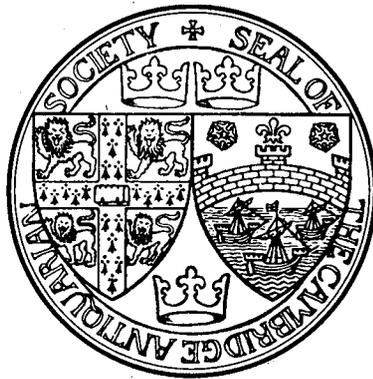

**Proceedings of the
Cambridge Antiquarian Society**
(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

**Volume LXXXVIII
for 1999**

Roman Cambridge

Excavations on Castle Hill 1956–1988

John Alexander and Joyce Pullinger



This volume is dedicated to more than 400 volunteers who worked in their free time on the excavations and post excavation work, and to those contributors to the final work who did not live to see the results: Don Allen, Bernard Denston, Ray Farrar, Chris Godfrey, Rex Hull, Joan Liversidge and John Scott.

Roman Cambridge: Excavations on Castle Hill 1956–1988

John Alexander and Joyce Pullinger

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Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Prefaces | 4 |
| Editorial | 6 |
| Acknowledgements | 7 |
| Summary | 8 |
| Chapters | |
| 1. Introduction | 9 |
| 2. The Iron Age Settlement | 17 |
| 3. First Century Settlement and a Possible Roman Fort | 27 |
| 4. Civil Settlement of the 2nd Century | 35 |
| 5. The Third and Early Fourth Centuries | 49 |
| 6. The Fourth Century Walled Town | 59 |
| 7. Discussion and Conclusions. A Taylor | 75 |
| | |
| Appendices | |
| I. The Small Finds. F Gardiner, M Henig and J Pullinger | 85 |
| II. The Glass. J Liversidge | 107 |
| III. The Coins. M F Sekulla, G R Thoday and P de Jersey | 109 |
| IV. The Amphorae. J Pullinger | 113 |
| V. The Iron Age pottery. R A H Farrar and M R Hull, J Pullinger | 117 |
| VI. Samian Ware. B Dickinson | 131 |
| VII. The Roman Pottery. M R Hull and J Pullinger | 141 |
| VIII Roman Pottery Illustrations. J Pullinger, B C Burnham, A Rotherham and P White | 145 |
| IX The Mortaria. K Hartley | 201 |
| X. Roman pottery. M R Hull | 209 |
| XI. Building materials. J Pullinger and F Weatherhead | 251 |
| XII. Summary of excavations post-1988. C Evans | 255 |
| Bibliography | |
| Index | |

3. First Century Settlement and a Possible Roman Fort

Summary

Immediately after the Roman conquest the strategic importance of Castle Hill, commanding the easiest river crossing for 50 miles upstream from the Wash and having direct access to the sea, attracted Roman attention. Four roads met near the river crossing and a bridge was probably built. A more temporary feature was a complex of ditches, probably of enclosures, laid out on the crest of the hill. Other features of this date include a well and two iron-smelting furnaces. Later there are indications, but no real proof, that a small fort or military post was built on top of the hill astride the track that later became Akeman Street, to guard the river crossing. This superseded at least one of the Roman enclosures, for it was laid over it. No contemporary pits or features were found within the enclosure or within 30m of its ditch. To the northeast, possible latrine pits, a gully and 3 rubbish pits were connected with the fort or the previous camp. Some distance southwest, features suggesting that scattered settlement was permitted including a house, four timber-lined wells, several boundary ditches and many pits. A major road, Akeman Street (to the Fens) was in use in this period, and the Via Devana to the river crossing was presumably also operational.

Description (Fig. 3.1)

Pre-Fort Occupation

Claudian Ditches (Plates LVII–LXIV: 232–335, LXV–LXVII: 342–356)

Ditch VI. A straight ditch running southeast-northwest, traced for 10m. It was U-profiled, 1.8m wide and 90cm deep. The fill in the eastern stretch was of a sandy silt but further west the fill was a brown silty clay with some stones. There was a series of post settings at the eastern end. Bones, predominantly sheep, were found with a few sherds of mid 1st century type and a brooch (Plate I: 8). The ditch had later been recut slightly north of the original line and slightly deeper. The fill was similar to that of the first cut. Two neighbouring gullies 20cm x 65cm wide and approximately 50cm deep and 28cm apart belong to this period. They ran south of, but parallel to, the above ditch through the same trenches. The gullies were traced for 22m. Their fills were of brown loam which was stony in places. Both gullies ended in the southeast end of CP VIII. Sherds in the fill were of mid 1st century type. On

top of the fill was a brooch (Plate V: 31).

Ditch VIa. A straight northeast-southwest ditch, 1.7m wide at the surface of bedrock and 60 cm deep. It was traced for 6m, and was V-shaped with a slot at the bottom on the north side. The fill was a mixture of loamy clay flecked with chalk marl. It appeared to have had three recuts. The few sherds in the primary silting were of Belgic and immediate post-Conquest types. Those in the recuts were of mid 1st century.

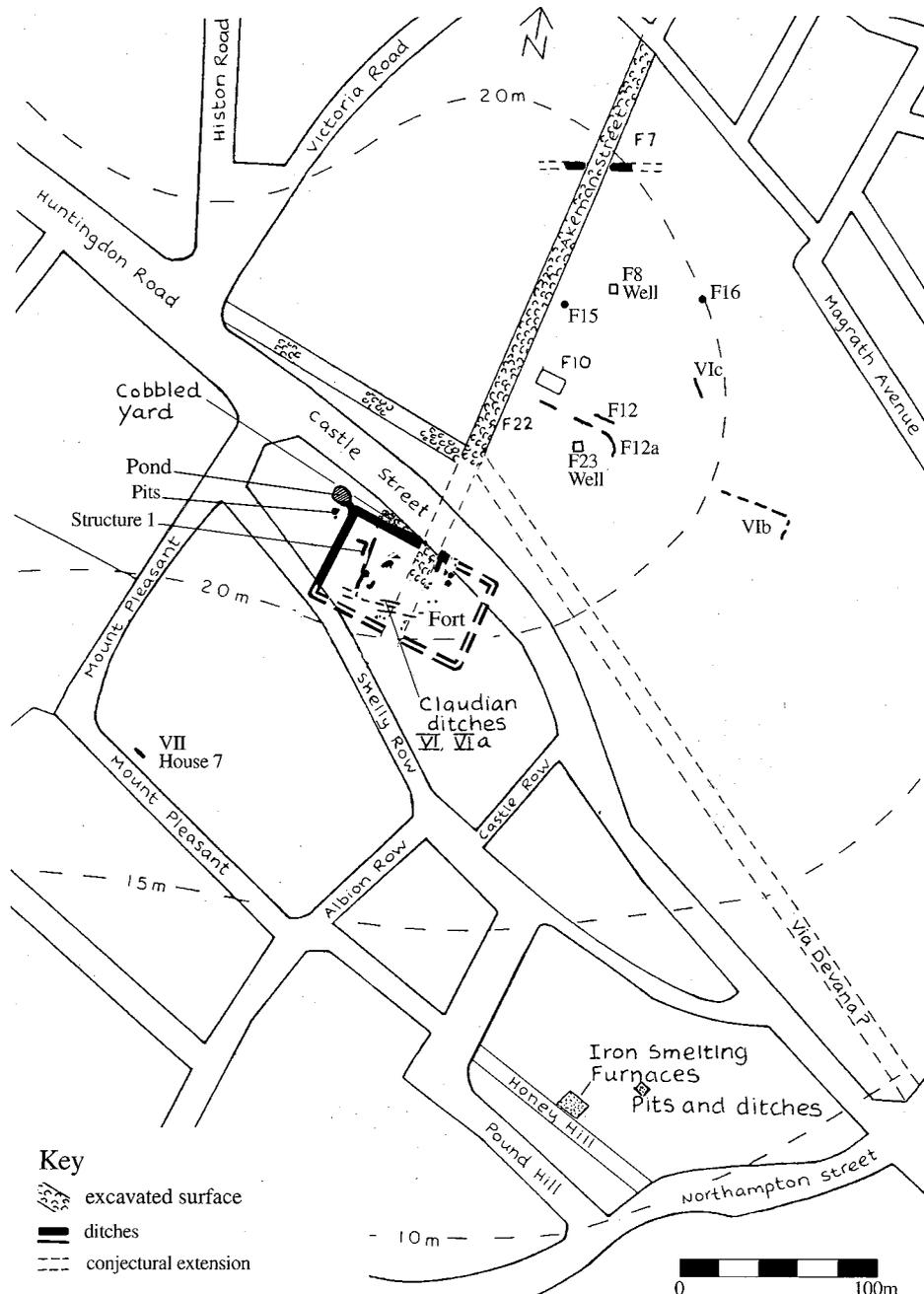
Ditch VIb. Probably also part of this complex. It was recorded in 1935 when two ditches, the profiles of which suggested to Lethbridge that they might be Roman military ditches, were observed at right angles to each other, in the foundation trenches of the Shire Hall (RCHM I 1959). Mid 1st century pottery came from the ditches and it is possible that they belonged to an enclosure on the hill.

Ditch VIc. Another V-shaped ditch, was excavated in CH, cut from the 1st–2nd century ground surface. It was 54cm deep and 1.3m wide. Similar ditches did not appear in the Law Courts, GT or RG excavations (30m further south and 39m and 45m further west respectively).

Ditch XV. Straight ditch cutting the top of the southeast edge of Iron Age ditch IX. In RGS IA, III and IIB it was traced for 16m, its upper edge cutting the Iron Age ditch. It was U-profiled and filled with brown loam containing pockets of ash, charcoal and orange sandy clay. A large quantity of sherds came from the fill; these were of Belgic and mid 1st century Roman type (Plates LVII–LXIV: 233–335, LXV–LXVII: 342–356). A pottery lamp of Claudian date was found in the upper fill (Plate LVII: 232). Among the animal bones sheep were predominant. This ditch was cut by a later palisade trench also of this phase. There were three brooches in the upper fills (Plates III: 16–17, IV: 26). It is possible that this ditch continued across Castle Street, appearing as the final recuts of ditch XVIII. (See App. VII, p143)

RGS/CP Structure I. (Fig. 3.2).

Immediately east of ditch XV, traced for 17m from a butt end. It was straight, aligned north-south and extremely regularly dug. Although only 1m wide, it was dug with near vertical sides to a depth of 1.8m and had held substantially sized posts, set close to each other. The chalk



3.1 The Roman fort and other 1st century features

marl packing for these was found to a depth of 98cm at the northern end. One posthole next to the entrance in RGS III was 25cm in diameter and well defined by its chalk packing. The general fill of the trench was a dark brown silty soil with small lumps of chalk in RGS I, and III, but towards the southern end in RGS IIb the fill consisted of sand, clay, charcoal flakes with some stones and chalk, and in parts contained much chalk, suggesting deliberate infilling. Sherds from under the chalk marl packing round the posts suggest a date in the third quarter of the 1st century for the construction of the palisade (Plate LXVII: 351-356). These sherds came from the west side of the trench. The posts were seen to have been standing against the east side with the chalk marl packing on the west (Fig. 3.3) and did not seem to have rotted *in situ*. These were probably removed in the first ten years of the

2nd century, when the trench was deliberately filled. Apart from sherds, there was a considerable quantity of animal bone in the upper fills, sheep bones predominating. The uppermost fill of the palisade trench was sealed by the ditch beside the 2nd century road. An entrance into the palisaded area was found in RGS III. It was marked by a gap 3.20m wide in the palisade trench which ended on either side in rounded butts. There were specially large postholes in the butt ends, no doubt for gate-posts. There was no sign of metallurgy or of wheeled traffic through the entrance. The entrance may have been blocked at some time by a shallow ditch (c. 20cm wide and 15cm deep), perhaps for a fence. Alternatively this shallow ditch may have been the bottom of the 2nd century road-side ditch which cut into the upper fills of the palisade trench. The west side of the palisade trench cut



3.2 RGS. Pre-fort Structure I

the topmost fills of the earlier Claudian ditch (Ditch XV). The stratigraphical relationship of the palisade to other near contemporary ditches in RGS II, V and VI and CP VIII could not be decided since the intersection was destroyed by modern pits.

Three ditches in CP V, VI and VII, two of them parallel to the palisade trench described above and one at right angles to it, suggest subdivisions of a large enclosure.

RGS Structure II.

A narrow gully 20cm wide, cut 8cm into natural, was traced in a west-east direction for 5.5m. This appears to have been a setting for a wooden structure as postholes were found at intervals along its length and along the one joining it at right angles in RGS IV and V. There was some evidence for wattle and daub walls and, in the western half, a mortar floor (Plates LXIX–LXX: 370–383).

Animal bones from the Claudian ditches were principally sheep and cattle, with smaller numbers of pig. There were also dog bones and a very small number of fish and birds.

Pits

A possible latrine pit, three rubbish pits, and a posthole in RG may have preceded the fort and been contemporary with the ditches. Pit F3.13 was large and probably rectangular, measuring 3m x 1.8m. It had been cut 2m into bedrock and had vertical sides and a flat bottom; its primary silt suggested that it had remained open for some time. After the primary silt a



3.3 CR. Postholes east of palisade

thin layer of organic matter accumulated before it had been deliberately filled in with sandy loam. From both siltings the pottery was of early 1st century date and the pit had probably been filled in before 70AD. Two pits, RG F2.18, F2.19, might possibly, from their stratigraphical position, have belonged to either the early or mid 1st century. A pit in CH 84 was found beneath the most likely later route of the Via Devana (Plate LXVIII: 357–364).

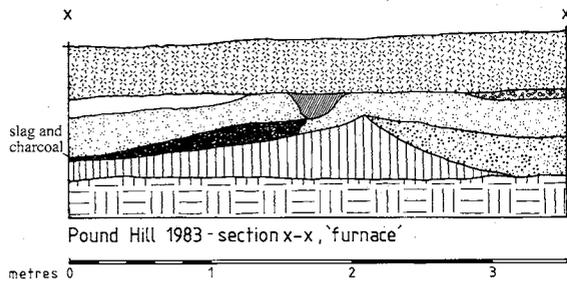
Well 6b

A shaft in Trench III, 1.78m square was tested to 5.6m but the bottom was not reached. It was cut through ditch IX and the western edge of ditch XV, and was probably contemporary with the palisade trench. The upper part had been timber-lined, clay being packed between the fills of the earlier ditch and the lining. The lining ceased when solid chalk was reached, but the shaft continued. Foot holes were cut into the chalk in the eastern corner of the well. The lowest half metre excavated was a dark brown/black sticky fill containing sherds of 1st century date, and a late Iron Age bronze coin (App. III, SF 55). Above this layer the well had been filled with gravel when a 2nd century gravel street was constructed over it. It probably continued in use through the military phase.

Iron Smelting Furnaces

PH

Furnace 1, underlying Ditch 7. It measured 1m x 1.2m, and was lined with blue/green sandy clay which showed signs of intense heat. The bottom was fairly flat and there was a run-off channel in which a large lump of iron slag was found. The furnace contained dark brown granular peaty soil, large flint pebbles, an almost complete 1st



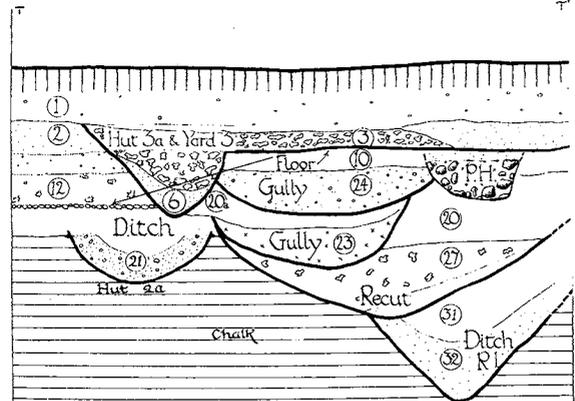
3.4 Iron smelting furnace 2

century pot (Plate LXIX: 367), and a large square fragment of slightly scorched limestone. Only the bottom 25cm of the furnace remained and this was cut into natural sand.
Furnace 2 (Fig 3.4). Found under a thick layer (up to 50cm) of redeposited sand. The domed base of an iron smelting furnace was approximately 2m in diameter. Iron slag was round the perimeter of the furnace base and a layer of charcoal 12cm thick covered the domed base of chalk/clay marl. To the southeast of the furnace were layers of burnt earth over ash and burnt clay. These layers and the furnace base lay directly on the natural gault clay.

The Fort (Fig. 3.5, 3.6, 3.7, 3.8) (Plates LXXI–LXXIV: 384–427, App. VII, p143)

Ditch (Fig 3.7) (Plates LXXI: 384–399, LXXII–LXXIV: 400–415, 422–427)

This was traced through RG and may be extrapolated under SR. The ditch was 3.6m wide, cut 1.5m into bedrock and had a well-made V-profile. Its lower grey-white silt contained only Flavian sherds (Plate LXXI: 384–386). After the ditch had almost totally silted up, it had been recut.



3.6 The fort ditch and its recut, overlaid by 2nd and 4th century hut floors

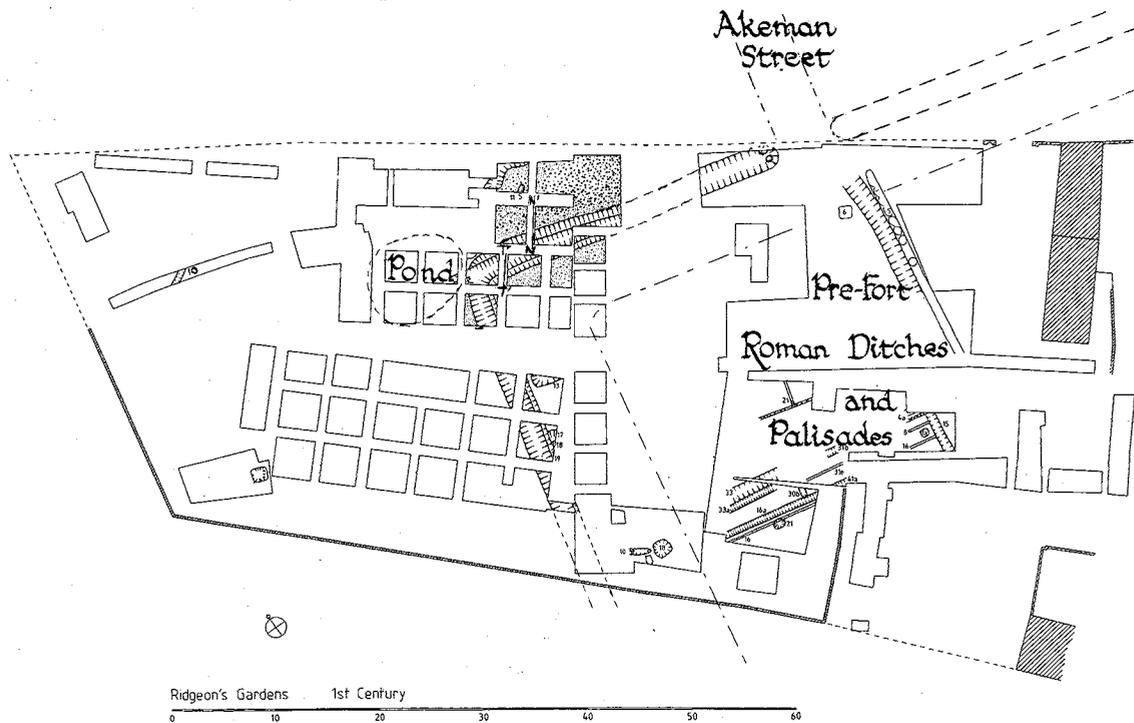
The recutting had silted slowly to c. 1m at the centre of the ditch and was then been deliberately filled in. The pottery from the latest infilling was of the late 1st century (no samian sherds were later than Flavian) but a levelling up layer added after settlement during reorganisation of the town contained sherds (Plate LXXIII: 416–421) of a slightly later date, up to 110 AD, and a coin (App. IV: 8). Its one major recut had in its upper fills a large quantity of charcoal, iron slag, and burnt clay. Below this but still within the recut was a layer of very dark soil containing many broken pots.

Entrance

In RGS Trench Ib the butt end upper fill of this ditch cut the Iron Age Phase III ditch. It was rounded and there was evidence for 2 post settings in the butt end.

Internal Bank

It is likely that there had been a bank on the inner side



3.5 Fort ditch, overlying earlier features



3.7 Excavation of the fort ditch

of the ditch, for there were no late 1st century pits in the 6m wide strip on the inner side in any of the areas excavated. Over an area of c. 15m² on the inner lip of the ditch where the old surface of the land was intact in RGS Ib no trace of wall or palisade was found. When the fort ditch and the nearby pond were filled in the 2nd century the spoil may have come from the bank and the interior, for they contained much occupation debris of this earlier period.

Interior

Although some 100m² of the interior were excavated no structures contemporary with the ditch could be recognised, although one well-made hearth may belong here. The 1st century ground surface within the enclosure had mostly been destroyed by later levelling (which had exposed the surface of the bedrock), and only features dug into bedrock would have survived (Plate LXXIX: 461–468).

Cobbled Yard

Outside the fort on the north, between it and Castle Street, more than 18m² of a carefully prepared cobbled surface was found bounded on the north by an irregular ditch. In preparation for the yard most of the soil and sand covering the chalk marl were removed leaving a level surface more than 30cm below the original surface. On the outer lip of the fort ditch a 1.5m wide strip was left sloping down from the old to the new level. The actual composition of the yard varied; in RG(N) it was a closely set series of selected water-worn flint cobbles and nodules, only one stone thick. When exposed, this still had a very regular appearance. Round the edges this gave place to a 13cm thick



3.8 Excavation of fort ditch

layer of gravel. In two hollows where water had stood leaving a layer of mud, patches of secondary cobbling had been laid on top of the first. On the surface of the yard 10cm of sticky clay had accumulated and this was stratigraphically linked with the upper silting of the ditch. A few animal bones and late 1st century pottery lay in it. Hearth 30b was cut into natural to a depth of 53cm, was 1.25m long and 64cm wide with straight sides and curved ends. There was a depression at each end possibly for upright supports of a spit. The hearth was full of ash and charcoal on which had been placed late 1st to early 2nd century pots. This included a range of cooking vessels, some of which were in use, still standing in the fire when something happened to prevent their removal and reuse. One cooking bowl with lid still contained hare bones, another, a casserole with lid, still contained fresh water mussels. Several other vessels stood in the ash. It would seem that other cooking pots were piled in when the hearth was abandoned and together they represent possibly an average kitchen collection; 11 cooking pots, 2 jugs, 1 pitcher, 1 bowl and lid, and 1 casserole (base and lid), all complete or nearly complete vessels. (Plate LXXVII–LXXIX: 454–460). This feature from the stratigraphy appears to have been in use at the end of the 1st century and on into the beginning of the 2nd. Around the hearth, other sherds had been dumped during some later clearance, including 14 fragments of one storage jar, 15 rims of samian ware and a large number of coarse vessel sherds representing at least 30 vessels.

A second cobbled yard within the fort was excavated in RGS IIc (26). It lay directly on the natural chalk marl, and over 200 sherds of late first to early 2nd century pottery was recovered from it (Plates LXXX, LXXXI: 469–490)

Pits

RGS

18 (Plate LXIV: 336), 21x, (Plate LXIV: 337) and 34.

14x was a large oval pit 4 x 3m, 1.6m deep, used for iron working. There were pieces of slag and iron bloom in the bottom layers of charcoal, ash, much pottery (Plate LXXV–LXXVI: 428–451), and a knife (Plate XVIII: 161). Animal bones included one horse bone, many cattle, 23 skulls and many other bones of sheep, and a small number of pig and chicken.

Settlement outside the Fort.

Houses and Ditches

CH

F7, F7a, F12, F12a, F20 and F22 were all ditches that appeared to be parts of enclosures, probably around houses. F10 was a rectangular house enclosure, 13 x 6.3m, with a ditch 1m wide. It was end-on to Akeman Street.

PH. Ditch (7) (Plate LXIX: 367–9)

SP

Well outside the fort, huts/houses began to be built by the end of the 1st century. House 7 was a timber building over 3.7m long. Its straight flat-bottomed ditch was 25cm wide and cut 15cm into bedrock. In three places 60cm apart the ditch deepened into postholes 15cm in diameter and 25cm deep. Five iron nails were found along it. A posthole 20cm square and 18cm deep and two stakeholes might also belong here. A drainage ditch roughly parallel with house 7 might have marked its yard or garden boundary, since it was stratigraphically contemporary. It was V-profiled, 15cm wide and cut 20cm into bedrock. Traced for 1.7m in a southwest-northeast direction deepening towards the northeast.

Pits

CH

Latrine pit F15, Cesspit F16. Pit E3 F21.

PH

F7d, F7e, F7f, F7g, F13.

RG

Pits A1.40, A1.28, A. 30, A1.36 and 16b.

SP Pit C.9

RG Latrine/Well A1.20 was 1.37m by 1.5m at mouth, narrowing to 90cm square. It was excavated to 3m and probed to 4.1 m without reaching bottom. At the lowest excavated level were found two brooches, an impression thought to be from an iron bowl or helmet,

articulated fragments of an ox skeleton, and much 1st century pottery.

Wells

CH

F8 V. A square well, 2.2m x 2.2m x 1.8m deep. A slight staining suggested that the well was clay lined, 10cm thick, with a wooden lining inside that. The upper fill of wet dark brown loam gave way to a chalky light grey silt in the bottom 50cm. The loam contained 240 sherds, and a few bones. The sherds were of the late 1st century, possibly going into early 2nd century and included samian, Lyon wares, flagon tops and many sherds of coarse wares but no mortaria (Plate LXXXIV: 509–513, and App. VII, p144).

F11 A round well 1.4m diameter. Only the bottom 30cm remained cut into natural chalk marl.

F23. A rectangular well with a timber lining 2m x 1.3m x 1.5m deep, contained a stone bowl (Plate XXVIII: 204).

Burial

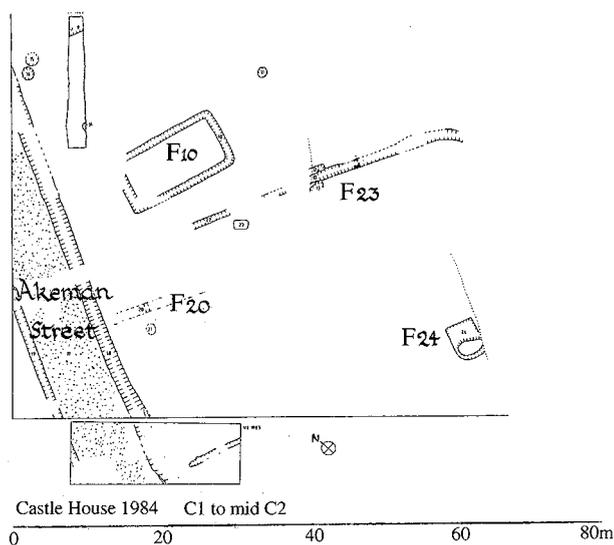
RGS VII Grave 17b. A single grave containing a woman of about 40, no grave goods, cut pit 18 and was in turn cut by 3rd century ritual shaft 17a. It may belong to this period.

Roads

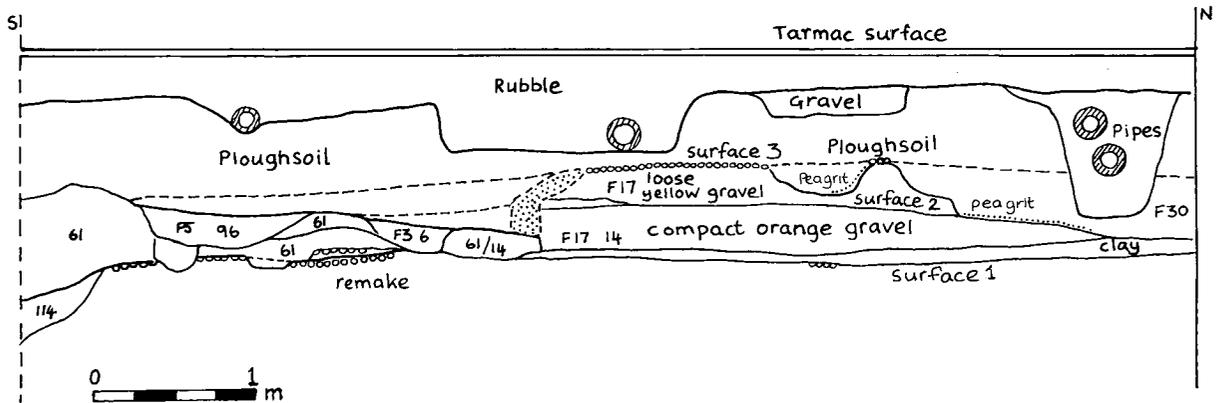
The two main roads occur in all the Roman phases, beginning in the 1st century, and so this description includes some later evidence.

The Fen Road (Akeman Street) (Fig. 3.9, 3.10) (Plate LXXXV: 514–520)

SH and CH. It was seen in several builder's trenches and overall traced for 105m. The first phase of the street had ditches on both sides. The road surface consisted of matched cobbles (up to 5cm diameter) laid



3.9 Akeman Street



3.10 Successive surfaces of Akeman Street, 1st to 4th century, on the Castle Court site

closely together directly on the natural marl and gravel. It was approximately 11m wide and cambered. There was only the slightest traces of wheel rutting except in SH II where the ruts were more numerous and deeper. The eastern roadside ditch, F18, was traced for 12m. It was 1.2m wide at the top of bedrock, 70cm deep and V-shaped. From its upper fill of light brown clay came an iron bun and 15 sherds of Roman pottery including rims of three samian vessels. The lower silty fill contained 60 sherds, mostly large 1st century coarse wares (Plate LXXXV: 514–520, App VII, p144). This ditch partially cut into an earlier Iron Age enclosure ditch. It was also excavated in SH VI. The western roadside ditch, F19, excavated in CH 86 Area B, was 1.1m wide at the top of natural and 85cm deep. The width varied along its length from 70cm to 1.1m and in depth from 30–80cm. It was V-shaped. The fill of brown clay/loam contained sherds of samian and coarse grey and black wares. No colour coated or later wares were found. This road, with its V-shaped ditches and fine cobbling in the 1st century, leading to the Fens from the direction of the fort may have been constructed under military supervision.

The Godmanchester Road (Via Devana)

This was observed in fragmentary form during building works to the west of Akeman Street, and it was also seen in a section close to the butt end of the 4th century town wall where the cobbles were built up to a depth of 25–30cm. To the east however the evidence is very unsatisfactory and it is obvious that it was a minor feature compared to Akeman Street.

In CH VI, both the road and the ditch were truncated by a 19th century cellar that had obliterated the intersection of the Via Devana and Akeman Street. To the east of Akeman Street no certain evidence, in the form of a continuation of the substantial gravel surface, was found. There is, however, circumstantial evidence which suggests that this might indeed have been a cross-roads rather than a T-junction. A cross ditch (F42) ran from Akeman Street at right angles in an easterly direction, following a straight course for some 13.6m until it disappeared under a northeast corner of Trench VI. This ditch, 90cm wide and 55cm deep, was of similar size to the ditch which ran beside the Via Devana to the west of Akeman Street. It is pos-

sible that despite the lack of a preserved road surface, the Via Devana crossed Akeman Street at this point, and that the ditch F42 marks its northern boundary. Although this ditch was very clearly in use in Saxo-Norman times, some of the loamy deposits within it, (102) and (103), contained exclusively Roman material from the 2nd century onwards. Another line of evidence, albeit negative, for the Via Devana having crossed Akeman Street at this point lies in the near absence from this area of any features dating from the middle of the 2nd century up until the medieval period. The projected line of the road therefore consists of a strip some 5.6m wide lying between the ditch F42 and, to the south, a building of the later 2nd century, (F12, p40–42) There are two apparent exceptions to this general avoidance of this strip over many hundreds of years. The first is a small steep-sided flat-bottomed pit some 80cm in diameter and 55cm deep (F57 (119)) which cuts into the southern edge of the ditch F42 and encroaches for about 60cm into the probable line of the Via Devana. This pit, filled with a dark orange-brown clayey/sandy loam with gravel and marl inclusions, yielded Roman pottery of the 2nd century onwards, and nothing post-Roman. Fragments of daub were present. Such a small intrusion as this pit into the strip of ground would hardly have impeded its utility as a thoroughfare, and therefore does not negate the suggestion that it once supported the continuation of the Via Devana to the east of Akeman Street. The second consists of an alignment of five postholes which are stratigraphically contemporary, and seem likely to relate to the same structure, F61 (126), F59 (124), P67 (160), F68 (162) and F69 (163). All of these postholes contained a similar postpacking material consisting of a mixture of red and black burnt daub, crushed marl and clay. Both F61 and F59 cut the sandy deposit (61) which is associated with upper Akeman Street, and the latter yielded pottery of the late 3rd to 4th century. F67 cuts (74), and F68 and F69 (which also contained Roman sherds) cut 1st century (116). These last three postholes all show distinct traces of the silhouettes of the posts, which were approximately 20cm and 30cm in diameter and were set on the same alignment as the ditch F42, that is at right angles to Akeman Street. The postholes were located approximately 1.7m east of the suggested southern

edge of the Via Devana and the posts would therefore have served to reduce the width of the road to c. 4m, had it run here and still been in use. However, if the Via Devana did run through this area, the location beside Akeman Street of the ditch F43 would have obstructed access from the cross-roads onto the suggested southeasterly route of the Via Devana. The same may apply to the curving linear feature F3 (6) which was located just to the east of F43. This gully-like cutting into (61), on average 13cm deep and 35cm wide, bottomed out on the lower surface of Akeman Street. Its fill (6) was a dark loam with some grit which contained late Roman pottery.

The evidence for the route of the Via Devana to the southeast of the junction is unclear and cannot be said to have been solved. Although the area lacked a gravel surface like those found elsewhere, clearly it had been deliberately made up with a variety of material to a level surface which would have constituted a suitable substratum for the road, (though it could equally have served as an open space suitable for a market). One other feature obstructing the projected line of Via Devana to the southeast is the large 2nd century cesspit, CH F24 (Plate LXVIII: 357–364). There was also no evidence for the road in any section across its possible alignment in CH 84, but this part of the town was so disturbed it is difficult to know how much should be deduced from this absence.

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Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Preface | 4 |
| Editorial | 6 |
| Acknowledgements | 7 |
| Summary | 8 |
| Chapters | |
| 1. Introduction | 9 |
| 2. The Iron Age Settlement | 17 |
| 3. First Century Settlement and a Possible Roman Fort | 27 |
| 4. Civil Settlement of the 2nd Century | 35 |
| 5. The Third and Early Fourth Centuries | 49 |
| 6. The Fourth Century Walled Town | 59 |
| 7. Discussion and Conclusions. A Taylor | 75 |
| Appendices | |
| I. The Small Finds. F Gardiner, M Henig and J Pullinger | 85 |
| II. The Glass. J Liversidge | 107 |
| III. The Coins. M F Sekulla, G R Thoday and P de Jersey | 109 |
| IV. The Amphorae. J Pullinger | 113 |
| V. The Iron Age pottery. R A H Farrar and M R Hull, J Pullinger | 117 |
| VI. Samian Ware. B Dickinson | 131 |
| VII. The Roman Pottery. M R Hull and J Pullinger | 141 |
| VIII Roman Pottery Illustrations. J Pullinger, B C Burnham, A Rotherham and P White | 145 |
| IX The Mortaria. K Hartley | 201 |
| X. Roman pottery. M R Hull | 209 |
| XI. Building materials. J Pullinger and F Weatherhead | 251 |
| XII. Summary of excavations post-1988. C Evans | 255 |
| Bibliography | |
| <i>Index</i> | |