



## Exeter City Council

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Report to Committee, 15 June 1990

## 1. EXCAVATIONS

## 1.1 Lower Coombe Street

Excavations undertaken by the Archaeological Field Unit in advance of the construction of a multi-storey car park at Lower Coombe Street were completed at the end of March. The work was funded by Exeter City Council. The results exceeded expectations and aroused considerable public interest and media attention both locally and nationally. Post-excavation analysis and report preparation is now in progress; it is hoped to complete full reports on all aspects of the site's archaeology during the current financial year. The large quantity of Roman pottery will be prepared for publication by Paul Bidwell and Neil Holbrook.

The site lies on the inside of the City Wall in the area bounded by Western Way, Lower Coombe Street and Quay Hill. The ground here falls away steeply from the City Wall towards Lower Coombe Street, which runs along the bottom of the Coombe valley; there is also a steep slope down to the Exe. The combe contains more than 1.5m of post-glacial alluvium which is overlain in turn by Roman and later deposits up to 3m deep.

*Early Roman period (c. 55-75)*

The earliest remains found on the site formed part of a large Roman military compound occupied at the same period as the legionary fortress, which lay about 110m to the NW on the other side of the Coombe valley. This establishment occupies a site 3-4 acres in extent on the broad sloping spur that overlooks Exeter Quay and separates the Coombe valley from the Larkbeare valley to the SE. On its NE side it was probably bounded by the Roman military ditch discovered at the South Gate in 1964 by Aileen Fox, which ran along the SW margin of the Roman road to Topsham.

At Lower Coombe Street a V-shaped ditch, 3m wide and 1.8m deep, and very similar to the South Gate ditch, was traced for about 30m along the SE flank of the Coombe. At the western corner of the military compound it curved round about 45 degrees towards the SE and terminated (Fig. 1, ditch 1). Beyond ditch 1, two further large military ditches (2 and 3) were traced for a distance of about 40m along

the bottom of thecombe. Both are thought to have functioned primarily as drainage ditches. Ditch 2 received water from ditch 1 before merging with ditch 3 near the SW limit of the site. Ditch 3 followed the lowest level in the bottom of thecombe and is likely to represent a Roman regularization of a pre-existing natural stream fed by springs in the vicinity of the Cathedral.

A bank c. 3m wide on the SE side of ditch 1 survived in places up to 0.5m high but had generally been truncated by post-medieval activity. The base of the bank was terraced into the slope, and in places layers of turf were noted. The southern end of the bank was not preserved but it is thought to have terminated at the same point as the ditch. There was clear evidence to show that no bank existed along the SW side of the enclosure overlooking the river. Instead, this side appears to have been bounded initially by a drainage gully up to 0.6m deep which continued the line of the curving inner edge of ditch 1. Subsequently this side of the enclosure was made secure by the addition of a timber palisade on a line a little further out than the drainage gully. A slightly curving palisade- or post-trench 1.4m deep and 5.5m long marked the corner of the compound. This was joined by a narrower palisade-trench up to 1.1m deep of which a 9m length was excavated.

It seems probable that the drainage gully originally bounded the compound on both sides, later being replaced altogether on the NW by the rampart and ditch and superseded by the palisade on the SW. This implies the piecemeal enclosure of a military activity area to create a walled compound rather than a defensive circuit of the kind that would have been provided for a fort. The case for the non-defensive nature of the enclosure is supported by a number of observations. The bank is relatively narrow, in places less than 3m wide, and is separated from the ditch by a berm no more than 0.3m in width. There was no sign of a basal timber corduroy or a front timber revetment, so that a sloping turf revetment must have existed at both front and rear, making it unlikely that there would have been sufficient width or support for a walkway on top. Furthermore, despite a careful search, no timber tower was found at the corner of the enclosure, and likewise no interval tower was located along the excavated length of the bank, although one would be expected within a corresponding length of a fort rampart.

The interior of the military compound was extensively disturbed by cellars and clay pits at the NE end of the site and by shallower post-medieval terracing in other places. Early Roman levels however survived in a strip immediately behind the City Wall which had been protected by the late 2nd-century

rampart. Figure 1 shows the main features uncovered in this area. At least four phases of activity are represented. Probably in the second phase, a timber gateway was built that seems to have controlled access to an enclosed area, which might suggest that the bank and palisade had not been erected by that time. It is worth noting in this connection that the buildings and other structures in this area are aligned not with ditch 1 but with ditches 2 and 3 which are likely to have been dug at an early stage in the military occupation for drainage purposes.

Sizeable groups of pottery were recovered from the buildings, the palisade trench and ditch 1. The date range of this material is similar to that of the finds from the fortress, the demolition of the compound and the infilling of ditch 1 took place in the mid 70s at the same period as most of the buildings in the fortress were dismantled. A similar picture emerges from a study of the finds from the military buildings excavated in 1973-1989 within the fenced compound next to Magdalen Street on the NE side of the Topsham road. A plan showing all of the Roman military structures in the area outside the South Gate is in preparation.

Both ditches 2 and 3 remained open after 75 but were eventually filled in around 100 or 110 when large quantities of pottery were deposited in them as rubbish. This material is of the greatest interest since it fills a gap in the Roman pottery sequence for Exeter and its region. The pottery includes many fragments of mortaria and flagons from the Bartholomew Street kiln site discovered in 1974. Some of these vessels are wasters, and nearly all were unused, showing that they represent waste discarded from the pottery. The Bartholomew Street pottery industry has previously been assumed to be military in date but it is now clear that it must have been operating early in the life of the Roman town, at the end of the 1st century. Stamps on mortaria made by the potter VITANUS were known from earlier finds; to these may now be added a stamped vessel made by an individual named SEVERUS.

No watercourse was located in the valley bottom which could have superseded the two filled-in drainage ditches. It is possible that the stream was diverted in the early second century to run on the line it is known to have followed in the medieval period: next to Lower Coombe Street beyond the limit of excavation. An alternative is that the springs were tapped to provide water for an aqueduct, perhaps serving the public baths which are thought to have been erected around the turn of the century. The springs near the Cathedral would have been conveniently situated to supply the baths.



### *Later Roman period*

Fragments of four timber buildings were found sealed beneath the rampart behind the City Wall. They were spread over a length of c. 95m and their foundation trenches in each case cut through a widespread layer of loam that covered the remains of the 1st-century military buildings. No finds were recovered for these buildings, which are assumed to be 2nd-century in date.

The late 2nd-century rampart was sectioned in a number of places and the general sequence of construction noted on other sites was confirmed. A longitudinal section through a 40m length of the rampart proved particularly informative. The primary bank could be seen to have been raised in two distinct stages. The first stage consisted of material derived from the red sandstone which lies just beneath the surface on the crest of the spur followed by the rampart. The second stage contained mainly alluvial clays which must have come from a little further to the SE within the Larkbeare valley. This suggests that the rampart was associated with two defensive ditches which provided the material for its construction. The late 2nd-century rampart was formerly believed not to have been finished. Following re-interpretation of the South Gate 1989 excavation results, this is no longer held to be the case and it is assumed that the rampart possessed some form of wooden front revetment, possibly of wattlework as at Silchester. The City Wall was probably added to the front of the primary rampart in the early 3rd century.

During the second century a 0.8m depth of sandy hillwash accumulated in the valley bottom. A widespread layer containing fragments of wall plaster overlay this material, showing that a timber house of some size must have existed somewhere nearby around that late 2nd or early 3rd century. There is however a notable lack of evidence for the presence of Roman buildings in this area in the later 3rd and 4th centuries, despite the fact that it now lay within the circuit of the town defences. Instead we find an extensive development of colluvial deposits, up to 1m deep, spreading up the valley side as well as covering its floor. This suggests extensive intra-mural cultivation in the late Roman town.

### *Medieval and post-medieval periods*

The Coombe stream presumably re-established itself in the late Roman or post-Roman period. Coombe Street is assumed to have been laid out next to the stream in the late 9th or 10th century. It originally ran from South Street down the valley to join the intra-mural lane ~~that~~ ran along the back of the City Wall. No trace of the latter survived in the excavation area but it is well attested on early maps as a strip

of City Chamber land.

In the late Saxon and early Norman town this area was again peripheral to the main settlement zone in the town. A widespread deposit of colluvium up to 1m deep contained considerable amounts of 10th/11th-century pottery and appears to have been cultivated as ridge and furrow. Two pits provided the only hint of habitation in this area in the 11th-12th century. A major change occurred in the 13th or 14th century with the laying out of tenements along the Coombe Street frontage. The excavation was mainly confined to the area behind the frontage, so that no house foundations were found. The change is recognisable, however, in the development of a relatively thin dark humic soil over the early medieval ploughsoil.

One of the Coombe Street tenements was the site of a brickworks in the late 17th century. The natural alluvium in the valley was exploited for brickmaking, and the bricks were fired in clamp kilns at the rear of the property. This is the first example of an intra-mural brickworks from Exeter.

In the 18th and 19th centuries the backs of the Coombe Street tenements gradually came to be built up with a maze of small courts and cottages.

CRICKLEPIT MILL — March, PX, Shilling, £3 10/- etc.  
FUTURE & CURRENT SITES

## 2. HISTORIC BUILDINGS AND ANCIENT MONUMENTS

### 2.1 Exeter Cathedral (S.R. Blaylock)

← Continuity  
BKA report in press? →

Recording of the fabric of the South Tower for the Dean and Chapter has continued, although at a slower pace (since the work takes place in advance of masonry repairs it necessarily moves at the same pace as the conservation). The record is now complete for all four faces of the upper stages of the tower comprising the ringing chamber, belfry and roof/turrets. Final drawings are now being made of the four faces (see, for example, that of the south face illustrated in Fig. 2). These will be used as a base on which to present other information recorded such as the extent of stone replaced in this and previous restorations, location of well-preserved blocks of which casts have been made, etc. It is hoped to complete the next tier down on the south and east faces later this year. This includes the large transept window on the south face. Thereafter only the lower parts of the east face will remain to be examined.

## 2.2 Bowhill, St Thomas (S.R. Blaylock)

X  
Px Archive  
RAI  
April

Excavation continued in the screens passage of the Hall late in the autumn of 1989. All of the floor levels were of post-medieval date but the probable position of the medieval screen was established. Fabric recording has continued in response to the needs of the conservation programme of English Heritage. Particular attention is being paid to the roof of the south range as it is dismantled for repair. Recent work has included the construction of analytical drawings which attempt to show how the roof fitted together (see Fig. 3).

A major effort has been expended in post-excavation analysis of the DoE excavations of 1977-78 and in similar processing of the results of AFU fabric recording at Bowhill since 1987. Both projects are now written up as archive reports and the drawing-up of plans and elevations is complete. Further work has involved the distillation of the results into text and illustrations for a temporary exhibition which is intended for display at Bowhill, when parts of the building will be opened to the public.

Further excavation and fabric recording will take place as the conservation programme continues in the summer of 1990 and, probably, in 1991.

## 2.3 Exeter Castle (S.R. Blaylock)

Crack  
Recording X - 1st on curtain.  
Tower

EASTERN TOWER + CITY WALL

Trial excavation trenches and fabric recording were undertaken in January and February 1990 at the southern corner of the Inner Ward of the Castle. The archaeological work took place in advance of remedial works at a point where several deep cracks had developed in the wall. A trench on the inside face of the wall revealed Norman footings and the top of the bank and provided the first opportunity to examine the relationship between the two. The wall may have been as wide as 3m, and was built of trap rubble in a brown sandy mortar, which has come to be known as typical of Norman buildings in the city. It was possible to demonstrate that the wall was constructed after the raising of the bank, a relationship of crucial importance to the history of the castle. The castle was begun in 1068; the stone gatehouse (investigated by the AFU in 1985) was an early element in the plan but the first defences were probably composed of an earth bank and ditch (still to be seen in Rougemont Gardens) perhaps with a timber breastwork. The primary defences were probably completed rapidly, say in the 1070s, and were then strengthened by the addition of a stone curtain wall as time and resources permitted. It is known that the castle possessed stone walls by 1136 when it was besieged by Stephen, so an early 12th-century date



is the most probable. Athelstan's Tower at the western junction of the castle and city walls may be contemporary with the addition of the stone wall.

Much of the fabric of the standing wall in this area is relatively modern. Most of the builds recorded to the east of the cracks (see Fig. 4: 549, 550, 555 etc.) are late 19th-century or later. One stretch of medieval facework (542) survives at the west end with later work above and below (541, 543). When the section of wall comprising parts of 545, 558, 559 and 550 was taken down for repair it was seen that there was no ancient core from the eastern limit of 542 etc. as far as a point within the later 19th-century refacing 549/550. The core was composed of loose rubble, earth and a revetment of 18th-century brickwork. Thus all of the rubble builds between 542 and 550 are 18th century or later and probably relate to reconstruction of the wall after the removal of a semicircular tower or bastion from the southern corner of the enclosure. This tower is shown by many maps up to the mid 18th century but not thereafter: for example, it appears on Rocque's map of the city of 1744 but not on the plans of the Chamber Map Book of c. 1758. Unfortunately, whilst enough evidence was recovered to demonstrate the existence of this tower, the area of walling dismantled was insufficient to provide points with which to plot its precise position.

The opportunity to work in the castle was also employed to survey a profile of the defences from east to west. No accurate survey of this existed (see Fig. 4). The distinction between the Roman rampart revetted by the City Wall on the NE and the castle defences of earth bank crowned by a wall on the SW is immediately apparent.

#### 2.4 Nos 1-2 Deanery Place (S.R. Blaylock)

From the outside the building appears to be a house of the late 18th century, but examination of the interior, which is undergoing alterations at present, has shown that the main walls survive from a late medieval building.

A small section of wall to the south, on a different alignment, appears to be a remnant of an earlier building incorporated in the late medieval structure. The external walls of No. 2 are composed of Heavitree stone masonry and represent the shell of a large medieval building. Number 1, adjoining to the north, may have been a part of the same structure. In the south-west corner is a turret for a newel stair

conversion  
superficial - much hidden



which survives to a greater height than the walls. Just above the present first floor level are the remains of a moulded door jamb selenic stone (which indicates the level of the medieval first floor level) and a window with a trefoil head which lit the stair turret. Stumps of the stone treads of the stair were located in two sections of the turret wall which have enabled the level of the second floor level to be estimated. Traces of a second turret window were seen at second floor level.

The property lies within the boundaries of the Deanery, near to the corner of Bear Lane (closed by Bear Gate from the 1280s until the early 19th century). Present observations have been limited to a very few areas exposed by the alterations, and the form of many parts of the building remains obscure. It is possible that the building was a gatehouse to the Deanery; the attached stair turret would certainly fit such a function. Some support is given to this idea by a map of c. 1560 in the Cathedral archives which shows a gatehouse to the Deanery garden in this position.

The later alterations to the house are also of interest. Remains of the first phase, datable to the late 17th century, include a new staircase in a brick block added to the rear of the building and a new roof. The building was known in later leases as 'Dame Anne Northcote's house'. This lady died in 1729 and may have lived in the house for some years prior to that date. Further alterations took place in the 18th century which gave the house its present appearance. From 1807-1818 the building was used as the Devon County Bank.

CUSTOM HOUSE

8 WEST STREET

BUILDING REPORTS

### 3. PREPARATION OF REPORTS AND PUBLICATIONS

#### 3.1 Roman finds volume

The text of this Exeter Archaeological Reports monograph, which is to be a joint publication of Exeter City Council and The University of Exeter, has now been commented on by the referees (George Boon, Kevin Greene and Valerie Maxfield), although the contribution of one outside specialist remains incomplete. The manuscript will be edited in June and July, and it is anticipated that it can be sent to the printers in the early autumn. Publication would thus probably be in the spring of 1991.

#### 3.2 Roman legionary fortress volume

Work on the preparation of this volume has continued intermittently over recent months. It is intended

to put in a major effort later in the year to bring it nearer to completion.

### **3.3 Exeter City defences volume**

Work continues on topics concerning the Civil War, the Castle and the excavations in the South Gate area. It is hoped that a full draft of this monograph will be available in 1991.

### **3.4 Medieval and early modern suburbs volume**

This will include reports on excavations at the Quay, Cricklepit, Exe Bridge and sites outside the South Gate, North Gate, East Gate and in St Thomas. Quite a lot of progress has been made over the past year on aspects of this volume and it is intended to continue this work over the coming winter. It may be necessary to produce the proposed contents in more than one monograph to avoid further delays.

### **3.5 General post-excavation**

A new computer system has recently been installed in the Archaeological Field Unit which will facilitate the production of better quality reports in the future. The format of archive and summary reports has now been standardized with the introduction of a series of stratigraphy and finds databases.

## **4. STAFF**

Neil Holbrook left the AFU at Christmas to take up a post with the Tyne and Wear Museums Service. His successor as Assistant Field Archaeologist is Peter Weddell, who has worked as a temporary member of staff in the AFU for several years. The Unit continues to function on an establishment of only two permanent members of staff.

C.G. Henderson

Director, Archaeological Field Unit

**EXETER: LOWER COOMBE STREET 1989-90**  
**ROMAN MILITARY**



**Figure 1**



EXETER CATHEDRAL: South Tower  
South Face

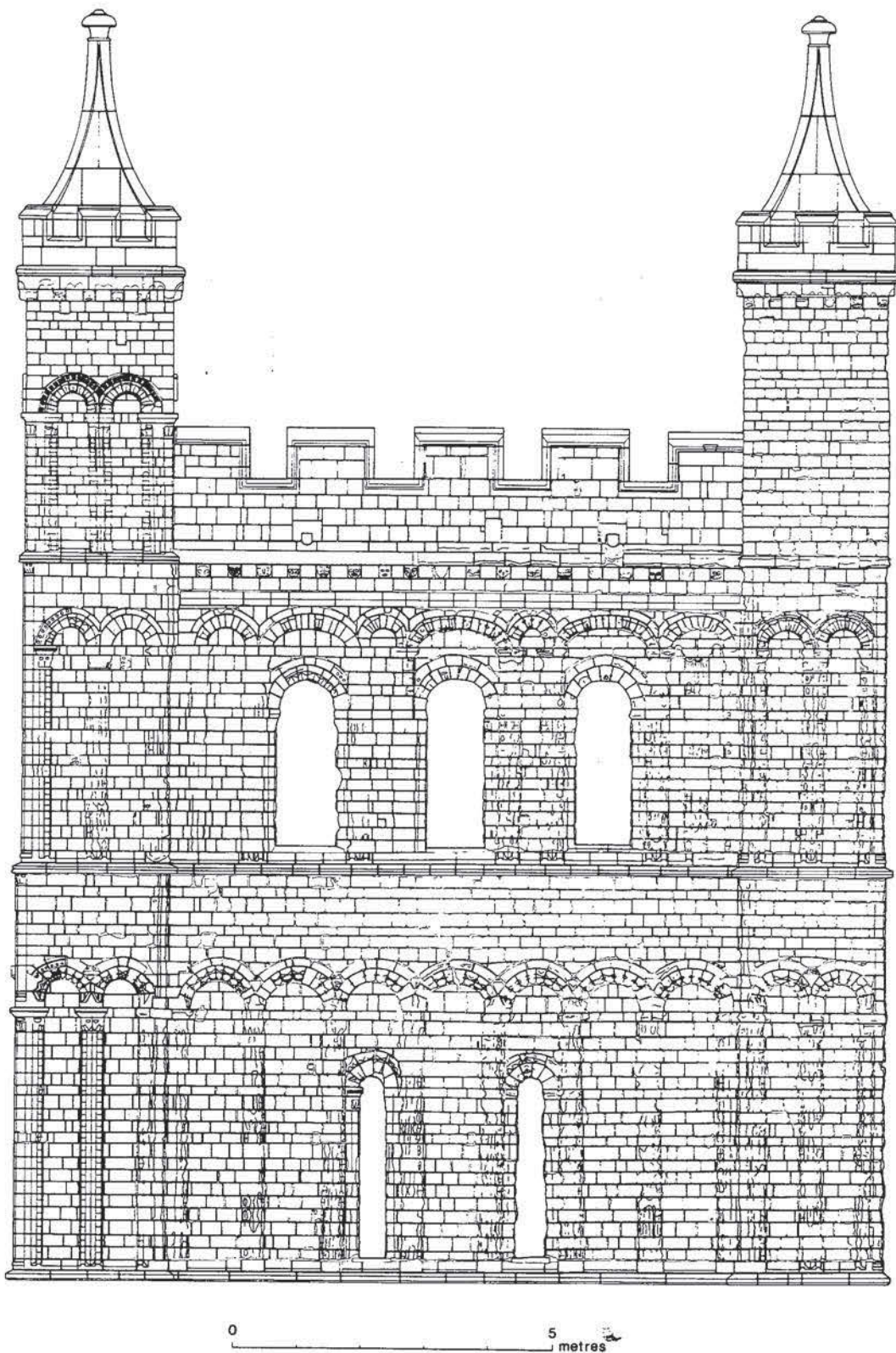


Figure 2

EXETER: BOWHILL 1989

SOUTH RANGE ROOF, Isometric projection of bays 4-6

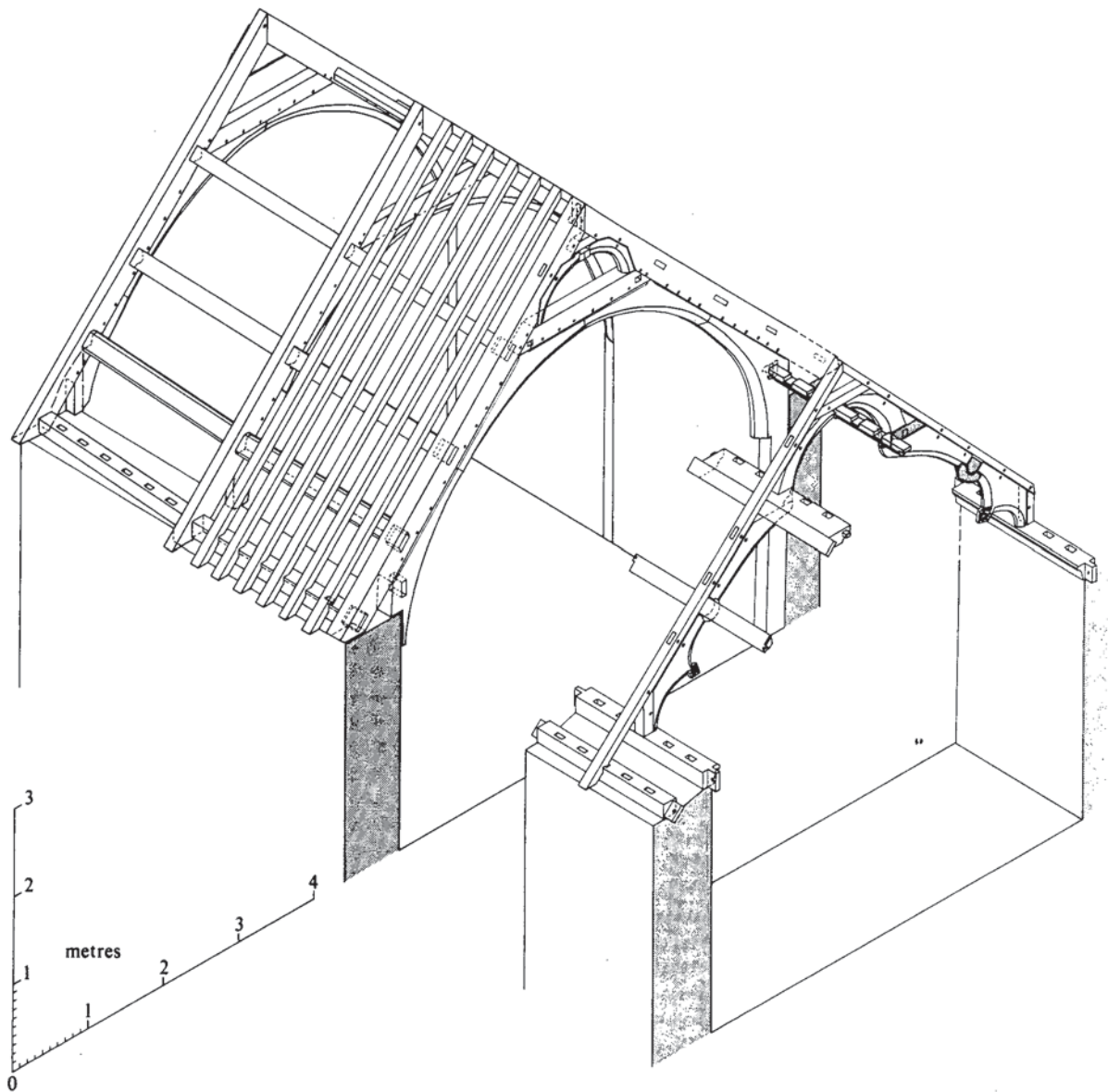


Figure 3

**EXETER CASTLE 1990**  
**South-West Curtain Wall**  
**Exterior Elevation**

**Interior Elevation**

**Detail**

**Profile of Inner Ward**

**Figure 4**