

1978

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE, 20th JANUARY 1978

Report to Committee

1. STANDING BUILDINGS

62 Fore Street, Topsham

Renovation of the former St. Margaret's Dairy has revealed a 16th century house of some quality - a rare and important survival in a town with few buildings earlier than 1600.

In Phase 1 a two storied block 5.5 m wide and 13.5 m long lay at right angles to the street. There were two rooms on each floor, separated by a closed truss situated 7.8 m from the front wall. This truss now forms the back wall of the house, the original rear section being no longer standing. The side walls are built of cob, 0.8 m thick, set on stone footings 1.1 m high. The two massive beams which carry the upper floor display deep chamfers with straight-cut stops.

The roof trusses are supported on thick posts set in the cob walls and resting on the stone wall footings. The principle rafters of the three open roof trusses have collar-beams strengthened by composite arch-braces which form a continuous curve from wall to wall. The first bay of the roof is unusually narrow, there being only a 1 m space between the front wall and the first truss. The remaining three bays each have a pair of windbraces between the square-set wall plate and the single butt purlin. There is no ridge tree. This type of roof was used in 36 and 38 North Street, and there are surviving examples at 38 Holloway Street (Larkbeare House), St Nicholas' Priory, 10 Cathedral Close and Bowhill. The closed truss was of jointed cruck construction.

The rooms at the front of the house were apparently unheated, since no fireplaces were found in either of the side walls. However, an original stone stack, containing fireplaces on both floors, is preserved in the northern party wall beyond the closed truss. The fireplaces had wooden lintels over Beer stone jambs, with deep ogee and hollow chamfer mouldings and stepped stops. A similar fireplace, entirely of Beer stone, occurs at 93 Fore Street, Topsham.

Most of the features in the original build point to a date in the early 16th century; however, the plan of the building is somewhat unconventional. The absence of a heated hall may suggest that the surviving building is merely one wing of a larger house which was subdivided in the 17th century. This must remain an open question, as it is unlikely that further evidence will be forthcoming without excavation.

In Phase 2 the front of the house was rebuilt with the addition of a range 4 m deep and 8.6 m long parallel to the street. The two new rooms on the north side were heated by fireplaces contained in a stack in the rear wall, built of re-used stone and dutch bricks. The chamfered wooden lintels had scroll stops and rested on plates set into the wall. The inside of the first floor fireplace was covered with very well preserved black and white sgraffito decoration in a geometric pattern. The lintel, however, was painted red. This fireplace is very similar to those in 44-46 Magdalen Street, dated 1659.

Another, slightly later, fireplace was inserted into the southern wall near the front of the original block. This was built of dutch brick and had a plain wooden lintel and a curving pentan. There is a similar fireplace at 27 Fore Street, Topsham, which probably dates to 1693.

61 Fore Street, Topsham

This is traditionally believed to be the oldest house in Topsham. However, the stone chimney stack in its north wall is inserted into the south wall of No. 62. The roof has two bays, with collar beam trusses and butt purlins, and probably dates to the later 16th century.

Limekilns at Glasshouse Lane

A group of three late 18th or early 19th century limekilns close to the River Exe were recorded before one of their number was demolished. They were built of Heavitree stone, South Devon limestone and brick. An unusual feature was the presence of small domestic ovens in two of the raking-out chambers.

2. EXCAVATION

Rack Street School

The excavation of an area measuring c 10 x 45 m in the Central School playing ground is nearly complete at the time of writing. The site is within the Mermaid Yard development and is partly financed through the Job Creation Programme. An adjacent area was excavated in 1974-5, when the southern corner of the legionary fortress was discovered.

The earliest feature is a V-shaped defensive ditch, c 4 m wide and 2 m deep, containing in its fill a small quantity of pottery probably dating to late in the Neronian period. This was superseded by a ditch of punice profile, c 8 m wide and 2.8 m deep, which cut the outer lip of the first ditch. The lowest fill contained a large group of pottery which can be dated to the period 80-90 AD. Post-Roman disturbance has unfortunately removed all trace of the rampart. Both ditches were found in 1974-5, but it was not possible to establish a relationship between them in that excavation. The inner edge of the first ditch is about 11 m from the projected outer edge of the via sagularis found recently at Mermaid Yard. This measurement should be taken only as a rough approximation; the sites are 60 m apart and the precise alignment of the features has yet to be established. A second excavation in Mermaid Yard, to be started in January, is designed to locate the ditches next to the known portion of via sagularis.

The partially infilled ditch remained a feature in the landscape throughout the 2nd and early 3rd centuries. The successive layers of fill produced a most useful sequence of large pottery groups which span this period. Elsewhere on the site there is little evidence of occupation until the 3rd century, when a road aligned NE-SW was laid down, partly overlapping the ditch. The road was c 6 m wide, made of compacted river gravel, with a c 1 m deep drainage ditch on the NW side. In the 1974-5 area it turned to run towards the west gate at an angle to the Roman street grid. The road was resurfaced twice during its lifetime. The surfaces yielded several late 3rd and 4th century coins.

To the SE of the road was a late 3rd century timber building which had been destroyed by fire. Only a fragmentary plan was obtained, due to later disturbance. However, a small domestic oven did remain in a good state of preservation; it had a roughly circular chamber with a rectangular stoking area floored in front of the oven mouth with five re-used tegulae.

The timber building was replaced by one in masonry, 12 m long and c 8 m wide, with its long axis at right angles to the road. The building may have had an industrial function, since within it were four features which seem to be a type of oven or furnace. The best preserved of these has a small, round-back, elongated chamber which narrows toward the entrance. The sides of the chamber show signs of burning, and slope inwards towards the base, giving a funnel shaped profile. The chamber is constructed of clay-bonded stones contained in a c 0.5m deep pit. In front of the entrance is a stoking pit. The building apparently went out of use sometime in the 4th century; rubble derived from its demolition spread some way over the road. Both rubble and road surface were sealed by a layer of fine dark soil which presumably accumulated during the succeeding centuries of abandonment.

3. FUTURE EXCAVATIONS

211 - 219 High Street (SX92009270)

This is the site of the proposed new Marks and Spencer supermarket. It measures 40 x 60 m (0.6 acres) and is almost all cellared. A barrack block was found immediately to the NW of the site in 1972. It appears to be the end member of a group of barracks arranged per strigas on the NE side of the fortress. The foundation trenches of the final phase of this building were unusually deep. It therefore seems likely that the partial plans of up to four other barrack blocks in the group will be recoverable beneath the cellar floors. The developers will be requested to pay 50% of the cost of the excavation, which will probably start in April and last for 12 weeks.

4. POST-EXCAVATION

Post-medieval pottery (J.P. Allan)

The collection is large - perhaps the 5th or 6th largest urban collection in Britain. Most of the material has now been examined, and statistics of wares drawn up in accordance with the recommendations of the Medieval Pottery Research Group. About 1500 line drawings have been made.

The continental imports make up about 10% of the total assemblage. John Hurst will write the specialist report on these. In his preliminary examination he has identified several types of wares which are rare in Britain - Ligurian faience, Beauvais stoneware and Malling jug fragments for example - and the occasional unique vessel - for example of Florentine, Tuscan and Sevillian maiolica. The stratified deposits have provided dating evidence for several types of pottery whose dating is currently uncertain - for example, some of the Saintonge wares. It has also extended the known date range of some of the more common imports, such as Spanish olive jars and plain Frechen jugs. The Delftware and procelain with be reported on by Lipski and Ayers respectively.

Study of the local wares has proved very rewarding. Because the products of the individual kilns of the South-West are much more distinctive than those of Eastern and South-Central England, they can be identified more precisely than is normal with post-medieval material. The excavations of kiln material in South Somerset and North Devon have proved particularly useful.

The picture emerging from the local wares is as follows. In the 16th century the most common fabric is a local sandy ware whose source is unknown. Already by the early 16th century Donyatt Ware make up about 30% of the total. St German's ware is rare (c 2%) but there is a more common class of micaceous wares whose source is unknown. Tudor Green wares or other English imports are rarities. In the mid 16th century a small quantity of wares which seem to be of North Devon origin arrive in Exeter. If their identification is correct they are the earliest dated North Devon wares.

A group of kiln wasters from Goldsmith Street contributed a small percentage of the total. The wasters are however of very great interest as all their features are of Low Countries pottery, and some specifically Dutch. They are completely different to all our local wares. These must surely be the products of Dutch immigrants, a suggestion strengthened by the identification of Dutch immigrants in a contemporary Muster Roll of 1522. Unfortunately it is not yet possible to see the specific set of traits in our wares in any Dutch collection.

We have little late 16th or early 17th century pottery. By the middle of the 17th century it is clear that production at Donyatt was dominating that of all other centres in the region. Donyatt is over 30 miles from Exeter, yet it makes up c 60% of the total local market in the mid 17th century, the bulk of the rest being the local sandy ware. The introduction of a new range of decorated Donyatt sgraffito wares after 1650 corresponds with the rapid decline in the quantity of local sandy wares, and these had certainly gone out of production by c 1670 - 80. At this period Donyatt ware makes up c 75% of the total. From c 1660 North Devon wares become increasingly common

in Exeter. It is interesting to see that North Devon sgraffito wares are of very restricted date-range in Exeter (1660-1700). This situation is closely paralleled in America. The local industries dominate the market so strongly that we receive little Bristol or Staffordshire material, and not much more from Surrey - Hants or Poole. Cornish wares are rarities.

The very good series of Exeter groups of the period 1650-1800 have proved important in refining the dating of the South-Western products. Donyatt ware in particular shows a series of changes in decorative styles at c 30 - 50 year intervals throughout this period, and the dating of these changes has enabled more accurate dating of some of our deposits.

Work on the documentary sources has proved useful. The main sources pursued have been inventories, accounts and the Port Books. The inventories have occasionally provided references to the quantities of some types of wares - especially Stonewares and Delft - in individual households. Accounts have included some useful price lists and an occasional reference to purchase from specific sources. The port books have been the most productive source of information. Prof. W.B. Stephens has kindly lent his complete transcript of the books for 1629-88, and these contain good references to the quantities of pots imported from various continental sources, and some indications of cargo values. They include references to sources other than the familiar continental ones.

5. PUBLICATION

Volume I: The main part of the report has now been fully revised. However the finds section is incomplete since there are still one or two specialist reports outstanding. Once these are received the section can be typed-up in its final form. We are assured that these reports will be forthcoming in January, so that it should be possible to send copies to the referees towards the end of the month.

REPORT TO COMMITTEE

1. EXCAVATIONS

Denver Road, Topsham (SX 965885) P.T. Bidwell

Evidence of Roman settlement at Topsham spanning the first to fourth centuries has been recovered on both sides of the main road leading to Exeter. A scatter of first-century pottery and coins in the area between the River Exe and the road has attracted particular attention; it has been suggested that this indicates the presence of a fort, or of a port serving the Classis Britannica. Excavations carried out after the Second World War recovered some slight traces of early timber buildings. Recently a larger scale excavation on a site further to the north-west revealed the plan of a first-century timber building described as a 'farmstead'. Samian and coins show that this 'farmstead' was abandoned c. A.D. 70-75.

There is comparatively little second and third-century material from the site, but fourth-century material is abundant. In the 1930's a fourth-century stone-built bake-house was excavated on a site north-east of the Topsham road. The attached plan shows the extent of Roman occupation indicated by chance finds and excavation.

A trial excavation carried out in February of this year on a 4.5 acre housing site to the south-east of the area where finds have previously been made failed to reveal any trace of occupation of Roman date. However, the settlement may have extended further to the north-west or north-east.

The future may well see building on other sites in this area. Because of the uncertain character of the Roman occupation, excavation would clearly be necessary.

North Gate (SX91669262)

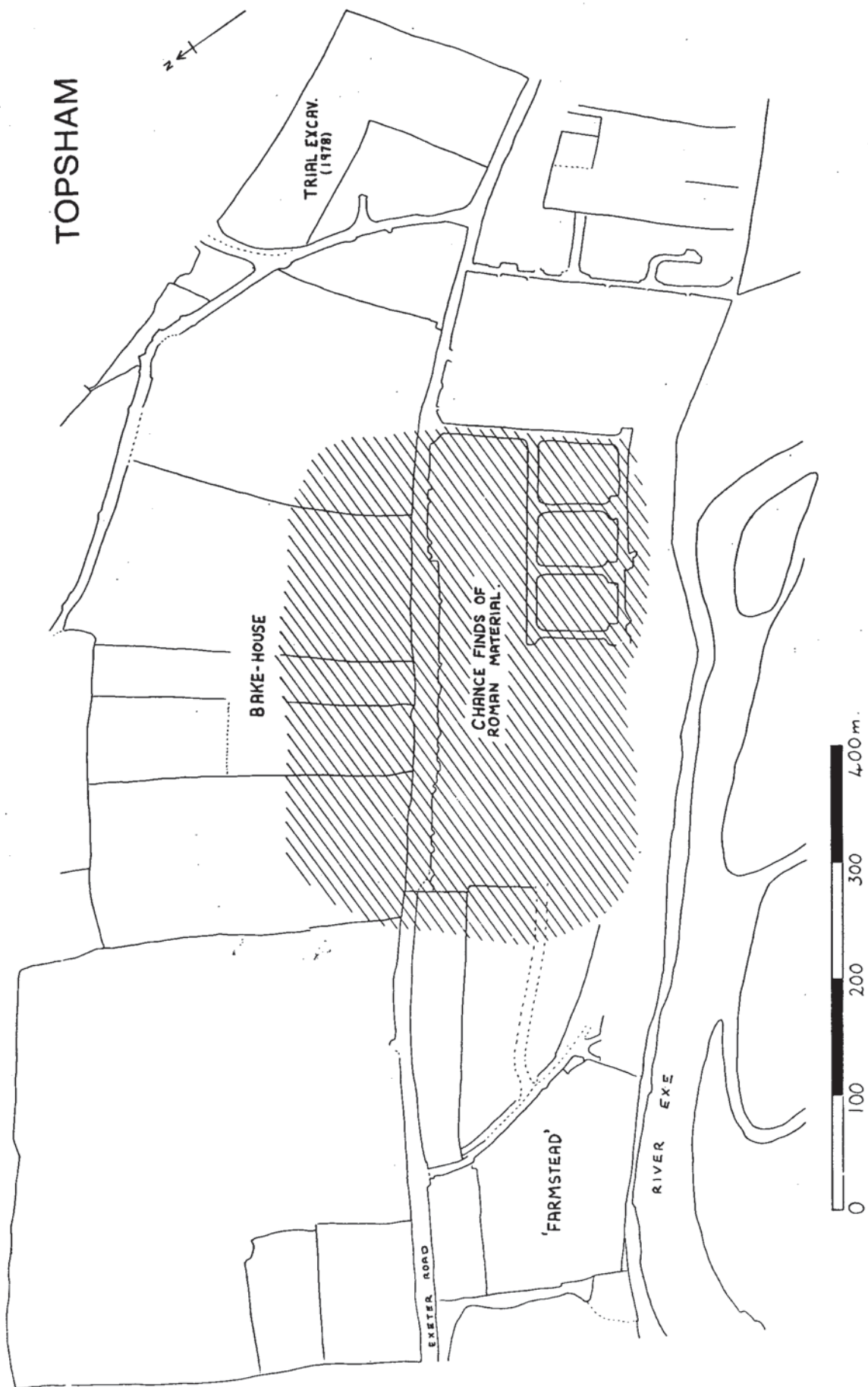
A ditch (at least 1.7m in depth, width unknown) running at right angles to the north-west side of the fortress defences was thought to have provided drainage for the main defensive ditch, which would have passed across the head of a small coombe some 30 m to the south-east. This probable drainage ditch was cut by another running parallel to it. The core of the town-wall, which passed across the site, was only 2.5 m wide, but had been cut back to this width in order to accommodate medieval and post-medieval re-facing.

An excavation on an adjacent site inside the town-wall will take place later this year. This will provide a section through the rampart behind the wall and may possibly locate the defensive ditch of the legionary fortress.

211-219 High Street (SX 920927)

An excavation in a cellared area on the High Street frontage has just started at the time of writing. It is hoped to locate the foundation trenches of the legionary barracks situated on the north-east side of the fortress. It has recently been established that at least part of 22, Goldsmith Street (at the north-west end of the area to be redeveloped) is not cellared, and an excavation will take place there later in the year.

TOPSHAM



Holloway Street (SX 92269212)

A 70 m long strip on the south-west side of Holloway Street was excavated in April in advance of a housing scheme and road widening. A number of pits and wells suggest that the area was occupied in the Roman Military period and also in the fourth-century. Several late thirteenth-century rubbish pits presumably indicate the extent of ribbon development along Holloway Street before the Franciscan Friary was established here in the early fourteenth-century. The limit of occupation at all periods coincided with a marked break in slope at the edge of the Shitbrook Valley at a distance of about 220 m from the South Gate.

Observation of a GPO in Holloway Street showed that the earliest preserved road levels were of eighteenth^{trench} or nineteenth-century date; these occupy a 4 m deep hollow way which almost certainly follows the line of the Roman road to Topsham.

Albany Road (SX 91559200)

A trial excavation in advance of the proposed new Leisure Centre demonstrated the presence of medieval occupation on Cowick Street from at least 1300. The most interesting discovery, however, was the site of the bronze foundry known from documentary evidence to have been situated in St. Thomas between 1575 and 1624 after its removal from the Preston Street area. The excavation revealed quarry pits and discarded mould material spread over an area of several acres in the angle between Cowick Street and Alphington Road. The main products were cauldrons and skillets for domestic use, but it is known that bells were also cast, including the oldest surviving bell in the Cathedral. The best single find was the baked clay mould for a bronze skillet handle inscribed with the name of the founder, (Joh)n Birdall. We know from the research carried out by Rev. John Scott that the Birdall family owned the foundry for three generations until it ceased production in 1624.

The excavation produced no finds of Roman date; however, a number of Roman finds (mainly coins, including a fourth century hoard) were made in the Cowick Street area in the nineteenth century. It must now be presumed that this material came from a site further away from the river than Albany Road.

Mermaid Yard (SX 91959233)

Excavation of a trench across the legionary defences on the south-east side of the fortress is in progress at the time of writing. The lip of the inner ditch has been located and it appears that part of the rampart face may be preserved, although this has yet to be confirmed. The outer ditch is partially overlain by the late third-century road running north-east to south-west which was first discovered in 1974 at Rack Street. On the south-east side of the road were the robbed-out foundations of a masonry building; this was preceded by two phases of late third- or early fourth-century timber buildings. The Roman levels were sealed by a layer of dark loam containing medieval and residual Roman pottery.

Cowick Priory (SX913923)

A small trial excavation on a riverside site near Okehampton Street has revealed traces of a masonry building which may have formed part of St. Andrews Priory, an alien house founded in the late eleventh-century as a dependency of the Norman abbey of Bec. A clay floor with a small hearth was bounded by a robbing-trench 1.4 m wide aligned north-west to south-east which was traced for a distance of 12 m. The building sealed a 30 cm thick layer of sand containing pottery of c. 1300; it was demolished in the early seventeenth-century.

The Priory was seriously damaged by a flood in 1439, followed two years later by a disastrous fire; it was finally dissolved in 1451. A house is shown on this site in the Hogenburg map of 1587. The stone debris contained in the robbing-trench consisted exclusively of volcanic stone; by the mid fifteenth-century the dominant building stone in Exeter was Heavitree breccia. It therefore seems possible that the excavated building belonged originally to St. Andrews Priory but was retained as secular dwelling house after the dissolution in 1451.

An application has been made to build a 'skatepark' on the site; if this is built about a third of the archaeological deposits will be destroyed. Any further archaeological work will depend on the outcome of the application.

2. POST-EXCAVATION

Medieval Pottery (J. Allan)

Work is currently in progress on the pottery from the Exe Bridge site. This is a most helpful group of material, with about 6000 sherds from c. 1000 contexts of the period 1250 - 1600. Of national interest is the demonstration that North French and Rouen wares dominate the imports of the mid to late thirteenth-century, with Saintonge wares becoming common at the end of the century and only thereafter dominating the market. Of local interest are the earliest stratified sherds, in secure mid thirteenth-century contexts, of North Devon and St. Germans type pottery, and the demonstration of a major change in the sources of local production c. 1260-1300. This is useful in the dating of sites elsewhere in Exeter, and, since Exeter ware was exported, elsewhere in the South-West.

The study of the post-medieval pottery is now well advanced. The collection is the largest and best dated series in the South-West. The scatter of North Devon vessels in Exeter provide a framework for the dating of this material. This has not been possible elsewhere because the groups from North Devon and America all date to the late seventeenth-century and many other finds are unstratified. The Exeter sherds show the production of North Devon Gravel Tempered Ware before 1540 and its medieval predecessor still in circulation after 1500. There is also good evidence for believing that North Devon ware was regularly exported in the fifteenth-century. The sgraffito wares now seem to have a very restricted date range of c. 1650-1710 with plain slipware surviving until c. 1750.

The Donyatt ware is the most common pottery in Exeter. Again the Exeter sequence has refined the dating of several classes of this ware. Its dating is now becoming firmly established with good correspondence between the dating here and in Somerset for many types.

3. PUBLICATION

Volume I

The manuscript has been read by Professor Frere, Mr Boon and Dr. Young, and an amended final draft was delivered to Professor Barlow at the beginning of June. A final financial estimate will be obtained from the printers after editing.

Volume II

It is hoped that this volume, dealing with the faunal remains from sites excavated up to 1975, will be published later this year by Sheffield University.

Volume III

This will be a monograph by John Allan on the medieval and post-medieval pottery from Exeter. Mr Allan intends to have the final draft finished by August 1979.

Report to Committee

1. EXCAVATIONS

Mermaid Yard (SX 91959233)

The results of this important excavation have yet to be fully evaluated, but the stratigraphic sequence may be summarised as follows:

- (a) The front of the rampart on the south-east side of the legionary fortress survived to a height of 70 cm at the north-east end of the site. The layers of mixed, gravelly clays contained in the core were interleaved with layers of finer clay which formed the c 60 cm thick front cheek of the rampart. Beyond a 1.2 m wide berm was a V - shaped ditch, c 3m wide and 2.2 m deep, similar to the earliest ditch found at Rack Street.
- (b) This first ditch was infilled in the Neronian period, to be replaced by one of 'punic' shape, 3.5 m deep, the outer lip of which was 12.5 m from the front of the rampart. The ditch appears to have silted up by c 80 at the latest.
- (c) Partly cutting into the two earlier ditches was a third ditch, 2.4 m deep, with a flat bottom 4 m wide. The pottery contained in its fill has not yet been examined closely but is believed to be late first century in date.
- (d) Truncating all three ditches described above was a broad, relatively shallow ditch c 11 m wide and 2 m deep. Shortly before it was infilled a number of small quarry pits were dug into its sides to obtain clay. A series of rubbish layers, tipped into the ditch from the south-east, contained a considerable quantity of pottery thought to be of late second century date. Sealing these layers were up to 2 m of clean clays which had been pushed into the ditch from the north-west and must have been derived from the slighting of the rampart. This material rested directly against the nearly vertical rampart face, which had been eroded or cut back c 50 cm from its original line during the period of over a century for which it was maintained.
- (e) The ditch was partially overlain by the late third century road with buildings on its south-east side described in the last report to the Committee.

The excavation has firmly established the line of the defences on the south-east side of the fortress and has shown for the first time the position of the rampart in relation to the ditches and the via sagularis. More important is the discovery that the defences were not demolished when the fortress was disbanded in c 75, but were maintained, apparently in good order, until late in the second century. This has important implications for our understanding of the development of the Roman town, which was previously thought to have been undefended until c 200 when the first - earth and timber - phase of the City Wall was built enclosing an area of 96 acres. It now appears that the early planned town was confined within the 38 acres enclosed by the defences of the former legionary fortress and that only after c 200 was the street grid extended into the outer areas of the town.

cont:-

22 Goldsmith Street

An excavation in the uncellared part of the Marks and Spencer site is in progress at the time of writing. A military and civil Roman street crosses the site. Several phases of timber buildings within the fortress have been found but it will not be possible to identify their function until a larger area has been excavated. A large stone building was erected on the south-east side of the road in the third century. A full report will be included in the next report to the Committee.

Future Sites

Excavations will take place at the City Wall near the North Gate and in 41-42 High Street (Star Jeans) later in the year.

2. STANDING BUILDINGS

62 Fore Street, Topsham

Part of this building was recorded last year, but recent renovations have uncovered much more of the fabric than was previously visible. The house is traditionally believed to be the Church House for Topsham and has been described as dating to the fourteenth century.

It was originally a small, two storied, single cell house with the roof parallel to the street. Both floors were heated by fireplaces contained in an end stack, but only the fireplace on the first floor is well preserved. It is a typical late medieval stone fireplace with a moulded surround and a relieving arch over the lintel. The stack is cut into the previously existing side wall of 61, Fore Street, which was recorded last year.

The structure is otherwise entirely timber framed, a form of construction which is very unusual in Devon. The large framing of the walls is seated on low stone footings and the major structural timbers were supported on heavy oak posts with jowled heads.

The ground floor room had been considerably reduced in size by the introduction of a carriageway, in the eighteenth century, giving access to the courtyard at the rear. At this time a fourteenth century stone arched door, presumably obtained from an older building nearby, was inserted into the side of the house.

The first floor, originally a single room, was provided with a four panel ceiling of intersecting beams, each with chamfered lower edges terminating in roll stops. The original joists were also chamfered but had run-out stops. The cambered cross-beam also served as the tie beam for the roof truss above. The remaining detail in this small but well appointed house suggests that it was built in the first half of the sixteenth century.

3. PUBLICATION

The manuscript of Volume I has now been read by Professor Barlow, and Mr Bidwell has made a number of final corrections. Townsends have submitted a revised estimate of £11975 based on sight of the text and illustrations. The manuscript will be delivered to the printers when it has been 'marked up' by Mr Erskine.