

1973

Exeter Excavation 1971-1973

1. St. Mary Major

The excavations in Cathedral Close were completed in late October, 1972 when a series of frosts made it necessary to cover the hypocaust of the bath-house.

It was hoped to begin the detailed preparation for the publication immediately after the completion of the excavation but it was not possible to do so until the Field Unit had settled in new accommodation at the beginning of the new year. Despite the delay the work has progressed extremely satisfactorily.

One of the major hold-ups has resulted from the massive burden of work which the whole excavation programme has placed on the conservation facilities of the museum. The conservator has done his best to maintain the flow of material between the site, laboratory and drawing office but we are still some twelve months behind in this work.

2. Guildhall (plan will be supplied at meeting)

As a result of a grant from the council and assistance from Laing Developments to continue the work in the area over the winter period, and include the recording of three properties affected by the development scheme.

The results of the excavations can now be summarised as follows :-

- a) Military period : In total some 2,100 square metres of the area have been excavated and revealed parts of seven buildings within the fortress area. These include parts of four barracks, part of a "fabrica" and two unidentified structures. Two streets within the fortress were also identified, one of which still survives today as the line of Waterbeer Street.

The plan of barrack 1 is the most complete and revealed four and a half contubernia at the south end and four and a half contubernia plus a part of the centurial quarters at the north end. These exhibit the normal arrangement of an inner living room, with an outer room for equipment, and flanked by a verandah which runs up to meet the projecting end wall of the centurial block. The blocks are smaller than other known legionary barracks but larger than those from auxillary forts. The short length is accounted for by the size of the individual contubernia whose area comes approximately half way between, for example, those at Gloucester and others at Hod Hill.

Four main phases of timber buildings have been noted each with a fairly distinctive construction method. In the case of the "fabrica", composed of a large rectangular office at the south end with a basilica structure to the north, it was not constructed until phase 3. It was not possible to identify any major construction in the proceeding periods, but the area had been occupied by three successive circular structures, the largest and latest of which measured 6 metres in diameter. As yet no explanation is available as to the purpose these features served.

Investigation of the properties to the south of Waterbeer Street has revealed fragmentary traces of other timber buildings which, though they cannot be identified, do not equate with the Barrack or other types to the north. They may represent buildings in the central area of the fortress.

The foundation trenches and scanty floors of the buildings are extremely poor in finds. Majority of the Samian identified is pre-Flavian and all the coins from foundation trenches have been Claudian. Pits and other features dug into the area in the post building dismantlement period suggest a post-Neronian date. The most interesting find from the end of the military phase was a decapitated Purbeck marble eagle, which Professor Toynbee suggests is part of a much larger statue possibly representing the Emperor Nero, hence disfigurement of the effigy on his fall from grace.

The "fabrica" may have survived after the barrack blocks were demolished since it is taken into account in the laying of a drain which cuts across other buildings in the area.

- b) Civil period : The site stood vacant for some time after the military period and was not built upon again until the very end of the 1st century when ^{small town} ~~courtyard~~ houses appeared. The military streets were maintained in this period. The buildings have produced no remarkable evidence apparently following the normal pattern in Exeter, being converted to stone structures in the 3rd century. There is little to suggest any of the buildings were of a particularly high standard though excavation seems to have revealed no more than the servants areas.

The buildings may have survived into the 5th century though it has been almost impossible, due to the intensive Mediaeval occupation, to decipher the scanty remains of the post-Roman period. The most interesting feature is that although the first occupation of any substance does not appear until the 12th century, two narrow tenement blocks to the north and south of Waterbeer Street mirror the earlier Roman street. This tends to suggest that there was some maintenance of property lines in the area from the end of the Roman period up to Mediaeval.

- c) Mediaeval and later : Victorian cellars removed all traces of the mediaeval structures fronting onto Waterbeer Street but enough evidence has come to light to suggest they were established in the 12th century and no major expansion occurred until the 17th century.

The tenements have shown that the area was the scene of considerable industrial activity from the 14th century onwards. One of the main features was a series of lime-burning kilns and lime-slaking pits of the 14th - 15th centuries. From the 16th century onwards a number of large stone-lined pits suggest the area may have been used for the tanning of leather.

The ceramic evidence from the area suggest that throughout the mediaeval period a coarse local pottery was dominant and that even with the appearance of fine glazed French wares in the 13th century it continued up to the 16th century. The major period for imports is the 16th century onwards when pottery was being imported from France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Holland and even China.

3. Sowton Industrial Estate (Middlemoor Farm)

A site at the industrial estate outside the city boundary was brought to the attention of the Unit in December, 1972 when it was threatened by development. It was possible through a grant from the County Council and the co-operation of the developer to carry out an excavation in the last three weeks of January.

The farm house began as a two-roomed structure built of turf, some time late in the 13th century, being rebuilt in stone in the 15th century when a third room was added to produce a typical long house with a through passage and screen.

4. The most important result of the past two years excavations has been to throw new light on the origin of Exeter. The discovery of barrack blocks on the Guildhall site and the bath-house on the Mary Major site clearly indicates that at an early point in its life the area now occupied by the City of Exeter was the site of a legionary fortress and that the Exe no doubt served as the south-western frontier in the first phase of the military occupation of Britain.

The most likely sequence of occupation would seem to be as follows:-

- i) A fort established on level ground to the south of the later town and probably acting as a construction camp for a fortress immediately to the north of it. This would explain why the more suitable terrain to the north was not the first site occupied.
(c.45 - 50 AD)
- ii) The occupation of a fortress on the level ground occupied by the later town by the legion responsible for the conquest and control of the south-west. The size of the bath-house (the Caldarium of which is the largest as yet found in this country) and the high standard of furnishing indicate legionary status and an intention of maintaining permanent garrison in the area.
(c.50 - 70 AD)
- iii) The legion was then despatched north to ward off the threat presented by the Silures, leaving the area in the control of an auxillary force. Soon after the end of the Silurian campaign, the area was handed over to the civil authorities and the town of Isca Dumnoniorum was established. (c.70 - 75/80 AD)

EXCAVATION PROGRAMME 1973 - 1974

It was expected that from April 1st the Field Unit would be committed to large scale excavation in the area of Holloway Street / Magdalen Street in advance of proposed road improvements. For this purpose the City Council agreed to the appointment of three more members of staff as of 1st November 1972. In late March it became obvious that it would not be possible to begin this work at the agreed date due to a public enquiry being called, the date of which has not yet been announced. It has been necessary, therefore, to delay any increase in the volunteer force until a later date. At the present the Unit is engaged on sites within the area which are in Corporation ownership and available for excavation.

Despite the fact that the area which was first available is surrounded by buildings due for demolition and is thereby restricted, it is already clear that this area will reveal traces of both Roman and Mediaeval occupation, and that the stratification is so slight that any work be it a new road or merely improvement is going to destroy an area of considerable archaeological importance.

M. Griffiths

Director : Archaeological Field Unit

Exeter City Council

EXETER - FRIARS GATE EXCAVATIONS 1973

Interim Report

Excavations were conducted from July to September 1973 by Exeter University History Department and the Exeter Archaeological Field Unit, financed by Exeter City, University and the Department of the Environment. The area under investigation was a corner site bounded by Friars' Gate to the north, Holloway Street to the east, and houses to the south and west. The immediate reason for excavation was the threatened development of the area. Holloway Street represents the main route southwards from Exeter towards Topsham, the port of Exeter from the Roman period into medieval and post-medieval times. The excavation site fronts onto this important road some 110 m. south of the Roman and medieval south gate of the City, and its eastern edge just clips the approximate line of the western defences of the small Claudian fort, of which Lady Fox located a short stretch of ditch in 1964.

An area roughly 14.5 m. by 22 m. was stripped partly by hand and partly by machine. The effective area available for excavation was, however, considerably less than this. The whole of the Holloway Street frontage and part of the Friars' Gate frontage had been destroyed by post-medieval cellars and a strip along the south side of the site by a large and deep brick-built sewer and the sanitary arrangements of a series of back lavatories.

One small upstand of undisturbed material (2 m. by 2 m.) sandwiched between the walls of two of the cellars was investigated, though it stood somewhat in isolation from the rest of the site. It produced one pit 0.9 m. in depth and of indeterminate circumference (it was truncated by the cellar to the north). The fill contained Roman and medieval pottery. The edges of two other features had been almost entirely cut away by the cellar to the south.

The earliest period of occupation on the site, which was Roman, was sparsely represented by two (possibly three) wells and a somewhat indeterminate collection of severely truncated pits and slots which made no meaningful pattern and produced no more than a couple of sherds of pottery each, giving no indication as to their original function. One well was excavated to a depth of approximately 3 m.; it contained predominantly fourth century finds, pottery and coins. A second was excavated to a depth of approximately 8 m. and was found to contain pottery of a late third to early fourth century date. Since the wells were not completely emptied the material from the fills can be taken to provide terminus post quem dates for their abandonment and not for their use. Another feature may also have been a well, but since it was at the extreme northern edge of the excavation extending under the pavement it was not possible to empty it to any considerable depth: it produced one piece of colour coated ware.

No trace was found of the Claudian military ditch which, it may therefore be concluded, presumably ran a short distance to the east, possibly under Holloway Street itself.

At the western edge of the area were the robbed-out remains of what had been a substantial masonry building. Its eastern wall was 7.8 m. in length but the full extent of the north and south walls is unknown since they ran into the western baulk under a lane and houses. The stone walls, 0.88 m. in width, had been largely robbed out, just one short stretch of volcanic stone remaining of the east wall and the rubble core of diagonal buttresses at the north-east and south-east angles. A soft light brown mortar had been used in the construction. The foundations of the wall at the south had been made considerably deeper than elsewhere to offset the danger of subsidence into an earlier medieval pit. This pit was one of four at the southern end of the building but none contained any datable material.

The building had been plastered internally: some of the plaster remained in situ along the internal faces of the north and east wall lines despite the robbing. The floor was composed of black, orange and green glazed tiles, some of which had survived in position; the impressions of others could be traced in the mortar bedding into which they had been keyed. Evidence for the superstructure of the building was provided by the mass of ashlar and rubble, mortar, plaster, tile and broken slate in the thick layer of demolition rubble used to level up the site when the building went out of use. Within this building were found six burials. One of these burials was in a well constructed plaster lined vault; another grave showed signs of plaster lining. The skeletons were orientated north-south, five of them very close to the east wall of the building.

The identification of this building as a church or chapel is strongly suggested by the presence of the burials, combined with its orientation and high standard of construction. In all probability we are here within the precinct of the Franciscan Friary. The exact location of the Friary buildings was uncertain though the general area of the precinct is known and is indicated today by the street names 'Friars' Gate' and 'Friars' Walk'. The interpretation of the building as a church is supported by the finding of fragments of window glass and lead within it and ecclesiastical stone mouldings reused in subsequent constructions on the site. Documentary evidence relating to the Friary has not yet been studied in detail, but we hope that the excavation results, combined with study of the written sources and the topography of the area will throw new light on the Exeter Greyfriars.

A shallow curving ditch ran around the outside of the building, closely following the line of the walls. The relationship between ditch and church shows the two to have been contemporary, though it is possible that the ditch had been re-cut. Overlying the ditch was a carefully laid area of cobbling which extended around the north-east corner of the building, ran south parallel to its east wall to be truncated at its southern end by a later wall and the brick-built sewer. The cobbling was composed of Heavitree stone, thick tile or brick, river cobble and three pieces of Beer stone including one ecclesiastical moulding.

Running side by side on an east/west alignment across the site to the east of the church were two gulleys. These had both been cut at their eastern end by the Holloway Street cellars. They are clearly boundary/drainage gulleys, one presumably superseding the other. The fill of both contained quantities of medieval pottery and demolition debris, notably glazed ridge

tiles. The more northerly of the two gulleys, which was the earlier, was cut by the shallow ditch which surrounds the church. The southern gully runs up to the east end of the church. In its fill was glass and lead, presumably from the demolition of the church. From this we would assume that it was open at the time of demolition.

The shallow ditch around the church and both of the east/west gulleys had been cut into the clay capping of an enormous quarry pit. The full extent of the quarry, which was presumably dug for the extraction of sand and clay, was not determined. Its western edge ran at an angle of approximately 20° to the church wall; on the east, some 12 m. away, it disappeared into the area disturbed by cellars. Its northern limit lay roughly on the line of the more northerly gully. The southern limit was not determined; it was traced for 7 m. but extended beyond the southern limit of excavation. Finds from within the quarry were few and suggest that it was not open for long (the instability of its sides would not have allowed this) but was soon back-filled with mixed clay and sand, capped with a layer of grey-green clay.

The relationship between quarry and church remains in some doubt. The south section of the quarry which might possibly have furnished the necessary evidence suffered a major collapse. The fact that the relative positions of church and quarry respect one another is not decisive. The shallow ditch around the church cuts the clay capping of the quarry-pit, but although contemporary with some stage of use of the church it may post-date its original construction. Similarly although the earlier of the two east-west gulleys is cut into the clay capping its relation to the church is destroyed by the shallow ditch which truncates its west end. Thus, in theory, the quarry could post-date the church though it would seem to put less strain on the evidence of the structural relationships if the quarry were the earlier.

Cut into the clay dump which capped the quarry pit was a complex of pits and slots, only the bottom few millimetres of which remained. One east/west slot, crossed towards its east end by a north/south slot, may be structural but far too little remained of it for any certainty. At the eastern end of the excavated area was a large pit which is interpreted as a clay-pit. Its fill was very clean, containing only a few sherds of medieval pottery and roof tile and a little bone.

The next phase of occupation on the site was represented by a series of walls of Heavitree stone running consistently east to west across the site, but much disturbed in parts by subsequent building operations. One of these walls overlay the more northerly of the two gulleys previously referred to, a fact which reinforces the interpretation of these gulleys as early tenement boundaries, the line of which survived and was later perpetuated in stone. The date of these Heavitree walls is uncertain; a post-medieval date is likely, but we need to do more work on the finds and on the post-medieval topography of the area.

The penultimate major building phase on the site appears to have been associated with some industrial working, though its precise nature is a matter of speculation. A trench approximately 1.4 m. in width and 1.1 m. deep was cut through the brown loam which had been deposited over the site (presumably at the time of the construction of the Heavitree walls) and down

into the natural clay below. The trench was 10.4 m. in length and was revetted with brick and stone on its northern side and eastern end, but not on west or south. The revetting walls showed signs of patching so may have been in-use for some considerable time. Holes had been cut into the clay base and in these were set large squared stones approximately 0.5 x 0.3 x 0.2 m. in size. Some at least of the holes may be earlier pits since they were not in all cases of precisely the correct size to contain the stone inserted in them. The stones were almost certainly reused; one, a fine Beer stone moulding set upside-down, certainly was. The stones were not contiguous being set some 0.6 m. apart. They gave the impression of having supported something - perhaps vats or a channel - an impression which was borne out by the finding on top of one of the stones of a wooden slab associated with rivets which may have served to secure wooden uprights. The function was perhaps connected with industry, drainage or sewage. This feature remained open, if not actually in use, until immediately before the building of the Friars' Gate cottages, for nineteenth century pottery went right down to the base and rough walling was inserted to carry the cottage walls across what would otherwise have been a dangerously loose area. The fill in the western part was loose mortary rubble; in the east was black and sooty material with much iron slag and metal debris.

Finally, in the nineteenth century small houses were built on the Friars' Gate frontage, some of the earlier Heavitree walls continuing to function as main building lines. These early substantial walls were much cut about and added to by insubstantial internal dividing walls and hefty stone fireplaces. The layout of these buildings is shown on the O.S. 25" sheet, ref. SX 9292 SW.

There were three properties, all with cellars, facing onto Holloway Street and six, of which only the two most easterly were cellared, facing onto Friars' Gate. Behind these properties lay small cobbled or concreted yards, back lavatories and drains. The properties remained in occupation until about 1969 when they were demolished as a prelude to the redevelopment of the area.

Finds

The Roman pottery from the site included coarse and fine wares which ranged in date from the first to the fourth centuries, the bulk of the material being of the second, third and early fourth centuries. By far the larger part of this was residual, being found in medieval and later contexts. A coin of Valens/Valentinian came from the topsoil immediately above the demolished front wall of one of the Friars' Gate cottages in the immediate vicinity, we are informed, of a former antique/junk shop! The medieval pottery seems thirteenth century and later. Other medieval material includes building debris, stone mouldings, roof and floor tiles, glass, plaster, window and roofing lead. There is a varied selection of post-medieval pottery dating from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Imports include German stonewares (Frechen and Westerwald) and Chinese export porcelain fragments. Delft sherds are common, as are various West Country sgraffito wares (North Devon, Donyatt) and slipwares from Staffordshire.

A.H. V.A.M. J.F.P.

Note

The first seven weeks of work were directed by Ann Hamlin and Valerie Maxfield with help from the History and Geography Departments of the University, members of the Devon Archaeological Society and others. As work was still unfinished, the site was taken over by the Exeter Archaeological Field Unit under Michael Griffiths, and J. F. Pamment was in charge of the work. The eventual report will be a co-operative effort. This short report has been prepared by A.H. and V.A.M. with information kindly supplied by the Unit. We would like to thank all our helpers most warmly and all who helped us with their interest and encouragement in the work.

EXETER : ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD UNIT**Topsham SX 96008875**

A sewer-pipe trench dug along Riverside Road, Topsham, cut through a number of features of Roman date. Two footings of unmortared sandstone blocks were encountered near the junction with Hamilton Road. A few pits, producing no closely datable finds, and a small shallow ditch were also observed in the course of the trench up to 150 m. distance from the junction. Finally a group of pottery was retrieved from the fill of a large pit outside "Windwhistle". The group included mortaria, amphorae, samian, and imported fine wares with very few local products. The samian has not yet been examined for dating but the rest of the group compares with pottery found at Exeter, from deposits dating to about 60 A. D.

West Street SX 91859230

Following the collapse of a 40 m. length of the city wall, the City Engineer's Dept. undertook emergency measures to consolidate the rest of the wall in this area. In order to check the stability of the structure and the deposits behind it five trenches were excavated by machine at the back of the wall. It proved possible in one trench to remove some of the deposits under controlled conditions, and thus retrieve material with which to date the five main periods of activity revealed elsewhere:

1. A few indeterminate features dating to c. 60-75 A. D. were found; finds included two military fittings.
2. Much material was dumped in the area during the (?) late C1 or early C2.
3. A low broad bank with a height of less than 1.50 m. where found was formed by dumping of clay and soil. This must represent the rampart, which may have been given greater height by terracing back the slope in front of it. Coarse pottery which included Rhenish and Nene Valley wares, indicates a late C2 date; in particular, several "incipient flange" dishes were found, which, at present, are thought to date to not before 190 A. D.
4. A wall with a base width of 3.20 m. was cut back into the front of the rampart. A modern disturbance allowed an almost complete section through the wall to be recorded. It was associated with a line of mortar - mixing pits cut into the back of the rampart which was heightened, presumably when the wall was completed. The finds offer no refinement of the date after 200 A. D. for the city wall which was proposed by Lady Fox in 1947.
5. Mediaeval: most of the Roman city wall had been completely demolished and replaced by a wall c 2.0 m. wide with a surviving height of c 5.00 m.. The front of the wall was carefully coursed with buttresses at intervals; at the back the wall was roughly faced, without any off-sets. Part of its 2 m. wide foundation trench was removed to establish the date of what formerly had been considered part of the original Roman wall; large quantities of material, derived from an ecclesiastical building were found and included floor tiles, slates, window glass, and human bones. Since it is unlikely that the wall is post-Reformation, this material may have come to the site with stonework robbed from the Friary of St. James de Marisco, suppressed in the mid C15.

St. Mary Major SX 92009255

Clearance of an area not hitherto available because of the presence of a water pipe confirmed the existence of a second furnace serving the caldarium of the legionary bathhouse. An underground room or crypt with walls robbed, but originally c. 1.0 m. wide, was also located; the bottom 1.50 m. of the fill was made up entirely of human bones. This is probably the charnel house of the close cemetery, known to be situated N. of St. Mary Major, which was in existence by 1323 and demolished c. 1540-1580.

High St. SX 920926

A C1 military granary, at right angles to the High Street, was at least 40 m. long and had been rebuilt at least three times. In the C2, 4 phases of timber buildings fronted the High St., before being replaced in the C3 by a stone building, the main part of which seems to lie to the N. E. Its walls were systematically demolished before the area was covered by a layer of fine dark soil. Cutting this deposit were some rubbish pits which contained imported caroligian pottery, including possible E-ware derivatives. By the C11, or possibly earlier, the frontage was occupied by timber buildings, several phases of which preceded the construction of a substantial stone town house in the C15. This survived, with modifications, until it was demolished early in 1974. A complete record was made of the standing remains.

Queen St. SX 9203 9265

A scatter of underfired tile debris, on the pre-Roman ground surface, was seen over a 20 m. length in a GPO trench near the junction with High St. This may indicate the presence of an early tilery. The absence of other military-type features in Queen St. suggests that the early defences lie within the Higher Market area. The civil Roman sequence was similar to that in 197, High St.. Away from the High St. frontage area occupation was negligible.

Queen St. SX 9180 9273

The city ditch was seen in a GPO trench outside the Employment Exchange. It was c 9m. wide, over 3m. deep, with a late C17 or C18 fill. There was no sign of the city wall.

Little Queen St. SX 9205 9272

The castle outer bailey ditch, aligned NW-SE, was observed c 16m. NE of Gandy St. It was 2.50 m. deep, with a flat bottom, and at least 5 m. wide.

North St. SX 9188 9256

Excavation in cellars on the corner with Waterbeer St. revealed Roman military timber buildings either side of a road running parallel to Waterbeer St.. The road continued in use throughout the Roman period, with the usual sequence of timber buildings to each side, later followed by stone. However, continuity between this road and Medieval Waterbeer St. now seems unlikely. A Roman origin for North St. is probably, but whether in the military period, or later, is still uncertain.

Trichay St. /Pancras Lane SX9198 9262

Work was completed on part of the legionary fabrica and a barrack block. The fabrica had a 9 m. wide aisled hall which produced extensive evidence for bronze working, with, at the SE end, an office surrounded by an ambulatory. Earlier than the fabrica were three circular millhouses. Adjacent, to the NE, was a single barrack block which did not belong to a cohort group. The centurial quarters, 16.80 m. in length, were at the SE end, in contrast to the position of those in the Pancras Lane - Goldsmith St. group of barracks, in which they were at the NW end. This group is now seen to be bounded by a road next to Pancras Lane. In C2, up to 3 phases of timber strip-buildings fronted this road before it went out of use after a fire in the Antonine period. In the C3 a large stone house occupied the area NE of Pancras Lane. By the mid C4 it had acquired an additional plot of land to the SW for use as an agricultural yard. This contained a corn drying room, threshing floor, and possibly a granary. Later, a drinking trough supplied by a wooden water pipe was installed, and animals (oxen?) were kept in the yard.