

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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**The Paddocks, West Street, Ilchester
Archaeological Excavations 1989 & 1990**

by

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1.0 Summary

An archaeological evaluation in 1989 demonstrated the archaeological potential of this development site at West Street, Ilchester (a Scheduled Ancient Monument), indicating that archaeological features and levels, from post-medieval back to Romano-British, and possibly pre-Roman periods, had survived (Leach 1989). The brief for a subsequent excavation in 1990 was to remove and record as much of this archaeological resource as was to be affected by the proposed development. From the results of both phases of excavation a full interpretative report is provided and an assessment made of the site in the context of Ilchester's known archaeology.

2.0 Introduction

This report describes the results of archaeological investigations conducted at The Paddocks, West Street, Ilchester, Somerset (NGR ST 520224) in December 1990, with reference to a preceding evaluation in 1989. The background to excavation is followed by an explanation of its purpose and aims, including a description of the techniques used. A trench narrative approach is employed to detail the archaeology. The analysis of recovered artefacts is structured according to material type and incorporates material from the 1989 evaluation. The conclusion attempts to interpret the recorded remains and place the archaeology of West Street within the wider context of Ilchester.

3.0 Background

Ilchester has been the subject of archaeological investigations over the past twenty years; knowledge of its pre-Roman origins and subsequent urban development expanding accordingly (fig. 1b). Iron Age activity centred around a large defended enclosure to the south of the Roman town. Artefacts from this phase are relatively scarce, some remains being buried under a later layer of alluvial deposits. Roman Ilchester began with a military role, developing later to become an important civil regional centre. Post-Roman abandonment was followed by a medieval re-occupation of the site and resumption of status, eventually as the county town of Somerset. This was followed by a decline to Ilchester's more modest modern-day appearance.

This cycle of expansion and decline is well documented (Leach 1982 and forthcoming, and Leach & Dunning 1990).

4.0 The Site

The site to be developed on West Street (NGR. ST 520224) lies within the southwest suburbs of Ilchester, immediately outside the historic South West gate on the Fosse Way (fig. 1c), and is scheduled as an Ancient Monument (Somerset AM 404). Previous archaeological investigations in this southwestern suburb have revealed an extensive sequence of archaeological evidence, comprising principally the remains of Romano-British suburban properties fronting onto the Fosse Way (Leach 1982 and forthcoming).

An archaeological evaluation of the land at The Paddocks was commissioned by the owner, Mr. John Major, in support of a planning application to develop the site: this was undertaken by the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in 1989, according to the conditions of a Scheduled Monument Consent order (Leach 1989). As a condition of the Scheduled Monument Consent and of the planning consent, BUFAU was commissioned to conduct further investigations in 1990. The nature of the development meant that although the proposals were modified to accommodate maximum preservation of the archaeology *in situ*, excavation, and thus preservation by record, was required where service trenches were to affect surviving remains.

5.0 Method

In December 1990, five mechanically cut trenches were positioned on the site according to the specifications for the proposed location of gas, water and electricity services. With the exception of Trenches I(e), (d) and (w), this arrangement largely complements the positioning of the 1989 evaluation trenches, most of which investigated the proposed dwelling sites (fig. 2). The 1990 trenches comprised the main E–W alignment of Trench I and its three segments I(e), I(d) and I(w), and four spurs II, III, IV and V. The modern topsoil, with turf cover, was removed mechanically to a depth sufficient to expose the archaeological surface, which proved to be variable over the site. Archaeological deposits were identified as spreads of darker soil, with some more coherent features associated with artefact scatters. The subsoil horizon was cleaned manually, with the majority of contexts and features surviving at that level being excavated in order to define their character, function and phasing. Figure 3 illustrates in more detail the character of the archaeological evidence uncovered in these areas.

Contexts and features were recorded using standardised pro-forma record sheets, measured drawings and photographs (BUFAU site archive).

6.0 The Archaeology

The evidence recorded within each of the five trenches excavated in 1990 (fig. 2) is summarised below and illustrated in figure 3. This, in conjunction with the artefact assemblage and the 1989 results, forms the basis for an interpretation of the site's significance (8.0 Discussion).

Trench I

This central trench, on an east–west alignment, was the longest excavated in 1990 (24 metres). Its division into three segments, I(e), I(d) and I(w), was necessitated by the access track, whose crossing had to be excavated separately from the sections on either side.

Trench I(w)

This trench, 8 metres long, formed the western segment of Trench I, making a junction with Trench III on its southern side. It contacted and coincided partly with the 1989 evaluation Trench II. In the latter a truncated surface of natural clay alluvium, contaminated with remains and deposits

of human activity, was exposed, within which two large pits, a ditch and several post holes were observed but not excavated. In 1990 a yellow-brown gritty mixed clay sealed a complex of small post holes (025–032), extending east c.5 metres from near the western edge of the trench. Immediately to the west of these was a stone setting with vertical-sided slots and stake holes (F38); all of which suggest the remains of structures in this trench. To the south, on an east–west alignment, was a slot (F34) with two post holes at the west end and two at the east end which were cut by a further post hole (017). A modern water service trench (F10) cut across the trench 6 metres to the east and continued on a northeast–southwest alignment into Trench III. A post-medieval layer of cobbles and rubble (002), also observed in 1989, ran east–west parallel with, and continuing west beneath the modern site boundary wall to the west, and appears to have truncated the evidence of earlier remains.

Trench I(d)

This trench segment, 6 metres long, formed the middle section of Trench I, partly beneath the access track. Extending east from the junction with Trench I (w) was a disturbed area with features cutting into the natural alluvium. A series of suspected Romano-British post holes (F7) was located one metre east of the junction, beyond which was an associated floor level (F6) comprising a level surface, c.2 metres wide, which cut into the alluvial clay. Shallow north–south slots on the west and eastern edges contained small stake holes which may also belong to this structure. Cutting the eastern slot was a sub-circular post hole (F3). On a north–south alignment, 1.5 metres further east, a robber trench (F4) contained dirty soft clay with mortar flecks and fragments of charcoal, and was associated with two post holes. These last three features appear to belong to a phase of medieval activity, also recorded in Trenches I(e) and III.

Trench I(e)

This trench was the eastern segment of Trench I, 10 metres long, making a junction with Trenches IV and V on its southern side and with Trench II at its west end. In 1989 a Romano-British pit was partly sectioned by Trench VII. This pit (F19) was sectioned again by the south baulk of Trench

I(e) in 1990. Immediately to the northeast, a pit (F18), much disturbed by animals and roots, contained Romano-British and medieval pottery and some worked flint. Five metres to the east was the base of a shallow scoop (F17) and two medieval pits (F1 and F2). These contained a dark clay loam fill with medieval pottery fragments. At the junction with Trench V was a shallow gully (F31) which cut into the natural clay and the top fill of an adjacent ditch (F30). This gully continued on a northeast-southwest alignment, apparently into Trench IV as F32.

Trench II

This trench extended north for 10 metres from its junction with Trench I(e). At the northern end was the basal course of a section of post-medieval lias stone wall, aligned northwest-southeast and set tightly into a foundation trench (F27) which cut a medieval occupation layer (049). One metre to the south, an earlier Romano-British oven flue (F42) contained a basal deposit of hard gritty clay sealing animal bone and pottery. The upper fill was cut by a later, but probably still Romano-British, slot (F26). Towards the junction with Trench I(e) were three medieval pits, including one cess pit (F29, F28 and F41); these contained 12th and 13th-century pottery and may be associated with other pits in Trench I(e) (F1, F2, F18 and F25).

A machined extension of this trench northwards, in front of the existing garage building (fig. 2), revealed a series of mixed stony clay and rubble deposits extending to at least 2 metres below the modern surface. The instability of these deposits required that the trench be rapidly backfilled, with no opportunity for detailed examination and recording, although some post-medieval brick and pottery was recovered. The natural alluvium was not seen here, and the depth and character of the deposits suggest the presence of a substantial disturbance, possibly a large ditch.

Trench III

This trench extended south from the junction with Trench I(w) for 9 metres. Trench III contained a number of suspected pre-Roman pits (F13-16, F10-24) cut into the natural alluvium, which yielded only pieces of worked flint, including a blade and an end scraper. The corner

of a post-medieval pit (F12) was sectioned by the western baulk of the trench. To the north, a ditch (F11) aligned southeast-northwest yielded a concentration of Romano-British pottery, animal bone and flint flakes. This Romano-British ditch may be linked with F39 and F32 in Trench IV and F30/F31 in Trench V. Feature 11 was cut by the modern pipe trench (F10) which continued northeast into Trench I(w).

Trench IV

This trench ran irregularly southeast from its junction with Trench I(e) for 18 metres. Close to the junction with Trench I(e) was a Roman gully (F32), almost certainly the westward continuation of F31 in Trench V. A concentration of Roman pottery was recovered from its fills. Seven metres to the south was a northeast-southwest-aligned ditch (F39). Within its fill was Iron Age and Romano-British pottery and a coin of AD 270-90. Fragments of medieval and post-medieval ceramics from the layer above (046) indicate that more recent activity may be responsible for the disturbance of earlier occupation phases here. Four and a half metres further south a post-Roman pit (F40) cut a Romano-British occupation layer (047). This dark loamy spread was associated with two post holes (F43, F45), but machining had obliterated the exact relationship at this point. The occupation layer (047) continued south for a further 2 metres, apparently sealing an earlier unexcavated Romano-British ditch (F44) on a northwest-southeast alignment.

Trench V

This trench ran southeast from its junction with the east end of Trench I(e) for 9 metres. A post-medieval pit (F46) was located at the southeastern end of this trench, adjacent to a post-medieval occupation spread (051). This dark mixed soil, also observed in 1989 in Trench VII, contained large Hamstone and lias stones, some of which were burnt and were mixed with grey mortar and charcoal flecks. This deposit was not excavated further. At the junction with Trench I(e) a shallow gully (F31) cut into the upper fill of a Romano-British ditch (F30), and both were sectioned. The alignment of the latter suggests that it may be a northern continuation of the ditch F39 in Trench IV.

7.0 Finds

The artefact assemblage from West Street comprises the main material categories of ceramic, flint, animal bone, metalwork, and smaller groups of worked stone, glass, roof tile and brick. Each category is summarised in terms of overall quantification, location, classification, and for the pottery an indication of the fabric types represented. These assemblages are discussed along with the 1989 evaluation yield and with reference to the wider context of Ilchester's archaeology.

The quantity of finds recovered from the 1990 excavation was greater than that for the 1989 evaluation. In both cases all finds were recorded according to their numbered context and feature locations.

Ceramics

This was by far the most numerous category of artefacts recovered from West Street, totalling 387 sherds in 1990 and 271 sherds in 1989, when the majority were of post-Roman types and from unstratified levels. All Roman sherds were classified according to the revised Ilchester Roman Pottery Fabric Series (Edwards 1988). They were quantified using sherd count and weight to facilitate comparison with other sites, the record of which is lodged in the site archive.

Pre-Roman Pottery

Three fragments of Iron Age type were recovered from Romano-British contexts; F6 in Trench I(d), and from the Roman ditch F44 in Trench IV. No pre-Roman ceramics were recovered in 1989.

Romano-British Pottery

A total of 287 sherds was distributed across the whole site. Particular concentrations were present in the Romano-British occupation spreads 014, 047 (Trenches I(w), IV), the Roman ditches F11, F30, F31, F32 and F39, and the Roman oven flue F42. Sherds were also recovered from intrusive medieval pits, e.g. F2 in Trench I(e) and F29 in Trench II.

Black Burnished wares and grey wares were consistently dominant. Fragments of large storage jars, mortaria and imported amphorae were also recovered; while Oxfordshire colour-coated ware was well represented, along with lesser quantities of New Forest ware, Shepton Mallet ware and

other Severn Valley wares. Imported wares from Gaul comprised a small collection of Samian, both decorated and plain.

The 1989 assemblage, though smaller, was broadly consistent in terms of fabric, styles and relative quantities. The bulk of this assemblage was, however, recovered from post-Roman contexts.

Medieval Pottery

Distribution of medieval material was limited to Trenches I(e), I(w), II and IV. Ninety-four sherds (Ilchester Fabric Groups 17, 18, 19 and 20, Pearson in Leach 1982) were concentrated within four pits which are phased as medieval (F1, F2, F25, F29), and from two pits with Roman pottery (F18 and F28), here possibly as intrusive material. Fragments recovered from 046, the post-medieval layer in Trench IV, indicate that more recent activity may be responsible for the disturbance of earlier occupation deposits.

Post-Medieval Pottery

Only a small sample of 16th–19th-century fabric types was recovered, concentrated within the layers of topsoil of Trench I(w). Trench IV yielded material from the post-medieval layer (046), which seemed to truncate medieval layers.

Flint

Twenty-two flakes, three cores and 22 pieces of unworked flint were recovered from The Paddocks in 1990. Only two implements were recovered, a blade shaft and an end scraper; both of these were from F13 in Trench III and are possibly of Mesolithic type. No flint was recovered in 1989.

The majority of flint was concentrated in Trench III, noticeably Features 9, 11, 13, 16 and 24, all of which are suspected pre-Roman pits. The remaining flint was evenly distributed, not only in terms of location but also recovery depths. Some flint was also recovered from intrusive Roman and Medieval pits, suggesting that these cut into and disturb evidence of earlier activity.

The presence of even such a small assemblage as this may still be taken as an indicator of pre-Roman activity, although reliable associations with contemporary features is more difficult to establish. The blade shaft and end scraper are

probably of Mesolithic date, whilst the waste flakes are more characteristic of Neolithic and Bronze Age types.

The context and interpretation of West Street's flint assemblage probably conforms with existing knowledge of Ilchester's pre-Roman history. Leach (1988) has clearly documented how the evidence of Ilchester's pre-Roman settlement now lies buried beneath a later river valley alluvium. The evidence of occasional worked flint from West Street is in fact consistent with discoveries from other excavation projects conducted in and around Ilchester (Leach 1982 and forthcoming).

Animal Bone and Marine Molluscs

One hundred and fifty-five fragments of animal bone were recovered, no human remains were found. Cattle and sheep bone comprise the bulk of the assemblage, with pig, bird and dog also being represented. In all cases it was the long bone, jaw, teeth and skull fragments which were best represented. Survival of the bone was reasonably good due to the relatively favourable soil conditions. A catalogue of identified fragments forms part of the site archive.

Animal bone was recovered from all five trenches, but was concentrated within certain Roman and Medieval ditches and pits. Particular concentrations were recovered from the suggested oven flue (F42) in Trench II and the late Roman ditch (F32) in Trench IV.

This group is too small to compare quantitatively or by period with other analysed groups from Ilchester. The possible contamination between some Romano-British and Medieval contexts must be noted, as bone itself is normally intrinsically undatable from visual inspection.

A small assemblage of marine mollusc shells recovered in 1990 was predominantly of Oyster. The majority of the molluscs were concentrated in F11, a suspected Romano-British boundary ditch.

Metalwork (ferrous and non-ferrous) and Slag

Recovery of metal artefacts was minimal. Iron objects comprised a few nails from a Roman gully (F32) and a Roman ditch (F44), an iron

blade (F39, Roman ditch), and an iron spoon (046, post-medieval layer). The ditch F11 also yielded one piece of bronze scrap. The most important find was a single coin recovered from the ditch F39, Trench IV. This is a Barbarous Radiate, copying the Claudius II Consecratio issue, dated AD 270-90.

A concentration of iron slag, including three possible fragments from a hearth or oven, were excavated from F11, Trench III. Slag was also recovered from F33, a possible Roman oven flue and from F43, a Roman post hole.

This material has not yet been analysed, but may indicate iron-working or smithing in the vicinity.

Miscellaneous Finds

In addition to the above material categories, further smaller groups of artefacts were recovered. These include a large dressed Hamstone block, probably building material, from a pit (F28) in Trench II. Other building material and remains were left *in situ*, although examples of roof tile and brick were recovered in some instances, the majority associated with Roman contexts.

Four fragments of vessel glass were recovered, three probably of Roman manufacture and the fourth from a post-medieval wine bottle. Other modern glass fragments from the upper levels were not collected.

8.0 Discussion

Any discussion or interpretation of the archaeological remains encountered at West Street must take account of the limitations of the investigation and of the site's location relative to the known sequences, zones and character of Ilchester's archaeology. In the first instance, two largely complementary but restricted sets of linear trenches have been cut and recorded, providing only transects through the archaeology of the site, but which themselves (notably in 1989) were not always subjected to total excavation. In the second instance, this particular area is located peripherally within a western suburb of the historic settlement, where successive disturbances have taken their toll in reducing the coherence of preceding phases, as represented by the remains of past occupations.

The remains themselves are summarised and their significance briefly reviewed in Section 6 for 1990 (above), and for 1989 in Section 4 of the earlier evaluation report (Leach 1989). The following account offers an overview of their potential significance within the framework of four principal chronological phases: Prehistoric, Romano-British, Medieval, and Post-Medieval, and the wider context of Ilchester's perceived archaeology.

Prehistoric

The nature and circumstances of preservation of prehistoric settlement remains or other evidence beneath Ilchester is considered more fully elsewhere (Leach 1988 and forthcoming). Essentially, what may have been a relatively dryer island of slightly higher ground within the flood plain of the River Yeo may at Ilchester have offered a favourable site for early settlement beside the river. Flint and stone artefacts or waste material, while not abundant, suggest a human presence in the area and perhaps specifically at this locality well before 2000 BC. Representatives of this scattered lithic material at West Street fit with this pattern but seem not to be associated with contemporary features. What may belong to a much later and probably more intensive phase of prehistoric occupation was the group of shallow pits in Trench III. The few sherds of Iron Age pottery suggest activity in the last few centuries preceding the Roman occupation, which is consistent with evidence recorded in excavations elsewhere in Ilchester (Leach forthcoming). It is not possible to characterise this later phase of prehistoric settlement more fully from the remains recovered here at West Street, a problem which is hardly yet resolved anywhere else in Ilchester.

Romano-British

Despite the now considerable body of published evidence relating to the remains of Romano-British settlement at Ilchester (e.g. Leach 1982 and forthcoming), the representation of that evidence encountered at West Street was neither impressive nor very coherent. As mentioned, this is partly an outcome of the nature and limitations of the investigations by excavation here, but also the result of subsequent activities on the site.

From the scattered evidence recovered and recorded, principally in the trenches of 1990, several classes of remains survive here. The best evidence for structural remains comes from Trenches I(w) and I(d), where relatively slight buildings of timber-framed and wattle-and-daub construction appear to have existed. Elsewhere, the remains of linear ditches and pits suggest the former existence of ovens, industrial features, and boundaries. Ditches seen in Trench III (F11), Trench IV (F32) and Trenches V and I(e) (F30/F31), could belong to a system of boundaries sub-dividing or separating properties whose frontage will have been aligned on the Roman road—the Fosse Way—further to the west. Finds from the fills of these various features suggest a range of domestic and localised industrial activities underway in this area, approximately between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD. From these remains, and on the basis of evidence excavated previously nearby (Leach 1982), the area of The Paddocks, West Street is clearly situated within the former backyards of suburban roadside properties extending outwards as a ribbon development alongside the Fosse Way from Ilchester's South West Gate.

Today, this former road frontage lies beneath the modern widening of West Street, where substantial stone-founded buildings could be anticipated. From the evidence recorded in the western zone (approximately one-third of the development site) it is apparent that activities subsequent to the Romano-British occupation affected its remains. A truncation of the archaeological deposits and features, recognised and discussed in the evaluation of 1989 (Leach 1989), has further reduced and confused the evidence of this period in that zone.

Medieval

The evidence for medieval activity at The Paddocks was confined principally to the higher platform area east of the access track. The most coherent remains were recorded in Trenches I(d), I(e) and II, comprising a series of rubbish pits, structural features (post holes, a robber trench and a stone wall foundation), and some spreads of occupation soil and debris. Similar occupation deposits and what may be other rubbish pits were encountered further to the east,

principally in 1989, but not then fully excavated. Pottery associated with these features and deposits suggests a focus of activity during the 12th and 13th centuries.

Although the trenching and excavation involving the terraced area to the west was of more limited extent, evidence for medieval activity was virtually non-existent here. Since the remains surviving to the east suggest, once again, that suburban roadside properties and their backyard plots occupied this area, it would appear that later disturbances involving the truncation and thus removal of medieval structures and material further west has occurred here. Since the height of medieval Ilchester's prosperity seems to have been reached by the 12th and early 13th centuries, the evidence of activity on West Street at this period should correspond with a maximum expansion and prosperity of the southern Fosse Way suburbs.

Post-Medieval

Remains of this period were more widely distributed across the trenches, particularly within the upper horizons. The platform of higher ground occupying the eastern part of the site is largely an accumulation of soil and debris from late medieval times onwards. Within it were identified several rubbish pits, and parts of compacted clay or cobbled floor and yard surfaces. It is difficult to suggest any clear pattern to these features, although a well-cobbled surface revealed in Trench III (1989) and Trench I(w) (1990) may represent a trackway or yard to the rear of properties formerly fronting onto the main road. As has already been pointed out, a modern widening and realignment of West Street will have buried or destroyed the remains of any post-medieval structures on the original frontage line. Once again, it would appear that The

Paddocks is situated in the rear plots of post-medieval suburban road frontage properties, whose existence is documented from at least the early 18th century (Stukely 1724). Their last representative, a toll house, stood several metres to the west of the present site boundaries, across the road from the Old School House, to be swept away with the modern widening of West Street in the 1960s.

Although not well documented in these investigations, the discovery of a deeply-cut disturbance at the northern perimeter of the site is of some significance. The fills observed here are almost certainly within a large east-west aligned ditch, which originally ran southeastwards from this site and is still visible as a slight linear indentation within the adjacent pasture field. Two previous sections across this feature to the east (Leach forthcoming, Chs. II.1 and II.5) suggest a post-medieval ditch, possibly cut in the 17th century. It follows a line corresponding closely with the earlier Roman and Medieval defences of Ilchester in this sector, although as a medieval watercourse it could have acted as a leat supplying water to the 13th-century mill which is documented as lying close to the West Gate of Ilchester (VCH 1975, 191).

9.0 Acknowledgements

Both the 1989 evaluation and the 1990 excavation were directed by Peter Leach with the aid of teams from the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit. Post-excavation analysis was undertaken by Catharine Mould with advice from Jane Evans, Lynne Bevan and Russell Heath (BUFAU). The main body of this report was written by Catharine Mould. Peter Leach wrote the discussion and edited the report overall, and it was produced by Liz Hooper.

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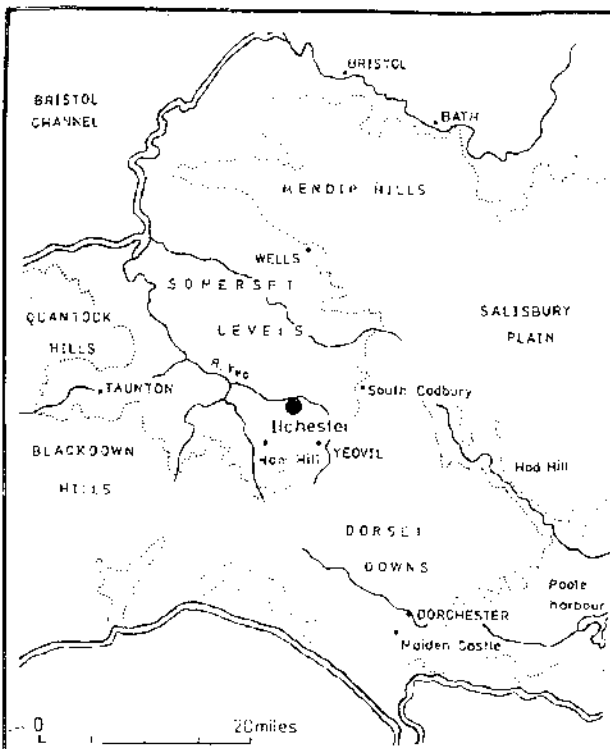


Fig 1a

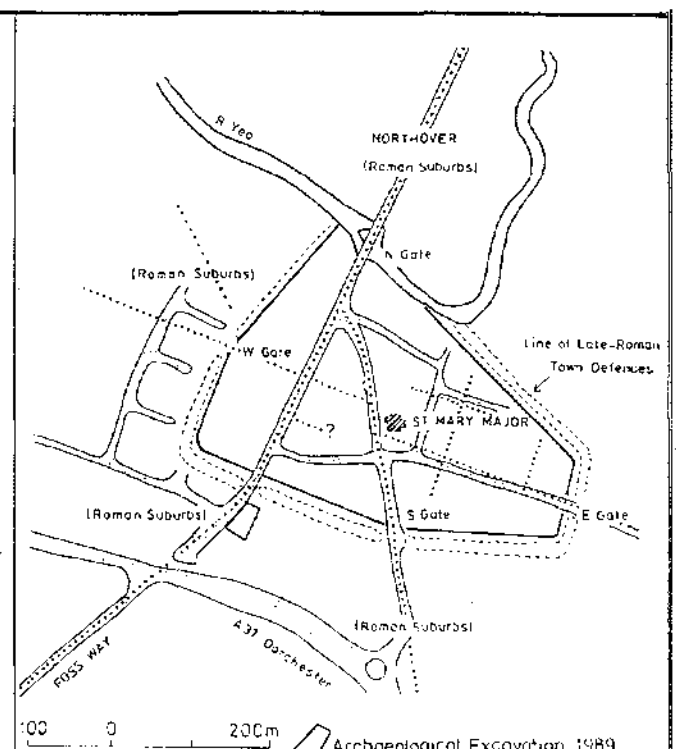


Fig 1b

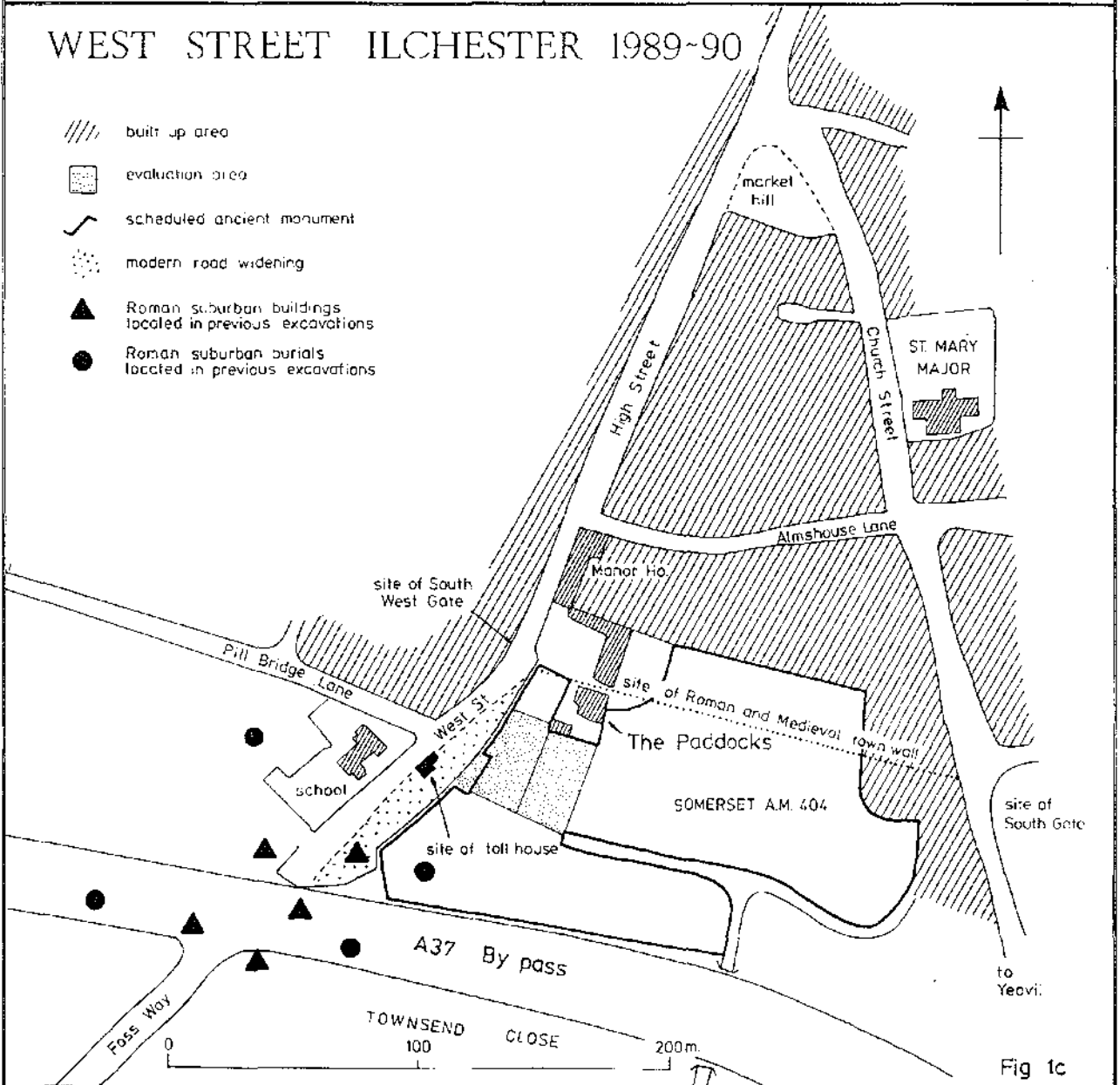


Fig 1c

Figure 1

LOCATION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRENCHES 1989-90

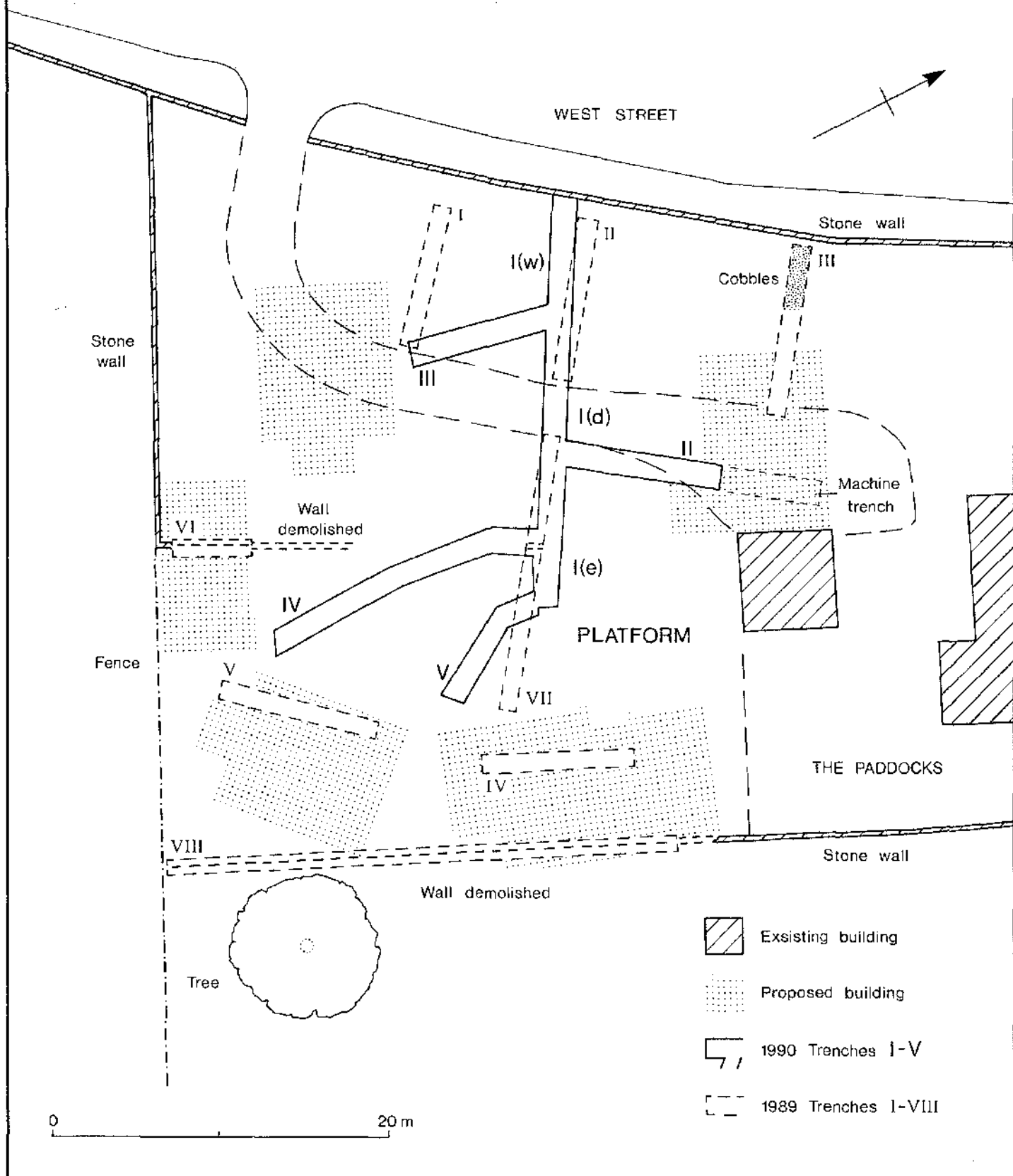


Figure 2

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES 1990

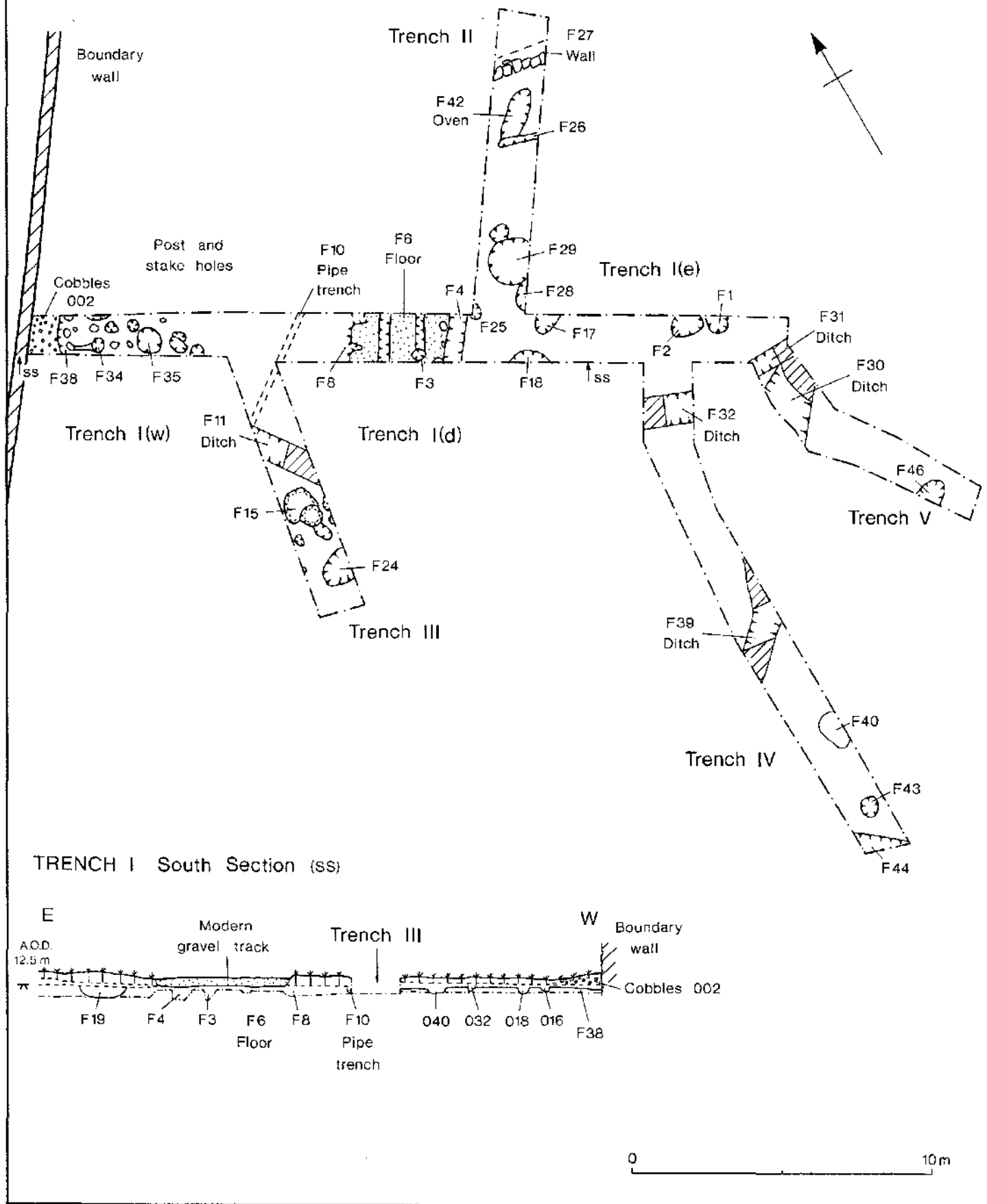


Figure 3