

EXCAVATIONS AT WALLINGFORD CASTLE, 1965: AN INTERIM REPORT

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THROUGH the kind permission of the owner, Sir John Hedges, and his tenant farmer, Mr E. G. Ryall, a first season's excavation was undertaken within the grounds of Wallingford Castle. The work was planned as part of a series of excavations of late-Saxon and early-medieval town sites carried out in recent years under the general guidance of Professor E. M. Jope and Dr C. A. Raleigh Radford, and was financed by grants from the Russell Trust, the Royal Archaeological Institute, and Reading Museum. The excavation was carried out by volunteer labour, recruited through the C.B.A. Calendar of Excavations and the Berkshire Field Research Group; the equipment was provided by Reading Museum.

SITE AND SCOPE OF THE EXCAVATION (fig. 1)

Wallingford, the first and largest late-Saxon borough in Berkshire and the site of one of the most powerful royal castles of the 12th and 13th centuries, owes its historical importance to its position at one of the earliest east-west crossings of the Thames. Situated on a gravel terrace of the river, the town is low-lying and has no natural defences. The town rampart and ditch, about 2,115 yd in length, form three sides of a somewhat irregular square. On the east the town has no extant defence apart from the river itself. In places where it is best preserved the town bank is still some 25 ft high from the bottom of the ditch. The lay-out of the modern streets suggests that the original plan may have been a grid-pattern, such as has been found in the excavations at Winchester in Hants, and Lydford in Devon. Wallingford Castle occupies most of the north-east quarter of the area within the borough ramparts; it

now comprises a motte which dominates the town and three concentric ditches, of which the third is visible only on the north. Two small fragments of the curtain-wall of the inner bailey are all that survive of the stone defences and buildings of the castle.

Fieldwork carried out in conjunction with Professor Jope suggested that the earthworks of the castle had made use of the earlier line of the rampart and ditch of the Saxon borough (E in fig. 1), and that the construction of the outer (third) bank of the castle had necessitated diverting the main north street of the town some 40 yd to the west of its original alignment to the site of the present Castle Street. This work would have involved the building of a new gate. A limited area in the N.W. corner of the outer bank of the castle was examined in order to test these hypotheses (fig. 1).

EXCAVATION

Apart from a major modern disturbance caused by the uprooting of two large elm trees, the site has not been touched since the 17th century. It was possible to distinguish at least five main structural periods.

Period 1

A massive bank with a wide ditch ran east-west across the site on the same alignment as the surviving section of the north ramparts of the town. Several sherds of black, handmade grass-tempered pottery of Pagan or Middle Saxon date (c. 500–900) were found in the body of the bank, and established that the earthwork is post-Roman; there is documentary evidence that the ramparts were in existence as a defence against Viking raids at least as early as the beginning of the 10th century.

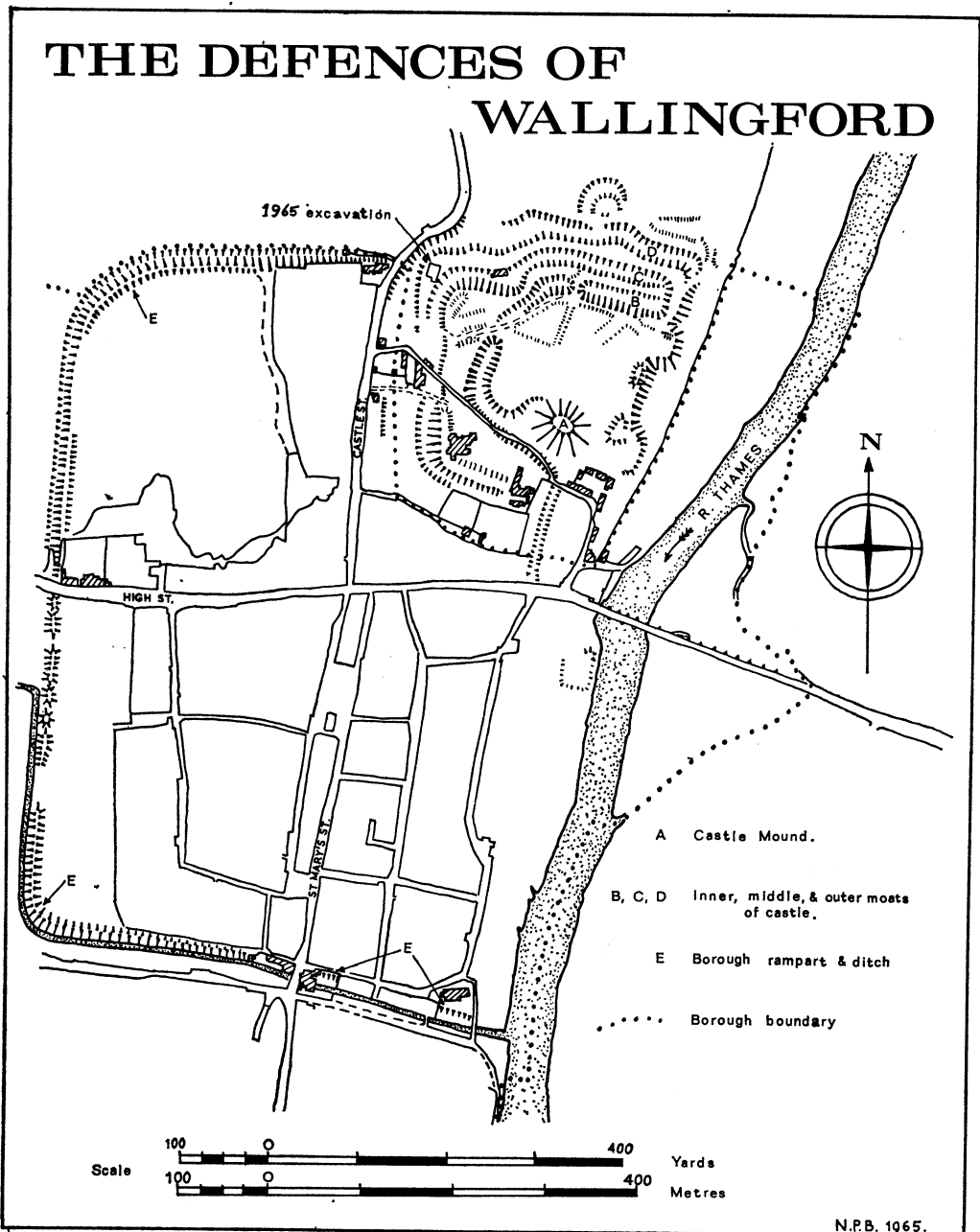


Figure 1

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WALLINGFORD NORTH GATE

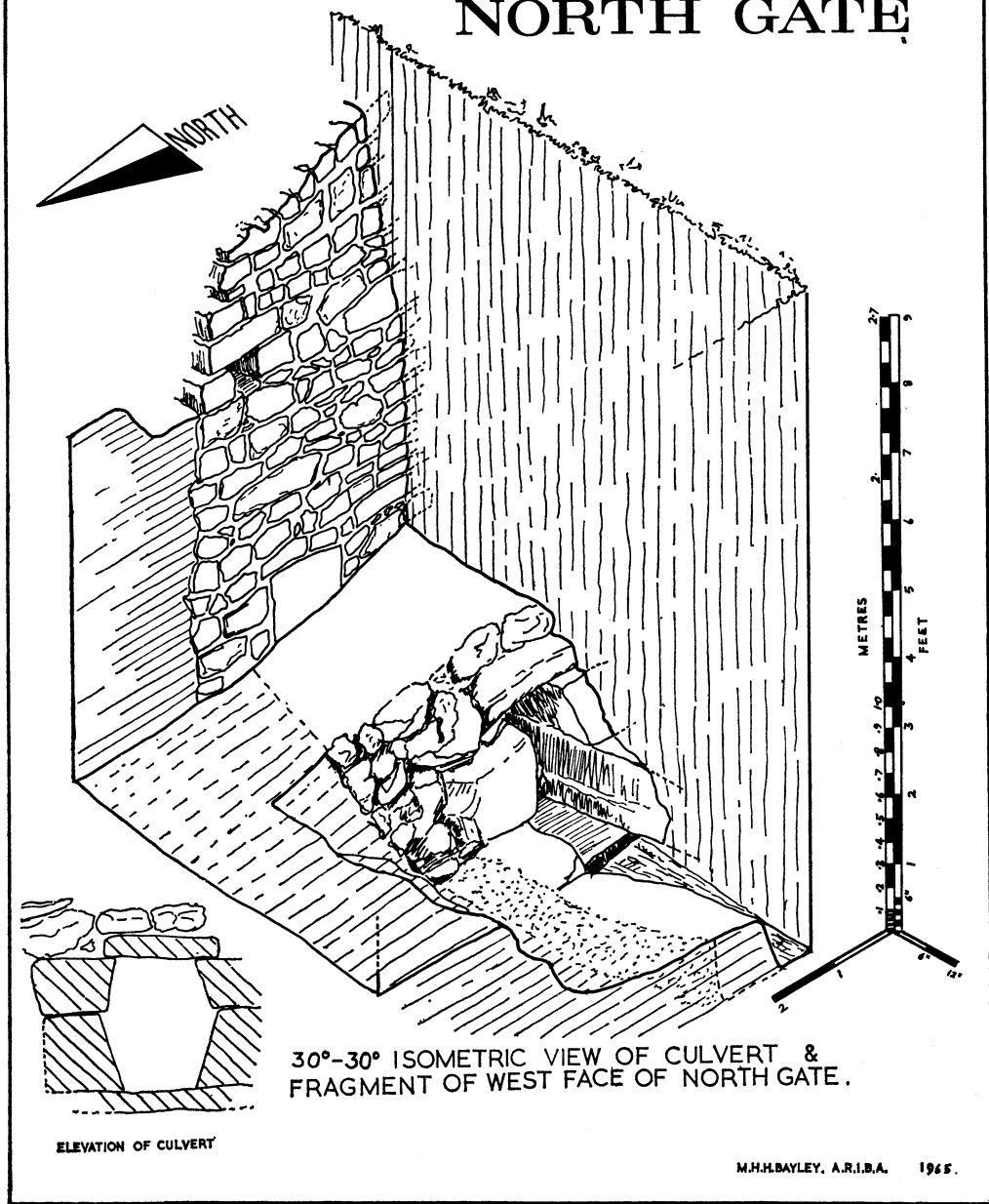


Figure 2

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The absence of any turf-line beneath the rampart and the horizontal stratification of its layers of brickearth and gravel suggest that the turf may have been stripped to form a revetment of turf at the front of the bank; all trace of this revetment was destroyed when the ditch was widened in period II. Possible indications of post-holes within the bank were protected under polythene sheeting, and reserved for excavation on a much larger scale in a future season. It is hoped to locate the site of the earliest gate, and to establish whether the Wallingford ramparts had a system of internal structural posts such as has been found in contemporary defensive earthworks on the continent.

Period II

The turf revetment of the town defences in period I was later replaced by a stone wall on the crest of the bank, as at Wareham in Dorset. Not even the footings of this wall survived intact, but its existence could be deduced from the layers of rubble and mortar debris that had fallen into the ditch when the wall was destroyed in period IV.

It is possible that the building of this wall coincided with a recutting of the ditch. Repairing the ditch may, however, have been a frequent occurrence. We know that in 1215 King John ordered the sheriff to summon men from the whole of Berkshire to repair the town ditch as they had been accustomed to do. The presence of pottery and roofing-tile of the late 12th or early 13th century indicate that the dimensions of the ditch (c. 20 ft wide and at least 11 ft deep below the 13th century ground surface) could derive from this work, but scarcely earlier.

Period III (c. 1250)

Later in the 13th century when 4 ft of silt had accumulated in the ditch, the site was replanned with a new stone gateway erected over the town ditch. The ditch stream was channelled into a culvert formed of massive dressed limestone blocks, and on this founda-

tion was constructed a large arch-gateway built of hard chalk (fig. 2).

A new road had been laid on a causeway across the ditch up to the stone gateway. The road was well cambered and approximately 20 ft in width, with a hard surface of compacted gravel and greensand. Apart from two pot-holes rather inadequately patched with gravel, the road showed little signs of wear.

Period IV (c. 1275-1300)

The period III gateway (the north gate of the town) did not remain in use for long. It was decided to add a third moat to the castle defences, and this involved destroying the gate and north street of the town, since they were now buried under the new outer bank of the castle. The opportunity was also taken at this time to rob much of the facing stone from the gate, but the culvert was left intact to admit water to the inner moats of the castle, and part of the west face of the gate (fig. 2) was also preserved. It now stood at the head of a timber-lined channel carrying the stream into the culvert.

Material thrown up in digging the moat covered the road and the remnant of the gate. These layers sealing the road and gateway contained a considerable quantity of animal bone and pottery, both glazed and undecorated wares, of the 12th and 13th centuries. A number of rubbish pits must have been disturbed when the moat was dug.

These extensive operations also involved razing the town rampart down to the level of the new castle bank at the point where they intersected. This levelling destroyed the footings of the borough wall, but layers of debris from the wall were found tumbling into the ditch. A firm date for this strengthening of the castle defences and for the consequent resiting of the main north street of the town must await detailed analysis of the pottery, but at present a date in the latter half of the 13th century seems to be indicated.

Period V (c. 1640)

At some date subsequent to period IV stone

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robbers dug a wide trench from the middle moat of the castle, and removed rather more than half the great sandstone blocks of the culvert, replacing them with a substantial timber-lined channel. Two huge vertical post-holes, 1 ft square and some 8 ft in depth, were excavated, and a third which had been discovered in an unfinished excavation in 1939

probably belonged to the same timber replacement. The pottery, brick and clay-pipe associated with the robbing of the culvert and its replacement in timber suggests a date in the 17th century. It may well be that the robbers were seeking good stone when the castle was hastily refortified as a Royalist stronghold in the Civil War.