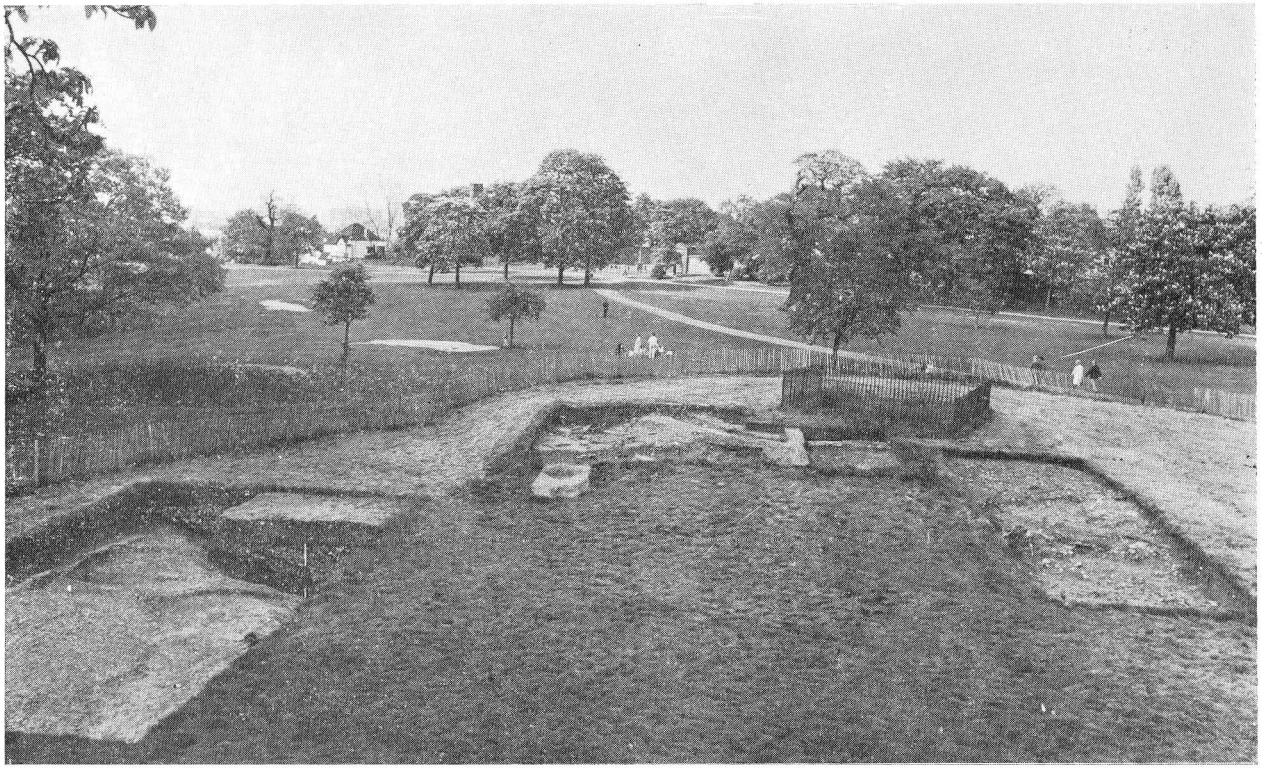

Fig. 1: Site, looking north towards the Thames.

(Photo: John Earp)

Excavations in Greenwich Park 1978-79

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MANY VISITORS to Greenwich Park will have noticed, in the eastern part of the grounds, a small railed enclosure which has a sign pointing to it inscribed with the words "Roman Remains". Within the enclosure can just be discerned a small patch of tesserae, part of a Roman floor which was found amidst much excitement in 1902, and which has thereafter been kept on view to the public.

This pavement lies on top of a low mound at +43.6m O.D. (+143ft O.D.). The mound is close to the northern edge of the high ground formed of the Lower Tertiary Blackheath pebble beds, at a spot which provides extensive views over the Thames and the low-lying land to the north (see Fig. 1).

Until quite recently the remains were within an impressive group of closely set old elms, thought to have been planted *c.* 1650, but age, and in the last few years the ravages of Dutch elm disease, have resulted in their destruction. The realisation that replanting might cause further destruction to whatever survived of the Roman site, led the authorities to decide that a fresh examination should take place. Consequently the Department of the Environment invited the Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Excavation Committee to undertake some exploratory excavations which were carried out between September 1978 and July 1979. The aim was to discover what Roman levels survived, to establish the stratigraphy of the site, and if possible to relate earlier discoveries to the current work.

The original investigations seem to have been the shared responsibility of the Park Superintendent,

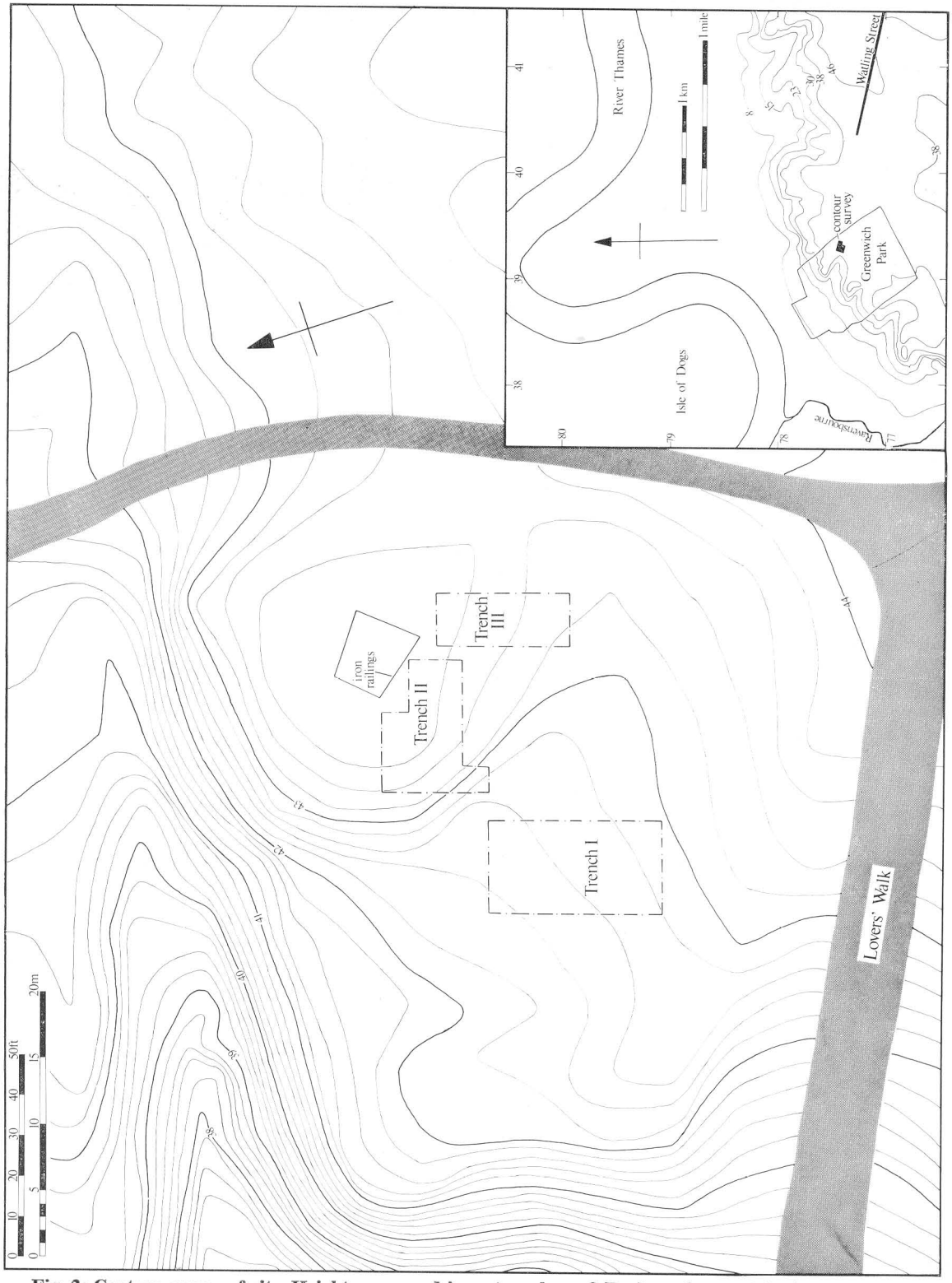

Fig. 2: Contour survey of site. Heights expressed in metres above O.D. (top of mound is +143.5ft O.D.)

A. D. Webster, and a prominent local antiquary Herbert Jones, an East India merchant, whose obituary records his involvement in excavations at Carlisle and Silchester as well as at Greenwich[1].

Evidently Webster, who was greatly interested in the history of the park, was the original finder of the site, which came to light when the mound was probed with an iron bar on February 6th, 1902. This led to the recovery of "several tesserae and cement"[2]. Jones was immediately summoned and examination of the site proceeded at various times in 1902 and 1903 seemingly under their joint authority. From the promptly published but separate accounts of their work[3] it appears that as many as three separate floors were uncovered as well as a considerable amount of building debris. Nearly 400 Roman coins were also found as well as pottery, parts of inscriptions and a fragment of statuary. Unfortunately there is little else that can be regarded as unambiguous; the reports differ in detail and are imprecise. Webster produced no plans, but did suggest that there were two successive buildings, the earlier one having been at least partially destroyed in a fire, perhaps as early as the reign of Hadrian. Jones gave a plan of three floors but claimed that no evidence of their temporal relationship was found. Floor 1, later fenced in with iron railings, was recorded as 3 feet higher than Floors 2 and 3. Jones' detailed drawing gave no clue as to their orientation, and his attempt to relate them to the contemporary Ordnance Survey 25 inch map appears to have been unsuccessful: the position of the railed enclosure on later OS maps does not tie up with the position of any of the floors he showed. It is not surprising that Beryl Platts wrote in 1969 "it is obvious from the tone of the two stories that each thought the other was making the correct archaeological notes, that were essential if the excavation was to have value"[4]. Indeed it may be that few records were made; none appear to have survived in 1924 when F. C. Elliston Erwood made an unsuccessful search during his preparations for an article on the pottery from the site. He concluded that in the digging "no attention was paid to the important matter of stratification"[5], and certainly within the published reports no attempt was made to classify finds according to contexts.

What was the nature of the building found by Jones and Webster in the park? Though Jones was too cautious to come to a conclusion, Webster, relying on the large number of coins, was of the opinion that it "may have been a pay place for soldiers, a canteen or the residence of an officer connected with the mint"[6].

Professor Haverfield was confident that the discovery signified the location of *Noviomagus* — a posting station referred to in the Antonine Itinerary as lying between *Londinium* and *Vagniacae* (Springhead) on Watling Street. Yet the site, lying only 5 miles from the City is clearly too near to account for the 10 mile journey as given in the Itinerary unless a considerable textual corruption has occurred. Also, although the building lies near to the line of Watling Street if it is projected north-west from Shooters Hill, it seems more likely that the road was diverted south-west well before it reached the park to avoid the mouth of the Ravensbourne.

Indeed the apparent isolation and hill-top setting, together with the presence of inscriptions, statuary and the quantity of coinage allow a non-secular interpretation. Wheeler wrote in 1928 it "may or may not have been a shrine"[7], while Lewis, in 1966, included it within his corpus of temples in Roman Britain[8]. He could not classify it further, largely because the excavations had provided so little information as to the plan of the structure and its environs.

1978-79 Excavations

Prior to excavation a contour survey of the area of the mound was prepared. Fig. 2 shows the mound on fairly level ground, defined to the north and south-west (the line of Lovers' Walk) by natural valleys; the steep scarp to the west may be an artificial feature.

Three trenches were dug, all of which encountered the large root systems of the old elm trees. These roots, animal burrows, and erosion had destroyed some of the stratigraphy. The mound had been further disturbed by a number of late pits and trenches, some cutting deeply into it: these apparently were the results both of post-medieval landscaping and the archaeological excavations of the earlier part of this century.

As the current excavation was conducted for exploratory purposes only, it was decided, for the most

1 *Soc. Antiq. Lond. Proc.* 2nd Series XXIX (1916-1917), 159.

2 A. D. Webster, *Greenwich Park* (1902), 68.

3 Webster, *op. cit.* in note 2, 67-100; Herbert Jones, 'Roman remains in Greenwich Park', *Home Counties Magazine* Vol 5 (1903), 49-55, 223-226.

4 Beryl Platts, 'A Lost City of South London', *Country Life* (Nov 20th 1969), 334

5 F. C. Elliston Erwood, 'Roman remains from Greenwich Park', *Trans. Greenwich and Lewisham Antq. Soc.* Vol III No. 2 (1925), 63.

6 Webster, *op. cit.* in note 2, 71

7 RCHM (England) *An inventory of the Historical Monuments in London Vol III Roman London* (1928), 151.

8 M. J. T. Lewis, *Temples in Roman Britain* (1966) 126.

part, to leave any surviving Roman strata. Therefore, only erosion deposits and intrusive features were removed so as to reveal the top of those strata, and only in selected small areas were Roman levels dug. Nevertheless, despite the earlier disturbances and the restricted nature of the 1978-79 work, it was found that enough Roman strata survived on the mound to ascertain the sequence of deposits.

The excavation succeeded in establishing the plan of part of a square or rectangular building with a raised tesselated floor. In addition it proved the existence of an earlier building, also with a raised floor and with a similar ground plan. Finally it revealed a deep natural channel, probably pre-Roman in origin, lying south-west of the mound.

The Channel

Trench I was located on level ground south-west of the mound and was dug for the purpose of investigating the ground surfaces contemporaneous with building remains on the mound itself. No such surfaces survived due to post-Roman erosion of deposits into the deep channel which cut across the north-eastern corner of the trench (see Fig. 3). Although the channel had been finally backfilled in landscaping, probably earlier this century, its line can possibly be traced from the surveyed contour plan (Fig. 2) as running from the south-east along the southern and western flanks of the mound. It presumably then ran into the still-open valley which cut across the northern edge of the mound.

Both the channel and the deeper-cut valley to the north are likely to have been formed naturally by erosion of the Blackheath gravels and sands along spring lines which occur at the boundary of the Blackheath and underlying Woolwich Beds. It is difficult to date these eroded features; though it is assumed that the cutting back which created them started in the pre-Roman period, the processes of erosion continued well after the building on the mound went out of use. If the features are indeed pre-Roman in origin this would imply that the building had natural boundaries to the north, west and south-west.

Pre-Roman Soil

A buried soil, predating the buildings, was found under the mound in the north-east corner of Trench II. The soil type, taken with the hilltop location of the site, suggests a pre-Roman heathland environment[9].

Roman Features

Trenches II and III were dug on the southern flanks of the mound in the area where, it was assumed, Jones and Webster had done most of their work in 1902 and 1903. This now does not seem to have been the case.

Phase 1: Construction deposits lay directly over the buried soil. The line of a wall *c.* 0.40m (1ft 4ins) wide aligned roughly east-west was found at the east end of Trench II (see Fig. 3). The wall probably had flint footings with clay and timber superstructure. The foundation had been comprehensively robbed out (and the stone no doubt reused in the later building). Clay together with much painted wall plaster had been backfilled into the robber trench and used to make up the ground level for the tesselated floor of the later building.

Sands and gravels had been dumped to the north and south of the wall. It is assumed that the surface to the north of the wall, which was *c.* 0.60m (2ft) higher than that to the south, was the internal floor of the building (as was clearly the case with the later structure). Nothing was found in the small area excavated to indicate that the building had more than an earth floor.

Excavation of a narrow strip along the western side of Trench III revealed the sequence of deposits south of the building. From *c.* 2m (6ft 6ins) south of the wall, gravel metalling had been laid and this extended south for at least 5m (16ft 3ins), beyond which erosion had removed the Roman levels. This metalling had been renewed at intervals and may represent a pathway or part of a forecourt to the building.

A date of *c.* A.D. 100 may be tentatively suggested for the erection of the building. The evidence for this comes from a burnt deposit lying in a hollow in the natural sands and sealed by the metalling. The deposit contained flints (probably construction debris) and pottery dating to the end of the 1st century.

The first phase of metalling was cut by a gully (A) *c.* 0.40m (1ft 4ins) wide and *c.* 0.20m (8ins) deep. The alignment of this gully was difficult to establish accurately because of root disturbance. Evidence for some kind of standing structure on the line of the gully is suggested by the northern termination of a second phase of gravel metalling at the gully. How this structure may have related to the wall *c.* 2.70m (8ft 10ins) to the north is unclear.

Further south were two gullies (D and E, Fig. 3). Both were apparently shallow features though calculation of their original depths and relationships to the stratified sequence on the mound was not possible due to the erosion of contemporaneous ground surfaces. As both gullies contained early 2nd century pottery they may belong to Phase 1.

There is no direct evidence as to the terminal date of the early building. Construction of the later

9 Analysis of the soil profile was carried out by Peter Fisher.

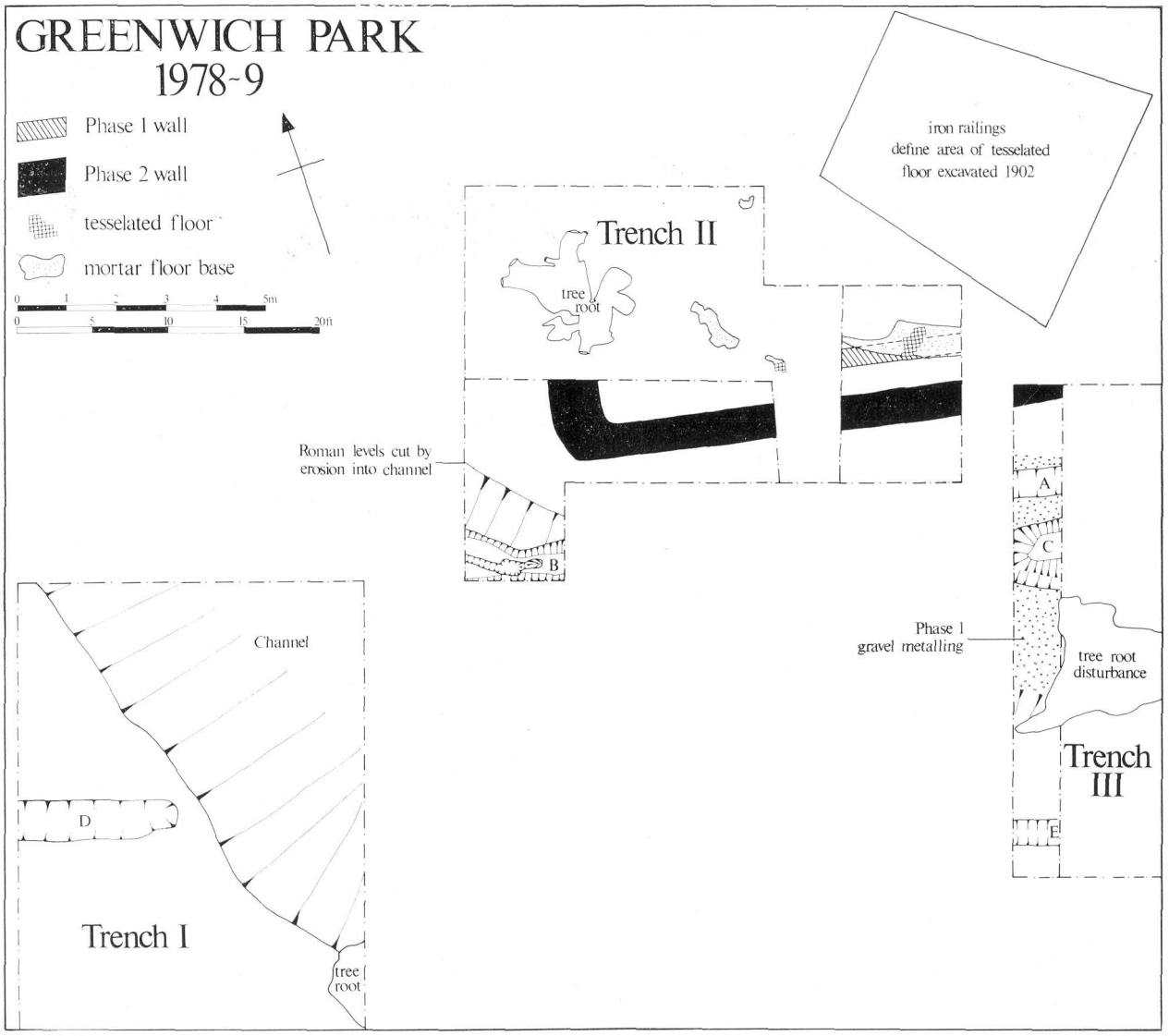

Fig. 3: Site plan showing Roman features.

building appears to have followed directly on the demolition of its predecessor for debris from that demolition seems to have been used to make up the ground level for the later floor, and construction surfaces for the phase 2 wall were present within the backfill of the phase 1 wall robber trench.

Phase 2: A larger area of the later building was found (see Fig. 3). The plan may have been substantially the same as that of the earlier one: the south walls were on the same alignment and both had raised internal floors. The southern wall was traced for a length of *c.* 10m (32ft 6ins), the south-west corner of the building was found at the west end of Trench II, and the return of the western wall to the north was followed for *c.* 2m (6ft 6in). As with the earlier structure the walls had been extensively robbed leaving only a few flints and pebbles set in mortar — the very base of the wall foundations. The later building appears to have been more substantial than the earlier: its south and west walls were *c.* 0.75m (2ft 6ins) and *c.* 1m (3ft 3in) wide respectively. From the material backfilled into the robber trench it seems that the walls had a flint core faced with ragstone. Painted wall plaster was also found in the fill of the robber trench.

Part of a tesselated floor, composed of plain red

tesserae set in a mortar base, was found at the eastern end of Trench II sealing the robber trench of the earlier wall (Fig. 4). Other smaller patches of flooring were found north of the south wall but over most of the area excavated the floor had been removed either by erosion or intrusive features. This tesselated floor constitutes a raised floor, *c.* 0.60m (2ft) above the external ground surface.

Little can be said concerning the period of use of the later building, which might not have been constructed until the middle of the 3rd century or later. Five coins found in earth layers probably contemporaneous with the later building, adjacent to its south-west corner, date from the later 3rd century to the mid-4th century.

2 - 2.50m (6ft 6in - 8ft 2in) south of the south wall were two lengths of deep-cut gullies *c.* 1.50m (5ft) deep (B and C, Fig. 3). Although the sector of gully (C) found in Trench III was butt-ended at the west it is thought to be part of the same feature as that found further west as the fill was the same and they were both cut to the same depth. There were post settings and narrow slots through the base of gully B.

Stratification suggested that the gullies postdated the construction of the later building. However although there was a good deal of building material, including some architectural stone fragments, in their fill, the absence of any tesserae suggests that the gullies predate its destruction. Three coins were found in the gullies — the latest an issue of Julian (AD 361-364).

The function of the gullies is difficult to determine. The location of gully B, possibly in the Roman period, on the north-eastern edge of the natural channel close to the south-west corner of the building might suggest that post settings and slot took a revetment of boards held in place by posts retaining the channel edge. However, this explanation cannot apply in the case of gully C which is some way north of the presumed line of the channel. It is possible that the two gullies were dug as extended post pits to take a series of large timber uprights. As only a short length of each was found it is uncertain whether their line, and therefore that of a conjectured line of posts, was concentric with the building.

The date at which the second building went out of use is uncertain. Activity on the site may have continued until at least *c.* A.D. 400 because coins of up to that date were recovered by Jones and Webster. The latest coin found in the fill of the robber trenches in the 1978-79 excavation was of mid-4th century date but it is possible that the removal of the walls occurred in the post-Roman period.

Conclusions

Evidence for two phases of building on the site has been established by the 1978-79 excavation. Though only a limited amount of material directly useful for dating was obtained it can be suggested that the first building was erected *c.* AD 100, while its successor might have been put up in the middle of the 3rd century.

That there were two structural phases clearly tallies more with Webster's account of the original excavation than it does with Jones'. Webster also suggested that at least part of the first building had burnt down, although no indications of destruction by fire were obtained in the recent work.

It is virtually certain that the tesselated floor found in 1978-79 is from the same building as the one uncovered and displayed by Jones and Webster. The area which they enclosed forms the only part of the original excavation which can be located with certainty and it is unclear where they found the other two floors. These, according to Jones, lay between 15ft and 30ft distant from the tesselated floor and only their "rough concrete" bases remained *in situ*[10]. They were also apparently some 3ft lower than the tesselated floor though not necessarily belonging to a different structural phase. It would appear that these floors lay to the east of the mound: the recent investigation suggests that the now filled-in channel ran to the south and west, probably joining the valley that is still visible to the north. It also seems probable that whatever flat ground there was to the south, between the mound and the channel, was outside the building (see Fig. 3). The lower floors therefore, which might belong to either phase of the building, were perhaps separate chambers or part of a range of rooms, set at a lower level to the east. As the easiest access to the building was from the east it might also be inferred that the entrance was located there.

Interpretation of the function of the building relies on its setting (an apparently isolated hill-top), its architectural features, and the nature of the finds. They do not suggest it can be classified either as a villa or a military signal station. The fragments of inscriptions, the statue, and the large number of coins from the original excavation might respectively be treated as evidence of dedications, cult figure and offerings, and have already led to the suggestion that the building was a temple. The 1978-79 work provides additional support for this interpretation for it has shown that the central building at least was raised so that it stood on a low platform, that it was square or rectangular in plan, and that it probably had its entrance to the east.

10 Jones, *op. cit.* in note 3, 49 and 224.

Fig. 4: Trench II looking north-west. The robber trenches of the south walls of both earlier and later buildings are visible, the former sealed by the later building's tesselated floor.

(Photo: John Earp)

All these features are common attributes of what are termed 'Romano-Celtic' temples.

If the building can be thus classified, then the walls found in the recent work were probably the external ones, and belonged to two phases of the ambulatory — the enclosed passage around the central chamber or *cella*. Both ambulatory and *cella* floors may have been tesselated; the floor found in the recent excavation may have been within the ambulatory while that discovered in the 1902-03 excavation may have belonged to the *cella*. The other floors located by Jones and Webster could have belonged to annexes or subsidiary shrines east of the main structure. Little can be said of the other features, but conceivably gullies D and E could have been southern boundaries of the *temenos* or sacred area during the early phase.

It seems certain that replanting on the mound and in its vicinity would adversely affect what remains of the site. Much could be established concerning the building's layout and history by large scale excavations which need not necessarily take place in the immediate future. It is now up to the authorities to decide what course of action would be most appropriate.

Acknowledgements

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