

## IV THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF MEDIEVAL CHESTER: A REVIEW

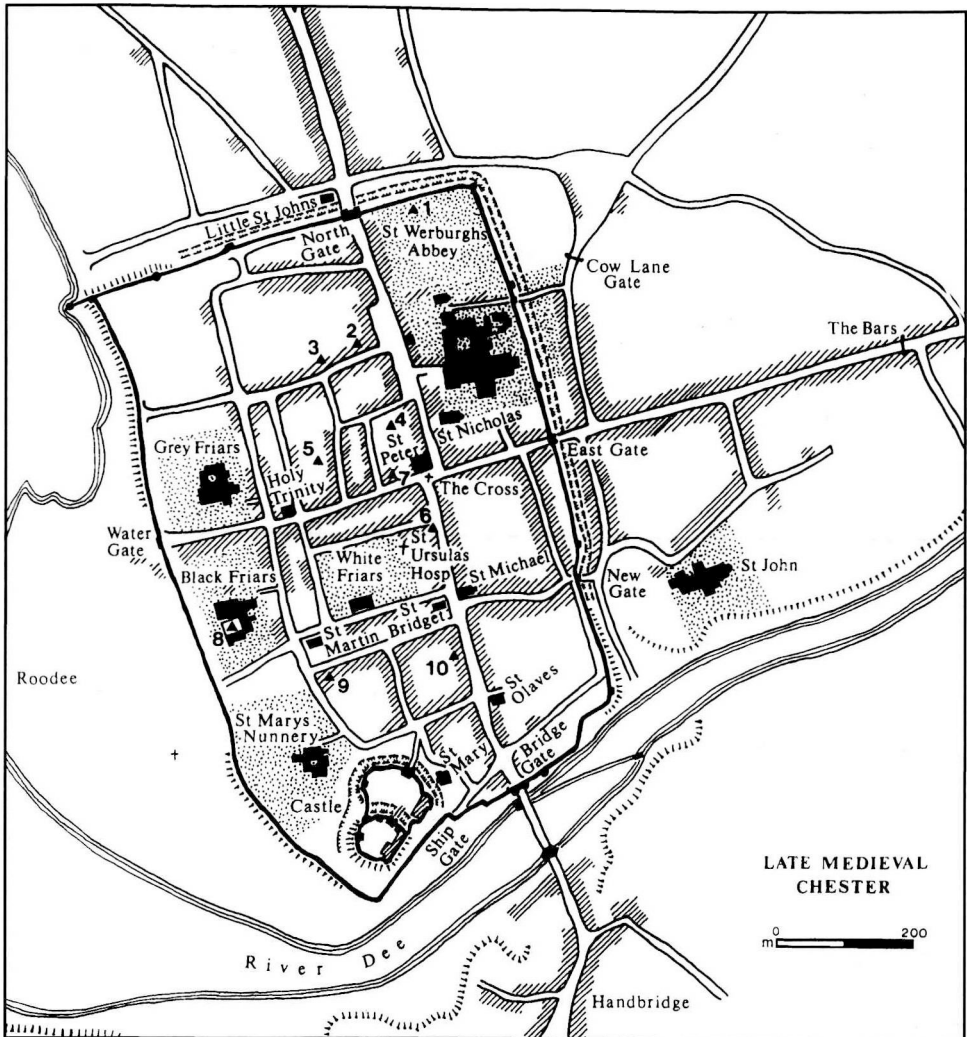
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### **Introduction**

The observation and recording of archaeological discoveries in the city of Chester has a considerable history, measurable in centuries, as previous volumes of this journal attest so well. The extent of redevelopment since the Second World War, and particularly during the nineteen sixties and seventies, produced a great explosion of new data which it has been the task of the eighties and nineties to order, synthesise and publish. The extent of destruction of the archaeological record by redevelopment and urban renewal led to the formation in 1972 of the Excavations Section of the Grosvenor Museum, (now Chester Archaeology, a section of the City Council's Department of Development and Leisure Services). This team has provided a continuous professional presence in the city to deal with any development threat. As a member of this team, the author has had the task of analysing the data and writing reports on the features of medieval date discovered on sites excavated largely during the last three decades (Ward 1990 and unpublished).

The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, the advanced state of the author's researches makes most desirable a presentation of some of the ideas that have developed. Reviews of the archaeological evidence for medieval Chester are notable for their scarcity and their negative slant (eg, Strickland 1977). It is intended that this paper will redress the balance somewhat and give some consideration as to why this situation has occurred. Secondly, the condition and importance of any surviving archaeological deposits is now a material factor in the determination of planning consent. In assessing the importance of sites we need to determine the questions the deposits they contain might help to answer. By reviewing the current state of knowledge in this paper, it is hoped that it will be possible to identify the trends of development during the medieval period and the gaps that exist in our understanding.

In order to do this, the various categories of medieval features found on excavations will be considered thematically. Firstly, however, it is worth considering what may be termed the problem of medieval archaeology in Chester, which imposes certain limitations on our knowledge. Some of these it may be possible to overcome; others, however, are likely to remain endemic to the subject and must therefore continue to be accepted.



IV.1 Late medieval Chester: excavations mentioned in the text. 1 – 1, Abbey Green 1975–8; 2 – Hunter’s Walk 1979 and 1980; 3 – Hunter Street School 1979 and 1981; 4 – Goss Street 1973; 5 – 1–11 Crook Street 1973/4; 6 – 30 Bridge Street 1987; 7 – 12 Watergate Street 1985; 8 – Grey Friars Court 1976–8 and 1981 and Nicholas Street Mews 1988; 9 – Cuppin Street 1986; 10 – 26–42 Lower Bridge Street 1974–6

### The problem of medieval archaeology

Although, as noted above, archaeological observation in Chester has been going on for centuries, the bulk of the early records concern only the Roman period. Obviously, the limited archaeological techniques of the early periods were only adequate to identify the more substantial remains left by the Romans as compared to the frequently slighter remains of later occupation. Unfortunately these techniques perform continued rather

later than they should have done, and Chester acquired a reputation, somewhat undeservedly, for being interested only in the Roman period and nothing else. In fact, the tactics that were used were often necessitated by severe limitations of both time and resources, with the inevitable result that only the most obvious, invariably Roman, features could be recorded. Although work in recent years has enabled this reputation to be lived down somewhat, the weight of the earlier work still means that an imbalance exists in our understanding. It is best illustrated by an example.

In 1948 a narrow trench was opened by Sir Ian Richmond and Graham Webster on the western side of Goss Street near its northern end (Richmond & Webster 1951, Trench IV) and re-examined in a larger area by J C McPeake in 1973 (McPeake 1974). This trench revealed a north-south section of Roman wall with partition walls running off to its west. This wall was identified by its plan and position in the legionary fortress as the eastern wall of one of the barracks for the First Cohort and appears as such on published plans of the fortress (eg, Carrington 1986 12.). That same trench also revealed at its northern end a finely constructed, masonry-lined, late medieval cess pit (Ill IV. 2) which the later excavation demonstrated to be one of a long sequence of pits. This particular pit contained a rich group of finds, both of local wares and foreign imports. It is also clear from the description of its fills that it contained well preserved organic remains, such as have been found in similar more recently excavated pits (eg, Greig 1988), although the facilities and technology to sample and analyse the fills were not readily available at that time. This feature was clearly of as much significance and importance to the medieval occupation of the site as the barrack wall was to the Roman period. Unlike the Roman structure, however, we are unable to explain and locate the feature in the history and development of the medieval city, except in very general terms. What is lacking is a clearly defined framework or research programme into which new discoveries may be fitted. It is hoped that this review will enable the basis of such a framework to be defined.

It is undoubtedly true that the precise framework that has been developed for the Roman fortress, to a considerable extent by extrapolation, will never be achieved for later periods, for the medieval city was never built to such a regular plan. It is, however, important to recognise such planning (in its broadest sense) as might have existed, either by design or through custom and usage. Such planning might have occurred on a large scale where areas or parcels of land were divided into separate units which served different functions or activities. Alternatively, on a smaller scale within each parcel of land, various features and structures were built which contributed to the activities carried on there and which can be used to identify them.

In addition, it has to be admitted that the archaeological data for the medieval period is much less plentiful than it is for others, both in the form of structures and finds. This is in large measure due to the small population of the city at that time. Although estimates of medieval population have to be treated with considerable caution, it is clear that the population of Chester was no greater than that of many modern villages. At the Domesday Survey, the population is not thought to have been more than 1500 (Sawyer & Thacker 1987, 327). By the early fourteenth century, this had probably risen to a peak of 4000–5000, declining to below 3000 following the Black Death and only regaining its former peak by *c* 1500 (Hewitt 1967, 65; Myers 1980, 48 considered the Tudor population



IV.2 Goss Street 1973: remains of a sandstone-lined medieval cess pit

to be at the lower end of this range). Nevertheless, it is certain that Chester was regarded as an urban centre by its inhabitants and was expected to provide a wide range of urban services including commercial, manufacturing and governmental ones. It is perhaps significant that in all the west midlands and the north-west of England, north of Gloucester only Chester and Shrewsbury contained houses of at least three of the four main orders of friars present in the country. The mendicant orders were pre-eminently an urban phenomenon, and the presence of houses of these orders can be taken to indicate urban rank (Butler 1984, 123).

It has become customary to divide the archaeological record of urban centres into several periods. At Chester, the medieval period is considered to date, broadly speaking, from the Norman Conquest to the middle of the sixteenth century. Besides being a convenient division, it will be shown that the identification of a medieval period does have

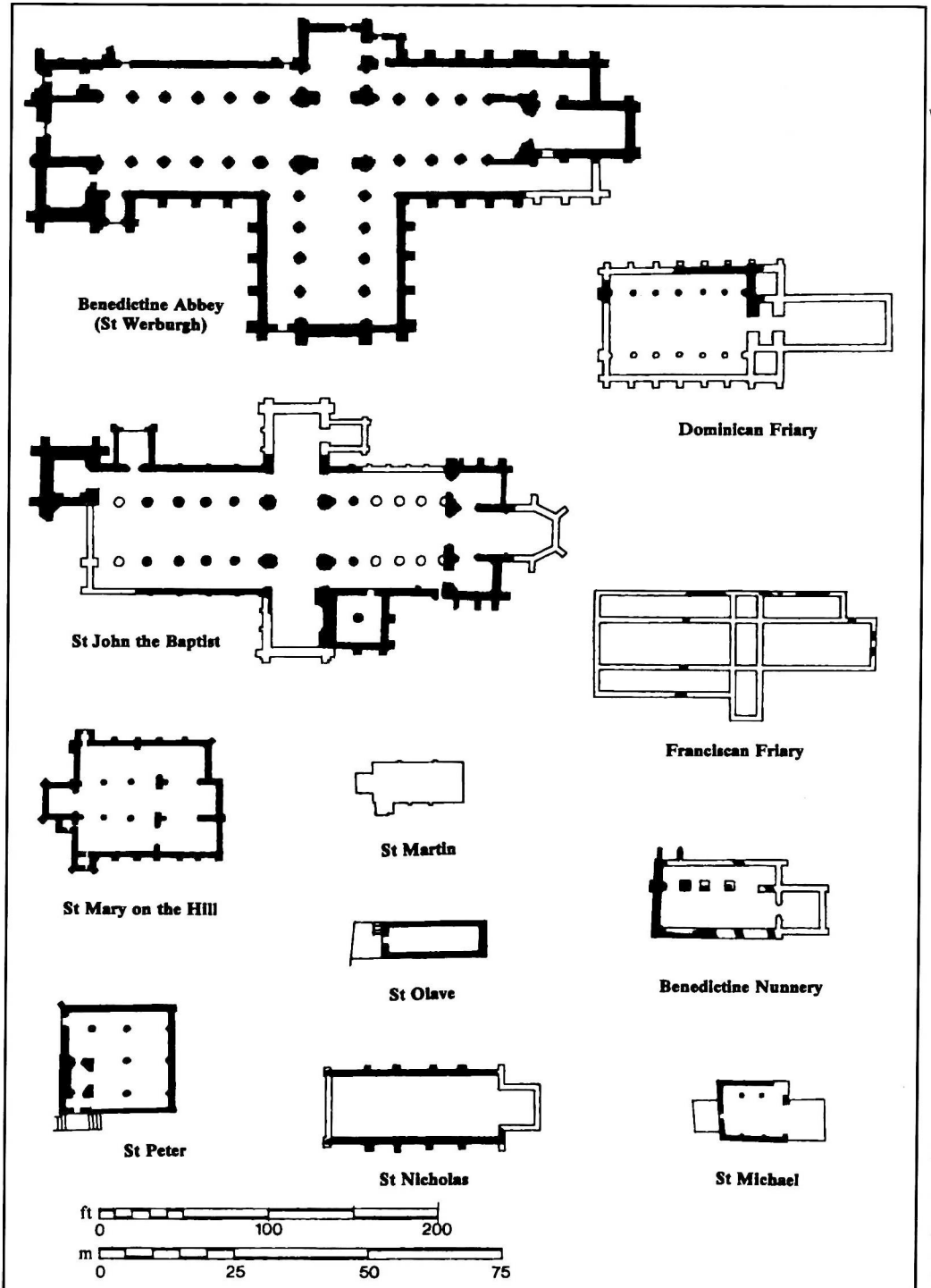
validity in the archaeological record. The Norman Conquest, or more precisely the foundation of the Norman earldom at Chester in 1070/1, does seem to mark a significant break in the occupation of the city. The end date cannot be so exactly defined, but various changes, including the dissolution of the monastic houses in 1538 and 1540, a great increase in population, and changes of living style and material culture, all took place in the mid-sixteenth century. It is therefore valid to see at this time a transition from the medieval to the post-medieval period.

### **The Church**

The significance of the Church and the monastic ideal is a well attested fact of life during the Middle Ages, and this was certainly the case at Chester as much as anywhere. Admittedly, the city was not richly endowed with churches when compared with some others: there were only nine parish churches, six monastic houses (including an ephemeral community of Friars of the Sack) and three hospitals (one of which was a very late foundation just preceding the Dissolution) (III IV.1). The small number reflects in part the small population compared to the great urban centres such as London and York. It was also due, however to the political situation in the county, where patronage was concentrated in the hands of the earls of Chester. Where such restricted power and patronage occurred, one tends to find a small number of richly endowed houses (Kettle 1980, 124). Even so the religious houses were, both as institutions and physical structures, an immensely important component in the development of the medieval city. By the second half of the fourteenth century the combined area of their precincts comprised at least one quarter of the walled area, to which should be added the large enclave held by the college and short-lived cathedral of St John immediately outside the City Walls. The size of these structures also dominated the urban landscape. This is easy to appreciate in the case of St Werburgh's abbey, which survives as the present Cathedral and even today is one of the largest buildings in the city, but can easily be overlooked in the case of the lesser religious houses, all of whose buildings have been lost.

Archaeological discoveries have enabled the plans of the churches of three of the religious houses, in addition to St Werburgh's abbey, to be reconstructed with varying degrees of certainty (Ward 1990, 224–5). These demonstrate that of the parish churches only St John's, which was, of course, designed as a cathedral in the late eleventh century when the see was moved temporarily to Chester, exceeded the size of the friary churches. Only the nunnery was of an equivalent size to the known plans of the parish churches. St Werburgh's abbey in its final, late medieval form, considerably exceeded the size of all the others (III IV.3).

The archaeological investigation of the religious houses, when combined with the historical framework provided by documentary evidence, reveals that their foundation and development had a complex and varying influence on the development of the city. The first and richest of the houses, the Benedictine abbey of St Werburgh, was founded in 1093 by the first of the Norman earls, Hugh of Avranches, displacing an existing college of secular canons. Among the rich endowments bestowed on it was a precinct incorporating all the north-eastern quarter of the city. Earl Hugh, nicknamed 'The Fat' or 'The Wolf', was not renowned for his pious acts and, although the desire for a fitting burial place and



IV.3 Comparative plans of monastic and parish churches in Chester (Scale 1/1250)

chantry for himself and his successors was, no doubt, one motive for the foundation, it must also have been regarded as an element in the imposition of the Norman state on the former Saxon *burh*. In 1070 William the Conqueror had marched through Cheshire and built a castle at Chester, which became the headquarters of the Norman earldom. In addition to completing the castle, the earls also began the construction of the City Walls on the southern and western sides (Alltridge 1981, 23–31). Moreover, the Norman Bishop Peter moved his see to Chester from Lichfield in 1075 and started the reconstruction of St John's church as a cathedral. All of these – castle, walls, abbey and cathedral – can be considered characteristic symbols of the Norman state.

Some indication of how the creation of the abbey precinct could affect urban development was given by the excavation between 1975 and 1978 at the Abbey Green site, which lay close to the City Walls just within the north-western corner of the precinct. This revealed that in the Saxon period various activities were carried out in the area, including antler-working and probably blacksmithing, apparently forming a strip of low density development along an intramural track laid over the tail of the Roman rampart and forming a successor to the Roman *intervallum* road (Ward and others 1994, 69–93; III IV.4). That such a track also existed around the western side of the fortress is suggested by the discovery of a similar one west of the North Gate (Ward 1994, 94–6) and by the survival of part of its line through the modern street plan (Water Tower Street, Trinity Street, Weaver Street, White Friars). At the Abbey Green site, the Saxon occupation and intramural track were superseded by medieval cultivation deposits. It appears that the creation of the monastic precinct completely stifled the early urban development that was occurring there and gave the area a much more undeveloped and secluded character, which it has largely retained down to the present day. The foundation of the abbey can therefore be regarded as a political act associated with the imposition of Norman control of the city, carried out at the expense of urban development in the north-eastern quarter of the city. The circumstances of the foundation were probably one of the reasons why the abbey was never particularly popular amongst the citizens of Chester.

The foundations of the three religious houses on the western side of the city, however, reveals an almost opposite process in operation. These houses were founded in substantial precincts in sequence from south to north: St Mary's Benedictine nunnery on land to the north of the castle, c 1150, the Dominican (Black) friary, c 1236, on the next block north running up to Watergate Street and, finally, the Franciscan (Grey) friary to the north of Watergate Street in 1237/8. All these houses have been the subject of some degree of archaeological investigation. The site of the nunnery was investigated in a short excavation in 1964 before the erection of the Police headquarters building; this established the main layout of the church and cloister. We are also fortunate to have a seventeenth-century ground plot of the buildings as then surviving, a Buck engraving of the ruins in the eighteenth century, and even the surviving chancel arch, which was moved in the early nineteenth century and re-erected in the Grosvenor Park (Rutland 1965, Ward 1990, 3–22). The Black friary has received the most attention, being the subject of almost three years' excavation by the present author on the confusingly named Grey Friars Court site and on several neighbouring sites since 1976. These excavations mainly examined the church and the outer court areas to the north and west of it. The cloister, which is thought



IV.4 1, Abbey Green 1975–8: burnt remains and post holes of a Saxon timber work shed

to lie to the south, remains little explored. Remains of the Franciscan (Grey) friary were recorded during the building of the racing stables in the early 1920s. The discoveries were confined to a section across the cloister and church with a few more trenches along the north wall of the church (Bennett 1921, 67–9).

These three religious houses were all founded in an area of open ground on the western side of the city known as the Crofts. This area had probably become enclosed within the City Walls when the Normans completed and rationalised the defences which had grown up during the Saxon and Roman periods. Although archaeological evidence for the Saxon burghal defences has yet to be found, it is thought likely that they consisted of spur walls from the north-western and south-eastern corners of the Roman fortress down to the river (Mason 1985, 36–9; Ward and others 1994, 119–21). Although this considerably increased the area defended, it greatly shortened the length of the defensive line. The Norman earls, therefore, by completing the wall line on the river sides of the city, can be



considered as rationalising what they found, rather than just enclosing the developed area within a minimum length of wall. No doubt they hoped that the western area which lay adjacent to the harbour outside the Water Gate would be subject to profitable commercial development. The continued silting of the river, however, stifled these hopes and this land remained open and free to grant to the various religious orders (Ward 1996, 10). Consequently, rather than inhibiting urban development, the foundation of these religious houses expanded the area under occupation.

Evidence of these developments was found on the Black friary, where it appears that the ruins of Roman buildings, part of the important civil settlement which grew up on the western side of the legionary fortress, were still protruding above ground level when the friars took up occupation. They robbed the ruins, clearing the collapsed debris down to the late Roman floor levels and removing the stonework from the wall footings. They then levelled the site with dumps of clay before starting their own building operations.

The Carmelite (White) friary provides the only significant example in Chester of the establishment of a large precinct by a process of accretion. This was the last religious community to be founded in Chester, in 1277. In 1289 the friars received from a local citizen, Hugh Payn, a small block of seven messuages close to the centre of the city on what became White Friars Lane (Kettle 1980, 176; Bennett 1935, 7–9). During the middle of the fourteenth century they acquired a series of adjacent blocks which increased the size of their landholding by at least a half and thus formed a precinct only slightly smaller than those of the other friaries. Their central situation proved beneficial, and by the time of their Dissolution in 1538 the Carmelites were the wealthiest of the three orders of friars.

The excavation of part of the Black friars' church demonstrated that it had undergone a considerable number of reconstructions (Ill IV.5). While this is not uncommon in medieval churches in general, it does appear to be unusual amongst Dominican friary churches. Several of these have been excavated in recent years and, in general, once completed (a process which might take two building campaigns), they seem to have remained little altered until the Dissolution. The similarity of many of their plans has suggested a certain degree of standardisation, possibly based on the influential house at Oxford (Lambrick & Woods 1976, 210). At Chester an unusually large number of five building phases was identified. The first, presumably constructed soon after the foundation in 1236, consisted of a narrow aisleless chapel, presumably divided internally by screens into a nave and choir. At the end of the thirteenth century the church was considerably enlarged by the addition of a large aisled 'preaching' nave of seven bays and probably a transeptual crossing. There was possibly a north-western tower or porch. The new work was wrapped around the western end of the original church, which was then demolished; the eastern end was retained as the choir. The third phase probably involved all parts of the church: a large crossing tower was added; the nave arcade was rebuilt with elegant octagonal columns; and the nave was shortened by one bay. Decorated floor tiles were used extensively for the first time. This reconstruction produced a fine and, in most respects typical, urban friary church. Its dating is rather uncertain, being dependent on archaeological evidence which suggests the later fourteenth or early fifteenth century.

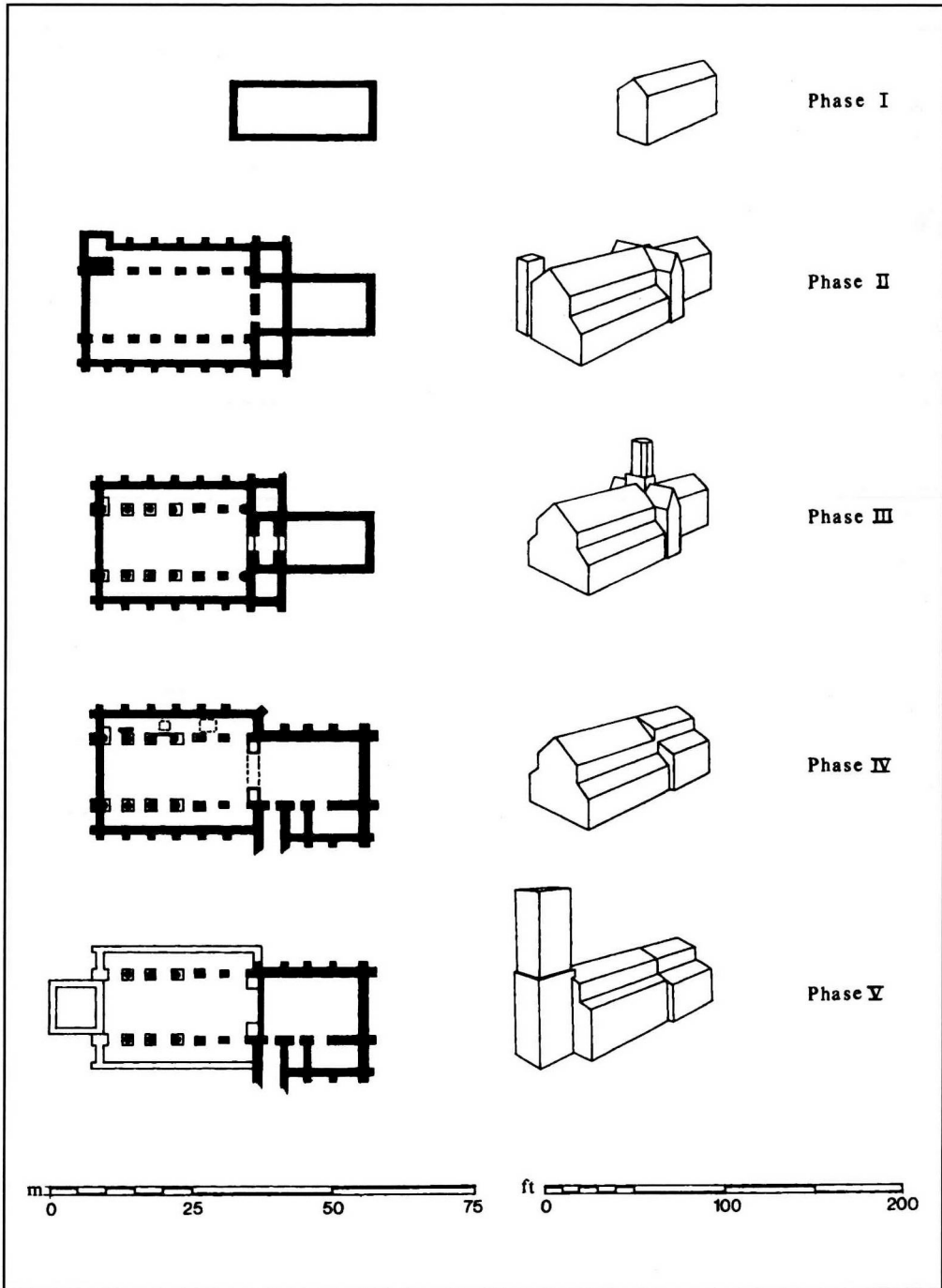
The final reconstruction occurred in two phases, IV and V. In Phase IV the choir, crossing and eastern bay of the nave were rebuilt. The new choir appears to have been

wider and taller but shorter than its predecessor. The crossing tower and transepts were suppressed. The archaeological dating indicates a late fifteenth-century date, which is supported by slight documentary evidence of work from the 1460s (Bennett 1952, 48). The rebuilding scheme was resumed, after a break of about forty years, with the nave, which was to include a large western tower. This programme had apparently ground to a halt with little more than the foundations dug and partly laid by the time of the Dissolution in 1538. This may well explain the friary's impecunious condition at that time. The church that was being built was, no doubt, intended to be of typical late medieval perpendicular style.

The alterations to the church, besides reflecting the development of gothic architecture during the Middle Ages, also demonstrates the developing and changing role of the friars and the urban monastic house through the period. At first, a modest church sufficed. The friars' work of teaching and preaching, the principal mission of the Dominican order, was presumably carried out in the open air or from the pulpits of other churches. However, their growing popularity among the citizenry and perhaps exclusion from other churches led to the need for their own large preaching nave. During this period the friaries also became popular as burial places. The right to provide burial was an important consideration to a monastic house, for it brought considerable financial benefit from the funeral itself and subsequent memorial masses. Anciently in Chester, only St Werburgh's and St John's had the right to bury. By the end of the thirteenth century the friars had broken this duopoly, although a proportion of the dues still had to go to the old mother churches. With much spare land in their large precincts, the smaller monastic houses were well placed to provide burial grounds.

At the Black friars' church these developments were attested by the large number of burials crammed into the aisles (Ill IV.6). The presence of females and juveniles demonstrated that these were members of the public. By the end of the fifteenth century the north aisle seems to have been increasingly blocked up with large tomb structures, burial vaults and side chapels. Burials were also encroaching into the nave area. The impression given is that the original teaching and preaching mission was gradually replaced by a more pastoral, even parochial one, exemplified perhaps by the way the crossing and walking place lost its architectural prominence.

The excavations also examined the areas north and west of the church. It appears that the proximity of the City Walls to the west of the church led the friars to develop the area to the north as the outer court. In this area lay a variety of medieval structures. Immediately to the north of the nave there was a substantial building, probably of timber-framed construction on sandstone footings. It contained a decorated tile floor of two phases and was probably not built until well into the fourteenth century. This appeared to be associated with a smaller building, possibly a service range, on the other side of a small yard. The main building is possibly to be identified as the 'old hall' a disused structure which is accorded first place in the inventory drawn up at the surrender, followed by the choir and then the claustral ranges (Bennett 1952, 39-42). A position north of the church would be logical for the 'old hall', as then the inventory could be considered to represent a systematic tour around the friary. It does not, however, assist in identifying the original purpose of the building. Its position, on the opposite side of the church to the cloister, its relatively late date of construction and high standard of accommodation would support an



IV.5 The phases of the church of the Dominican (Black) friary (Scale 1/1250)



IV.6 Grey Friars Court 1976–8: burials packed among the foundations of the aisles of the Dominican friary church

interpretation as the prior's lodging or guest accommodation, or perhaps a combination of both. The reduced circumstances of the friars by the time of the dissolution would explain why it had become disused by then.

Further excavation to the east of this building was undertaken in 1988 on the Nicholas Street Mews site. This revealed an enormous subterranean structure approximately 4.2 m square internally and at least 5.7 m deep. (It was not practical to excavate it to the bottom for safety reasons). It was lined with well constructed masonry walls, with the angle of each corner cut off by a section of oblique walling. The lower parts of the walls were rendered and bleached, suggesting that it had held water. A smaller but similarly well constructed sandstone-lined pit lay immediately to its east. These features were constructed early in the life of the friary and were dismantled and infilled in the later fifteenth century. The area was then levelled and a large dwelling house was erected (Ill



IV.7 Nicholas Street Mews 1988: medieval cisterns (large one in foreground) overlain by a late medieval building in the Dominican friary precinct

IV.7). The levelling deposit contained much interesting building debris from the friary, including parts of grave slabs and wasted floor tiles, the latter showing that tile manufacturing was carried out in the friary precinct. The dwelling that was then built used parts of the side walls of the subterranean features for foundations. It underwent a major reconstruction in the first half of the sixteenth century, when a fine fireplace and an external garderobe pit were added. It is uncertain whether this reconstruction pre-or post-dates the Dissolution of 1538. Various alterations to light internal partitions were made during the use of the building, which was not demolished until the seventeenth century. It

is tempting to associate this structure with a lease to Ralph Waryne made in 1537 of two old chambers and a ruinous building with associated gardens and orchards on the north and east side of the church, adjacent to his mansion (Bennett 1952, 50–1). Although it is impossible to be certain, the position of this building corresponds to that ascribed to the buildings Waryne leased. It is also illustrative of the manner in which the precincts of the friaries were encroached upon towards the end of the period, a situation forced on the friars by financial necessity. Presumably their work in the community meant that this intrusion was not as unacceptable as it would have been for the other orders. The place of this structure in the residential development of the city is considered further below.

### **Secular sites**

On the majority of non-monastic sites excavated within the city there is a varying density of medieval structures, cut features (especially pits) and soil deposits, their number and complexity frequently relating to their proximity to major street frontages. Although their presence on sites in recent decades has been recorded and frequently reported on, in general their precise purpose and functional relationship to other features has been little understood. What has been lacking is a spatial framework within which these features can be placed and associated or distinguished. On a large scale, the city itself may be considered as a spatial entity, with different activities occurring in different areas or zones. The proportion of the city taken up by religious houses has been considered above, and they obviously comprised an important and distinctive land-use zone in the city. Similarly, the castle formed an enclave in the southern corner of the city, from which the county was governed, controlled by the earls until 1237 and then by the Crown. Consequently, it has always tended to have a separate history and been subject to different pressures from the city as a whole. Interestingly for the present purpose, this situation still holds good today, for the preservation and archaeological investigation of the castle has remained in the hands of the County and the national government and outside the remit of the City's authority. In the remainder of the city there were undoubtedly other zones of activity and areas where particular trades were concentrated, as witnessed by such street names as Gose Lane (Goss Street) and Fleshmongers' Lane (Newgate Street). These might be expected to be reflected in the archaeological record. In general, however, the evidence is still too sparse and widely scattered to draw useful conclusions. One such example, however, may be the evidence for leather-working during the Saxon period discovered to the west of Lower Bridge Street (Mason 1985, 23–30). This particular activity had ceased by the time of the Norman Conquest, but during the medieval period the area just to the west, around the castle gate was known as the Gloverstone (Dodgson 1968, 43), indicating a continuing association of the area with leather-working. Otherwise, within the city at present it is only possible to identify areas of more intensive occupation concentrated close to the major street frontages, with evidence for development decreasing in proportion to distance from them.

### **Medieval properties**

Although the identification of zones of land use is of significance in general terms and is obviously crucial in, for example, defining the extent of the monastic houses, it is

inadequate to satisfactorily account for the variety of medieval features found on an excavation site. For this purpose, the medieval property is the best basic functional unit. If the extent of the property can be defined, then all the features found within it can be considered together, representing either a sequence of events and structures in use over a period of time or, alternatively, a series of activities carried out concurrently which together indicate the functioning of that particular site. Features within one property can be distinguished from those in a neighbouring one with which they need have very little connection. The identification of the extent and arrangement of the medieval properties on a site might, therefore, seem a very obvious policy to adopt whilst excavating medieval features, but in fact this had been little followed prior to the author's excavation of the Hunter's Walk area in 1980 (Ward 1984, 39–42). In practice it is frequently very difficult to identify the extent of an individual property. However, the medieval property or tenement strip can be considered to have several typical characteristics. In shape they were generally a narrow rectangle, with a short side fronting on to the street. This, of course, enabled the maximum number of property plots or strips to be fitted along a given length of street frontage. It contained a building on the street frontage, frequently occupying the whole width of the strip. Behind lay a yard area in which there would be a number of pits used for both sewage and rubbish disposal. These pits are sometimes found in considerable densities. Other features that may occur include ancillary buildings. Elsewhere across the yard area, there is generally found a build up of dark brown soil.

#### *Property boundaries*

The boundaries which marked the limits of properties may survive below ground as a variety of linear features. An important factor in the identification of their course is their longevity. Once established, the boundaries have often continued in use until recent times, and maps which predate modern redevelopment, such as the Ordnance Survey 1:500 1875 series, in many cases preserve the basic medieval layout, although obviously incorporating much subsequent infilling and subdivision. The recognition of these recent property boundaries in the ground can point to the position of the earlier ones. However, this longevity can also be a hindrance, as the traces of early boundaries may lie beneath site boundaries which are still in use and therefore be inaccessible or may have been destroyed by them.

At the street end of a property the side walls of the street-front building generally formed the property boundary. The line of the boundary were sometimes continued back by sandstone walls which usually survive as rubble foundations in a shallow trench. However, where such walls have been located, for example at Goss Street in 1973 (III IV.8), they appear to be late in date – sixteenth-century if not seventeenth. Ditches also occur, having been found on the Princess Street and Cuppin Street sites, though again these examples are not early, apparently having been dug in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. Fences, represented during excavation by rows of posts or stake holes are known from the Cuppin Street and Lower Bridge Street sites.

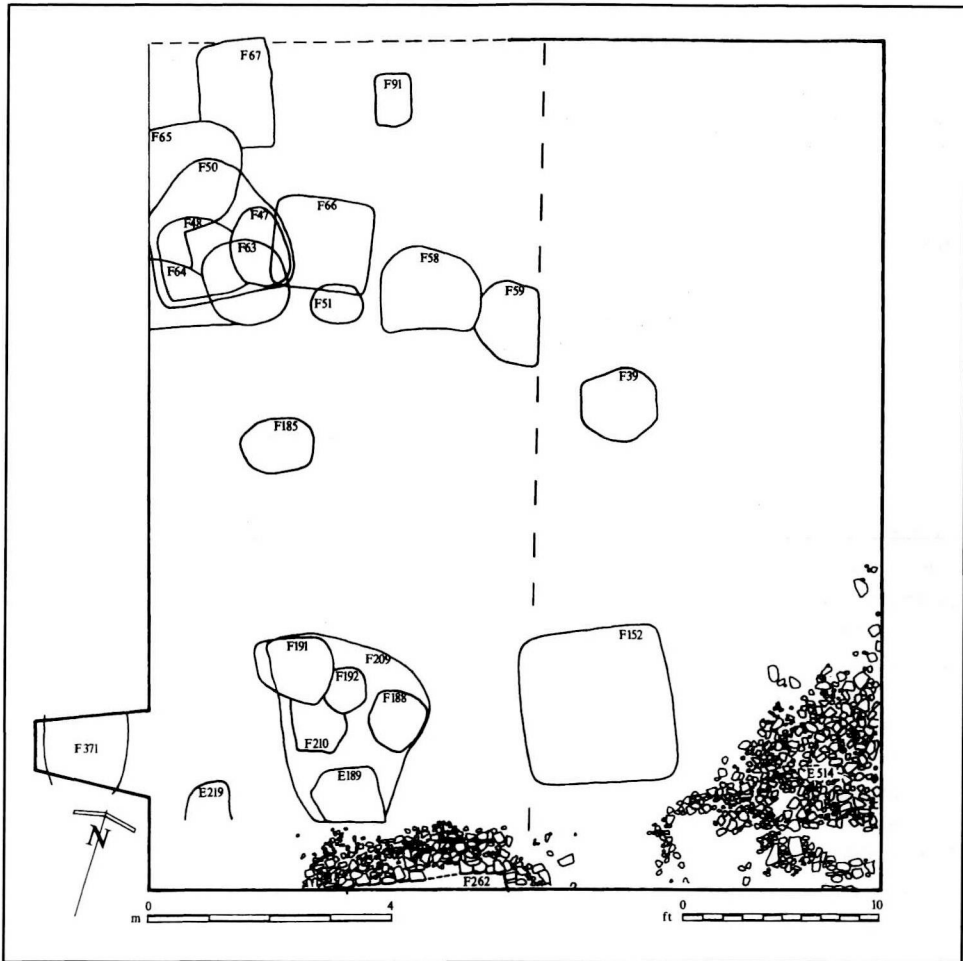
Frequently, however, there is little or no evidence for an identifiable linear structure. It is possible that boundary-markers such as hedges or light wattle fences would leave too slight a trace in the ground to be picked up during the course of urban excavation. In such



IV.8 Goss Street 1973: sandstone boundary wall foundations, later replaced in brick

cases the lines of the property boundaries have to be located with varying degrees of certainty using other sources of evidence, such as the distribution of pits or the extension of surviving boundaries of apparent antiquity. These methods were used by the author to interpret the remains found on the Crook Street 1973/4 excavation. During the medieval period, the site formed part of the back yards of buildings fronting onto Watergate Street to the south (nos 44/46 and 48/50 ), rather than forming a property fronting onto Crook Street itself. The boundary between the two Watergate Street buildings, when projected northwards across the site, divided it into two areas, and it was observable that the western of the two yards thus formed contained a great density of rubbish- and cess pits in an area about 30 m to the rear of the building (Ill IV.9). Indeed one pit was dug in a 'D' shape, with its flat side lying along the supposed line of the boundary. The eastern yard contained very few pits, at least in the area which was excavated.





IV.9 Distribution of medieval pits at Crook Street. The dashed line indicates the line of property boundary (Scale 1/125)

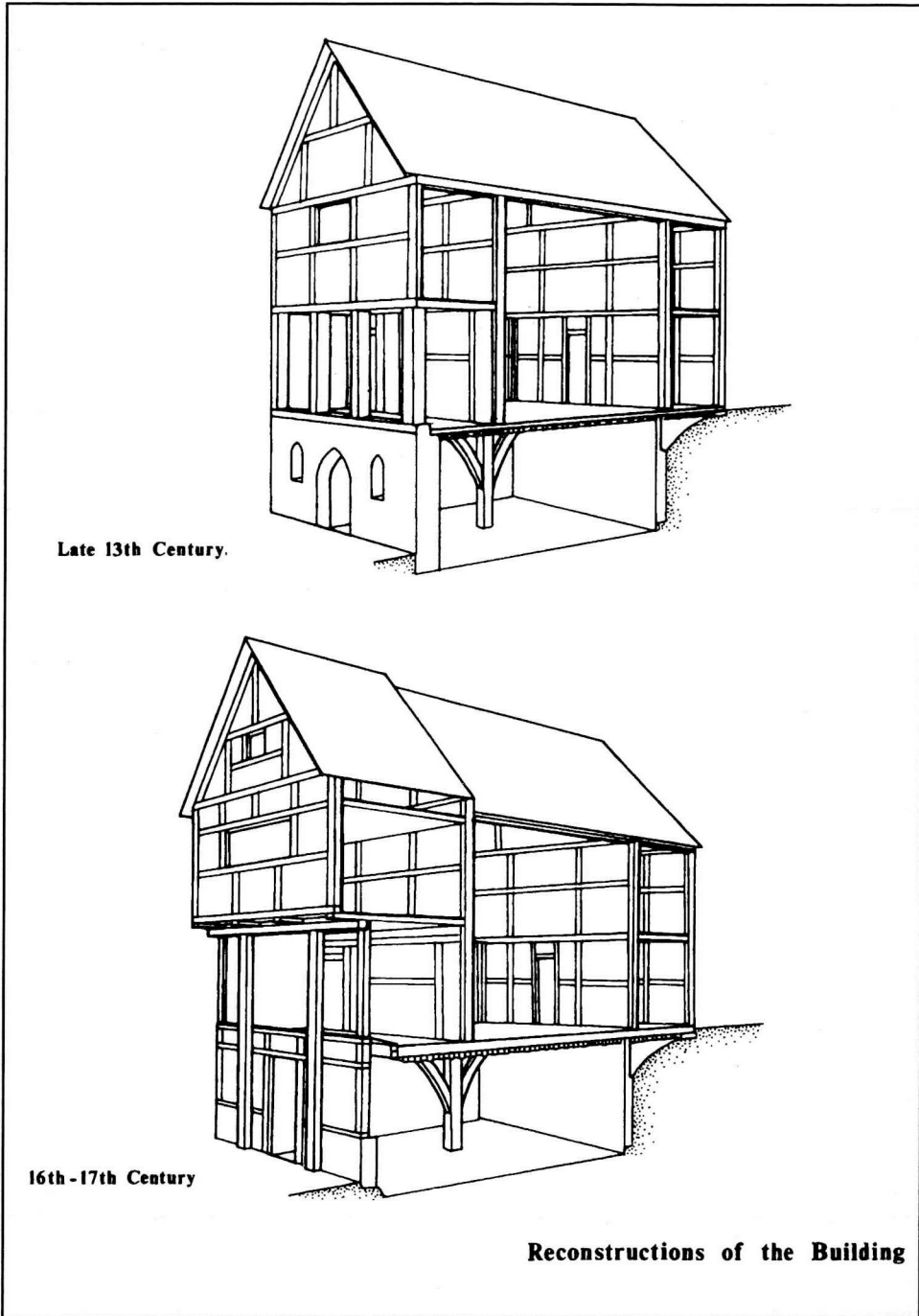
### *Buildings*

The major structure on a medieval property was a building or house lying, in all the known examples, on the street frontage. The existence in Chester of medieval undercrofts, known colloquially as 'crypts', and the Row system above them, has long been known and commented on. Work in recent years, however, by the author on a now demolished building at 12 Watergate Street (Ward 1988, 32–3; Ill IV.10) and subsequently by the Rows Research Project set up by Chester City and Cheshire County Councils (Brown and others 1986) has revealed what a wealth of medieval structures survive behind more recent facades along Chester's main streets. The buildings discovered conform in most respects to the normal medieval arrangement, with a first-floor hall with a variable number of associated chambers and service rooms set above an undercroft. At Chester the

configuration of the ground surface means that at the front the undercroft opens out at street level, whereas the yard area at the back lies at hall level. However, on the street at hall level (ie, one floor above the street) there is the Row, a continuous open-sided gallery running through the building. The study of these buildings and the dendrochronological dating of their timbers has shown that the Row system was in existence by the late thirteenth century, when many of the surviving medieval buildings were erected. The apparent building boom at this period probably relates to the prosperity experienced by the city when it was the headquarters for Edward I's campaigns and castle building in North Wales.

A wide range in the size of buildings has been identified. The building at 12 Watergate Street was a small hall of three bays built at right angles to the street with service rooms behind. The hall possibly doubled as a retail outlet. Beneath lay a small sandstone undercroft. In contrast, 38–42 Watergate Street (Brown and others 1986) was a single very large building, with a hall built parallel to the street behind a row of shops opening onto the Row and with the service range at its western end. This building spanned three undercrofts. The 'Three Old Arches' in Bridge Street is the surviving section of a further example of a parallel hall set over three undercrofts. It would be most useful for understanding the development of the Rows and the medieval city to find out whether the properties which these large buildings imply were originally that size and have since become subdivided or if they were created by a process of amalgamation. Excavation in their yard areas could throw light on this aspect of their formation.

In spite of these recent discoveries there are still important and startling gaps in our knowledge. Where they can be dated, the great majority of standing buildings and excavated remains belong to no earlier than the middle of the thirteenth century. There are, in consequence, very few known structures or parts of structures which can be dated to the first two centuries of the medieval period. This lack of evidence is even more remarkable when it is compared with the period of equivalent length which predated the Conquest and started roughly at the foundation of the burh in AD 907 by Aethelflaed. There are now known to be a considerable number of structures and related activity dating to the Saxon period (Mason 1985; Ward 1984, 40–1; Ward and others 1994, *passim*). Several lay on the sites under discussion here, including Crook Street, Hunter Street School, Hunter's Walk and Lower Bridge Street. The reason for the lack of evidence after the Conquest is probably that, following the establishment of the earldom, there was a trend to concentrate occupation along the major street frontages, which, of course, have remained the areas most intensively occupied ever since and which have only rarely become available for excavation. During the Saxon period occupation seems to have been more widely spread, with substantial buildings occupying back areas which were not built up in the Middle Ages. This does not mean that the Saxon population was larger: it was probably just more dispersed. The move to the street frontages was obviously a major prerequisite for the formation of the Row system. There is at present, though, very little evidence for the form of the early post-Conquest buildings erected on the street frontages. This is indeed unfortunate as this was obviously the important formative period for the Row system. When structural evidence does become more plentiful, after the mid-thirteenth century, the Rows appear more or less fully developed.



IV.10 12 Watergate Street: reconstructions of the medieval building

At present, only one structure from the early post-Conquest period has been examined archaeologically and that only partially (Ill IV.11). It was found on the Hunter's Walk excavation and at the time of its construction was the first building on the northern side of the street going down from the market. It was probably built in the second half of the twelfth century on a substantial bed of crushed sandstone which formed its earliest floor. The walls were of sill-beam construction with the beams laid on a bed of clay set in a narrow trench. The overall size of the building was *c* 10.3 m north-south and 3.8 m east-west, occupying the whole width of the rather narrow property. Only one partition wall was located, forming a room *c* 3 m deep at the back of the building. This room contained a hearth in the centre of its floor. Further partitions may have existed towards the front of the building, but if so they were not located. The front area had been badly cut up by later intrusions and was only partially excavated. The building was reconstructed on two occasions and survived until the seventeenth century.

Even after the structural evidence for buildings becomes more abundant, the evidence is still of a restricted nature. Although the hall-type structures are of varying sizes, from substantial stone town houses occupying three adjacent strips to much more modest halls with few rooms, they all still represent the dwellings of the relatively prosperous trading and merchant classes. There is little evidence for the living conditions of their less well-off contemporaries.

### *Pits*

In the areas behind the street front – those most often available for excavation – undoubtedly the most commonly encountered medieval features are pits. Frequently such pits have been considered only from a negative point of view because of their destructiveness to earlier deposits and features, which indeed can be severe when they are found in density. Nevertheless, they were an important component in the use of a site in the medieval period and they contain much important information, both as containers of important groups of finds and for the land-use within a property which their position implies.

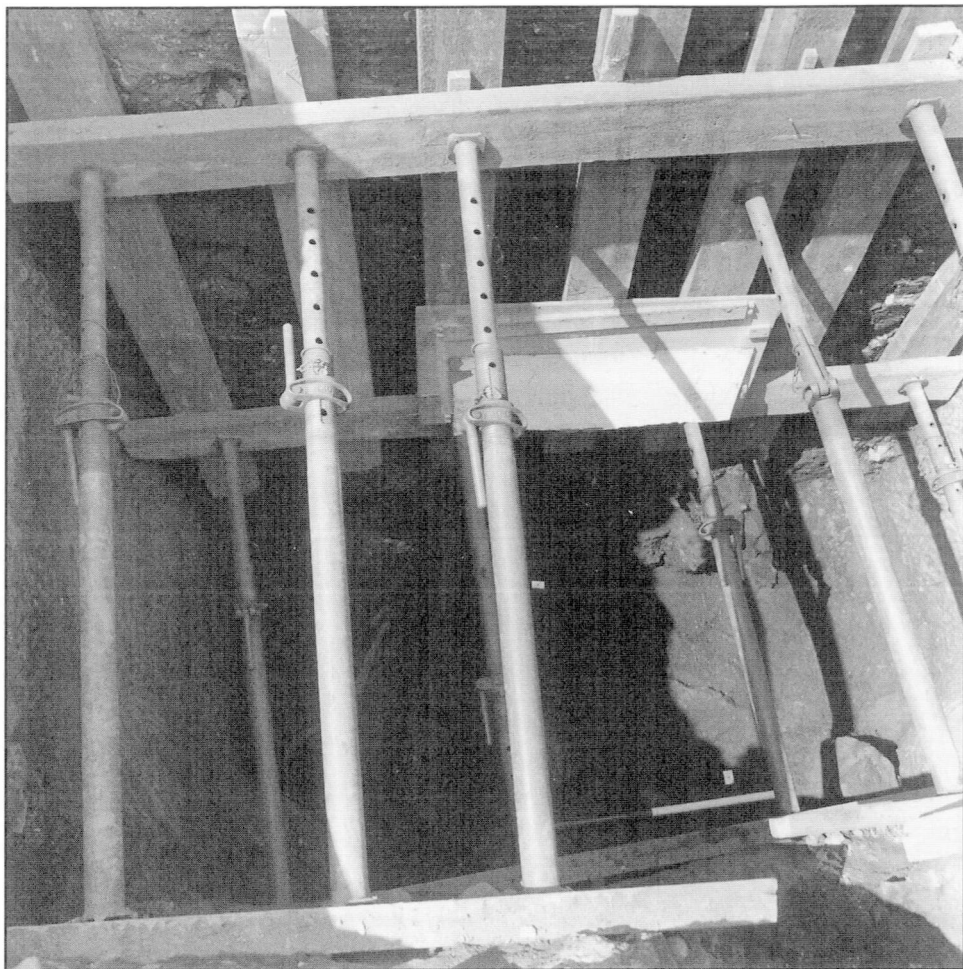
Pits were basically dug as a means of disposal of household refuse and sewage. Consequently, they are a most important source of information for the life-style and material culture of the people who used them. They have long been recognised as the best source of groups of pottery and other finds (Rutter 1984, 58). Identifiable imports have shown the importance of trade-routes to other parts of the country and to the continent (Rutter 1988, 54–7). Moreover, in some cases these pits formed a local environment which excluded air and held water, enabling a wide variety of organic remains to survive. Generally, the sandstone hill on which Chester is situated does not provide conditions for organic survival, as the ground water drains quickly through. Large pits, however, filled originally with mainly organic material, have a spongy texture which holds water. Moreover, as the edges of these deposits decomposed they formed a clayey silt which provided a seal to exclude air. In such conditions a wide range of artefacts of wood or leather can survive as well as environmental material. One such large pit, found immediately to the rear of the twelfth-century building found on the Hunter's Walk site



IV.11 Hunter's Walk 1980: remains of an early medieval building with a large hearth

discussed above, produced a huge quantity of such material (Ill IV.12). This included the remains of vegetables (peas, broad beans, leek or onion) and fruit (apple, pear, damson, bramble, strawberry), large amounts of cereal remains, especially bran, and great quantities of straw which might have been strewn on the floor or used as thatching. The presence of human sewage was attested by quantities of human parasite ova as well as the food remains. Not surprisingly in these conditions there were numerous fly puparia and other insects present (Greig 1986).

Besides the value of the study of their contents, pits were an important element in the functioning of a property. It seems likely that they generally formed part of a more complex structure as, on its own, a hole in the ground which could often be 1.5 m in diameter and more than 2 m deep would have constituted a considerable safety hazard. However, only rarely does the evidence for any structure survive: a wooden floor with a



IV.12 Hunter's Walk 1980: wood and other organic remains preserved in a large medieval pit

privy structure erected on it need leave little trace in the ground. Nevertheless, an example found to the rear of 30 Bridge Street had substantial beam slots dug on either side of the pit (Ill IV.13). Occasionally, a pair of post holes on opposite sides of the floor of the pit may indicate the former presence of a privy seat above. The large pit from Princess Street, whose contents were described above, also contained boards, beams and wedges which formed part of its shoring and narrower planks which may have formed a floor. Around the pit were several substantial post holes which probably represent a privy structure.

When the extent of the medieval properties on a site have been identified, it is frequently possible to identify zones within them where there are large numbers of intersecting pits and others where there are very few. Clearly, certain areas within a back yard were designated to accommodate the waste disposal of the property. It is probable that in a particular property only one or two pits were open at a time, so if the sequence



IV.13 30 Bridge Street 1987: circular cess pit with beam slots on either side visible in foreground

of pit digging can be established by careful excavation, an important sequence of groups of finds can be established. On the Crook Street 1973/4 excavation, it was notable that in one of the yard areas excavated, the larger pits were concentrated in a zone starting *c* 30 m from the back of the building. Closer to it, at a distance of *c* 25 m lay a group of contemporary smaller pits. It is tempting to suggest that these smaller pits had a different function, perhaps for the disposal of household refuse whereas the larger ones served as cess pits. Unfortunately, the character of the two groups of finds produced no evidence to support such an attractive hypothesis.

When the evidence for the date of the pit groups is considered there appear to be periods of intensive pit digging and periods of little or none. The great bulk appear to be late thirteenth- to early fourteenth-century. Another smaller peak occurs in the later medieval period, in the late fifteenth to sixteenth century. This distribution reflects the known trends of population growth and general levels of economic activity and so is probably in part due to them. However it is also probably due to changing practices in rubbish disposal. At some periods, for example, refuse and 'night soil' might have been collected and removed, possibly to spread on fields. Also it is noticeable that in the later medieval period pits revetted with dry stone walling became more common. This

presumably enabled a pit to be emptied periodically and thus have a longer life. Many of the earlier pits, which were roughly circular, have no evidence for revetting (although wattled hurdles might leave no trace) and it appears that once full or too noisome to continue in use they were backfilled, perhaps with the spoil dug from a new pit nearby. In conclusion, therefore, a smaller number of pits is not necessarily evidence solely for a decline in occupation; it could be the result of using individual pits for a longer period or of employing different rubbish disposal practices. Moreover, the absence of pits of a particular period may be more apparent than real and may be the result of only partial excavation of a particular property strip. Only when a complete back yard has been examined would it be possible to decide with certainty which periods are not represented.

### *Soil deposits*

Much of the remaining area of property strips which were occupied by neither buildings nor pits consists of a generally homogeneous dark brown soil, with only rarely evidence for ground levels or paved surfaces within it. The depth of soil can vary considerably from a few centimetres to up to as much as a metre. This soil deposit is not to be confused with the 'dark earth' which has been identified on various urban centres around the country, which seem to range in date from the late Roman period to the Saxon (MacPhail 1981). Such 'dark earth' has been found at Chester, for example on the Hunter Street School site (Ward and others 1994, 56–60, 67–8). It is darker in colour than the medieval soils and, where found in association, lies below them. It was therefore presumably produced by different processes and at an earlier period.

The medieval soils are very hard to make anything of during excavation because, as noted above, they rarely exhibit ground surfaces, horizons or features within them. They generally contain many residual finds, especially Roman pottery, and so could in part be derived from the upcast of adjacent pit digging. Otherwise, they were probably formed by gardening or cultivation. Frequently the soil lies directly above Roman stratigraphy, the intervening Saxon period being represented merely by cut features. This implies that the initial creation of the soil deposit by digging and turning over the top few centimetres of the ground surface destroyed the relatively insubstantial Saxon deposits. As the digging continued over a period of many years, possibly centuries, the soil would have accumulated and the ground level would have gradually risen without forming an archaeologically recognisable surface.

Possible confirmation of this process is provided by the evidence from the Hunter's Walk 1980 excavation. On that site the Saxon occupation was represented by a large hall-type structure (Ward 1984, 40–1; Ward and others 1994, 48–9) and a group of finds, mainly consisting of Chester ware pottery. The distribution of the Chester ware sherds on the site is very interesting. Only 7.5% came from contexts directly associated with the Saxon building. A further 34% lay in the 'post Saxon' deposits, a period post-dating the hall structure but pre-dating the medieval development of the site and so presumably equating with the decades around the Norman Conquest. 38% and 20.5% of the sherds were found in medieval and post-medieval deposits respectively. It was clear, therefore, that considerable disturbance had occurred. When the density of the sherds in the



medieval and post-medieval layers is considered, however, it is apparent that the disturbance was not uniform. In the south-western part of the area, which was sealed early in the medieval period by the substantial broken sandstone surface for the building described above, there was a density of only 0.17 sherds per square metre. In the areas to the east of this building, where soil had accumulated, the density rose to 1.3 sherds per square metre (almost eight times as great). There is support, therefore, for the hypothesis that the soil was generated by digging over the pre-existing levels, in this case the Saxon stratigraphy.

A major problem with these soil deposits is that to reveal their full story they would have to be excavated in a very slow and detailed manner. Inevitably, archaeological work on an urban site is multi-period and multi-objective and is carried out under pressure of both finances and time. The careful trowelling down and frequent planning of apparently featureless layers of soil would have to be done at the expense of the investigation of some other aspect of the site. This would be hard to justify for something which might or might not produce results.

### **Open land**

As has been considered above, occupation in the medieval city was concentrated on the street frontages with back yards stretching varying distances behind them. The zone of occupation was deepest close to the four major thoroughfares of the city, but appears to have thinned out rapidly away from them, especially on the western side. As has been discussed, this was an area where land was available for the foundation of religious houses in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Even so much land remained open in these areas until the end of the medieval period. Archaeologically, it is characterised by a cultivation soil similar to that described above, containing few cut features and probably formed by a similar process.

However, on these much more extensive areas it would have been feasible to practise full-scale farming. Possible evidence for such activity was found in the north-western quarter of the Hunter Street School excavations where there lay a large corn drying oven, dating to the thirteenth century (Ill IV.14). It consisted of a circular chamber in the shape of an inverted, truncated cone of *c* 2.2 m diameter at the surface, a flue *c* 2 m long which terminated in a fireplace, and a stoking area. Corn-driers such as this example were operated by spreading corn on a horse-hair blanket set on a timber floor over the chamber. The long flue between the chamber and fireplace ensured that only a gentle heat and no sparks reached the corn. Such large structures were only fired around harvest time in order to dry corn before it was stored and were frequently constructed in the fields where the crop was harvested, although it is arguable that this one was sited near the barns in which it was to be stored.

### **Historical development**

Throughout this paper allusions have been made to various historical developments or events which are reflected in the activities observed during excavations. When drawn together it can be seen that several of these have had a widespread effect on the



IV.14 Hunter Street School 1979: thirteenth-century corn-drying oven

archaeological record and so form reference points against which the features found on a site can be compared.

The first significant event is the foundation of the Norman earldom in 1071. As seen above, the Normans were responsible for founding the major institutions of medieval Chester, namely the castle, St Werburgh's abbey and St John's cathedral; they were also responsible for completing the circuit of the City Walls. It would also appear that they were responsible for a complete reorganisation of the property holdings in the city, creating the medieval tenement strip system discussed above. The Saxon occupation pattern, which has been found widely spread within the walled area and which included evidence for buildings, industrial activity and agriculture, can in no instance be shown to have continued after the Conquest. This change may well have been due to a reorganisation of land-holding by the earls and a redistribution to their followers. They were,

perhaps, in the unique position of having to pay no regard to the rights and traditions of the existing inhabitants. This does not mean, however, that there was an immediate development along all the street frontages after 1071; the north side of Princess Street, for example, does not appear to have been built on until the later twelfth century.

In contrast to the foundation of the earldom, the major fires which swept the city and are chronicled in 1140, 1180 and particularly 1278 (Lawson & Smith 1958, 24), have proved to be remarkably elusive, even though they should be readily observable in the archaeological record. At 12 Watergate Street a dense layer of charcoal was found behind the back wall of the undercroft, sealing its construction; this could be the result of the 1278 fire, although there was no evidence by which to date it.

As noted above, there is evidence on many sites for much activity and prosperity in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, coinciding with the period of Edward I's campaigns in Wales. This evidence is found in the form of building work and numerous rubbish pits on both secular sites and at the religious houses (for instance, Phase II at the Black friary). It is evident that many standing medieval structures also date to this period in both the secular Row properties and at the former abbey. This period of growth was followed by one of decline associated with the Black Death of 1349 and its aftermath. There appears to have been little redevelopment for a considerable time, which has no doubt been a major factor in the survival today of so many structures from the preceding period.

At the friaries, however, the situation is not so clear cut. The extensive Phase III reconstruction at the Black friary occurred late in the fourteenth century or early in the fifteenth. There is also the documentary evidence for a major expansion of the White friary precinct, followed by a building campaign in the middle of the fourteenth century (Bennett 1935, 11–12). The ability of the Carmelites to expand their precinct may well have been in large part due to the Black Death and its attendant decline in population, which considerably reduced the pressure on land. However, the ability of the friars to undertake expensive rebuilding programmes in what was otherwise a period of stagnation and decline is also a tribute to their continued popularity, perhaps a result of their good work in the community during the plague.

In the late medieval period there is abundant evidence for renewed development activity both at the religious houses and on secular sites, corresponding to the recovery of population levels and the increased prosperity of the period. At the Black friary, the church was extensively rebuilt in two campaigns, Phases IV and V, although the latter was not completed before the Dissolution in 1538. There is documentary evidence for major building work around this time at both of the other friaries and at the abbey (Kettle 1980, 142–3, 172, 176), the last readily traceable in the surviving fabric. On secular sites, the evidence consists of building work on the main streets, infilling in the spaces between and around buildings, and also of a spread into formerly undeveloped areas. Two new properties were created at the eastern end of Princess Street, on the northern side, by cutting off the backs of several strips lying parallel to the street and fronting onto the Market Square (Ward 1984, 42.) At Lower Bridge Street (no 30, on the western side) a sandstone cellar for a building behind the street frontage was constructed in this period (III IV. 15). Access to it was gained by an alleyway running up from the street. At the western



IV.15 26–42 Lower Bridge Street 1974–6: late medieval cellar with alleyway giving access to the street lying behind the wooden fence at top left. The dividing wall is a later alteration.

end of Cuppin Street, a site which lay north of the castle but some distance from the main commercial streets of the city, there was no evidence for occupation between the Conquest and the late Middle Ages. Instead there was an accumulation of a homogeneous cultivation soil. In the later fifteenth century, however, property strips were laid out. The one excavated was *c* 10 m wide and survived for a length of *c* 27.5 m, although it may have been longer originally. The property boundary was defined by a ditch which was superseded by a line of post holes, presumably representing a fence. A building with a sandstone undercroft was built on the street frontage with a timber extension or outbuilding to its rear. Interestingly, during the eighteenth century, this property was split longitudinally into two strips only *c* 5 m wide, providing evidence for continued population growth resulting in further sub-division and infilling.



IV.16 Nicholas Street Mews 1988: late medieval building with fireplace and garderobe pit  
(at top right near foot of ladder)

The Dissolution of the monastic houses (the friaries in 1538 and the abbey and nunnery in 1540) coincided with this period of development and provided new areas in which to expand. As discussed above, the Black and Grey friars, at least, had already been subject to encroachment into their precincts before the Dissolution. The developments that occurred after the Dissolution form a distinct break from the medieval tradition. In general, the former precincts of the religious houses (except, of course that of the abbey) passed into the hands of local gentry or wealthy citizenry and were split into relatively few parcels. This enabled their new owners to erect substantial town houses in relatively

extensive grounds. The building found on Nicholas Street Mews in the Black friary, discussed above, with its fireplace and garderobe pit (Ills IV.7 and IV.16) is an example of these developments.

### **Conclusions and guidelines for the future**

This paper demonstrates that there is much that can be gained from an archaeological study of the remains of this period, even though in many cases the excavations referred to were not planned with this period in mind. It is apparent, however, that there remain significant gaps in our knowledge that the archaeological evidence should be able to fill.

On secular sites, the areas of study have generally formed swathes running parallel to the streets: for example, the standing buildings along the street frontages have constituted one area of study, whereas excavations have examined yard areas to their rear. This, of course, is at right angles to the medieval grain which ran back from the streets, with the building and yard area behind forming an organisational unit. What is greatly needed is the excavation of a series of complete properties of varying sizes including both street frontages and yard areas. Such complete excavation would give much clearer evidence for the progress of development, activities and occupation throughout the whole period. It has also become apparent that the survival of evidence for the structures built in the period from the Conquest to the mid-thirteenth century is so rare that no opportunity to record a building of this period should be missed. This period is crucially important in the development of Chester because it encompasses the move to the street frontages and the initial stages in the development of the Rows.

The study of the religious houses is profitable in its own right as these occupied such a considerable area of the city. In addition, their periods of expansion, development and decline are important indicators for the city as a whole. Also, the identification and isolation of the various phases at a religious house could theoretically provide useful groups of finds which can be more closely dated than comparable groups from secular sites. In practice, however, the religious houses have so far produced relatively poor groups of finds, with the exception of decorated floor tiles. This has been noticed elsewhere and is possibly a general characteristic, perhaps indicating that they were kept cleaner than secular sites. In Chester, whilst much remains to merit archaeological investigation at all the religious houses, the White friars in particular are an area of interest, given that the precinct was established over a period of almost a century.

Archaeological investigation in Chester in the last three decades has been developer-driven, a situation unlikely to change in the near future. Development has provided both the necessity to excavate and the opportunity to gain access to sites. Inevitably, however excavation has tended to be restricted to only those areas threatened with destruction and, with the increasing use of developer funding in archaeology, this situation is likely to continue. Those areas do not necessarily coincide with the academic priorities. However, it is hoped that, by the careful synthesis and consideration of the available evidence, the best response to a development threat can be formulated. Thus important and scarce evidence for the medieval period will not, as in the past, be lost because its significance within the whole development of the city was not realised.

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