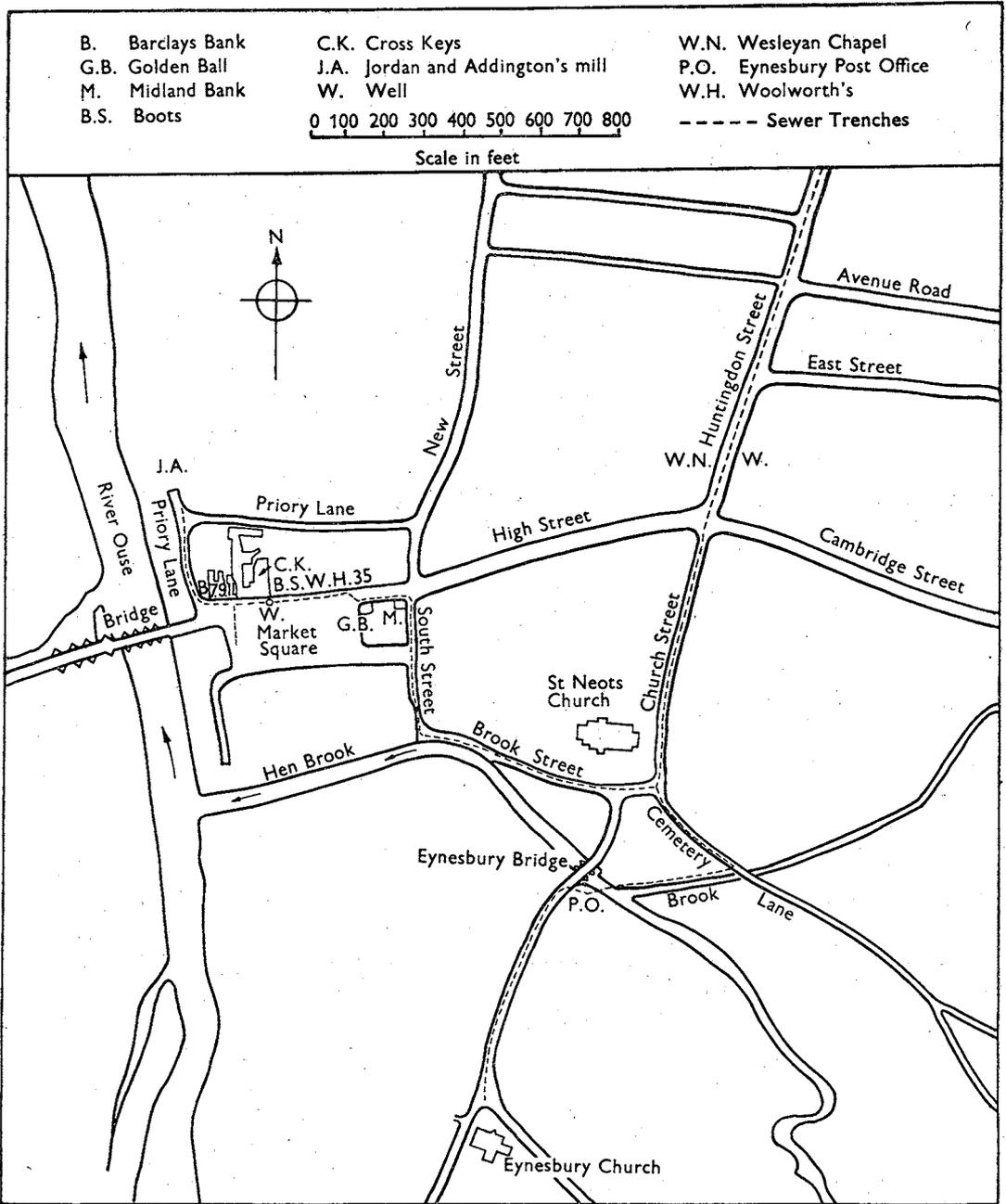


Fig. 1. Plan of St Neots showing new sewer trenches 1954.

told that this was one of a number scattered through the town to provide water for fire fighting and they were traditionally said to date from a time when concern spread as a result of the Great Fire of London. The natural water table provided the supply. Just south-east of St Neots Church the old natural surface below the road began to dip towards Hen Brook, the present level having been made up by dumping large quantities of gravel mixed with brick rubble. This filling up of the natural valley of the brook was in some places as much as 3 ft. thick and was obviously designed to bring the surface above normal flood level and enable building to take place there. Similar filling was found along St Mary's Street, Eynesbury, from Eynesbury Bridge to within a short distance of Eynesbury Church. All the existing houses between the two churches are built on this artificially raised surface.

Close to Eynesbury Bridge on the south side just opposite the door of Eynesbury Post Office, the foundations of a red brick wall were found 2 ft. down. This appeared to be the wing wall of a ford over the brook, and the cobbled approach to such a ford was found in previous road excavations. The present bridge was widened twice, the original being of stone and about 9 ft. wide.

It was obviously important to date this major work of filling up the flood plain of Hen Brook between St Neots and Eynesbury. Nothing datable turned up from the old surface below the filling or in the filling itself except the red brick. Toseland Hall, dated about 1600, is perhaps one of the earliest local domestic buildings built in red brick, while its use went on at least to the late eighteenth century. From their coarseness and medium thickness I would judge the bricks in question to be seventeenth century. This estimate is confirmed by the dating of the houses built on the raised ground. Many are listed in the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments Report on Huntingdonshire as seventeenth-century and none earlier.

Along Brook Street similar filling was found until the trench reached the west end where the brook is open to the street. From here to the corner the filling below the present brook wall was of a much later date, white and willow pattern china occurring at a depth of over 7 ft. This filling was done to make a public barge quay, and indeed the houses along this part of Brook Street are early nineteenth century.

As the trench turned north at the corner of Brook Street, the wall of a large brick and stone sewer outlet was struck, the stone being re-used Barnack probably from the Priory. This appeared to run down South Street. Opposite the roadway leading to the Market Square a large complete circular brick sewer was uncovered. A number of these were found during the course of the work, all examples of skilful brickwork in a rather harder and yellower brick than that already mentioned, but still thinner and redder than the nineteenth-century local yellow brick. I consider that these sewers also are seventeenth-century and contemporary with the gravel filling.

In the short length of roadway leading to the High Street several sewer pits or ditches were crossed. On reaching the High Street the trench turned west along the south side of the street about 4 ft. from the pavement until the Square was reached, when it crossed to the north side and continued along the roadway about 6 ft. from the pavement as far as Priory Lane. In the short section from the Midland Bank to

the Golden Ball Inn were found two ditches, once open, running at right angles into a ditch that followed the edge of an old metalled road leading from the High Street to the river bridge, now about 2 ft. below the present surface. These ditches contained cattle and sheep bones, many parts of leather shoes of the late fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, and a small amount of pottery of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Along the north side of the Market Square were a number of similar open ditches obviously leading from properties on the site of the present shops. They also contained pottery and shoes similar to the others. In one case a circular brick sewer had been laid along the line of a former open ditch. It was also apparent that only the ancient roadway had been metalled; between the ditches had been grass or mud.

Opposite the east end of the Cross Keys Hotel was found a well, 25 ft. deep. The top 4 ft. was in brick, but the remainder was built in stone blocks cut in circular shape to fit the circumference, and almost certainly medieval. Near the approaches to Priory Lane a metalled branch of the old roadway led diagonally towards it.

At the approaches to the river bridge the natural land surface dipped towards the river bank and at the corner of Priory Lane as much as 6 ft. of gravel had been laid to raise the approach to the present stone bridge, built about 1617.¹ In the mud below the filling were found more sixteenth- and seventeenth-century shoes with much decayed wood and nails. Perhaps these latter were remains of the wooden bridge on stone piers, which the present bridge replaced.

The trench was only continued up Priory Lane as far as Messrs Jordan and Addington's mill gateway, and nothing of interest was found in this section. Being in the centre of the road it probably followed the line of the old road and passed through the Priory gateway, thus missing the foundations of the gatehouse.

From the line above described at the bus shelter near Barclay's Bank, a short length of trench was dug south across the present main road to about half-way across the west side of the Square. This uncovered a section at right angles across the old road, which was found at this point to be 4 ft. below the present surface and 24 ft. wide. Imbedded in its cobbled surface was a late sixteenth-century shoe sole and a seventeenth-century horse-shoe. Twenty feet south of this road and running parallel to it, was a large ditch 12 ft. wide and at least 5 ft. deep running towards the river. It contained the usual pottery of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and shoes of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—one with a bronze buckle in the shape of a figure of eight. Finds of equal interest were sea mussel and oyster shells, proving river navigation to the coast.

This trench gave an interesting section of the Market Square. When the old road had been in use and the large ditch open, the Square had only a grass or mud surface and could have been little above river level. At the same time that other parts of the town were raised above flood level the ditch had been filled up and 9 in. of gravel, mixed with red brick rubble, had been laid all over it. Above this 6 in. of mud had accumulated before 2 ft. more of gravel had been added to make it up to its present level.

¹ *Victoria County History, Huntingdonshire*, vol. II, p. 337.

EXCAVATIONS AT NOS. 7, 9, AND II MARKET SQUARE (FIG. 2)

As previously stated, this site spans the line of the Priory wall, and trenches, 42 ft. apart, were dug along part of its east and west extremities for the foundations of a shopping arcade leading from the Square to Priory Lane. The west trench crossed the line of the wall, while the east trench was shorter and entirely within the Priory precincts. A number of drainage pits were also dug between the foundation trenches. All these penetrated down to and below monastic levels, as a number of drains and cesspits of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries and wells of unknown date had also done.¹ There was also in the upper levels the foundations of a red brick house of the early eighteenth century with the remains of a clay pipe kiln containing many wasters and a cesspit with wine and gin bottles and other glass-ware. The clay pipes, unfortunately, had no trade mark, but a wig curler found with the glass-ware was marked R.W. surmounted by a crown; there is a similar one from London in the Guildhall Museum.²

In the west foundation trench the Priory wall was found in the position expected. It was represented by a robber-trench containing mortar. All stone had been removed, and indeed a great deal was found in the walls of the eighteenth-century house above it. On the south, or outside, of the wall was a berm 4 ft. wide and then a shallow ditch which contained a sherd of black unglazed pottery of earlier than sixteenth-century date. At some time when the wall was still standing, the ditch had been filled-in level with the berm, and a small building of stud and mud built against the wall. It had posts driven into the berm and had been destroyed by fire. Minute fragments of stained glass were found among the rubble.

North of the Priory wall and inside the precincts was an open space 34 ft. wide; to the north of this again there was a building of monastic date; it was 40 ft. wide, divided by a wall into two rooms and oriented east and west. The floors of these rooms were of level mortar on which still survived a number of fragmentary 9 in. square floor tiles, a few showing traces of glaze, but all being much worn. The south wall was represented by a foundation of cobble stones, the middle wall by a 4 ft. gap in the floor from which I presume stone had been removed. At the north end the floor just ceased 35 ft. south of Priory Lane.

The east trench confirmed the finds in the west trench, except that the cobble foundations of the middle dividing wall were here intact. Also a floor of mortar, and in some places cobbles, extended 18 ft. further south than in the west trench.

From all over the south side of the site human remains were found, both disturbed and undisturbed, representing at least fifteen individuals. Those that I was able to examine were all adults, of various ages, and included two women. All the undisturbed burials were south of the monastic buildings, but were found indifferently

¹ Pottery from some of these pits seems to be comparable to that found recently on a kiln site at Harlow. Newton, 'A Seventeenth Century Pottery Site at Harlow, Essex', *Journal of S.W. Essex Technical College* (January, 1955).

² *Guildhall Museum Catalogue* (2nd ed. 1908), p. 135.

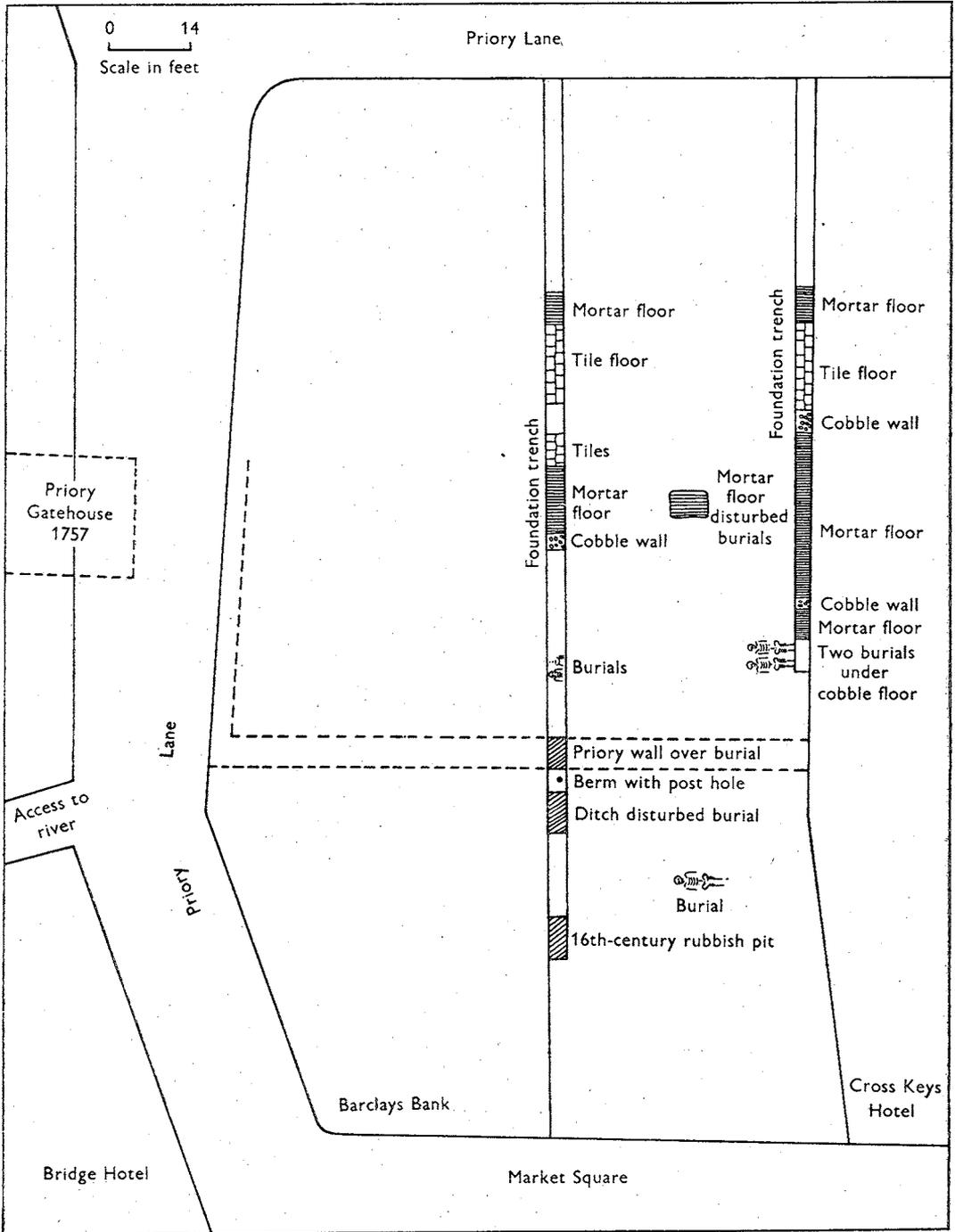


Fig. 2. Plan showing finds in foundation excavations for new arcade, nos. 7, 9 and 11 Market Square, St Neots.

both north and south of the Priory boundary-wall and it seems that at the time they were buried this boundary had no significance. This was further proved by finding an undisturbed burial under the actual wall position and another disturbed by the digging of the ditch that ran just outside the wall and would seem to have been a part of the boundary.

The bodies were all buried carefully and were oriented east and west in Christian fashion, apparently without coffins. Similar burials on the sites of Boots and Woolworth's shops and at Barclays Bank were also of both sexes and on both sides of the Priory wall. One can only imagine that they date from an early phase of the Priory when the south boundary extended as far as the Market Square, and that in the cemetery established lay men and women (perhaps benefactors to the Priory) were buried as well as monks. I would guess that later, probably in the fifteenth century, when the town became an important trading centre, the boundary was set back to enable valuable space for shops, stalls and workshops to be let alongside the main road and facing the Market Square on the important sunny side (where, indeed, nearly all the shops still are). I think the small burnt building described above was one of these early shops.

It is interesting that at the Visitation of Bishop Alnwick of Lincoln in 1439,¹ complaint was made of the ruinous state of the enclosures (a wall is not mentioned) round the Priory, so that laymen and monks could go in and out without check. Also, it was complained that townsfolk were being attracted to attend service at the Priory rather than their own parish church, thus robbing the vicar of St Neots of his dues and profits.

Much bronze and iron slag was found, probably from the nearby bell foundry of Joseph Eayre (who is shown on the 1757 map as having workshops on the site). Masonry from the Priory was found in the walls and foundations of the later buildings which have been pulled down, and this is being saved to make an ornamental feature in the new arcade.

CONCLUSIONS

All the above evidence seems to point to several significant phases in the growth of St Neots from a small village, dominated by the Priory, and adjacent to the more populous Eynesbury across the Hen Brook, to the prosperous market town of today. The evidence shows that its growth started in the late fifteenth century as practically nothing earlier than this date was found in the street excavations.² It was then evidently able to share in the general growth of trade and commerce of the bigger towns and ports throughout the country. This, in my opinion, was due to several causes. It was situated on an ancient main road from Cambridge to the Midlands where it crossed the Ouse at a point that was virtually the head of the navigation or

¹ Hamilton Thompson, 'Visitation of Religious Houses in the Diocese of Lincoln', *Lincoln Record Society*, vol. II (1918), pp. 325, 327.

² All evidence of pagan and late Saxon settlement has been found east of Huntingdon Street and Church Street. *Victoria County History, Huntingdonshire*, vol. I, p. 277. *Proc. C.A.S.* vol. xxxIII (1933), p. 137.

the furthest inland port. Before the seventeenth century there were no locks on the Ouse, but since Roman times navigation had been carried on from the sea as far as the St Neots area, though this must have been at most times a slow and difficult process, only possible for small vessels of shallow draught. From the seventeenth-century navigation records¹ we know how much more difficult was the passage above St Neots towards Bedford. Furthermore the Priory had a charter giving them the privilege of holding a market, and they had with foresight planned a town with a wide main street and large market square for the purpose. In the late fifteenth century the monks saw profit in moving back their south boundary to half-way across the old cemetery and letting for shops the valuable space opposite the cattle market (the square being then ungravelled), and along the main road, building a wall along the new line. As shops and houses grew up there, open sewer ditches were dug connecting them with a ditch system following the road to the river, in the usual medieval fashion.

Perhaps the greatest evidence in support of this theory is the fact that the old church was pulled down and the splendid parish church of today, with its wealth of wood carving, was built during the same period of prosperity. A few ancient wooden-framed houses in the town also date from this time—including a fine example, now in the course of restoration, in the High Street next to Church Walk.

The evidence seems to suggest the same or perhaps a lower level of prosperity during the sixteenth century when the Priory was dissolved and its rights and privileges came into lay hands. The next change noticeable in the excavations was that caused by the replacement of the old wooden bridge by the present fine stone arches at the very beginning of the seventeenth century. The disused Priory nearby provided a cheap stone quarry, and the need for making up the approach to the new bridge caused the medieval road to be covered with several feet of gravel.

In the seventeenth century, however, a change took place which must have coincided with another great increase in prosperity and population. During this century large areas of the floodable green meadows in St Neots and Eynesbury between the two churches were raised at great expense and built on. The Market Square was gravelled over and a system of expensive brick sewers was laid to replace the old open ditches. This system apparently consisted of a main sewer from the brook in Cambridge Street via the High Street and Market Square to the river just above the bridge. When the brook was in flood, water washed right through the pipe to the river, flushing it clean. Subsidiary pipes fed into it, and the other shorter independent lengths led direct into the river and brook.²

This new growth I also attribute to the navigation of the river. In 1620 locks were completed up-river as far as St Neots and were not carried on to Bedford until 1680.³

¹ T. S. Willan, 'The Navigation of the Great Ouse between St Ives and Bedford in the Seventeenth Century', *Bedfordshire Historical Record Soc.* vol. XXIV (1946).

² T. Hennell, *Scheme for Sewage and Water Works for the Town of St Neots* (1874).

³ The contractors, with great difficulty, did actually extend them to Great Barford, but after functioning for a few years they became ruinous during the Civil War.

Trade with north-west Europe expanded greatly in this century and the locks enabled vessels of greater draught to use the river with far less difficulty and at much cheaper rates. St Neots became a thriving inland port, serving a large area of Bedfordshire, Huntingdonshire and Cambridgeshire.

The extension of the navigation to Bedford did not seem to have greatly affected the trade of the town, and when the locks were much improved about 1800 further reclamation of land took place at Brook Street, and a public quay was made there.

It was about 100 years later that the navigation finally came to an end through competition from the railway; at about the same time a new system replaced the old brick sewers.

I am indebted to Messrs Wm. Farrow Ltd., their staff and the Resident Engineer, for allowing me access to their work, saving finds and helping me to interpret sections. I am also very grateful to Mr Garritty for allowing me to excavate on his Arcade site and often delay and impede his building work. In both cases proprietors and workmen displayed the new enlightened interest in archaeology. Mr Reginald Brown, F.L.A., F.R.S.A., kindly dated the shoes. To Mr J. Wrycroft I am indebted for permission to publish the photographic copy of the 1757 map, the original of which is in his possession. The finds have been deposited in the Norris Museum, St Ives, with the exception of some shoes which have gone to Northampton Central Museum and Art Gallery.

