BURPHAM: A SETTLEMENT SITE WITHIN THE SAXON DEFENCES

by H. Sutermeister

A limited excavation of this Saxon burh has revealed traces of settlement and industrial activity within the walls. The suggestion is made that a considerable village existed on the site up to and beyond the Norman conquest.

The village of Burpham lies about two miles upstream from Arundel and five miles from the south coast. It takes its name from the enormous defensive enclosure which still dominates the village and constitutes one of the most impressive of that great series of fortified camps which King Alfred established along the boundaries of the Kingdom of Wessex to protect his people from the invading Danes (Fig. 1.).

Our knowledge of the *Burghal* system is derived largely from a set of seven documents derived from an original, now lost, of the reign of Alfred's son, Edward and known collectively as the Burghal Hidage. The seven lists, taken together, include thirty sites in Wessex and another three in the neighbouring kingdom of Mercia. Most *burghs* were on the coast or on the rivers Thames and Avon, which could have been used by the invaders to reach the interior. The system was so designed that no part of Wessex was more than twenty miles from a *burgh* and the defended areas were sufficiently large to offer shelter in emergencies to their local population and, perhaps, their cattle.[1]

The defensive system allocated to each *burgh* a certain acreage of land, which was related to the length of its walls and was supposed to support enough men to garrison the fort in times of trouble:

> For the maintenance and defence of an acre's breadth of wall sixteen hides are required. If every hide is represented by one man then every pole of wall can be manned by four men. Then for the maintenance of twenty poles of wall eighty hides are required.[2]

Burpham is in the middle rank of size, neither amongst the very largest *burghs*, which might require as many as 2,400 hides for their defence, nor amongst the smallest, with as little as 24 hides.[3] The allocation at Burpham was 720 hides, which accords well with the length of the existing defences.
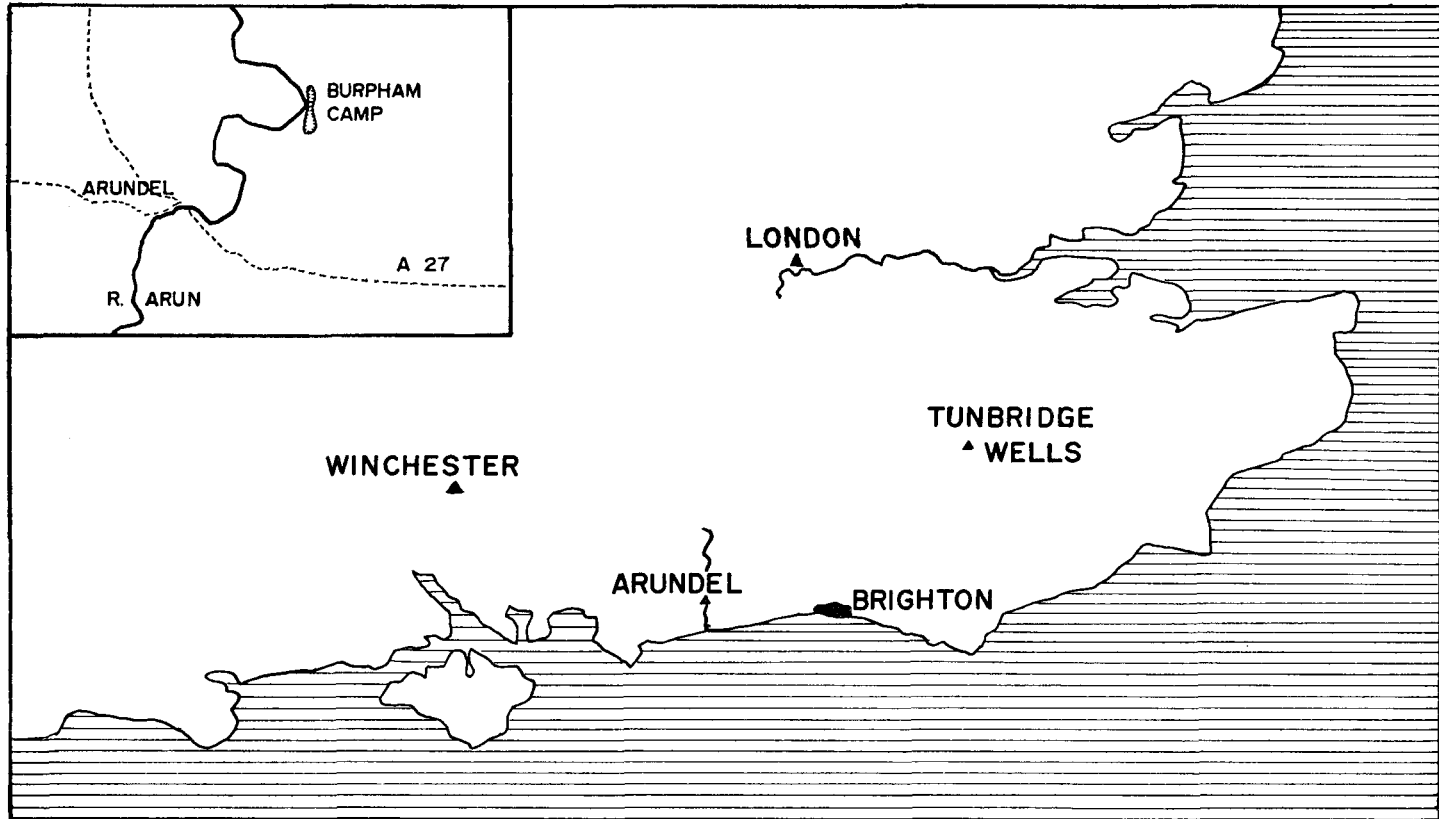
About half the *burghs* listed in the Burghal Hidage were, or became, substantial towns: these include Wallingford, Oxford, Southampton, Winchester and Southwark. Others remained as villages and a few, such as Burpham, retained no settlement at all: the modern village lies outside the defences on the north. It is, indeed, uncertain whether there was any Saxon settlement on the site or whether it was intended solely as a refuge for short periods of emergency. One of the aims of excavation was to explore this question.

---

[1] F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England.* (1947), p. 262.

[2] D. Hill, ' The Burghal Hidage: the establishment of a text ', *Medieval Archaeology*, vol. 13 (1969), p. 90.

[3] Ibid, pp. 87, 91.

SOUTH EAST ENGLAND SHOWING POSITION OF BURPHAM

BURPHAM
CAMP

ARUNDEL

A 27

R. ARUN

LONDON

TUNBRIDGE
▲ WELLS

WINCHESTER
▲

ARUNDEL
BRIGHTON

FIG. 1.   Position of Burpham

VILLAGE

SITE

RIVER
ARUN

N

BURPHAM

0   50   100   200
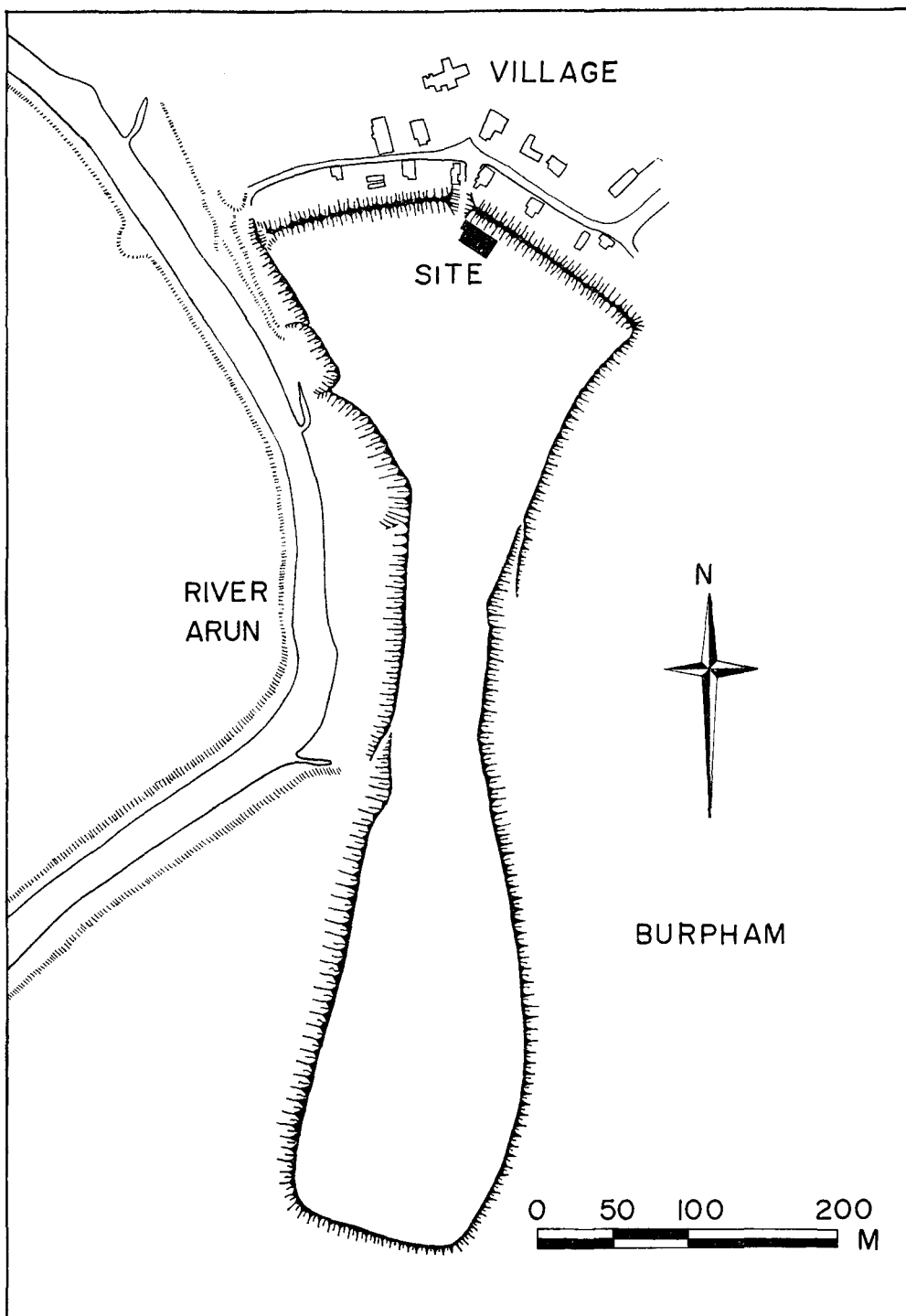   M

FIG. 2.   Plan of the defences and position of the excavation site

The earthworks at Burpham comprise a large embanked enclosure in the shape of a figure 8 running directly north-south with the river Arun flowing past the western side. The site is a natural Chalk hill rising above the flood plain of the river and fortified with a bank on all sides to emphasise the contours of the land. The defences are most formidable on the north at the neck of the promontory, because there is no natural rise in the ground at this point. The bank here is at least seven metres high and there is a deep ditch on the north, now occupied by the gardens of the cottages along the main street. The main entrance gateway is a narrow opening through the centre of this northern bank. The whole fort measured 681m. from north to south, 56m. across the waist and 244m. across the broadest part of the northern half. It is very probable that in Saxon times the river Arun carried more water than it does today and the plain would frequently have been flooded, offering additional protection from attack on the south and eastern sides.

The nature of the defences and the site suggests that Burpham might well have originated as an Iron Age promontory fort. No scientific excavation of the bank has ever been undertaken to check this possibility, but it is quite consistent with the use of the site as a Saxon *burgh*. Alfred was not too proud to employ the defences of his predecessors when they were suitably placed. At Porchester, for example, he refortified the Roman shore fort, and Pilton, Halwell and Chisbury are also of the Iron Age in origin.[1]

Excavations inside the fortifications at Burpham were brought about by plans to erect a new village hall just inside the gateway and took place at two different stages: In July of 1972 the area expected to be occupied by the new building was excavated under the auspices of the Department of the Environment. The investigation took two weeks and was confined to stripping an area of 25m. north-south by .15m. east-west. A small digging machine was employed to strip off the topsoil and the area was then cleaned down by a group of six volunteers augmented by local archaeologists.[2]

The second stage of the investigation took place in February, 1973 while the builders were engaged in laying drainage pipes from the new hall to the main street of the village, passing through the eastern side of the gateway. It was only possible to make brief observations of the features encountered in this narrow trench and there was no opportunity for detailed excavation or measurement. The position of these features is shown only approximately in Figure 6.

The excavations are described in the two stages in which they took place.

THE HOUSE SITE (FIG. 3)

After stripping off the topsoil in the area of the proposed building, Chalk bedrock was exposed at a depth of .25 to .40m. The land was currently used for grazing, but had at some point been ploughed, for the furrows had scored into the Chalk. A modern drainage trench also ran across the whole of the excavated area parallel to the bank. With these exceptions, all features revealed in the Chalk were of Saxon date.

Cut into the surface of the rock was a complex of post holes, small gullies and pits arranged in two main lines running east-west and parallel to the edge of the bank, the nearer line being only about 1.5 to 2m. away from the foot of the slope. Other, shorter lines ran at right angles to these

STRUCTURE TWO

STRUCTURE ONE

N

METRES

0   1   2
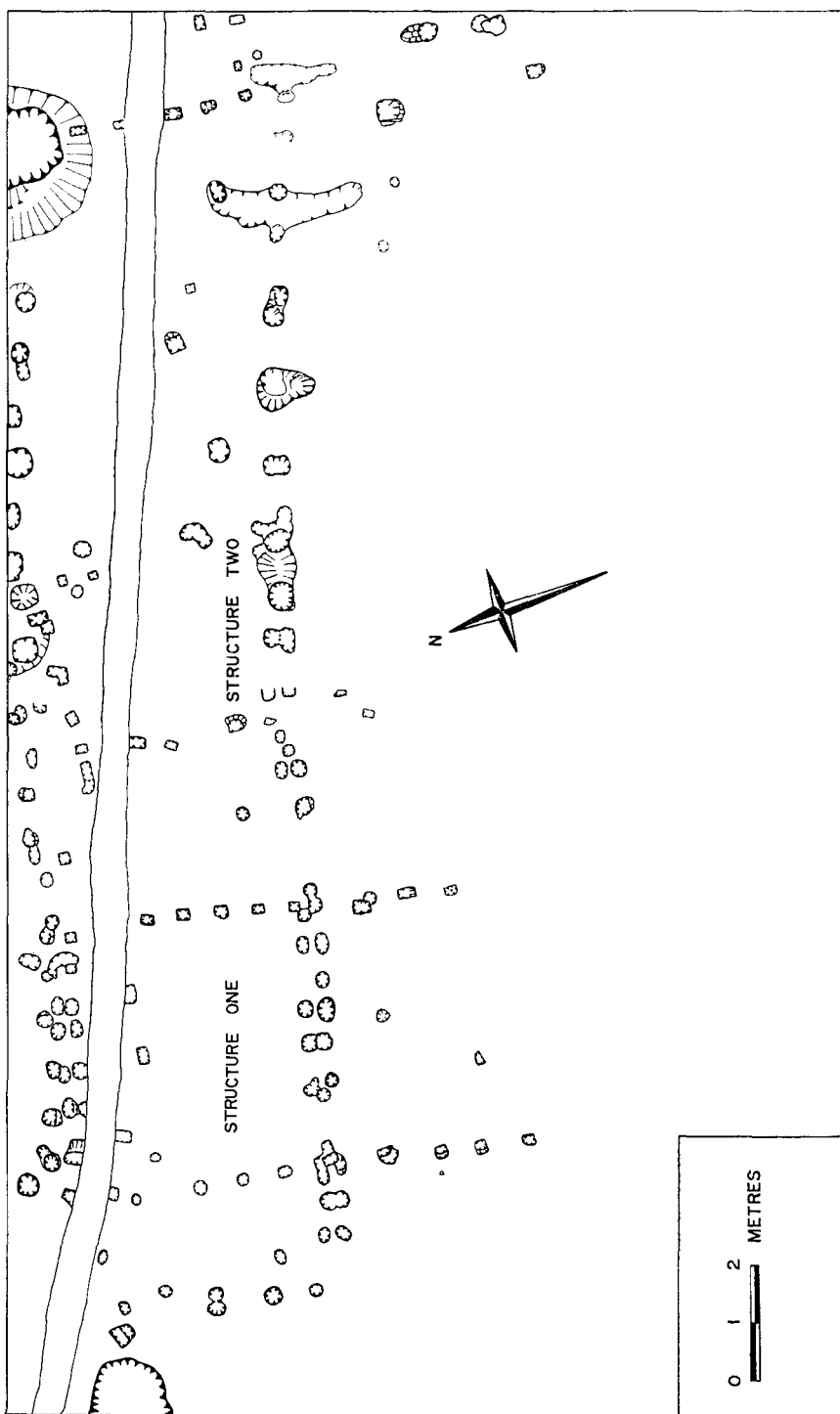
FIG. 3.   General plan of the site

BURPHAM PITS

P. I.

P. 2

KEY

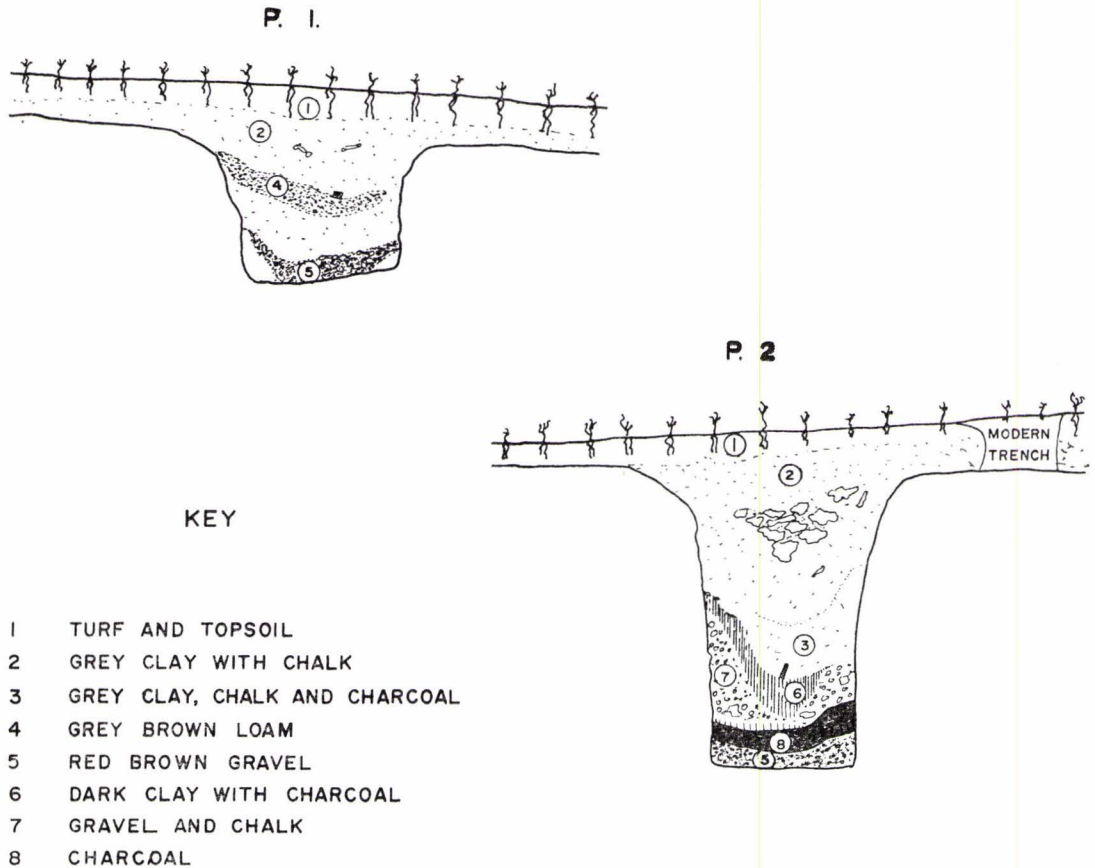|	
I	TURF AND TOPSOIL
2	GREY CLAY WITH CHALK
3	GREY CLAY, CHALK AND CHARCOAL
4	GREY BROWN LOAM
5	RED BROWN GRAVEL
6	DARK CLAY WITH CHARCOAL
7	GRAVEL AND CHALK
8	CHARCOAL

Fig. 4.   Sections through the two pits

and suggest that there were two separate buildings in this area.   Although the Chalk was cleared for a distance of 15m. north-south there were no traces of structures in the southern part of the site.

The smaller of the two buildings, termed structure one, measured only 7m. along the long sides east-west.   It differed from structure two on the east in that the post holes were rather smaller and shallower (on average .12m.).   Those on the long side walls were double, or in some cases, triple post holes and pose a problem of interpretation.   Such double sets of posts have sometimes been taken to indicate a cruck construction: J. T. Smith has argued this interpretation for the German sites of Westick, near Kamen and Haldern, near Wesel.[1]   A cruck, however, requires double posts once in each bay, not at every upright, and the holes dug to accommodate

[1]   J. T. Smith, ' Cruck construction: a survey of the problems ', *Medieval Archaeology*, vol. 8 (1964), pp. 134-6.

the crucks show an inward lean.   At Burpham every hole on the long sides is double and there is no indication of slanting.   It seems more likely that the duplication at Burpham should be attributed to an extensive reconstruction on the same site.

Structure one was divided into three units.   The largest unit, which might be described as the hall, was unusually square in shape, measuring nearly 5m. east-west and 4m. north-south.   A smaller room to the west was partitioned off the main sturcture by a line of single, small post holes.   It measured only two metres in breadth: barely enough to accommodate a small sleeping chamber or withdrawing room.   The probable position of the doorway was at the north end of the partition wall with the main room.   Thus the whole building was probably built in three bays, of which two formed the hall and two the private room.   A third unit in this complex was represented by two walls projecting southwards from the southern lateral wall on either side of the main doorway, as though to act as an open porch. The doorway itself was marked by the grouping of six post holes, three on each side, which is now accepted as the distinctive feature of a door hung on the interior of the building.[2]   In most Saxon buildings of any size doorways are usually found counterposed on either side of the long walls, but on this site there is no sign of any break in the line of post holes forming the opposite wall.

Structure two lay to the east of the building just described and was characterised by rather larger and deeper post holes (average .16m.).   In some cases these, too, were double holes, but they did not occur in sufficient numbers to suggest such a complete rebuild as in structure one. This second building was set on a slightly different axis, varying by about 5 or 10 degrees from the line set by structure one.   It seems to have been built gable to gable with the first house with a light partition cutting off a small room at the eastern end, but this might also be interpreted as a separate gable wall leaving a fenced-off, open area between the two buildings.   The total length between the gable of structure one and the most easterly line of posts excavated was 14.2m., but it is not impossible that this line was also an internal partition and the house actually extended beyond the excavated area.

Neither structure showed any sign of a hearth, either by burning on the Chalk bedrock or through traces of a clay hearth.   Nor was there any trace of wattle and daub make-up for the walls, so it seems probable that the walls were constructed of wooden planking slotted into the uprights in the style of a palisade.   The posts were generally set about 5m. apart in structure one and rather wider, .8 or 1m., in structure two.   There was no sign of corner posts any heavier than the others, indeed the corners are missing in the north-west and south-west of structure one. This weakness at corners was a feature of one of the smaller halls at West Stow in Suffolk and at Charlton, Hampshire.[3]   It may suggest a wall of quite heavy, spliced logs in which each side braces the next.

Two other features were discovered in the vicinity of these buildings: two large pits filled with humus and rubbish, one of which was dug into the Chalk beside the west gable wall of structure one and very close to the main entrance, the other was cut through the north east corner of structure two, removing traces of the post holes in that area and clearly post dating the building. It seems likely that pit one was also a late feature as it was awkwardly placed to hinder traffic

[1] P. V. Addyman, 'A dark age settlement at Maxey, Northants', *Medieval Archaeology*, vol. 8 (1964), pp. 23-25.
    'Anglo Saxon houses at Chalton, Hampshire', *Medieval Archaeology*, vol. 16 (1972), p. 23.

[2] S. E. West, 'The Anglo Saxon village of West Stow', *Medieval Archaeology*, vol. 13 (1969), Fig VI. e.g. Building A 11, P. V. Addyman and D. Leigh, 'The Anglo Saxon village at Chalton, Hampshire', *Medieval Archaeology*, vol. 17 (1973), pp. 2-25.

through the gate into the defended area and might date from a time when settlement had moved from the interior of the fort to the present village site.   Sections of the pits are shown in Figure 4. That nearest the gate was the deeper of the two, measuring 2.4m. from surface level and the filling material included considerable quantities of bone, charcoal and pottery discussed below.

A scatter of post holes in a restricted area may be interpreted in a wide variety of different ways and readers may well come to different conclusions to the author, but Figure 5 is offered as a likely explanation of the sequence of building periods.   It is based on two assumptions: that structure one is older than structure two, because it shows more signs of rebuilding, and that both structures were standing together in the later phase, because the second is clearly designed to link up with the first.

In phase one the westernmost building (structure one) stood alone as a small hall with the private room at one end and was probably a single family dwelling. In Phase two it was rebuilt, either as a hall enlarged by the addition of the porch (which shows no sign of rebuilding) or else re-orientated so that the porch actually acted as a new private room, of which one wall is now missing.   In phase three the second and longer hall was added on the east; this could, however, have been done at the same time as phase two. In the final phase both buildings were demolished and the two pits dug at either end of the site.
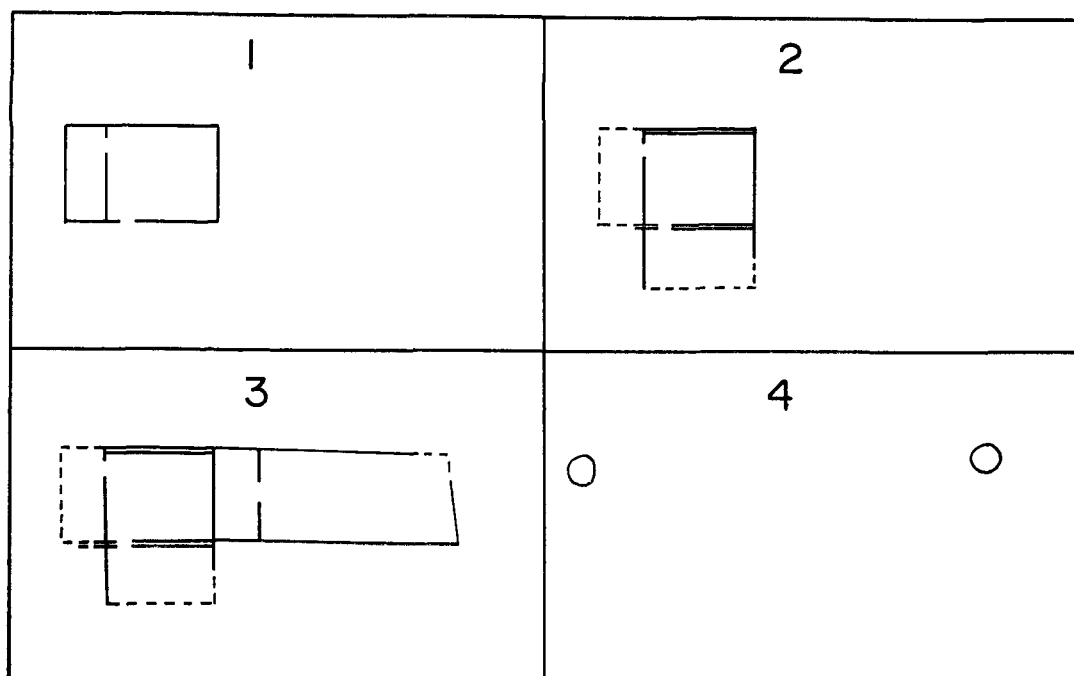
BURPHAM : PHASES

FIG 5.   Phases of development

THE GATEWAY (FIG. 6)

During drainage works a trench was dug by an excavation machine between the south east corner of the gateway and the village street, thus crossing the trackway of the entrance and the ditch outside it.   Observations suggested that nothing remained of a medieval or Saxon roadway. The stratification showed irregular metalling on the surface above 0.10m. of dark soil, which, in turn overlay another metalled surface, which contained brick and must have been of fairly recent date.   Below was another layer of dark soil above natural Chalk.   Probably the entrance had been cleared in post medieval times and the original surface lost.

Outside the entrance the trench crossed a strip of dark earth 12.90m. wide, which must represent the northern ditch.   It was excavated only to a depth of 1.40m. and the sides sloped at about 45 or 50 degrees.   This would suggest that the ditch measured some 6m. in depth, if it were V shaped and rather less if it were U shaped.   This corresponds well with the height of the bank (about 7m.), which was doubtless built up of the material taken from the ditch.   The position of this ditch suggests that there was a berm of about two or three metres between ditch and bank. The upper filling was probably medieval in date, for the finds included coarse medieval cooking pot fragments and a sherd of green-glazed ware.

Although the drainage trench was only 0.6m. wide it also encountered a number of pits and post holes, which might have been associated with the gate itself.   A group of three large post holes was located about 3m. from the edge of the ditch on the line of the rampart front.   They were
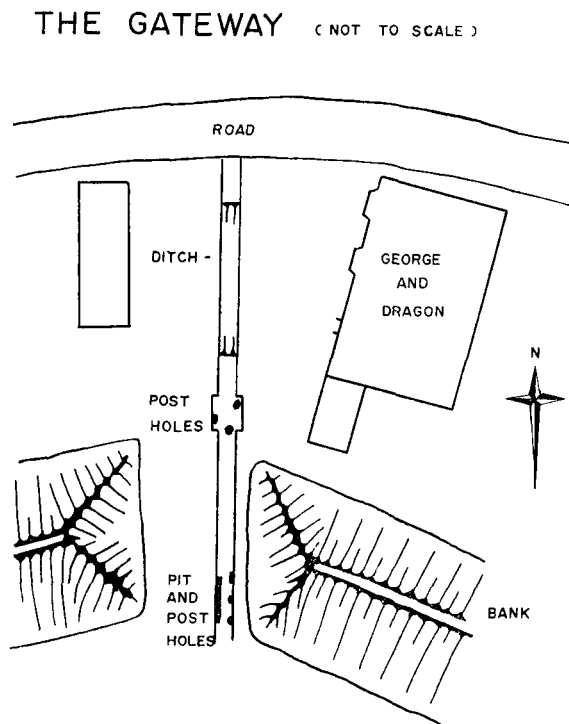
THE GATEWAY (NOT TO SCALE)

FIG. 6.   Sketch plan of the Gateway

set back too far to be connected with any possible bridge across the ditch, but might have been connected with the supports for a gate on the eastern side. They measured 0.65m. in diameter and showed traces of posts some 0.30m. across. A fragment of brick found in one may, however, suggest that they were actually modern features.

A second group of three post holes and a very large pit was encountered on the inner, eastern edge of the gateway and these were sealed by the earlier (but post medieval) metalling of the road surface. The largest of these might have been connected with the gate, the pit is more puzzling as it measured 2.90m. in width north-south and 0.5m. in depth. This is large for a rubbish pit; moreover if the feature extended as far west as it did northwards it would have blocked almost the whole gateway. Presumably, therefore, it relates to some period after the settlement inside the fortifications was abandoned.

<div align="center">THE FINDS</div>

The finds can be divided into two groups: those from the two pits which post-dated the buildings and those from the fillings of post holes which had housed the timbers of those buildings. Neither need necessarily contain any material dating from the time the buildings were in use.

Pit One, that nearest the gateway, produced large quantities of animal bone, including portions of at least three pigs, two calves, four chickens, sheep, fish and many fresh water oysters. There were two sherds of Roman Samian ware, which suggests that the filling included some material which had been lying about the ground surface for a very long time. In spite of this there was no early or middle Saxon pottery amongst the finds. The pottery (illustrated in Figure 7) was very rough, gritty and hand made; the vessels generally had narrow necks, flared out below the rim and sagged at the base, and the walls were generally thin. It can be dated to the tenth or early eleventh century, indeed a post-conquest date is not impossible. Pit Two, at the opposite end of the excavated area, was found to contain part of the skeleton of a rabbit; since it is generally thought that this animal was introduced by the Normans it may indicate that the pits are a very late feature.[1] Two other finds in Pit One are of interest: lumps of iron slag and of baked but mis-shapen clay vessels suggest that pottery making and iron work (probably in a smithy) was carried on nearby.

The pottery recovered from the rest of the site is illustrated in Figure 8. It is generally of rather finer, less gritty ware than that from the two pits, but showed the same rim types.

Figure 7: Pottery from Pit One
1 Large cooking pot of very crude, thick, grey shelly ware.
2 Smaller cooking pot of black, shelly ware with everted rim.
3 Similar, everted rim of a small cooking pot of very coarse, buff, gritty ware.
4 Similar, everted rim of a small cooking pot of brown, gritty ware showing very uneven firing.
5 Sagging base of a small pot of thin, coarse, grey-brown, gritty ware.
6 Similar base of coarse, grey-black, gritty ware.
7 Straight rim of a pot of coarse, black, gritty ware.
8 Similar rim of coarse, grey-brown, gritty ware.
9 Similar rim of coarse, black, gritty ware.
10 Similar rim of coarse, black, gritty ware.
11 Everted rim of a small pot of very coarse, dark grey, gritty ware.
12 Everted rim of a small, thin walled pot of coarse, red-black, shelly ware.
13 Rim of a bowl of smooth, buff-grey, gritty ware.
14 Body fragment decorated with incised lines, of coarse, black-brown gritty ware.

Figure 8: Finds from the House Site
1 Everted rim of a large cooking pot of buff coloured, chalky ware with grey core.
2 Similar rim of dark, grey, gritty ware decorated with thumb impressions.
3 Everted rim of thin, black, gritty ware.
4 Straight rim of buff coloured, gritty ware.
5 Rim of a small bowl of pink, shelly ware.
6 Straight rim of a pot of pink and grey, shelly ware.
7 Everted rim of a small cooking pot of buff coloured, gritty ware.

[1] R. & M. Fitter, *The Penguin Dictionary of British Natural History*, (1968), p. 213.

BURPHAM : GROUP FROM PIT F. I.
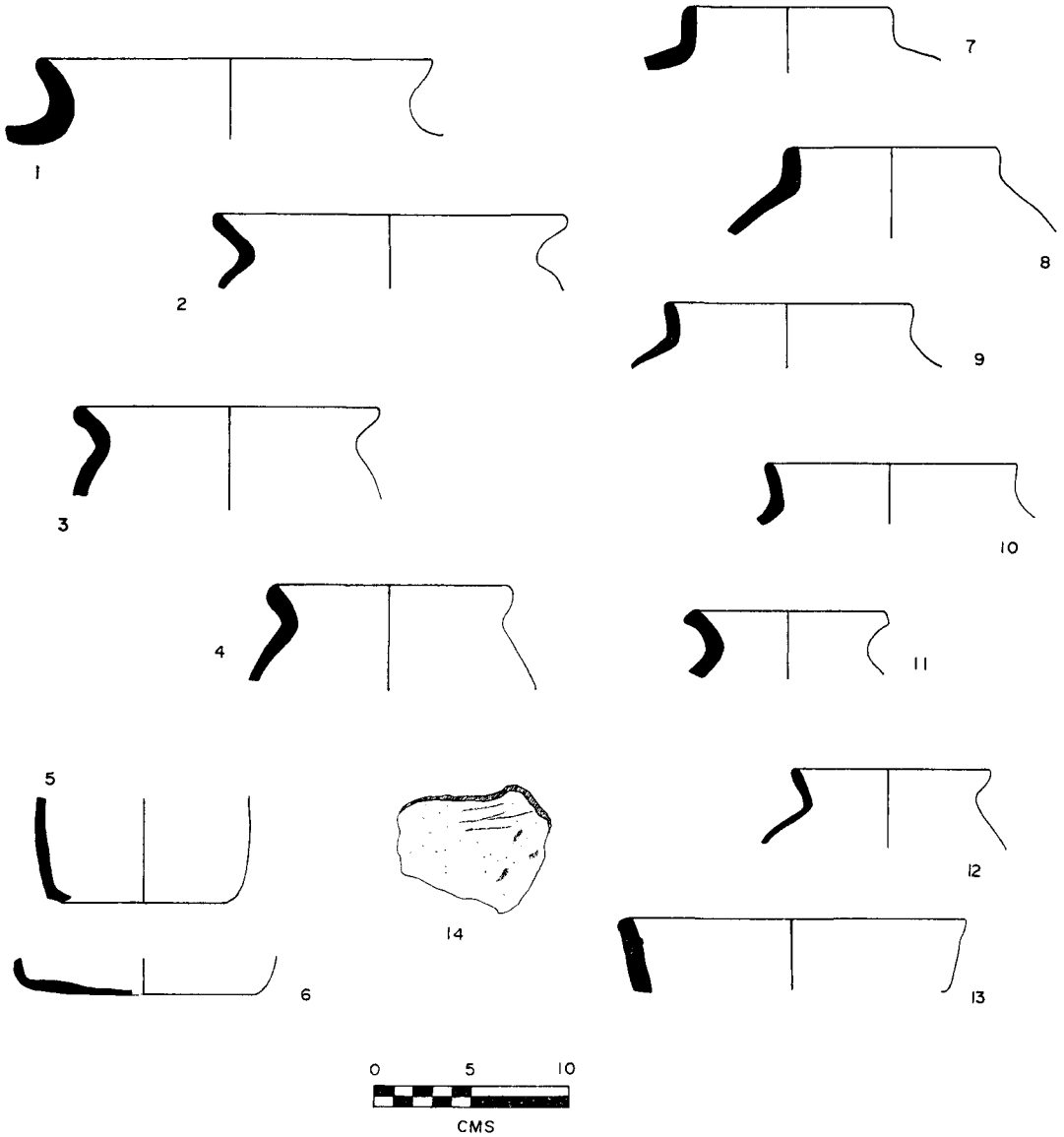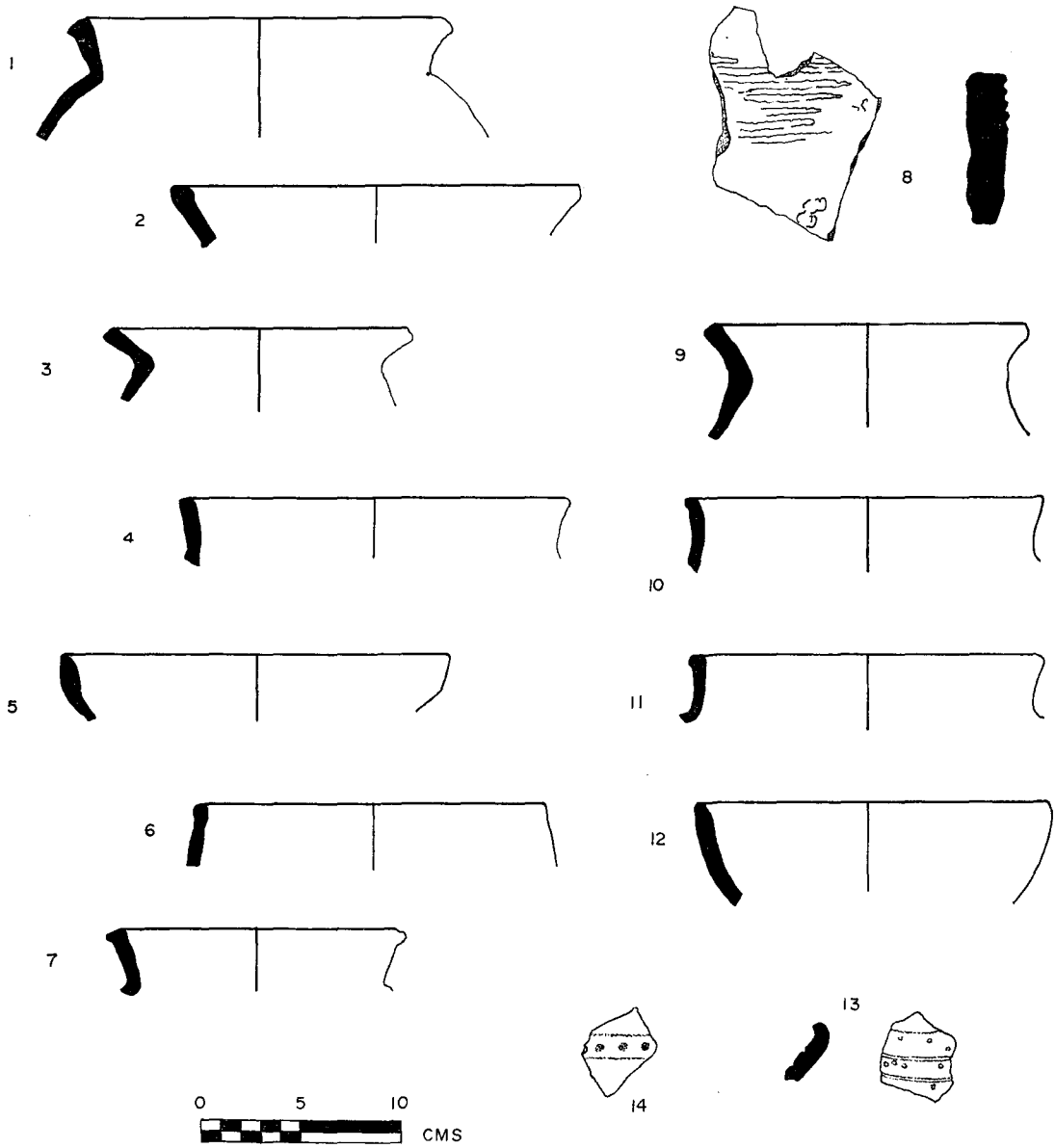

FIG. 7.   The finds from pit 1

FIG. 8. The finds from the house site

8 Fragment of a tile of fine red ware, probably Roman.
9 Everted rim of a cooking pot of smooth, buff coloured, shelly ware.
10 Rim of a pot of fairly coarse, grey-pink, shelly ware.
11 Rim of fine, soft, pink, shelly ware.
12 Rim of a small bowl of coarse, grey-pink, gritty ware with smooth surface.
13 Sherd of bright pink, gritty ware decorated with grooves and impressed dots.
14 Similar sherd of grey-pink gritty ware.

INTERPRETATION

Recent excavations in Sussex and elsewhere have led archaeologists to abandon the old view that Saxons lived exclusively in small, half subterranean hovels. It is now well known that they were perfectly capable of constructing large open buildings in both town and village.

The nearest parallel to Burpham in the plan of its buildings is to be found in the current excavations on the sixth and seventh century site at Chalton, Hampshire.[1]   In buildings A1 and A2 we find a very similar arrangement to the gable-to-gable construction of the two buildings at Burpham. Several of the smaller Chalton buildings have small rooms partitioned off one end, of very similar size to those at Burpham (e.g. AZ1 and A20). Building A2 even shows a structure similar to the 'porch' at Burpham, although it does have a fourth side. The main differences between the two sites are in the lack of opposing doorways, which are almost universal at Chalton, even in the smaller buildings, and in the comparatively small size of structures at Burpham.   In particular, structure one is substantially smaller than any two-celled building at Chalton, where the smaller buildings were only one cell. A parallel may be found in a possible two-celled building at Maxey, Northants (structure D) from the middle Saxon period.[2]

The chief curiosity of the Burpham site is that a building which has such close parallels with pagan and mid Saxon sites should be excavated within the confines of a fortress of the reign of Alfred and associated with pottery of late Saxon type. This pottery does indeed come from features post-dating the occupation of the buildings but it is curious that no early Saxon wares should have been found, if Burpham were occupied at the same period as Chalton. It seems more probable that the structure excavated here was actually of late Saxon date and that the tradition of timber building in Sussex remained unchanged for several centuries.

The discovery of a Saxon habitation site within the banks of the *burgh* does nothing to indicate the date of the fortifications; these may still prove to be of the Iron Age period. It does, however, tell us something about the use to which the fort was put in Saxon times. We can no longer suppose that it was used only as a retreat for the local population in times of trouble; there was clearly some settlement within the walls and the traces of industrial activity, such as pottery making and iron work, suggest that the portion excavated was only a fragment of some quite sizeable village and that occupation continued through the late Saxon period up to and beyond the Norman conquest. The presence of fine, early Norman work in the present village church indicates that the Normans may have taken over a well established late Saxon community.

[1] P. V. Addyman et alia, *op cit, Medieval Archaeology*, vols. 16 and 17 (1972 and 1973).

[2] P. V. Addyman, 'A dark age settlement at Maxey, Northants', *Medieval Archaelogy*, vol. 8 (1964), pp. 20-73.