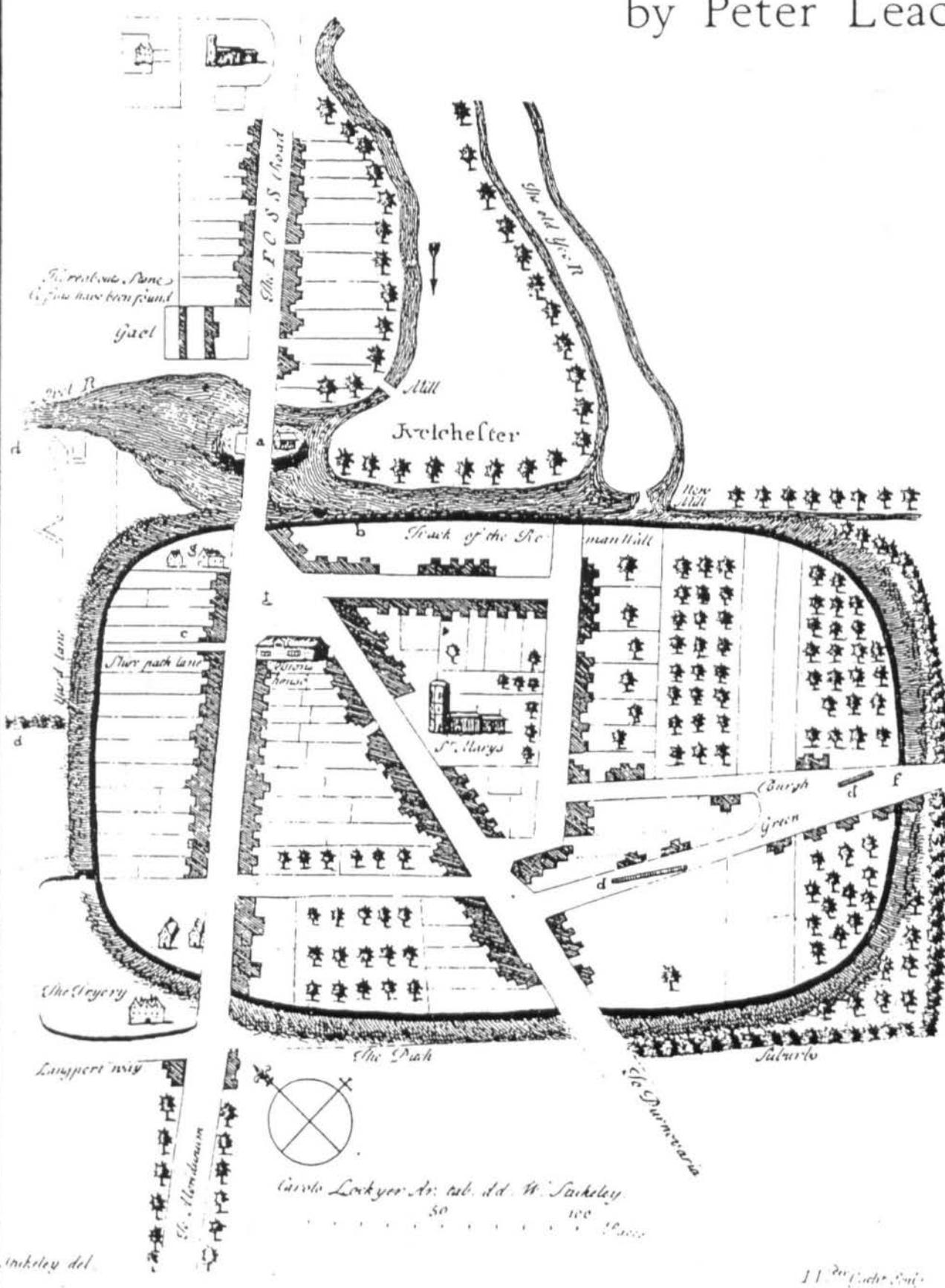


ILCHESTER Great Yard 1987

an archaeological evaluation

by Peter Leach



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

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit 1987

ILCHESTER GREAT YARD 1987

An interim report on archaeological excavations at
Castle Farm, Ilchester, Somerset

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1: Introduction and Acknowledgements

An evaluation of the archaeology in an area of the field Great Yard immediately to the west of Castle Farm, Ilchester, Somerset (NGR ST 520220) was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit. The project was arranged in conjunction with Somerset County Council on behalf of Trinity College, Cambridge, to provide an archaeological assessment of an area designated as Lot 6, prior to its sale for residential development. The evaluation took the form of excavations following on from an earlier and related project in 1985 involving neighbouring development plots of Castle Farm (Leach & Ellis 1985) and a geophysical survey by the Ancient Monuments Laboratory, Department of the Environment (now H.B.M.C.) in 1983 (Report no. G 25/83).

Six weeks of excavations directed by Peter Leach from late July until early September 1987 involved a field team from B.U.F.A.U., students from the University, and local volunteers from Ilchester and the neighbouring district. The following report provides an interim summary of the archaeological results and their implications, both environmental and academic. A more completely researched and illustrated report documenting this project will be prepared for publication in due course.

The excavations were sponsored principally by Trinity College Cambridge, and we are grateful to them and to their agents Bidwells, chartered surveyors of Cambridge, for assistance and permission, and to their tenants Messrs. T.R. and L.D. King for their forebearance. For additional financial support we would also thank Ilchester Relief in Need and Educational Charity, The Maltwood Fund of the Royal Society of Arts, The Somerset Archaeological Society and Somerset County Council, while Haynes Development Ltd. kindly provided accommodation facilities.

Many individuals were involved in the execution of this project in B.U.F.A.U. and in Somerset, both on and off the excavations; and it is gratifying to record the high level of interest and support from the local community. At the risk of offending anyone who gave their support I would single out my colleagues Peter Ellis for assistance on site and Ms Clare Grove for management of the finds and records from the excavation, Mr. and Mrs. D. Moxley and Mr. and Mrs. M. Penn for their frequent hospitality in Ilchester, and Mr. Bob Croft, Archaeological Officer, Somerset County Council; to them and to all who contributed to the project and its outcome, my sincere thanks.

2: Great Yard : The Site

The small portion of the field Great Yard proposed for development lies on the western margin of the built-up area of modern Ilchester and adjacent to a new extension of Priory Road (Fig. 1b). Excavations in 1985 established the successive alignments of Roman military and civil, and medieval, urban defences immediately east of Priory Road. Further discoveries in 1985 and earlier records suggested the existence of Roman and medieval suburbs close to the river frontage, possibly connected with waterfront and river port facilities.

Hints of historic suburban settlement and industrial evidence were less coherent further south, and regrettably there were no records of archaeological discoveries from the Priory Road housing estate built early in the 1970s. Great Yard is primarily a large area of water meadows on the south bank of the River Yeo, within which are still visible substantial earthwork features reflecting medieval and possibly earlier use and activities. The portion designated for development comprised approximately 3/4 of an acre of permanent pasture, now defined by residential development on three sides and by a recent flood alleviation bank to the west.

3: The Evaluation

A selective excavation strategy was the principal means whereby the archaeological assessment was achieved, although a geophysical survey commissioned in 1983 (*op cit*) was also available. Results from the latter were largely inconclusive due to extensive modern surface disturbances and debris associated with the adjacent farm outbuildings, although some apparently significant magnetic anomalies were recorded at deeper levels. Six areas were selected for excavation by means of rectangular trenches designated I - VI, and varying between 25 and 30m² each in area, to sample the available plot as extensively as possible (Fig. 2). A JCB mechanical excavator was employed to remove up to 0.40m of topsoil overburden from each area prior to the definition, excavation and recording of archaeological features and deposits from then on. In each area the priority was as complete an evaluation of the archaeology as possible, without necessarily achieving total removal of all remains. In the event the surviving extent of archaeological deposits was such that the latter objective would have been impossible given the time and resources available. Nevertheless information recovered in each area is regarded as being more than adequate to an understanding of the sequence, arrangement, and dynamics of the data contained in individual trenches, and of the site as a whole.

4: The Results

The information recorded in each of the excavated areas is summarised in trench order: I - VI (Fig. 2), and its significance in relation to Ilchester's historic settlements sequence assessed briefly in section 5 (below).

TRENCH I

Natural deposits of river alluvium were encountered in this trench at c 1.0m below the modern surface (c 12.0m AOD), and sealing an unknown depth of valley-bottom gravel at c 11.0m AOD beneath. These exposures were facilitated by means of the earliest recorded archaeological feature, a deep sub-circular pit cut to at least 1.6m below its contemporary surface, and over 3.0m in diameter. Previous discoveries of such features around Ilchester suggest an original function as quarries for the gravel raw material at lower levels, in this instance probably dug late in the 1st century AD. Filling much of the pit were deposits including predominantly 2nd-century material. By the 3rd century the still visible hollow was receiving debris from adjacent buildings

and associated domestic rubbish. This process evidently continued well into the 4th century AD. and possibly beyond, when such buildings were probably in decay and the depression was then obliterated.

Severely robbed foundations of a stone-footed building immediately to the west were excavated (Structure 1), almost certainly the source of much of the material recorded in the later levels of the pit. Part of an outer building-wall, aligned approximately N-S, was defined almost entirely by its original construction-trench c 0.70m wide. The end of an E-W alignment of pitched-stone foundations at approximately 90° to the external wall should mark an internal partition. Fragments of a mortar and stone-flagged floor were also recorded in the small exposed portions of the two rooms. Painted wall plaster fragments from the latest deposits sealing the pit to the east may belong to this building and were associated with late 4th-century AD. coinage.

At a much later stage the building was robbed down to, and sometimes including, its foundations, presumably following a period of abandonment and decay. Medieval pottery from the wall-robbing trenches suggest 12th-century activity, although there was no other evidence of medieval occupation or use in this area. Deposits of soil mixed with some domestic debris accumulated to a depth of c 0.40m above the latest Romano-British horizon, culminating in the post-medieval activities associated with Castle Farm and the formation of the modern turf and topsoil.

TRENCH II

Most of the features and deposits in Trench II were associated with Roman building sequences. The earliest horizon was evidently forming during the first half of the 2nd century AD., and perhaps earlier, upon the pre-Roman natural clay alluvium approximately 1.5m below the modern surface. No structural remains could be associated with this deposit, which was subsequently cut through by wall-foundation trenches of Structure 2. These represent a building defined by part of a robbed wall-trench aligned approximately SE-NW, c 0.70m wide, and the north end junction of a second wall surviving as pitched-stone foundations at 90° to the first and of similar width. No clear floor levels were identified although the SE-NW wall appears to have been external. Sub-floor and exterior make-up deposits associated with the building suggest a later 2nd-century origin.

Subsequently Structure 2 was demolished and its remains sealed beneath deposits associated with a realigned building (Structure 3) located to the north and mainly beyond the excavation. Only a short segment of a massive, exterior stone wall foundation-trench was seen, over 1.0m wide but totally robbed of its stone. Its E-W alignment was in closer conformity to that of the building remains in other trenches, and, like them, appears to represent 3rd and 4th-century AD. arrangements in the area.

The post-4th-century stone robbing was almost certainly medieval and the next clearly discernible event in the history of this area. No further evidence of medieval occupation or activity was recognised, and subsequent accumulations of soil and other debris are characterised by post-medieval artifacts.

TRENCH III

The evidence from Trench III was in many respects the most difficult to interpret, although a more complete excavation might have remedied this position somewhat. At c 12.30m AOD natural clay alluvium was found at a little over 1.0m below the modern surface. Cut into this the earliest feature recognised was part of a broad, V-profiled ditch, over 2.0m wide and c 0.70m deep, aligned approximately N-S. Finds from within its clay silt fills indicate virtual obliteration during the 2nd century AD. No accompanying bank was seen although this could have survived for longer as a visible element within the Roman suburban landscape, and probably lay to the west. A horizon sealed some 0.50m deep within the natural alluvium was visible in the lower sides of the ditch cut, defined primarily by charcoal concentrations. Regrettably this could not be dated or exposed more extensively, but probably related to an earlier prehistoric phase of activity, encountered and documented elsewhere around Ilchester (Leach 1987):

Successive deposits of later Roman origin were recorded to within 0.30m of the modern surface, but could not be clearly related to any perceived structural arrangements in this area. At least one well-defined gravel floor surface was found, as well as indications of banked material to the west. It was not possible to fully remove and expose these build-ups of material throughout the available area but finds from these deposits were indicative of later-2nd to 4th-century AD activity.

No medieval features or deposits were recognised but the upper levels of Roman stratigraphy were evidently truncated by an 18th-century cobbled yard surface which sealed them. This well-defined and compacted horizon of worn cobbles (seen also in Trenches IV and V) incorporated predominantly 18th-century artifacts, had been subjected to repair and re-surfacing, and featured in Trench III a pair of cart-wheel ruts. Its origins and associations are most probably with Castle Farm, the modern turf and topsoil level above being an accumulation only of the present century.

TRENCH IV

The archaeological sequence in this trench was the most complex of those investigated, although rarely more than 0.5m of Roman or medieval stratigraphy survived. Natural alluvium at c 12.0m AOD was barely penetrated, although its contaminated upper horizon, probably in formation during the 1st and early 2nd centuries AD, was well exposed less than 1.0m below the modern pasture.

The earliest coherent feature here was the eastern half of a stone-flagged and cobbled N-S road alignment. This was probably laid out sometime in the 2nd century AD and may have been re-surfaced or repaired before going out of use. Its subsequent redundancy was no more than a re-location, on the same alignment but at least 1.5m further to the west. Unfortunately the full width of this road and its successors was obscured by partial medieval robbing of the road metalling, but seems to have been approximately 3.0m. At least three successive metalled road surfaces were recorded in the more westerly location but secure dating evidence was sparse.

Accumulations of soil and debris along the eastern margin of the re-located road sealed its predecessor and were associated with at least two stone-built ovens in this area. Neither appeared to have been subjected to exceptionally high temperatures and they may have been connected with food processing - possibly as bread ovens. In a relatively limited area-excavation no associated buildings or structures were seen although the spreads of ash and charcoal in their vicinity and deriving from their use, were extensive. Pottery from within their latest backfills suggested use well into the 3rd century AD.

A further change of use in this area was marked by the layout of a stone-founded building - Structure 4 - on a N-S alignment but misaligned to the latest ?contemporary road phase to the west. A N-S aligned section of ?exterior wall c 0.20m-wide was severely robbed of its stone, only one fragment of pitched foundations surviving. A second E-W segment still retained its stone footings and one mortared bottom-wall course. In association with the latter was an extensive deposit of building debris including much painted wall plaster, pottery and coins, largely of the 4th century AD. This deposit presumably marks the desertion and eventual destruction of the late Roman suburb, probably after the 4th century.

Robbing of the stone wall-foundations was certainly an event of the 12th or 13th centuries, as seems to have been the extensive quarrying of Roman road metalling. Once again there was no other sign of medieval occupation or use of this former area of the Roman town. The cobbled yard surface noted in Trench III evidently continued across IV, of similar date and character, and truncating the earlier deposits and horizons immediately beneath it. Accumulations of turf, topsoil and other material above were clearly of relatively recent origin.

TRENCH V

Following the removal of post-Roman deposits, efforts here were concentrated upon the investigation of a large industrial feature occupying most of the 5 x 5m excavation. In its earliest phase this apparently originated as a sub-circular pit over 3.0m in diameter and cut c 2.0m-deep through the underlying natural deposits of alluvium and gravel (top at c 12.0m AOD). It resembled closely the pit in Trench I, and a similar purpose - the extraction of gravel - is suspected. Following some initial silting the lower half of the pit was used for domestic refuse disposal, and large quantities of pottery and animal bone were recovered. This was a well-sealed group of material, apparently deposited before the middle of the 2nd century AD, and would repay full recovery and analysis.

A change of use during the 2nd century was marked by the insertion of a lining of heavily burnt limestone and clay. This extended as a horizontal platform to the south and suggests that the pit was modified for use as a large kiln or oven. No slag or other readily identifiable waste products were recovered from the areas excavated although samples of ash and charcoal may indicate the fuels used in firing and throw more light upon this feature's function. At least two subsequent phases of re-use were clearly identified, represented by successive re-linings of the pit with compacted stone and gravel. Neither appeared to have been burnt in situ although deposits of ash

and burnt lime were associated with the second phase. The final phase of massive stone and compacted gravel lining extended southwards to form another horizontal, laid stone platform, this time unburnt. Another platform of pitched stone to the east may have been associated and contemporary. Material from the final phase of use and infill suggest that the whole sequence of activity belonged within the 2nd century AD.

Because of the depth and complexity of deposits here it was unfortunately impossible to excavate more than half of this multiphase structure. The full character of these well-preserved industrial features, and thus perhaps a clearer understanding of their original function, would repay further excavation here. No later Roman phases of building or other activity were recognised, although 4th-century coinage and pottery was recovered from disturbed upper levels.

The post-medieval cobbled yard surface of Trenches III and IV extended across this area, sealing and truncating the upper levels of Romano-British stratigraphy at less than 0.40m below the modern turf and topsoil of Great Yard.

TRENCH VI

Located in the NW corner of the plot, the archaeological sequence in this trench was the least complicated encountered during the evaluation. A pre-Roman natural clay alluvium was reached at the limit of excavation here c 0.70m below the modern surface at c 12.0m AOD. A relatively thin zone of disturbance sealed that horizon, probably accumulating from at least the 2nd century AD. At some time during the ?3rd century a V-profiled drainage or boundary ditch was cut across this area on a N-S alignment. The sparsity of finds from its fills suggest that adjacent contemporary activity or occupation was slight. Early in the 4th century, at a late stage in the infill and presumed abandonment of this ditch, an adult inhumation burial was inserted. The remains were moderately well-preserved although partly disturbed by a later ditch cut, and represent an extended young ?male adult burial aligned N-S along the ditch axis. Iron nails around the body suggest the former presence of a wooden coffin but no other accompanying material was recorded.

At a later date a ditch of similar character and axis was cut just to the west. This impinged upon the Romano-British ditch and burial southwards, and may have been a medieval boundary. Above both ditches an extensive but undifferentiated deposit of stony humic soil contained mainly 3rd and 4th century AD material but was probably for the most part a post-Roman formation. The upper horizons comprised turf and topsoil of more recent origin, but there was no sign of the 18th-century cobbled yard seen elsewhere to the south.

5: Conclusions

Almost all the discoveries made in this area relate to suburban development and arrangements on the western outskirts of Lendiniae - the Romano-British town of Ilchester. Excepting the hint of an earlier prehistoric presence noted in Trench III, the primary phase of activity

appeared to be the excavation of pits late in the 1st century AD. Such excavations are widely documented elsewhere around Ilchester in suburban contexts, and are presumed to have been for the purpose of gravel extraction as a building raw material (Leach 1982, 10 and 71). Whether this was in a military or civil context is impossible to determine, although both are likely. The examples encountered in Great Yard both contained extensive deposits of early 2nd-century date, and although incompletely excavated provide valuable and so far rare assemblages of artifactual and environmental material from a relatively early phase of the town. The substantial ?boundary ditch excavated in Trench III may be contemporary with the pits or their infill and seems to mark the earliest definition of alignments which determine the layout of this suburb throughout the Roman period.

What seems also to have been have a key element was the N-S road alignment in Trench IV, re-defined and maintained throughout. This road may be one of several serving the suburb, possibly extending from the exit of a postulated West Gate to the town out towards potential port facilities on the river frontage to the north. To what extent these western suburbs were buildt up before the 3rd century AD is uncertain. Domestic rubbish disposal and the location of ?semi-industrial hearths and ovens (pottery kilns were also found in an earlier service trench in this area) suggest a diversity of 2nd-century activity. Only one identified building (Structure 2 in Trench II) was potentially of this phase, but not apparently laid out on the otherwise predominant N-S axis.

The 3rd and 4th centuries AD see the maximum development, with the erection of stone-founded buildings conforming once again to the N-S site axis. Painted wall plaster and substantial quantities of tessellated paving fragments (neither recovered *in situ*) suggest a degree of sophistication and prosperity in these western suburbs by then. To what extent this was linked with earlier activity or was representative of changes in the status or fortunes of this area, is difficult to assess. Coins were relatively abundant in these periods and attest to continuity of occupation here at least until the end of the 4th century.

There was nothing in the archaeological record to document the long interregnum between urban decline and eventual abandonment of Ilchester as a town in the post-Roman period, and its medieval revival. Roman stone buildings and the gravel streets were certainly being exploited as quarries by the 12th century, but there was no other evidence of medieval suburban expansion or other activities in the area. In the post-medieval period the sites of what may by then have been overgrown ruins or earthworks, were levelled and in places sealed by extensive yards and areas of hardstanding. This phase almost certainly relates to the adjacent Castle Farm during the 18th century, the operation of which only ceased during the late 1970s.

6: Recommendations

Archaeologically the value of this evaluation has been high relative to its modest extent and resources. For the first time we have something approaching a coherent picture of Roman Ilchester's western development; some details of an important suburb whose history, character and extent have hitherto been largely guesswork. Of particular interest is the demonstration

of diversity, with perhaps less emphasis upon agriculture, within a comparable chronological and developmental framework already established for the southern suburbs at least; and the divergence of layout from that which seems to determine much of the intra-mural settlement and its street grid - the Foss Way (Leach, forthcoming Part 1). It can only be a matter for regret that the opportunity was lost early in the 1970s to record the undoubtedly much greater area of this suburb destroyed or fragmented beneath the housing estate to the south. Given these circumstances and the impending proposals for development, what further archaeological response might now be appropriate?

i) Preservation:

At this stage total preservation of the site upon archaeological grounds alone, may not be viable or worthwhile. There is evidence to suggest that substantial areas of intact archaeological deposits still survive in remaining and apparently unthreatened areas of Great Yard lying outside the flood alleviation bank. It is probable that the western Roman suburbs also extend out beyond the Priory Road estate along a suspected western exit from the town and still visible as a low earthwork in the adjacent field (Long Yard). This hypothesis remains to be tested.

Consideration should therefore be given to means whereby these remaining areas of archaeological potential can be protected from future damage. The 'western exit' suburban earthwork is enclosed by the flood alleviation bank and could theoretically be considered suitable for further development. Finally it should be borne in mind that the necessarily destructive nature of the evaluation itself must diminish somewhat the value of the area so examined as an intact archaeological site.

ii) Development Implications:

Given the expectation that development will proceed, a strategy for an archaeological response to the specific threat thus posed to the site is now required. The completed evaluation has amply demonstrated an archaeological potential here, but has by no means neutralised or written it off. To formulate an appropriate response to the development itself a more detailed brief of the proposals is required, although the archaeological evaluation already provides a clear lead. Should the outline proposals for six residential units on this site still stand, the principal threat to proven archaeological deposits will arise from sub-surface excavation of service trenches and building foundations. Wherever this is required more or less total destruction of deposits appears unavoidable, since Romano-British remains lie for the most part within 1.0m and 0.40m of the modern ground surface.

iii) Archaeological Response:

To provide an adequate archaeological response to the anticipated threats two main options suggest themselves: a) minimise the damage, and or b) adequately record what is destroyed.

a) Minimising the damage caused by foundations might be overcome by alternative building methods. Rafted foundations could achieve this result providing that preparatory disturbances penetrated to no more than 0.30m below present ground surface. The excavation of service trenches would still be required and thus a degree of archaeological recording.

b) Adequate archaeological recording of both foundation and service trenches overlap in part with option a), although the archaeological input is necessarily greater. Ideally a combination of mechanical and archaeological excavation by hand, in co-ordination with recording and finds collection, could be instituted at an early stage in the development. This could be undertaken in accordance with contractor's and building inspector's specifications, but at the same time enabling an adequate record to be made of the archaeological features and deposits so removed. For a recent successful example of this applied elsewhere in Ilchester see Ellis and McDonnell 1987.

Previous experiences in Ilchester, and on almost any other archaeological site highlight the deficiencies of a response which merely permits a watching brief during contractors earthmoving operations. Some information will usually be recovered but its value as a contribution to the comprehension of the archaeological site and its remains is generally low. The circumstances surrounding a recent development at Almshouse Lane in Ilchester demonstrate these inadequacies well (Leach forthcoming, II.5).

iv) Proposals:

Assuming the successful approval of development proposals some degree of further archaeological disturbance will be inevitable on this site. To combat this, provision for adequate recording by the means suggested in 6,iii b), above should be built into the planning approval. The cost of this provision should be borne by the development. The scale of the archaeological response will of course be dependent upon the degree of below-ground disturbance, and consultation with the County Council's archaeological officer would determine its precise terms and costing.

In conclusion it is worth re-emphasizing both the considerable archaeological interest of this site, and the especial value of properly recorded excavation necessitated by its development. In the context of information already obtained by this evaluation the value of further discoveries to be anticipated from a follow-up exercise, as here proposed, would be greatly enhanced. Indeed the additional information itself would add greatly to the archaeological knowledge of the site, and make a significant popular and academic contribution to our understanding of Ilchester's heritage.

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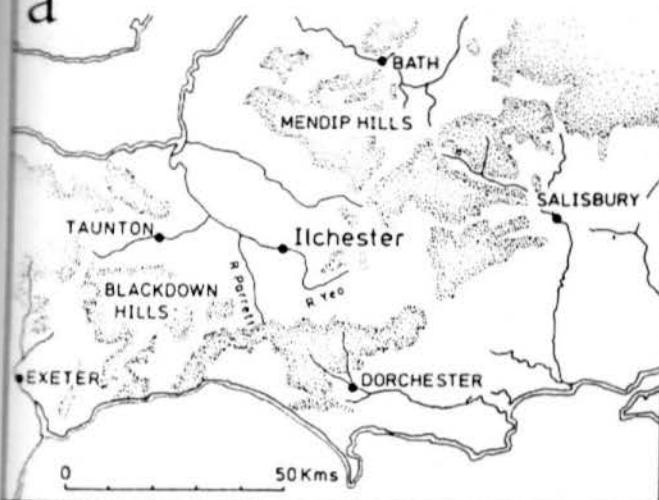
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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ILCHESTER Great Yard 1987

a



Northover

Foss Way

River Yeo

b

GREAT
YARD

1985 EXCAVATION

ROMAN ROAD

V
I
II
III
IV

Priory Road

CASTLE
FARM

1985
EXCAVATION

SITE OF WEST GATE ?

Zone of Roman and Medieval
town defences

High St

Church St

SITE OF SOUTH GATE

50

0

50 m.

Fig. 1

ILCHESTER Great Yard 1987

Excavation Trenches and Principal Features

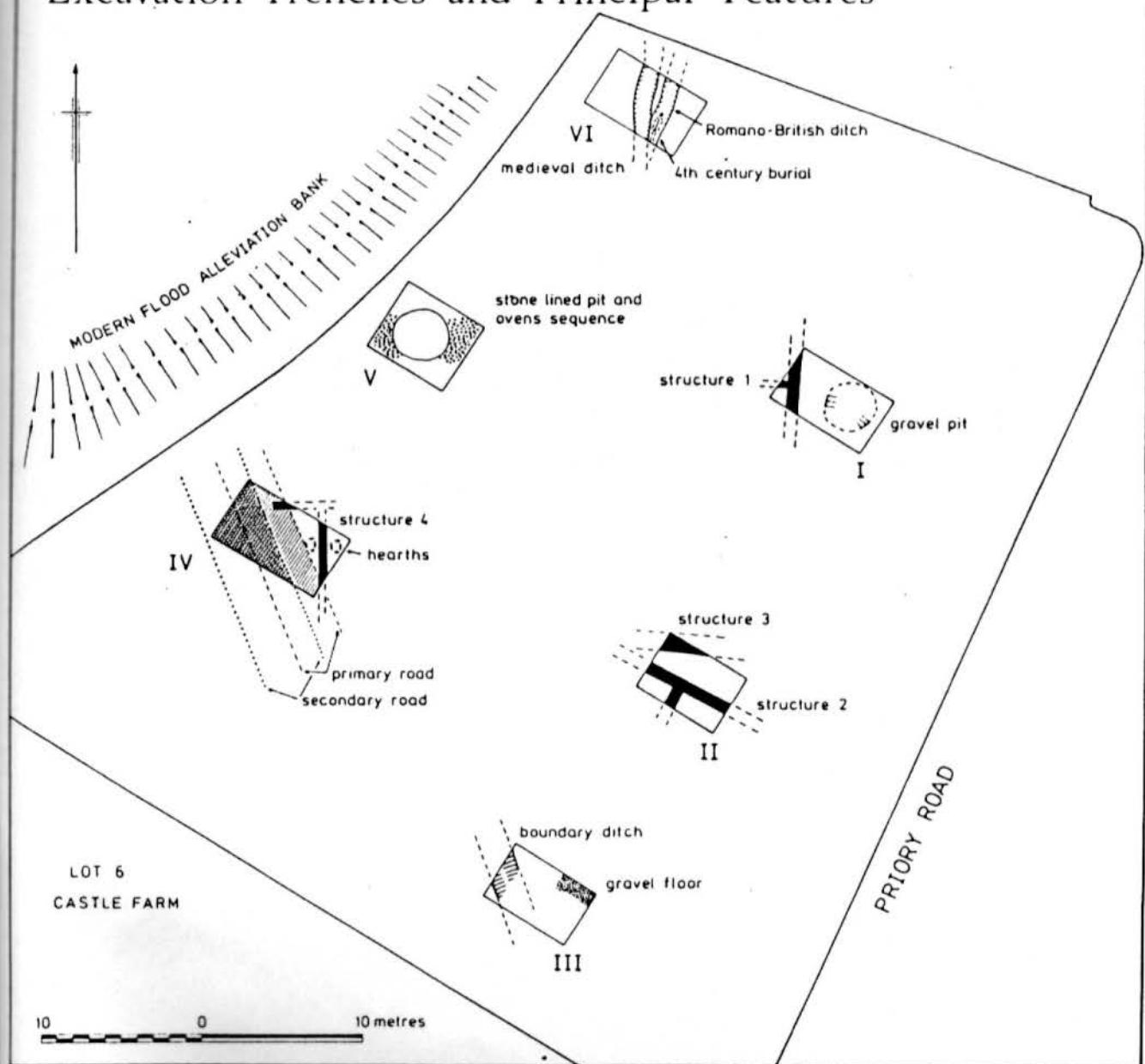


Fig. 2