

Chester Southerly By-Pass 1975

(Excavations near Eaton Road, Eccleston.)

By D. Mason.

INTRODUCTION.

In 1972 Mr. D. F. Petch carried out an excavation on the east side of Eaton Road at the point where the proposed by-pass would cross⁽¹⁾ (see figs. 12 and 13). It had long been known that the line of the Roman road which led south from the fortress at Chester was represented approximately by the route of the modern Eaton Road and the excavation was successful in locating its eastern edge in this sector. This road was found to consist of gravel and small cobbles set in clay which had been laid on the surface of the natural clay⁽²⁾. Two unusual features of the road were that its surface was slightly below the contemporary ground level and its fall was consistently westwards.

Construction work for the new by-pass began in January 1975 and its primary phase, prior to any major excavation works, involved the building of a temporary diversion road and its accompanying drainage systems in the fields to the west of Eaton Road. (opposite the site of the 1972 excavation.) The character of these preliminary operations together with the help of the contractors and the staff of the North-West Road Construction Unit made it possible to obtain further information concerning the road located in 1972 and to investigate a hitherto unknown structure which lay to the west of the modern road.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THE ROMAN ROAD.

A large tree-lined drainage ditch some two metres deep occupied the space between the western limit of the 1972 excavation and the eastern edge of Eaton Road. Several trenches cut into the western bank of this ditch revealed further traces of the Roman road. One of them lay in an exact line with one of the 1972 trenches and thus made it possible to extend the original section.

The character of the road uncovered by these new explorations was found to be identical to that revealed in 1972. The primary road surface was composed of the same materials; gravel and small cobbles set in clay laid directly onto the natural stiff brown clay. This surface had a consistent thickness of 22-24 cm. (7 $\frac{1}{4}$ -8 in.) tapering to 17 cm. (5 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.) as it disappeared beneath the modern road. The layer of red sand⁽³⁾ noted as lying immediately on top of this surface was again present in these new cuts, though in a more substantial form. It varied in thickness from 15-30 cm. (5-10 in.) and was found throughout the length of the section. Observation of this layer in several other trenches indicated that it had originally been formed of blocks of sandstone which had been cut from a soft strata of rock. Traffic and/or the natural processes of weathering had subsequently caused the disintegration of the majority of the blocks. Overlying it was a 30 cms. thick layer of dirty yellow clay which contained many small pebbles. Next followed a 15 cm. thick layer of red sand and pebbles which may have been part of a nineteenth century road. The remaining 60 cm. (19 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.) was composed of dark brown topsoil. There were no indications of any pre-road features.

When these recent findings are correlated with those of the previous excavation it appears that the road surfaces in this sector extend over an area at least 13 metres (42 ft. 7 in.) wide. Although the relevant stratigraphy suggested that the various areas of road which were examined had formed part of a single and consistent layer of surfacing there are several other occurrences which may have accounted for the excessive width of this sector. It may have been caused by numerous patchings and re-surfacings whose alignments differed slightly from that of the original road, thus resulting in the formation of a very wide area of surfacing. As it is quite likely that the materials used in any such repairs would have been identical to those of the original surface the task of distinguishing between old and new would be extremely difficult. Furthermore, the compression of the layers by traffic and the particular environmental conditions which prevail in this area would render any attempt at distinction impossible.

Another but more remote possibility is that the areas of road which were investigated lay at a point immediately after a branching of the route. A situation could have existed in which the western fork continued southwards to Holt or turned westwards to Ffrith and the eastern fork carried on to the ford south of Eccleston and thence to Whitchurch. Unfortunately the part of our 'extended' section which would have revealed the presence of a space between the two forks had been destroyed by a large drainage ditch. There is one further explanation for the width of the

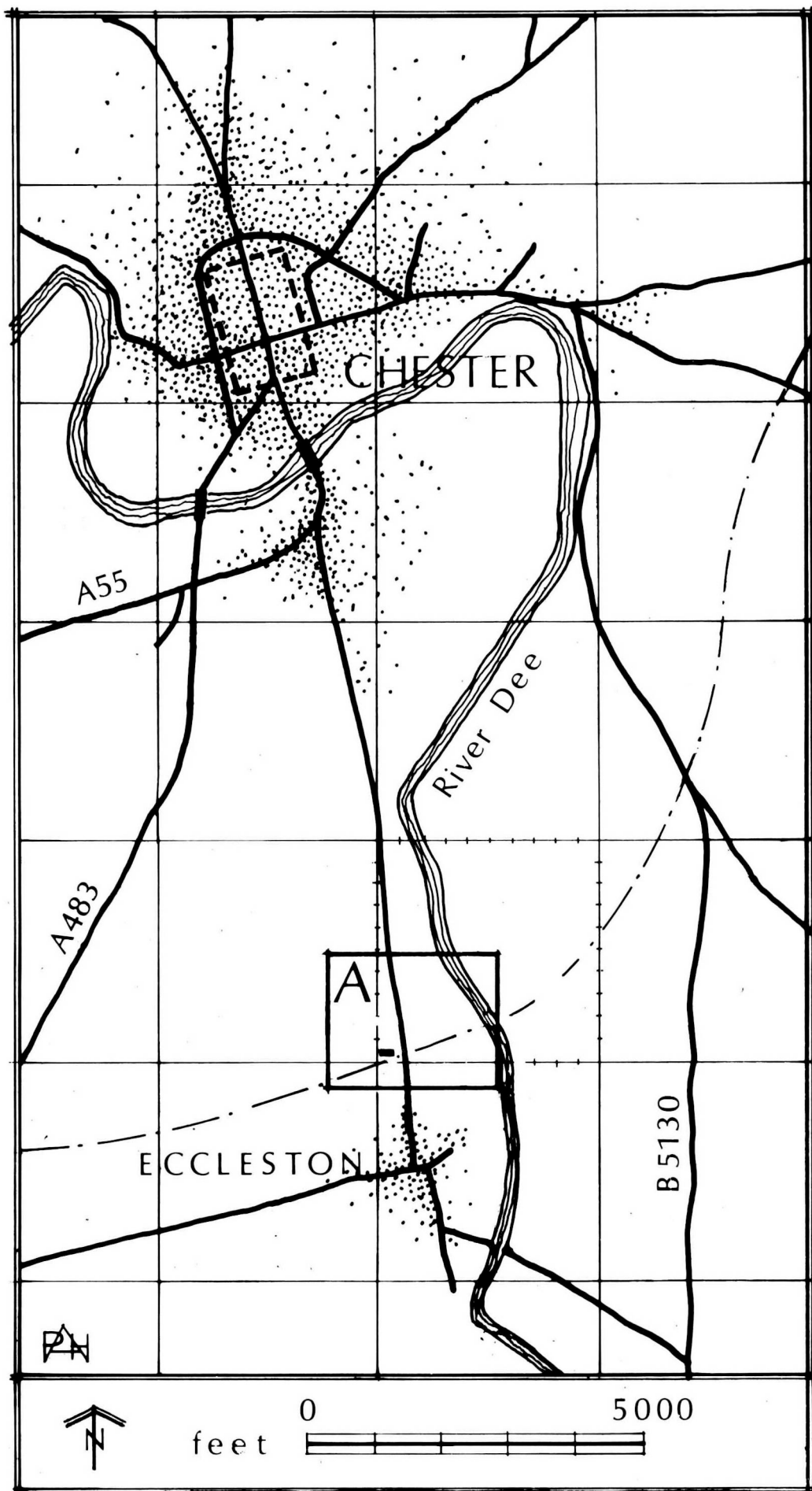


Fig. 12

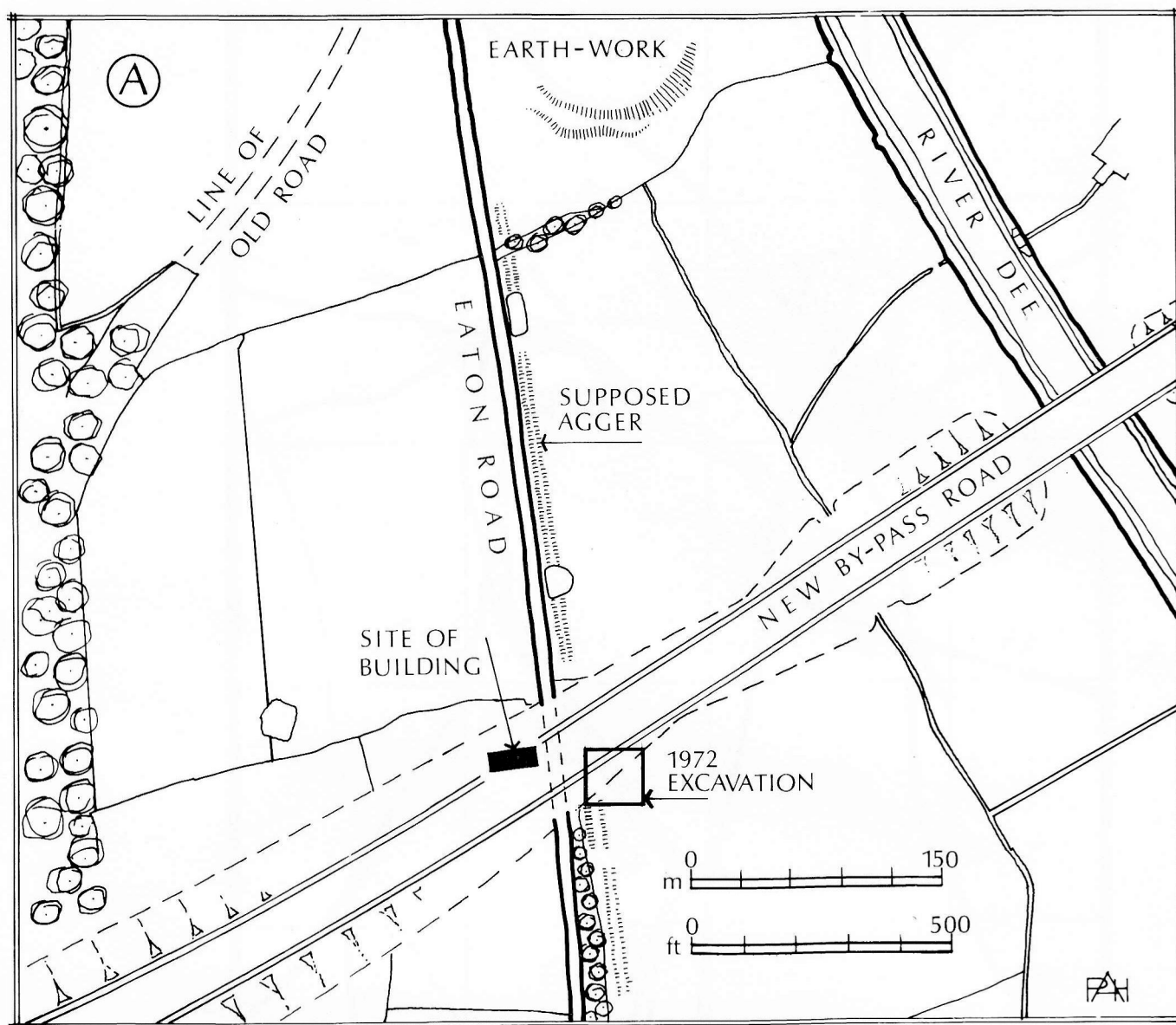


Fig. 13

road in this area but as this revolves around the discoveries made to the west of Eaton Road it is discussed after the information presented below.

As there was a total absence of finds from these new explorations the dating sequence postulated by Mr. Petch remains unaltered⁽⁴⁾.

STRUCTURE WEST OF EATON ROAD.

During the removal of topsoil in preparation for the construction of a temporary diversion road the outline of a foundation trench was observed in the surface of the underlying clay. Following a series of small trial holes to determine the approximate extent of the remains permission was granted by the contractor for a more detailed investigation. This took place between January and March of 1975. The structure lay to the north-west of the 1972 site and was aligned on an east-west axis. Almost the whole of the building was examined with the central and eastern areas receiving the most attention. The surface of the foundations was located at an average depth of 30 cm. (10 in.) though this varied considerably due to the 'ridge and furrow' system present in the field. This overburden was composed of a 10 cm. (3½ in.) thick layer of light brown soil and a 20 cm. (7 in.) thick layer of dark brown topsoil. The foundations consisted of a slot 55 cm. deep (1 ft. 6 in.) and 70 cm. (1 ft. 11 in.) wide filled with a mixture of sandstone rubble, small cobbles and pebbles set in stiff yellow clay. Traces of the first course level survived on two short sections of the foundation and these indicated that the wall and been faced with roughly-hewn,

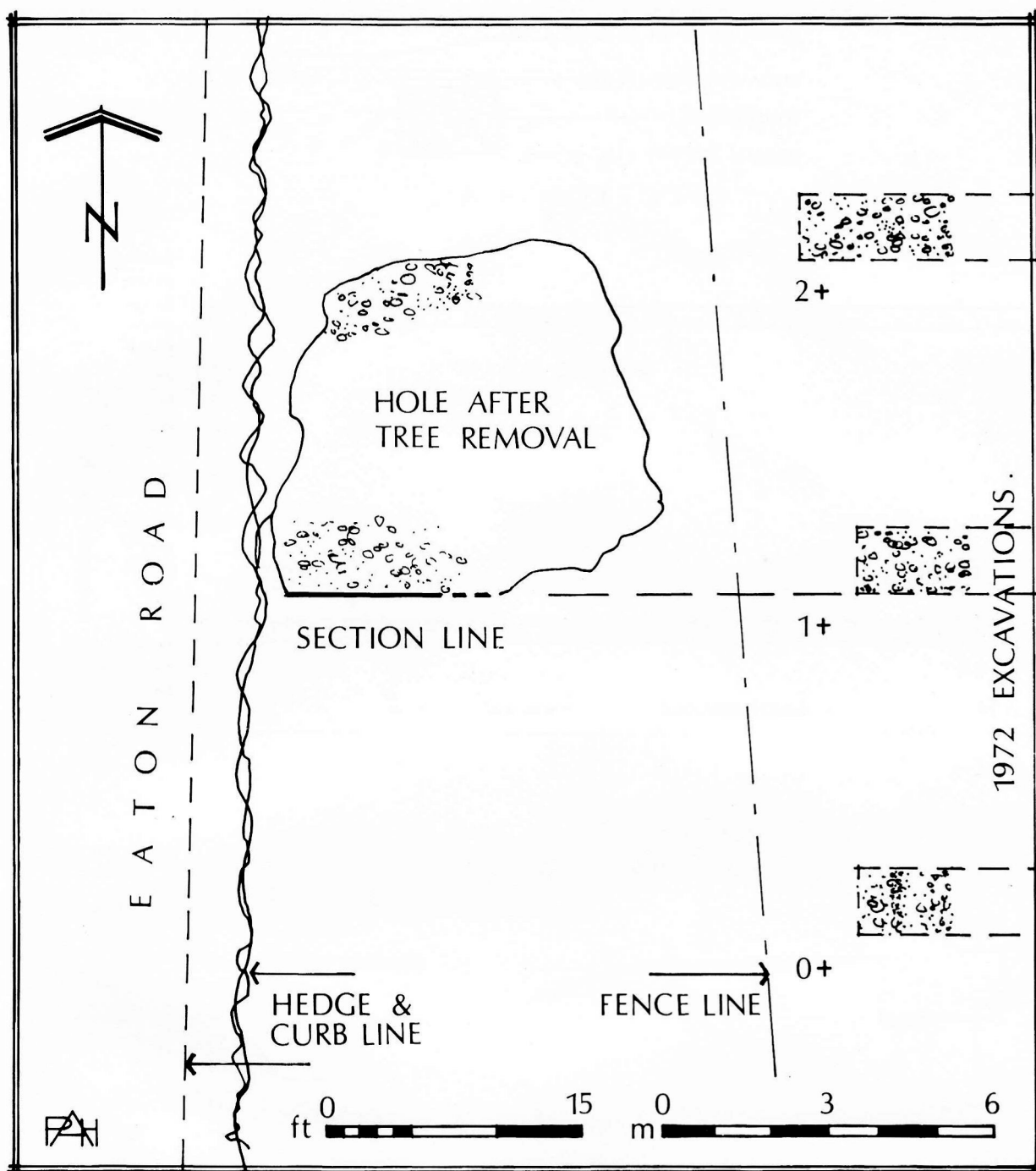


Fig. 14

rectangular blocks of sandstone and that the core had been formed of fine sandstone rubble and pebbles set in clay. The overall dimensions of the structure were 29.20 metres east-west (95 ft. 10 in.) by 11.40 metres north-south (37 ft. 5 in.), forming a near perfect rectangle. The east wall of the structure was pierced by two unequally sized entrances, represented by two gaps in the foundation slot, 3 metres and 2.10 metres. (9 ft 10 in. and 6 ft. 11 in.) The 90 cm. length (2 ft. 5 in.) of foundation which separated the entrances was slightly different to those in the rest of the building in that it was formed of sandstone blocks and not rubble.

There were no signs of any internal features, structural or otherwise, and any floor surfaces that might have existed had been totally removed by ploughing and the 'ridge and furrow' system. As a result of these disturbances the only pottery from the site which did not come from contaminated contexts were four very abraded sherds of Romano-British coarse ware from the foundation material. The only other finds from the site (unstratified) consisted of several further sherds of the Roman period and numerous fragments of eighteenth and nineteenth century pots. The lack of debris in and around the building together with the remarkably consistent level of the surviving foundations would indicate that it had been systematically robbed down to foundation level. In

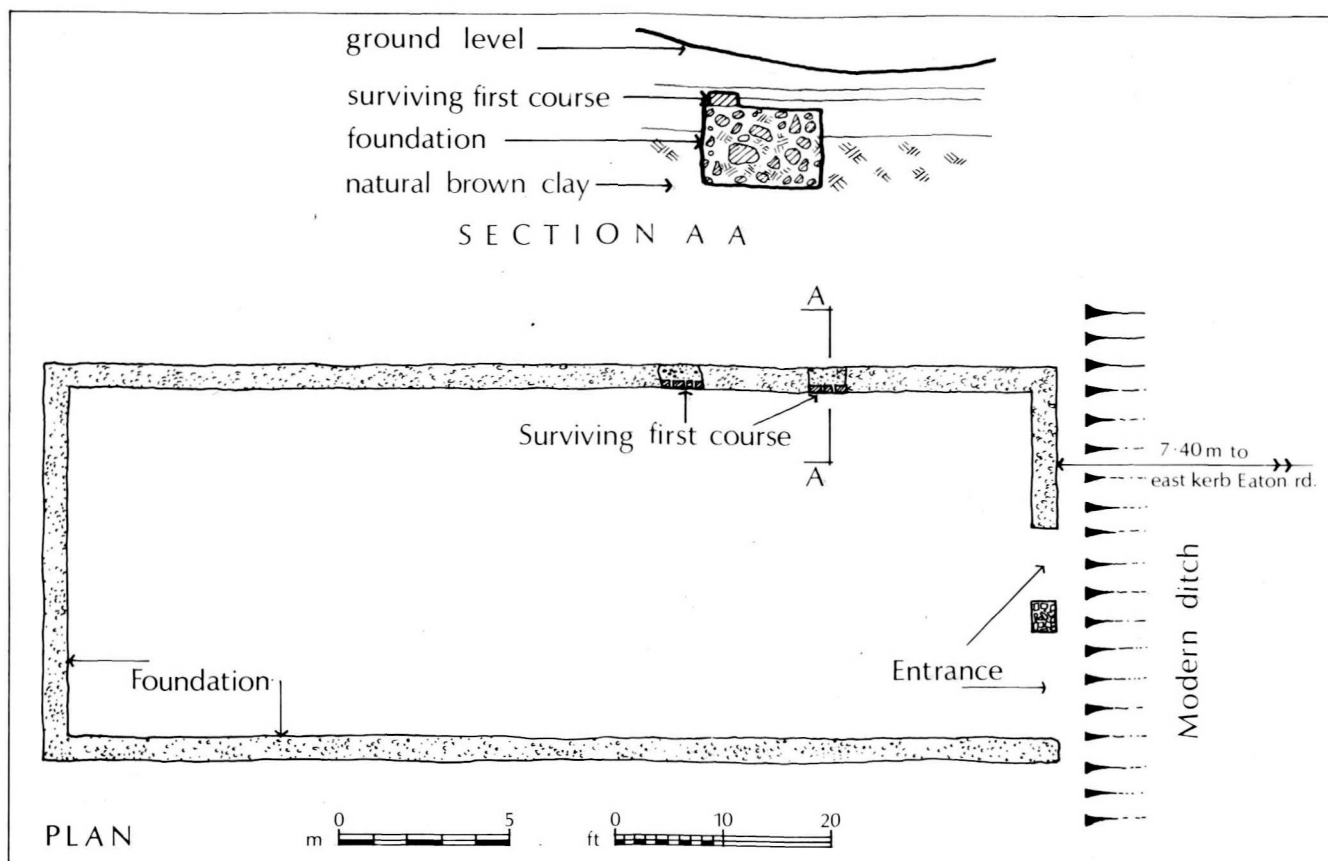


Fig. 15

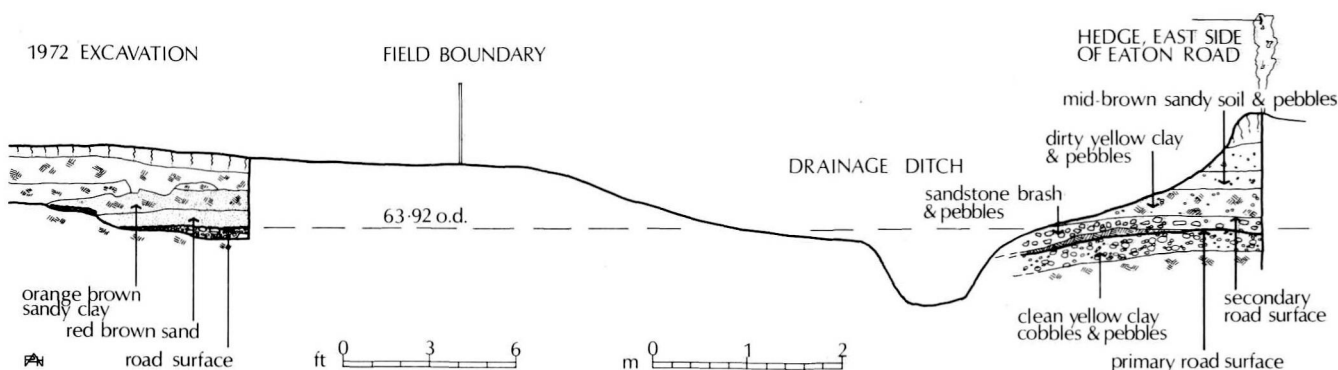


Fig. 16

later months the contractors removed the topsoil from an area which extended a hundred metres to the North and South of the building. Despite an intensive examination no traces of any other structures were found.

Due to the rather inconclusive results of the excavation it is impossible to give even an approximate date for the erection of the building. However there are several pieces of indirect evidence which may provide a general indication. The overlying spreads of eighteenth and nineteenth century pottery coupled with the total absence of Medieval finds perhaps point to a pre-Medieval date. The type of wall construction, the general accuracy of the surveying, and the position of the building relative to the Roman road would all appear to suggest a Roman origin. This hypothesis is supported by a comparison of this structure's dimensions with those of the buildings found at the nearby Romano-British settlement of Heronbridge⁽⁵⁾. The average size of the latter is 10-11 m. x 30-35 m. which is very similar to the newly-discovered structure. To complete the meagre amount of information we have the few sherds of Roman coarse pottery from the foundation material. If the theory of a Roman origin is correct the most likely period for its construction would be in the second or third centuries A.D.

The function of this building is equally difficult to assess. The absence of internal features, the minute amount of pottery and the lack of the usually indicative implements or utensils could be interpreted in several different ways. Either:- (a) that the foundations and some of the super-structure were erected but the building was never completed, (b) that the building was used for some form of semi-industrial activity the tools of which were either few and/or perishable or were very valuable and difficult to replace which were removed when the building was vacated, or (c) that the building was neither a residence nor a workshop but a store or barn. There is no way of testing the validity of theory (a) and so it must always remain as a possibility. With regard to theory (b) the scarcity of all types of finds would seem to discredit the idea of residential or industrial usage, the former becoming more remote when the width of the entrances is taken into account. The third possibility, that of a store or barn, would appear to be the most plausible. A function such as this would explain the meagre amount of finds, the absence of major internal features, and the width of the openings in the East wall, presumably designed for the entry of carts.

The Roman road which led South from the fortress has been examined at a number of different locations⁽⁶⁾ and has always been found to have a width of less than 30 ft. (9.14 m.). The overall route chosen by the Roman surveyors had resulted in this section of the road occupying a position high up on the sloping valley side. This had necessitated the cutting of a level platform into the slope to accommodate the road surface. The site of the building was on the nearest area of level ground some 18 metres (59 ft 1 in.) west of the point where the edge of a normal sized road would have been.

If, as seems likely, the building was erected in the Roman period and its function was that of a barn or store then perhaps it is not pure coincidence that it lay in such close proximity to this wider section of road. If it had been a collecting point for agricultural produce, prior to its removal to the settlement at Heronbridge and/or the fortress, this would have involved a considerable amount of 'comings and goings' by carts or similar vehicles. Thus it may well be the case that it was positioned away from the normal line of the road not only because of the need for a level site but also due to the desire for keeping the road proper clear for more important traffic. Therefore the wider section of road could be regarded as a forecourt or loading area for the building.

From the results of the 1972 and earlier excavations Mr. Petch has demonstrated that the probable date of construction for the gravel and cobble road surface lies in the period of 100-130 A.D. As the recently discovered sections are of identical composition, level and gradient it seems likely that they belong to the same period and that the widening was an original feature. If the reasons proposed in this article for the wider section are correct then it would imply that the building was either erected during the construction of the road or that it was already in existence before this surface was laid.

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