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BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT

THE PADDOCKS, WEST STREET

ILCHESTER

An Archaeological Evaluation

February 1989

By Peter Leach

B.U.F.A.U.



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An Archaeological Assessment of Proposals for Development

1.0: Introduction and Acknowledgements

Proposals for residential development on a portion of the area scheduled as an Ancient Monument under the provisions of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979, required that an archaeological evaluation be carried out to assess the impact of these proposals upon the archaeological resource so protected. The site comprised c. 0.5ha of pasture paddocks at West Street, Ilchester, Somerset (NGR. ST 520224) within the bounds of the scheduled area, Somerset A.M.404. In compliance with the Act and as a condition of the South Somerset District's outline planning consent for this development, an archaeological assessment and report was commissioned from Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit by the current owner, Mr. John Major.

Scheduled Monument Consent for this evaluation was granted by the Secretary of State through the Department of the Environment and with the advice of the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England. The work was undertaken according to that consent by a field team from B.U.F.A.U. in the second week of February 1989 under the direction of Peter Leach. We are particularly grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Major for their co-operation and hospitality during that period; thanks are also due to Mr. R. Croft (Somerset County Council) and to Mr. P. Gosling (H.B.M.C.) for their advice. Most of the work in the field was undertaken by Steven Litherland, assisted by Andrew Hussain and Edward Newton, and the illustrations were prepared by Trevor Pearson.

This report is presented as a summary of the archaeological information obtained during the evaluation, supplemented by knowledge of previous archaeological research and discoveries made in this part of Ilchester. Its conclusions form the basis for a series of recommendations which should

ideally be used as a guide for the development and the granting of detailed planning permission.

2.0 The Site

The area for evaluation (Figs. 1b and 1c) lies alongside West Street, immediately adjacent to the southern fringe of Ilchester's built-up area and properties formerly belonging to the Manor House, now converted into dwellings. Historically, the site lay east of the Foss Way (now West Street) and close to the South West gate of the Roman and Medieval town. Previous archaeological records for this area indicate the former presence of suburban roadside development flanking the Foss Way at its exit from the defended Roman, and subsequently Medieval town (Leach 1982, Part II; and in press).

Currently, the site comprises a rectangular enclosure of rough pasture adjacent to and south of 'The Paddocks', West Street, to which it belongs. A stone wall bounds the area to the west and in part to the south, continuing as a post and wire fence to the south and east. While in essence a level site, it was observed that a zone 15-20 metres wide along the western margin lay up to 0.30m lower than the remainder, which in effect existed as a slight platform behind and east of that area. Further to the east this platform was emphasised by a gentle fall to the meadows beyond the plot boundaries, and to some extent to the south. The site was formerly divided into two small enclosures by a stone wall (since demolished), and had belonged to a series of closes and outbuildings attached until recently to the Manor House. A cottage, formerly the Turnpike toll house, also stood in this area until the middle of this century when the main road was widened.

3.0 Procedure

A series of eight trenches in all were examined (Fig. 2); I-V and VII as part of the proposed evaluation, and two others (VI and VIII) making use of trenches created previously by the landowner through the removal of stone walls and their foundations. The six evaluation trenches involved

mechanical removal of turf/topsoil and excavation by hand to a maximum depth of 0.50m or to a horizon of identifiable undisturbed archaeological features/deposits. Written proformae, graphic and photographic records were made relating to the deposits encountered but care was taken to avoid wherever possible the excavation of intact archaeological contexts.

The records made form the basis of this report, its conclusions and recommendations; supplemented by information recovered and assessed previously from other archaeological sites in the vicinity.

4.0 Evaluation (Fig. 2)

As stated, six of the trenches examined were made as part of this evaluation and located as closely as possible to the proposed sites for development within the area as a whole. The presence of an access driveway to "The Paddocks" was the principal constraint, while the wall foundation trench excavations provided useful additional information and replaced one of the proposed evaluation trenches (VI).

4.1: Trenches I and II were both dug c. 10x1m to investigate the localities of proposed house plot no.4 and the west end of the mains service trench. The archaeological results from both were very similar in character. Removal of between 0.30 and 0.40m of recent topsoil and debris exposed a truncated surface of natural clay alluvium, slightly contaminated with the remains of human activity. Discrete areas within this horizon and contrasting with it in colour and texture, suggested the fills of scattered archaeological features cut to a lower level. None of these were excavated, although at least two large pits, a ditch and several post-holes appear to be represented. 2nd-3rd century AD. Roman pottery was recovered from the surface of most of these feature fills.

4.2: Trench III was located north of II to evaluate the site of house plot no.1, but revealed a somewhat contrasting picture beneath the surface mantle of c. 0.30m of turf and topsoil. The entire area of 11x1m exposed was covered by an extensive spread of stone building rubble with some brick, tile and mortar, and included pottery and other finds of 19th-

century date. Removal of a c. 0.20m thickness in the western half of the trench revealed below, a yard surface of heavy stone cobbles with some 18th and 19th-century tile and pottery pressed into it. Excavation was limited to this surface and no earlier deposits or finds were recognised.

4.3: Trenches IV and V were positioned relative to the projected plots for houses 2 and 3, respectively 10x1m and 11x1m in area. Both were excavated to the maximum depth of 0.50m through relatively homogenous levels of dark brown humic soil. In IV, an indistinctly defined area of more stony soil mixed with considerable quantities of animal bone and post-medieval pottery, suggested the presence here of a large 18th-century pit, of which only 0.20-0.30m of its upper fills were removed as exposed. To the south, a concentration of 12th-13th-century pottery suggested the upper fill of another (medieval) feature. The soil horizons within Trench V were even less differentiated, although a lighter colour and greater concentrations of stone towards the bottom indicate a change in the stratigraphy to be imminent at this level.

4.4: Trenches VI and VIII were created by the removal of existing stone walls and their foundations on the site, prior to the evaluation taking place. These open trenches provided free sections to a depth of approximately 1m below the modern surface, and were therefore cleaned and recorded. Both were located within the area of the platform noted in 2. (above) and together with trenches IV and V, permitted a good sample of that feature's character and extent. As in the latter trenches, stratigraphic distinctions were not easily discerned within the mixed humic soils beneath the turf/topsoil horizon, but at c. 0.70-0.80m below the surface a marked change was recorded. Exposures of lighter clay soils, some containing building stone, burnt material, animal bone fragments and sherds of Roman pottery, suggest that the Romano-British occupation horizon had been contacted here.

4.5: Trench VII continued the alignment of II, following the proposed course of a service trench eastwards. To the west, almost half of the 17x1m trench revealed the disturbed clay subsoil horizon recorded in the adjacent trenches I and II, at no more than 0.40m below the modern

surface. Colour and textural soil variations at this level suggested the fills of several ditch, post-hole and other features surviving here; associated in several instances with Roman pottery, although no attempt to investigate these further by excavation was made. Eastwards, this horizon was overlain by a mantle of mixed, darker brown humic soils; similar to and almost certainly contiguous with the deposits recorded in the adjacent trenches IV and V.

5.0 Conclusions

As might have been anticipated, this evaluation revealed evidence of Romano-British occupation at depths of between 0.30m and 0.80m, widely across the area proposed for development. For the purposes of archaeology two zones can be discerned; a 'terraced' area to the west, adjacent and parallel with West Street, and a 'platform' occupying the eastern half of the site (Fig. 2).

This configuration is echoed to some extent in the levels of natural alluvium and Romano-British features encountered and recorded. In Trenches I and II, levels at c. 12.50m AOD. contrast with a surface of alluvium at around 11.90m in an equivalent position 100m or more to the south, as recorded in previous archaeological excavations (Leach 1982, 56-9). This fell off to c. 11.50m AOD. further back eastwards from the Foss Way at this more southerly location, but at West Street these levels rise to over 12.80m AOD. (in Trench VII) before falling off gradually again eastwards to a little over 12.0m AOD. in Trench VIII. The overall differences between the two sets of levels is accounted for by the closer proximity of the site at West Street to the natural 'island' of gravel and alluvium at between 12 and 13m AOD. beneath Ilchester itself.

The 'terrace' effect at West Street is probably to be accounted for by post-Roman levelling along the Foss Way frontage in the course of Medieval and later suburban roadside development extending southwards from the original South West Gate. This evidently truncated much of the preceding Romano-British suburban roadside frontage, an effect most graphically illustrated in Trench III by the cobbled surface inset there. This

contrasts somewhat with the picture revealed by excavation further south and now beneath the A37 by-pass, where the Romano-British suburban structures had survived much more intact. An additional factor is the realignment of West Street, formerly the A303, as it exited south from Ilchester (Fig. 1c). It is evident that road widening here has in fact sealed much of the built suburban road frontage of all periods, and that the remaining area subject to the terracing effect must represent only the rear of any properties formerly occupying that frontage. That said, it is clear that some truncated remains of the earliest (Roman) suburbs still survive, and indeed evidence for later (post-Roman) development also, at no great distance beneath the modern ground surface.

The 'platform' feature visible as a slight earthwork over the eastern half of the site stood up to 0.30m higher than the terraced area, at c. 13.30m AOD. Much of this was composed of post-Roman deposits lacking clearly definable horizons or structural remains and within which Roman, medieval and post-medieval finds were well mixed. To the west it may be postulated to have continued as a thinner mantle overlying what had been a natural rise in the pre-Roman alluvium and a build up of Roman occupation stratigraphy, now destroyed by a largely post-medieval terracing. The surviving platform area is probably the remains of a post-Roman, suburban roadside earthwork created primarily by rubbish disposal and cultivation. A similar feature, now partly destroyed, is present alongside the western margin of the former A37 road exiting south from Ilchester towards Yeovil (Leach 1982, Fig.33 and 110). Beneath the platform the natural horizon of pre-Roman alluvium, overlain or cut into by Romano-British suburban features to the rear of the Foss Way road frontage, sloped gently down eastwards to level out at around 12m AOD. This would be in conformity with the picture revealed in earlier excavations to the south (op.cit).

To summarise, it is clear that the archaeology of this area is very similar in character to that revealed elsewhere around the suburban roadside exits from Ilchester in the course of more detailed excavations. The post-medieval? terracing and modern road widening have had a greater impact here than that recorded elsewhere but have not destroyed all earlier archaeological deposits. Further east, the post-Roman platform itself

preserves a relatively low level of archaeological information, but beneath it lie the remains of features relating to the most densely occupied zone along the former road frontage - less dense in themselves but of hardly less complexity and significance for the history of the Roman suburbs here. Within the contaminated upper horizons of the 'natural' alluvium fragments of prehistoric pottery hint at the possibility of earlier pre-Roman occupation evidence, as documented nearby in 1975 (Leach 1982, 59-61). Finally, it should be emphasised that the inferences and conclusions drawn here rely heavily upon information recorded in much greater detail in previous excavations nearby, but that the relatively sparse information obtained on this site is fully consistent with the interpretation offered.

6.0 Recommendations

- i) Depths of ground disturbance, if not exceeded as specified in the outline planning permission, should not cause significant damage to surviving archaeology in most areas of the site.
- ii) The most sensitive area is the 'terrace' zone. Disturbances for mains services and building rafts here should be archaeologically excavated if penetrating below 0.40m from the modern surface, to the depth required.
- iii) An archaeological watching brief should also be maintained for the excavation of all the raft foundations and other service excavations in the less sensitive 'platform' area.

The additional archaeological input recommended here would of necessity be concurrent with the earliest stage of development, and could probably be accomplished by a small field team within a week to ten days, depending upon the contractor's timetable. A more comprehensive report should then be prepared for publication, incorporating the results from both phases of field work on the site.

References

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- Leach, P.J., in press Ilchester Volume 2. Excavations and Fieldwork. Sheffield Academic press.

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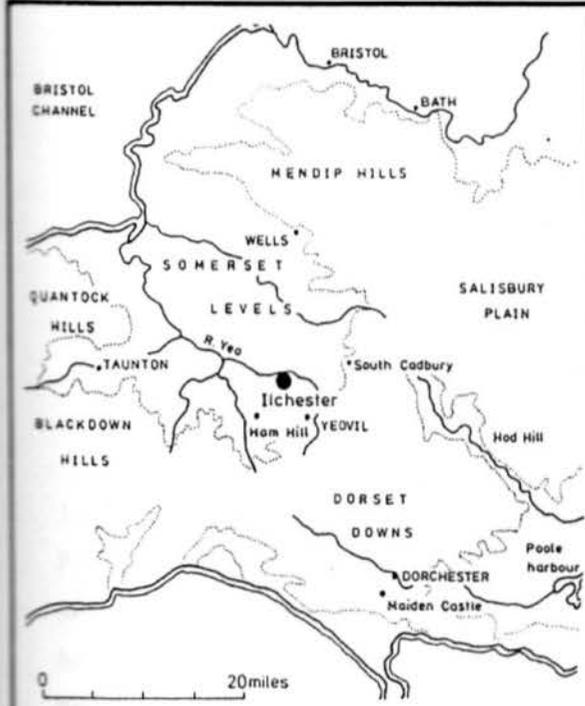


Fig 1a

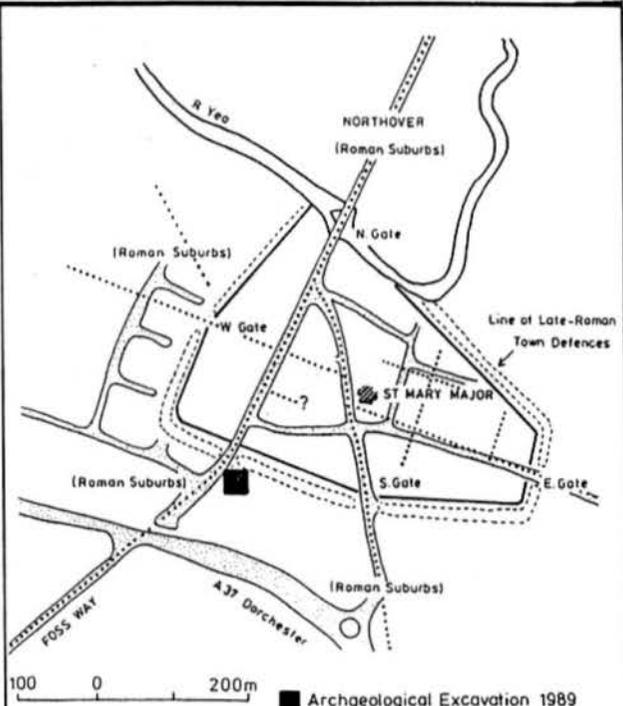


Fig 1b

ILCHESTER WEST STREET

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- built up area
- evaluation area
- scheduled ancient monument
- modern road widening
- Roman suburban buildings located in previous excavations
- Roman suburban burials located in previous excavations

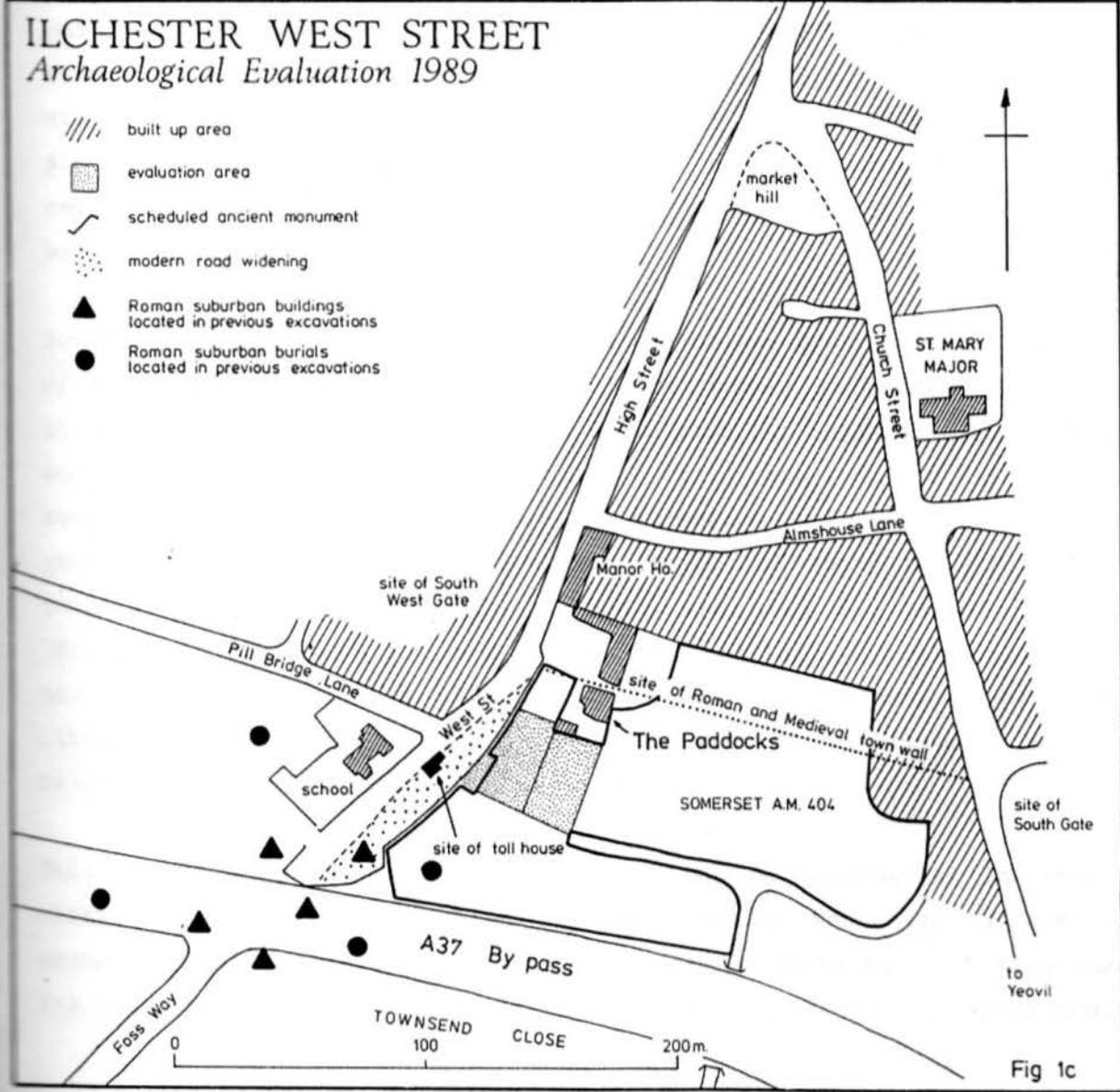


Fig 1c

LOCATION OF EVALUATION TRENCHES

The Paddocks

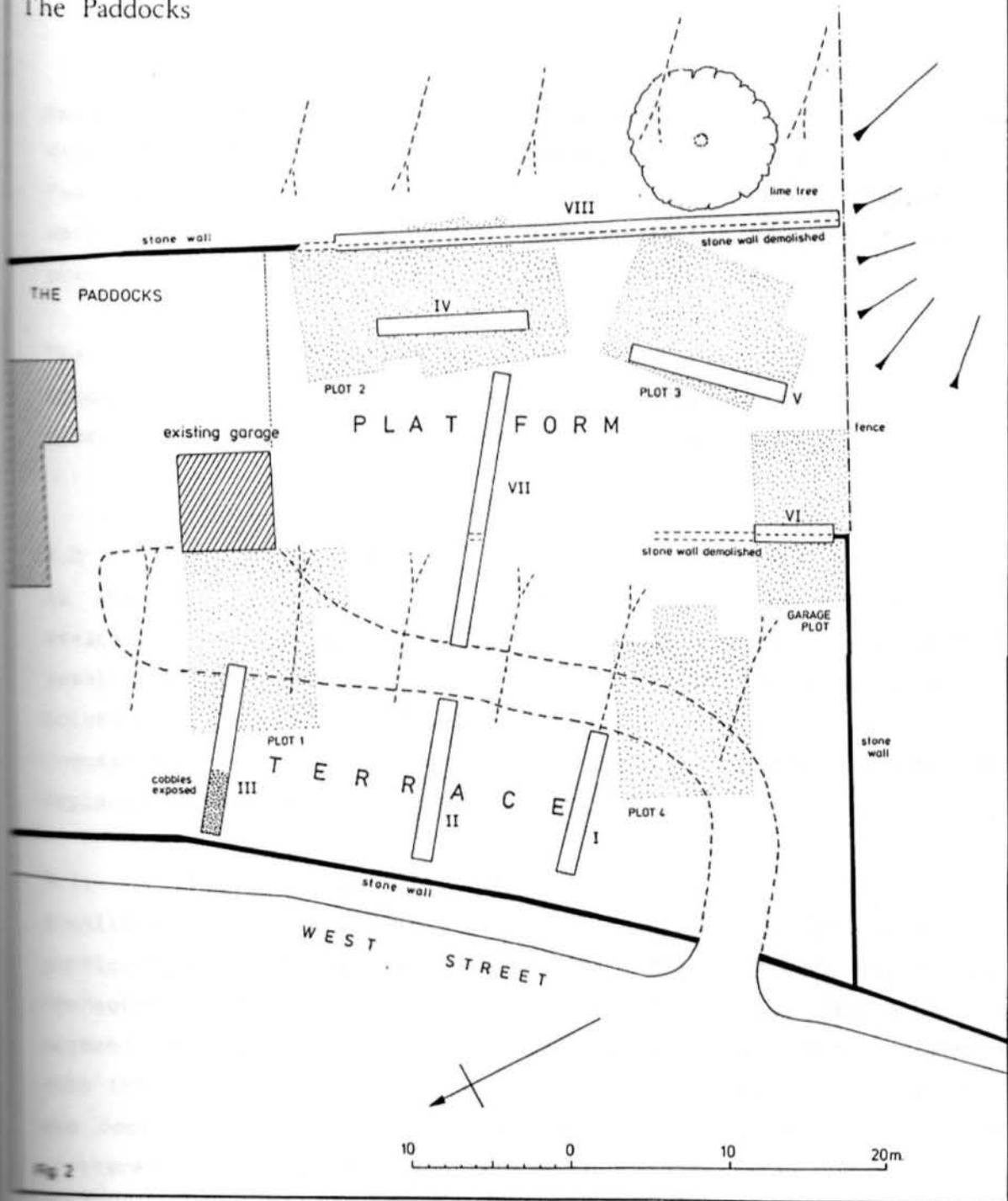


Fig 2