

VIII

AN EXCAVATION AT THE CORNER TOWER, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE, 1978

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IN July/August, 1978, I was asked by Miss R. B. Harbottle, County Archaeologist, Tyne and Wear, to conduct an excavation down the south face of the Corner Tower, to be financed by the City Estate and Property Department. The large derelict area south of the Corner Tower, from Croft Stairs to Manor Chare, was to be landscaped at some time in the future. In addition it was important that the stonemasons repairing the Corner Tower at the time should have the opportunity to repoint it all the way down to the foundations.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Mr. Ivan Stretton, of the Estate and Property Department, for access to the site and for extending our stay from a fortnight to four weeks. For their generosity in letting us store our tools on their premises I am grateful to Easy and Best Ltd., and I thank the stonemasons of J. & W. Lowry Ltd. for the use of their hut for teabreaks and for needed shelter. For digging in wet and hazardous conditions I am indebted to Colin Crammond, Ian Shepherd, and Ian Taylor. Also thanks to Miss Margaret Finch for drawing the finds, and to Mrs Margaret Ellison for her report on the pottery. Finally I am grateful to Miss R. B. Harbottle for her help and advice, and for her encouragement in urging me to dig the site.

The area that was investigated lay immediately down the south face of the Corner Tower (64152522, NZ26/36), which forms the eastern boundary of Croft Stairs, a small lane off City Road, just south of Manors Station. To the south there is a great tract of waste land sloping down to Manor Chare. At present, the Corner Tower is being restored by J. & W. Lowry, on behalf of the City, having been neglected and obscured by buildings for many years. Today it survives to a height of some 10 metres, together with a stretch of town wall to the east.

The Corner Tower was an internal turret in the medieval town wall, forming the eastern of its two re-entrants; to the north was the Austin Tower; to the east the wall ran downhill over Pandon Burn to Pandon Gate. A turret was situated half way down the slope towards the Burn,¹ which ran through an arch in the wall. The Corner Tower was constructed between 1299 (when Newcastle petitioned Edward I for permission to include the suburb of Pandon within the town boundaries) and 1307, when the wall had cut through the Close of the Carmelite friary, thus obliging the friars to move to the west end of the town.²

In 1788 the Corner Tower was bounded to the south by a garden;³ a view published by Brand shows the town wall, including the Corner Tower, from Shieldfield, and

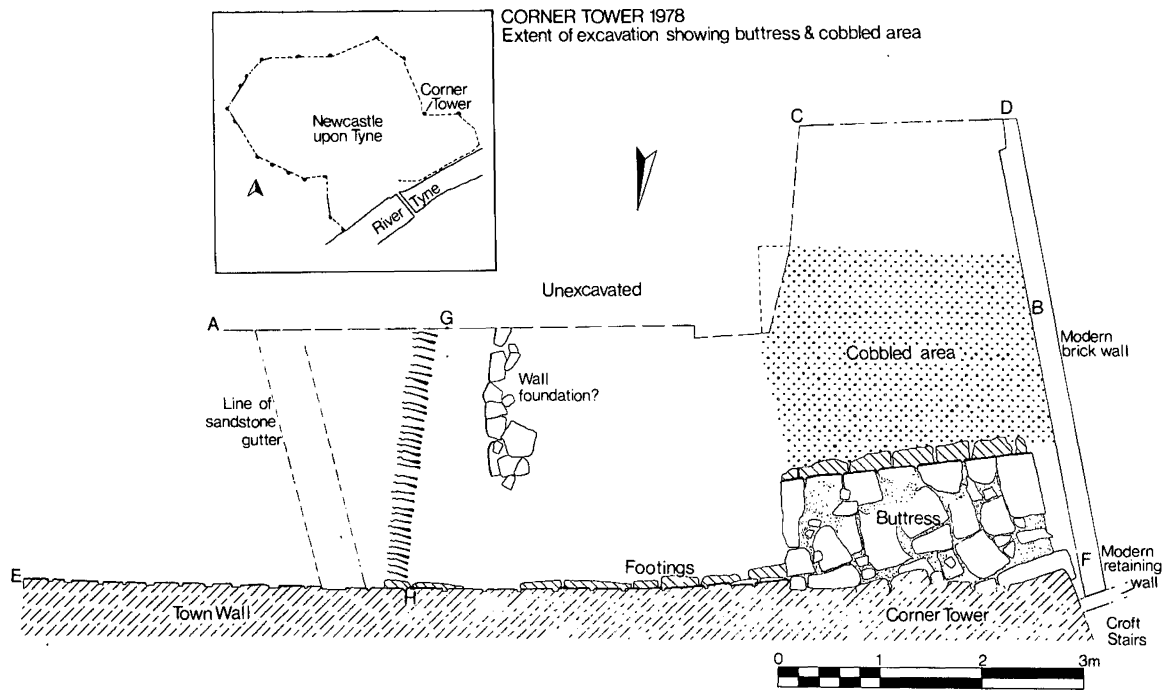


Fig. 1.

indeed it appears to be in an idyllic setting with fields and trees all around.⁴ The rapid growth of Newcastle in the first half of the nineteenth century was to end this period of isolation, the Corner Tower becoming surrounded by industrial and domestic buildings. The last construction on the site (a factory belonging to British Insulated Callenders Cables Ltd.) was pulled down a few years ago making excavation possible.

Antiquarian interest in the Corner Tower began with the construction of City Road in 1881. This ran east/west cutting across Pandon Dene and forcing Pandon Burn underground. As it also cut across the town wall, large sections of the wall were exposed and observers were able to see it running down from the Corner Tower to the bottom of the Dene. The sight of the wall prompted writers such as the Reverend R. E. Hooppell and Sheriton Holmes to take the view that before 1299 the town wall had run directly south from the Corner Tower to the Quayside. Hooppell stated that "the town wall of Newcastle did not include so large an area as in later times, but ran along the western edge of the Dene which must have been totally outside the fortifications".⁵ Holmes supported this, and considered that the town wall would originally "go direct to the river, leaving the town of Pandon outside on the east".⁶

The object of the excavation was to establish if, in fact, the town wall had ever run south from the Corner Tower and had then been pulled down to make way for the inclusion of Pandon within the town walls as Holmes and Hooppell assumed. It is a reasonable assumption to make, for three reasons: (1) the wall east of the Corner Tower makes for an awkward re-entrant, difficult to defend, suggesting that it was an afterthought; (2) the fact that Pandon was not an original part of Newcastle suggests that an earlier wall could have run straight down to the present Quayside; and (3) that before excavation took place it was noticed that on the south side of the Corner Tower there was a patch of raggy wall, four metres high and two metres wide, hinting at the possible continuation of the wall.

The excavation site was the concrete floor that was all that was left of the building of British Insulated Callenders Cables Ltd., and it lay directly south of the Corner Tower, bounded to the east by a retaining wall about six metres high. An L-shaped trench was dug down the south face of the Corner Tower, the stem of the L from the point where the Tower meets Croft Stairs, to about seven metres down the hill; this necessitated demolishing part of the retaining wall. This was to establish the depth and the footings of the town wall. After this preliminary trench was dug, an area about two metres square was opened out further south of the corner of the Corner Tower, in order to determine whether or not any earlier wall had run down from this spot.

The natural subsoil of yellow/brown boulder clay was reached on the south side of the trench. It runs down at a gentle and regular slope for seven metres when it falls away in a most erratic fashion (see fig. 2). Because a revetment wall has been intruded into the side of this bank it is impossible to determine the shape of the medieval bank, and it was impossible to see if there had been a medieval retaining wall. The subsoil was not reached on the north side of the excavation because a

CORNER TOWER 1978. Section 1
South side E - W section

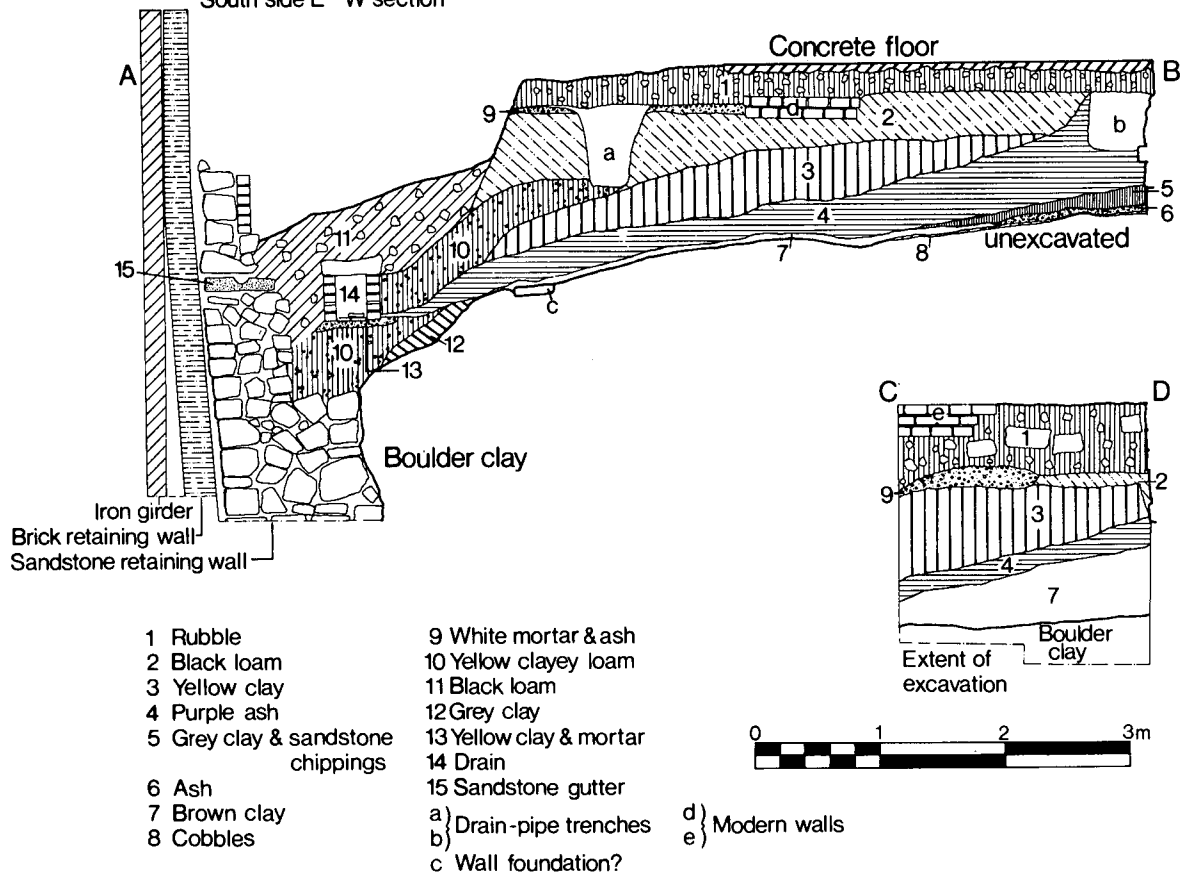


Fig. 2.

large ditch-like feature was discovered running parallel to, and about a metre from, the town wall. It appeared to run all the way down the bank and was infilled with layers of sand, ash and clay (see fig. 3). Excavation was impossible as the sand ran right under the town wall foundations. Dumped over the "ditch" filling was a layer of green/brown clay, possibly re-dumped boulder clay, and this runs up to and under the footings of the town wall. It seems that rather than dig the sand away the builders of the town wall preferred to take the easier, though more hazardous step of filling in the top of the "ditch" with boulder clay to act as a foundation raft for the wall.

CORNER TOWER 1978. Section 2
East end S-N

- 1 Re-dumped boulder clay
- 2 Yellow mortar & loam
- 3 Black ash
- 4 Ash
- 5 Grey sand
- 6 Yellow sand

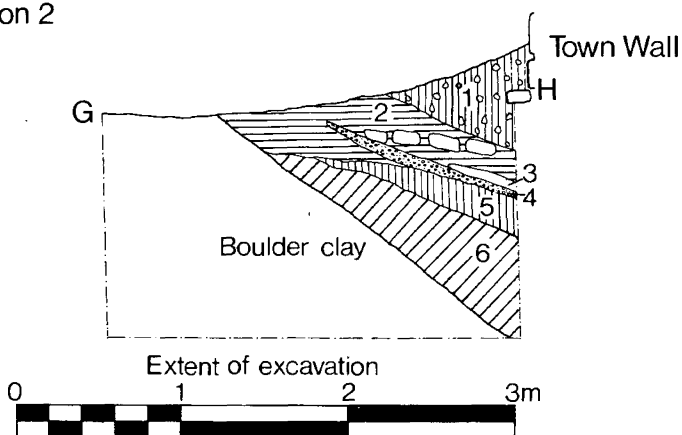


Fig. 3.

It is difficult to know what the sand was doing there, especially without excavation. Ballast was dumped in large quantities by the Quayside, but such dumping was post thirteenth century.⁷ The sand under the Corner Tower is firmly thirteenth century and earlier, and it is also situated over 400 metres from the river, and up a steep hill. Another possibility is that the sand was dumped in an earlier defensive ditch thrown up as a temporary deterrent for would be attackers. In that case why not use it as part of the later fortifications? That the feature is natural is not impossible,

but the true and sharp angle of its slope would seem to preclude this. Only further excavation may provide an answer.

Upon digging about a metre down on the west end of the Corner Tower, the problem of the raggy wall was solved. It related to a buttress, rather than the continuation of the town wall. It originally rose to a height of some four metres, and was situated right on the corner of the wall (fig. 1). It is an internal buttress and its building may have been necessitated by the presence of the sand a little lower down the bank. It measures 0.50 metres by 2.50 metres, and its angle to the town wall is less than ninety degrees, thus reflecting perhaps the hurried nature of its construction. What is left of it is made of local yellow sandstone, four courses high, the top two courses being bounded with very sandy mortar, and constituting the first two courses of the buttress proper. The bottom two courses are footings, jutting out at about 0.20 metres, and they are clay-bonded. The south-west cornerstone had been chopped out to make way for a modern drain-pipe. The facing stones are flatter and wider than the squarer blocks common to the town wall suggesting that the buttress is later than the rest of the wall, but examination showed that the buttress is in fact keyed in to the main body of the wall all the way up to its original height. It is cored with wide flat stones of a similar character to the facing stones.

Directly to the south of the buttress are the remnants of a cobbled road, forming an area two metres square. Made of irregular flint-like pebbles set in brown clay, it is part of the lane or *pomerium* inside the town wall. This is the only archaeological evidence of the *pomerium* in the area, neither Holmes nor Hooppell making any mention of it. The cobbles continued under the west end of the trench some two metres below street level. They look as though they have been repaired at some stage with hard compacted ash and coal that has been rammed on to the surface. The cobbles and the south side of the site were covered by a thin layer of brown clay from which fourteenth-century pottery was found. Immediately over the clay at the west end of the trench was a layer of loose grey mortary clay with sandstone chippings, probably showing partial demolition of the buttress. The reason for the demolition of the buttress is unknown. It may be that to have the buttress flush with the town wall was necessary for the erection of a temporary building, but no evidence was found of this. Maps show a garden running up to the Corner Tower, but no buttress.

The town wall was excavated down to its footings and where possible to natural, but this could only be done at one point (fig. 4). It descends in an irregular series of three jumps following the lie of the land, rather than like the regular well-shaped steps shown in the photograph of the wall further down Pandon Dene published in Hooppell's report.⁸ The footings are all of one course, and like the rest of the wall are made from local sandstone. They consist of a flat shaped stone jutting out from the rest of the wall between 0.5 metres and 0.20 metres. The town wall was built directly on redumped boulder clay lying on top of a series of sand deposits. The builders of the wall must have been fully aware that building on sand was risky, since they built a small revetment wall incorporated into the main body of the town wall in an attempt to keep the sand back (fig. 4). So far as I could determine it

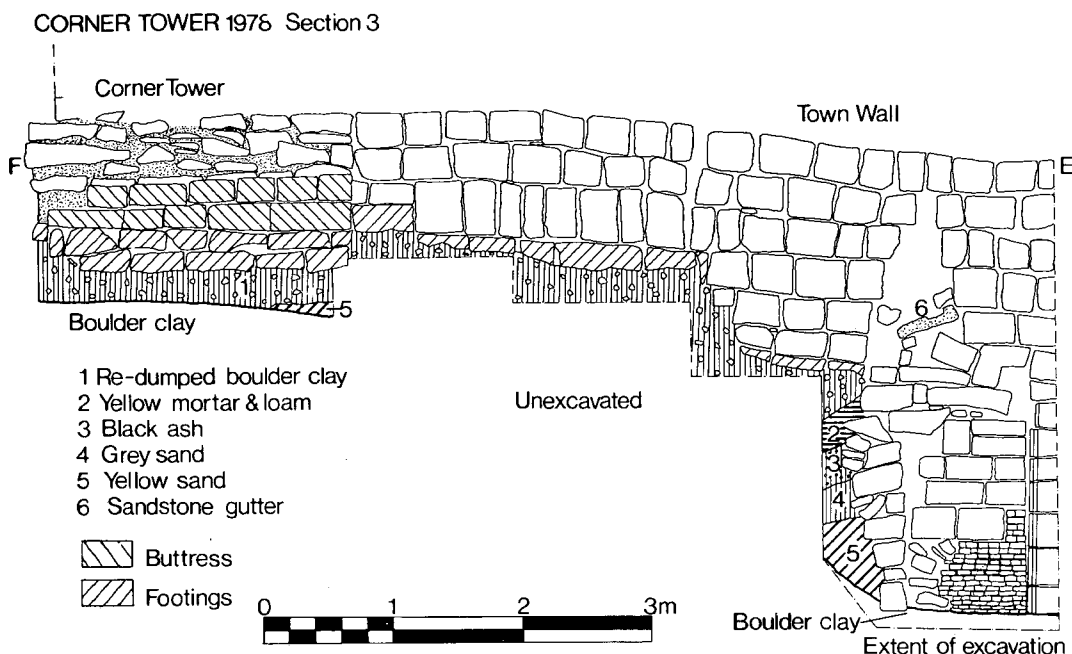


Fig. 4.

is only one course thick, and it may be surmised that such behaviour may have been forced on the builders due to a lack of capital at this stage in the construction of the wall. The rest of the town wall in this area appears to be shoddy and hastily built, compared to the well-shaped blocks and chamfered footings seen in other parts of the medieval defences.

At the point where the town wall crosses the steep bank there is a large crack in the shape of a very rough arch, or inverted V, about 0.75 metres wide at the bottom where a hole was torn out of the wall fabric to facilitate the construction of a drain running through the town wall north/south, under which was found a George II halfpenny. Straight underneath this feature there are signs of a blocked up entrance into the wall. What appears to be lintels in poor condition still survive. Council workmen reported that when repairing the wall some years ago they came across a chamber hacked out of the inside of the town wall, a few metres down from the present excavation. The feature reported here is presumably a door allowing access to the chamber. For structural reasons the workmen had immediately infilled the chamber, and the only object recovered was a sherd picked up from the soil filling of the chamber. This sherd has been included in the pottery report (no. 14).

Towards the top of the bank, about 1 m from the edge, was a badly made foundation running approximately at right angles to the town wall. It was sitting on boulder clay and consisted of one or two courses of sandstone blocks irregularly placed. There

was no evidence of occupation and no clue to what it may have related, although some seventeenth-century pottery was found close by.

The modern history of the site is straightforward. In the nineteenth century it became a great rubbish heap of ash and clay tipped over the east end of the trench. Presumably for structural reasons, two retaining walls were added, the first contained late seventeenth-century pot and consisted of large sandstone blocks rammed into the natural subsoil of the bank. This wall was built in two stages, an earlier version carried a stone gutter already described, before the wall was heightened to about seven or eight metres. Outside the sandstone wall is a slightly taller brick revetment wall which itself is braced by a modern iron girder, and represents the last period of occupation at the Corner Tower.

CONCLUSIONS

Although not all of the site could be dug down to boulder clay it is clear that there is no continuation of the Town Wall in the way that Holmes and Hooppell thought. The wall was not pulled down and re-sited, but was built from the beginning in the manner that we can still see today, although this may represent a modification of the original plan, and when Pandon was granted to the town the wall may well have been re-routed to take it in.

Some questions still remain unanswered, especially the problem of the "ditch" and the sand in the area, problems that selective digging within the vicinity might well solve.

THE FINDS

(fig. 5. An asterisk indicates that the object is illustrated)

POTTERY

From the re-dumped boulder clay running up to and under the town wall (see layer 1 in fig. 4).

1. Body sherd in smooth orange/buff fabric with external bloom and internal green glaze; late fourteenth/fifteenth century.

From the cobbles (see layer 8 in fig. 2)

- 2.* Rim and neck fragment with pie-crust cordon and lid seated rim with six other body sherds. Light grey fabric, rather coarser than the following vessel, with external green glaze. This form was the commonest type of strap-handled cistern found in deposits of this period at the Black Gate, Newcastle (Excavations 1974–1976), publication in preparation. Late fourteenth/fifteenth century.

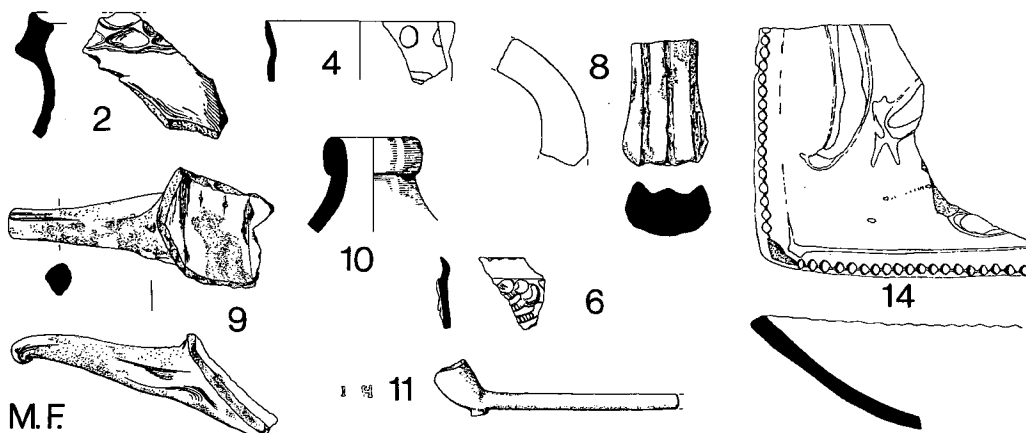


Fig. 5. ($\frac{1}{4}$); pipe marks ($\frac{1}{2}$).

3. Body sherd with external brown glaze and fairly smooth mud-grey fabric. Late fourteenth/fifteenth century.

From the wall foundation at the east end of the site (see "c" in fig. 2)

- 4.* Body sherd in rather coarse redware fabric with external slip spot decoration and internal and external brown glaze.
5.* Base and lower wall fragment with internal brown glaze and external soot blackening. Fabric similar to above. Both these vessels are seventeenth century.

From the ash above the cobbles (see layer 6 in fig. 2)

- 6.* Rim fragment from one cup of Cistercian ware. Red fabric chestnut glaze and applied rouletted strip and pellet decoration. Mid sixteenth century.

From the brown clay above the ash and the cobbles (see layer 6 in fig. 2)

7. Body sherd with internal green glaze. Smooth fabric of orange/buff colour reduced under the glaze. Local fifteenth-century type.

Unstratified deposits

These contained a mixture of sixteenth-, seventeenth- and nineteenth-century deposits including examples of sixteenth-century Raeren stoneware, Dutch ware, reduced greenware, seventeenth-century redwares, tin-glazed ware, yellow ware (probably Staffordshire) and nineteenth-century stonewares and redwares.

- 8.* A strap-handle in slightly gritty orange/buff fabric with purplish glaze. A few examples of this type have occurred in sixteenth-century deposits at the Black Gate, Newcastle.
9.* Handle and wall fragment of a skillet or frying pan. Hard red fabric and amber glaze. Probably seventeenth-century Dutch.
10.* Shoulder of bottle? Mud-grey stoneware and even lustrous cover of dark-brown salt glaze externally.

Other finds

From the eighteenth/nineteenth century rubbish tips (see layer 13 in fig. 2)

- 11.* Clay pipe with most of stem missing and some of the bowl broken off. It corresponds to types 9 and 10 illustrated opposite page 237, and to type "b" illustrated opposite page 247, in J. E. Parsons paper. "The Archaeology of the Clay Tobacco Pipe in North East England", *AA*⁵, XLII (1964). This places it in the first half of the eighteenth century. The initials I. H. appear in a horizontal position on the stem, and the pipe probably came from the workshops of John Hastings the Younger who worked in Gateshead between 1733 and 1737.

Coins (information kindly provided by G. D. Robson)

From under the stone gutter (see 15 in fig. 2)

12. An AE halfpenny of George II, but in such poor condition that type dating was not possible—1729 to 1754.

From the black loam under the concrete floor (see layer 2 in fig. 2)

13. Fragmented brass coin which is quite indecipherable, but the style and size could indicate a jeton of the fifteenth century.

Animal bones (information kindly provided by D. James Rackham)

Fifty-nine fragments or complete bones were collected and four marine shells. These are tabulated below as determined;

Cattle	8	(2)	
Sheep or goat	22	(3)	
Pig	1		
Rabbit	1		
Goose, domestic		(3)	
Oyster	3		
Cockle	1		
Large ungulate	5		
Small ungulate	7		
Large animal	7		() = comparable with.

The finds warrant little discussion. Among the sheep (or goat) bones, two were from juvenile animals and one of the ox bones also. One bone only bore the marks of butchery. The sheep bones are also of a size consistent with post-medieval material, being larger and more robust than the typical medieval sheep found in Newcastle.

Note on the pot found inside the town wall

- 14.* Part of a press-moulded rectangular dish with internal white slip coating, decorated with brown slip slip. Staffordshire is the most likely source, press moulding starting at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

NOTES

¹ Described by R. B. Harbottle in "Excavation and Survey in Newcastle upon Tyne 1972-1973", *AA*⁵, II (1974), pp. 83-5.

² See R. B. Harbottle in "Excavations at the Carmelite Friary, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1965 and 1967", *AA*⁴, XLVI (1968), pp. 168-9.

³ Ralph Beilby, Newcastle and Gateshead, 1788. Folding map in J. Brand, *History of Newcastle upon Tyne*, I (1798).

⁴ *Ibid.*, opp. p. 17.

⁵ Rev. R. E. Hooppell, "The Town Wall of Newcastle upon Tyne in Pandon Dene", *AA*², XI (1886), p. 237.

⁶ S. Holmes, "The Walls of Newcastle upon Tyne", *AA*², XVII (1896), p. 19.

⁷ C. M. Daniels and E. Cambridge, "New Light on Sandgate, Newcastle upon Tyne", *CBA* 3 8 (Sept. 1974), pp. 8-12.

⁸ *AA*², XI (1886), opp. p. 236.

