

EXCAVATIONS ON THE TOWN WALL, GREAT YARMOUTH, NORFOLK, 1955

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INTRODUCTION

IN 1955, extensions to the buildings of the British Home Stores in Regent Road and Deneside, Great Yarmouth, gave rise to some anxiety on the part of Ministry of Works architects, as the town wall bordered the east side of the property. Difficulties in the test-boring for the necessary foundations led to my being asked to inspect a test-excavation which had subsequently been made and, if necessary, to enlarge it a little. With the aid of two members of the local Ministry staff, this was done during the Easter holiday and something of the internal structure of the wall foundations was determined. This led to uncertainty about the basal structure of the external part of the wall and, in July of the same year, arrangements were made to uncover a small area close to the outer face of the wall in a garden nearly opposed to the site of the previous work. This was done by three days' digging on July 18-20.

Though this work was primarily for the information of the architects concerned with the preservation of the wall, the archaeological results were important and provided very unexpected constructional information, which also bore on the history of the estuarine deposits of the former "great estuary" of the Broadland rivers. In consequence, a section drawing of the wall at this point, together with a very short summary of the structural detail, was published in 1960 (Green and Hutchinson 1960, 130, 139-40, Fig. 10). The available historical details of the wall have been given by Swinden (1772) and the designation of gates and towers is that used by him.

My thanks are due to the authorities of the British Home Stores and particularly to the late Dr. I. W. Hockley who permitted us to excavate in the garden of his surgery at No. 4 Alexandra Road. I am also grateful to Mr. M. D. Rosie of the Ministry staff who gave valuable help and also sacrificed much of his own time to ensure the completion of this somewhat hasty and laborious investigation.

THE SITE (TG 526085)

From the north side of Trafalgar Road, where formerly stood the Fifth (Chapel) Gate, the town wall forms the boundary between the gardens of houses in Alexandra Road and the properties in Deneside, as far north as Regent Road, the site of the Sixth (Oxney) Gate. The 27-ft. wide Sixth Tower, which once adjoined the north side of the Chapel Gate, still stands behind the Nurses' Home in Alexandra Road and, beyond this, remnants of the wall, 246 ft. long, link it with the Seventh Tower in the rear of No. 6 Alexandra Road. This

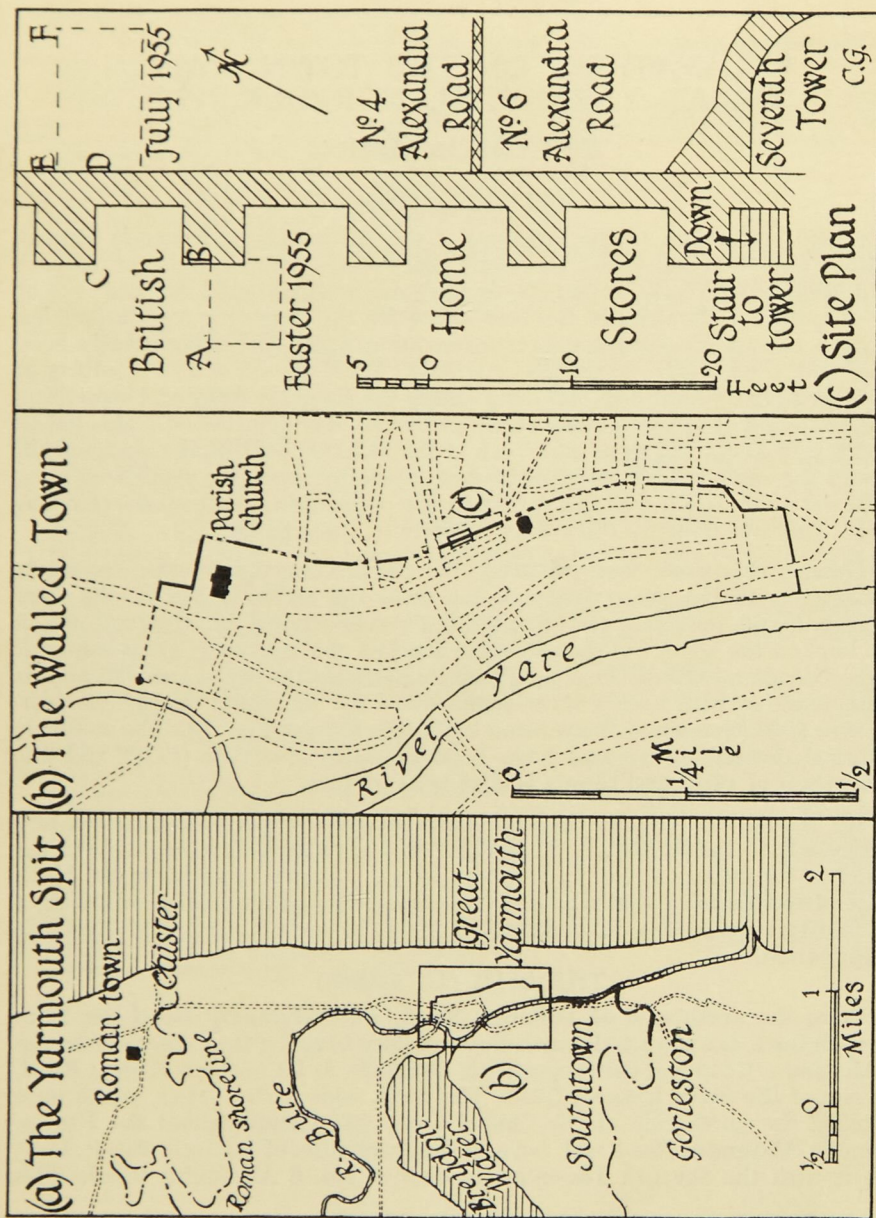


Fig. 1 Key map and site-plans

tower is also 27 ft. wide. To the north again, a section of the wall, 249 ft. long, runs to the site of the Oxney Gate. The outer face of the wall is largely of knapped flint, although in places it has been repaired with inserted patches of brickwork. The arcading of the inner face of the wall is of brickwork, the embrasures between the piers being faced with flints similar to those of the outer face. In this length of the wall, the upper part of the arcading has now disappeared, leaving truncated piers with broken tops at about the level whence sprang the arches. Before the extensions to the British Home Stores were begun, the yard here had contained part of the internal earthen ramp of the wall, thrown up in Tudor times, but this had been largely removed by the time of the Eastertide investigation.

The town wall was originally planned in the middle of the thirteenth century and the licence for its building was given in A.D. 1261. But the first effective murage grant was not made until 1284 (Swinden 1772, 76, 78 fn.) and the building began with the erection of King Henry's Tower near the parish church (*ibid.*, 100). We have no details of the annual progress in the building of the wall, but it may safely be inferred that the section under consideration was erected at some time in the first half of the fourteenth century.

The subsoil consists of the marine deposits—beach ballast, clay-silts and blown sand—which form the Yarmouth Spit, the core of which, represented roughly by the northern half of the walled area of the modern town, first appeared as a "middle ground" in the entrance to the estuary during the Iron Age—Romano-British marine transgression. This has been described and fully discussed by Green and Hutchinson (1960).

THE EXCAVATIONS

(a) *Inside the wall*

The initial work of the building contractors had been the levelling of the upper part of the ramp and the cutting of a deeper trench close to the wall-face. Borings were then made and, as an obstruction was encountered in one of these, a small test-trench was cut to ascertain its nature. This small trench was by us squared, slightly enlarged and deepened. Its north face was centred on the adjoining pier and the south face was opposite the adjacent embrasure, though here it was not possible to continue the cutting right to the wall-face (Fig. 1c).

The section (Fig. 2, A-B) revealed the disturbed and irregularly deposited remains of the Tudor ramp, which consisted of a mixture of earth, sand and occasional building debris (Layer 1). A few pottery fragments were of sixteenth-century type but, as this part of the trench had been largely dug beforehand, the only pottery found *in situ* was that revealed during the trimming of the original irregular test-pit.

The underlying layer (2) had a compacted surface. It contained proportionately less sand than the overlying ramp and in it were odd small sherds of fourteenth-century type pottery. This in turn rested on another compacted surface of rather similar mixed earth (Layer 3), though close to the wall there was a small bed of mortar rubble, later seen to be covering the filling of a trench

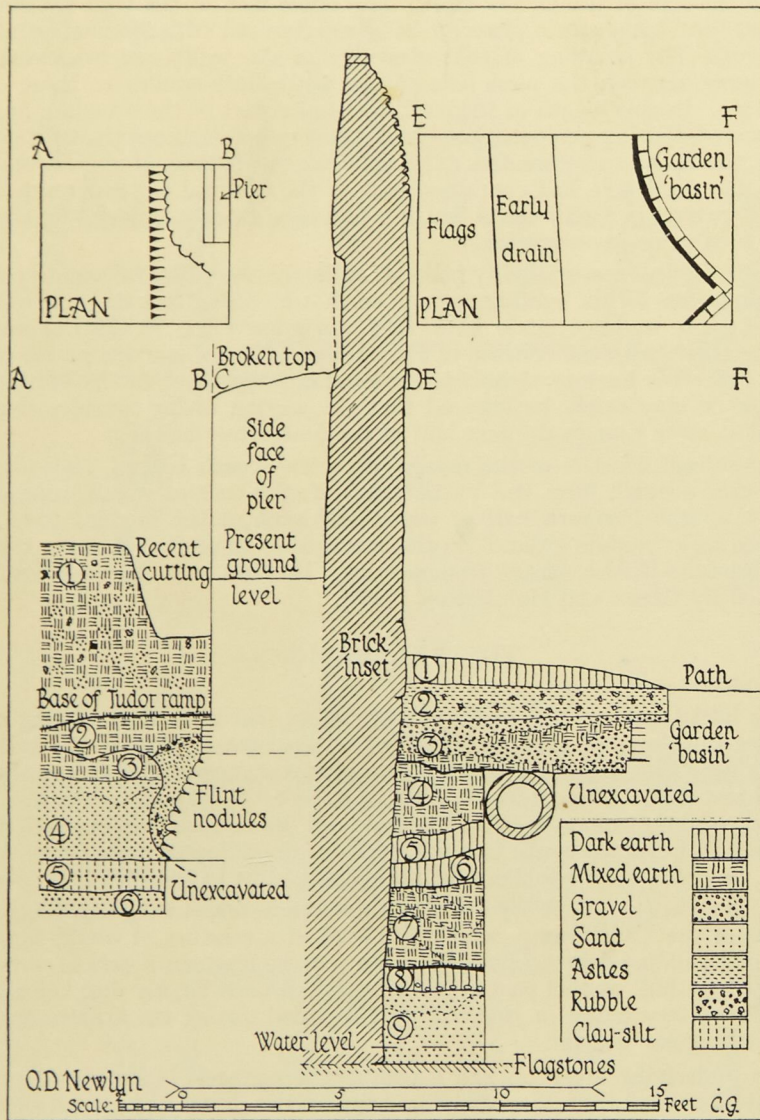


Fig. 2 Section through the town wall

cut into Layer 3. Below this in the western part of the trench were several layers of the original marine deposits. Of these the important one (Layer 5) was a foot-deep deposit of clay-silt in which was a seam of pebbles. Many of these were normal beach pebbles of flint, but others, though heavily water-worn, were recognizable fragments of Roman *tegulae* and *imbrices* and a single sherd of local fourth-century grey ware.

On the east side, the mortar rubble layer sealed the filling of the early trench which, it became clear, was the original foundation trench of the inner side of the wall. Close to the pier it was almost filled by a solid heap of large flint nodules which formed the foundation of the pier. The remainder of the filling was of discoloured sand which, towards the south end, held also a measure of mortar rubble. No potsherds were found in this filling. The lowest six courses of the pier projected slightly from the wall-face above to leave a small offset.

(b) *Outside the wall*

Owing to the fact that the town wall here appeared to tilt slightly outwards, a simple shoring had been erected and the excavation was limited to a single trench 6 ft. wide along the wall-face and 10 ft. long towards the east. The house to which the garden belonged was of nineteenth-century date, today occupied as the surgeries of medical practitioners, with a resident caretaker. The garden itself was in consequence very simply maintained but showed evidence of earlier elaboration and also of earlier occupation by medical tenants.

Against the wall (Fig. 2, E-F) was a garden-bed flanked by a path and, when removed, this bed revealed a mixed layer of ash and earth containing a mass of broken medicine and poison bottles, miscellaneous nineteenth-century sherds and other household debris. Below was a thin layer of gravel resting on mixed earth and gravel which abutted at the east end on the coping of a brick-lined garden "basin", previously concealed by the superficial deposits.

Immediately below the gravel, running almost parallel to the wall-face, was a 2-ft. wide trench which, when emptied, exposed a small brick-built "culvert". This was left undisturbed and subsequent digging was limited to the area between this culvert and the wall-face, a superficial area of some 3 ft. by 6 ft.

Below the gravel and cut into by the "culvert-trench", was a layer of compacted dark earth and rubble (Layer 4). In it were several sherds of early salt-glaze, Delft and glazed brown wares. This layer covered two rather shallow layers (5 and 6) of fine dark mould, the lower being thickly speckled with lime to show a greyish colour. Below again was another compacted layer (7) of earth and rubble, defined below by a thin vein of dark vegetable matter. Then came a layer (8) of earth with a little brick rubble resting on a rough cobbled spread. The cobbles rested on a layer (9) of comparatively clean sandy silt, very different from the superimposed deposits. In this layer was the surface of the water-table as it was on that day (July 20) at +1.25 ft. O.D. Some 6 in. below was a paved floor of large flagstones, below which excavation

was impossible. However, it could be seen, and was tested by probing, that the base of the knapped flint wall-face rested directly on these flagstones, which passed well below the wall. From the surface of the flagstones to the present wall-top was 31 ft. 9 in.

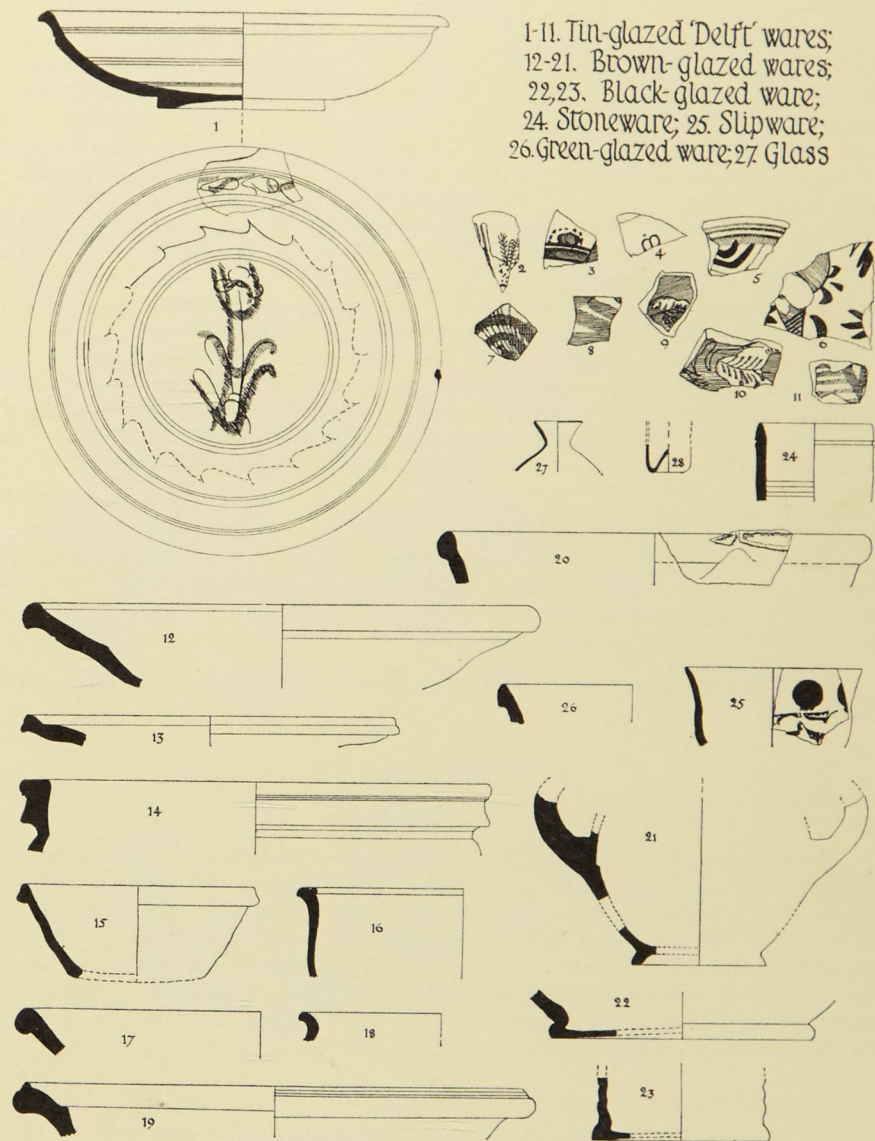
Scattered through Layers 5, 6, 7 and 8 were sherds of late seventeenth-century type, including slipwares, early Delft and glazed fawn coarse ware, together with sundry clay-pipe fragments. That all these layers were contemporary was made certain by the fact that sherds from the top layers joined others from near the bottom to form part of the same vessels.

DISCUSSION

When considering this sequence of deposits and structural activity, it must be remembered that, not only is the subsoil an accumulation of recent marine origin but that, following the Romano-British marine transgression, a marine regression with consequent emergence of the land surface has been demonstrated for this part of East Anglia (Green and Hutchinson 1960, 1965). The maximum emergence of the land was reached about the time of the Norman Conquest and the subsequent re-submergence, the last of which is now apparently not far away, did not become appreciable until the fourteenth century. The wall, therefore, was erected at a time when the land still stood 12-13 ft. higher in relation to sea-level than it does today or did in Roman times. The layer of clay-silt cut into by the foundation-trench of the wall-piers demonstrates this. In it, the pebble-band lay at about +7.0 ft. O.D. and, as the drift of beach material along this coast is known to be from north to south, these fragments of roof-tiles and pottery doubtless washed southwards from the Roman site at Caister across the mouth of the then-open estuary, to be deposited on the middle bank by a very high tide.

Of greater interest, perhaps, is the structure of the outer side of the wall. We have no historical evidence of a medieval moat. But we do know, as Swinden tells us, that at the beginning of the Civil War, the Roundhead authorities of Yarmouth dug a moat outside their wall, to increase its defensive strength. It can now be seen that the moat was an integral part of the original defences which, between 1340 and 1640, had become filled either by natural or human activity or both. When the moat was again needed, the earlier filling was removed and the whole refurbished to serve its original purpose.

After the Restoration, however, it was not long before steps were taken to restore the former *status quo* and, apart from the small quantity of naturally-deposited sand at the bottom, the whole was refilled systematically at one time to the then surface-level. This is proved by the scatter of sherds, ranging from near the bottom to the top, which later proved to belong to the same vessels. The uppermost layer (No. 4) would then seem to have been added at a somewhat later date when the earlier filling had settled and compacted. The "culvert", inserted into this layer, was examined by the appropriate Corporation official who broke it and pronounced it to be a disused drain of probably *c.* 1800.



The sequence of events in the process of wall-building has also been made clear. First a large trench was dug, to become the moat. The base of this was flagged to provide a level and rigid surface over the mixed deposits below. The limited extent of the second excavation made it impossible to locate the outer side of the moat, but the nature of the deposits into which it was dug makes it reasonably certain that this, too, would have been revetted, probably with flint. On the inner side of the moat, the procedure seems clear. The thickness of the wall in the embrasures is some 2.25 ft. A wall of this thickness, faced with knapped flint resting on the flagstone base, was built as a revetment to the inner face of the moat and taken to above the then surface-level. Inside this structure, a trench some 5.5 ft. wide was dug parallel and in this were placed consolidated heaps of flint nodules at measured intervals to form the bases of the brick piers. On their levelled tops were set the wider brick footings and over these grew the brick inner part of the wall, the outer flintwork doubtless being continued simultaneously. In the meantime the vacant parts of this foundation trench had been refilled with some of the removed sand with which had become intermingled some of the mortar rubble from the building activity. The loss of the facing flints from the top of the wall enabled the core to be examined. This appeared to be of grouted rounded flint beach-cobbles.

Over the original surface level to this foundation trench, the mixed earth of Layer 2 (Fig. 2, A-B) which just covered the offset, grew up by normal accumulation between the building of the wall and the heaping of the Tudor ramp. Its surface was well-compacted and it was doubtless a pathway along the inner face of the wall, but it is noticeable that, in this area at least, no attempt had been made to pave it with cobbles.

The finds are preserved in the Old Merchant's House, Row 117, Great Yarmouth.

THE FINDS

(Fig. 3)

Though considerable quantities of pottery were found in the small area excavated, a large proportion consisted of small body-sherds not suitable for illustration. Those of nineteenth-century type from the superficial layers outside the wall are of no special interest. The most significant, however, is the pottery from Layers 5-8, the seventeenth-century refill of the moat, and a representative sample of these is illustrated. There were also sundry small sherds of mottled Bellarmine-type jugs, but these did not show the masks which normally determine the dating.

TIN-GLAZED "DELFT" WARES

- 1-11 A representative sample of these wares, decorated with blue or polychrome patterns. The "flower" and "border-loops" in the dish (No. 1) were incised. *Cf.* Hurst and Golson (1955), 64-68, Figs. 15, 16.

BROWN-GLAZED RED WARE

- 12-21 Dishes, bowls and jars of a red ware with yellowish-brown or a richer brown glaze. They may be compared with a characteristic group of similar vessels from Well No. 1, Barn Road, Norwich (Hurst 1963, 161-5, Figs. 11, 12). No. 21, although drawn to show the handle both in profile and section, was probably a one-handed jug (*cf. ibid.*, Fig. 11, 4-6).

BLACK-GLAZED WARE

- 22-23 Fragments of vessels with a black manganese glaze. No. 23 is the base of a tyg.

STONEWARE

- 24 Rim and neck of a large stoneware jug or bottle with brownish-grey glaze.

SLIPWARE

- 25 Slipware cup or beaker in yellow and brown. *Cf.* Hurst and Golson (1955), Fig. 16.

GREEN-GLAZED RED WARE

- 26 Rim-fragment of a jar of red ware with a rich green glaze. The only example of this type found in the moat-filling, it could well be a survival from the previous century.

GLASS VESSELS

- 27-28 Fragments of two glass bottles of a very pale greenish glass. *Cf.* I. Noel-Hume in Hurst and Golson (1955), 87-91, Fig. 22.

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