

The Eastgate, Chester 1972

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At the beginning of September 1972 workmen from the City Engineer's Department dug a hole in the north side of Foregate Street, some six metres outside the modern Eastgate (SJ 40726634), in order to repair a main sewer which had collapsed and become blocked. In doing so a quantity of masonry was uncovered. The writers, on behalf of the Grosvenor Museum, were allowed to investigate these structures during the three weeks the sewer took to repair. Considerable amounts of shoring were required to ensure that the sewer kept flowing and to prevent the other mains services from collapse. This meant that working conditions were very restricted and some of the structures and deposits were only partially examined. The hole reached a maximum extent of 5.0 metres by 3.9 metres and a depth of 4.1 metres.

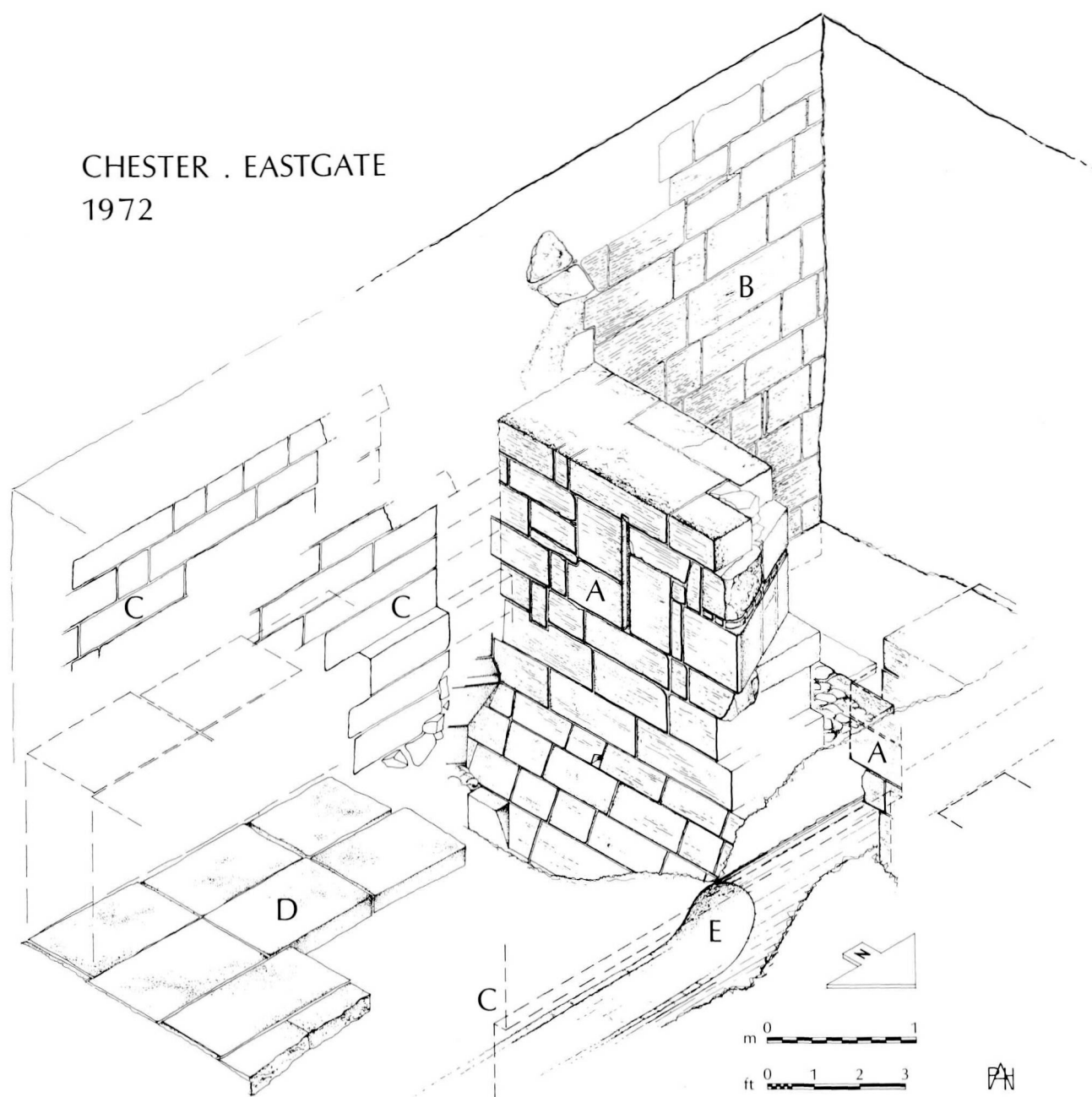


Fig. 19

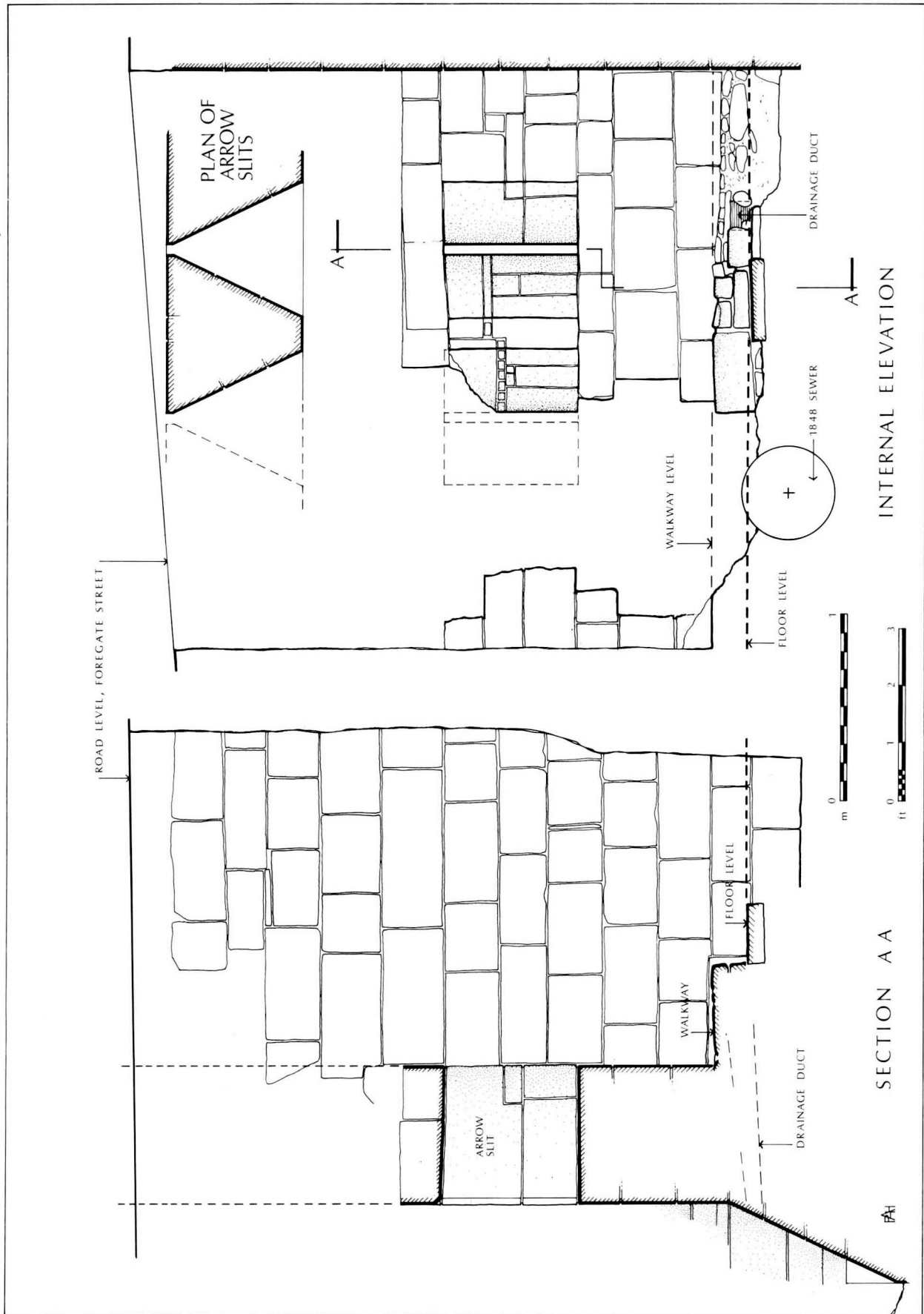


Fig. 20

THE STRUCTURES (fig. 19, A-E)

A. At a distance of 7.5 metres east of the front of the present gate and running parallel to the city walls in a north-south direction, was a well-built, pale yellow sandstone wall with a chamfered plinth and two arrow-slits. The sewer trench had removed about 1 metre of the wall including half of the northernmost arrow-slit. The northern extent of this masonry could not be determined. At the southern edge of the excavation the back of the wall was bonded into another sandstone structure (B), while the plinth course at the front (east) was bonded on at least four courses of projecting masonry whose extent could not be determined. On its west side rubble foundations and the remnants of a sandstone floor, possibly a walkway, were uncovered (fig. 20). Beneath the section of surviving floor ran a small 'weeper' which had its exit on the east side of the wall, in the first course of the chamfered plinth.

B. One face of a yellow sandstone wall, bonded into A, but with different coursing was exposed on the southern side of the excavations. The highest of twelve courses of well constructed masonry survived to within 0.20 metres of the modern ground surface.

C. East of A, on either side of the excavation were ten courses and the footings of a red sandstone building composed of long, narrow stone blocks. The building butted onto A. Its easterly extent could not be determined.

D. Just above the footings of A a sandstone flagged floor had been laid. The northern edge of this had been destroyed by the sewer trench and further damaged by more recent feeder sewers. The average size of the flags was 0.8 metres by 0.5 metres by 0.12 metres.

E. The sewer itself was of brick barrel-vaulted construction.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXTS

Layer 1.

Within the area defined by the westerly edge of the excavation, and the wall (A), a large quantity of sandstone rubble, mortar, slate and a few sherds of pottery was recovered. The character of this deposit would suggest a demolition. The discovery of a sherd of Creamware amongst this material would suggest a date after 1761.

Finds

Pottery

1. Clay pipe; stem bore diameter $\frac{7}{64}$ "
2. Rim sherd of Creamware: Staffordshire or Leeds.
3. Fragment of Medieval mosaic floor tile (fig. 21, 13).
4. Body sherd of coarse red fabric, with blotchy green and orange external glaze.
- 5/6 Two fragments of Roman tile.
7. Body sherd of red coarse ware.
8. Sandstone mullion or jamb; probably Medieval (fig. 21, 14)

Layers 2/3.

Beneath the rubble described above were two layers of sticky clay, which occupied the bottom 0.6 metres of the area and covered the footings and sandstone flags. The upper layer (2) was grey/green in colour, the lower (3) was very dark grey or black. Both contained a small amount of Medieval pottery, probably belonging to the 14th or 15th centuries and a few animal and bird bones. The number and character of the finds would not indicate intense human occupation. On the northern side all three layers recorded in this area were damaged by the sewer trench and contaminated by subsequent lateral seepage.

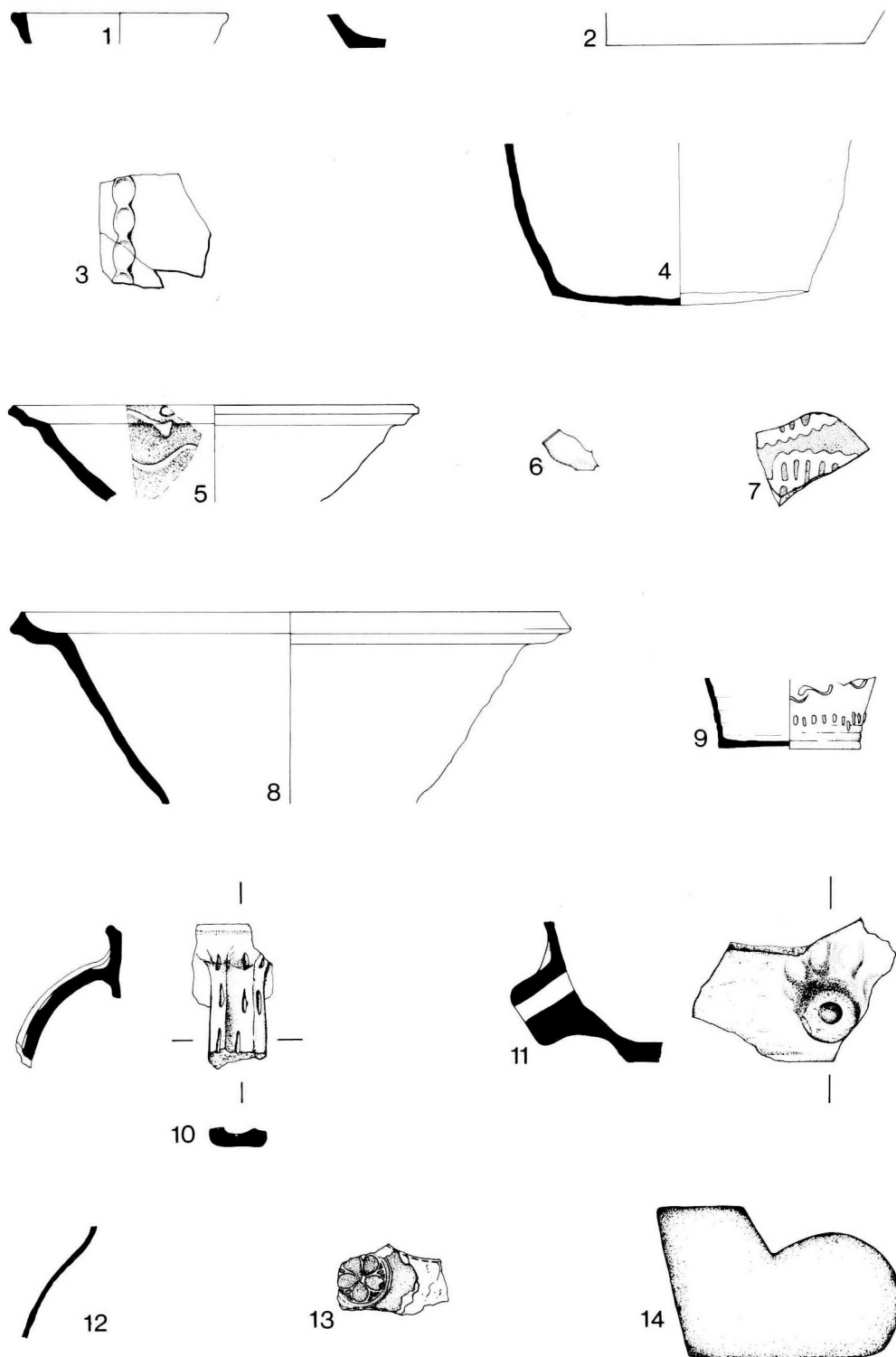


Fig. 21 (scale = $\frac{1}{4}$)

Layer 2

Finds

Pottery

1. Body sherd in coarse pink gritty fabric.
2. Asymmetric strap handle, coarse quartz gritted red fabric.
3. Body sherd of very hard purple fabric; green external glaze.

Animal Bone

1. Right tarsometatarsus from immature domestic chicken *Gallus gallus*.
2. Right carpometacarpus similar to that of lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*.
3. Left lower jaw of domestic cat *Felis domesticus*.
4. Three tibiae of *Felis domesticus*.
5. Two femurs of *Felis domesticus*.
6. Radius of *Felis domesticus*.
7. Ulna of *Felis domesticus*.
8. Fibula of *Felis domesticus*.
9. Part of rib of larger mammal of either family *Boridae* or *Equidae*.
10. Scapula fragments of large mammal *Equus*.

Layer 3.

Finds

Pottery

1. Base of a large storage vessel (ten sherds); dark grey fabric with dark green external glaze. The base is warped (fig. 21, 4).
2. Body sherd in coarse white fabric; green external glaze.
3. Two joining body sherds in coarse white fabric; applied thumbled strip and external green glaze (fig. 21, 3).
4. Two body sherds of quartz gritted cream fabric; blotchy brown/green glaze on both sides.
5. Body sherd in coarse pink gritty fabric with blotchy green/yellow external glaze.
6. Two body sherds in gritty orange fabric; unglazed.
7. A fragment of Roman tile.

Animal Bone

1. Two humeri of *Felis domesticus*.
 2. Tibia of *Felis domesticus*.
 3. Two ulnae of *Felis domesticus*.
 4. Two radii of *Felis domesticus*.
 5. Two ribs of *Felis domesticus*.
 6. Femur of *Felis domesticus*.
 7. Fragment of pelvis of *Felis domesticus*.
 8. Part of scapula—probably *Felis domesticus*.
 9. Cannon bone of family *Boridae*.
- + fragments of bones from larger mammals.

Layer 4.

A small area of clean laminated sandy fills, dipping steeply eastward was examined immediately east of A over the lower part of the chamfered plinth. Five sherds of Medieval pottery, probably belonging to the 14th century were recovered. Interference by modern feeder sewers, the need to construct a new main sewer inspection chamber in this position with the greatest possible speed and the contamination of modern sewage made it impossible to explore this deposit any further.

Finds

Pottery

1. Three joining body sherds in a hard white fabric with yellow/orange external glaze.
2. Rim sherd in coarse pink gritty fabric; yellow/orange glaze on the inside (fig. 21, 1).
3. Base sherd in fine buff fabric; reduced grey core and splashed with blotchy medium dark brown internal glaze (fig. 21, 2).

Layer 5.

Beneath the sandstone flagged floor (C) was a considerable quantity of sandstone rubble, including mortar, slate and some pottery and clay tobacco pipes. The lower part of this layer, which seemed to date from the mid 17th century, was also contaminated by lateral seepage from the main sewer.

Finds

Pottery

1. Clay pipe bowl $\frac{7}{64}$ " stem diameter (fig. 21, 6), three stems, $1-\frac{7}{64}$ " ; $2-\frac{8}{64}$ ".
2. Six body sherds and one base sherd of iron-glazed ware with purple fabric. Three of the body sherds have handle attachments.
3. Body sherd, iron-glazed ware; red fabric.
4. Three joining sherds of a dish in buff fabric with yellow slip-trailed decoration and lead glaze. Fire burnt. Probably Staffordshire (fig. 21, 7).
5. Rim sherd in red fabric with yellow slip-trailed decoration and clear lead glaze. Probably Staffordshire (fig. 21, 5).

Layer 6.

The sewer trench fill contained much rubble of all kinds and large quantities of pottery, glass, clay pipes, tiles etc of the 17th-19th centuries. The base of a Roman amphora and a few sherds of Medieval pottery were also found.

Finds

Pottery

A considerable quantity was collected by the workmen in their efforts to re-locate the sewer. The following are the most interesting:-

1. Neck of unglazed jug in fine buff ware; probably Saintonge (fig. 21, 12).
2. Base and frilled bung-hole, in coarse gritty pink fabric; blotchy dark green/brown external glaze (fig. 21, 11).
3. Slashed strap handle in coarse gritty pink fabric; blotchy yellow external glaze (fig. 21, 10).

INTERPRETATION

A/B.

The character of the masonry and the finds from the earliest levels associated with it suggest a medieval date, whilst its position and the date and character of the rubble within it are completely consonant with the demolition of the Eastgate which took place early in 1768 (*Assembly Minutes* A/B256-256v). The sandy deposits preserved close to the Medieval masonry had all the appearance of primary ditch fills and may well be the remnants of a Town Ditch. Reference to a

ditch being in existence at the Eastgate occur in a Petition to the Assembly by Thurston Holinshead in 1588 (*Assembly Minutes* A/B/1/218) and to its clearing out during the Civil War (*Assembly Minutes* A/B/2/67v). It is clear that the Eastgate was entered by crossing a draw-bridge at this time (*Harleian Mss* 2155). The material discovered in 1972 probably represents early silting of the ditch which had escaped later cleansings.

C/D

The building and sandstone floor butting on to the gate structure was also demolished in 1768. It may well be the one about which the Assembly were petitioned on a number of occasions by the Ley family whose lease on 'a dwelling house and garden in Foregate Street, adjoining the Eastgate and the walls of the city' expired on 30th May 1743, having been originally granted on the 30th May 1663. (*Assembly Minutes* A/B/4/103). Alternatively, the building may be the shop belonging to Robert Fletcher, a merchant, who had held a lease for life from the city for 'one shop with a chamber over it adjoining the Eastgate and of two little towers under the gate'. The shop and chamber had been demolished and he petitioned the Assembly on the 15th August 1654 to grant him the ground and towers in fee farm on the condition that he built a substantial building on 'this waste ground' (*Assembly Minutes* A/B/2/104).

The area outside the Eastgate was devastated by the Civil War and in the reconstruction of the City's defences in 1644 it seems very improbable that any building would be allowed to butt onto the gate itself, thus allowing easy access to the walls. The material preserved under the floor of this building may well represent demolition or clearance which took place in 1644 or devastation caused by the siege itself in September 1645. In any case the pottery and other finds sealed beneath it almost certainly date to before leases for new buildings were granted i.e., c. 1663 outside the gate and probably to before the siege itself i.e., 1646. This gives a very useful *terminus ante quem* for the pottery sealed beneath the sandstone floor and for the arrival of Staffordshire slipware into the Chester area.

E.

The construction of the brick barrel-vaulted main sewer is recorded by Watkin who noted that during its construction in December 1848 two separate Roman pavements were recorded outside the Eastgate at depths of three and twelve feet respectively (Watkin, 1886, 112). The excavations of 1972 have established that the upper of these pavements is of mid 17th century date. No trace was found of the lower pavement, even though a depth of slightly more than 4 metres was reached.

In backfilling, the Medieval masonry was protected by a layer of breeze blocks and heavy-duty polythene. All the finds, notebooks, original drawings and photographs are in the Grosvenor Museum, Chester.

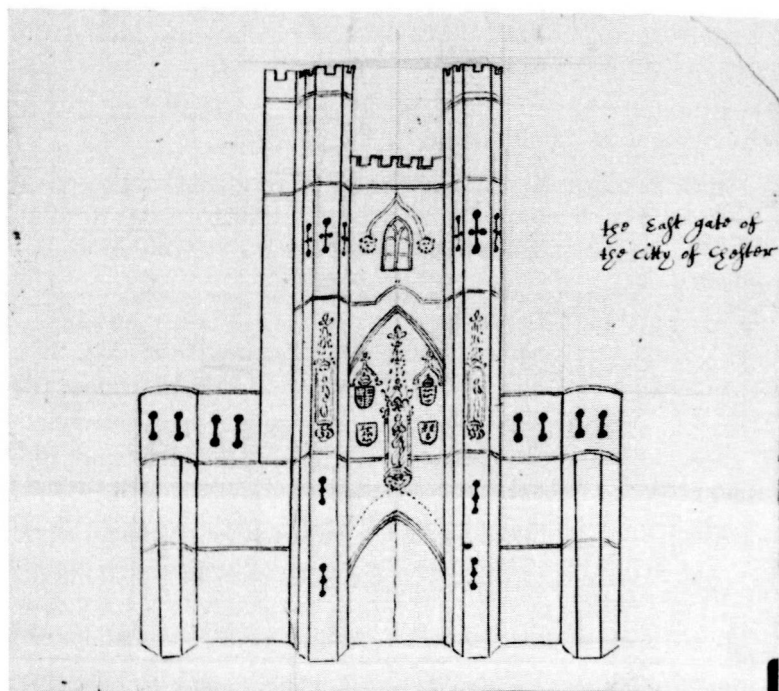


Fig. 22 'Sketch by Randle Holme'.

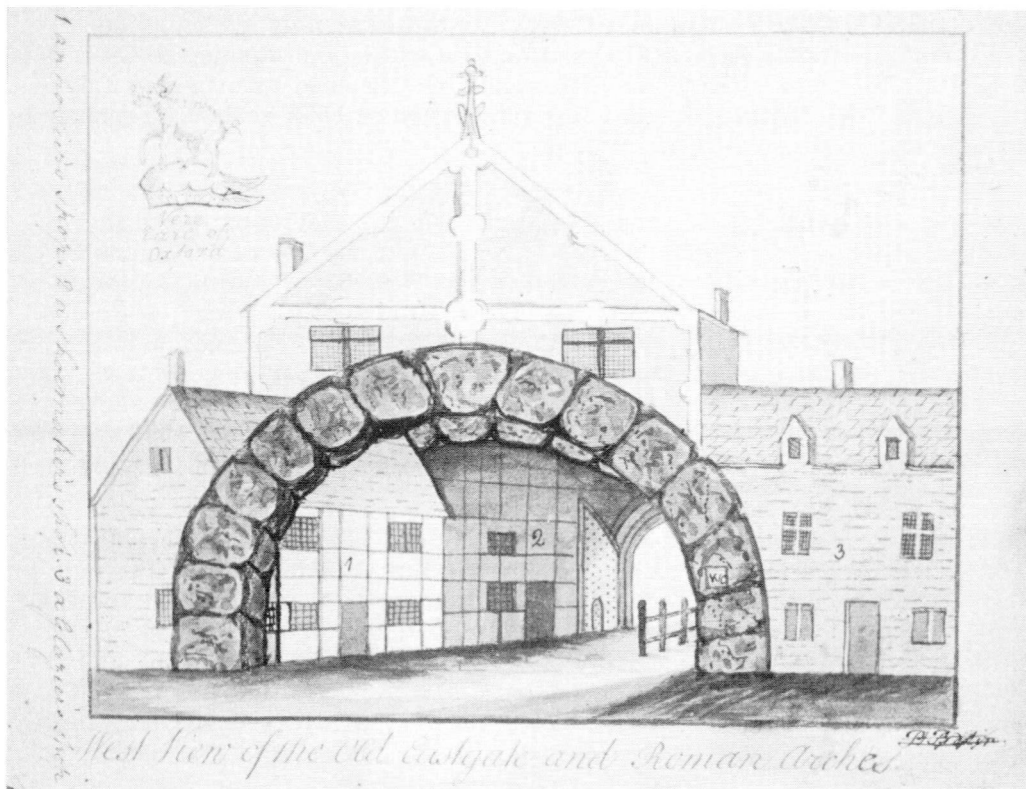


Fig. 23 'Sketch by George Wilkinson & Peter Broster'

DISCUSSION

The discovery of the Medieval masonry under Foregate Street has highlighted the considerable mystery still surrounding the old Eastgate's appearance, and provided new problems for the interpretation of the so-called Roman arches. The present discoveries have not produced any positive evidence for the Roman East Gate and the authors have therefore not included a discussion in this paper. However, a suggested restoration of Chester's principal Medieval gateway is offered with some confidence, based on a comparison of documentary evidence with the remains found in 1972.

The gate dismantled in 1768 was very poorly recorded, and there appears to be only four extant drawings of its elevation. In chronological order they are:-

1. A sketch by Randle Holme (fig. 22) of the gate before the Civil War seige (*Harleian MSS 2073* in the British Museum; also appearing as a vignette in Ormerod (1882, 11, 583).
2. A sketch by George Wilkinson and Peter Broster (fig. 23) of the interior (west) face, drawn when they were schoolboys (i.e., early 18th century), which is intended to illustrate the Roman arches, but includes details of the back of the Eastgate and its passageway (*Earwaker MSS CR/63/2/133* in Chester City Record Office).
3. An etching by Wilkinson (fig. 24) showing the gate from the east with the cluster of houses still round it—there are a number of versions of this in print form (e.g., Hughes 1856, 17). It is not clear if there is any relationship between this Wilkinson and the artist of the *Earwaker MSS*. Chronology would certainly allow them to be the same person.
4. An etching by Stuart (fig. 25) of the gate and adjacent walls viewed from the east 'when the buildings were removed' (see e.g., Simpson, 1910, 12-14).

As to the appearance of the medieval gate, all the illustrations agree on a gothic archway of no great width flanked by octagonal towers with lancet windows. On the Randle Holme drawing short wing walls from these main towers terminate in two smaller towers which have a similar hexagonal plan. The relationship of the whole structure to the City Walls is not made clear. In fact it is only Stuart's drawing which shows both the gate and the walls. He gives two octagonal towers flanking the gate, the whole structure being linked to the City Walls by what appear to be wing walls leaving the gate at about 45 degrees, so that it lies well in front of the main curtain. A sense



Fig. 24 'Etching by Wilkinson'.



Fig. 25 'Etching by J. Stuart'.

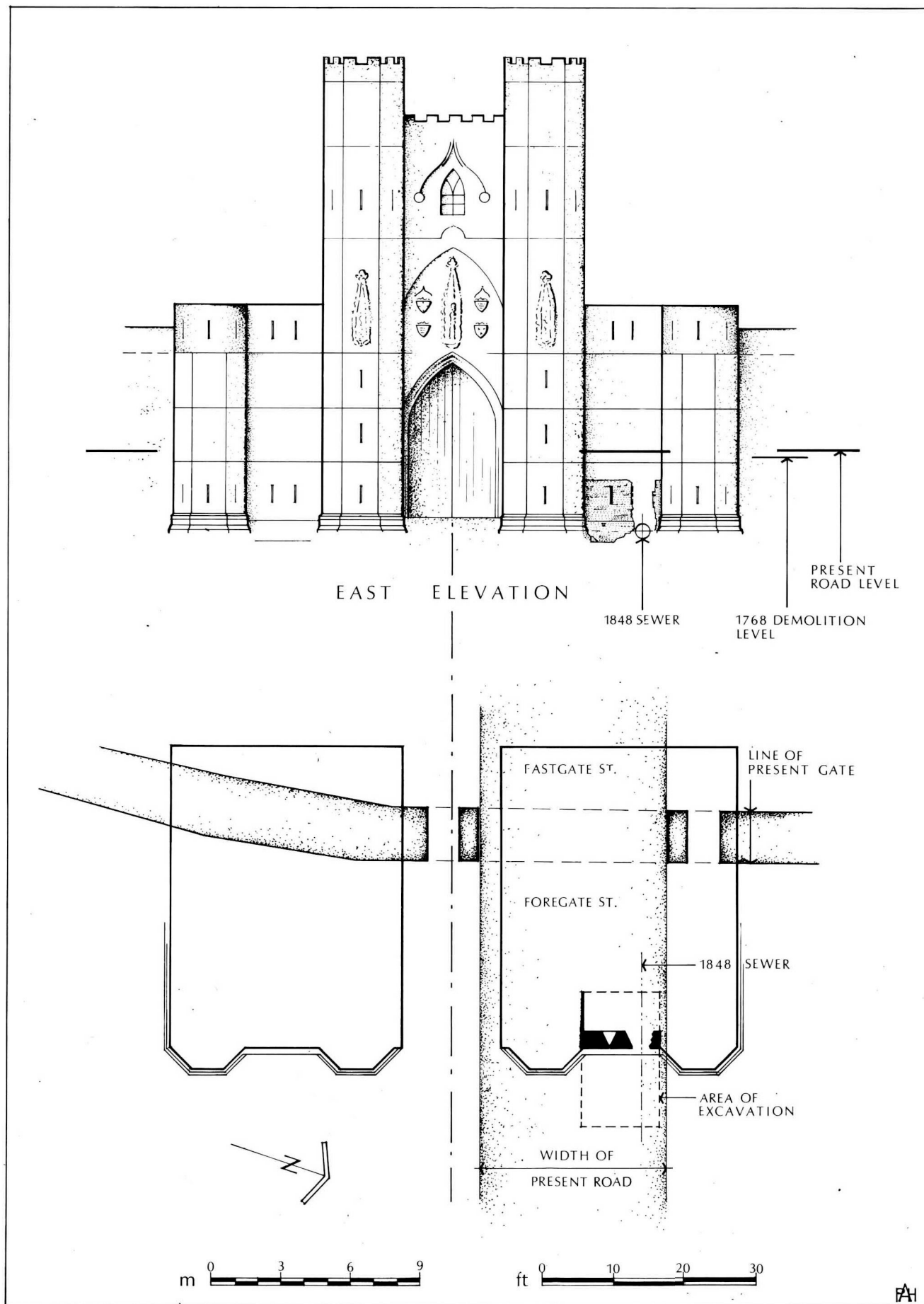


Fig. 26

of scale is given by figures which appear on the Stuart and Wilkinson drawings, although the various versions of the latter are hardly consistent. The size of the actual passageway may be judged from various references to its inconvenience for wheeled traffic.

The stonework found in 1972 under Foregate Street was clearly already underground in 1768 when the present gate was built, since it lies less than 20 centimetres under the centre of the present road surfaces. It therefore cannot appear on any of the 18th century drawings. It does not figure either on Randle Holme's sketch done a century earlier, since there is no sign of the pair of arrow slits at ground level found in 1972. During the excavation no signs of modification were seen, in particular no traces of Stuart's wing-walls.

When compared with the 17th and 18th century drawings the relevant features of recent discoveries seems to be a well-built but fairly insubstantial wall, parallel to, but 8 metres in front of the City Walls, and what is presumably the beginning of an octagonal tower. It seems reasonable to conclude that the most reliable elevation of the old gate is that by Randle Holme. Stuart's drawing remains a mystery, a possible but unlikely explanation is that the century between the two drawings saw the demolition of the original flanking structures of the medieval gate, and that the 45 degree wing walls were added to keep the City Walls intact. No signs of the substantial foundations necessary were found in 1972.

Using Randle Holme's sketch as a basis and interpolating measurements from the other drawings and from the 1972 excavation, it has been possible to draw a tentative elevation of the Eastgate, and a plan which shows the possible position of the medieval structures under the modern street (fig. 26). On this interpretation the masonry discovered in the sewer trench was the base of the north-south wall joining the northern set of towers, with just the angle of the northern main tower showing at the southern side of the trench. It will be seen that the area on the western side was not the inside of a tower, but a large presumably empty space within the gate complex. This may explain the lack of pre-20th century finds in this area. However, it must be admitted that the east-west wall which was exposed nearest the modern gate looked very much like an inside face. There is very meagre evidence for the gate's plan, and the area behind the front wall may have been roofed or vaulted to protect the defenders without ever being used for accommodation. This reconstruction places the medieval roadway to the south of Foregate Street, which from a comparison of the present line of Eastgate Street with that appearing on earlier maps, seems the most likely. If the masonry is considered in isolation it could possibly represent the southernmost tower of the four, with a portion of the wall linking it to the southern gate tower, but this would place the medieval street well to the north of the present line.

At first it seemed that the doors of the gate would have been impossibly high if the depth of masonry found under Foregate Street was to be added to the archway shown on 18th century prints, but when drawn the proportions are very similar to the King's Gate of Caernarvon Castle. A gate of these proportions would imply a build-up of the surrounding ground level of at least 4 metres between the date when it was built and its demolition in the 18th century. If the proposed reconstruction is right, by Randle Holme's time the height of the gate arch must already have been severely reduced, while by the 1760's it may have become little more than 3 metres high (cf. Wilkinson's and Stuart's versions). The width is known to have been meagre, and it is suggested that it was probably around 3.50 metres. Cowper's footpath of 1754 will have reduced this further, an action which must have emphasised the inadequacy of the old gate and perhaps precipitated the move to have it dismantled.

There are inevitably some difficulties. There is no way of knowing what the gate looked like in plan, although some clues exist. The town walls in the area of the modern Eastgate have vertical butt-joints some distance to either side of the gate, and it is a reasonable inference to connect these with the demolition of the old gate and construction of the new. The joint on the northern side occurs opposite the entrance to the King's Arms Kitchen public house, and introduces a minor change in the wall's line which brings it slightly west of what may have been its original position at the Eastgate. The southern section is more informative. Here the joint is visible in the small yard behind the Old Bank Buildings. The medieval wall can be seen continuing on the line it has been following from the Newgate area, while from the front face of this springs a series of arches carrying the modern wall-walk. As they proceed northwards these arches diverge more and more from the medieval wall, which ends abruptly at the south wall of the premises of the Leeds Permanent Building Society. The arches, built of ashlar with occasional brick, run through the Building Society's premises (where they may be seen in the foyer), to emerge at the southern end of the Eastgate. It seems certain that the city walls north and south of the medieval gate were not on the same line, but staggered by as much as 6 metres with the northern stretch lying furthest east. This clearly affects any speculation on the depth of the medieval gate structure, since it obviously has to be connected to the city walls on both the north and south sides. There

seems no way in which the northern section of the city wall could have been as far forward as the masonry found in 1972. Hence the depth of the structure as shown on the hypothetical plan should be considered as a minimum requirement; whether the gate passage itself was as long as this is another matter. Wilkinson and Broster's drawing suggests that the structure opened up in some way at the rear in a manner which can no longer be understood. In this respect it is tantalising to have the reference in the *Assembly Book* to two towers directly under and four towers directly over the Eastgate, without any way of establishing what plan this might indicate.

Another difficulty is provided by Wilkinson's drawing. He shows an open stone gallery crossing the gate passage, while behind it lies a wall bearing the four shields and central statue which are a feature of all the drawings. This wall is thus recessed some distance behind the front face of the gate. At the top it is sealed by an arch, which appears on all the drawings, sometimes Roman sometimes Gothic in style. It is difficult to reconcile the two versions or to explain such an important discrepancy when a minor detail such as the shields appears on them all. Obviously a passage would be included in the structure to make the parapet-walk of the City Walls continuous, but it is not now possible to decide whether it was totally internal or partly open.

It is therefore suggested that the facade of the Eastgate as built consisted of four towers standing well forward of the City Walls, as shown on the Randle Holme drawing, with a single tall passage-way between the central pair. While the structure survived more or less intact until the period of the Civil War, a degree of neglect, in its early years at least, is implied by the rapid silt discovered in 1972 immediately in front of the masonry. It could be argued that the exceptional quality of the stonework could only have survived if protected from weathering by being rapidly buried under a build up of soil. Whatever the condition of the gate when Randle Holme drew it, the following century saw rapid decay. The two outer towers disappeared, whether destroyed in the Civil War or absorbed into the houses which clustered round the Eastgate is not clear. Furthermore, the gate became increasingly a nuisance to traffic and pedestrians, not least because the ground level continued to rise and reduce the headroom. The tangle of medieval masonry and later housing is evident from Broster's drawing, so that drastic surgery was needed in 1768 to clear the area. (cf. *Assembly Minutes* A/B/4 256-256V). The authors believe that the limits of this demolition are to be seen at the King's Arms Kitchen and the southern wall of the Leeds Building Society, (see above). This represents a far larger area than necessary for the removal of a twin-towered medieval structure or the building of the present gate, but becomes more intelligible if ruinous medieval masonry from two or more towers is concealed in the houses shown by Broster and Wilkinson. As yet there is no evidence to date the movement of the City Walls in this sector away from the Roman line which has been discovered recently (March 1973) to lie in front of the present wall along the St. John Street section, nor is there any documentary evidence which might suggest the date of the gate's construction. It is therefore impossible to be sure whether the decision to build the gate forward of the walls was influenced by a difference in alignment of the northern and southern stretches at this point or whether the misalignment developed at a later date.

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Also see:-

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HARLEIAN MANUSCRIPTS 2073 and 2155 in the British Museum.

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