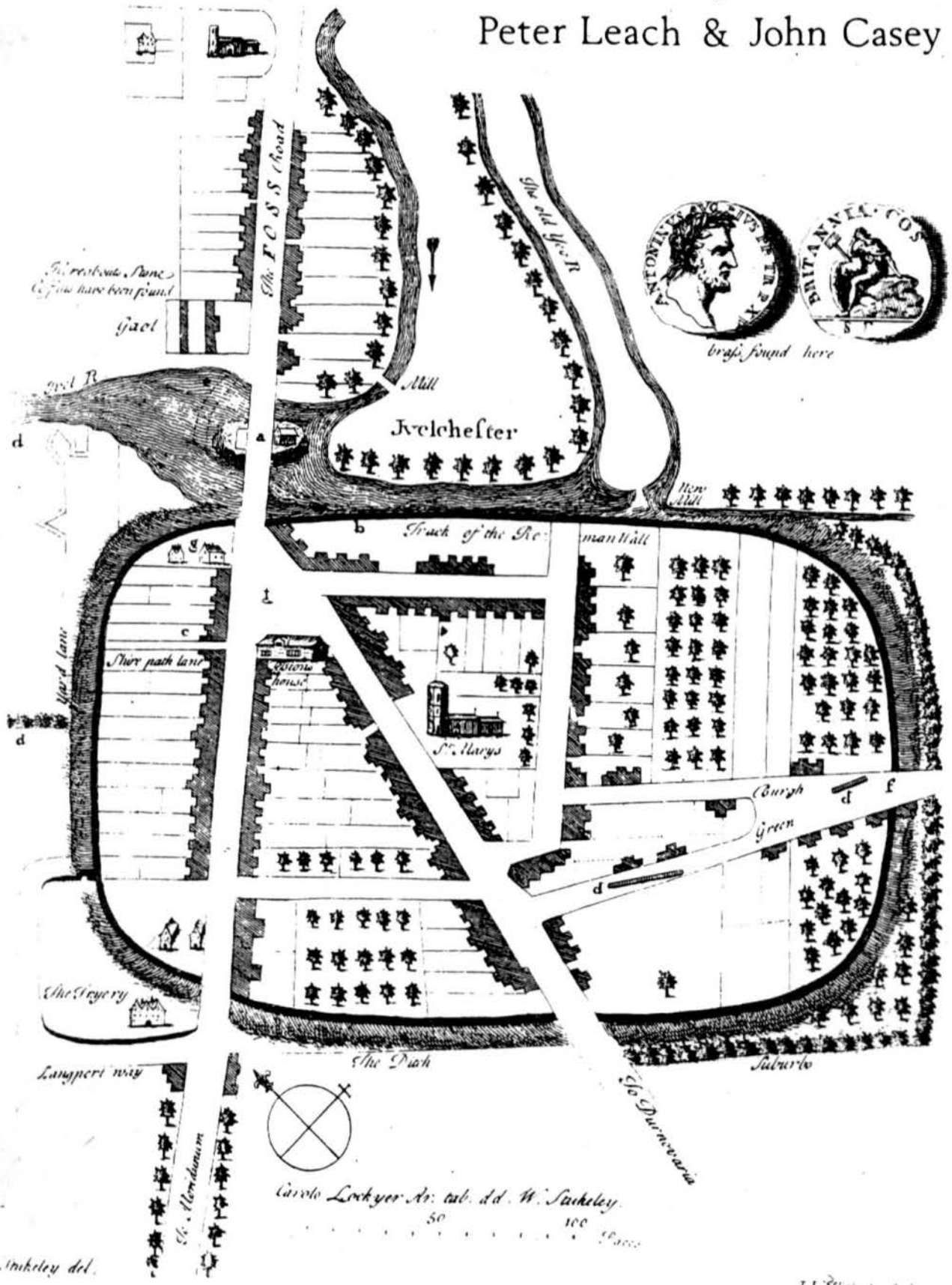


SEPT 9

ILCHESTER Dolphin Lane 1986

An Archaeological Assessment
by
Peter Leach & John Casey



Ilchester' Map of Ilchester. 1723. by William Stukeley from *Itinerarium Curiosum* (1723). London.

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Exploratory Excavations at Dolphin Lane, Ilchester
An Interim Report 1986

Introduction

In September 1986 ten days of exploratory excavations were undertaken at Dolphin Lane, Ilchester, Somerset to assess the archaeological potential of this site. Occupying a triangular piece of derelict land in the angle between Ilchester's two principal thoroughfares, the site lies centrally within the historic town (NGR. ST. 522226). Information was sought concerning the chronology and sequence of post urban layouts in this area, with particular reference to the origins and development of the Roman settlement (Lendinae). Previous work in Ilchester has concentrated around the perimeters, notably the defences and suburbs (Leach 1982, and forthcoming), and opportunities to investigate a central site have been rare. With this in mind, and thus the potential for location of a major, and so far elusive, public building commensurate with Roman Ilchester's suspected administrative status, an evaluatory excavation project was arranged.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful in the first instance to Bass, Wales & West Limited, owners of the site and to their representative Mr. D.P. Faulkner, for their readiness to grant site access and their interest in the project. The costs of excavation were met by grants from the University of Durham, Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, and Somerset County Council, to whom thanks are due. As initiators and authors of this project we are especially in debt to all those who assisted our endeavours, in particular Peter Ellis, Jeremy Evans, Trevor Pearson, Mike and Pauline Penn (for both help and hospitality), Bruce Wilmington for mechanical excavation, and to other members of the local community and the Somerset Archaeological Society.

Site Evaluation

Two cuttings were opened with the assistance of a mechanical JCB excavator, located at the north and south-east extremities of the site (Figure 1). Up to 1 m of overburden was thus removed in both areas; Trench I covering an area approximately 14 x 3 m, and Trench II to the north c. 4 x 2 m. Excavation was continued by hand in both trenches, where distinctions and interfaces between archaeological contexts became more clearly defined. In neither was it possible to explore the full sequence of features and deposits revealed, although their lower limits could be assessed. The mechanically excavated overburden at both localities comprised extensive and largely undifferentiated post-medieval deposits, merging into later medieval accumulations, including the upper fills of pits. Previous experience in Ilchester suggests that careful dissection of these horizons rarely justifies the necessary expenditure of time and effort unless better defined structures

are encountered. Since this was not the case the procedure adopted allowed earlier medieval features and the preceding Romano-British stratigraphy to be distinguished and recorded more expeditiously.

Trench I

In the time allowed it was not possible to expose and fully examine the earliest archaeological levels on the site. Nevertheless some assessment was possible thanks to the deep penetration of some medieval features, and up to 0.5 m of as yet unexcavated stratigraphy appears to survive in places. Since later disturbances are relatively less at these levels their investigation would probably benefit from more extensive exposure. Finds from secondary contexts suggest that deposits and events from at least the late 1st century AD onwards may be represented here.

The earliest levels which could be examined in any detail may have belonged to the late 2nd or early 3rd centuries. A north-south alignment of stone-packed post-holes, gravel floors, and other unexcavated features, probably represent 2nd-century building arrangements in this area. A change in use and arrangements was heralded by accumulations of soil and rubbish sealing the earlier horizons. This was succeeded by a sequence of flooring and make-up deposits, the earliest a solid mortar and crushed stone floor, the latest a badly damaged and worn floor of lias limestone flags upon a thick mortary gravel base. Coins and pottery from within these deposits suggest that it was created and used during the late 3rd and probably much of the 4th century. The implication that these horizons represent successive floors, make-up, and rubbish accumulation within a building is supported by the presence of a substantial E-W wall foundation trench to the south. This had been thoroughly robbed of stone in the Middle Ages, only the impressions of packed foundation stones surviving on its base. Stone-robbing and subsequent disturbances had destroyed the direct relationship between floors and wall but the evidence points to the former existence of a substantial building in this area. No other walls were seen but from the scale of the foundation trench (over 1 m wide) an outside wall seems likely.

Ultimately this building was robbed of its building stone and the remains were subsequently disturbed by the excavation of medieval rubbish pits. Most of these activities took place during the 11th to 13th centuries, and considerable quantities of rubbish, principally pottery and animal bone, were recovered from those portions of the medieval pits excavated. No building remains or evidence of other contemporary activities were recognised from this period. Similar deposits continued to accumulate up to the present day.

Trench II

Within the more limited confines of this trench excavation was restricted to the definition of what appeared to be a road sequence. Mechanical excavation was halted at the first appearance of these remains beneath c. 1 m of disturbed medieval and later overburden. At this level, a series of overlapping medieval rubbish pits became apparent, some cutting a horizontal sequence of road metallings.

In the time available for excavation it was only possible to empty the portions of two such features revealed in this trench. Of those, the first, a shallow east-west linear ditch was cut along the road axis and through its upper levels. A deeper rubbish pit provided a more informative section through the street sequence and its southern boundary, but did not reach the earliest archaeological deposits. No attempt was made to dismantle the street levels, although at least six re-surfacings could be detected in the sections provided by the later cuts. The upper surviving cobbled surface retained part of a wheel rut and its camber, and thus the best indication of the street's intended alignment - approximately east-west. Several of the earlier cobbled stone surfaces showed signs of heavy wear, and the whole sequence suggests a long continuity of use, possibly over several centuries. No intrinsically dateable finds were recovered in situ from the road remains, although the 12th-century pottery assemblage from the excavated rubbish pit does at least provide an approximate terminus ante quem for the road's use. In view of this, and its very substantial character, the feature can reasonably be interpreted as a street of Roman Ilchester.

Conclusions

The objectives of this archaeological evaluation have been substantially fulfilled and the site's potential adequately assessed. The most disappointing aspect of this season was the failure to explore the earliest levels and thus, perhaps, the origins of settlement. It was nevertheless apparent that considerable deposits do survive, and moreover that they survive undisturbed to a greater degree than the later Roman levels. With this potential it is evident that questions concerning the origins and early development of Ilchester, military or otherwise, remain to be addressed and perhaps answered.

Whether or not the earliest recorded phase of building related to the later Roman arrangements in this part of the town, it is clear that a major re-building occurred some time during the 3rd century. Despite the limitations of the sample excavated a substantial and potentially prestigious late Roman building can be postulated, occupying most of the site. The discovery of a road alignment to the north probably represents its limit in that direction and would give this building one minimum dimension of over 30 m. The sequence of floors within what appears to be a room to the south suggest an extended period of use, principally during the 4th century. Evidence for the later history of this

building was lost through medieval disturbance and truncation, although further evidence may survive elsewhere. The road itself is additionally important as a new contribution towards the reconstruction of Roman Ilchester's town plan. Its function as a street almost certainly linking the predecessors (on similar alignments) of Church Street and High Street, appears also to define a triangular insula of the town to the north (Figure 1).

In the post-Roman period this area of the town was occupied by the rear portions of burgage tenements whose buildings fronted onto Church Street or High Street. This is clearly reflected in its use as an area for rubbish disposal, exhibited most prominently in the excavation of rubbish pits, mostly between the 11th and 13th centuries. Immediately prior to this the presumably ruinous Roman buildings within the emerging late Saxon town were extensively robbed of their masonry components. The status and prosperity of early medieval Ilchester was probably very similar to its predecessor Lendiniae, and the remains of the old town were probably used extensively in the creation of the new. The numerous rubbish pits and their contents are some reflection of urban life in those times, although buildings are less likely to occur on this site. There may be some echo of Ilchester's relative decline from the 13th century here, although the area continued to be used for rubbish disposal, cultivation and possibly other activities up to the present day.

The Future

As a demonstration of archaeological potential, albeit incomplete, this short campaign of excavation at Dolphin Lane has been a success. In view of this, and since no foreseeable development of the area is proposed, an opportunity for more extensive excavation has now been demonstrated. In outline these would involve investigation of :

- (1) the origins of settlement - prehistoric and/or Roman military, and early development of the Roman town.
- (2) a major, later Roman building, its earlier relationships, history and possible status.
- (3) the Roman street and its relationship to the urban layout and building sequence on this site.
- (4) the post-Roman history of the site with particular reference to the early medieval development and economy of Ilchester.

In addition to these specific archaeological objectives there are opportunities to provide training and educational facilities for both students of archaeology and the local community, a focus of local historic interest to complement that of the proposed Town Trust museum; and, ultimately perhaps, some visible monument to Ilchester's past, barely apparent in the town

today, and capable of attracting further interest and visitors to Ilchester, in concert once again with the museum and its functions.

To pursue these objectives and to implement the necessary project will require a guaranteed material and financial input. The proposed educational and training aspects of the scheme may attract some financial support via the Universities of Birmingham and Durham. To equip and run an excavation project for a 3 to 4 week period, to pay for the contributions of specialists, and to process and prepare the results for eventual publication, will all require additional funding.

Given the immense historical and archaeological interest and potential of Ilchester and its region, viewed against an already extensive background of recent research and discoveries here, it is our belief that Dolphin Lane presents an opportunity to make an important academic as well as a social and educative contribution to the town, past, present and future. National public funding is rarely available for such ventures and we shall therefore seek to implement and maintain this project, through local sponsorship.

Peter Leach, Birmingham University
Field Archaeology Unit.
John Casey, University of Durham.
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