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# ROCESTER ARCHÆOLOGY

EXCAVATIONS 1985-1986  
AN INTERIM REPORT



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by  
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and  
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INTRODUCTION

In 1985 a preliminary season of archaeological investigation in the New Cemetery, Church Lane, Rocester yielded results sufficiently encouraging to justify further large-scale excavation both here and at other sites in the village as they became available. The potential of the New Cemetery has been outlined in an Evaluation Report (Esmonde Cleary & Ferris, 1985), and the summary of the first season's results and the general survey of the history of the village given there will not be repeated here. Rather, this report will concentrate on the results obtained from the excavations in the New Cemetery (April-September 1986), Dove First School (September-November 1985) and Rocester Football Club (November-December 1986).

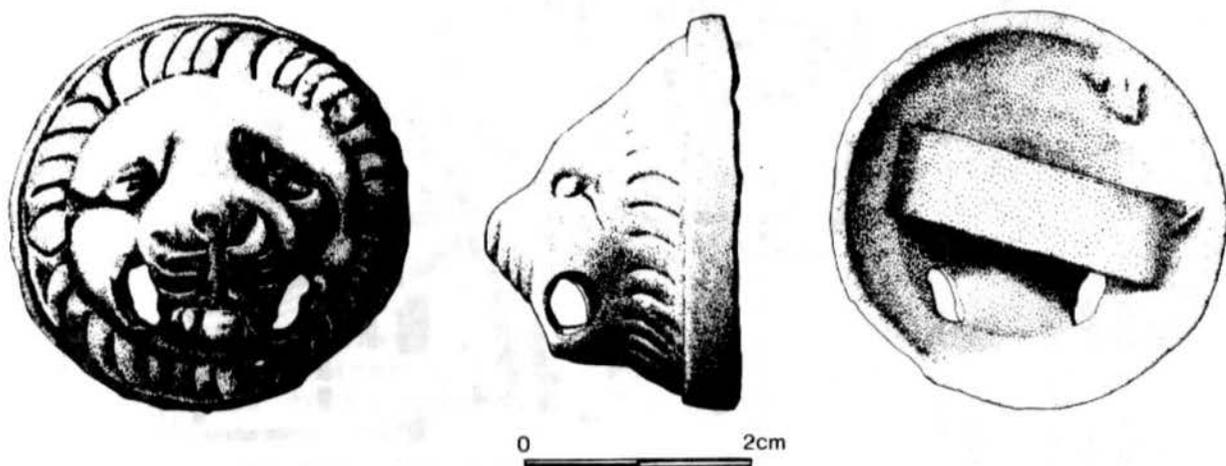


Fig. 1 Copper Alloy Lion's Head Mount. Probably 1st or 2nd century AD. (A.Fisher/T.Pearson)

## EXCAVATIONS

### NEW CEMETERY, CHURCH LANE.

The backfill covering the uncompleted 1985 excavation area of 10 x 25m. was removed at the start of the 1986 season, and the site was extended southwards by a further 19m. giving an area of 440m<sup>2</sup>.

In this southern area was a shallow sequence representing mediaeval activity, the most extensive features being two large pits forming the lower parts of grain-processing ovens. The westernmost retained fragments of its original cobble and stone lining; the eastern one was unlined and contained the collapsed or stoved-in material of its clay dome and a quantity of carbonised grain. The material from the digging of the pits, including much Roman pottery, had been dumped to the east. Comparative evidence suggests that these features were grain-malting kilns, and their large size suggests that they may have been communal or for relatively large-scale processing. The kilns date to the thirteenth or fourteenth century and are thus broadly contemporary with the smithy excavated in 1986, so this may be part of a small industrial complex or service compound.

In the area opened in 1985 excavation had reached a horizon consisting of cobbled surfaces and associated beam-slots. It was initially thought that this was mediaeval in date, but much of the pottery previously thought to be mediaeval has since been demonstrated to be Roman, and the rest may be derived from the undoubted mediaeval disturbance to these deposits. Provisionally, therefore, these features are now assigned to the later Roman period. This is also the date of a large gully some 15m. to the south, which yielded a Barbarous Radiate coin of ca.AD 270-90.

Once the mediaeval deposits had been recorded and removed, the cobbled surfaces and the beam-slots were dissected, and the soil to their south excavated. This immediately revealed the plan of a preceding structure, and it was the excavation of this that was to occupy most of the 1986 season. The size and distinctive plan of this building soon made it clear that it was part of a Roman military barrack-block. At just under 10m. wide, its full width lay within the site; though if, as often happened, there was a verandah along one side, it would lie outside the current limits of the excavation. 28m. of the length of the building lie within the site, another 12-22m. are still to be uncovered if the barrack falls within the normal size range. The northern rooms had gravel surfaces, which may have been the bedding for the floors proper. Outside the northern end was the cess-pit of a private latrine attached to these rooms. The latrine pit is of interest, as it is one of only a few to have been identified in this country. It is over 2m. deep and retains traces of its wooden lining in the form of charred planks. The lower fill has the characteristic green staining of a cess-pit. The upper fill

contains much domestic refuse - including pottery, glass, bone, painted wall plaster and part of the skeleton of a dog - all presumably dumped when the fort was dismantled and tidied-away at its abandonment. These rooms clearly form the officer's suite for a centurion (if it was an infantry unit) or a decurion (for cavalry). The other rooms had clay floors which reflects a difference in status, these being the men's accommodation. There would have been some eighty men living in the barrack, eight to a pair of not very large rooms.

This barrack-block was constructed late in the first century AD and was abandoned and systematically dismantled by the middle of the second. Full examination of the pottery and coins from the excavations should, in due course, allow greater precision in dating. Between the northern end of the barrack and the rear face of the rampart of the fort there were two phases of building. The later, which was excavated in 1986, had stone or cobble foundations for walls which may have been timber-framed, and was open-ended or open-sided. From the number of hearths and ovens inside, and from the quantities of broken pottery and glass strewn on its floor, it seems likely that it was some form of 'cookhouse'. The pottery was principally samian (a fine table-ware imported from Gaul), mortaria (grinding and mixing bowls) and amphorae (bulk containers for olive oil or wine, mostly from Spain); this would support the identification of the building as being for food preparation. It has been possible to reconstruct five near-complete samian vessels. The earlier building has yet to be examined, and appears to be a structure entirely of timber.

At the northern end of the site lies the defensive rampart of the fort. This was exposed but not excavated in 1985. In 1986 the upper part of the rampart (corresponding to the civilian rampart as identified by Dr. Graham Webster in 1961 [Webster, 1962]) was removed - with great difficulty as it was very clayey and up to 1m. thick. The pottery recovered from the clay rampart agreed with Webster's proposed date of the later second century AD for this phase. No trace, however, of his postulated trench for a wall was found along the front of the rampart. Under the clay rampart was a layer of mixed material which may represent a demolition horizon. On the surface of the first phase of the rampart was an emplacement, 3.5m. x 4.5m., of river cobbles and stone, with good edges. The edging suggests that it was designed as the base for some feature, rather than as an internal structure for the rampart. It is unlikely to have been the base for an interval-tower; these were generally supported on wooden posts. Further examination will be necessary in 1987 to ascertain its function.

Late in the 1986 season the internal floors of the barrack-block were removed, and the underlying deposits examined. Under the northern part of the barrack there were only a few dumps of soil levelling up existing irregularities in the ground surface prior to the construction of the fort. Under the southern part the situation was very different. Here there was a much greater depth and extent of made ground, its upper surface somewhat

dished. On excavation it proved that this dumped soil was settling into two large ditches, part of the defences of an earlier fort. The ditches were each up to 2m. deep by 5m. across. The southern one was of a regular V-profile with a slot along the bottom. The northern was less regular in profile, and may even have had obstacles set into its northern face. Together they would have presented a formidable obstacle to any would-be attacker. There was a small amount of silt at the bottom of the ditches, but the bulk of the infill was brown clay, mottled with redder streaks. It seems likely that this material is the body of the rampart, clay with a facing of squared turf (perhaps represented by the red streaks), pushed back into the ditches when the fort was abandoned. At present it is uncertain to which side of the ditches the rampart lay; most probably to the south. There was very little pottery from the ditches, so their date is equally uncertain; they may be Neronian (50s/60s AD).

These ditches raise considerable questions of interpretation. In the conquest years the Roman army built two main types of installation. One was the 'marching camp', a temporary fortification erected when on campaign in the summer. The other was the semi-permanent base, a fort (for non-legionary troops) or a fortress (for a full legion or part of one). The Rocester ditches are far too large to be those of a marching camp, besides, they are double whereas marching camps only have a single ditch. For forts of this period they are somewhat large, and though they may be simply for an auxiliary (non-legionary) garrison, there is the possibility that their size indicates the presence of legionary troops in a so-called 'vexillation fortress'. This would be entirely possible in the fluid situation of the campaigning in the north Midlands in the 50s and 60s AD. There may well have been a screen of forts running from Littlechester (Derby) through Rocester, Trent Vale and Chesterton (Stoke) towards the Welsh Marches, to defend Roman lands from the Brigantes, the hill-folk of the Pennines.

The later fort, to which the barrack-block belongs, seems simply to have been an auxiliary fort. The discovery of several pieces of Roman military harness-trappings shows that the garrison was at least in part cavalry, ideal for scouting and patrolling amongst potentially hostile hill tribes. Littlechester and Chesterton were also occupied at this period to maintain the screen south of the Peaks.

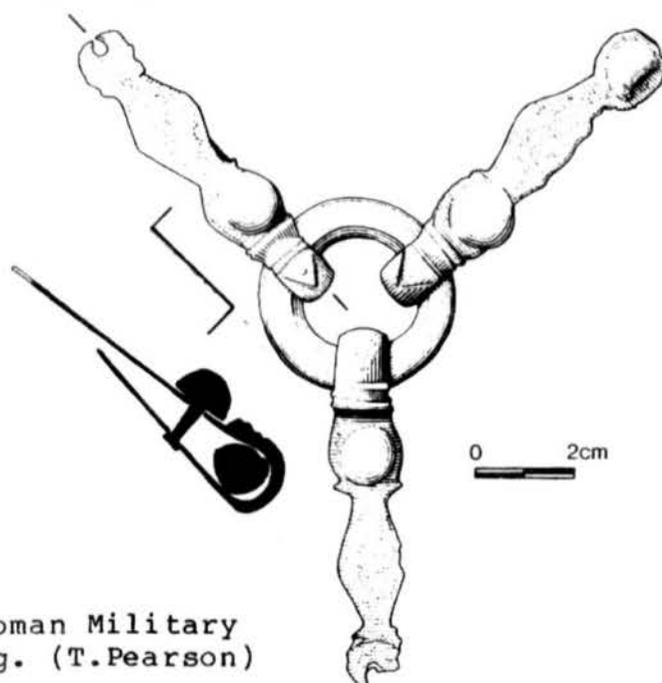


Fig. 4 Copper Alloy Roman Military Harness-Fitting. (T. Pearson)

Besides the material mentioned above there have been many other finds from the 1986 season. The largest category has been pottery, but there has also been a considerable amount of metalwork including coins, military equipment and weapons. Perhaps the most interesting find was a group of pieces of crucible and of fragments of moulds for casting decorative metalwork. Such material is not common, particularly on military sites. As well as man-made items, evidence for the environment of the site, for the food-supply and for agriculture in the area, has been recovered by sampling the soil to retrieve seeds and plant remains. The study of material from the mediaeval ovens and the Roman cess-pit should be particularly informative and rewarding.

**Participants:**

A.S.Esmonde Cleary (Project Director)  
 I.M.Ferris (Field Director)  
 J.Sterenbergh (Supervisor) and the BUFAU CP Archaeological Roving Team  
 R.Waller (Supervisor) and the Staffordshire County Council CP Archaeological Roving Team  
 M.Reid (Site Assistant) BUFAU Diploma Student  
 Students, Department of Ancient History and Archaeology, University of Birmingham  
 Local Volunteers  
 Boys from the Riverside Centre

Permission: Diocese of Lichfield

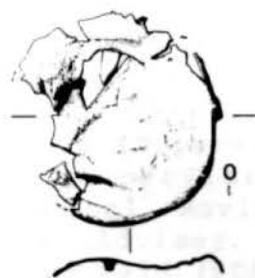


Fig. 5  
 Tinned Copper Alloy Military Mount. (T.Pearson)

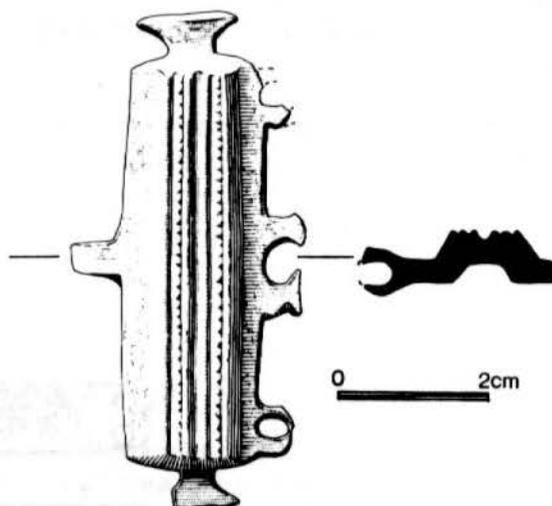


Fig. 6  
 Copper Alloy Military Belt Fitting. (T.Pearson)

DOVE FIRST SCHOOL, DOVE LANE.

In advance of building work for extensions to Dove First School a trench 2m. wide by 16m. long was dug to test the nature and survival of the archaeological deposits. There had been considerable disturbance from nineteenth- and twentieth-century allotment cultivation, and from late-mediaeval pit-digging. The line of the eastern defences of the late-first-century fort was discovered, overlain by a clay rampart as at the New Cemetery. Two phases of structures probably associated with the fort were detected, the later including a metalled surface and a large oven behind the rampart. In the mediaeval period the area seems to have had a long history of use for processing hides and other animal products. Cut into the Roman rampart was a series of pits containing quantities of waste bone and cattle horn-cores. This may indicate tanning and leather-working. These pits were associated with cobbled floors or working surfaces.

The finds also included a number of late-Saxon objects, and these, along with the other material, are being studied at Birmingham University with a view to a final report being submitted in April 1987.

Participants:

J.Symonds (Supervisor) & L.Watson (Supervisor) and Staffordshire County Council CP Archaeological Roving Team.  
I.M.Ferris (Adviser & Post-Excavation Supervisor).  
S.Butler (Post-Excavation Processing & Reporting) BUFAU Diploma Student  
M.Reid (Post-Excavation Processing & Reporting) BUFAU Diploma Student.

Permission: Staffordshire County Education Authority.

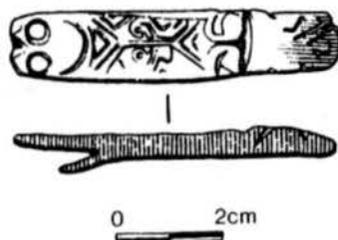


Fig. 7 Copper Alloy Saxon Strap-end. Ninth Century.  
(T.Pearson)

## ROCESTER FOOTBALL CLUB.

At the time of writing excavation on the site of the new pitch and clubhouse for Rocester Football Club is only just being completed, and the evidence has yet to be studied in detail.

Between the eastern side of the Tutbury mill and the river Dove, and north of the Rocester to Marston Montgomery road, lies a large irregularly-shaped field, currently under grass. It is on the southern part of this that the new pitch and clubhouse have been laid out. During grading of earthen banks in the field large quantities of Roman pottery were recovered by Pat Drayton and by Bob Meeson of the County Planning Department. They suggested that the Rocester Project should become involved. Access was allowed by Rocester Football Club and the landowner, with the proviso that the archaeological work should be within areas scheduled for disturbance in the development.

Four small trenches were dug across the line of a planned access road to the north of the present road. These revealed the metalled surface of what was probably the pre-Turnpike road. A trench across the line of a second proposed road, to the north, encountered only a post-mediaeval rubbish dump. Trenches were also dug across two earthworks in the field. One, a low curving bank, was sectioned in two places. The results were somewhat contradictory, but in one place the earliest phase of the bank was undoubtedly Roman. It was also shown that the bank had originally continued east-west across the field until partially destroyed some ten years ago. The area enclosed by this bank, the site of the new pitch, was subjected to a detailed geophysical survey. The second and larger bank, to the north, was sectioned in one place using a JCB. The bank was of a single build and contained Roman pottery in its make-up. But it may have been built in connection with the mill; certainly records show that earth from the centre of the village was brought here in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so the Roman pottery may have been derived from there. A detailed plan of the banks was made using an Electronic Distance Measurer.

### Participants:

J.Sterenber (Supervisor) and BUFAU CP Archaeological Roving Team  
R.Waller (Supervisor) and Staffordshire County Council CP  
Archaeological Roving Team  
I.M.Ferris (Adviser. Post-Excavation Supervisor)  
N.Jaffa & M.Reid (EDM Survey) BUFAU Diploma Students  
Dr.R.Barker (Geophysical Survey) Department of Geological  
Sciences, University of Birmingham

Permission: Mr.D.Hill, Rocester Football Club

## DISPLAY AND PRESENTATION

BUFAU considers the presentation of its work to the wider public to be an integral part of its duties. Through the generosity of JCB Excavators Ltd the former Bourne Methodist Chapel in the High Street was purchased and renovated as a Display Centre and as a base for the Rocester Project. Grants towards the building work were also made by Staffordshire County Council and East Staffordshire District Council, and Rocester Parish Council made a grant towards the cost of mounting the exhibition.

The exhibition details what is known of the development of Rocester, and displays the results of the current archaeological investigations along with some of the finds. The display was officially opened by Dr. Graham Webster OBE, and Martin Carver, the then Director of BUFAU, and remained open through July and August.

For 1987 it is intended to open the Centre from April to August, and it is hoped that the considerable amount of publicity the project has received in newspapers, magazines and on the radio will continue to attract large numbers of visitors.

### Participants:

C. Moss (Supervisor) and BUFAU CP Archaeological Display Team

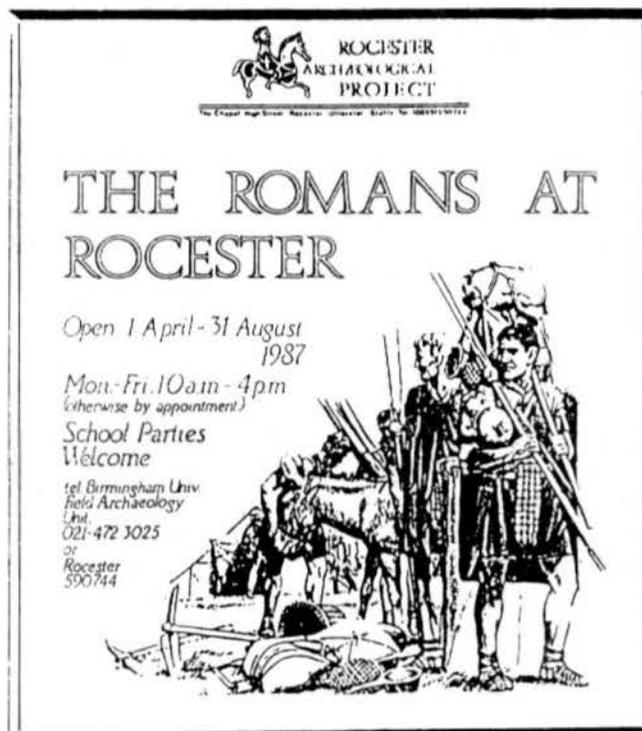


Fig. 8 Rocester Exhibition Poster, designed by the Display Team.

## THE 1987 SEASON

It is intended to carry out a further five months of excavation at the New Cemetery in 1987, from April to August. There are three main objectives: (i) to complete excavation of the rampart and the structures immediately to its rear: (ii) to extend the trench southwards to expose more of the barrack-block and to look for deposits associated with the earlier ditches: (iii) to open a trench adjacent to the north side of Dr. Webster's 1961 trench to examine the deposits which yielded late-Saxon material, and to elucidate the military structures he observed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all the project sponsors for the 1986-1987 work: JCB Excavators Ltd., English Heritage, Staffordshire County Council, East Staffordshire District Council, Rocester Parish Council and the Cole Charitable Trust. In addition to its financial sponsorship, JCB also greatly assisted the Project by the loan of machinery, and we would like to thank Michael Bradley and Will Turner for arranging this. The Planning Department of Staffordshire County Council through Ken Sheridan and Bob Meeson has helped the Project at every stage from its inception, and its role has been crucial. Again through the County, the Community Programme Agency has provided the services of its Archaeological Roving Team under the expert supervision of Ruth Waller, and managed by Bob Scowen who has helped at every stage of the excavation. The Birmingham Community Programme Agency provided the services of the BUFAU Roving Team led by Jon Sterenberg whose expertise in a number of fields was a never-failing wonder. The University of Birmingham, through BUFAU provided the invaluable managerial skills of Andrew Brooker-Carey and other central services. Students of the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology worked on the site for their 1986 Training Excavation.

In Rocester the Revd. Anthony Fothergill continued to take a great interest in the site, and we would like to thank him and his Parochial Church Council for their support and tolerance. On Rocester Parish Council we would like to thank the Chairman Cllr. Philip Atkin for his help. Finally we would wish to remember Cllr. Tony Hirst, who died during the 1986 season. Tony Hirst took a lifelong interest in the history of his village, whilst not neglecting the present or the future. Our presence owes a great deal to his efforts.

January 1987

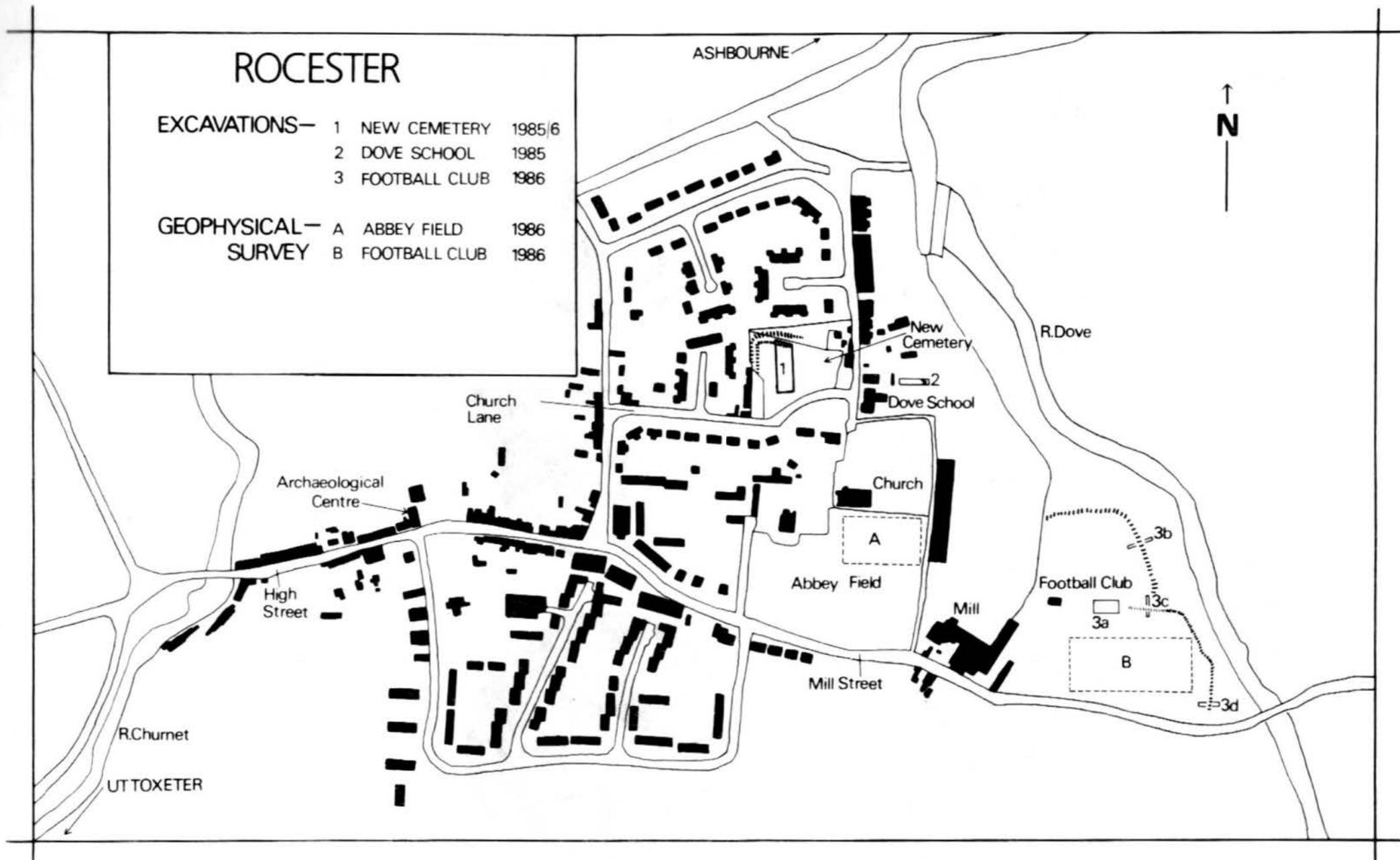


Fig. 2

Map of the Town showing Location of Excavations, Areas Surveyed and Position of the Archaeological Centre.

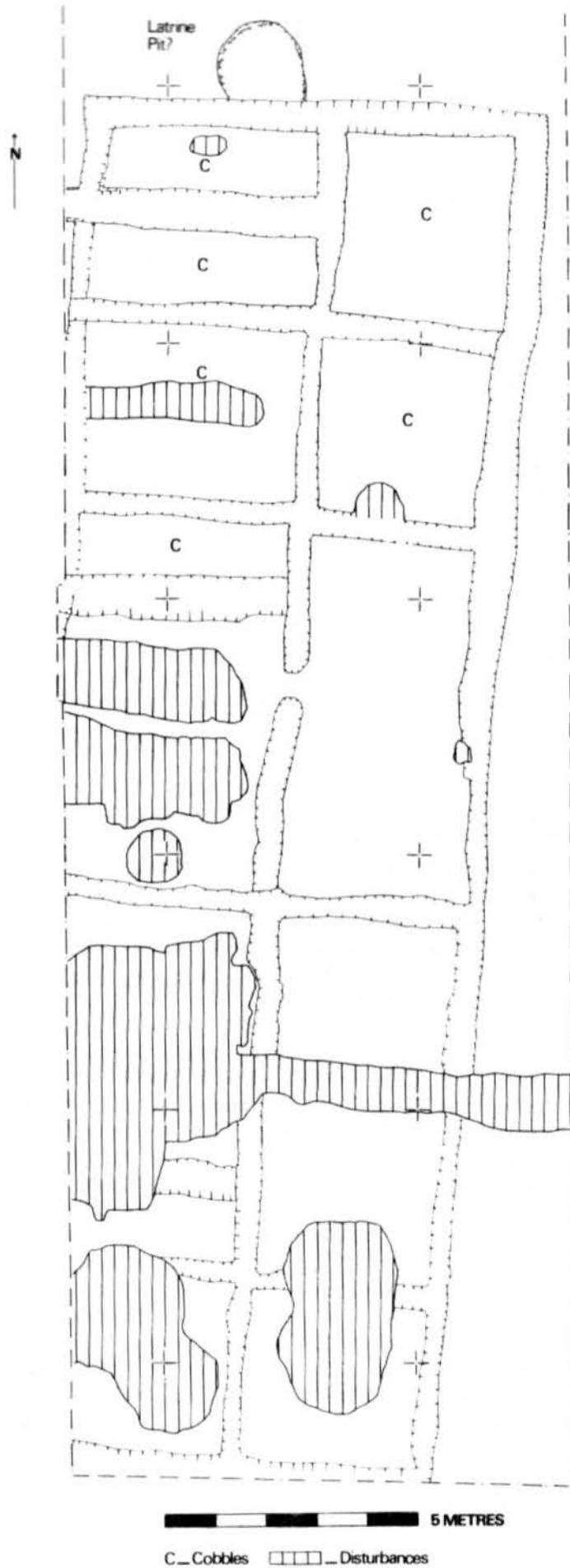


Fig. 3 Simplified Plan of the late-first-century Roman Barrack-Block on the New Cemetery site. (I.Ferris)