

# Excavations on the site of the Chester Telephone Exchange extension 1970-1

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PRIOR to an extension of the Telephone Exchange, St. John Street, to the east of the existing building, trial excavations were carried out by the staff of the Grosvenor Museum between November 1970 and February 1971. Thanks are due to the staff of the G.P.O. at Chester for permission to dig and their kind co-operation.

Four mechanically dug trenches were sited on the western and southern sides of the available area, since this was to continue in use as a car-park.<sup>1</sup> An abortive trench at 'e' (Fig. 1) encountered loose modern bricks going down to at least 3 metres, and it was decided to back-fill immediately. Work had been carried out in this area to the east of St. John Street in 1938<sup>2</sup> and 1953<sup>3</sup> with little result. The present trenches were equally unproductive and it can only be assumed that this area of the city never carried any substantial population. No traces of the glass layer previously recorded in this area were found.

The four trenches had very similar profiles and a single description can be taken as being typical. The primary ground level had in most cases been removed by the earliest Roman deposits which survived on average to a depth of 60 to 90 cms. The pottery recovered from these layers was consistent with occupation from the last quarter of the first century to the mid-second century. Above these came an homogenous black sticky mass which extended almost to modern ground level, so that its average depth was from 1.5 to 2 metres. It contained liberal quantities of pottery, tile, brick, mortar, slate, shell, charcoal, and wood. There was a suggestion that this deposit might have 'planed off' the later Roman and Medieval levels. The date and cause of the mixed build-up was not established although Roman tiles occurred near the top and post-medieval pottery near the bottom; it should be noted that this phenomenon appeared in all the trenches, representing a considerable area. Such Roman pottery as was recovered from it was almost entirely pre-third century, which might imply that the loss of Roman levels was not great.

## Trenches A and B

No structures of any period were encountered in these trenches, the sections of which agreed with the general description given above. None of the surviving

<sup>1</sup> The original plan was to work round the perimeter of the car park, but the unpromising results from the present trenches caused the idea to be abandoned.

<sup>2</sup> C.A.S., 33, 1939, pp.9-31.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 41, 1954, pp.89-92.

Roman levels could be interpreted as surfacing, either internal or external, within the area stripped. The edge of an undated Roman pit with clean brown sand fill was encountered at the extreme south-east corner of Trench B.

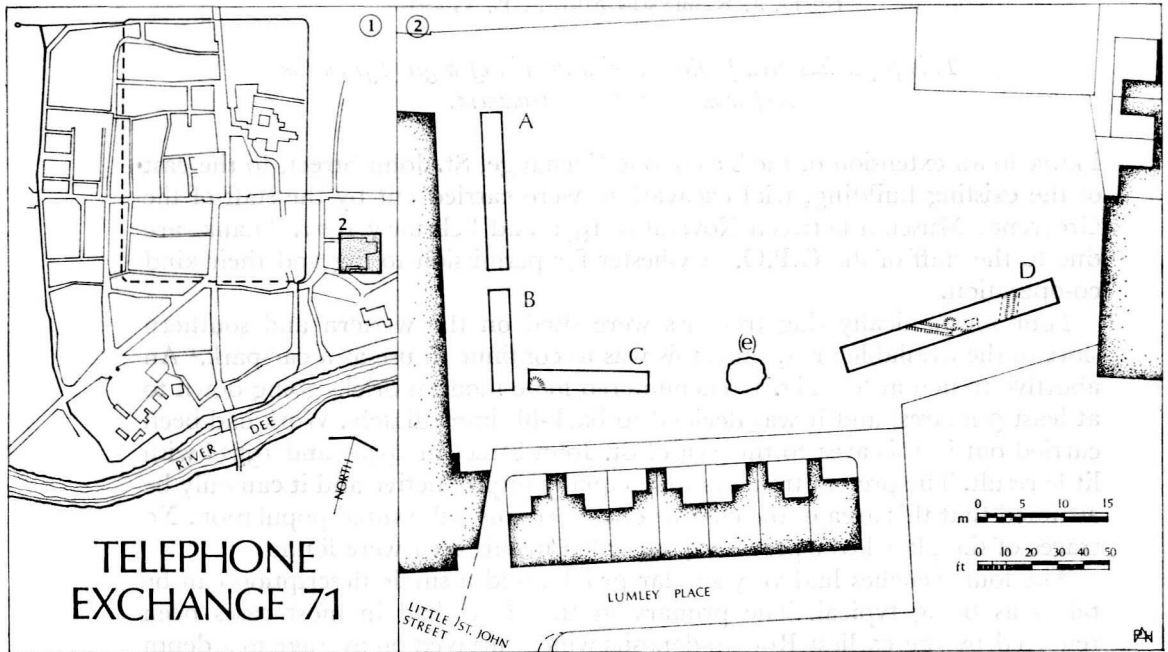


Fig. 1. Site and excavation plans

### Trench C

This trench proved a little more productive. A segment of a pit of considerable size was encountered at the extreme western end<sup>4</sup>. A rim fragment of an early Drag. 37 bowl came from the upper fills (Fig. 3, No. 1), as did small body sherds of Holt fabric. The pit was primary and these finds imply a late first century date for the earliest activity on this site. The Roman levels showed no traces of any structures, and were capped by a layer of sandstone fragments which was often over 30 cms. thick. It is difficult to understand this as a surfacing or building destruction, for it was uncompacted and irregular. No squared stones were recovered. In the area of the pit the sandstone was sealed by a brown soil layer which contained only Roman tiles, so that it seems safe to consider the sandstone as Roman. A possibility is that this area was used for stone dressing, and it is tempting to see a connection with the reconstruction of the Roman walls conventionally dated to the late third century. However the meagre pottery evidence from the lower Roman levels would better fit an earlier date. In addition the sandstone layer was not seen in Trenches A, B, or

<sup>4</sup> The writers are inclined to think that this pit was not identical to that seen in Trench B.



D, implying that this activity was on no great scale. The eastern end of the trench encountered loose modern bricks similar to those in the abortive Trench 'e' mentioned above.

### Trench D

Within the limitations imposed by the weather this trench was by far the most productive. Near the eastern end a Roman(?) sandstone surfaced road or lane was superimposed on a primary ditch running in the same direction (i.e. north-south), and near the centre of the trench a deep Roman drain ran WNW to ESE. Several bands of red clay of Roman period, possibly burnt, were encountered, which were separated by more substantial deposits of dark earth with considerable quantities of charcoal. No structural evidence was recorded to account for this feature; the best explanation seems some minor industrial activity, but there was nothing in the finds to substantiate this. To the east of the lane a particularly large spread of clay was suggestive of flooring, but no trace of a wall or partition was observed.

Just west of the centre of the trench a large concrete base and its attendant disturbance intruded from the northern face of the trench<sup>5</sup>. West of this it was possible to record the north sections with some difficulty, but continuous water-logging and side-slips from the southern face made it impossible to retrieve any plan. In the eastern part of the trench the drain was a most impressive feature, cut through the sandstone to a depth of almost exactly 2 metres. Obtaining a true section was made almost impossible by water problems,<sup>6</sup> but the sides were as near vertical as the rock would allow. Its life must have been quite short; it appeared to have been filled in from the east and pottery of the end of the first century came from near the top. There was no evidence for any capping of the drain with stone or timber. A number of stake and post holes were of this period, but they formed no obvious pattern. Of the three pits encountered, No. 1 was merely a shallow depression, roughly contemporary with the drain; pit No. 2 was substantial but still quite shallow (roughly 50 cms. deep). It contained a high proportion of broken roof tiles, and seemed to date to the last half of the second century. Pit No. 3 turned out to be a cess pit of the nineteenth century.

Subsequent observation of the site when mechanically excavated for the new building's underground car-park was extremely unhelpful, and it was not possible to trace further the drain, ditch, or roadway seen in Trench D.

### SELECTED FINDS (Fig. 3)

#### Samian

1. Rim of Drag. 37, very worn. For the decoration compare B. Cunliffe, 'Excavations at Fishbourne', Society of Antiquaries, Leeds, 1971, Vol. II,

<sup>5</sup> This must have been the base for the large crane which stood in the timber yard on the site prior to the original Telephone Exchange Extension.

<sup>6</sup> In the middle of winter, and at a depth of over 4 metres, this may be imagined.

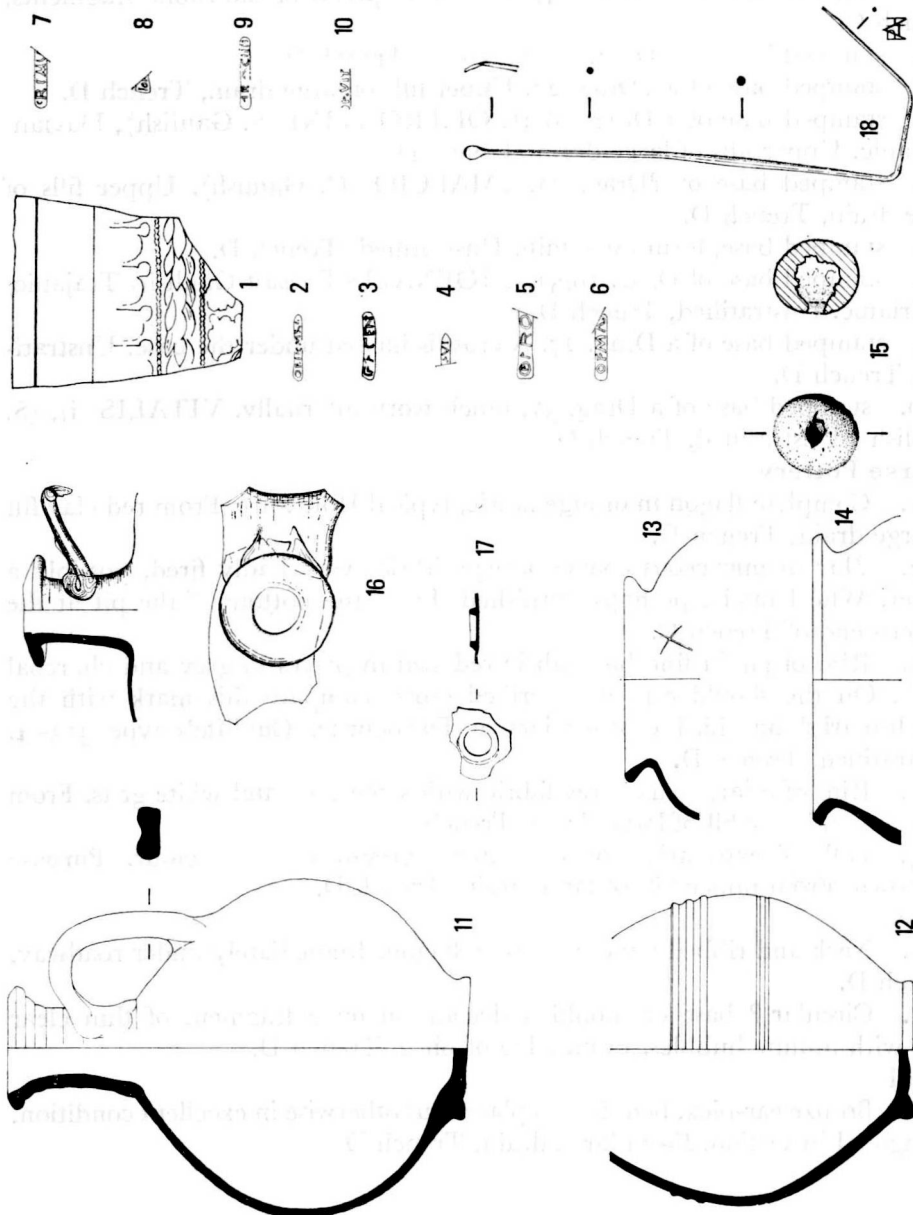


Fig. 3. Selected finds 1-10 and 18 half size; 11-17 quarter size

Fig. 135, No. 91, and similar motifs at Wroxeter and Newstead, all dated to the Flavian period. From the upper fills of the pit at the west end of Trench C.

2. stamped base of a Drag. 37, from the spread of sandstone fragments, Trench C.

3. stamped base of a Drag. 18. Pit No. 1, Trench D.

4. stamped base of a ?Drag. 27. Upper fills of large drain, Trench D.

5. stamped base of a Drag. 18/31, OF.FRONTINI (S. Gaulish), Flavian/Trajanic. Upper fills of large drain, Trench D.

6. stamped base of ?Drag. 27. ?MALCIO (C. Gaulish). Upper fills of large drain, Trench D.

7. stamped base, form uncertain. Unstratified, Trench D.

8. stamped base of Drag. 18/31. ? IOENALIS F (East Gaulish) Trajanic/Hadrianic. Unstratified, Trench D.

9. stamped base of a Drag. 27. A cross is incised under the base. Unstratified, Trench D.

10. stamped base of a Drag. 37, much worn internally. VITALIS (i), (S. Gaulish). Unstratified, Trench D.

#### **Coarse Pottery**

11. Complete flagon in orange fabric, typical Holt ware. From red clay fill of large drain, Trench D.

12. ?Jar in micaceous coarse orange fabric; very badly fired, possibly a waster. Wheel made, perhaps burnished. From the bottom of the pit at the western end of Trench C.

13. Rim of jar in fine buff fabric reduced in places to grey and charcoal black. On the shoulder is an inscribed cross; compare this mark with the 'batch-marks' on third century jars at Fishbourne, Cunliffe's type 313-4. Unstratified, Trench D.

14. Rim of a jar, coarse grey fabric with some grey and white grits. From charcoal and clay fill of large drain, Trench D.

15. Ball of extremely coarse pottery, grey-brown in colour. Purpose unknown. From upper fills of large drain, Trench D.

#### **Glass**

16. Neck and ribbed handle of green flagon. Immediately under roadway, Trench D.

17. Circular ? base or moulded decoration on a fragment of thin clear glass with minute bubbles. From edge of pit 2, Trench D.

#### **Metal**

18. Bronze ear-pick, bent in two places but otherwise in excellent condition. Hexagonal in section. From large drain, Trench D.