

17899

**23 LIMINGTON ROAD,  
ILCHESTER**

**Archaeological  
Watching Brief, 2005**

April 2005

**Peter Leach BA FSA MIFA  
Archaeological Consultant**

Wenlock Edge,  
Pilton, Shepton Mallet  
Somerset BA4 4AZ

*Tel. 01749 890241  
e-mail [113204.233@compuserve.com](mailto:113204.233@compuserve.com)*

# **An archaeological watching brief at 23 Limington Road, Ilchester, Somerset, March 2005**

## **1.0 Summary**

*An archaeological watching brief was required in response to a proposed house extension for No. 23 Limington Road, Ilchester. The principal discovery was location of the north side of the main east-west street through the Roman town, linking the East and West Gates. Alongside to the north were late 1<sup>st</sup>/early 2<sup>nd</sup>-century occupation deposits, cut through by two walls of a later Roman stone-founded building fronting the road. Successive drainage ditches separated the road metalling sequence from the outer southern building wall. A sequence of floor and occupation/destruction deposits were seen within parts of the two rooms identified. Medieval stone robbing had removed all but the unmortared foundations of the walls. Medieval rubbish pits and more extensive truncation had severely affected some of the Roman deposits, although much of the road sequence survives intact, up to one metre thick.*

## **2.0 Introduction**

2.1: An archaeological watching brief was required by South Somerset District Council as a condition of planning permission for an extension to No. 23 Limington Road, Ilchester (Application No.03/03257/ful.). This follows a recommendation from the Culture and Heritage Directorate of Somerset County Council, who provided a Specification for the monitoring operation. This was undertaken in March 2005 in accordance with that brief and the *General Specification for Archaeological Work in Somerset*, Somerset County Council, March 1995. The recommendation follows central government advice as set out in *Planning Policy Guidance on Archaeology and Planning* (PPG 16) issued by the Department of the Environment in 1990, County Structure Plan policy AH5 and Local Plan policy.

## **3.0 The site**

3.1: No. 23 Limington Road, at NGR ST 52346 22584, lies within the eastern part of the historic town area of Ilchester (Fig. 1). Built in the 1960s, it occupies part of the former grounds of Kingshams House, an early 19<sup>th</sup>-century house which now adjoins the property to the east. This was a walled kitchen garden area, whose boundary walls still survive as the south and east walls bounding the front garden of the property today. The proposed development required excavations of foundation trenches for a building extension within the garden on the west side of the house, formerly occupied by a garage and utility room.

3.2: The site is located within the known bounds of the former Roman and Medieval towns at Ilchester, and remains of those periods have been found in close proximity. These include evidence of mid-1<sup>st</sup> century fort defences, Roman streets and buildings, the Roman and medieval town defences, and other medieval structures at Kingshams, just to the north (Leach 1982), and several discoveries of mosaic pavements and other Roman material in gardens along the north side of Limington

Road (Somerset Heritage and Environment Record numbers: 53032, 53039, 53040 and 55924). Of these, the last was a mosaic pavement fragment located close to the northeast corner of No. 23, although very little detail was recorded at the time of discovery. This occurred during development of the site during the 1960s, but there is no record of any other finds made here at that time.

3.3: Ilchester, located within the floodplain of the River Yeo and at a major crossing point, was successively the site of important late Prehistoric, Roman and Medieval regional centres. Both the Roman and Medieval towns corresponded fairly closely with the area of the modern settlement, and although little survives visibly today, remains of Ilchester's antecedents have regularly come to light in the course of development in and around the town over the past half-century and more (Fig. 1). Limington Road was almost certainly a medieval street giving access to the East Gate of the town, and may have followed a Roman predecessor. Little is known of other medieval structures in this part of the town but the discovery of mosaic pavements and other building remains hint at the presence of town houses of some pretension in this area of Roman Ilchester.

#### **4.0 The watching brief**

4.1: Following demolition and removal of the existing structures on the site a series of wall foundation trenches were excavated for the footprint of the new extension to the house. These covered an area approximately 6m wide and over 8m long, those for the external walls being cut approximately 0.6m wide and to depths of around 2m from the modern garden surface, where the deposits and surfaces reached were deemed to be sufficiently firm for load-bearing purposes. One internal wall foundation of 0.4m width was cut to a depth of less than 1m, where a pre-existing concrete foundation was considered to provide an adequate base for that wall (Fig 2).

4.2: The mechanical excavation of all these trenches was observed and their sides and bases were subsequently cleaned by hand and examined. Archaeological deposits and structures were identified and defined by pro-forma written record (Appendix), finds were collected, photographs were taken and scale drawings of exposed sections and a trench plan was made. These records provide the basis for this report and are deposited along with finds in the Somerset County Museum at Taunton Castle (TTNCM/58/2005).

#### **5.0 Archaeology**

5.1: At the lowest levels of excavation in the base of the southern and western foundation trenches (Fig. 2), at around 12.2m AOD, a buff-yellow, clean silty clay (layer 1008) appears to be the naturally deposited river alluvium seen widely elsewhere beneath Ilchester. Sealing this throughout the southern trench and for over 4m northwards along the western foundation trench was a very compact banded deposit of sandy orange-brown gravel with occasional larger stone fragments and patches or lenses of softer yellow-grey sandy silt (layer 1005), the whole surviving up to one metre deep in places. This deposit could only be examined in the machine cut sections, but it was evident that several separate horizons of deposition and worn surfaces were present within it. Its base was characterised by a marked concentration of shattered angular lias limestone mixed with gravel. Up to four broad sequences of

deposition and surface wear were identified, although others may have been present more intermittently, indicating a long-established road sequence (F5). A few broken fragments of Roman brick or tile were the only artefacts recovered.

5.2: The base level of alluvial clay was occasionally seen in the northern foundation trenches, but for the most part these did not penetrate a fairly compact deposit of greenish yellow/buff silty clay, with scatters of small stone, gravel, charcoal, occasional animal bone, shell, Roman pottery fragments, and some patches of darker ashy soil and charcoal (layer 1007). This rarely survived to a depth exceeding 150-200mm, although its base level sealing the underlying alluvium was barely seen.

5.3: This more northerly deposit was cut through in two places by steep-sided linear trenches, the larger (F3) almost one metre wide and crossing the western trench on an east-west axis. This contained several large Lias limestone blocks pitched on edge together at approximately 45°, and set within a stiff gritty buff-yellow clay with some smaller stone (layer 1006). This fill indicates unmortared stone wall foundations set into a trench, which was also cut into the underlying clay alluvium (1008), but was not bottomed. There was no indication of the wall supported by these foundations, their upper levels having been truncated and the stone probably removed in medieval times (Fig. 2, section).

5.4: The truncated wall foundation F3 was separated from the northern edge of the F5 road levels by a narrow steep-sided cut (F4) containing mixed stony grey silts and gravel (layer 1013). At a higher level and truncating it, a broader and shallower cut (F7) contained similar stony silt and numerous medium and large Lias limestone blocks, some with wear on their upper surfaces (layer 1004). Both of these cuts may have been successive drainage channels marking the northern perimeter of the road.

5.5: A second trench (F6) following part of the northern new extension foundation trenches, was approximately 0.6m wide and cut on virtually a north-south axis. Once again, this contained many pitched Lias limestone blocks packed together within a stony clay matrix (layer 1010), but with patches of mixed cream mortar and smaller stone rubble above. No upper stone courses of this presumed second wall survived medieval truncation and the full depth of the foundation trench was not seen.

5.6: Further east a 300mm thick sequence of relatively thin deposits survived above a continuation of the lower level (1007), commencing with a compact, dirty orange gravel, a succeeding deposit of mixed grey-buff stony silt with charcoal, and a capping deposit of compact orange sandy gravel, disturbed from above in places (layer 1009). Their relationship with the wall foundation F6 was interrupted by medieval disturbance arising from robbing of the upper stone-wall courses, but these deposits appear to represent interior floor and occupation levels. To the west of wall F6 a thin layer of dirty cream mortar and small stone (layer 1012) sealed the earlier deposits 1007 as another internal floor level. Above this and disturbing it in places was up to 500mm of more mixed stony soils with some ash and charcoal patches, scatters of larger stone rubble and blocks, and occasional Roman pottery, shell and animal bone fragments (layer 1011).

5.7: As mentioned above, the upper wall courses above foundations F3 and F6 were completely lost, in all probability robbed of their stone in medieval times. A clear stone-robbing trench (F2) was detected above F3 (Fig. 2, section), though more difficult to distinguish from more extensive general disturbance above F6. This general layer of disturbance (layer 1001) was a mixed stony brown soil with scatters of stone rubble, occasional charcoal, animal bone and medieval pottery sherds, 500-750mm thick. In the exposed trench sections it was impossible to distinguish other cuts or meaningful deposition horizons that could assist further with interpreting the sequence or origins of this deposit, except where more deeply cut disturbances had affected underlying Roman levels. Of these, a relatively shallow cut (F9) was observed to penetrate the upper levels of the road F5 in the west foundation trench, while a much larger and deeper disturbance (F1) reached the bottom of the trenches further north. The latter's fills (layer 1002) suggest more than one pit excavation, probably for rubbish disposal, and included ash and charcoal deposits, much stone rubble, some animal bones and occasional 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century cooking pot sherds.

5.8: The latest levels on the site were modern garden and cultivation soils (layer 1000), over 400mm thick in places. Some modern debris was incorporated into this deposit, and the most northerly new foundation trench intercepted a drystone wall foundation of large blocks and smaller rubble (F8) on a similar east-west alignment. This feature was associated with a more extensive spread of smaller broken Lias slate and stone rubble with occasional modern brick or tile fragments (layer 1014), and appears to mark the line of the demolished north stone wall of the walled kitchen garden belonging to Kingshams House.

## 6.0 Interpretation

6.1: Despite the limitations of archaeological recovery and recording in development watching brief contexts of this nature, the information gathered here has made a significant contribution towards expanding our understanding of Ilchester's Roman topography and historical development, in particular. Notable is the discovery of a well-preserved Roman street sequence (F5), apparently surviving in places to almost full original depth, although its southern edge, and thus its full width, was not established. From previous discoveries and projections of the Roman town layout it is evident that this road is part of the main east-west thoroughfare through the town, linking the postulated East and West Gates (Fig 1). An earlier projection suggested that this street lay slightly further south, but clearly, this latest evidence gives a better alignment. Regrettably, dating evidence from the road makeup sequence was minimal, although it appears to have been laid on virgin ground, probably before the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, conceivably originating as the east-west cross-street of Ilchester's mid-1<sup>st</sup> century Neronian fortress.

6.2: Pottery recovered from the earliest deposits reached on the northern side of the road indicate settlement and occupation here by the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century at least, although no structures were discerned. This was superseded by the layout of a large stone-founded building, whose southern outer wall (F3) fronted directly onto the street, though separated from it by a roadside drain (F4), that was recut at least once at a higher level (F7) as the street levels rose. The narrower foundation (F6) evidently represents an internal wall of this building, although regrettably its junction with F6 lay unseen beneath the modern concrete base of the new building extension partition

wall. Floor levels preserved on either side of this internal wall indicate two rooms, the 'West room' with a plaster floor (Fig. 2, plan).

6.3: Given the discovery of a mosaic pavement fragment a few metres away to the east in the garden (Fig.1, IL 94), the building remains here suggest a suite of rooms belonging to a wealthy Roman town house set alongside one of the main streets in the town. The origin of this building is uncertain, although a later 2<sup>nd</sup>-century date would not be surprising. A succession of floors in the 'East room' and 4<sup>th</sup>-century pottery from the deposits above the 'West room' mortar floor indicate continuing occupation, although the nature of the latter deposit suggests an episode of destruction and burial, possibly marking the demise and abandonment of the building near the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century or somewhat later.

6.4: The wholesale medieval robbing out of stone from the walls of the Roman building is a phenomenon widely recorded in Ilchester. Although not precisely dated here, much of it probably occurred in the late Anglo-Saxon period (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries) when the revived medieval town was expanding. Medieval rubbish pit excavation is also a widespread phenomenon, resulting in severe truncation or destruction of much Roman urban stratigraphy and the widespread creation, along with more general occupation activity, of extensive and largely undifferentiated medieval deposits, commonly a metre or more deep (layer 1001).

6.5: By contrast, the road makeup levels survived largely intact below the horizon of post-Roman disturbance. This may in part be attributed to the resistance of the street makeup material and its lower value for recycling. However, its preservation may also have been aided by continued use as a thoroughfare in the medieval town, a possibility supported by knowledge of earlier street layouts in this part of Ilchester. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century Limington Road, formerly known as East Street, divided as it approached its junction with Back Lane and Church Street to form the triangular Borough Green. The northern side of the green was defined by a lane, as depicted on William Stukeley's 1723 map of Ilchester, which appears to follow the line of the earlier Roman street. Later, by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the Borough Green had disappeared and Limington Road realigned to its present course (VCH 1975, p.180).

## **7.0 Conclusions**

7.1: Despite the limitations and inevitable loss of archaeological data arising from a watching brief of machine-excavated building foundations, this particular opportunity has demonstrated the value of such monitoring in Ilchester, the survival of remains of various periods, and its potential contribution towards broadening our understanding of its historical development.

7.2: While it is evident that hand excavation and recording would have recovered significantly more detailed structural and dating information, the watching brief appears to have obtained sufficient data for the essence of the remains and their sequence to be understood. Given the depth at which much of the earlier (principally Roman) levels survive, usually at least one metre below modern surfaces, it is unfortunate that foundations for modern building within the historic town area are not always designed to minimise the impact upon archaeology below that depth.

7.3: The application of modern detailed archaeological excavation and recording as an alternative response to a watching brief will often be disproportionate to the relatively high costs involved, particularly in the context of the majority of small developments now taking place at Ilchester. As these continue some destruction, albeit subject to monitoring as here, may be inevitable, but if full excavation is not an option, alternatives such as raft foundations - a technique applied at Ivel Gardens in 1997 for example (Leach and Ellis 1998) - should be more actively considered.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Mr and Mrs C. Williams of 23 Limington Road who commissioned this watching brief, to Steve Membury of Somerset County Council for monitoring the project, and to contractors Adrian and Kieth Helyar for their good humoured co-operation and assistance in the early stages of the development.

### References

Leach, P.1982 *Ilchester Volume 1, Excavations 1974-5* Western Archaeological Trust, Bristol

Leach, P. (ed.) 1994 *Ilchester Volume 2, Archaeology, Excavations and Fieldwork to 1984* Sheffield

Leach, P. and Ellis, P. 1998 'Ilchester Archaeology: a watching brief and salvage excavations at Ivel House, 1997' *Somerset Archaeology and Natural History Proceedings* Vol, 141, 35-55

VCH 1975 *Victoria County History of England, Somerset* Vol. III, 'Ilchester', 179-201

## Appendix

### Table of archaeological stratigraphy

Context	Description	Finds	Interpretation
1000	Surface layer to 300mm+, dark soil and mixed debris	Modern material	Modern garden soil, etc.
1001	Very mixed, stony dark brown soils, stone rubble scatters, 500-800mm deep	Animal bone, tile/brick	Mixed medieval/post-med. soils/occupation deposits
1002	Tips of dark brown stony soil, some large stone rubble, clay, ash, charcoal, etc.	medieval pot, shell, anim. bone	Fill of medieval rubbish pits F1
1003	Mixed dark brown soil, stone blocks and rubble, mortar, clay, etc	None	Fill of wall-robbing trench F2
1004	Sandy grey-green silt fill with some larger stone blocks	None	Fill of drainage ditch F7
1005	Up to 1m thick, Compact banded deposits of yellow/orange sandy gravel, grey-green silt lenses, stone scatters, etc.	Brick/tile, animal bone	Roman street makeup and metalling components of F5
1006	Large pitched stone blocks and rubble in a stony clay matrix	None	Wall foundation material in trench F3
1007	Mixed, sandy, grey-green silt with some gravel, ash and charcoal bands, <200mm	Roman pottery, shell, anim. bone	Early Roman soil/occupation deposits, C1st - C2nd
1008	Base level of dense, buff-yellow clay/silt of unknown depth	None	Natural alluvial silt
1009	Two thin bands of mixed orange-brown gravel separated by stony grey-green silts soil with charcoal, <300mm	Roman pottery, shell, an. bone	Internal floor level sequence, 'East room'
1010	Large pitched stone blocks and rubble in a stony clay matrix capped by mortar patches	None	Wall foundation material in trench F6
1011	Mixed deposits, banded stony grey-brown soil, stone, mortar, ash, charcoal, etc. <400mm	Roman pottery, brick/tile, a. bone	Occupation/building destruction levels, 'West room', C4th >
1012	Thin layer of dirty cream/white mortar	None	Internal floor, 'West room'
1013	Fill of buff-grey/green silty clay and gravel	None	Fill of drainage gully F4
1014	Lense of shattered Lias stone and stony soil	None	Building demolition level - F8
F1	Steep/vertical-sided cuts through Roman deposits to base of trenches,	see 1002	Medieval pit complex, fills - 1002
F2	Steep-sided, flat-bottomed cut above F3	None	Post-Roman wall-robbing trench
F3	Vertical-sided trench for pitched stone wall foundations	None	External, E-W Roman building wall foundation
F4	Narrow, steep-sided cut between gravels 1005 and wall foundations 1006	None	Drainage gully between F3 wall and street F5
F5	Composite deposit of compacted horizontal layers 1005	see 1005	Roman town street surfaces and makeup
F6	Vertical-sided trench for pitched stone wall foundations	None	Internal, N-S Roman building wall foundation
F7	Broad, shallow-sided, E-W cut above F4	None	Later roadside drainage gully
F8	Setting of large stone blocks and rubble	None	C19th garden wall foundation
F9	Irregular, steep-sided cut into 1005 gravel	None	Medieval cut into F5 street



# ILCHESTER: an Archaeological Gazetteer

## ROMAN

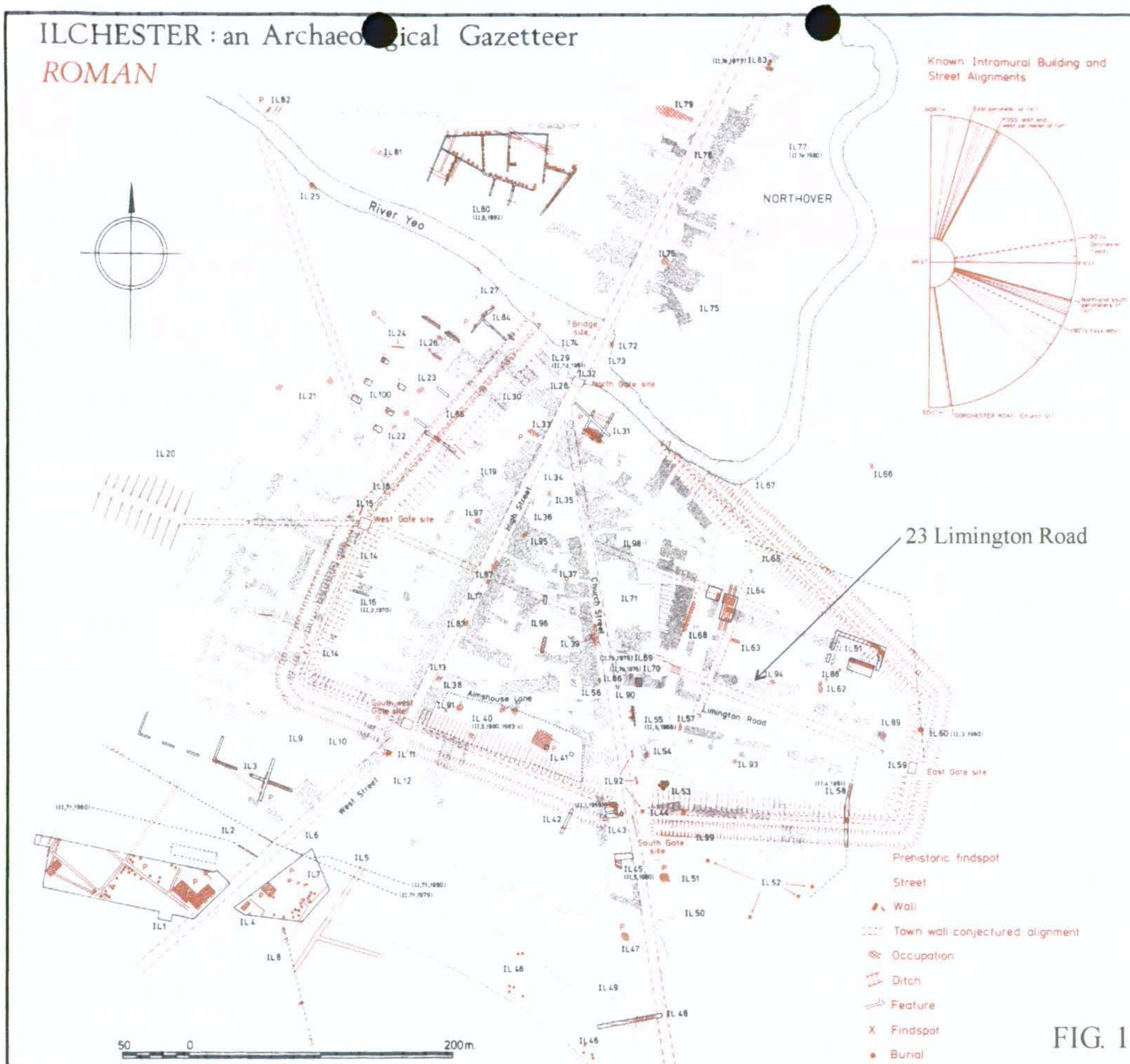
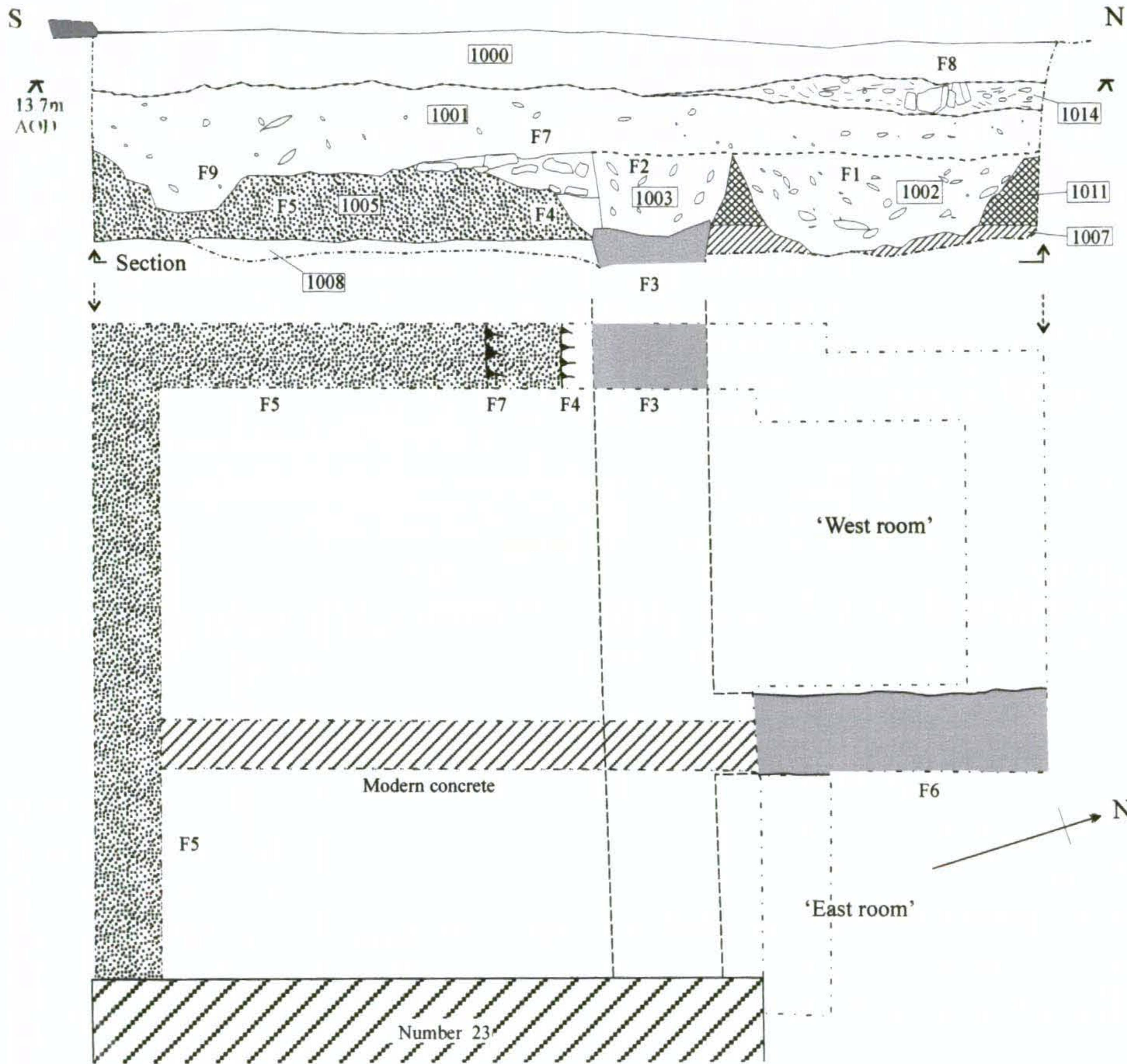






FIG. 1





23 LIMINGTON ROAD,  
ILCHESTER: 2005

KEY

-  Existing building
-  Foundation trenches
-  Street metalling
-  Wall foundations

0 2m

FIG. 2