Exeter City Council

EXETER ARCHAEOLOGICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE, 15th March 1985

Report to Committee

1. EXCAVATIONS

Paul Street

The three-year programme of rescue excavations undertaken in advance of the redevelopment of the Paul Street surface car parks was concluded in January. The scale of the investigations carried out in 1984-5 in the lower (SW) car park was limited by a shortage of funds, and only one trench (14) was fully excavated by hand to the natural subsoil. Nevertheless a number of important discoveries were made which add significantly to our understanding of the history of the North Gate area.

Detailed discussion of the results of the 1982-4 excavations will be found in previous reports to the Committee. The overall sequence of topographical development suggested for the Roman and medieval periods is shown in Fig. 2 and summarized below. In addition, certain new observations or points of interpretation are given more extended consideration.

Roman Fortress c. AD 55/60-75 : The outer edge of the second fortress ditch was located in trench 16. The ditch has now been traced over a length of about 140m on the NW side of the fortress. The discovery, made in 1982, that the two ditches continued north-eastwards through both trench 9 and a service trench on the NE side of Queen Street demonstrated that the fortress was longer than had previously been believed. It is now apparent that Exeter, Lincoln and Gloucester are roughly similar in size at around 40 acres.

The extra-mural road next to the second fortress ditch was located in trenches 14 and 16. In the latter it was 0.4m thick with its SE edge forming a steep scarp continuous with the outer face of the fortress ditch, which had eroded back into the road metalling. In trench 14 the basal make-up material of the road contained a fragment of hypocaust pila tile, which suggests that the road may not have been constructed until some years after the foundation of the fortress. The width of the road around 75 was a little over 6m.

Its identification as a patrol track now seems inappropriate since it was very solidly built and in any case there is little evidence from other fortresses for extra-mural roads having fully encircled the defences. The figure of c. 14m previously given for the width of the road on the basis of the metalling recorded in trenches 8 and 13 is clearly incorrect. Presumably the road changed direction at this point or was joined by another road coming in from the north.

Whilst it remains possible that the fortress north gate lay immediately to the SE of trench 14 (as used to be thought) it is now almost certain that no road approached this point directly from the NW, since the outer edge of the extra-mural road was well-defined in trench 14. It may be that in the military period no road crossed the Longbrook valley in the vicinity of the north gate: perhaps the road joining the extra-mural road from the north represents a major route. A military road built across the Longbrook valley below the fortress north gate would probably have continued in use through later Roman times and its line might well be perpetuated in St David's Hill and Lower North Street, which led up to the medieval North Gate. In 1979 a deep Roman military ditch was discovered running down the NE side of Lower North Street just outside the medieval gate (Fig. 2). This must have been dug to drain water from the fortress ditch at a point where it crossed the head of a re-entrant valley cut into the side of the Longbrook valley. This dry combe would have afforded the easiest line of ascent up the steep SE side of the main valley, and the ideal site for the north gate of the fortress would therefore have been at its head. However the position of the gate was pre-determined by the overall design and siting of the fortress and so the gate had to be built 60m to the SW. A military road across the Longbrook would probably have climbed up the combe on the line of Lower North Street and then either turned SSW towards the gate as shown in Fig. 2 or continued upwards to join the extra-mural road.

Paul Street, trench locations

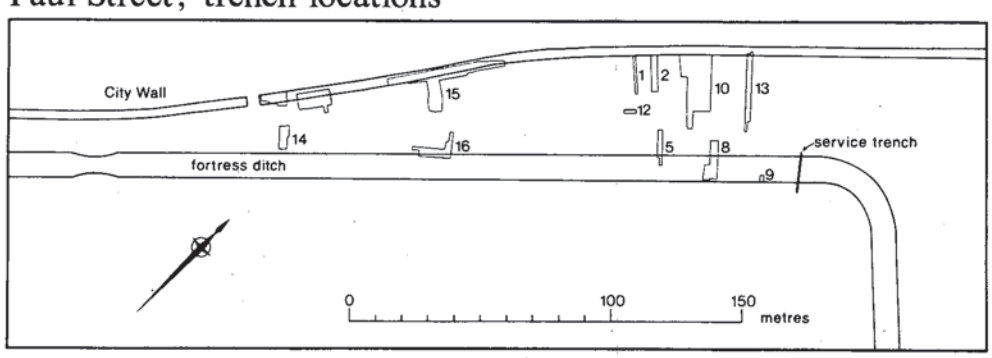


Figure 1.

EXETER: Suggested Development of Paul Street Area

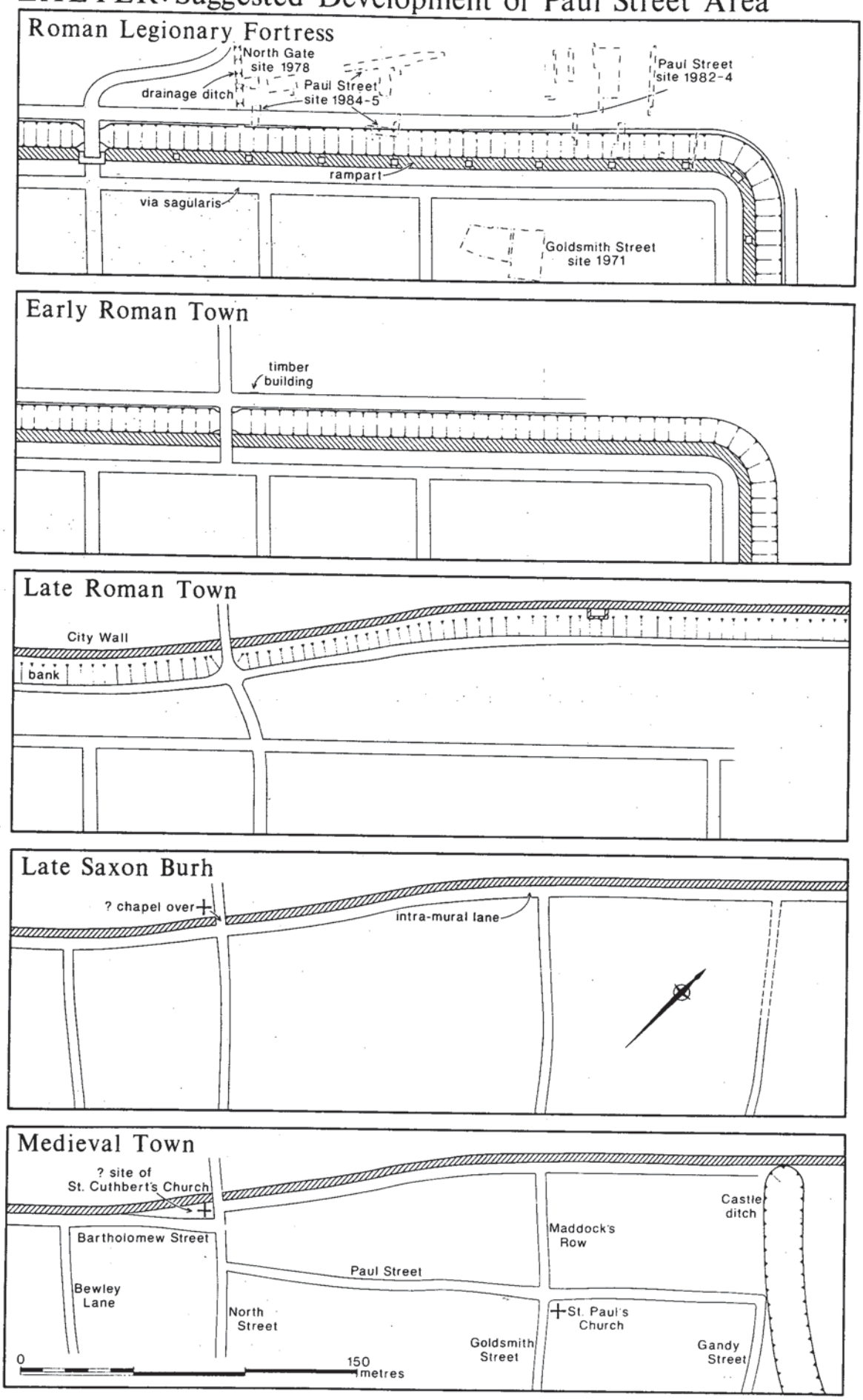


Figure 2

Early Roman town c. 80-180/200 : In either case, once the rigid conventions which governed fortress planning no longer applied, it would have been a simple matter to create a new entrance through the rampart at the head of the combe so as to provide a more direct route into the Roman town. It is possible that the gate remained in its original position until the construction of the later Roman defences at the end of the 2nd century. However it is more likely that the gate was moved in about 80 when the fortress street system was adapted to form the more regular street grid of the early Roman town. In this case two phases of timber building in trench 14 which were erected in the period 125-50 would have fronted onto the road immediately outside the town gate.

The section excavated across the fortress ditch in 1982 (trench 8) showed that it silted up gradually over the later 1st and early 2nd century, and it may be assumed that the rampart was also in a neglected state at this period. A timber bridge (omitted from Fig.2) found in trench 8 and dated by dendrochronology to c. 100/101, is thought to have formed part of a temporary aqueduct bringing water into the middle of the town at a time when the main supply was out of commission.

Later Roman town c. 180/200+ : The old fortress defences were levelled around 180-200 and it is assumed that a new defensive circuit was created at this time on the line of the City Wall. In the trenches excavated in 1982-4 a primary clay bank was found to be partly overlain by the Roman wall, which was in turn backed by a sizeable secondary bank. Elsewhere on the circuit, including the North Gate site excavated in 1978, the wall has been found invariably to cut through the primary bank. In trench 15 it was possible to observe the transition between these two constructional practices. At the NE end of the trench the wall overlay the primary bank. About halfway along the trench however the foundations became progressively deeper until at the SW end they cut through the primary bank and into the natural subsoil.

The new sections dug through the primary bank in trench 15 call into question once again its original nature and purpose. There is no doubt that the bank is stratigraphically earlier than the Roman wall or that it was probably thrown up some years before the wall itself was started. However, there is no evidence to suggest that it ever stood more than about 1.6m high and in some places it appears to have been considerably lower than this. Moreover, although in trench 13 it

approached 12m in width, in some sections elsewhere it was no more than 6m wide. It is thus difficult to avoid the conclusion that the bank never functioned as a defensive feature in its own right. Three possible alternative explanations may be advanced : that the bank represents (1) an unfinished rampart; (2) a non-defensive boundary feature; or (3) an initial stage in the construction of the Roman wall and its associated ditch system. Much of the material making up the primary bank consists of deep-dug clay probably derived from the digging of a ditch.

Little additional dating evidence was obtained from the primary and secondary banks in the lower car park since not much hand excavation was feasible because of financial restrictions. A c. 60m length of the bank has been bulldozed away almost entirely in recent weeks and an important opportunity to obtain a large sample of pottery from the two phases of the bank has been lost. It is unlikely that such an opportunity will occur again.

The upper levels of the military extra-mural road were truncated by post-Roman disturbances in every trench except 16, where it was established that the road went out of use in the late 2nd century, when a thick layer of loam was deposited over it and across the adjacent ditch.

The early 3rd-century street or track found to run along the back of the secondary bank in trenches 2, 10 and 13 was again examined in trench 15. Here it was somewhat different in character, being in part composed of Triassic sandstone river or beach cobbles and roofing slates. However it was about the same width (c. 4m) as in the lengths examined further to the NW and it occupied the same stratigraphic position, overlapping the tail of the bank and sealed by late Roman loam deposits. The street probably went out of use before the middle of the 3rd century.

It is clear that a number of the streets belonging to the grid pattern of the early Roman town went out of use in the late second or early 3rd century, but the extent of this loss is difficult to assess since so often the later street surfaces are not preserved. In the Paul Street area, for example, we do not know whether the inner perimeter street (via sagularis) of the fortress and early town continued in use during the 3rd and 4th centuries. It seems clear that insulae were generally larger in the later Roman town, and it is possible that the street pattern depicted in our reconstructions of the later Roman town plan are misleading in showing too many streets as retained from earlier periods.

Saxo-Norman : trenches 15 and 16 were designed to examine the line of a putative late Saxon lane 60m to the NE of North Street. The existence of this lane was postulated on analogy with the back lanes (Catherine Street and Waterbeer Street) to either side of High Street and a similar lane (Bewley Lane, Fig. 2) which ran parallel with North Street on its SW side. The tenements on both sides of North Street are 60m (12 rods) long, whilst those on the High Street are 40m (8 rods) in length. The excavation demonstrated that no lane is likely to have existed on this line after about 1200 when the metalling of minor streets became usual in Exeter. Unfortunately the excavations were not extensive enough to disprove the presence of an unmetalled track on this line in the pre-Conquest period. In trench 16, however, a probable early medieval boundary ditch was located running at right angles to Paul Street.

An aspect of the excavations in the upper car park not previously reported to the Committee concerns the nature of the dark soil layers which overlie the tail of the later Roman bank. These have been studied by Richard MacPhail of the University of London Institute of Archaeology, who has also examined samples of 'dark soils' from sites in London and Southwark. The results of this work will appear shortly in Nordic Archaeometry 3, published by the Finnish Archaeological Socity (1).

In the later Roman period a considerable thickness of clay-loam accumulated in the dip immediately behind the bank, and it is these deposits which seal the early 3rd-century intra-mural street. This material probably largely comprises erosion products from the bank. A layer of dark (?cultivation) soil 0.1-0.2m thick, which overlay the late Roman deposits and lapped against the rear of the rampart, contained Saxo-Norman pottery including a glazed rim of Bedford Garage ware. Sealing this soil over a large part of the site was a layer of clean, apparently deep-dug clay up to 0.4m thick, incorporating rock fragments characteristic of the subsoil and bedrock in the vicinity of Rougemont Castle. The outer ditch of the castle, started in 1068, lies about 50m to the NE of the site (Fig. 2), and it is therefore possible that this deposit represents material dug out from the ditch and spread over neighbouring tenements.

EAAC 15.3.85

Alphington Street/Shooting Marsh Stile

In the autumn of 1984 the Unit investigated a site on the corner of Alphington Street and Shooting Marsh Stile in St Thomas. The excavations were financed by Devon County Council and took place in advance of road improvements linked with the construction of the new Albany Road leisure and shopping centre. The earliest levels on the site consisted of coarse river gravels containing fragments of Roman tile. These were presumably deposited by the main channel of the Exe in late- or sub-Roman times. The channel subsequently moved away towards the NE and the site appears to have become first a marsh and later probably a meadow subject to seasonal flooding. By the late Saxon period the main channel evidently lay much closer to the city than it does today, since the medieval parish boundary of St Thomas ran across Shilhay island on the Exeter side of the river (Fig. 5). The parish boundary no doubt reflected the former extent of a late Saxon estate whose limit followed the centre line of the river channel. At some time in the Saxo-Norman period the river must have shifted back towards St Thomas, probably in a single catastrophic event during a major flood. The line of the parish boundary across Shilhay should not be taken as marking the precise course of the old river channel since it was probably arrived at after the shift by a process of legal arbitration between the landowners involved. The river may in fact have flowed somewhat closer to the Exeter side than the parish boundary suggests. A scarp along the NE side of the excavation site (Fig. 3.1) may represent the furthest point reached by the main river channel when it shifted back towards the St Thomas side. Subsequently it receded towards the NE leaving an area of marsh known since at least the 16th century by the name Shooting Marsh.

By the mid 11th century a mill leat crossed the excavation site on a line roughly parallel with Alphington Street. This could have originated at Head Weir or perhaps at a weir next to the Exe Bridge. The leat may have given rise to the name Sotrebroc (Southbrook) recorded in the Exon Domesday Book (but not the Exchequer version) as the original name of the Floyershayes manor which lay between Alphington Street and the Exe (Fig. 4) and included part of Belle Isle on the far side of the river.

A small strip of marsh within the northern corner of the site was probably reclaimed with spoil derived from the excavation of the leat. By the 12th or 13th century a hollow roadway crossed this area as shown in Fig. 3.2. This was eventually filled in with layers of gravel

EXETER: ALPHINGTON STREET, ST. THOMAS, 1984

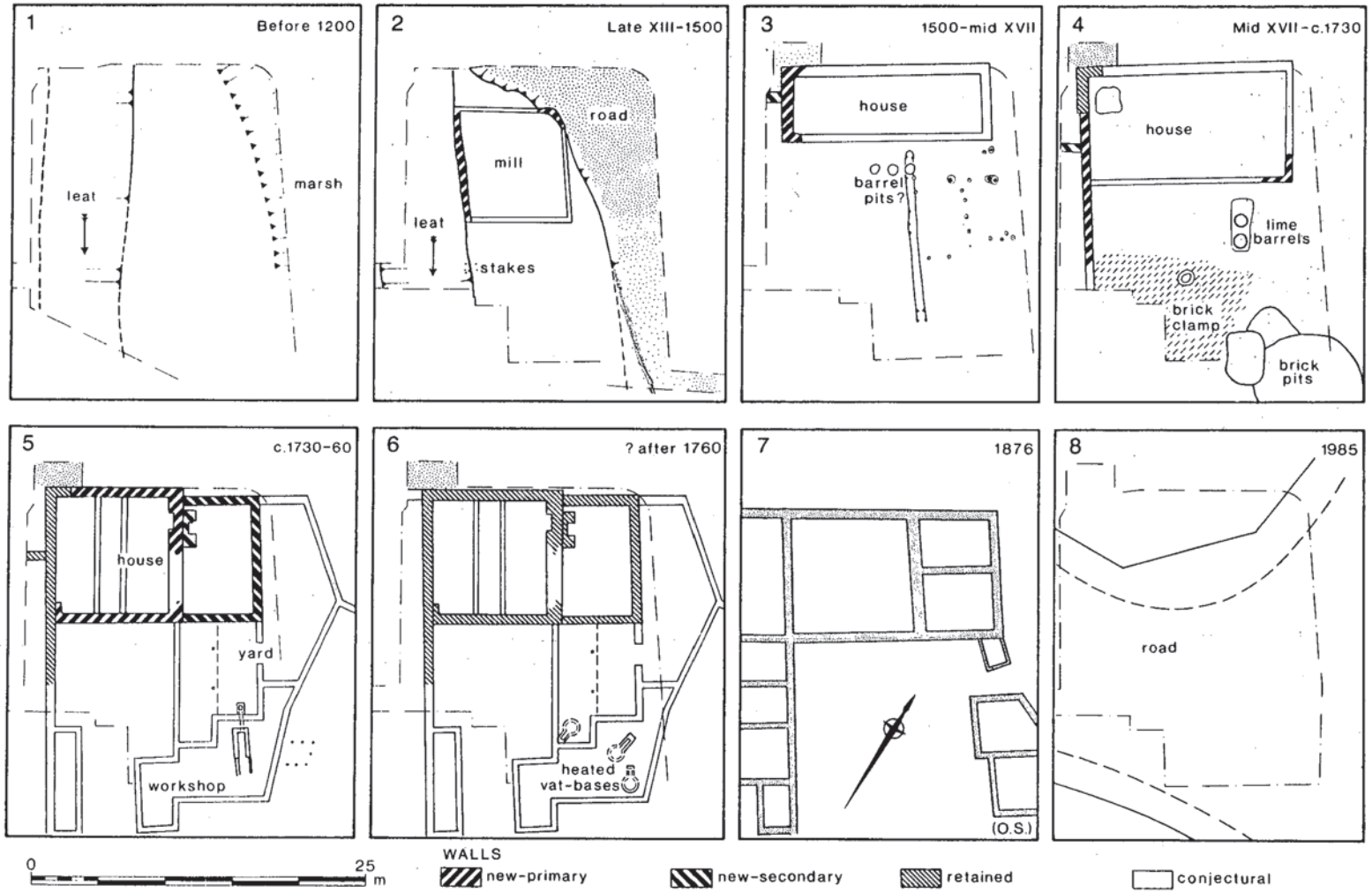


Figure 3

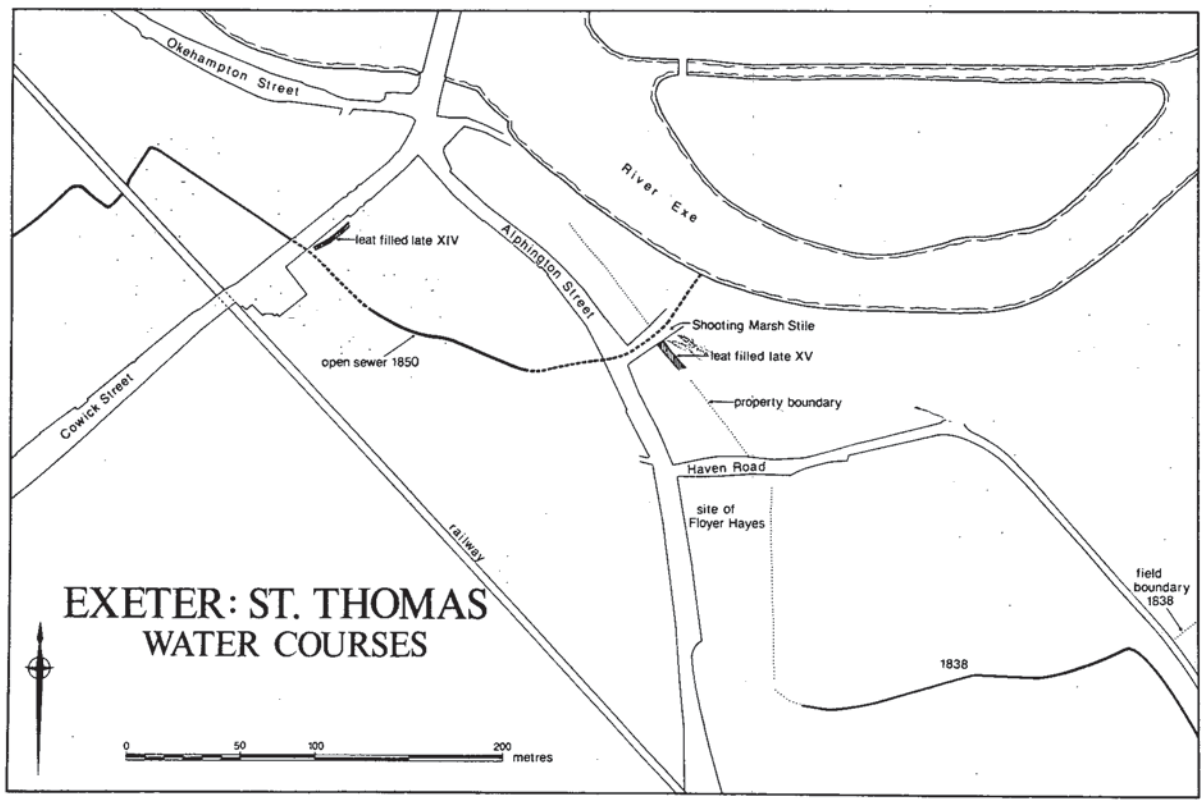


Figure 4.

metalling in the 14th and 15th centuries. A building situated between the leat and the road, with one wall forming a revetment to the leat, is interpreted as a mill. Several mills are recorded in St Thomas during the medieval period. The leat was filled in during the last quarter of the 15th century. During the 15th century the road appears to have taken a more easterly direction, probably indicating that by this time more land had been reclaimed from the marsh. The upper levels of the road contained much iron slag, suggesting the possibility that the mill building was at this period in use as a smithy. In the early 16th century the part of the road within the excavation area went out of use entirely. The stretch of the road to the NW of the site became known as Shooting Marsh Stile, a name which still exists today. The plot of reclaimed ground between the leat and Shooting Marsh (Fig. 5, plot 7) amounted by the mid 16th century to an area two acres in extent. The plot was called Barrowhill and until 1538 it belonged to the Courtenay earls of Devon as parcel of their Manor of Exe Island. The manor was acquired by the City Chamber in 1550 and is continuously documented thereafter. In late 16th-century leases

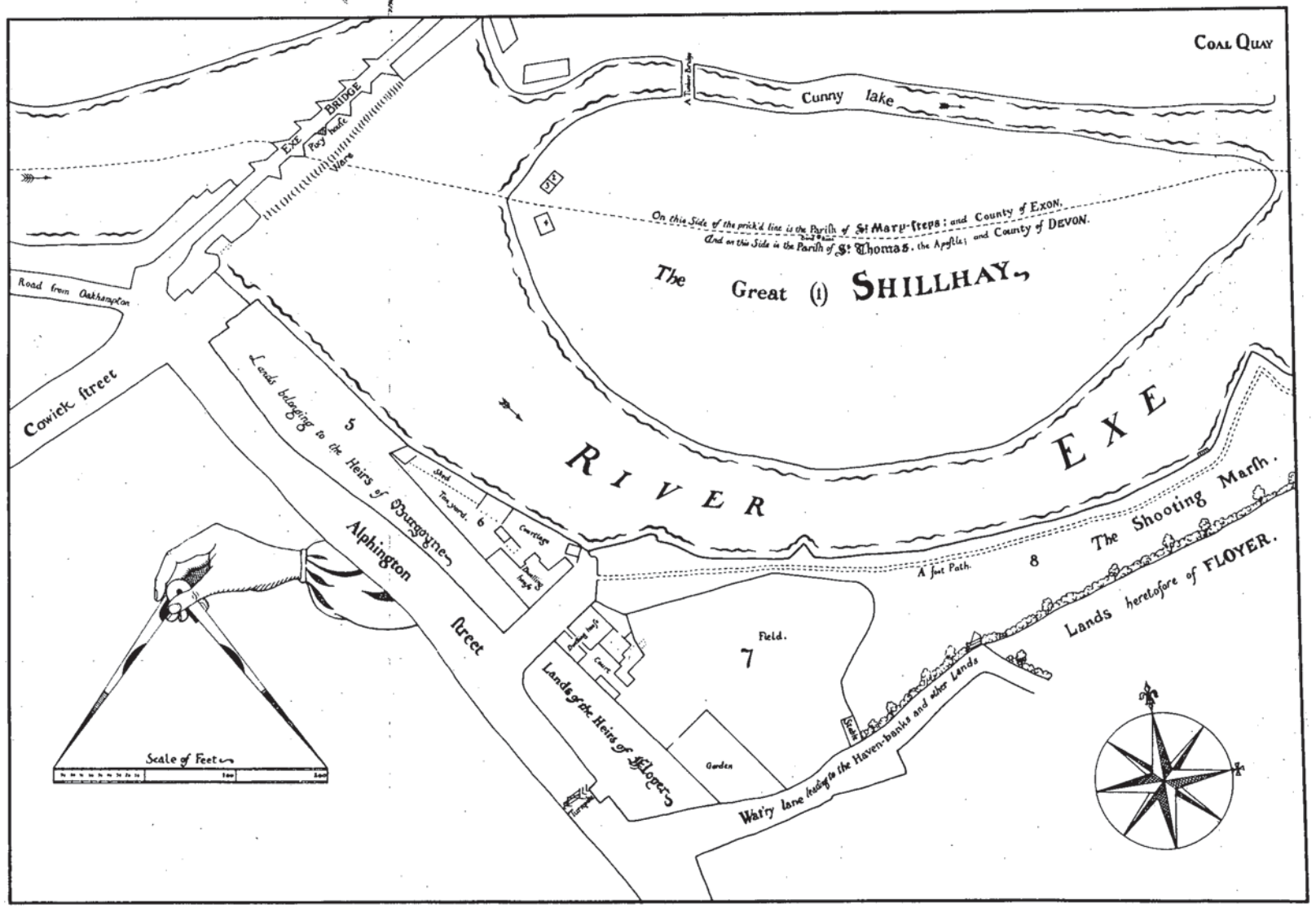
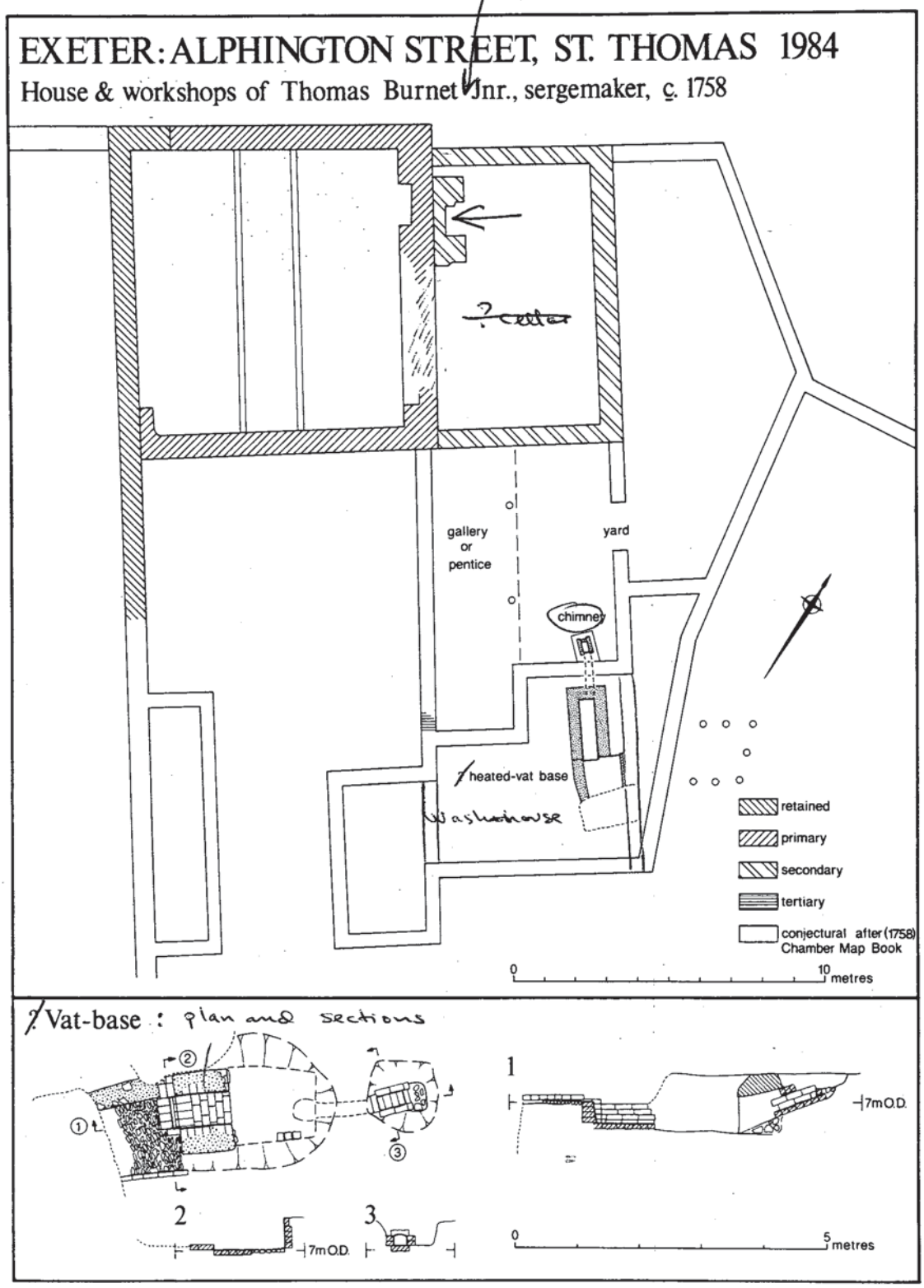


Figure 5 : Chamber Map Book



Conjectural

Figure 6

the old mill or a building on its site is described as a cottage. It was occupied at this time by members of the Birdall family of bell-founders and braziers whose foundry premises were excavated at Cowick Street earlier in 1984. Although a single fragment of cauldron mould was found in the excavation, there is no evidence to show that Barrowhill was used by the Birdalls in their foundry business, even for quarrying clay.

Around 1700 the Barrowhill plot was quarried extensively as a brickfield and bricks were fired in a clamp- or bonfire-kiln in the southern part of the excavation area. This is the first evidence for brickmaking in St Thomas. Fragments of pottery sugar-refining vessels from early 18th-century levels attest another industry not previously documented in the parish.

Three barrels containing slaked lime were backfilled with cattle horn-cores deposited around 1720-30. A sample of about 250 of these is being studied by Bruce Levitan of Bristol Museum. They afford a rare opportunity to examine the physical evidence for the early development of the longhorn type produced by breeding improvements initiated around 1700. The cores probably represent tanners' or horners' waste material. Most of them seem to have come from oxen (i.e. castrates) of 3-4 years' age.

By 1736 the Barrowhill tenement was occupied by Thomas Burnet, a sergemaker. He was succeeded by his son, Thomas Burnet Jnr., also a sergemaker, who is recorded as a bankrupt in 1760. Their premises are briefly described in two Sun Insurance Policies preserved in the Guildhall Library in London. These state that the buildings were constructed of stone and cob with roofs of slate. The foundations of

EXETER:
18th-century circular heated vat-bases

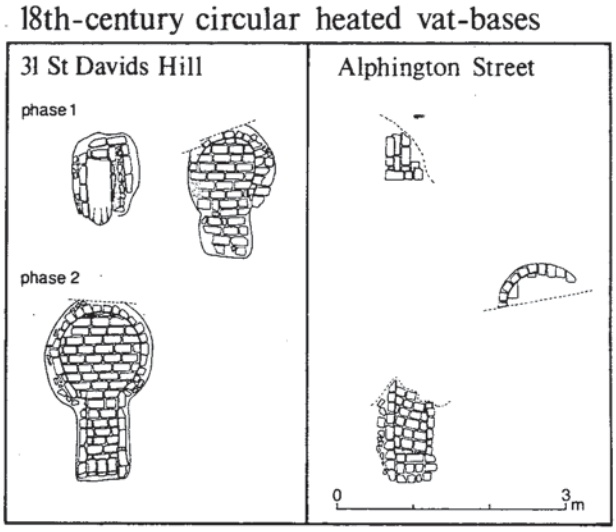


Figure 7

the Burnet house were well preserved, although no floor levels survived (Fig. 3.5). The workshops were much less solidly constructed, with very shallow foundations which were almost obliterated without trace at a later period. We are most fortunate however in having a plan of the tenement made in 1758 and preserved in the Exeter Chamber Map Book (Fig. 5). This appears to be reasonably accurate in its depiction of the layout insofar as this can be checked against the excavated remains. The plans shown in Figs. 3.5, 3.6 and 6 are reconstructions based on both sources of evidence.

In the Burnet workshop a large rectangular heated boiler- or vat-base was found. Built mainly of brick, it was connected to an external chimney by a short tunnel driven beneath one wall of the building. At a later period, possibly subsequent to the Burnet tenure, brick vat-bases of circular form were constructed in the workshops (Fig. 3.7). These are similar in type to examples excavated in 1982 in the rear wing of 31 St David's Hill. The bases are shown for comparison in Fig. 7.

2. THE CATHEDRAL (John Allan)

At the invitation of the Dean and Chapter a second year of archaeological recording was undertaken on the West Front of the cathedral between October 1983 and October 1984; again this was funded entirely by the Exeter Cathedral Preservation Trust. The area A-C 10-26 (the central sector, between the aisle buttresses) was recorded completely; recording of portions of the S sector is currently in progress. In the absence of detailed measured drawings of the front, new elevations (Figs. 8-9), plans and sections have been prepared, and a photographic record of the fabric was made before, during and after conservation. A full report on this work has been presented to the Technical Advisory Committee of Exeter Cathedral; copies of this report will be circulated upon request.

The central sector displays three medieval constructional periods and three phases of restoration. As is well-known, the two lower tiers of figures (the A and B registers) are attributable to the episcopate of Bishop John Grandisson (1327-69). Perhaps the most interesting observation in the present season is the recognition that some elements of this work are actually later than the time of Grandisson's death. Some of the sculptures (the figure B23 and a group around the S. buttress) are certainly 15th-century work whilst four others (B8, 9, 24 and 25) are probably of that date. Taken with the evidence that the N. porch can be

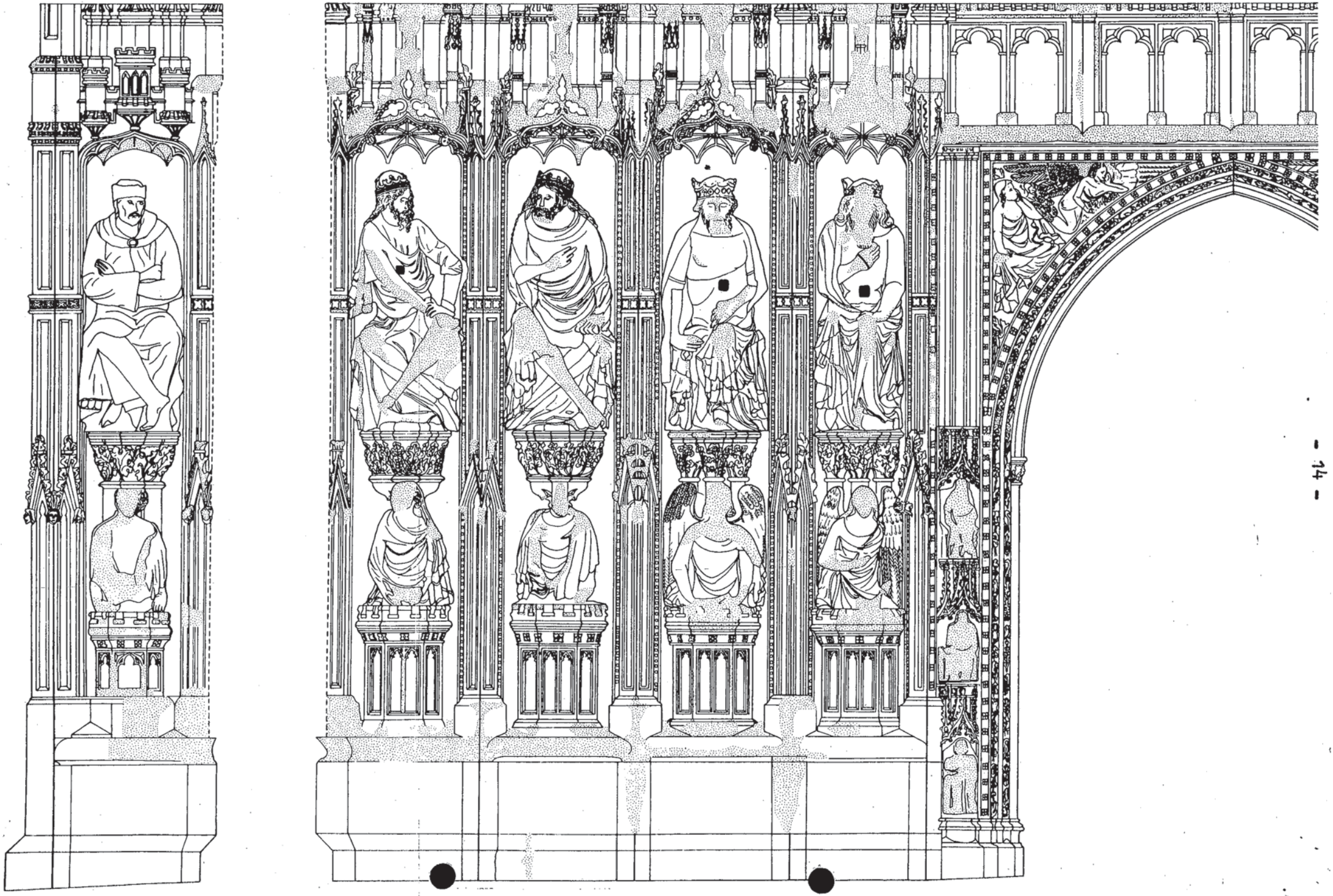


Fig. 8 Sheet 1 A & B registers

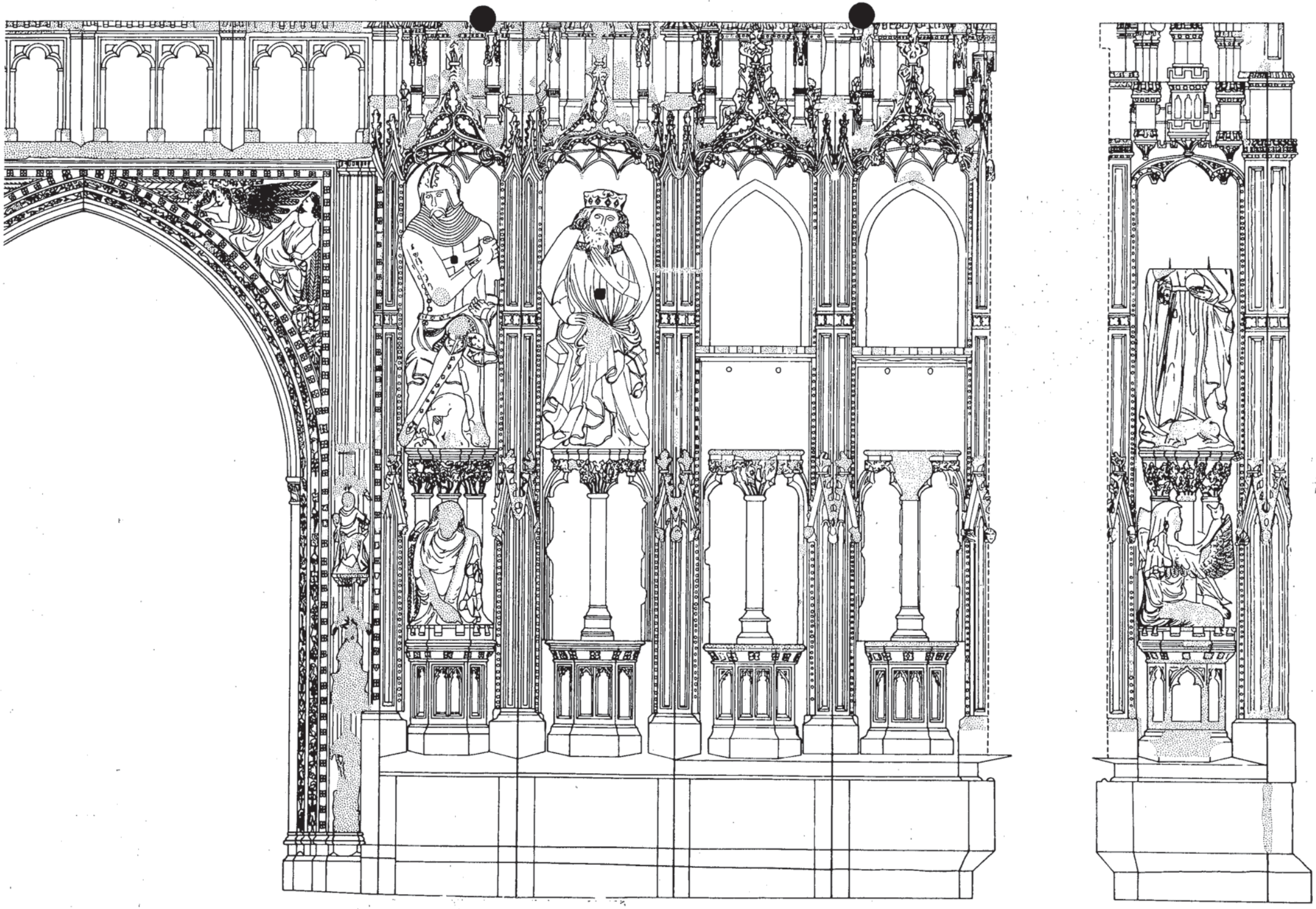


Fig. 8. Sheet 2 A & B registers

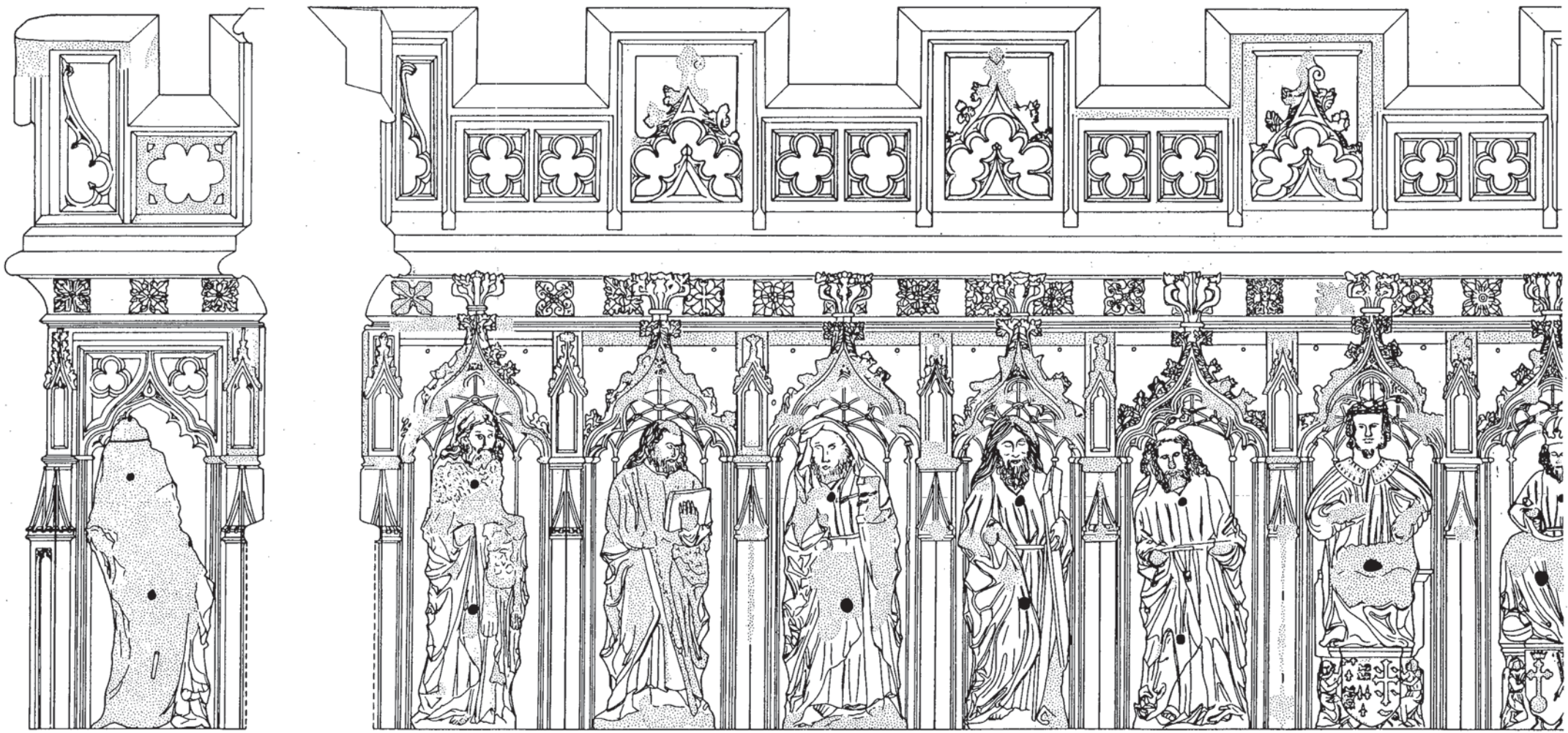


Fig. 9 Sheet 1 C register

Fig. 9 Sheet 2 C register

attributed to the visit of Robert Lesyngham of Gloucester to Exeter in the years around 1380, this appears to indicate that the lower tiers of the screen were incomplete in 1369. In the hope of resolving the problem of whether the spandrel sculptures of the central doorway are in situ or insertions, the doorway was carefully examined. Despite a number of infelicities of construction, it now seems certain that the doorway is in its primary form.

In the 15th-century work of the C register, examination of the attributes of the figures has brought several useful revisions to the published lists. One 14th-century figure in this register has been recognised for some time; a second has been identified this year. Evidence of a late medieval reconstruction of the 15th-century canopies was also found in the central sector; a variety of medieval construction details were also seen. As in the previous season, it has been possible to recover new details of medieval construction techniques.

Many of the canopies were formerly decorated with some form of metal fixtures, the dowels and plugs of which are preserved. Some retain polychrome colour, which is being subjected to analysis by Miss E. Sinclair.

Regarding the restoration work, the most significant advance has been the recognition that John Kendall's early 19th-century restoration was more extensive than has hitherto been appreciated. It included the wholesale replacement of the basement courses and C register canopies and gablets, together with extensive piecing-in of the major shafts.

3. PUBLICATION

Aileen Fox's memorandum on publication, appended to this report, provides a basis for discussion at the meeting.

C.G. Henderson

Director, Archaeological Field Unit

Memorandum from Lady (Aileen) Fox

Publication and publicity. Section 5 of Policy statement Sept 1984

5.10 After the publication of Allan's fine volume on Medieval and post-medieval finds the Advisory Committee will have to decide what next. In the Director's view "the highest priority must be given to the publication of excavations 1970-80, mainly outside the City Walls." I agree but not in the expensive format of vols I-III. These excavations are mainly of local interest, and the Reports could be issued as Xerox copies of an edited and illustrated typescript, supplemented by microfiche. The reports would be deposited in libraries in Exeter and sold to others. Alternatively some reports may be suitable for publication by the Devon Archaeological Society or the Devonshire Association and made available for sale as offprints.

5.11 A publication devoted to Roman Pottery used in Exeter is certainly desirable. It could take the form of a Handbook, which should have some general sale and might be eligible for a grant to cover costs from C.B.A. or similar body.

5.12 Postgraduate studies, including environmental subjects might be suitable for specialised Journal publication if of a sufficiently high standard.

5.13 Popular publications are now very important in my opinion and should have immediate priority. It would be worthwhile for the City Council to underwrite the cost of these as part of the attractions for tourists. The need is for brochures written in simple language, attractively produced with a coloured cover and other illustrations, costing 50-95p, similar to those produced by the Devon Archaeological and the Civic Societies. The following topics are suggested. Roman Exeter (a popular short Guide); A Walk around Exeter's City Walls; Old Exe Bridge;

Rougemont Castle; The Underground Conduits (updated); St Nicholas Priory (revised). The series could be sold at the Information kiosk, the Museum, the Cathedral shop, as well as in bookshops. They could be offered to coach companies, to conferences at the University, etc., and should pay for themselves in a short time.

Site signs and information boards.

More of these are needed to explain sites to visitors. The City Gates were all monumentally recorded after their demolition in the 19th century and there are a few well designed Jubilee plaques on the City Wall. More of these are needed on the Quay Lane and Cricklepit sections of the wall, in Northernhay Gardens and Paul Street carpark. The remains of Old Exe Bridge are difficult to reach across the streams of fast traffic and site signs and an information board are greatly needed as well as a pedestrian crossing. In the Cathedral Close, an information board on the site of St Mary Major is needed to illustrate and explain the Roman discoveries here and in the Deanery garden. I would hope that the Dean and Chapter would consent to this.

The Museum

It is intended to move the archaeological collections in Rougemont House back to Queen Street for display in two large rooms. This is an opportunity to exhibit more Roman and medieval material from the recent excavations. A more compact display will be necessary but has some advantages. There is a growing interest in archaeology among the general public and it should not be difficult to attract visitors in increasing numbers by new methods of display, now in evidence at Dorchester and Salisbury County Museums. More publicity will be needed in Exeter, as for example in buses, hotels and with touring coach companies and for school teachers.

Aileen Fox. January 1985