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EXETER CITY COUNCIL

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Report to Committee 25 June 1993

1. FIELD RECORDING PROJECTS

1.1 Danes Castle excavation

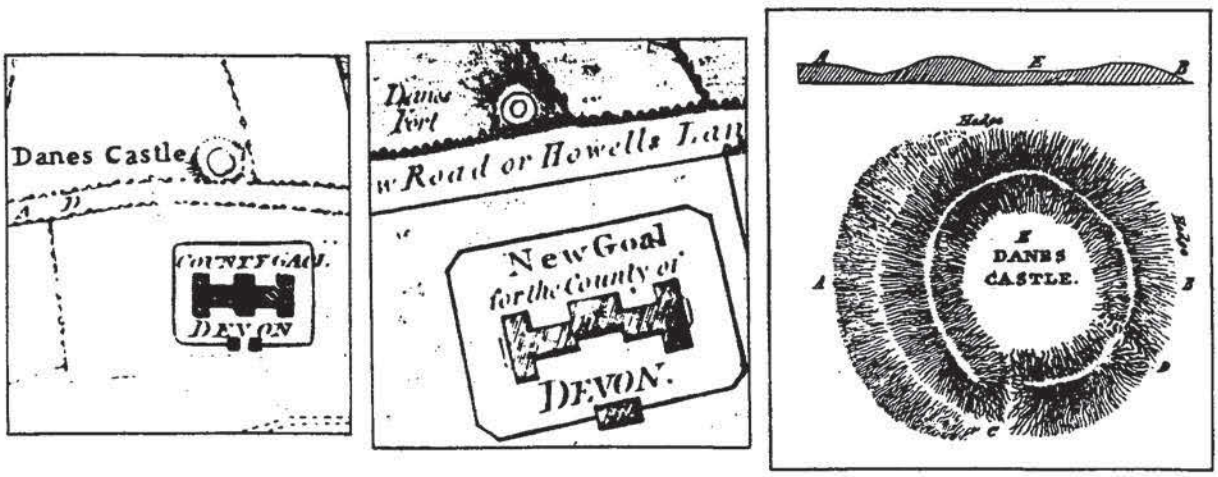
Introduction

South West Water Services are currently rebuilding the covered reservoir at Danes Castle in Exeter. At each stage of the project the company has consulted the Archaeological Field Unit over the archaeological implications of the works. This has resulted in the discovery of a Norman earthwork castle probably built by King Stephen during his siege of Exeter Castle in 1136. Early in the construction programme it became apparent that the castle remains were relatively well preserved and that the site contained an archaeological monument of national importance. South West Water accordingly revised their design for the new reservoir to enable the earthwork to be preserved at one end of the site as a monument accessible to the public. English Heritage have indicated that in due course the castle is likely to be designated a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

Background to the discovery

The reservoir now undergoing reconstruction was built in 1852 in replacement of an earlier one built in 1833 on an adjacent site now occupied by the fire station. These were Exeter's first reservoirs, supplied with water pumped up from the River Exe at Pynes, above Cowley Bridge.

The feature known as Danes Castle or Danes Fort is shown on late 18th- and early 19th-century maps as a substantial circular earthwork situated on the side of a ridge between the Longbrook and Hoopern valleys at a distance of about 300 m from the northern corner of the city walls (occupied by Rougemont Castle). At some time in the 1830s or early 40s the site was visited by W.T.P. Shortt who made the only known plan and



Figures 1-3: Danes Castle depicted on early 19th-century maps and in the survey by Shortt.

profiles of the earthwork prior to its disappearance beneath the reservoir. He believed it to be a Roman amphitheatre or military outpost and published an account of it in his *Collectanea Curiosa Antiqua Dumnonia* (1842). Over the years, various different explanations have been advanced to account for the origin and significance of the site. These include its identification as a prehistoric ritual enclosure (Joce 1934-5); a Norman motte (Sherwin 1934-5); a fortification erected by William the Conqueror during in his eighteen-day siege of the city in 1068 (Renn 1959); and a defensive outwork raised in 1136 during King Stephen's siege of Exeter Castle (Hoskins 1960). Robert Higham, in his 1979 survey of early Devon castles, concluded that the earthwork was a Norman ringwork which possibly dated from 1068.

The original engineering design drawings for the 1852 Danes Castle reservoir, held in the South West Water archives, gave no indication whether any element of the castle was preserved beneath the reservoir floor. In December 1992, therefore, following the dismantling of the roof structure and concrete lining, an evaluation trench was cut by machine across the presumed site of the northern perimeter of the earthwork. It soon became apparent that the earthwork survived in a comparatively good state of preservation beneath a metre thickness of make-up layers at the base of the reservoir. The truncated rampart, 11 m wide at its base, was found to remain upstanding to a height of almost two metres; the encircling ditch proved to be 7 m wide and up to 3.9 m deep. Several sherds of 11th/12th-century medieval coarseware pottery were retrieved from a cultivation layer sealed by the rampart. The identification of the earthwork as a Norman ringwork castle was thus confirmed.

Excavation

In January 1993 South West Water agreed to sponsor further exploration of the site. This involved the bulk excavation of 19th-century overburden up to a depth of almost 4 m over the north-western quadrant of the ditch and clearance of a corresponding arc of the rampart and much of the interior in order to determine more fully the extent of the monument and to assess the likely impact of the reservoir upon the remains. It eventually became clear that the entire circuit of the rampart and most of the surrounding ditch lay within the reservoir site. The earthwork had been truncated, the interior infilled, and the whole structure, about 54 m wide across the ditches, had become incorporated within the south-east corner of the reservoir in the angle between Howell Road (on the south) and the back gardens of houses fronting on Danes Road (to the east).

Once the full extent and importance of the site was established, South West Water voluntarily took the decision to redesign the new reservoir so as to avoid the site of the castle altogether. In addition the company agreed to sponsor the removal of 19th-century overburden from the remainder of the site so as to expose the full circuit of the rampart with a view to the eventual landscaping and display of the monument within the setting of a small public park. What started as a rescue archaeology project, aimed at the total excavation of those parts of the site threatened with destruction, now became an exercise in clearance and preservation. Following consultations with a number of castles specialists and representatives from interested organisations, including English Heritage, it was decided to undertake limited excavation of medieval deposits in order to find out more about the history and function of the monument.

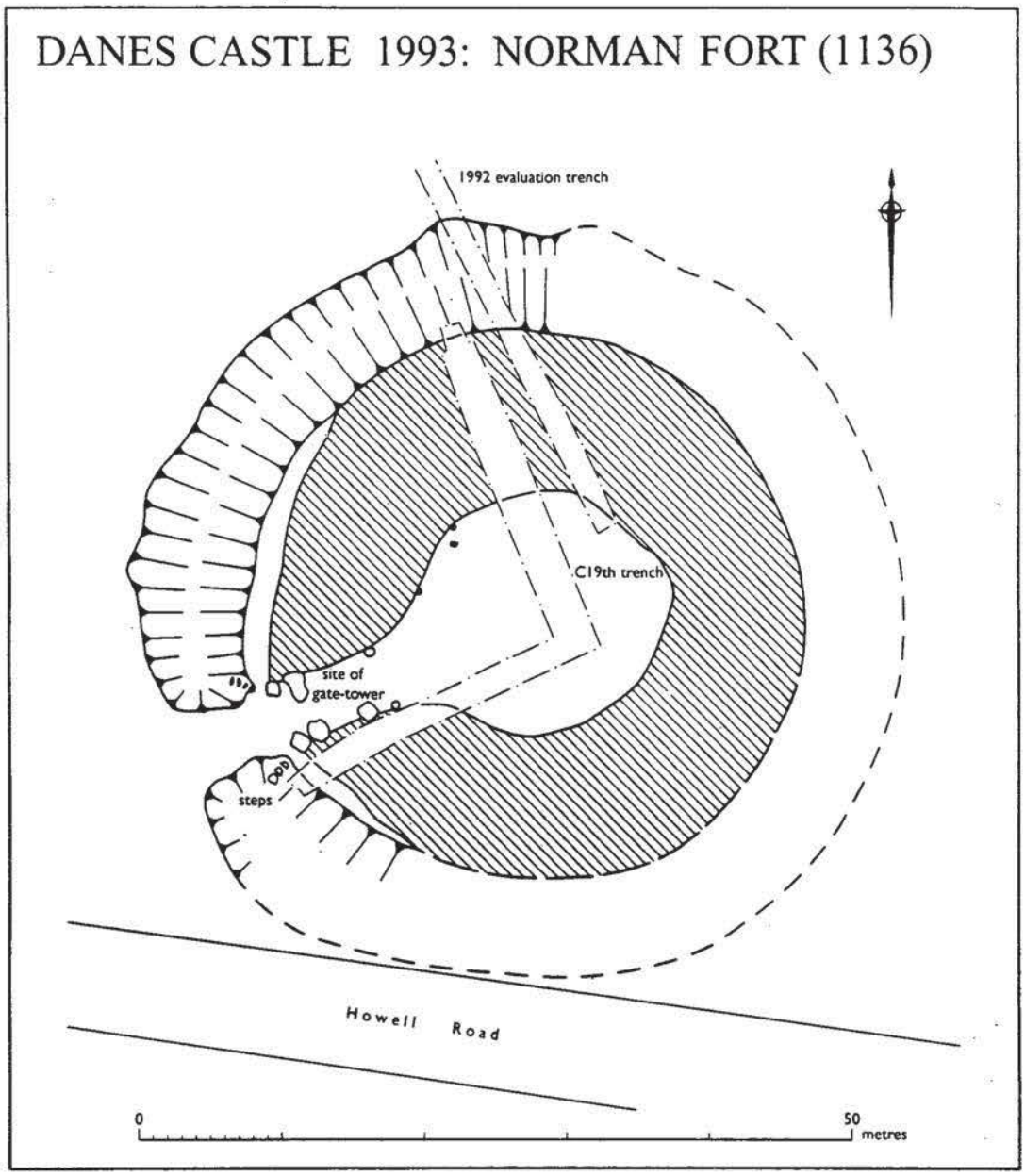


Figure 4: Plan of Danes Castle excavation showing features dating from 1136.

The Castle and its context

The circular space enclosed by the rampart, which measured about 16 m in diameter, was quite devoid of buildings or any trace of occupation debris. The rampart, of simple dump construction made by piling up spoil obtained from the ditch, would probably have stood at least 4 m high (detailed calculations have yet to be made) flanked by fairly steeply-sloping sides at front and rear. No evidence was found for any form of timber or drystone front revetment, although the provision of a turf facing or other superficial covering designed to reduce surface erosion cannot be ruled out. Two widely-spaced post-holes at the rear of the north-west sector of the rampart may indicate the provision

of some form of low barrier erected to prevent spoil from spreading downslope at this point. No such features were found in a corresponding position behind the southern rampart. Some form of timber or wattle breastwork would no doubt have been provided to screen a walkway running around the top of the earthwork.

On the south-western side of the castle the ditch was interrupted by an unexcavated entrance causeway about 4 m wide which gave access to the site of an unfinished timber gate-tower, set centrally within the body of the rampart. The completed tower would have been roughly square in plan, with sides about 4 m in length framed by substantial timber corner posts set in large post-pits. In fact, only three of the foundation pits were actually dug by the castle builders, and, despite a very careful search, no post-pipes were detected in these, suggesting that work on erecting the structure had been discontinued before the corner posts could be inserted into their pits. Two pairs of smaller post-holes positioned to the front and rear of the main tower posts were possibly intended to take angled timbers revetting the exposed vertical ends of the rampart where these could not be retained by the side walls of the tower.

It seems fairly certain that Danes Castle was built as a temporary campaign fort at some time in the 11th or 12th century. A number of factors point to a very short life for the fortification. We have seen already that the gate-tower was unfinished, that no occupation material was found either in the interior of the enclosure or in the ditch, and that no buildings were erected within the defences. The fort was sited on arable fields belonging to the citizens of Exeter at a distance of only 300 m or so from the walls of their city. It is probable that the earthwork was built in summer and that it was deliberately demolished almost immediately work on its construction ceased, for little or no silt had accumulated in the downslope butt end of the ditch before it became half-filled with material derived from the slighting of the rampart, and no soil or erosion horizon had time to develop over the rear slopes of the rampart before it was slighted.

During the Norman period Exeter twice experienced lengthy sieges, both mounted by royal armies. William I laid siege to the city for eighteen days in 1068; and King Stephen, having first gained admittance to the city, besieged Rougemont Castle for almost three months in the early summer of 1136, following its illegal occupation by Baldwin de Redvers. Danes Castle is likely to have been thrown up during one of these documented sieges, since no other Norman military campaigns took place in the Westcountry which are likely to have involved the city of Exeter.

The name Danes Castle is a relatively recent one dating from shortly before 1700. The original name, however, recorded as early as 1276-7, was New Castle. This presumably implies that at the time of its construction the site was regarded as 'new' relative to Rougemont Castle (built by William the Conqueror following the siege of 1068), since no other castles are known in the vicinity. It is therefore probable that Danes Castle was erected in the summer of 1136 during King Stephen's siege of Rougemont Castle. The siting of Danes Castle indeed suggests a possible relationship with Rougemont Castle, since the Norman fort lies on the upper flank, rather than the crest, of the ridge which faces Rougemont across the narrow Longbrook valley, and the earthwork would have been clearly visible to Baldwin and his men. A lengthy description of the events surrounding the siege is given in *The Works of Stephen*, thought to have been written by

an eye-witness (probably the Bishop of Bath), but this account makes no mention of any fort erected outside the walls. The principal focus of the siege seems to have been in the area of the main entrance to the castle, which was approached from the High Street. We are told that an outwork, probably to be identified with the outer bailey rampart, was taken by Stephen's men with the aid of siege engines. They then went on to capture the bridge in front of the main gatehouse (which would have crossed the great inner bailey ditch at the point where Rougemont House now stands).

Given this account of the siege, one might hesitate to ascribe the construction of Danes Castle to Stephen were it not for the existence of small earthwork castles within a few hundred metres of a number of other places known to have been besieged by the king

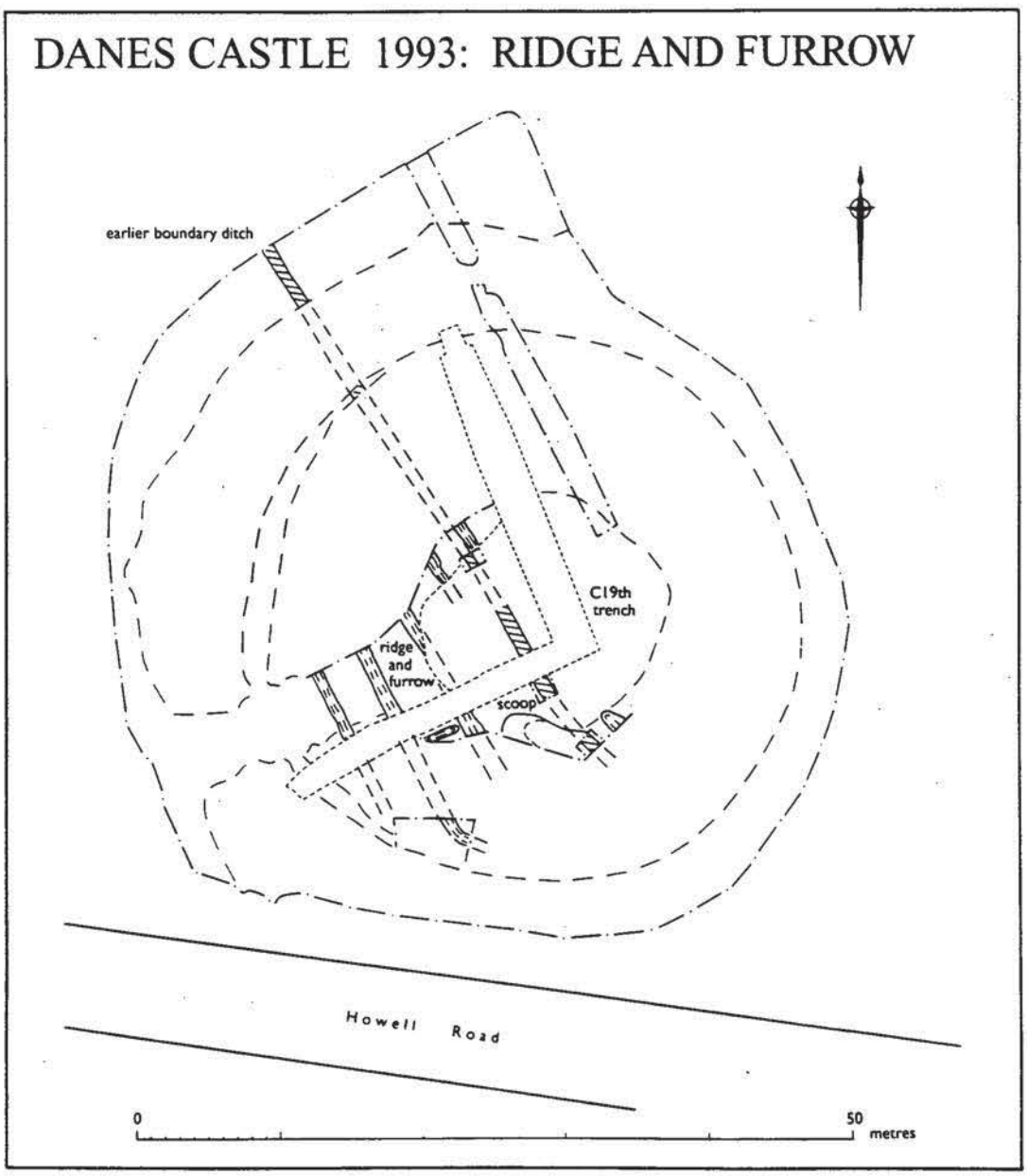


Figure 5: Plan of 12th-century ridge and furrow predating Danes Castle.

over the twelve-year period of his campaigning during the Anarchy. Examples cited recently by Higham and Barker include Corfe Castle, Arundel Castle and Dunster Castle. The Exeter siege took place within the context of a wider revolt against the king which early in 1136 was apparently centred on the Westcountry. Danes Castle may therefore have been built as a strong point or place of last resort in the event of the siege being relieved by an army raised elsewhere in the region. Its construction would have served the additional purpose of impressing upon Baldwin that the king meant business and that he would continue the siege for as long as it took to achieve the desired outcome. In the event, the two wells of Rougemont Castle ran dry and we are told that the defenders had to drink wine. When this too was finally exhausted, almost three months after the start of the siege, Baldwin surrendered the royal castle to its rightful owner.

Medieval ridge and furrow

Mention has already been made of the earlier cultivation soil which was found to underlie the Norman fort. Marked variations in the thickness of this deposit were noted at an early stage in the excavation, suggesting the possibility that fossilized early medieval plough-ridges (known as 'ridge and furrow') might be preserved beneath the rampart. At the front of the rampart a sloping section through the ploughsoil was exposed in the zone where the deposit had been cut through by the ditch. Careful examination of the profile of its upper surface rather disappointingly failed to produce any convincing pattern of ridges and furrows. The reason for this eventually became apparent. On the inner lip of the ditch a series of small terraces about 1m wide had been cut into the top of the ploughsoil to provide a level seating for the front of the rampart, so as to minimise the risk of slippage. A series of furrows, spaced 3-3.8 m apart, running between low ridges, was excavated in the area of the gate-tower and in a zone at the back of the rampart which had been protected by material deposited during the slighting of the castle. A boundary ditch running down the hillside on the same alignment of the ridge and furrow, but sealed by the ploughsoil, may perhaps date from the period when a field system was first laid out on the hillside. The feature produced no artefacts but it is hoped to obtain a radiocarbon date from a sample of charcoal taken from low down in its fill.

At the beginning of the 19th century a group of long, narrow fields could still be seen to the east of the Danes Castle site in the area now occupied by the houses in Danes Road. These have the appearance of typical, formerly open, medieval arable cultivation strips. The alignment of these strips, as shown on early maps, is identical with that of the ridge and furrow found in the excavation, suggesting that a large part of the hillside on the north side of the Longbrook valley was under arable cultivation in the 12th century. The nature of the finds recovered from the ploughsoil tends to confirm this interpretation. In a collection of 39 sherds of pottery and tile over 40% consists of Roman residual material, and the 22 pieces of medieval pottery in the group were all heavily abraded, probably by the plough, suggesting the practice of manuring regularly-cultivated fields with domestic refuse brought out from the town. There are indications that at the south-east end of the excavated ridge and furrow the plough-ridges are curving towards the east, presumably at a point where they approached a headland at the bottom of the slope, lying parallel with a boundary on the line of Howell Road. The eastward trend of the ridges would reflect the direction in which the plough teams turned around at the headland.

Later history of the site
From the foregoing, it seems likely that a lane already existed on the line of Howell Road by the early 12th century. This was known as 'the road to New Castle' by 1376-7 and as Pound Lane by the end of the 16th century. It is quite possible that Danes Castle was by then used for impounding stray animals. The medieval ploughsoil layer was found to have been churned up, probably by cows, over the lowest part of the interior of the earthwork. Presumably a hedge would have run around the top of the rampart to form a secure enclosure.

On an early 19th-century map the site is labelled Fairfax's Entrench[ment], suggesting utilization of the medieval earthwork for the mounting of an artillery battery during the Civil War blockade of Exeter by Fairfax and the New Model Army early in 1646. The location would fit very well with the recorded description of an incident in which Fairfax himself was fired at from Rougemont Castle while inspecting one of his positions on a hill close to the city.

Two long trenches which cut through the rampart to meet at right angles in the middle of the interior were discovered early in the excavation. They contained finds from the first half of the 19th-century and did not seem to be connected in any way with the construction of the reservoir. There can be little doubt that these features represent the earliest archaeological excavation trenches known from Exeter. They were probably dug by workmen engaged by Captain W.T.P. Shortt, the author of the earliest known detailed survey of the earthwork, although he left no record of his having carried out an excavation.

Preservation
The clearance of the 19th-century reservoir embankment and the limited research excavation of medieval levels were completed in the third week of June. South West Water have arranged for the earthwork to be sealed with sheets of synthetic fabric (Terram) covered over with a protective layer of spoil about half a metre deep. This work will be carried out under archaeological supervision and should be finished by the end of June. Discussions are in progress on the details of plans for the public presentation of the monument, and possible means of funding the costs of landscaping and the long-term management of the site are currently being explored.

The rediscovery of Danes Castle has been the subject of considerable media attention and public interest. An Open Day held on a bitterly cold Saturday in February attracted over 800 visitors. The Castle has featured in local newspapers and on television as well as in *The Times* and *The Independent*. There has also been considerable interest in the archaeological community, exemplified by front-page stories in *British Archaeological News* and the *Devon Archaeological Society Newsletter*.

1.2 Digby Hospital Tesco site excavation (Figure 6)

A large block of land centred on the old Digby Hospital, on the southern outskirts of the City next to Rydon Lane, will be developed for housing and commercial purposes over the next few years. The first site to be built on will contain a Tesco superstore, work on

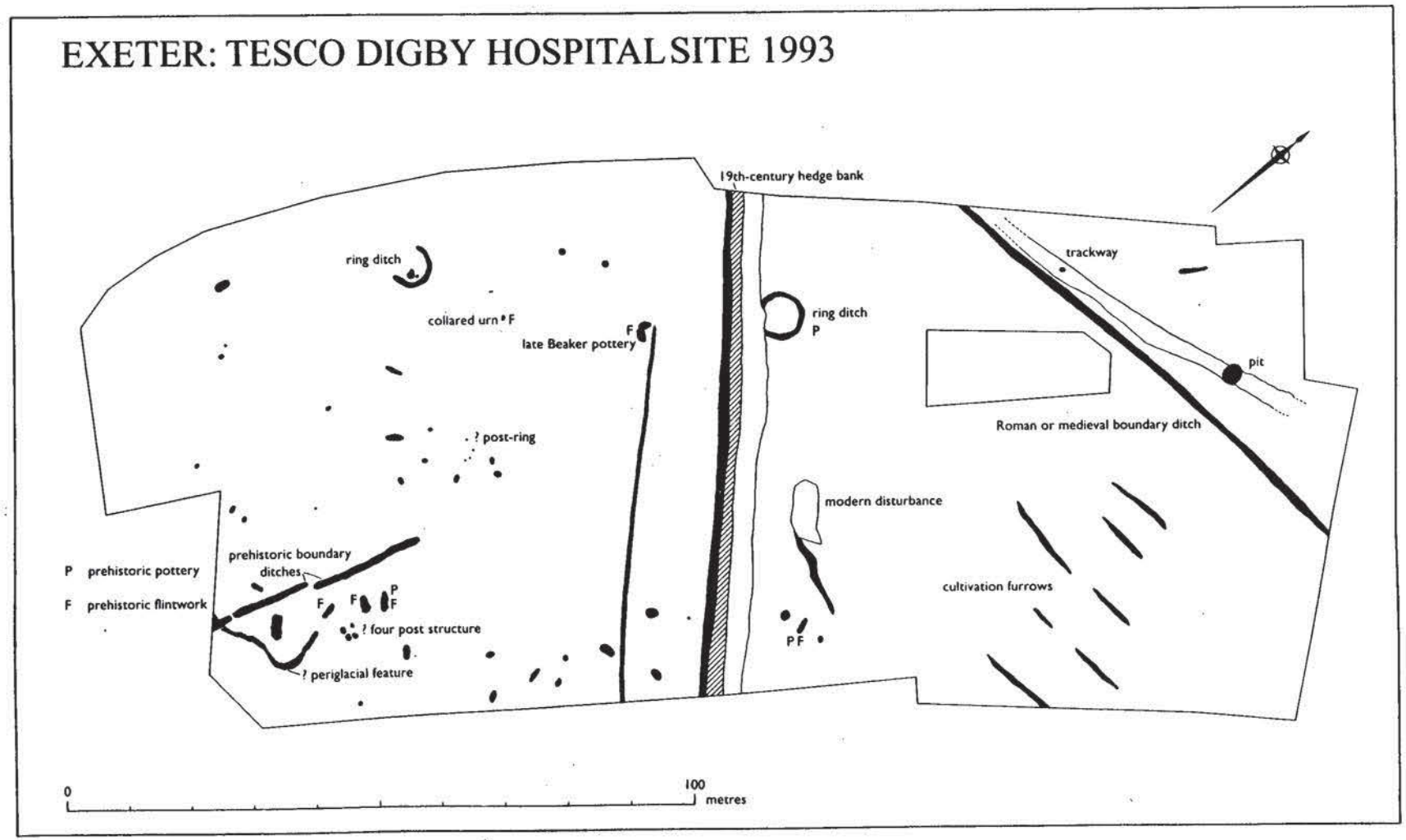


Figure 6: Plan of excavation at Digby Hospital site showing prehistoric and later features.

which is due to start shortly. Tesco commissioned an archaeological assessment of their site in 1992 which was followed up early this year with an evaluation excavation based on a 2% machine-trenched sample of a 2 ha area that will be substantially reduced in level during construction works, thereby removing all archaeological deposits. Although the site had clearly suffered considerable degradation from modern ploughing, resulting in the loss in some areas of all but the deepest archaeological features, sufficient evidence of prehistoric activity was found to justify the machine clearance of a 1.6 ha (4 acre) site so as to permit the full recording of the varied remains preserved therein. This is the first time it has been possible to sample on a large scale the prehistoric landscape in an area on the edge of the Exe valley. The results have been most encouraging, suggesting that other sites due to be redeveloped nearby, particularly on slightly lower slopes where colluvial deposits are likely to have accumulated, will probably produce similar but better-preserved funerary and settlement evidence dating from the third millennium BC onwards.

The earliest material recovered from the site is a collection of flint artefacts probably dating in the main from the late Neolithic period -- i.e. around the end of the third millennium BC. A possible sherd of late Beaker pottery dates perhaps from the beginning of the second millennium, whilst a substantial portion from the side of a Collared Urn was probably deposited in a funerary context during the first half of the second millennium. The latter vessel has a band decorated with horizontal cord impressions below the collar and a pattern of probably triangular cord-impressed decoration above. A second vessel from the same feature also has cord impressions and may be of Trevisker type. Two other fragments of Trevisker pottery were recovered from elsewhere on the site -- one with cord impressions, the other with incised chevron decoration.

In the same general area as the features which produced the pottery described above, two small ring ditches were found, marking the positions of ploughed down Bronze Age barrows. Further to the south a partially preserved arc of post-holes may indicate the site of a round-house, whilst in the southern corner of the site a concentration of prehistoric features includes a discontinuous boundary ditch and a possible four-post structure. Towards the northern corner of the excavation a hollowed-out trackway ran along the northern side of a very straight boundary ditch which produced two fragments of Roman tile. These features could be either Roman or medieval in origin and were probably associated with a series of cultivation furrows to the south.

There is little documentary evidence for medieval settlement in this area, which seems to have remained unenclosed sandy heathland (being on Permian Series sandstones) until a system of large fields was laid out over the whole area in the late 18th or early 19th century.

1.3 City Wall recording and watching brief at Quay Lane (Figure 7)

The programme of consolidation and repairs carried out on the City Wall in 1992, associated with the construction of a new wall-walk, was described in the last report to the Committee. In November further recording and limited excavation took place when

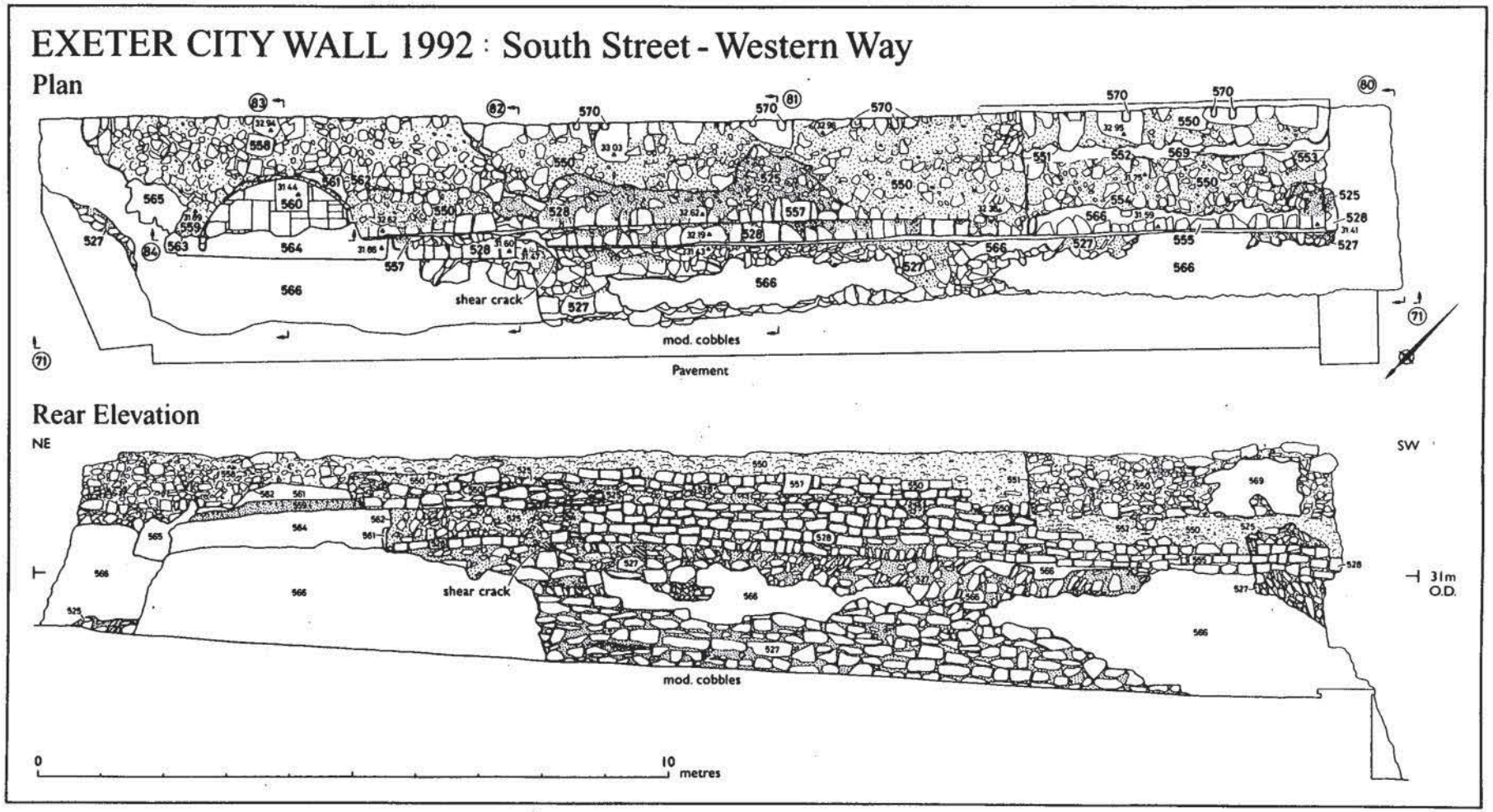


Figure 7: Drawing of city wall at South Street-Western Way.

a pedestrian ramp was constructed to carry the wall-walk, via a gap in the wall, down to the footpath in Quay Lane. This provided the opportunity to record a complete section through the wall for the first time, an exercise that proved most informative since it demonstrated the precise form of the junction between the Roman corework, dating from around 200 AD, and the late medieval front facing. It has long been something of a puzzle as to why it should have been necessary to replace such a high proportion of the original Roman facing stones in the City Wall during the medieval period. The answer seems to lie in the fact that the foundations of the rear part of the wall were generally bonded, to quite a high level, only with clay, whilst the front third of the wall was bonded with good-quality lime mortar. There was therefore a tendency for the front section of the wall to shear away from the rear portion along a line of weakness at the junction between the two types of bonding material. With the recutting of the defensive ditch in front of the wall in the medieval period the berm would become progressively reduced in level, leaving the front foot of the wall liable to undercutting. It is now clear that long stretches of collapsed Roman facework had to be rebuilt in the medieval period and later, so that there now remain only a few pieces of original Roman blockwork in the whole circuit of the walls. It is hoped to complete the primary project reports describing the results of the 1992 recording by the autumn. Figure 7 shows an example of the sort of detailed survey drawing that is produced as part of the primary record.

1.4 Excavation and watching brief in Mint Lane

In December 1992 the City Council installed a French drain running along the exterior of the foundation of the north wall of St Nicholas Priory in order to prevent groundwater from seeping into the building. Arrangements were made for the lower part of the drain-trench to be excavated archaeologically so that undisturbed medieval and Roman deposits could be recorded and the foundations of the north wall of the priory west range examined in detail prior to strengthening works taking place in certain areas. At the same time the opportunity was taken to prepare an accurate ground-plan of the west range. The primary project report on this work is in preparation, as is the task of integrating the 1992 observations with the results of previous excavations undertaken nearby in 1971 and 1983-4. A fully-integrated account will be presented in a future report to the Committee, and only a brief summary of the main findings from 1992 is given here.

At the lowest level reached in the trench, a Roman road running NE-SW was recorded over its full width. This originated as one of two longitudinal streets that ran the full length of the legionary fortress and later became part of the street system of the Roman town. On the north-west side of the road a wall foundation was noted that is thought to be the continuation of a boundary wall discovered on an adjoining site at Friernhay Street in 1981. This marked the south-east limit of a large town house that is believed to have occupied a large site extending under modern Bartholomew Street West. Several phases of medieval wall foundations were recorded which belonged to parts of St Nicholas Priory that no longer stand above ground. These include a building demolished in the later 12th century, when the present west range was erected, and part of the great 14th-century west tower of the church.

1.5 Underground Passages and medieval East Gate

A lengthy account of the results of survey and documentary research on the development of the medieval aqueduct tunnels in the East Gate area was given in the last report. Since then work has continued on various aspects of the subject and new survey observations are currently being made inside the passages. The results of this research will be drawn together for inclusion in a series of reports on the history of the passages and of Exeter's medieval water supply. A short revised account of recent conclusions will be prepared for the next report.

1.6 Roman and medieval South Gate

The Roman gate tower discovered by Lady Fox in 1964 will be marked out in permanent form when the footpath in South Street is repaved later this summer. Arrangements have been made to ensure that the works cause no damage to the Roman remains, which will be exposed archaeologically prior to their being sealed over with a protective membrane. The layout of the projecting late medieval gate tower will also be shown in the new scheme. It is possible that the archaeological watching brief on the repaving works will produce some fresh information on the structural development of the gate.

2. REPORTS AND PUBLICATIONS

2.1 Primary project reports

In the current year work is in progress on a wide range of these limited edition internal reports, which contain the basic information and primary analysis upon which are founded the higher level syntheses presented in printed publications.

Roman military sites
A project which was started at the end of 1991 with the purpose of producing recast and updated versions of the primary reports on over thirty sites excavated within the Roman legionary fortress and its environs is nearing completion.

Medieval and later aqueducts
As noted above, a series of reports on the documentary evidence for the history of the aqueducts and the results of survey and excavation work are currently in preparation.

Medieval property deeds
A collection of over 500 previously untranslated deeds will be presented in the sixth report in this series.

City Wall recording
A number of reports on surveys carried out over the past year are in preparation.

Danes Castle, St Nicholas Priory, Tesco Digby Hospital
It is hoped to complete primary reports on these projects by the end of the year.

2.2 Exeter Historical Documents

It is proposed to launch a new series of A4 short-run monographs to provide a vehicle for the publication of selected material from the large body of documentary evidence that has accrued from the Unit's work over the past ten years. A separate report series for the dissemination of historical documents is necessary since much of this material is too voluminous for inclusion elsewhere but nevertheless merits publication in its own right. It is envisaged that at least six volumes could be produced over the next 3-4 years. Work is in progress in the current year on (1) *Exeter Property Deeds 1150-1450* and (2) *Exeter in the English Civil War*, both of which should appear in 1994.

2.3 Exeter Archaeological Reports

This monograph series is published jointly by Exeter City Council and Exeter University Press. The reports in the series present the detailed synthesized results of the Unit's work in Exeter and are intended primarily for a specialist academic readership. English Heritage normally makes a 75% grant towards the printing costs for each volume. At present material is being assembled for volumes (5) *The Roman Legionary Fortress* and (6) *The Roman, medieval and Civil War defences of Exeter.* Given the present level of funding available to the AFU, these are unlikely to be ready to go to press before 1995. The publication of four further volumes is envisaged: (7) *Medieval and post-medieval sites in the suburbs*; (8) *The Roman town*; (9) *Medieval and post-medieval sites within the walls* and (10) *Exeter Historic Buildings.*

2.4 Popular publications

An A5 booklet on *The Underground Passages* is in preparation and will be published later this summer. This will have a similar format to the *Exeter Guildhall* booklet produced in 1991. A booklet on *The Civil War Defences of Exeter* will appear in the autumn, published by the Devon Archaeological Society. Production of the long-planned booklet on *The City Walls* has been postponed for financial reasons.

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