

ART. XVII. – *Excavations in Egremont Town Centre, 1983.*

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EXCAVATIONS were undertaken on the site of Nos. 6-10 Main Street, Egremont in July and August 1983, in advance of redevelopment, in order to assess the potential survival of medieval structures in the town. The work was carried out by the Cumbria and Lancashire Archaeological Unit on behalf of the Department of the Environment (now English Heritage).

Egremont seems to have been founded as a town in the later twelfth century at the instigation of the de Lucy family, lords of the Barony of Copeland. It served as a market centre for the area between Ravenglass and Workington, and was thus of considerable local importance. It is likely, however, that it suffered from the general depression of the area in the later medieval period, as the number of burgage plots occupied fell from 138 recorded in the *Inquisition Post Mortem* of John de Multon¹ in 1334, to 101 recorded in the 1578 survey, made for the Earl of Northumberland.² Reference to properties described as burgages in post-medieval documents has led Dr Winchester to suggest that the built-up areas of the nineteenth century town were considerably smaller than that of the medieval town at its greatest extent.³

There is a total lack of earlier documentation relating to the site of 6-10 Main Street, but more than one burgage plot is listed in various eighteenth and nineteenth century documents⁴ and the Tithe Plan of 1841 seems to show a burgage division running through the back of the plot, although it has been masked by later street-front buildings. This evidence suggests that the land boundaries had originally been laid out during the medieval period.

A trial trench was dug across the width of the site from the pavement to the edge of the present land boundary, a distance of some 17 m. This was later extended to 140 m², covering approximately half the area available for investigation.

The excavations showed that the buildings demolished over the last twenty years were probably those shown on the Tithe map (Fig. 2). This map depicted a terrace of three small houses, Nos. 6-8 Main Street, in the northern part of the site, and another row of two houses, Nos. 9 and 10 Main Street in the south, separated by a narrow passage called Cross Keys Lane. Behind Nos. 7 and 8 Main Street was another row of two houses apparently backing on the main row, with a yard in between. These were known as Cross Keys Lane, as were another two houses, situated behind No. 9 Main Street.

The excavations revealed that these nineteenth century houses lay directly on a bank of natural gravel, with only shallow foundation trenches cutting it. The bank sloped down towards the east of the site and here the nineteenth century floors were commensurably lower. There was a dump of demolition rubble over the whole excavated area which had effectively levelled up the site, and this had subsequently been turfed over.

Some floors composed of paved or cobbled areas survived within the houses, and there was a paved yard between the backs of Nos. 7 and 8 Main Street, and the houses on Cross Keys Lane, which had been converted into lavatories at some stage in its recent history. All these surfaces lay on deposits of silty soil, presumably made-up layers to

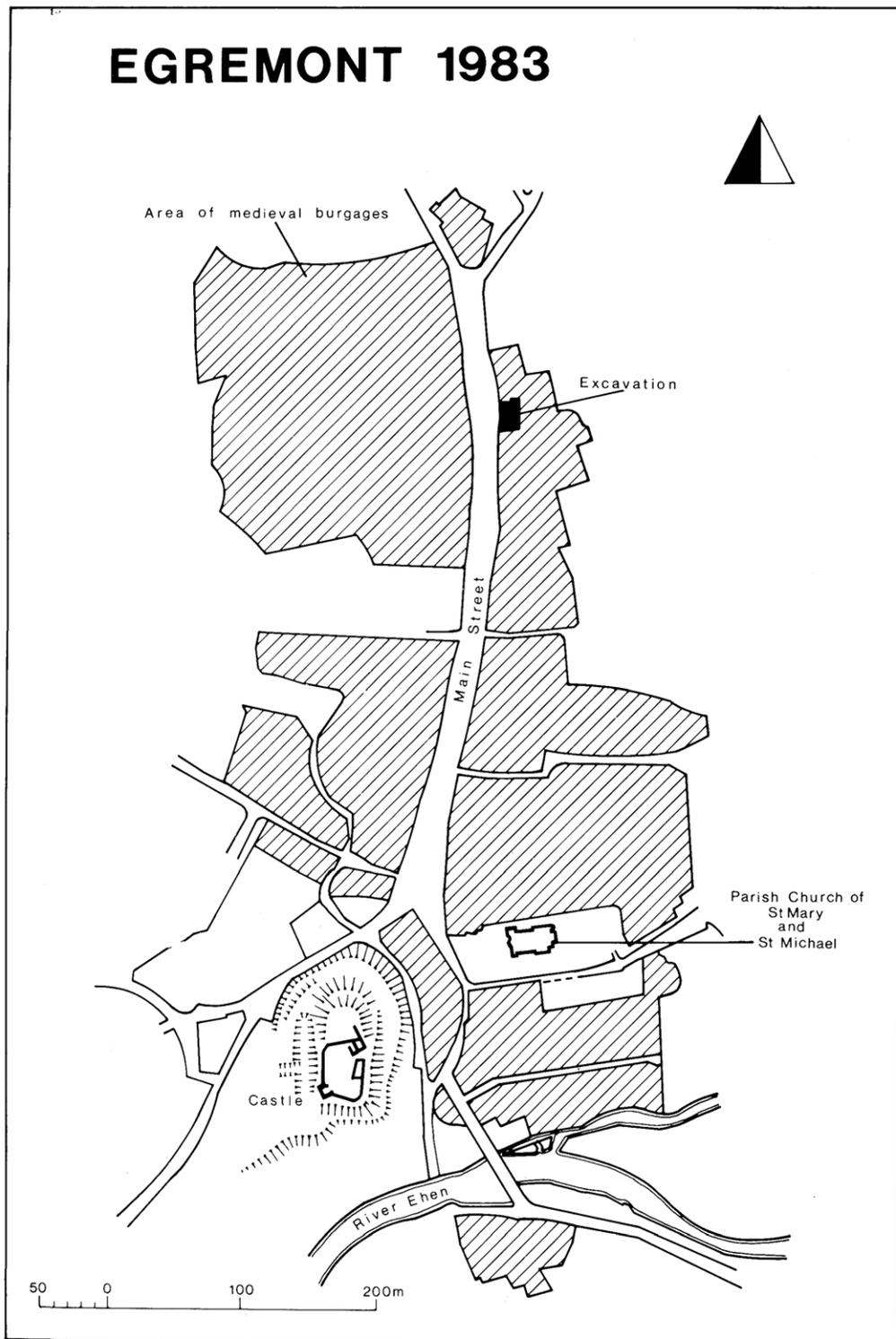


FIG. 1. - The location of the excavation in relation to the medieval town.

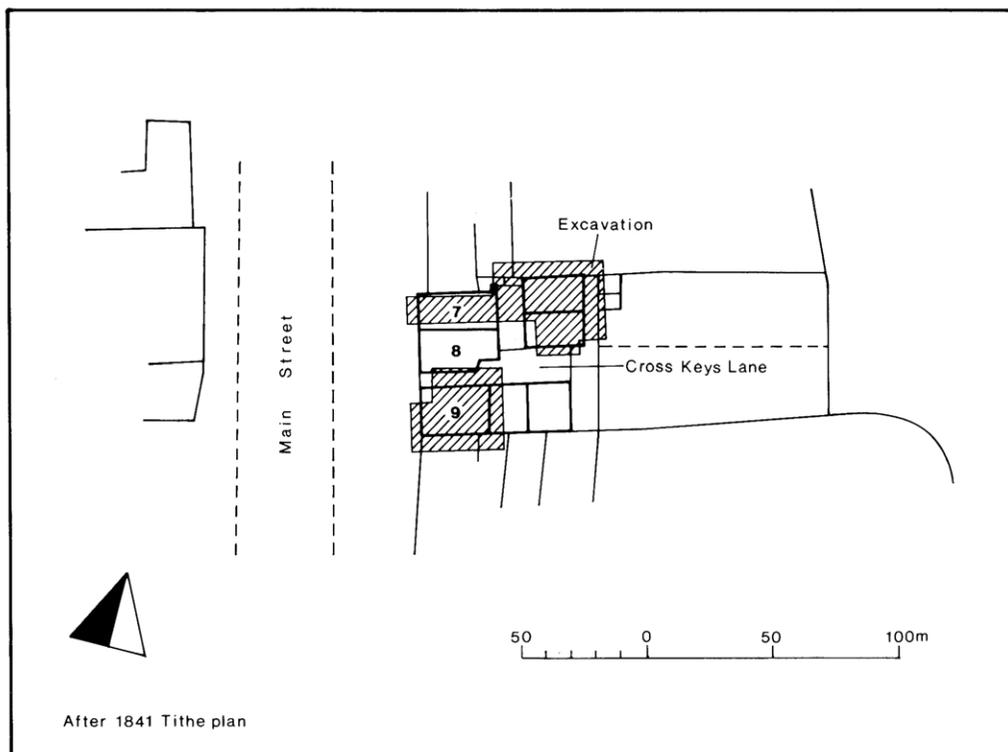


FIG. 2. – The nineteenth century structures, taken from the Tithe Map (1841) and confirmed by excavation.

level the floors. The walls of these houses were of mixed, roughly shaped stones, laid in irregular courses and bonded by lime mortar.

The presence of the gravel subsoil immediately below the nineteenth century levels and the disturbance caused by service trenches beneath Cross Keys Lane and elsewhere meant that the evidence for a pre-nineteenth century occupation of the site was extremely fragmentary. This problem was compounded by the lack of secure dating evidence from the features that stratigraphically seemed to be pre-nineteenth century. There seemed to be two distinct phases of earlier occupation in at least two areas of the site, although the majority of earlier features came from the area below No. 9 Main Street (Fig. 3). Here a series of fairly uniform post-holes, cutting what seemed to be a floor level, lay beneath the paved floor associated with nineteenth century walls. Six of these post-holes formed a rough alignment of more than 7 m in length, at an angle of 95° from the road and another two to the north may have been part of a converging alignment. The possible floor level (Fig. 3, 40) did not, however, seem to be related to the post-holes, since they cut across it at an acute angle. It comprised a spread of hard reddish clay, but no walls or other post-holes seemed connected with it and there was no associated dating evidence.

A pit (Fig. 3, 101), which had been heavily disturbed by nineteenth century features, lay to the south. It contained three tiny fragments of possibly medieval pottery, and could have been associated with either the post-holes or the clay floor.

An area of cobbles (Fig. 3, 31) was identified in the northern part of the site, beneath

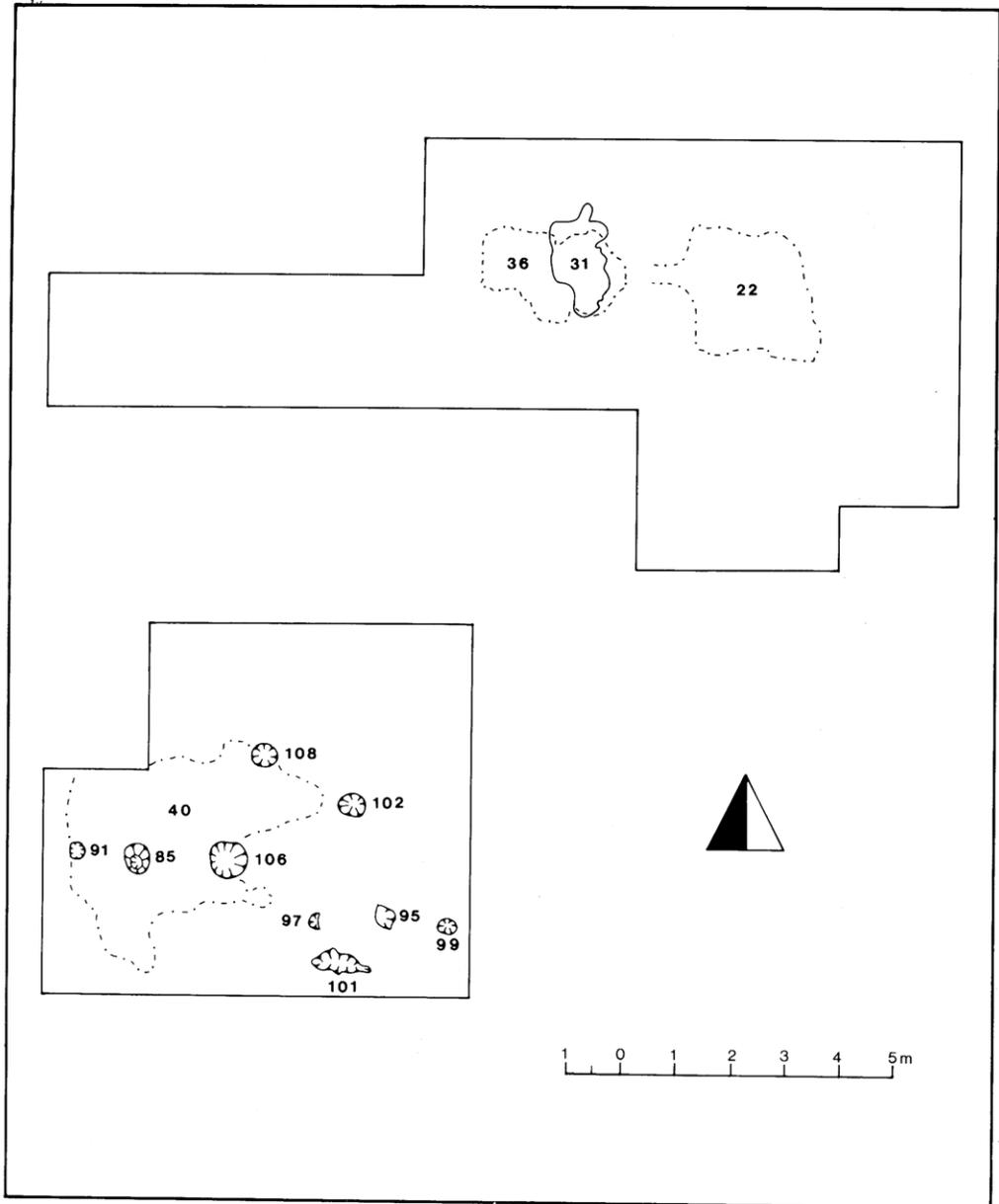


FIG. 3. - Pre-nineteenth century features.

the yard between the two rows of houses. This had clearly been cut by the insertion of the water pipes and the back wall of the houses on Cross Keys Lane. Beneath this lay another spread of hard clay (Fig. 3, 36) similar to that below No. 9 Main Street. A third spread of clay (Fig. 3, 22) was found to the east of the yard, within the area of the houses on Cross Keys Lane. A small sherd of medieval pottery was found on its surface, but

none of the possible floors could be securely dated. No walls or other structural evidence could be associated with any of them.

The excavation and a watching brief in the burgage tail of 59-60 Main Street, Egremont, showed that the natural gravel subsoil lies extremely close to the present surface. The nineteenth century developments, which seem to have taken place along most of the Main Street in the town, will thus have effectively destroyed most earlier occupation levels. What is left is mostly fragmentary and therefore difficult to rationalize, although it is possible that more archaeological deposits may survive beneath older houses in the town as less disturbance may have taken place there.

Acknowledgements

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References

- ¹ Public Record Office, C135/41/1.
- ² Cumbrian Record Office, Carlisle, D/LEC/301.
- ³ A. J. L. Winchester, Cumbrian Towns Survey, Cumbrian County Council (unpublished).
- ⁴ C.R.O. (Carlisle), D/LEC/317/Abstract 32.

