# EXCAVATIONS OF AN EARLY ROMAN FORT AND WATLING STREET AT WIGSTON PARVA, 1969 TO 1970

*Elizabeth Hartley with Paul Bidwell*

Archaeological excavations by the author in 1969 and 1970 at Wigston Parva, Leicestershire (SP 464 894), at the site of a single-ditched enclosure recorded by an aerial photograph by Dr St Joseph, revealed a fort of the early Roman period. Excavations in advance of the widening of the A5 recorded the south-west ditch sections, one of which was overlain by a cobbled surface, possibly a stretch of the original Watling Street. The eastern gate was examined and found to be a towered gateway with double entrance with a *titulus* in front. The ditch, rampart and intervallum road were located as well as part of an interior structure. The enclosure at Wigston Parva is a small Roman fort, just over 0.68ha, which dates to the early years of Roman occupation possibly preceding the construction of Watling Street.

## INTRODUCTION

In June 1959 cropmarks revealing part of a single-ditched square enclosure were photographed by Dr J. K. S. St Joseph immediately to the north of Watling Street, the present A5, at Wigston Parva, Leicestershire (SP 464 894). The north-east and part of the south-east perimeter were visible; the north-west side was concealed by a crop of hay and the south-west was obscured by the A5 and field boundaries. The position of an entrance was seen on the south-east side where a gap in the ditch was visible. It also appears that the enclosure partly overlay an Iron-Age settlement (Plate 1).

The ditches along the north-east and south-east sides of the enclosure are approximately at right angles to each other. Where they meet to form the east corner of the site, they are curved in a wide arc. The north corner of the enclosure is similarly curved, indicating that the north-west perimeter is probably nearly at right angles to the north-east side and parallel to the south-east side.

The site is about 1.2km west of the intersection of Watling Street and the Fosse Way at High Cross (Fig. 1). Situated on the western end of a flat hilltop ranged east-west, the enclosure commanded a strong tactical position (Fig. 2). To the west the ground drops steeply to Soar Brook, a tributary of the River Soar, and there are less steep gradients on the north and south-west sides. The weakest position is on the east, since there the ground is comparatively level, with a slight upward gradient towards High Cross. In this direction the view from the site is limited to about 1.6km, whereas to the north one can see 13km and to the west 6.5km.

Plate 1. Aerial photograph of fort looking north-east taken by J. K. S. St Joseph ZA52 dated June 24 1959. (Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photography.)

## 1969 EXCAVATION

In October 1969 a preliminary excavation of the site was carried out by the Department of Antiquities of Leicester Museums to locate the ditch at the north corner (Trench 1) (Fig. 3). It was found to be of Roman military type, V-shaped with a cleaning channel. Measuring approximately 2.4m wide and 1.2m deep, it cut into the subsoil of mixed sandy gravel and clay. There was about 30cm of silt in the

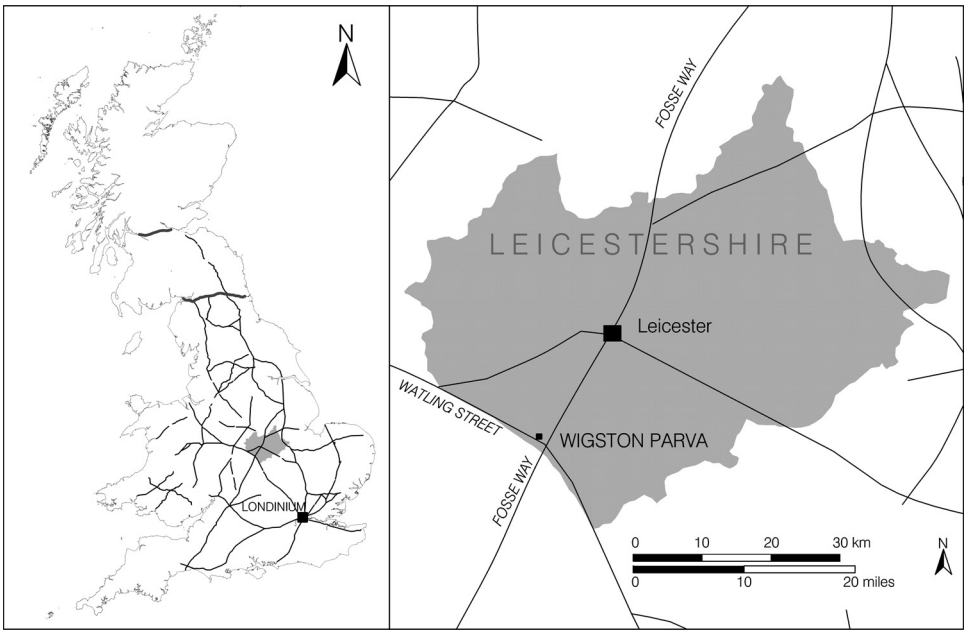


Fig. 1. Location of Wigston Parva, Leicestershire, showing the route of Watling Street and the Fosse Way.

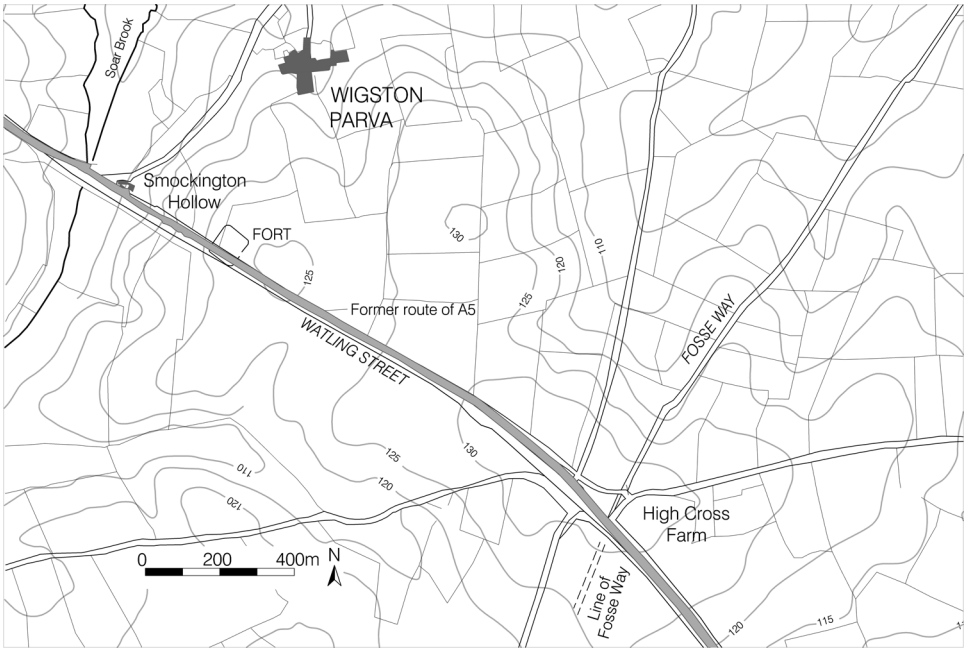


Fig. 2. Location of the fort at Wigston Parva, Leicestershire, showing its topographic setting.

bottom of the ditch and grey turfy material in the filling above (Fig. 4). Individually cut turves piled on the natural subsoil along the southern side of the ditch suggested the existence of a turf rampart. The turves were found stacked behind the ditch, and had been preserved by the field headland which was not disturbed by ploughing to the same extent as the rest of the site.

## SPRING 1970 EXCAVATION

In the spring of 1970 a rescue excavation was undertaken along the southern side of the A5 as the road was being widened for a dual carriageway. Seven trenches were placed at close intervals along the length of the road widening to find the south-west ditch of the enclosure (Trenches 2 to 8) (Fig. 3). The ditch appeared in all trenches except Trench 3, and since many of the trenches were closely spaced it seems that

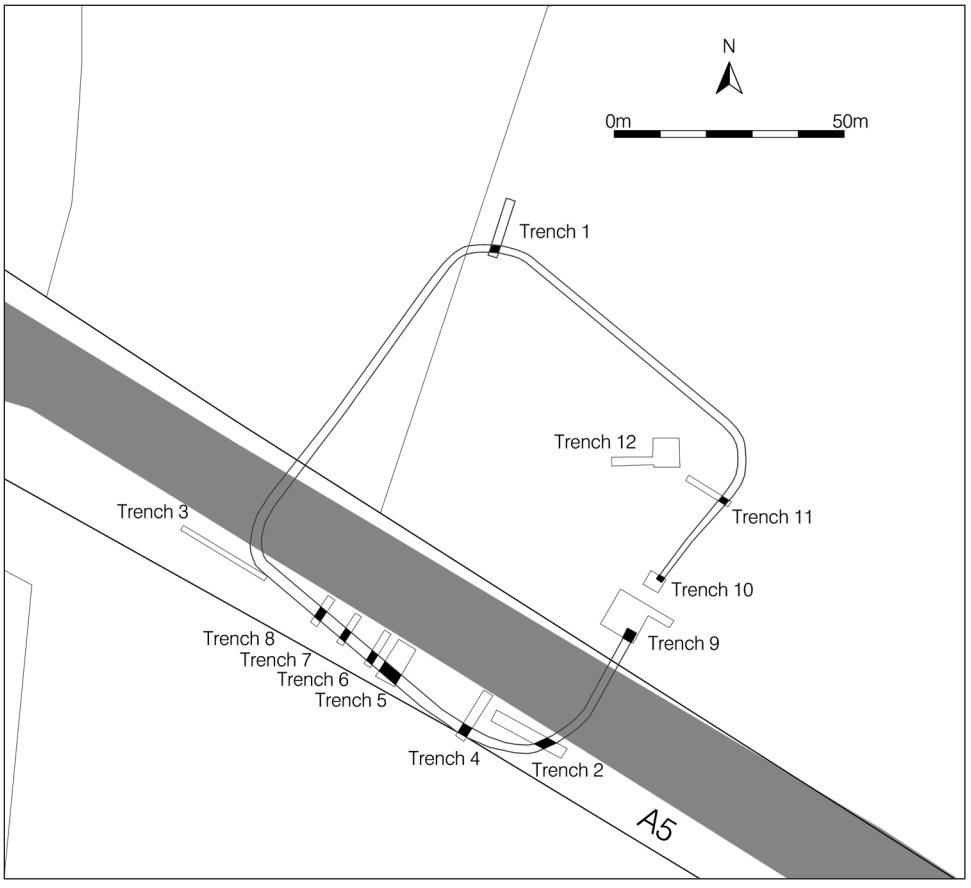


Fig. 3. Location of Trenches 1 to 12 across the Wigston Parva fort: Trench 1 excavated 1969, Trenches 2 to 8 excavated April 1970 (equivalent to archive 1970 Trench 1 to 8), and Trenches 9 to 12 excavated September and October 1970 (equivalent to archive Autumn 1970, Trench 1 to 4).

there was no break in the ditch along that side of the enclosure, just as there was none visible on the aerial photograph on the north-east side. The ditch was similar in size and filling to the ditch recorded in Trench 1.

Critically, unlike its counterparts, Trench 2 also located the south-west ditch of the enclosure where it was sealed by a cobbled road. Trench 2 was positioned at the south corner of the enclosure approximately 4.3m to the south of the former single carriageway of the A5, and picked up a cobbled surface running parallel with the modern road, presumed to be Watling Street. Consisting of a layer of water-worn pebbles about 0.1–0.15m thick, it seemed to rest on a slight foundation of clay (Fig. 5) (Plate 2). The width of the surface, which is presumed to be that of a Roman road, was not determined, since 1.8m north of its southern edge it was cut by modern disturbances along the A5. Its outer edge had subsided several inches into the filling of a small V-shaped gully measuring 0.75m wide and 0.3m deep. The gully was filled with sand like the surrounding subsoil but darker, presumably because it contained humus. There were two similar gullies beneath the Roman road apparently running parallel to it. The three gullies were spaced at about 0.6m intervals.

With the discovery of the position of the ditch in Trenches 2 to 8, excluding Trench 3 where it was not located, it was possible to determine the approximate size of the entire enclosure, measuring within its ditches about 88m along its north-south axis and 78m along its west-east axis, the enclosure covered about 0.68ha.

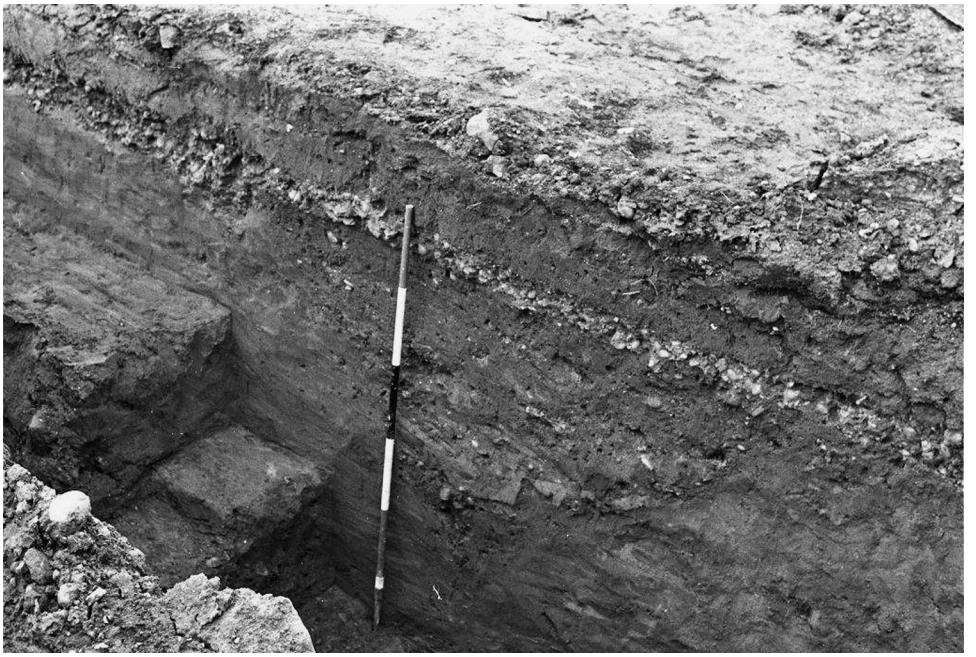

Plate 2. Trench 2 south-facing section showing Watling Street overlying the south-west ditch (scale shown 6ft).

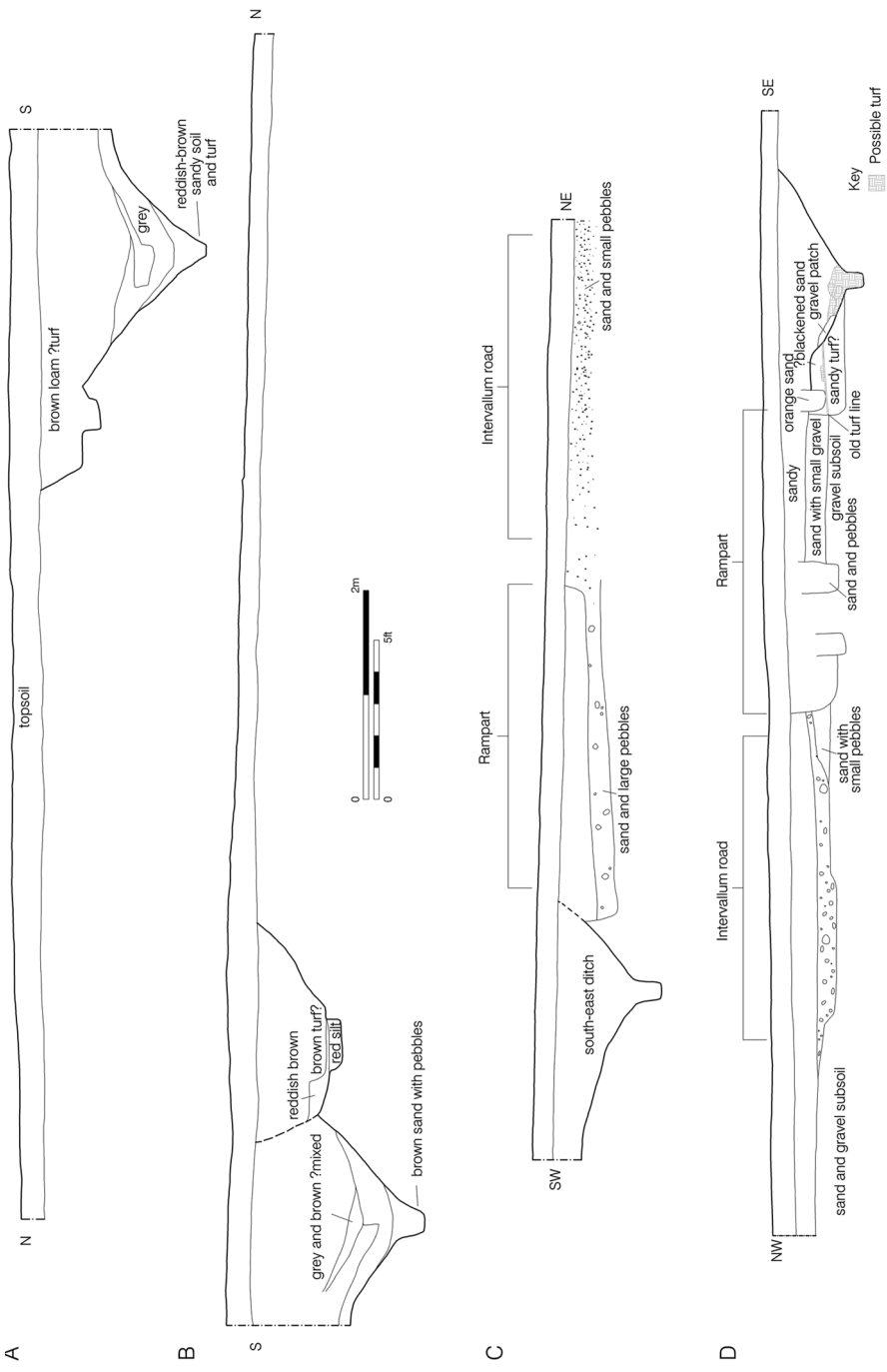


Fig. 4. a, Trench 1, west-facing section; b, Trench 1, east-facing section; c, Trench 9, north-east-facing section; d, Trench 11, south-west-facing section.

## LATE SUMMER 1970 EXCAVATION OF SOUTH-EASTERN ENTRANCE

The question still remained whether the site, rather than being a temporary camp, contained evidence for the permanent structures of a Roman fort. Also, the date at which it was occupied was not yet determined, although an early date was inferred from sealing of the ditch by the possible stretch of Watling Street. Therefore, in September and October of 1970, excavations took place to determine whether there was a timber gateway at the south-eastern entrance of the enclosure.

A resistivity survey carried out before excavation located the position of the entrance. The survey indicated that the gap of the ditch at the entrance measured approximately 12m. A trench 9m square was excavated to examine the southern end of the entrance (Trench 9). This trench was extended eastwards for 5.2m, down the centre of the entrance, to investigate an area about 4.6m outside the ditch terminals, where high readings were recorded in the resistivity survey. Another trench, 3m by 3.6m, was dug to locate the ditch-end on the north side of the entrance (Trench 10).

These trenches revealed that the V-shaped ditch was square-ended at the entrance to the enclosure and the distance between the ditch-ends was 12.8m. In Trench 9 the ditch was traced for 2m before it terminated at the southern edge of the entrance. Over 0.3m to the rear of the ditch was a band of sandy soil, 3m in width and about 0.3m in depth, which was aligned parallel to the ditch and ended at the same point (see Fig. 4c). As it is normal for Roman military sites to have a rampart behind the ditch system it seems likely that this sandy layer marks the presence of a rampart, especially as the natural subsoil seems to have been terraced at this point as if to seat the rampart (cf. Ilkley, Hartley 1996, 25, Fig. 1; and Oakwood, Steer and Feachem 1951–52, 88). Such a rampart would account for the decomposed turf found in the ditch and the individually cut turves, stacked behind the inner edge of the ditch within Trench 1. No individual turves were recognised in the band of 'sandy' material, but this is not surprising since it had been disturbed by medieval ploughing. This layer lacked the large quantity of stone which was found in its surroundings and this may mean that it had indeed been constructed of turves which had decomposed.

In the area between the ends of the ditches and the ramparts was a number of pits (10)(Fig. 7) (Plate 3). All but one were similar in having vertical sides and in being about 0.6m in diameter, 0.5m in depth and filled with pebbles (Fig. 6). A single easternmost pit differed from the rest, though of similar depth, measured about 0.9m across the top and 0.3m across the bottom, and the abundant stone in it appeared to be pitched. The tops of these pits had been ploughed away and it seems probable that they would originally have been at least 0.9m in depth, implying that the ground level was about the level it is today. No artefacts were found in any of the pits. That they were all contemporary with the Roman enclosure was evident since they were aligned parallel to and at right angles to the ditches. The pit which differed from the rest was located midway between the ditch-ends; the other pits lay behind the ditch.

The nature and positioning of the pits suggests that they had been dug to hold timber uprights. Several large pebbles about 15cm by 10cm in size were found in

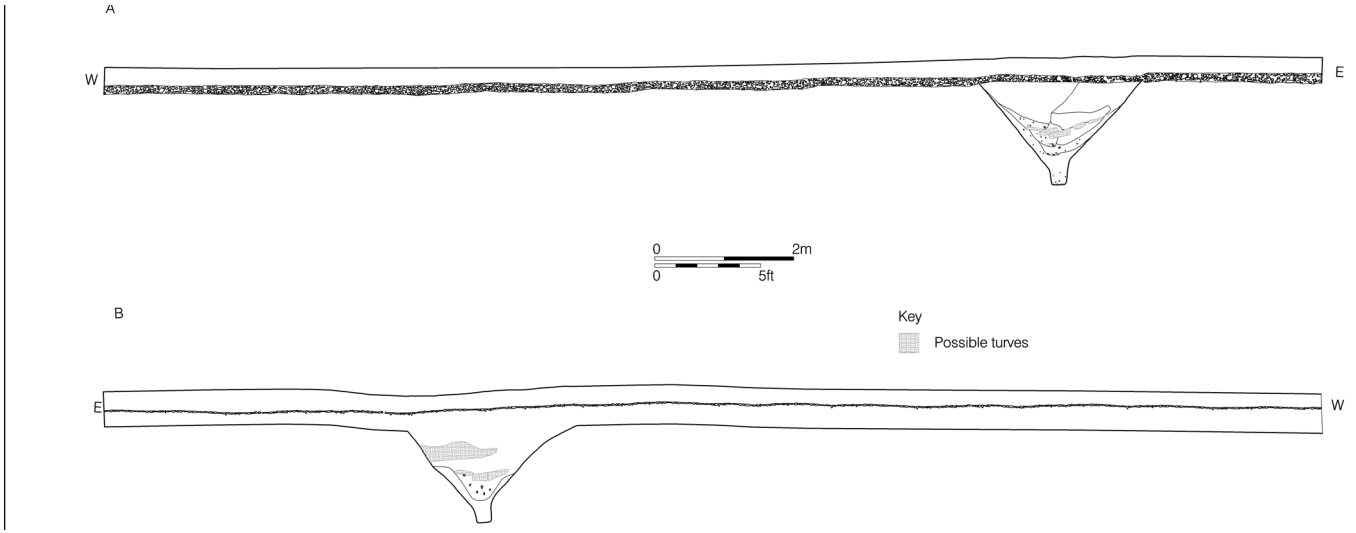


Fig. 5. a, Trench 2, south-facing section; b, Trench 2, north-facing section.

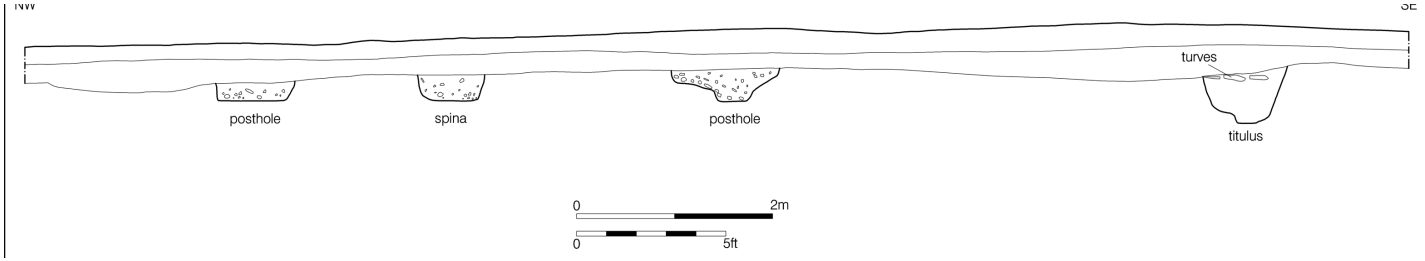


Fig. 6. Trench 9 south-facing section, showing profile and fill of postholes and titulus.

each of the pits and these stones were presumably the packing for supporting timbers. As a group the pits reveal in outline a structure which can readily be identified as a Roman gateway.

Although the entire gate was not excavated, there was enough evidence to suggest that it consisted of a twin portal 6m wide with two flanking towers each about 3.5m wide and 4m deep, and that it spanned the 12.8m gap in the rampart.

The towers were set about 1.2m behind the front of the rampart and were aligned parallel to the defences (cf. Great Casterton, Todd 1968). Since the defences on either side of the gate bore different alignments, so too the towers were on different alignments from each other. The frontage of the twin portal spanned the distance between the front inside corners of the towers, the front post of the division of the portal (i.e. the *spina*) being midway between (see Fig. 7). The above-mentioned tower posts and forepost of the *spina* probably carried double doors for each portal and supported the front of the overhead gangway. The rear post of the *spina*, 1.4m behind the front post, presumably rose to meet the back of the gangway. An irregularly-shaped pit in front of the gate was aligned with the *spina*, but its relationship with the gate is not known. It may have been a derrick-hole such as that found at Fendoch (Richmond and McIntyre 1938–39, 116, Fig. 3). A cobbled road, no more than several centimetres thick and raised about 7.5cm above the natural on a platform of sandy soil, approached the entrance and tailed off towards the rear of the gate.

Inside the area of the tower were several emplacements for timbers. Strung across the interior of the tower from roughly the middle of the south wall to the middle of the north wall were three slots, each approximately 1.5m long, 0.2m wide and 0.3m deep (Fig. 7) (also see Plate 3). These were filled with stone and angled at about 28 degrees from the vertical towards the rear of the tower. The timbers would have been similarly angled, suggesting that they were some form of cross-bracing and possibly the frame for steps up to the first floor of the tower. A fragment of melon bead was found within the footprint of the southern tower (Fig. 8).

The superstructure of the gate poses questions, many of which cannot be answered. The height of the first floor of the tower and the gangway can be surmised, however, when considering the probable height of the rampart. The rampart would have had its frontage stepped at an angle of about 70 degrees off the vertical and its back stepped as well. Allowing for a rampart walk of about 1.4m in width, the turf bank would have stood about 2.5m high. This height is also deduced for the first floor of the tower, assuming the timbers within the tower were cross-bracing. Such structural reinforcement would not have been amiss in this tower as the gate seems to have been shoddily built.

Some 7.5m in front of the gate was a V-shaped ditch with cleaning channel running in a north-south direction (see Fig. 7). It measured approximately 0.9m wide and 0.6m deep and had decomposed turves in the top of its filling. Its length was not determined, but the resistivity survey indicated that it was about 4.5m end to end. It may be the outer ditch of a *titulus* outwork, especially as it is centrally placed to the entrance area.

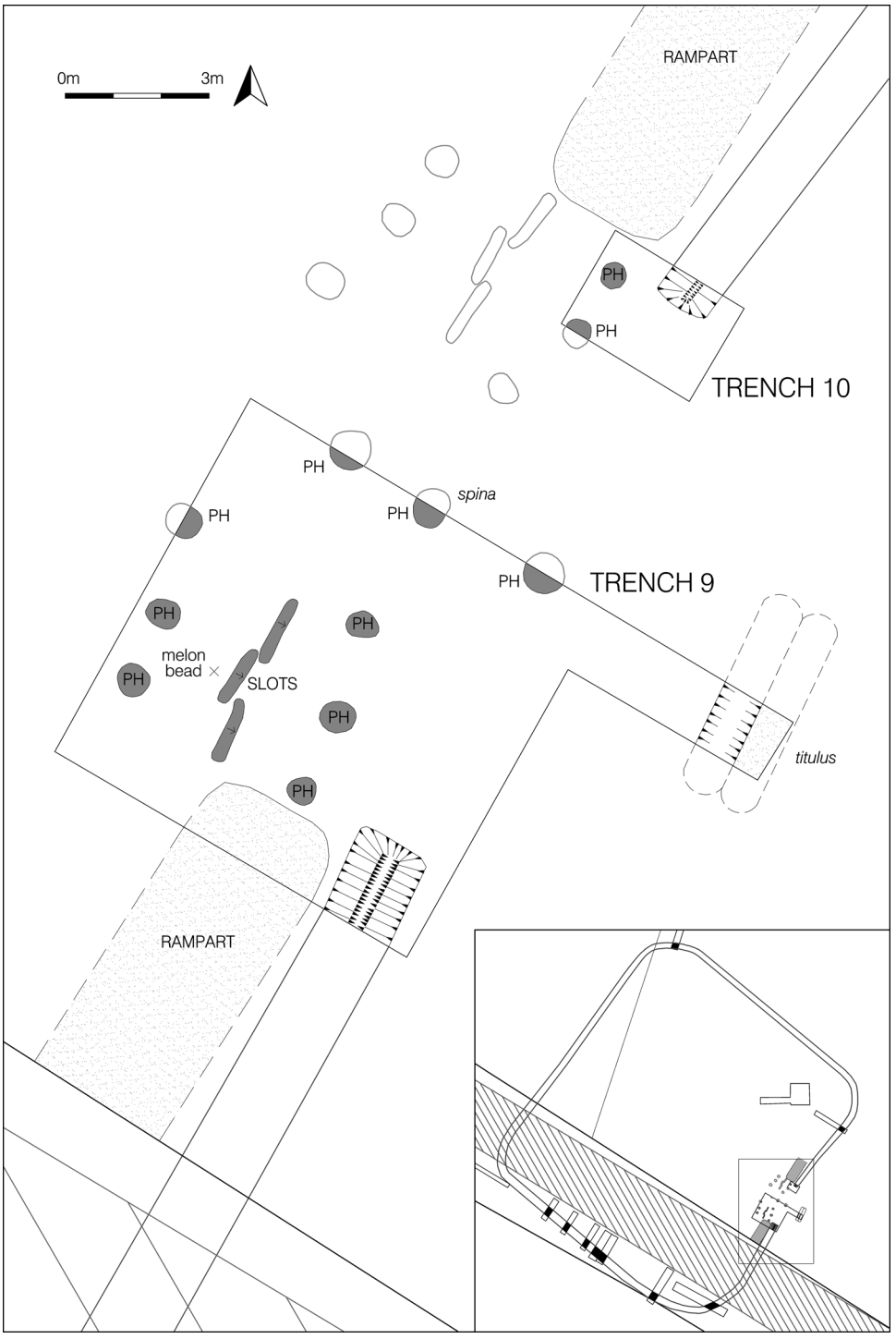


Fig. 7. Trenches 9 and 10, plan of features showing plan of gate.

Plate 3. Trench 9 looking north, showing structural features of the south-east gate looking north (scales shown 6ft).

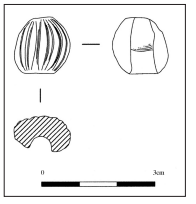

Fig. 8. Melon bead fragment recovered from Trench 9, within the south gate tower.

## LATE SUMMER 1970 EXCAVATION OF EASTERN CORNER INTERIOR

An area within the eastern corner of the enclosure was also excavated to establish whether there had been any permanent timber buildings (Trench 12) (Fig. 9). Across the western half of this trench was a cobbled layer 4.5m wide and there was what appeared to be a posthole in the eastern end of the trench. The area to the east of the cobbling was then opened up to determine whether there was any evidence for structure there.

Within this area, measuring 5.8m by 7m, 15 postholes were found, some of which were filled entirely with stone and others with sandy soil. The postholes varied in size from just over 0.45m in diameter to 0.3m in diameter and were about 0.3m

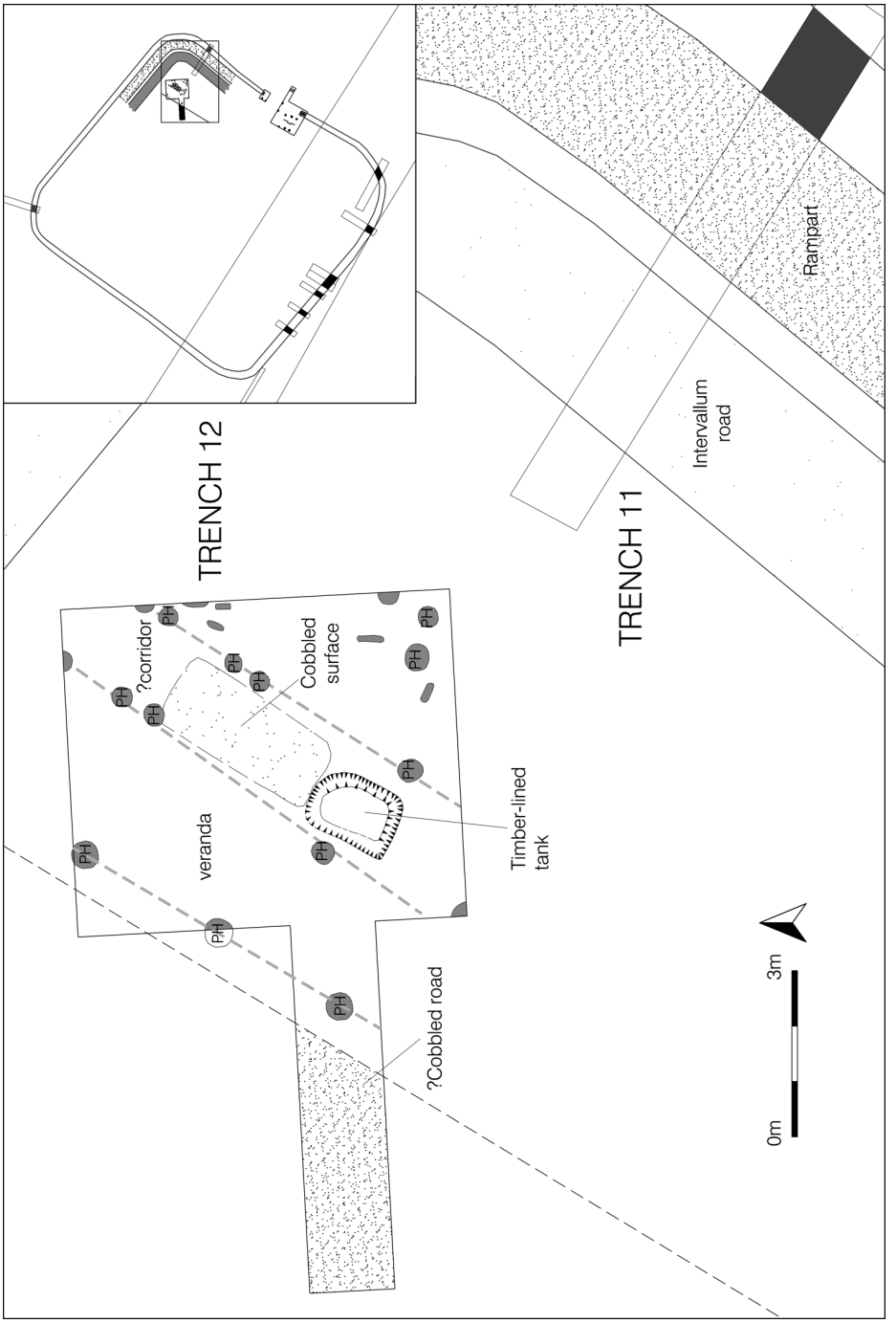


Fig. 9. Trenches 11 and 12, plan of south-east defences and interior building showing postholes, tank and cobbled areas.

in depth. Twelve of the postholes were arranged in three parallel lines, the alignment of which was the same as the edge of the cobbling and the north-west defences of the enclosure. Three postholes, spaced at 2.75m intervals, bordered the cobbled area. Set 2.7m to the east was a second row of postholes and at a further 1.5m east was a third row. These postholes presumably would have originally contained the timber uprights of a building whose width is defined by the first and third lines of postholes, and whose length extends beyond the confines of the trench in a north-east, south-west direction. The middle line of posts may well have divided the building internally, between rooms 2.7m wide on the western side and a 1.5m-wide 'corridor' on the east. This division is further suggested by a cobbled layer 2.7m in length which appears between the second and third lines of postholes in the so-called corridor. Also within this narrow passage is a vertical-sided pit, rectangular in shape with rounded corners, measuring 1.2m by 1.7m and 0.5m deep. Around the base of the pit, on its north, east and south sides, is a channel 15cm wide and 5cm deep, which probably served as an emplacement for timbers (Plate 4). This pit was most probably a timber-lined water tank. Seven small sherds from a closed vessel in a fine grey fabric with oxidised surfaces and rouletted decoration were found in the base of the tank.

Plate 4. Trench 12, view of probable timber-lined water tank and two adjacent postholes of possible corridor, looking south-east (scales shown 6ft).

## LATE SUMMER 1970 EXCAVATION OF SECTION ACROSS SOUTH-EASTERN DEFENCES

The section across the north end of the south-eastern defences provided further details of the nature of the rampart (Trench 11) (Fig. 9). In this area there was no ridge ploughing and therefore the base of the levelled rampart remained intact (see Fig. 4c). The front 0.7m of the rampart was composed of turfy material. A double layer of turves laid grass-side downwards was distinguishable at the base. The rear of the rampart was of similar composition and between the front and back revetments of turf was a core of sand and gravel, presumably the upturned natural obtained when cutting the defensive ditch. Immediately to the rear of the rampart was a cobbled *intervallum* road, about 3m wide, trench-built, which had a maximum thickness of 20cm.

## WATLING STREET AT WIGSTON PARVA

The road may well have been an early military one, constructed soon after the enclosure was abandoned. A short period of time between the abandonment of the enclosure and the construction of the road would account for the fact that the road did not sink into the filling of the ditch. It seems likely that the road builders were aware of the filled in ditches and took the precaution of compressing the loose filling before laying the road over it. The road did slip into the fillings of the gullies. These gullies may have been of an earlier date than the ditch and therefore not known to the road builders. On the aerial photograph there are cropmarks on either side of the south-east ditch of the enclosure which define a boundary ditch and roundhouses of an Iron Age settlement earlier than the Roman site, and the gullies may belong to this complex. The absence of debris on the road surface suggests that it was not in use for more than a few decades and the 'sterile' deposit of light-coloured loam found on top of the road may well have been dumped to deliberately cover the road when it went out of use.

## OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

*by Paul Bidwell*

### The size and planning of the fort

Wigston Parva's dimensions, as defined by its single ditch (88m by 78m, 0.68ha), can be compared to those of the forts built in the pre-Flavian period at Nanstallon, Cornwall (0.89ha: Fox and Ravenhill 1972) and Marton, Lincolnshire (0.7ha: Clay 2010, 35); Greensforge Fort A, Staffordshire (0.72ha: Welfare and Swan 1995, fig. 142), which is probably pre-Flavian or early Flavian, should also be considered. Another fort, recently discovered at Restormel, Cornwall, measures 60m by 70m within its rampart (Hartgroves and Smith 2008) and is probably pre-Flavian in origin, with occupation on the site apparently continuing into the fourth century. The sizes of these five forts are remarkably small when compared to those of second-century cohort forts, most of which are at least twice as large. However, Nanstallon

shows the smaller forts could probably have contained a full auxiliary unit, together with a *principia* and *praetorium*; Fox and Ravenhill (1972, 84–6) suggested that it held a *cohors quingenaria equitata* (480 foot-soldiers and 120 cavalry).

Only at Restormel and Nanstallon have the positions of all the gates been established: at the first of these forts, geophysical survey detected gaps in the rampart and ditches marking the sites of the two *portae principales* and the *porta decumana*, and the position of the *porta praetoria* can be inferred; at Nanstallon, the position of the two excavated gates and the layout of the internal buildings means that the position of the two other gates can again be inferred. The only gate known at Wigston Parva occupies the mid-point on the south-east side and is therefore probably the *porta praetoria* or *decumana*.

## The plan of the south-east gate

The gate consisted of two towers flanking a double portal, all of the same depth (Manning and Scott 1979, Type IIb). The overall width of the gate was 13.2m, or approximately 45 Roman feet, which is within the range of widths of the examples cited by Manning and Scott. An unusual feature of the Wigston Parva gate was the construction of the front and back walls of the towers, where there were three post-pits. The other examples had two post-pits, so that the entire gates were supported on grids, often equally-spaced posts arranged in two rows of five. The additional posts at Wigston Parva might be explained by the small size of the post-pits which were only *c*.0.65m in diameter, as compared with more typical examples such as those at the west gate of Tiverton (also a Type Ib gate) which ranged from 0.9m by 1.4m to 1.7m by 1.2m (Maxfield 1991, 42). It can be assumed that the thickness of the timbers at Wigston Parva was proportionately less and was compensated for by the insertion of additional posts at the front and back of the towers. The slots in the south tower, if they were indeed to hold raking timbers, suggest that the original reinforcement of the structure had to be supplemented at some stage.

The irregular pit between the ends of the ditches was 1.9m south-east of the *spina*. It may have been a derrick-hole (cf. Fendoch, Richmond and McIntyre 1938–39, 116, fig. 3; Oakwood, Steer and Feachem 1951–52, 94–5; and Rödgen, Schönberger 1961, 45), but this is doubtful. It would have been more sensible to site any form of lifting-device in the centre of the gate, and this is an objection to the interpretation of pits identified as 'derrick-holes' at other gates, which are all located in positions where only parts of the structures could have been reached. Careful examinations of gate post-pits have recorded sloping cuts on one of their sides that were used as ramps when the posts were raised into position (Hanson 2007, 149–52), and Hobley (1982) lists and illustrates lifting devices, including shearlegs, which would not have left any archaeological traces. At Tiverton, there is a pit outside the west gate in a position equivalent to that at Wigston Parva; it was unsealed and seems to have been regarded as a prehistoric feature (Maxfield 1991, figs 3 and 8).

The probable *titulus*, a short length of bank and ditch, was intended to prevent a direct attack on the gate. There are only a few examples at forts in Britain, but they include pre-Flavian Hod Hill (Richmond 1968, 69, fig. 62; Johnson 1983, 50).

### The interior of the fort

The postholes in the area opened in the eastern corner of the fort do not in themselves represent an intelligible building plan. The cobbling west of the building could be the *via principalis*, with the three widely-spaced posts alongside perhaps representing a veranda. Inside the building, the tank is almost certainly a water-tank which may suggest part of a *fabrica*. A similar tank was found at Hod Hill, larger than that at Wigston Parva and not inside a building (Richmond 1968, 87, fig. 46C).

### Dating the fort

Neither the finds, a melon bead, pottery from the tank and a few coarseware sherds from the ploughsoil, nor any aspect in its design, indicate whether the fort belongs to the early years of the conquest or to a later period of consolidation in the Claudio-Neronian period. However, if the cobbled surface which sealed the south ditch represented the original Watling Street, and not a later widening of it, the fort could still have remained in occupation for as much as 10 to 15 years after the conquest. It can be shown that major Roman roads – Dere Street in Yorkshire and the Stanegate in Northumberland – were not built for a decade or so after forts were first established on or near their general line (Bidwell 1999, 13–14).

### Acknowledgements

Permission to excavate was kindly given by Mr and Mrs G. H. Bourne. Mr and Mrs P. Bettney, Miss Allison Brown, Mr M. Card, Mr K. C. Clarke, Mr S. Smith and students of Leicester Museum Studies Course offered regular assistance on the site. Thanks to the generous help and cooperation of the Leicestershire County Council Highways Department, the excavation was able to proceed in conjunction with road-building. I am particularly indebted to the County Surveyor, R. R. W. Grigson, and to Mr J. N. Allison, Mr L. R. Revell and Mr L. G. Heighton. The writer would like to thank all of the people who helped out on the excavation. I am also grateful to Mr L. Jones, Headmaster of Desford Boys School, for permitting the masters and boys to offer assistance throughout the dig. Their great energy and enthusiasm could always be relied upon. Generous support was also given by Mr D. Paddison, Mr D. Wassall and Mr J. B. Whitwell. The resistivity survey was carried out primarily with the help of Mr K. C. Clarke.

The writer would like to thank Paul Bidwell for assistance in the preparation of this report and identification of the pottery. FAS Heritage produced or revised the illustrations.

The finds and archive have been deposited in Leicester Museums, Accession number 391.1970.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bidwell, P. (ed.) 1999 *Hadrian's Wall 1989–1999, A Summary of Recent Research and Excavation* (Kendal).

| | |
|---|---|
| Clay, P., 2010 | 'Roman forts in Lincolnshire', in S. Malone and M. Williams (eds), *Rumours of Roman Finds, Recent work on Roman Lincolnshire*, pp. 30–42 (Heckington, Heritage Trust of Lincolnshire). |
| Hanson, W. S., 2007 | 'Elginhaugh: A Flavian Fort and its Annexe', *Britannia Mon. Ser.* 23 (2 vols). |
| Hartgroves, S. and Smith, J., 2008 | 'A second Roman fort is confirmed in Cornwall', *Britannia* 39, pp. 237–9. |
| Hartley, B. R. H., 1996 | 'The Roman fort at Ilkley', *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society* 12. |
| Hobley, B., 1982 | 'Roman military structures at The Lunt Roman fort: experimental stimulations 1966–1977', in P. J. Drury (ed.), Structural Reconstruction, Approaches to the Interpretation of the Excavated Remains of Buildings, *BAR British Series* 110, pp. 223–73. |
| Johnson, A., 1983 | *Roman Forts of the 1st and 2nd Centuries AD in Britain and the German Provinces* (London). |
| Manning, W. H. and Scott, I. R., 1979 | 'Roman timber military gateways in Britain and on the German Frontier', *Britannia* 10, pp. 19–61. |
| Maxfield, V. A., 1991 | 'Tiverton Roman (Bolham) fort: excavations 1981–1986', *Proc. Devon Archaeol. Soc.* 49, pp. 25–98. |
| Richmond, I. A., 1968 | *Hod Hill, Vol 2: Excavations Carried Out Between 1951 and 1958 for the Trustees of the British Museum*, London. |
| Richmond, I. A. and McIntyre, J., 1938–39 | 'The Agricolan Fort at Fendoch', *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scotland* 73, pp. 110–54. |
| Schönberger, H., 1961 | 'Ein augusteisches Lager in Rödgen bei Bad Nauheim', *Saalberg Jahrbuch* 19, p. 45. |
| Steer, K. A. and Feachem, R. W., 1951–52 | 'The Roman fort and temporary camp at Oakwood, Selkirkshire', *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scotland* 86, pp. 81–105. |
| Todd, M., 1968 | *The Roman fort at Great Casterton, Rutland, Excavations of 1960 and 1962 directed by Ian Richmond and Philip Corder* (University of Nottingham). |
| Welfare, H. and Swan, V., 1995 | Roman Camps in England, *The Field Archaeologist*, p. 35 (London). |