

# REFLECTIONS ON ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE CREATION OF THE GROSVENOR MUSEUM: 1948-55

by G A Webster OBE, MA, PHD, FSA, AMA

## *From Lincoln to Chester*

In 1947 the City Council took over the Grosvenor Museum and Mechanics' Institute from the Archaeological Society and placed it under the direction of the Education Committee, which formed a Museum Sub-Committee for that purpose. The Sub-Committee proceeded to ask Sir Mortimer Wheeler to draw up a plan for the modernisation of the museum, especially in view of its remarkably large collection of Roman tombstones and fragments of mausolea from the North Wall of the fortress, and then set about appointing the first full-time Curator.

When the position of Curator was advertised, in 1948, I was a Senior Engineering Assistant in the City Engineer's Office in Lincoln and had, in fact, been offered the post of Chief Assistant. But I had been in charge of a considerable amount of excavation in Lincoln and the county and been responsible for the discovery of the site of the legionary fortress on the hill top. I was anxious to become a full-time archaeologist, and at that time the only way to do this was by joining a museum with an excavating tradition. My qualifications were inadequate and I did not even have a degree since, although I had matriculated at school (a minor public school – Stamford), I was not considered clever enough to sit for a county scholarship for Oxford or Cambridge. Nevertheless, with the help and encouragement of my two supporters, Ian Richmond and Philip Corder, I applied for the post and was asked to attend an interview. This gave me my first view of the Grosvenor Museum, as it did the other applicants, who were museum assistants from elsewhere. There was a sense of growing horror among them at the enormous amount of work to be done – and in the end none of them wanted the post, except for a lady from Liverpool who appeared to talk herself out of it. The Committee turned to me in despair: 'Could I really do it?' they asked. 'Well gentlemen', I replied, 'I certainly could not make it worse!', which lightened the mood, but I was told, 'You have no degree'. 'That alas is the case', I replied, 'but my friends at Liverpool and Manchester have assured me that this would be possible to achieve'. At this the mood of the Committee improved and one worthy member stated roundly that they would help me towards this end. That statement later enabled me to claim such help 'as a condition of appointment', when the City Treasurer began to protest at the time I had to spend at Manchester University.

At Manchester, Donald Atkinson, the Professor of Ancient History, found a forgotten Ordinance of the Foundation Charter which stated that a well-supported applicant could proceed direct to an MA without graduating. But the Senate was determined to make it hard and obliged me to attend classes in Ancient History, Roman Britain and German, and I actually sat examinations, so in a sense the Senate found ways of ensuring that I did actually graduate. Eventually I produced a thesis on Roman Chester which was accepted. My external examiner was Marjorie Taylor, who had been Haverfield's secretary. Her standards were very high and some revision was necessary, but she was a very kind person and she gave me her father's Manchester honorary MA hood.

### *The Goss Street excavation*

By a happy coincidence, I arrived at Chester in time for the Goss Street excavation. This had been planned by the Archaeological Society, which had invited Ian Richmond to undertake it. I naturally accepted that part of my task as Curator was to assist him, and eventually our joint report was published in the *Journal* for 1951. This excavation, although on a small scale, was a milestone in the understanding of the history of the Roman fortress. Richmond was able to identify an early timber period below the later stone buildings. Perhaps the most spectacular triumph was in the basement of 23 Northgate Street, at that time occupied by 'Nola Gowns'. The cellar floor had been lowered into the sandstone bedrock, but three of the column bases of the headquarters building (*principia*) had been left standing. In sections below the bases the rock-cut foundations of the earlier timber columns could be seen (Richmond & Webster 1951, 17 and pl vii, 2). Ian was able to relate these column bases in the cellar to one found during the Goss Street excavation and attempted a reconstruction of that corner of the building (*art cit*, 9).

One of the finds which fascinated Ian Richmond at Goss Street was a bottle of 'Daffy's Elixir', a seventeenth-century laxative which he seemed to know all about. A little of the content survived, and he had these analysed by the Public Analyst, who found traces of iron and suggested that senna had been present: it must have been a powerfully purging cordial. Ian insisted on this being included in the report, and I even drew the bottle with its raised lettering (*art cit*, fig 15). But that was not the only excitement: we cut through the fill of an eighteenth-century cellar, which produced a collection of wine bottles, one of which was stamped 'John Bowker 1731'. A little research showed that he was a draper and a City Councillor elected in 1733 but had been fined £20 for failing to take up his office! I included a photograph of the eighteenth-century pottery. In my later excavations I began to publish seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pottery in full. It did not occur to me at the time that Chester was the first place to do this, but this was mainly due to the enthusiasm of Kenneth Barton who drew it (*see especially the group from Trinity Street: Webster 1956a*).

Kenneth was a strange, wayward young man, who had insisted on helping during the Goss Street excavation. He was a rate-fixer at a metal window factory and he was so persistent that I gave him a large pit to empty on the south edge of the site. I almost forgot about him, but suddenly remembered and expected to find he had left, but there he was at the bottom of a very large hole, holding up an almost complete medieval jug. This began

a career which made him one of the main European experts on medieval pottery and raised him to the post of Director of the Hampshire Museums Service, earning far more than ever I did. How this was all accomplished was an astonishing story of determination and will-power which overcame initial educational disadvantages. He attached himself to the museum, doing all the odd jobs in his spare time, and he took to model-making without any hesitation.

### *The Roman Stones Gallery*

When I first came to Chester I lived in the YMCA, on the site of the Old Bishop's Palace, and worked in the museum most evenings. Ian joined me, and we discussed ways of displaying the stones and other antiquities. I well remember the quite dreadful state of the stones gallery: ancient cast-iron heating pipes had been laid round the room just above the floor, and there was a large amount of dust and filth under them. As I walked around I noticed what appeared to be the corner of a flat stone poking out; I picked it up and blew away some of the collected dust. Ian immediately seized it and, after an incredulous look, started to dance around the gallery with chuckles of delight. This, he announced, was the missing slate inscription which had been found in 1884 in the Hop Pole paddock. We took it downstairs where the filth could be washed away, and Ian then became even more excited over the bottom edge. 'Look', he exclaimed, 'There's a serif and it should be the letter D'. This, he explained, must make it Trajanic to fit in the title DACICVS which the emperor received in AD 102. From the find-spot Ian argued that it must have been part of the monumental inscription over the Roman east gate. The significance of all this was to emerge later in his historical conclusions in the Goss Street report, but how this important fragment had been lost under the hot water pipes remained a mystery. It dated the building of the stone wall of the fortress, and I made sure that a fragment of such historical importance would have a special place in the gallery, even if it meant making a new showcase, which we eventually did.

It was Ian Richmond who insisted that all the stones should be properly photographed while they were being moved. It so happened that the Chief Inspector of Weights and Measures, Harry Robinson, had been very helpful during the Goss Street excavation, allowing use of his premises nearby. We discovered that he was an excellent photographer, and he immediately saw it as his duty to help with the photography of the stones. This was a very long and tedious operation, as we could only deal with one or two in an evening. We had moveable lamps which could light up the stones in any direction. Eventually, the task was completed and Ian and Richard Wright produced the catalogue (Wright & Richmond 1955). There was an obvious need for a shorter guide to the stones for sale at the museum, and this I published in 1950.

The manhandling of the stones into their display positions was even more difficult, as it had to be carefully planned to avoid later alterations. The gallery itself also required totally redecorating and the vertical iron bars at the windows had to be removed to avoid the appearance of a prison! The City Livery banners hung most inappropriately over the stones, and these were re-hung in the front gallery as part of a display on the later history of Chester. It was so slow getting the workmen from the depot to arrive to do these tasks that I deliberately stopped chasing them up and waited. Eventually, at an appropriate

Committee meeting, I reported that progress was slow, because no-one had arrived to carry out the work on the orders placed, and after waiting for three months I felt that an alternative solution was required. I showed the Committee the basement and suggested that it could easily be adapted as a carpenter's workshop. This was fortunately agreed on and a carpenter appointed. All was now plain sailing, and work was accomplished steadily and new equipment was regularly acquired on the annual budgets. We were lucky to have such excellent and loyal craftsmen. The work proceeded steadily in the museum, and this included turning the lecture theatre into a comfortable, modern one for school parties and the use of the Archaeological Society.

### *The Newstead Gallery*

One of my most difficult problems was the gallery entirely devoted to annual shows by local artists and the photographic society and occasionally to temporary exhibitions. I badly needed this gallery to display the artefacts from excavations, which were locked away in a large safe. As a move towards a take-over, I persuaded the Committee to adopt a policy of only accepting pictures and photographs from local artists on local subjects. Whether this helped or not I have never discovered, but I got the gallery and much publicity. As a result of this, dealers from all over the country started to send me pictures, and a wealthy local collector began to take a friendly interest in the museum. I discovered that I rather liked some of the watercolours myself. I started a modest collection and developed an interest which has given me hours of delight and enjoyment over the years.

The new gallery, however, instead of being an asset was an embarrassment, as I soon discovered that the large safe contained merely a few handfuls of Roman artefacts – hardly enough for a single case. New material was, of course, pouring in from continuing excavations, but most of it was post-Roman. I therefore decided that the only answer was to display the legionary fortress with models, including a full-size Roman soldier and a diorama of a distant view of Roman Chester. These were, of course, specialised tasks, and I got my friend Russell Robinson at the Tower of London to make me the armour and equipment for the soldier, who was to stand in a glass case. When the model arrived and was duly clothed and armoured, we were taken aback by his bare legs with a complete absence of hair, so my secretary and I had the unusual task of drawing hairs all over the legs to make him look more natural!

I wanted to recreate a roof with Roman tiles but found we did not have enough complete examples. However, I knew that there was a cache in the National Museum of Wales at Cardiff from the excavations at Holt. In our collection of stones there was one which did not belong to Chester – it was part of an altar from Caersws – and I persuaded the Committee to offer it in exchange for the tiles. As I expected, the National Museum leapt at the opportunity. Soon I had more tiles than I really needed. By a strange coincidence, a short time after this a Chester man came to the museum and asked if I wanted any Roman tiles. I naturally said that I was interested, and he told me that he had gone to Holt after the National Museum had taken all they wanted and removed a load, which he had stored in his cellar, which he now needed. So the museum took another load which was stacked away for another occasion.

Despite this, we were still left with much empty wall space. As the gallery was about the army and the excavations, I felt it might be an idea to make panels with information on such themes as the organisation of a legion and Roman coinage. When the gallery was open, I discovered that it was highly suitable for schools, and soon they had to make appointments to avoid overcrowding. I discovered that necessity had invented a new type of museum with what was described as a 'didactic display'. I then had to look in a dictionary to find out what we had achieved! (The *Oxford Shorter Dictionary* gives 'characterised by giving instruction'). When later I directed a training excavation school, I suppose I became highly didactic myself.

The new gallery was named after Robert Newstead and was opened by his niece. As it illustrated the Roman army it seemed only natural that I should attempt a *Short guide to the Roman army*. This I did in 1956 (Webster 1956b), and it has gone through a number of editions. In collecting all the material together I became aware of the need for a larger book, which I was tempted to produce. However, I was deterred by the unfortunate rule of the City Council that any additional earnings of an officer of the Council, from whatever source, had to be paid to the City Treasurer. For this reason I had not done any of the extra-mural lecturing which I was pressed to do by Liverpool University. Apparently, about this time a clerk in the City Treasurer's office was found to be helping his wife in a fish and chip shop in his spare time. When a demand for his share of the profits was made, he promptly resigned and helped his wife full-time to earn far more than he ever did as a clerk. I understand that the rule has never been changed. As soon as I left Chester, I began to write my *Roman imperial army* (Webster 1969), which is now in its third edition and is the standard work on the subject – and I have received all the royalties!

### *The Period House*

During the early years I discovered that the Council was debating the future of the house behind the museum, fronting onto Castle Street. There was even the idea of demolishing it to make a car park for the museum. I had in mind the creation of a period house, with rooms illustrating the styles of different centuries. This was eventually agreed, and an entry was made from the museum into the back of the house. A ground-floor room immediately suggested display in Victorian style. Some Chester ladies led by Mrs Basil Jones took over the job of finding Victoriana to fill it, and soon it was truly a period piece. I also planned an eighteenth-century room upstairs and even collected panelling from a house being demolished in the county, but there was never time to complete it while I was Curator.

### *Excavations*

All this time, actually only six full years (1948-54), I continued to excavate in Chester when it was necessary. As it happened, these investigations were concentrated on the Roman defences, which I believed were more sensitive to change than the internal buildings of the fortress. These excavations clearly showed the presence of a turf rampart built on a timber corduroy, prior to the building of the stone wall.

The most exciting event was in 1950, when a local teacher came to the museum with a handful of coins which had been given to one of her pupils by her father to take to school for identification. They were Anglo-Saxon; I immediately knew that a hoard must have been found and began enquiries. The hoard had, in fact, appeared as a cascade of coins when digging a trench for an electricity cable in Castle Esplanade, at the south end of Nicholas Street and within sight of the museum. Some of the workmen had vanished in the direction of Liverpool, but what was most impressive was the story of a pot sliced by a spade. The idea of recovering a complete Anglo-Saxon pot was more compelling than the coins. We went to the site immediately, raised the paving slabs, found the trench and began to empty the backfill. Not only were the pieces of pot there, but most of the coins and silver ingots, which had been shovelled back. Later we heard that the workmen, except those who had grabbed handfuls and vanished, assumed that they were modern milk tokens! We dug down to the cable but avoided any contact, assuming that it was live. We put all the backfill into wheelbarrows and carted it to the museum, where it was all carefully sieved. We then discovered that the cable was still dead, so back we went and excavated around and under the cable, recovering even more coins and bullion.

Finally there were 522 coins, 142 pieces of silver bullion and a virtually complete pot to reassemble. Richard Dolley, the leading authority on coins of this period, was overjoyed at having such a large hoard to examine and publish (Webster *et al* 1953). It included some unique coins, like the ones of Eadwig with the obverse of a London monogram of Halfdene the Viking, suggesting that Eadgar was demonstrating his completion of the task begun by Alfred. The date of the hoard was put at *c AD* 970. But the real *pièce de résistance* in my opinion was a virtually complete Saxon pot as closely dated as one could wish. This large addition to the museum's small collection of Saxon coins made it a realistic idea that we should also acquire the fine collection of Dr Willoughby Gardner, and this was done with the help of substantial grants from national bodies (*see* Pirie 1964).

The Roman site at Heronbridge, south of Chester, was being explored sporadically by a most extraordinary character known as 'Walrus Williams' because of his moustache. He had an excellent pupil in the Head Boy at Chester Grammar School, who showed an aptitude for archaeology and had helped us at Goss Street. This was Brian Hartley, who has become the leading British authority on samian ware. Heronbridge is a very peculiar site, and the only reason for its existence that I could imagine was as a portage station, where tiles and pottery from Holt were transferred from river craft to road transport. This may have been necessitated by the state of the river nearer Chester, where it became very shallow; but this is now difficult to judge since the river was drastically altered by the building of the medieval mill. Moreover, the Roman road from Heronbridge to Chester is some distance from the river and at a much higher level and one would have to find a road linking a jetty on the river with this main road.

Walrus Williams must be credited with the important suggestion that he made about the site of the amphitheatre: he noticed a significant bulge in the retaining wall along Souters Lane, leading to the river, and he was right. But many of the other ideas which he laid before me from time to time were far from sensible. He kept an eye on all excavations and came in one day full of excitement to announce that he had found a Mithraeum in a garden

in Watergate Street, where someone had dug a trench which, he announced, had revealed the roof of a building, so the whole of the building must be intact below it! He wanted me to report this to the Archdeacon, who was the Chairman of the Archaeological Society, so that a full-scale excavation could be undertaken immediately. The idea seemed so astonishing that I insisted on seeing it for myself first. There certainly were stone slabs, but they appeared to be in a line, so I levered one up and, sure enough, they were cover slabs of a drain.

### *Wroxeter and Birmingham*

While there was all this hard work and excitement in Chester, events elsewhere were to affect my future. In 1954 Donald Dudley was appointed as the first Director of the new Extra-Mural Department at Birmingham University. A classical scholar of considerable calibre, he felt very strongly that practical archaeology brought the past alive. He planned not only to establish a tutorship in his subject but also a training school in practical archaeology. For reasons I never discovered he singled me out as the person he wanted, but I was unwilling to leave the museum with so much still to be done. By now I had an assistant and also a Natural History Curator to set up a gallery related to the needs of the schools.

Donald persuaded me to give up two of my summer vacations to assist Kathleen Kenyon in short training courses at Wroxeter, based at Attingham Park. After my Great Casterton experiences, this was most revealing in clarifying my ideas about training adult students. The fees I recovered from the two schools, of course, went straight to the City Treasurer; he may have been surprised to find that I was receiving more than my museum salary, but he did not hand over the extra, nor did I expect it.

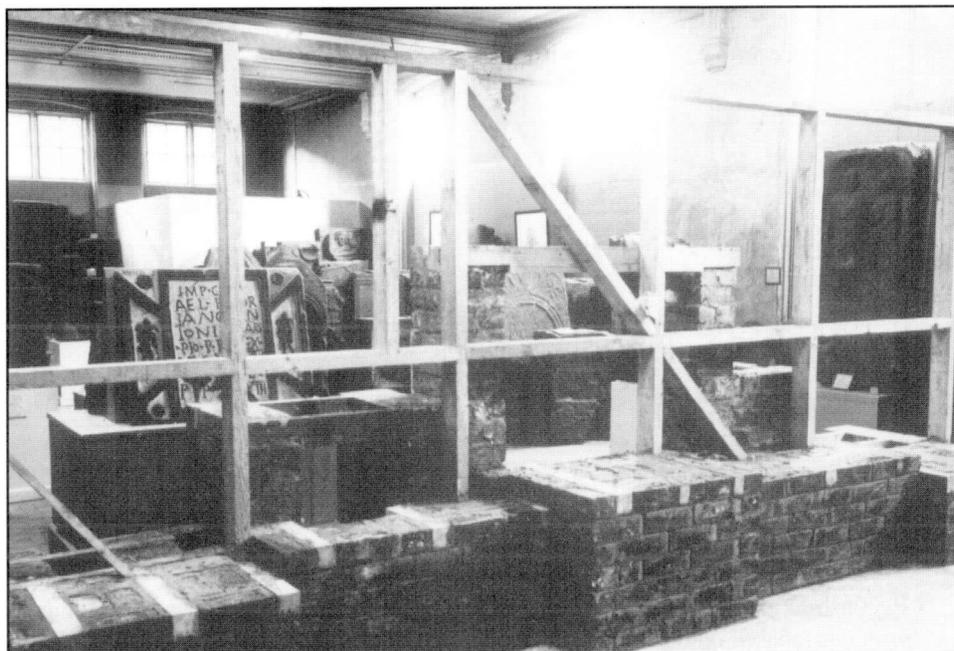
The pressure Donald exerted obliged me to make an arrangement with the City Council that I would spend half my time at the university and the other half at the museum completing the tasks that I had started. This was a highly unsatisfactory period (1954-57) for both employers, but Donald was unable to give me an immediate appointment to his department. This did not, however, stop him, for he secured for me an Edward Cadbury Senior Research Fellowship and I chose as my research project 'The Fosse Way in an early Roman defence system' the results of which were published in the *Archaeological Journal* (Webster 1958). In 1957 I eventually left Chester to take up a full-time staff tutorship (later Readership) in archaeology at Birmingham.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

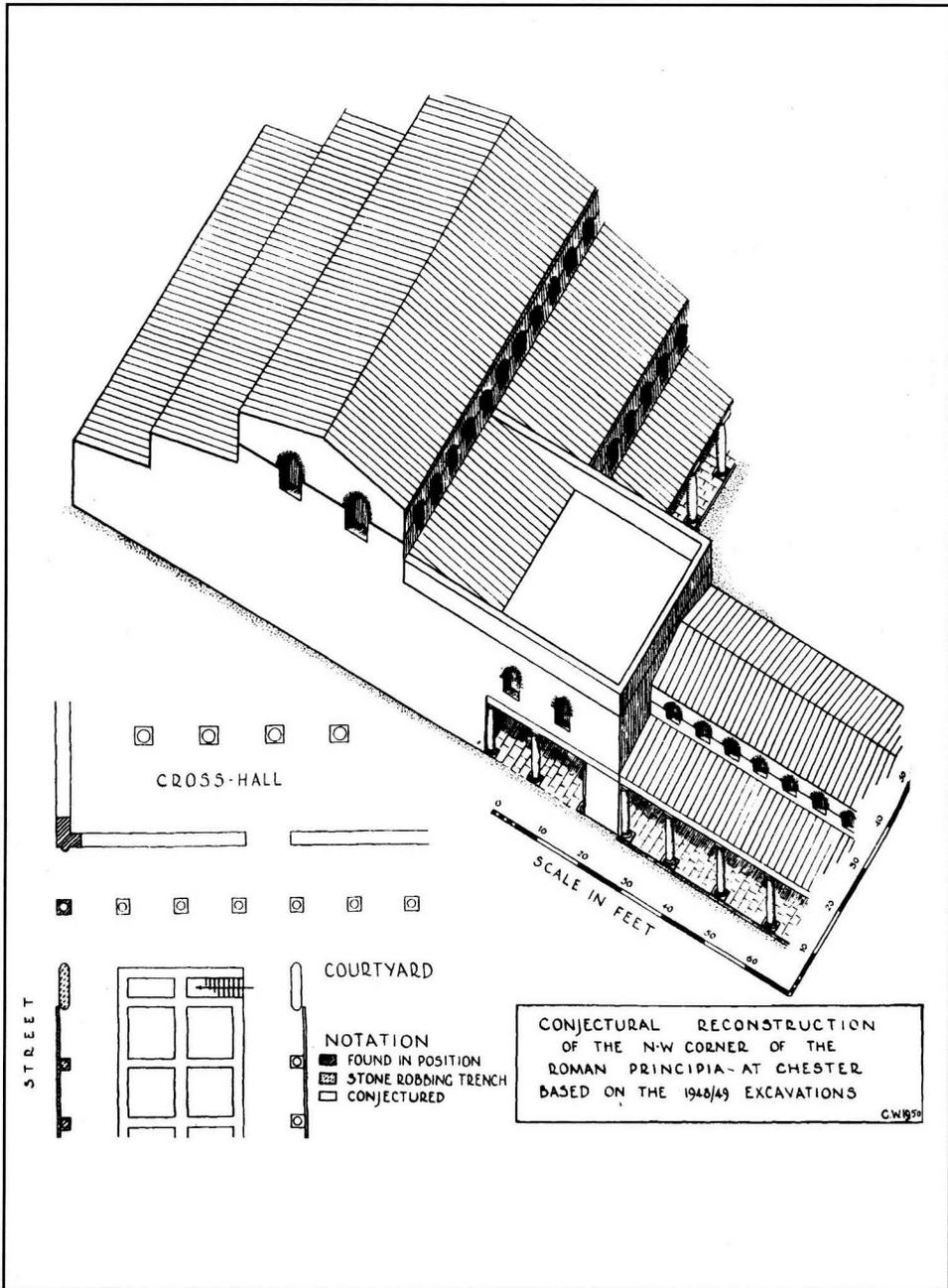
- Pirie, E J E 1964 Grosvenor Museum, Chester, part 1: the Willoughby Gardner collection of coins with the Chester mint-signature. London: OUP/Spink for the British Academy. (Sylloge of coins of the British Isles **5**)
- Richmond, I A & Webster, G A 1951 Excavations in Goss Street, Chester, 1948-9. *J Chester Archaeol Soc* **38**, 1-38
- Webster, G A 1956a Excavation of the Roman remains east of Trinity Street 1950-1953. *J Chester Archaeol Soc* **43**, 27-33
- Webster, G A 1956b A short guide to the Roman army. Chester City Council
- Webster, G A 1958 The Roman military advance under Ostorius Scapula. *Archaeol J* **105**, 49-98
- Webster, G A 1969 The Roman imperial army of the first and second centuries AD. London: Black
- Webster, G A *et al* 1953 A Saxon treasure hoard found at Chester, 1950. *Antiq J* **33** (1-2), 22-32
- Wright, R P & Richmond, I A 1955 Catalogue of the Roman inscribed and sculptured stones in the Grosvenor Museum, Chester. Chester Archaeological Society



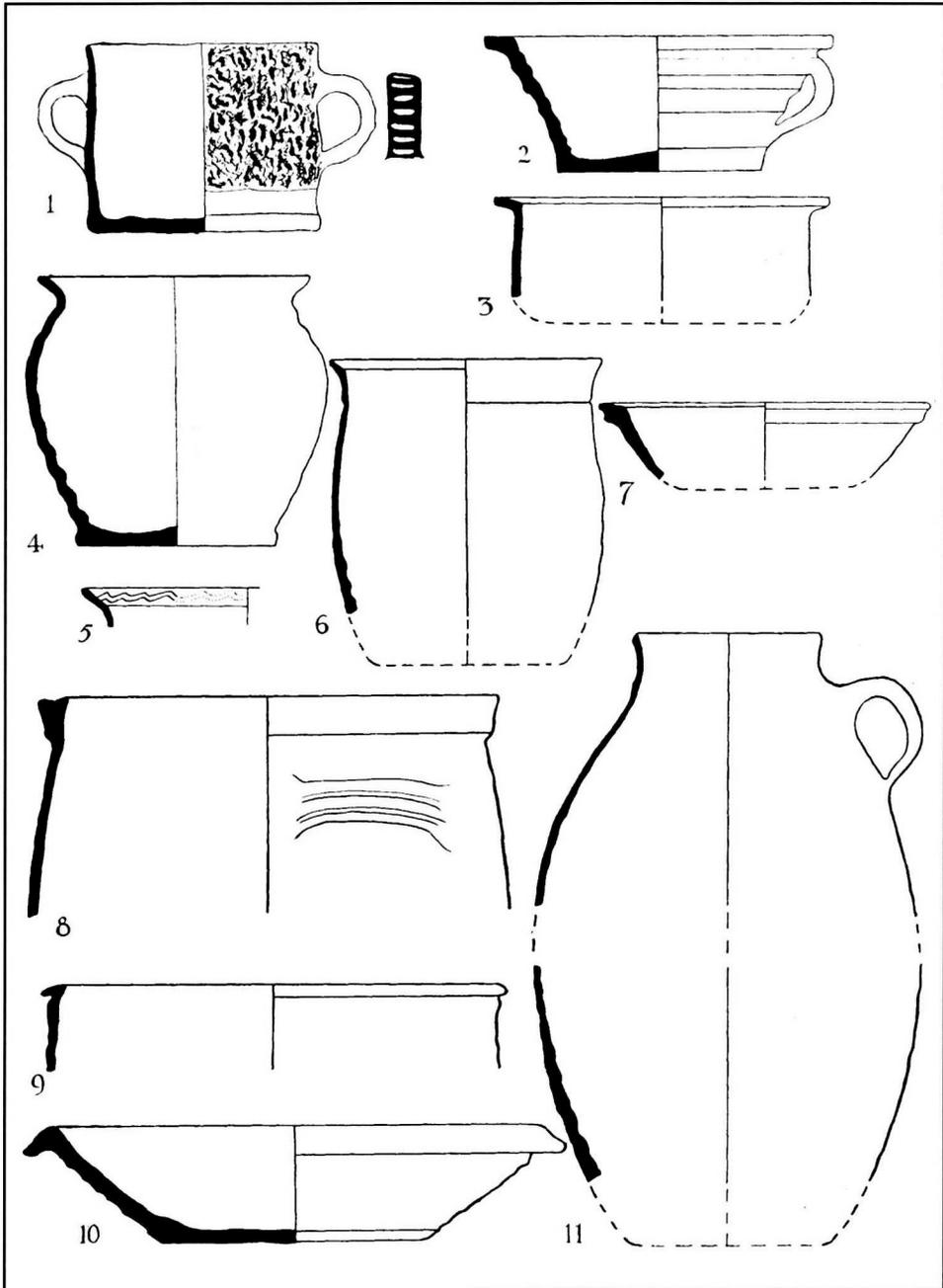
6 The opening of the Newstead Gallery. *Left to right:* Graham Webster, Professor Ian Richmond and Miss Joan Newstead.



7 The Roman Stones Gallery under construction.



8 Reconstruction drawing by Graham Webster of the Roman headquarters building (*principia*), based on discoveries made during the Goss Street 1948/9 excavation. (Richmond and Webster 1951, 16, fig 9).



9 Medieval and post-medieval pottery from the Trinity Street 1950-3 excavation, drawn by Ken Barton. (Webster 1956, 29, fig 3).

