

The Praetorium at Deva

By D. F. PETCH

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THE publication of a note by Mr. V. Nutton in this volume of the Journal on a sandstone altar dedicated to Aesculapius, Hygeia and Panacea has prompted the preparation of this summary account of the building in which it was found, in part to furnish the reader of Mr. Nutton's article with information on the archaeological context of this important discovery, and also to provide an interim report on the first phase of an excavation which has added substantially to our knowledge of the fortress.

The demolition of the old Market Hall released for archaeological exploration a large site on the south and west sides of Town Hall; this interim report is concerned only with that portion which lies to the south of Town Hall and fronting onto Northgate Street, explored during the period November, 1967, to March, 1968.¹ In relation to the plan of the fortress the building to be described lies to the north of the *principia* (headquarters building),² a site which would normally be assigned to the legionary legate's residence (*praetorium*). No prior archaeological exploration of the site had ever taken place, and the only recorded antiquity from it was the sandstone altar with a dedication in Greek³ found during the excavation of a cellar under the Saracen's Head in 1851.⁴

The plan (fig. 1) of the building was recovered by a virtually total process of excavation, dictated in part by the lack of information concerning the structure or structures likely to be encountered, and in part by the knowledge that redevelopment of the site would result in total destruction of all archaeological evidence. Where gaps appear on the plan these represent in the main the areas sterilised by disturbances of the post-Roman period, principally deep cellars of comparatively recent date. As will be seen, the most distinctive element in the plan of the *praetorium* consists of ranges of rooms on its west and south sides; the rooms in the former case being normally 17 feet (5 m.) wide, and in the latter from 19 to 23 feet (5.8–7 m.) across. The width overall of the ranges was consistently 28 feet (8.5 m.). Within the L-shape of these ranges there was an internal colonnade 13½ feet (4 m.) wide on a north-south alignment, with a building on the east side of this which may have measured no more

¹ For a brief account of the subsequent work during 1968 see *J.R.S.* LIX (1969) under *Roman Britain in 1968*.

² *C.A.S.* VI (1899) 277; *C.A.S.* XXVII part II (1928) 168; *C.A.S.* 38 (1951) 1. The final stage of excavation on this site in 1969 will be in large part concerned with the northern end of the *principia*.

³ *Catalogue of Roman Inscribed and Sculptured Stones in the Grosvenor Museum* no. 10 = *R.I.B.* 461

⁴ For references see *C.A.S.* XXVII part II (1928) 168. The approximate find-spot is indicated on the plan.

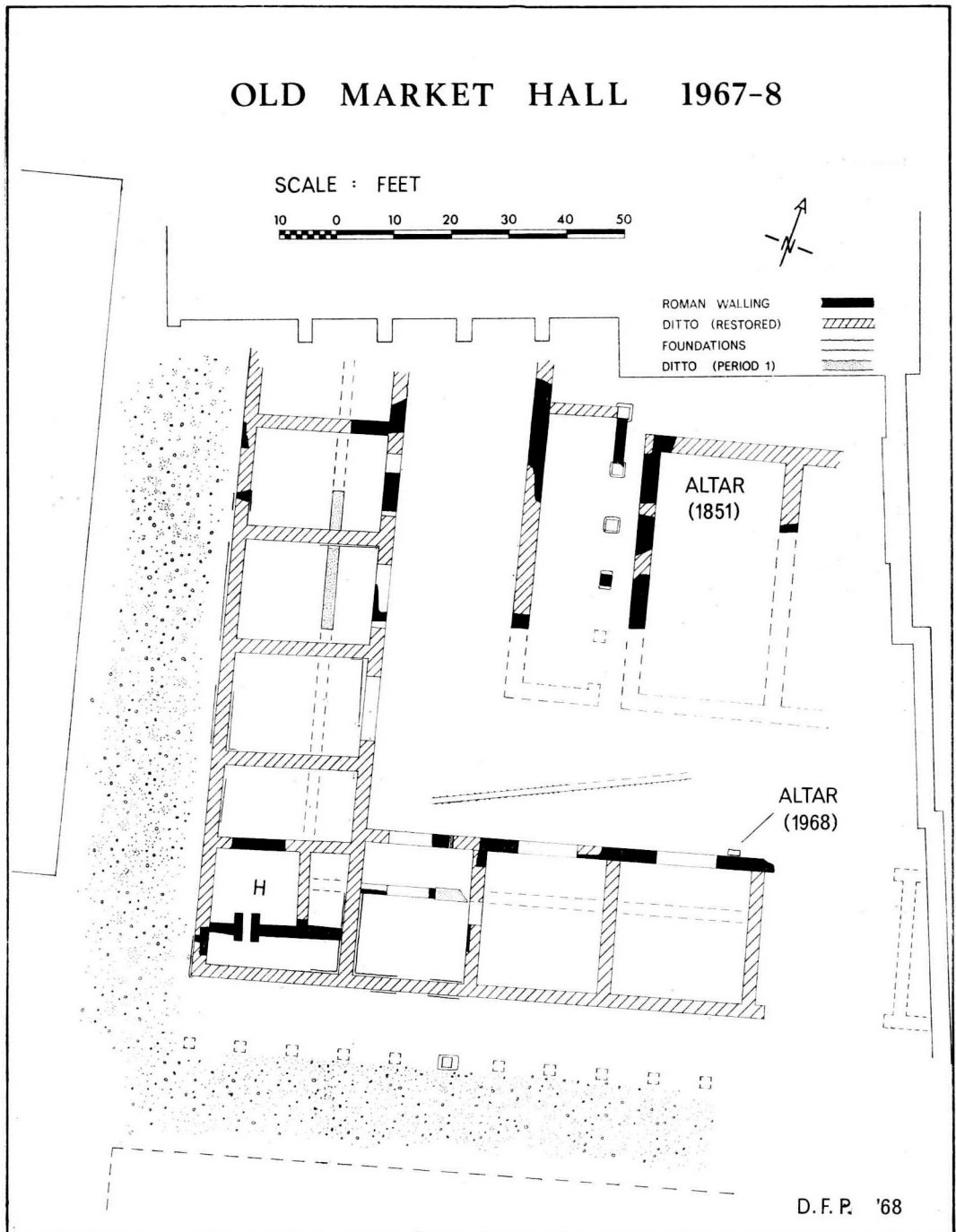


FIG. 1. Old Market Hall, Chester, Outline-plan of site, Phase I.

than 28 feet (8.5 m.) from east to west, and cannot have exceeded *c.* 50 feet (*c.* 15 m.) on the other axis. These buildings were separated from the outer ranges by a courtyard of which only the southern part was surfaced at a comparatively late date. The south front of the building, facing the *principia* across a street over 21 feet (6 m.) wide, had an external colonnade 12 feet (3.6 m.) in width. The main entrance to the building, probably *c.* 24 feet (7.3 m.) wide, was apparently in the centre of the south range. At the south-west corner there was a heated room 15 feet by 13 feet (4.5 × 4 m.), with its accompanying stoke-hole. A small room, perhaps an annexe to this, was provided with a mortar floor, but elsewhere the floors, where these had survived, were of simple sandstone flagging in the main, with some hints at earlier scrappy tile floors in two rooms. The internal colonnade had a substantial *opus signinum* floor, whilst that outside the building was surfaced with sandstone cobbling. A small drain, originating near the internal south-west corner, crossed the southern part of the courtyard.

The rooms in the west and south ranges were provided with exceptionally large doorways, rather over 10 feet (*c.* 3 m.) in width, opening internally onto the courtyard.⁵ Their size seems to exclude the possibility of residential accommodation being intended, and implies that a function in terms of storage and possibly other similar workaday activities is to be preferred. However, it must be remarked that consistently in both west and south ranges these doorways had been either narrowed or blocked completely, thus permitting a change in function during subsequent use.

The identification of the building as a whole cannot, of course, rest merely on its position in relation to the plan of the fortress: indeed, the comparable building at Caerleon⁶ exhibits few points of similarity. On the other hand, a strikingly close analogy exists in the *praetorium* at Neuss, where the ranges in the fore-part of the plan clearly look inwards to a central courtyard entered through an axial entrance in the side facing the *principia*. Having accepted, as a working hypothesis at least, that the building at Chester is to be identified as the *praetorium*, it must be assumed that the residential quarters required by the legate and his immediate entourage were situated in the rear half of the building, that is to say under Town Hall and Northgate Street.⁷ The total size of the building can be estimated at 220 feet (64 m.) on each side, so that roughly a quarter of the plan was uncovered during the recent excavations.

It now remains to discuss the various periods of occupation in the *praetorium*, and to relate the altar to these. The conclusions put forward are at this stage only

⁵ The opportunities for locating door-openings in the outer wall were comparatively limited. It is possible that one such existed in the west range, but the impression received was that the ranges were inward-looking.

⁶ *Arch. Camb.* XC (1935) 112; *Arch. Camb.* XCI (1936) 321.

⁷ As in the case of the Market Hall site, the construction of the Town Hall in 1865-9 seems to have resulted in no material finds being recorded at the time, nor has any material found its way into the Grosvenor Museum's collections with either site provenance attached to it. This is curious, since it is known that the construction of the Market Hall caused considerable damage to the underlying Roman structures, and the same may be assumed to be true of the Town Hall.

tentative; not all of the considerable mass of evidence has been fully studied, and detailed discussion must in any case await publication of the final report.

I. The earliest structural features encountered were comparatively slight foundations of cobbles and mortar.⁸ A slight amount of superstructure existed on this foundation-work at one point, but all the evidence seems to suggest that the building was very far from complete when work was interrupted. In this initial layout the west and south ranges were to have been some 10 feet narrower than their eventual width. Comparatively little material was assignable to this period, but a date in the late Flavian or early Trajanic period would be consistent with the slender evidence.

II. After what seems to have been quite a short interval construction work began again. The principal evidence exists in terms of a quantity of pottery sealed by the floor of the internal colonnade which runs to the Trajanic period in date but no later. The colonnade⁹ and the building to the east of it utilised the foundations of period I: at several points it was observed that the superstructure oversailed the foundations by several inches on either side. As mentioned above, the west and south ranges were carried to completion at a greater width, and their walls were now provided with substantial foundations of sandstone and clay based on the underlying rock. At two points it was clear that foundations for internal partition walls of period II had cut through the cobble and mortar foundations of period I. A scrap of black-burnished ware from a period II foundation in the west range indicates that work continued into the reign of Hadrian; on the other hand, the flagged floor of an adjacent room sealed only Trajanic material, and this may imply completion early in the Hadrianic period.

III. Occupation of the building during the remainder of the second century is attested, although it is not clear that all the rooms were provided with floors in this period. In the south range substantial flagged floors were not laid until the Severan period at the earliest, and this is partially true of the west range also. At the same time, in round terms the first quarter of the third century, the tile roofing of the internal colonnade and adjacent building was renewed, and the process of reduction or blocking of doorways began.

IV. The second half of the third century saw further minor building activity: repair work was undertaken on internal floors, and one doorway at least was further narrowed. The internal colonnade may have been re-floored at this time.

⁸ There was no evidence at all that the earliest stone period (I) had been preceded by timber structures. This is surprising, not least because Sir Ian Richmond and Dr. Graham Webster have demonstrated that the *principia* had been of timber construction in the Flavian period. The thesis that the Flavian *praetorium* was considerably smaller and so escaped detection does not carry conviction; equally one cannot suppose that the plans of timber and stone buildings agreed so closely that the timberwork could not be detected since no Flavian floor levels survived anywhere. It may not be entirely irrelevant to point to the plan of Inchtuthil where the abandonment of the fortress in 86-7 found this site still unoccupied.

⁹ Some of the column base foundations of period I were re-used; one at least was relaid in II. The primacy in date of completion of this part of the complex may reflect its function as the means of access to the residential quarters.

V. Probably quite early in the fourth century a consistent paving was laid over the southern portion of the courtyard: associated with this was the final blocking of one doorway and, more important from the point of view of the present survey, the deposition of the sandstone altar with a Greek inscription. This was in the mutilated form in which we now see it, with the lower part of the shaft and the whole of its base missing: the state of the back of the stone makes it virtually certain that this was not a free-standing altar but had been built into a structure quite conceivably elsewhere in the fortress. The altar was deposited on its right side with the inscribed face against the north wall of the south range.¹⁰

VI. The flagging of period V remained in service for a sufficient length of time for further re-surfacing to become necessary, and in the provision of this an eaves gutter was provided. How late in the fourth century this work should be placed, and how much longer after this work occupation continued, it is not easy to say with the rather limited evidence available.

¹⁰ At a stage in the work in which the plan had by no means been fully recovered, but two medical inscriptions had been found, there was quite naturally some conjecture as to whether the *valetudinarium* (hospital) had been located. Comparison of the final plan with that of a hospital, as at Neuss, indicates far too many points of divergence for this solution to be acceptable. As at Neuss, it seems possible that the hospital was situated to the east of the *praetorium* and therefore to a large extent covered by the Cathedral. There is, of course, no strong reason to suppose that either of the two altars found in the *praetorium* need necessarily have been erected there in the first place. The altar found in 1851, like that recently recovered, is in a damaged state and both may in all probability represent the transfer of stone for re-use from the hospital which, as argued above, could have been adjacent to the *praetorium*.

