

Frontispiece: general view of site, Site B in foreground, looking south-west along the line of the levelled railway embankment towards Site A. In the foreground the stone bases and foundations of the columned building with well 2 to the left and well 1 in the centre. The corner of the Stukeley Fort lies on the near side of the two huts in the distance.

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SOUTH-EASTERN DEFENCES AND EXTRAMURAL SETTLEMENT OF LITTLE CHESTER, DERBY 1971–2

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SUMMARY

Excavations in 1971–2 at the Roman fort and settlement at Little Chester on the northern outskirts of Derby were carried out in advance of redevelopment of the south-east corner of the known Roman defences (Site A) and adjacent extra-mural settlement (Site B). The first occupation on Site A consisted of three phases of timber buildings of the late first to mid-second century AD from an extensive military and/or civil settlement, the defences or limits of which remain uncertain. The enceinte recorded by William Stukeley in the eighteenth century prior to its demolition succeeded this layout in the late second century and, on Site A, had at first consisted of a clay rampart and one or two ditches of at least three phases. In the late third or early fourth century the rampart was fronted by a stone wall and a larger single ditch of two periods was cut further from the rampart front.

On Site B, in the extra-mural settlement to the east, three successive metalled surfaces were identified, the latter two associated with stone-lined wells and metalled road surfaces on the projected line of Ryknield Street. In the angle between the latter and the road approaching the east gate timber buildings were erected and, in the late third century, a substantial rectangular building with stone footings and an external colonnade was constructed.

Occupation on both sites declined in the fourth century but in the late sixth century the ruined extra-mural structures were succeeded by a Saxon cemetery of extended inhumations accompanied by grave goods, an isolated burial lying on the berm outside the wall. In the later Anglo-Saxon period a rubble platform outside the rounded south-eastern corner of the Roman wall may have supported a strengthening of the wall or the addition of a bastion. At a similar date timber buildings had been erected against the exterior of the Roman wall and on the site of the Saxon cemetery. Thereafter the ground was given over to agriculture until in the eighteenth century the fort defences were destroyed and farm buildings erected on their site, to be succeeded in the mid nineteenth century by a railway embankment, now replaced by housing.

A wide range of finds, from pottery and glass vessels to metal and stone objects, environmental evidence and human remains of Roman to medieval date were recovered.

INTRODUCTION

The excavations at Little Chester in 1971–2 were arranged in the first instance through the co-operation of the landowners, Derby Corporation, the Department of the Environment (now the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission), and the Derbyshire Archaeological Society. All three bodies generously provided funding and

material assistance. The brunt of the administrative work during both excavation and the post-excavation process fell on the officers of the Derbyshire Archaeological Society and the writer would especially like to thank the then Secretary Mr M.A.B. Mallender and the Treasurer Mr F. Jeffery for their assistance in organisational and financial matters. During the course of the excavation Derby Corporation very kindly provided accommodation for the excavation team, the loan of equipment and also manual labour to assist completion of excavation in the final weeks. There was the closest collaboration at all times with the staff of the Derby Corporation Estates and Development Department, the Borough Architects Department and Derby Museum and Art Gallery. Richard Darlington of the Architects Department and Bryan P. Blake, the then Curator of the Museum, were of particular assistance and were largely instrumental in arranging a very successful open day. Grateful thanks are due to all those who helped on the excavation and particularly to the members of the full-time excavation team, Peter Brady, Christopher Drage, Nancy Gosney, Alexander McCondach, Colm O'Brien, and Bruce Williams. The officers of the Archaeological Research Committee, Richard Morley and Roger Salt helped to organise local volunteer support. Mechanical excavators were provided by City Plant Hire (Derby) Ltd, Geoff Greaves and J.S. Player Contractors Ltd.

The writer would particularly wish to thank Maurice Brassington, Josephine Dool and Hazel Wheeler for their help and advice, freely given, during the course of excavation and post-excavation. More recently the assistant curator of Derby Museum, Richard Langley, has generously discussed recent work on the site and arranged access to material in the Museum archives. I am also grateful to Gavin Kinsley for discussion of the post-Roman aspects of the site.

The report was completed over the course of almost two decades with the support and encouragement of firstly Sarnia Butcher, then of the Department of the Environment, and, later, Peter Wilson and Sarah Jennings of English Heritage. Completion had originally been planned for the mid 1980s, as a complement to work both within the defences and on adjoining sites carried out by Josephine Dool, Hazel Wheeler and others, but these were published separately (Dool and Wheeler 1985). Continuation of the project thereafter was, in no small part, due to encouragement from the Director of the Trent and Peak Archaeological Trust, Graeme Guilbert, and the past and present editors of the Derbyshire Archaeological Society, Dr. John Drinkwater and Pauline Beswick.

The initial post-excavation work on the finds was carried out by Howard Pell and members of the site staff. The plans and sections are the work of Alexander McCondach and Graham Scobie, the drawings of the pottery by Lucia Vinciguerra, Robin Symonds and the writer. The majority of the small finds were drawn by the Illustrators Department of the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments; the remainder by Dominique Bacon and Beverley Leader of Canterbury Archaeological Trust. Peter Atkinson, Mark Duncan, Will Foster and Peter Reavill produced other drawings, the histograms and tables; Don Farnsworth produced the composite panorama in the frontispiece, the remaining photographs were printed by Andrew Savage of Canterbury Archaeological Trust. To all these persons grateful thanks are due. For assistance in the editing and production of the report I am much indebted to Jane Elder, Ann Clark and Dee Dent of Canterbury Archaeological Trust.

In the preparation of the report the assistance of many consultants, credited at the head of their respective reports, is gratefully acknowledged. I am indebted to Leo Biek for help and encouragement and for arranging specialist study of much material. The conservation of the finds was carried out by the Institute of Archaeology, London University, and the Conservation Laboratory of the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission (then the Department of the Environment). The final stages and editing of the report were completed while the writer was employed by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust and the writer is very grateful to the Director, Paul Bennett, the publications officer, Ian Riddler, and other members of staff, credited above, for their support in bringing this work, long in gestation, to a successful conclusion. The protracted delay in the production of this report and any shortcomings in its content remain alone the responsibility of the principal author.

Location, Geology, Soils

The Roman fort at Little Chester lies in the north-east suburbs of Derby, 1km from the present city centre, the site of the main Saxon and medieval settlements (Fig. 1). The site lies on the flood plain east of the River Derwent, which here follows the west side of its valley, below the high ground of Strutt's Park, the site of the earliest Roman activity (Dool 1985a, 15–32). The valley floor is here some 1.5km wide, the ground on the east rising less steeply towards Breadsall. To the south the valley widens, the river turning south-east to join the Trent at Sawley. Little Chester thus has access downstream to a major navigable river and upstream to the southern Pennines, complementing the Roman road system radiating from it. The rich mineral deposits and pastureland of the Peaks lie within easy reach to the north, the agricultural land of the Trent Valley adjoins to the south.

The Derwent flood plain here consists of deposits of gravel and sand covered by varying depths of loam and silt. The higher ground to the east and west consists of Keuper Marl (now called Mercia Mudstone), the hill of Strutt's Park comprising interleaved bands of red marl and sandstone capped by boulder clay. Within a kilometre to the north the geology changes to Bunter Sandstone and Millstone Grit while 5km to the north-east this gives way to the Coal Measures. The majority of minerals used on the site were derived from these deposits.

The soils on the site were fine-textured, poorly drained clay silts in large part derived from disturbed alluvium. The uppermost natural deposits on both Sites A and B consisted of a grey-brown clay silt. In Section G–K on Site A this deposit was encountered at 46.78m OD on the west and 46.30m OD on the east while in E–F it dropped from 46.30 on the north to 45.75 on the south (Figs 4 and 5). In the former section sand and small pebbles underlay the clay silt at approximately 46.05m OD but in the latter a fine sand was visible at 44.75m OD. On Site B a similar grey-brown loam was noted in Section L–M at 45.75m OD, continuing to a depth of at least 44.30m OD. The present water-table was noted at approximately 44.70m OD on both sites, the base of Ditch 2 in Section E–F as well as the base of Well 1 being waterlogged; in both cases organic debris survived. The bases of the other ditches became waterlogged at times during the winter of 1971–2 and there was noticeable iron-panning in the base of Ditch 4, but no organic remains survived in these features.

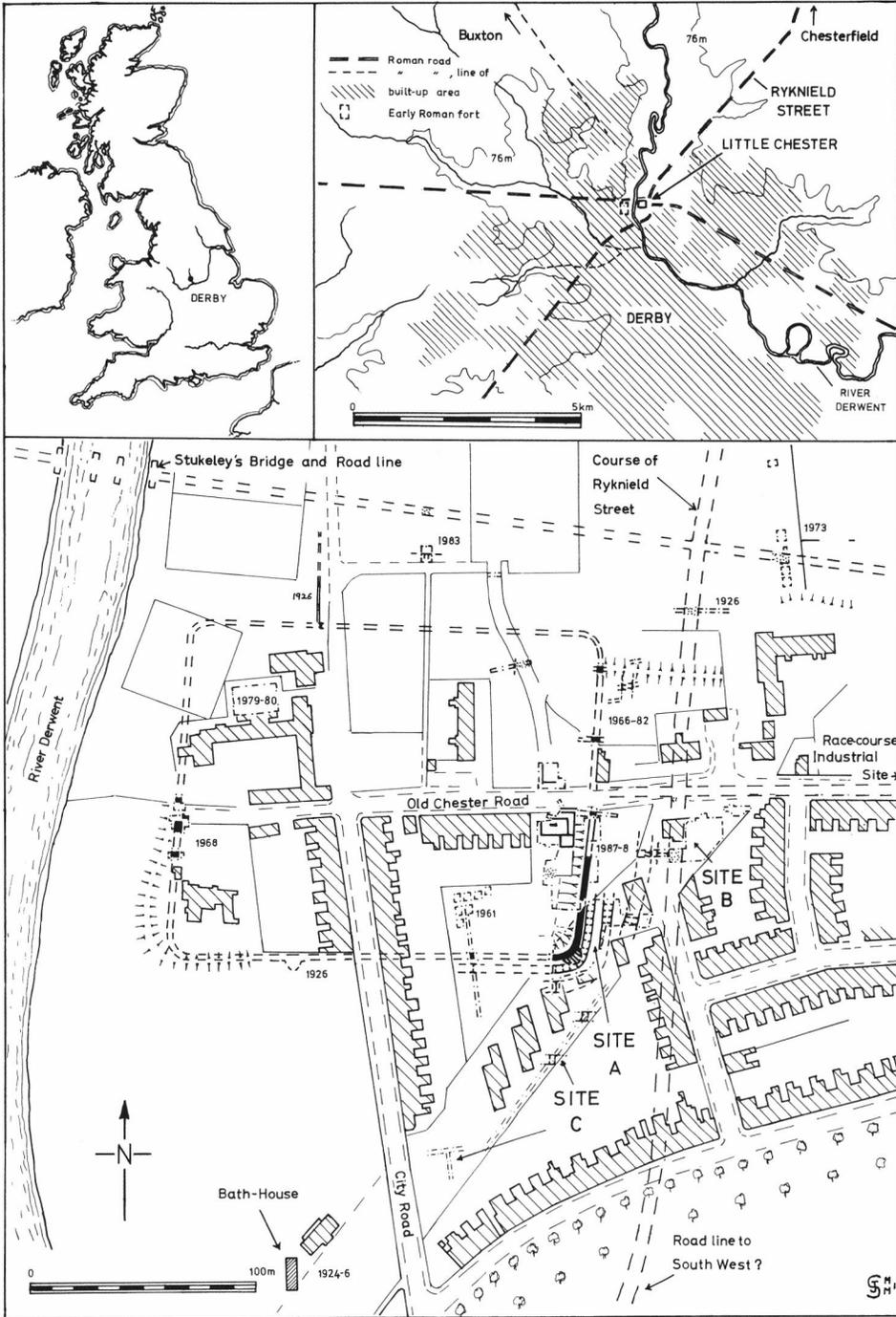


Fig. 1: Little Chester: location plans.

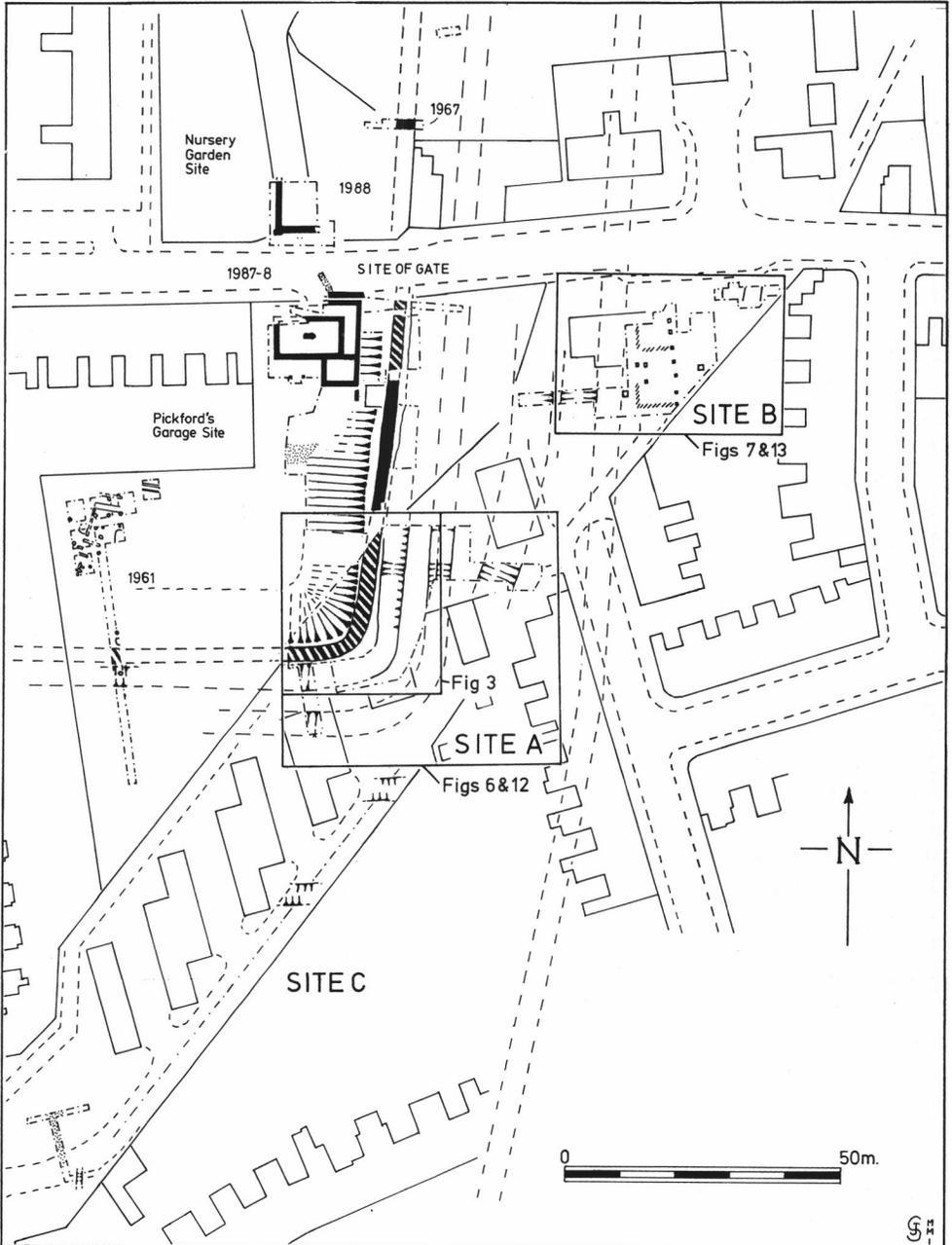


Fig. 2: Little Chester: location of Sites A–C and detailed plans.

History of Investigations on the Site

From the time of William Stukeley, Little Chester has been identified as the *Derbentione* of the *Ravenna Cosmography* on the basis of the present name and its listing between

Lutudaron, probably near Carsington in the southern Peak district, and *Salinis*, Middlewich in Cheshire (Rivet and Smith 1979, 334). The next apparent reference occurs in the Domesday Book where the settlement is called *Cestre*, the first element in the name not appearing until the late thirteenth century when the site is referred to as *Parva Cestria* in a charter. In another charter of 1298 the site is referred to as *Ad Pontechester*, an interesting variation but referring not to the Roman bridge, then probably ruinous, but to the contemporary bridge to the south nearer the medieval city (Williamson 1927, 143–198).

Stukeley in the early eighteenth century not only recorded the plan of the later Roman defences during their demolition for road metalling, but also noted the position of the presumed Roman bridge over the Derwent and the roads approaching it from the south-west and east (Stukeley 1721, 24–5; 1776, 54). Little is heard of the site again until, in the late nineteenth century, house building and the construction of the Great Northern Railway in 1888 produced a spate of casual finds both within the defences and in the area outside the east gate (VCH 1905, 216–21). The layout and true extent of the extra-mural settlement only became apparent subsequently in 1925–6 when the present Park and playing fields were created north and south of the fort. To the south a substantial heated building, either a bath house or part of a *mansio*, represented the first major structure discovered outside the southern defences (Sherwin 1925a, 256–8; Brassington 1993). On the north side over a kilometre of Rykniel Street was exposed, flanked for at least 250 metres by structures. In the light of the previous finds to the east of the fort this ribbon development, and the structure to the south, suggested an extensive civil settlement focused on the area outside the east gate but extending out along the access routes. Of the fort itself part of the robbed south wall was exposed while within the north-west corner substantial building remains and a post-Roman inhumation cemetery came to light, the latter the first hint of later activity on the site (Clews 1927, 376).

It was not until 1961 that any controlled excavations took place and a structural sequence was established for the south defences and internal structures (Webster 1961, 85–110). Subsequent work over the following two decades rediscovered elements of the east defences, internal structures and a simple gate on the western river side (Todd 1967, 70–85; Brassington 1967, 39–69; Annable and Wheeler 1985, 33–37). The most significant investigation of the interior of the walled area was that carried out by Wheeler in 1979–80, this site referred to here as the ‘North-West Sector’ (Wheeler 1985a, 38–153). Later redevelopment adjacent to the present site allowed the recording of a section of the eastern rampart and wall and of a substantial structure within them, this site here termed the ‘Pickford’s Garage Site’ (Langley and Drage 2000).

One major result of work over recent decades has been the identification of a primary Flavian occupation extending beyond the known defences, and presumably part of a larger military establishment or its civil settlement, the defences of the former having not yet been certainly identified. The military history of the site was further extended by the recognition of even earlier pre-Flavian military site in Strutt’s Park on the opposite bank of the river (Forrest 1967, 162–5; Brassington 1970, 22–30; Dool 1985a, 15–32). Recent research has also illuminated the history of the extra-mural complex, with the discovery of a kiln complex belonging to the major early second century phase of Little Chester, but succeeded by later domestic and industrial occupation. The location of this site one kilometre to the east is another indication of the size of the total complex which, as a

result of work in the early 1980s, can be seen to comprise a high-status burial ground and further industrial zones (Brassington 1971, 36; Dool and Wheeler 1985, 154–280). In addition, the excavations in the 1960s at St. Alkmund's Church and of the Full Street site in the centre of Derby have filled in details of the subsequent shift of occupation and the development of the late Saxon and medieval urban focus (Hall and Coppack 1972, 29–77).

The 1971–2 Excavations

The present excavations were occasioned by plans to redevelop the site of a disused embankment of the old Midland Railway which crossed part of the Little Chester Roman fort and the extensive extra-mural settlement on the Derwent flood plain (Fig. 1). The embankment was levelled to approximately the pre-existing ground level of the mid nineteenth century during the first part of 1971 and the excavations were thereafter conducted from October of that year to May 1972.

Work was concentrated on the potentially richest zone of the levelled embankment south of the Old Chester Road (centred at SK 35433749).

From previous work at Little Chester, in particular Webster's and Todd's excavations, it was anticipated that the south-east corner of the fort and part of the eastern extra-mural settlement would lie on this site, the latter focused on the junction of Rykniel Street, skirting the eastern defences, and the road heading east from the eastern gateway towards the Racecourse industrial area and cemetery (Webster 1961; Todd 1967). The land available comprised a strip 28–30m wide by 220m long, the section of greatest potential being the 120m from the Old Chester Road south-west to include the fort corner (Fig. 2). Considerable disturbance from the construction of the embankment had been anticipated but the initial archaeological clearance showed that the nineteenth century embankment had simply been dumped over the low earthworks remaining after the demolition of the walls a century before. Consequently, while the surviving summit of the rampart had been exposed by the contractors removing the bank in 1971, the ditch system lay beneath a metre of embankment material, filling the slight hollow left from the erosion and levelling of the entrenchments. To the south-west up to the line of City Road, the old ground surface was similarly inaccessible. Outside the defences, north-eastwards towards the Old Chester Road, the ground level rose and only superficial embankment makeup had been left. Demolition of the bridge had caused some disturbance close to the Old Chester Road but this potential area of extra-mural settlement was largely intact and vulnerable to damage during development.

Work was therefore concentrated on the most accessible and significant areas, the rampart and ditches at the fort corner (Site A) and the extra-mural settlement (Site B). Contractors' trenches south-west of Site A also provided some information on major features on Site C. On Site A it was intended to investigate the character and history of the known defensive circuit and the extensive occupation deposits observed in the past to underlie them. To this end the rampart, the layers underlying it and the berm to the east were cleared in plan but the ditches were only sectioned by trenches cut east and south from the corner. The base of the rampart and the footings forming the late Roman defences survived as expected but the ditch system proved unexpectedly complex and, within the constraints of the site, could not be fully sectioned at any one point. The fullest section was achieved on the east side of the fort defences (Section G–K) but even there

problems of dating individual ditches relative to changes in the rampart were not fully resolved and one ditch of late Roman or later date was only partially exposed and not traced along its course northwards. The unexpected feature of this area was the presence of an Anglo-Saxon burial and evidence for late Anglo-Saxon ditches and occupation outside the defences. On Site B, as anticipated, the line of Rykniel Street and the adjoining settlement were revealed by open excavation as well as a further zone of Anglo-Saxon burials and later occupation. The outer limits of the ditch system were sectioned to complement the results from Site A, allowing a composite drawing to be created for the complete ditch system (Fig. 27). Finally, observations of trenches on Site C allowed tentative identification of the corresponding ditch system on the south. The deeper stratigraphy on the site was thus left largely untouched, being only sectioned where this would not affect the stability of the proposed development; the open excavation, especially on Site B, was directed to areas where the foundations would most damage the shallow archaeological levels.

The rampart has been reinstated as a feature within the new layout and Well 1 is now displayed in a turfed area amongst the buildings of the development, the stone foundation blocks from the main extra-mural building having been moved and relaid close by.

Recording System, Post-Excavation Analysis and Nature of Report

The archaeological deposits in the 1971–2 excavations were recorded by arabic numerals in sequence 1–199, being assigned on Site A, 200–276; 300–334, 400–439 being used on sections of Site B. In addition features recorded but not numbered on site have been given contexts from 500–527. With smaller features the number refers to both cut and fill; with larger features the series of numbered deposits filling them have been grouped under new titles assigned to them in post-excavation work, for example, Ditches 1–7, or Wells 1 and 2. The site was recorded in Imperial measurements here converted to metric; scales in photographs are consequently Imperial.

The site chronology has been divided into nine periods, 1–9, sub-divided into phases. Periods 1–5 cover the Roman period, Period 5/6 is tentatively identified as a sub-Roman phase, 6 is the early Anglo-Saxon cemetery, 7 is the later Anglo-Saxon or Saxo-Norman activity, 8 the medieval occupation and 9 covers the post-medieval remains.

The finds collection policy will be described below, here it should be noted that all stratified material observed by eye during excavation was initially collected but that during the finds processing a proportion of the pottery was discarded after initial recording of types and quantities. The Site Records and finds are lodged in Derby Museum and Art Gallery.

The bulk of the report text was written in 1989 and 1995–6, the majority of the specialist reports being either provided, or given a final editing, during 1996–8. Some environmental reports were only finally edited in the early part of 2001. No revisions have been carried out to the specialist work since that date but the text of the report and discussion has been much revised in 2000–2001, incorporating recent work on this and comparable sites. The following account of the site is firstly divided between a description of the excavated features of the Roman period and the following post-Roman periods. In view of the separation of the site into two main areas which, in stratigraphic terms, are only loosely connected, the description of each period below is divided into two main sections covering Sites A and B, with a subsidiary note on the observations on Site C. The

Anglo-Saxon cemetery is treated separately but the concluding discussion of the Roman and then post-Roman periods covers all aspects of the site.