

Excavations at 9 Bridport Road,
Dorchester

by

E.G. Hughes

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit 1990

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Summary

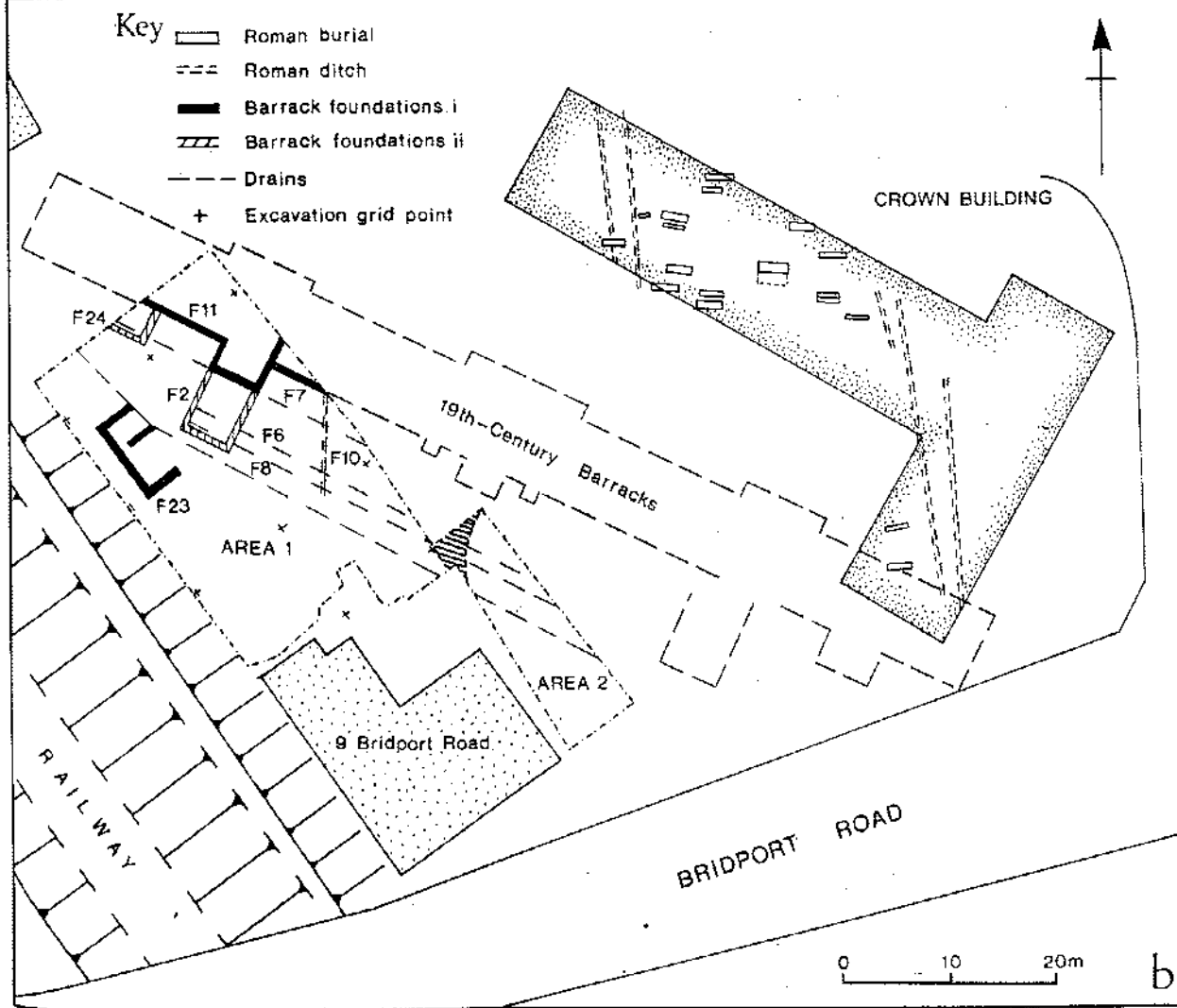
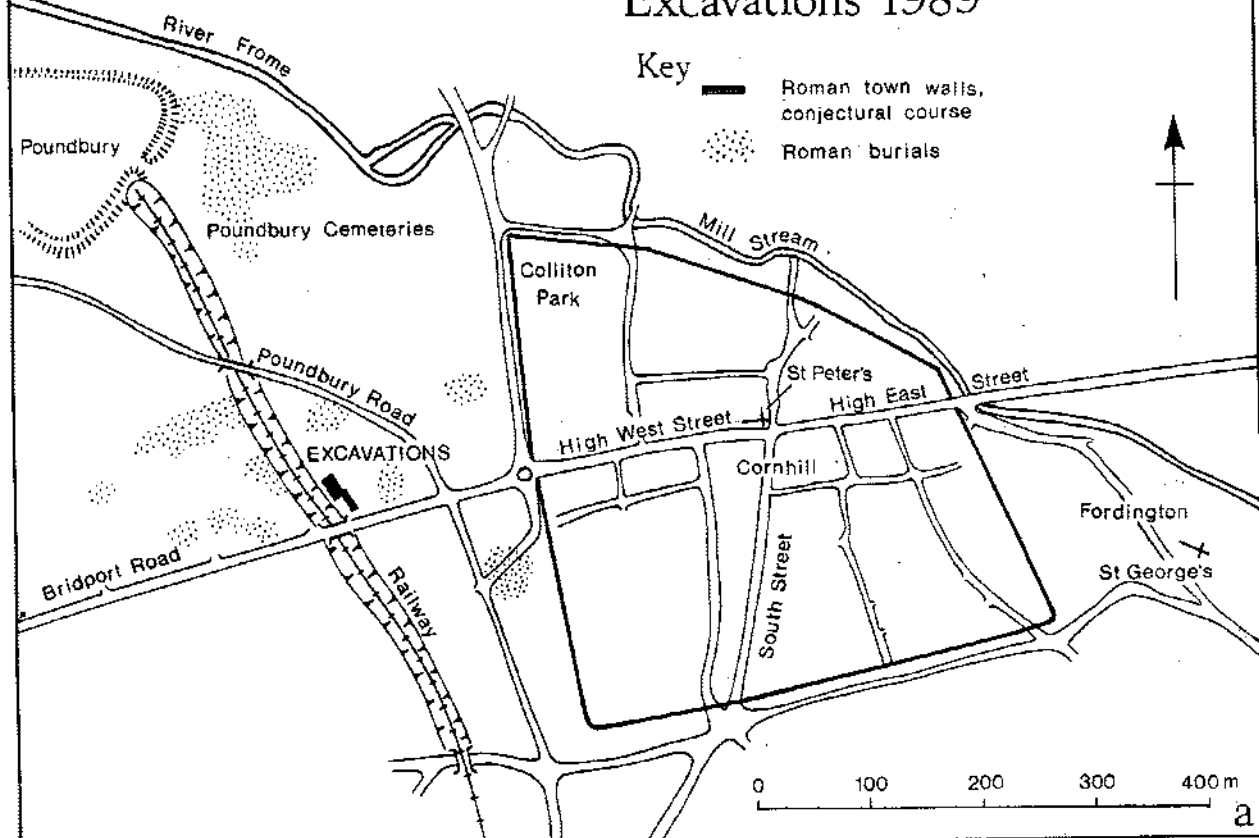
This report outlines the results of a short excavation undertaken in November 1989 prior to the development of the area adjacent to 9 Bridport Road, Dorchester for a new County Records Office. The archaeological potential of the area had been demonstrated in 1971 by the discovery of a late Roman cemetery on the site of the neighbouring Crown Building. However, it became clear that considerable disturbance had taken place on the present site during the late 19th century for the construction of an army barrack block. Only a single late Roman ditch representing earlier occupation, had survived this.

Introduction

The high archaeological potential of this area was first demonstrated in 1971 by the discovery of a late Roman cemetery during the construction of the neighbouring Crown Building (Green et al 1981). In view of this, the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was contracted by Dorset County Council to undertake an archaeological investigation prior to the development at 9 Bridport Road of a new County Records Office.

The work was carried out during November 1989 and directed by Peter Leach and the author, with the assistance of Ed Newton, George Luke, Richard Turnbull and Quentin Hutchinson. Ed Newton produced the site plans and the figure drawing. I am also grateful to Laurence Keen (County Archaeological Officer), Hugh Jaques (County Archivist), Mr. F. P. Pitfield (County Architects Office) and Major Carrol (Dorset Military Museum) for their valuable information and assistance. Peter Leach edited the text of this report. Copies of the site archive will be deposited with the Dorset County Museum and the National Sites and Monuments Record Office.

Bridport Road, Dorchester Excavations 1989



The Site

Location and historical background

The site is located to the west of the Dorchester town centre, on the north side of Bridport Road and immediately to the east of the Western Region railway line (Figure 1a). This area lay outside the Roman town walls between the roads to Exeter (Bridport Road) and Ilchester (Poundbury Road).

During the late 1870's the triangle of land formed between these two roads and the railway became the site for a new army barracks. This subsequently served as the main depot for the Dorsetshire regiment following its formation in 1881 from the 39th and 54th of Foot (Popham 1970). The barracks to the north of the Poundbury road have a longer history, appearing on the 1811 O.S. map and the tithe maps of 1844 (DRO T/FOR 1844) and 1877 (DRO T/FOR 1877). These maps show no indication of structures on the Bridport Road site, which appears to have been fields until the new barracks were laid out from c.1877.

The full layout of the Dorchester Regimental Barracks appears on the 1888, 1:500 O.S. map. It underwent a series of minor changes until the amalgamation of the Dorsetshire and Devonshire regiments in 1958 and the abandonment of the Dorchester depot. The main barrack block in the south-western area of the site was subsequently demolished and in 1971 a government office block, the Crown Buildings, was constructed in the middle of the former barrack square. Other buildings within the former depot have been retained and subsequently adapted for non-military use.

Archaeological background

A number of cemeteries serving the Roman town of Dorchester (Durnovaria) have been identified to the west of the town walls. Numerous burials have been noted in the vicinity of the Bridport Road site (RCHM(E) 1970) and the extensively investigated cemetery of Poundbury (Green 1976, and forthcoming) lies 500 metres to the north. During the construction of the Crown Building approximately 50 graves, aligned east-west, were recorded. These were located within a 25-metre strip, bounded by linear gullies with an approximate north-south orientation (Green 1981). The most significant burial was identified as that of a young man, who had been placed in a lead coffin which had then been half filled with burnt gypsum powder. The particular conditions of the burial allowed the survival of a head and pigtail of red hair.

The investigation reported upon here was located immediately to the west of the Crown Building site and principally to the rear of 9 Bridport Road, formerly the Regimental Institute (Fig. 1b).

The Excavation

Method

The excavation covered a total of c.850 square metres and was divided into two areas. Area 1 extended from the north-west side of the existing building and Area 2 was adjacent to its north-east side. The area had previously been used as a car park and as a site for temporary office accommodation. A machine was used to remove the surface tarmac and underlying hardcore. The site was then cleaned using shovels, hoes and brushes to facilitate the definition of archaeological contexts. Numerous features were observed cutting the truncated chalk natural, the top of which lay between 0.2 and 0.3 m below the tarmac. These features were recorded, photographed and drawn and a small selection were then sampled by excavation. A full record of this data is to be found in the site archive.

Archaeology

Phase 1- Roman

The earliest feature on the site proved to be a linear ditch, orientated approximately north-south (Feature 10), with a maximum recorded width of 0.86 m and depth of 0.36 m. It became narrower and shallower towards its southern end where it appeared to have become truncated by a subsequent terracing of the site for the barrack complex. The excavated section was 8 m long and had a bowl-shaped profile. It contained a brown silty fill with fragments of chalk, Roman pottery, flint and animal bone (Context 008).

The extent of the levelling for the barracks is indicated by a two-metre high bank retained alongside the cutting for the railway, which appears to preserve what remains of the original ground profile. This terracing makes the survival of any Roman features to the west of the ditch (Feature 10) unlikely. The northern and eastern parts of the site, lower down the

original slope , would have been less affected by this terracing, as the progressively better survival of Feature 10 northwards, demonstrates. The depth of the grave cuts recorded from the Crown Buildings site (up to 1.75 metres) suggests that had similar burials been present in this area, some evidence should have survived, despite the additional disturbances resulting from the barrack-block construction and the insertion of drains.

Phase 2- Early Barracks.

The Roman ditch (Feature 10) was cut by a series of linear drainage trenches (Features 6, 7 and 8) orientated northwest- southeast. Modern drainpipes and other occasional artifacts within their rubble and gravel fills (004, 005 and 006) clearly indicated a recent date.

A solid, green-grey concrete foundation, with a similar northwest-southeast orientation, was observed in the northern corner of the excavation (Feature 11). This matches the location of part of the original south-west face of the main infantry barrack-block recorded on the 1888 1:500 O.S. map. Several photographs from a collection located in the Dorset Military Museum show that this was a three storey brick building with a pitched slate roof.

One or two of the drainage trenches appear to have serviced an outbuilding (Feature 23), with a similar green-grey concrete foundation, located to the south west of the main building. The drainage trenches, together with the appearance of this outbuilding on the 1888 map, suggest that it was a latrine block.

Phase 3- Late Barracks.

The drainage trenches of the early barrack phase were subsequently cut by the foundation trenches for two extensions added onto the south-west face of the barrack-block. The larger of the two extensions (Feature 2) measured 10 m by 5.5 m, while the smaller (Feature 24) protruded 3.2 m beyond the original face of the building. Fragments of the lower courses of a brick superstructure overlying the solid concrete foundations of both extensions had survived. The extensions are clearly part of a series of alterations which appear on a plan of the barrack-block before it was demolished, now held in the County Architects Office (DRG. No. E. S. 1061). A complex of drainpipes within one of the walls (Feature 5) of the larger extension suggests that at least part of this served as a new latrine block replacing the outbuilding (Feature 23).

A new system of service trenches (including Features 19-22) was developed to replace the earlier drainage system, which had become redundant following the construction of the extensions.

Finds

The only finds of pre-19th-century date came from the fill of the ditch (Feature 10) and are summarised below. Artifacts relating to the 19th-century barracks and later disturbances included fragments of ceramics, glass, building materials, pipes, and occasional metal objects, but were relatively sparse and are not catalogued in detail.

Pottery

35 sherds of Roman pottery were recovered from the fill of Feature 10 (008), representing a minimum of 4 vessels.

Vessel 1 - Black burnished jar with everted rim. Band of incised cross-hatching on body. Similar vessels recovered from Colliton Park (Aitken, G. and N. 1982, Fig. 17 vessel no. 4) and elsewhere in Dorchester (Draper and Chaplin 1982, Fig. 19) suggest a 4th-century type.

Vessel 2 - Black burnished bowl with flanged rim.

Vessel 3 - Black burnished bowl with flanged rim.

Vessel 4 - Red colour-coated mortarium with upright rim and angular, rouletted flange. Oxford colour-coated ware, type C100 (Young 1975, Fig. 67, date range A. D. 300-400+).

Flint

A roughly-worked core and 15 waste flakes were recovered from the fill of Feature 10 (008)

Animal Bone

52 fragments of bone were recovered from Feature 10 (008). The identifiable majority were bovine and included fragments from a scapula, a long bone and a premolar.

Discussion

Roman Period

The poor survival of Roman deposits, caused by the severely truncated and disturbed nature of the site, limits any inferences that can be made concerning suburban roadside development in this area of Roman Dorchester.

The alignment of the ditch (Feature 10) has a similar orientation to the ditches noted during the construction of the Crown Buildings (Fig. 1b), and may belong to a common system of 4th-century enclosures fronting onto the Exeter (Bridport) Road. The absence of any evidence for graves in the south-eastern parts of the excavation could suggest that the area between the Crown Building's cemetery and Feature 10 was not used for burials. However, the considerable truncation of the area to the west of Feature 10 does not rule out the possibility that features or graves with relatively shallow cuts could originally have existed here. The possibility of domestic occupation in this area must also be considered, particularly in view of the domestic nature of the pottery and animal bone from the fill (008) of the ditch (Feature 10).

The evidence of flint working, represented by the core and flakes, presumably originates from an earlier phase of prehistoric activity in the area, not otherwise represented on this site.

The Barracks

The excavation revealed a section of the foundation for the south-west face of the main infantry barrack-block within the depot barracks for the Dorsetshire Regiment, together with its associated service trenches and outbuildings. This was an elongated, three storey brick structure, constructed, together with the rest of the depot, after 1877. The information recovered appears to confirm the evidence for the development of this building obtained from successive maps and plans.

The most significant development recorded related to the construction of a number of extensions onto the south-west face of the building. The excavation indicated that at least one of these (Feature 2) was partly used to accommodate a new latrine block, replacing an outdoor one that was subsequently demolished (Feature 23). These alterations do not appear on the 1:2500 1929 O.S. map and may be contemporary with the construction of what was the Regimental Institute (the present building at 9 Bridport Road) during the late 1930's.

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