

Excavations on a Saxon site in St James' Square, Northampton, 1981

by JOHN H WILLIAMS and D FARWELL

with contributions from J R Baker, Helen Bamford, H Cleere, Varian Denham, I Goodall,
M Harman, R T Jones, D T Moore, G C Morgan, M Robinson and J M Swann

INTRODUCTION

St James's Square is situated at the edge of the flood plain of the river Nene at the foot of a steep slope to the south of the rising ground on which the Saxon and Medieval town of Northampton was located. The excavations lay within the general area where the southern defences of the Late Saxon town might be expected to be encountered (*cf* Lee 1954; Williams 1982, 4, 9) but no defences were discovered. Late Saxon pits, metallised surfaces and dumps *c* 1m thick were excavated but the waterlogged nature of the deposits together with the evidence of the finds suggests industrial activity and the disposal of waste rather than domestic occupation. The work was undertaken by Northampton Development Corporation's Archaeological Unit with financial support from the Department of the Environment, ahead of anticipated redevelopment. We are grateful to Northampton Borough Council for access to the site.

THE MAIN REPORT AND THE MICROFICHE

This report is divided between printed text and microfiche with the main discussion appearing in 'hard copy' and the supporting data in fiche. The contents of the two sections are as follows:

Structural

Main text

- 1) Main report and discussion
- 2) Plans and sections

Microfiche

- 1) Sequence diagram of layers (fiche 1)
- 2) Layer list (fiche 2-5)

Pottery

For division see page 146

Other finds

The following reports are contained within the main report with supporting information in microfiche:

The Leather, *by* J M Swann (fiche 25-28)

The Late Saxon Environment, *by* Mark Robinson (fiche 30-38)

The Mammalian Bones, *by* Mary Harman (fiche 39-46)

The Bone Comb is also illustrated (FIG 8)

Other reports appear in microfiche although the findings are incorporated within the main report:

The Iron Object, *by* I Goodall (fiche 16-17)

The Ferrous Slags and Associated Material, *by* H Cleere (fiche 18-19)

The Worked Flints, *by* Helen Bamford (fiche 20)

The Hone, *by* D T Moore (fiche 21)

The Clay Loomweight, *by* Varian Denham (fiche 22)

The Wood, *by* G C Morgan and Jacqui Watson (fiche 23-24)

The Worked Bone, *by* John Williams (Fiche 29)

The Pathological Bones, *by* J R Baker (fiche 47-48)

The Bird Bones, *by* R T Jones (fiche 49)

THE EXCAVATIONS

The site lay on Lias clay. Immediately to the north was a steep slope with the ground rising some 3m, while to the south the flood plain of the river valley stretched out for some 300m towards the Nene. The excavations were undertaken in May and June 1981, but even at that time of year the trench rapidly became waterlogged at a depth of *c* 1.5m below the present ground surface and a pump had to be used during the excavations.

Trench Z was initially excavated by machine to

Site Location

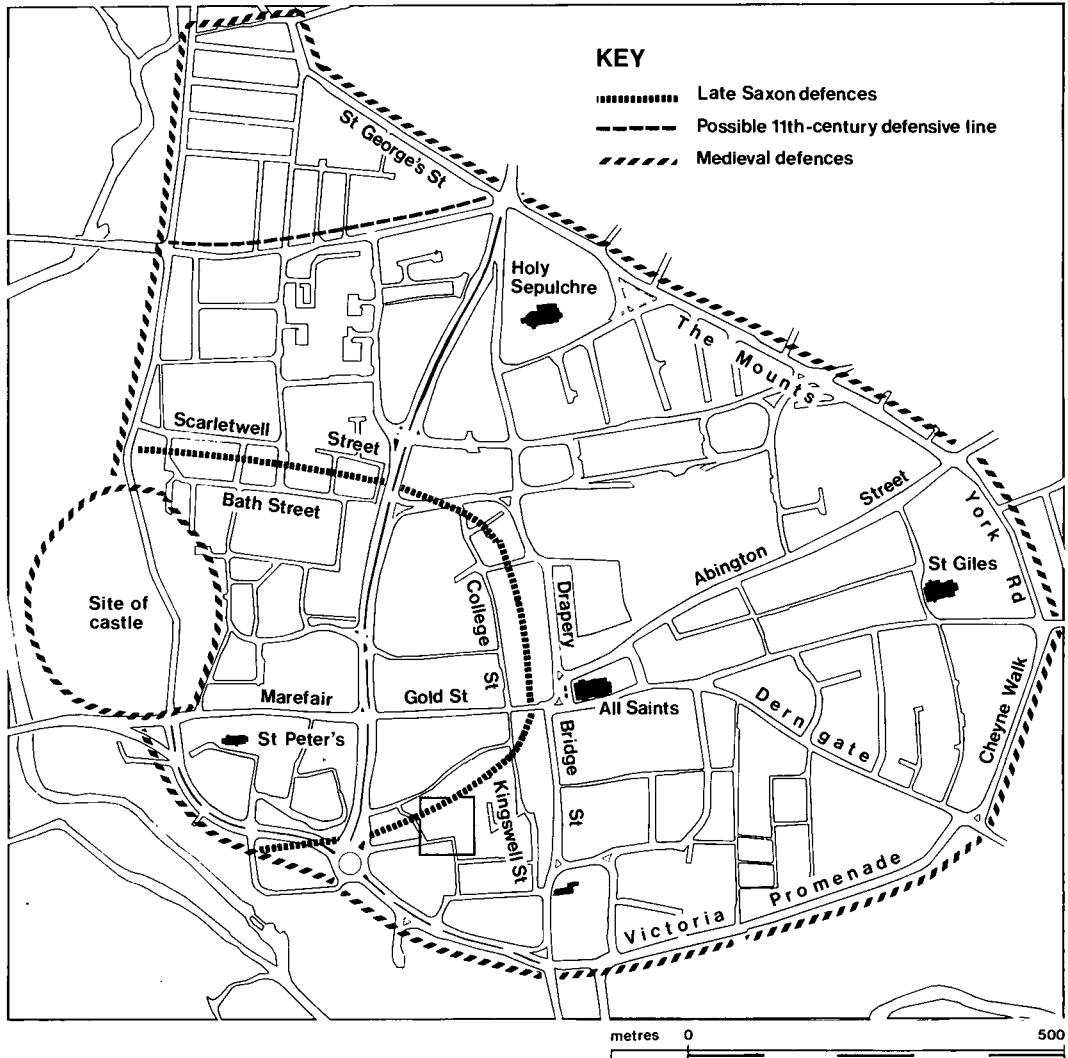
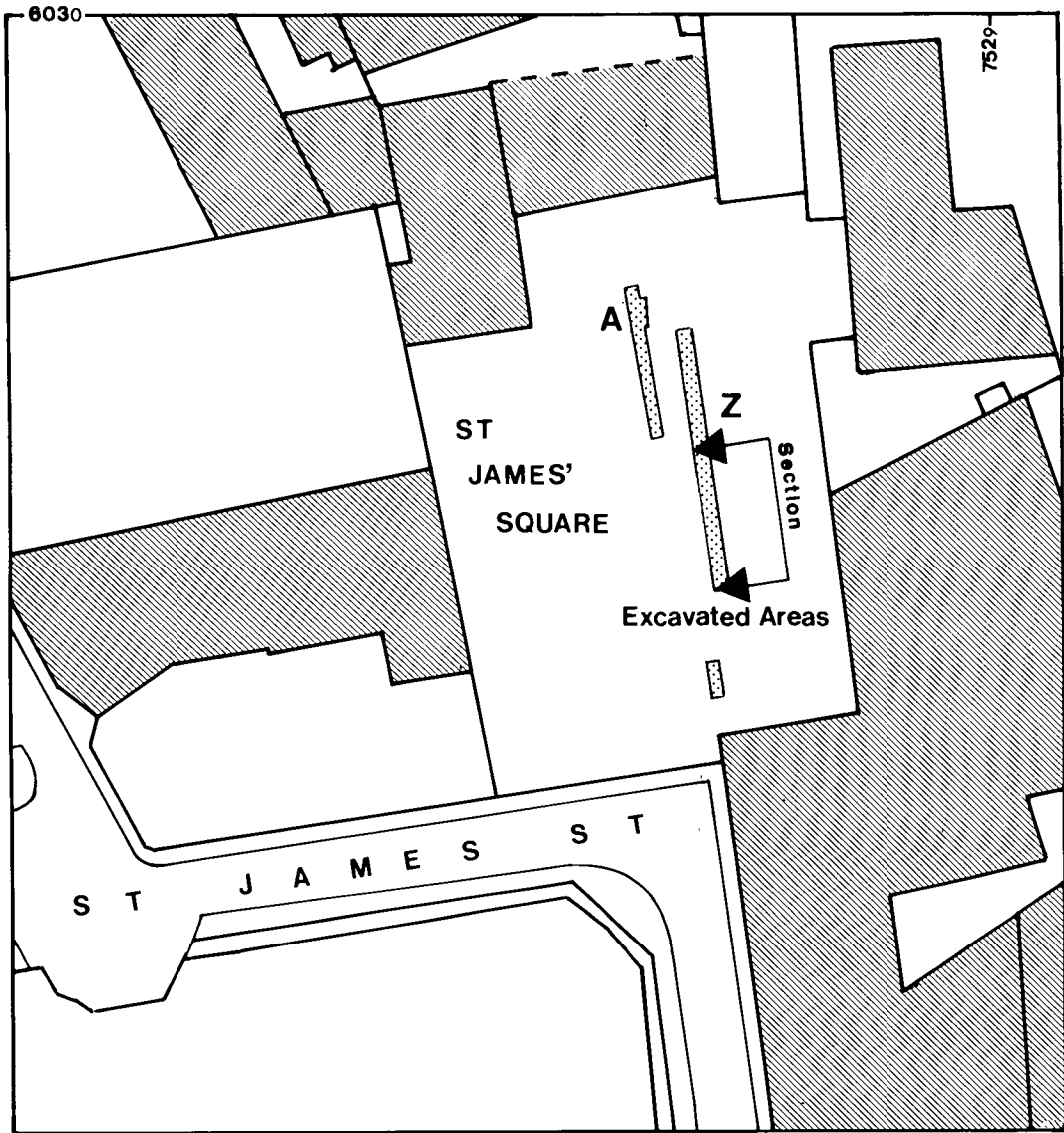


Fig 1 St James' Square: location plan

establish the nature of the archaeological deposits. Because of the depth of the trench, the unstable nature of the soil and waterlogged conditions it was not possible to work in the trench itself and the sketch section was drawn from the surface (FIG 3). There was no evidence of pits but rather a gradual build-up of deposits. The bottom c 0.4m (Z7) was composed of a sticky green/blue and brown clay and contained one sherd of

Middle/Late Saxon transitional pottery. Above this was a further c 0.4m (Z6) of mottled grey green blue silty clay with mainly Late Saxon pottery but perhaps containing a single sherd of T2 (post-Conquest). On top of this deposit was a small oven and the ash spread from the oven contained pottery belonging to the period 1100-1400. Ironstone wall 2 ran roughly parallel to the trench along its west side and turned a right

St James' Square



Scale 1:500



Fig 2 St James' Square: general site plan

St James' Square: Trench Z

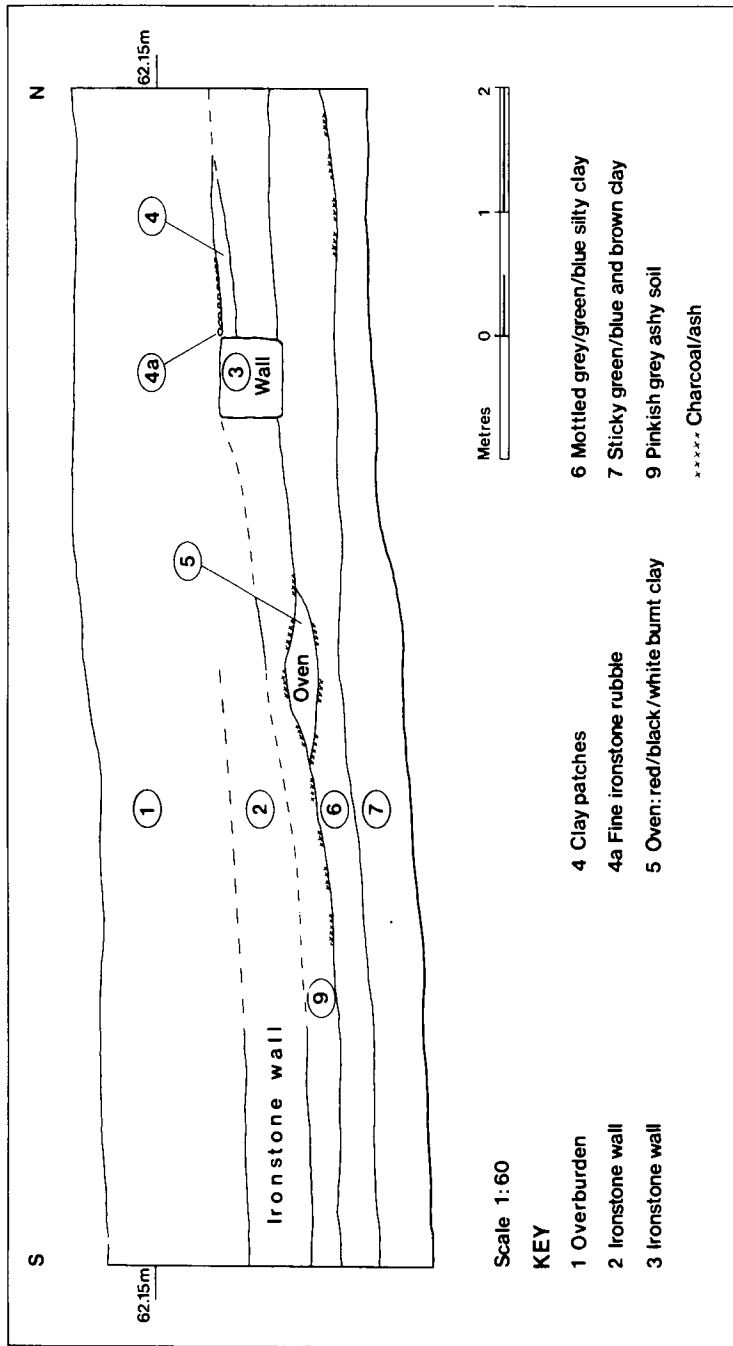
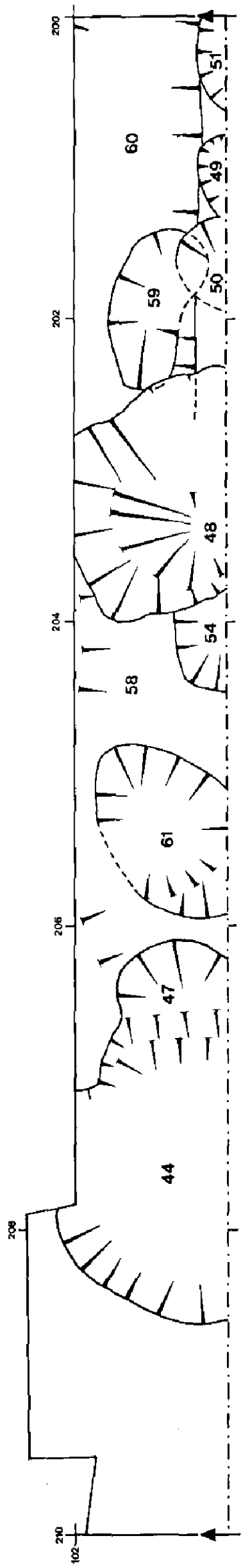


Fig 3 St James' Square: section trench Z

St James' Square: Trench A

Cut features Phases 1 to 5



Phase 6



Sumps cut through surfaces during excavation to aid drainage

Positions of bones



Scale 1:40

Fig 4 St James' Square: plan trench A

St James' Square: Trench A

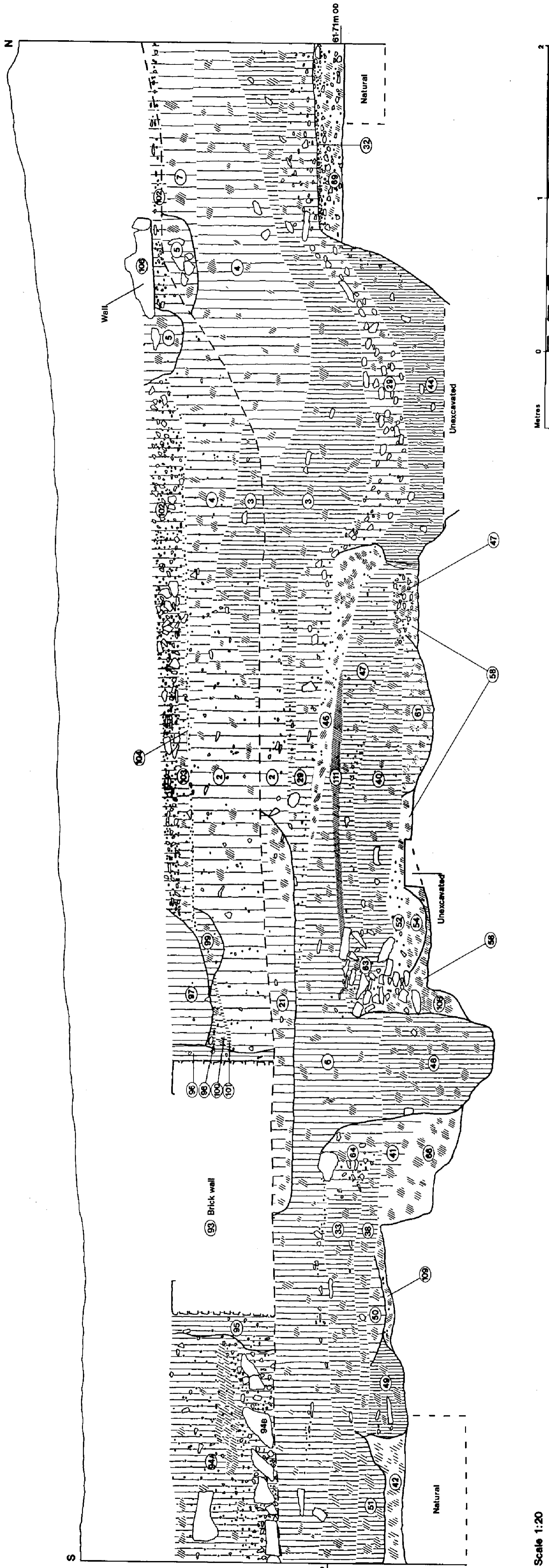


Fig 5 St James' Square: section trench A

angle eastwards as wall 3. This east-west wall was c 0.7m thick. The walls perhaps relate to a domestic building but could possibly be part of the Augustinian friary complex known in the area from the 13th century (Serjeantson 1911-12; *VCH Northants* 2, 147).

Trench A was excavated initially by machine roughly to the top of the Late Saxon deposits, at a depth of c 1.25m below the modern surface, in a cutting 3m wide; the trench was then narrowed to a width of 1m. Excavation was made more difficult by the waterlogged nature of the soil which hindered precise identification of stratigraphic units as the excavation proceeded and the sequence was more clearly defined in the final sections. Pottery and other artefacts were individually recorded three dimensionally and it was thus possible, using a combination of the various records, to assign finds to their respective deposits with a high degree of accuracy. The stratigraphic sequence has been broken down into a number of 'phases'. These should not be regarded, however, as true phases or major divisions but rather as useful groupings of deposits facilitating the understanding of the sequence of activities on the site. Only those layers which appear on the published plans and sections appear in the microfiche layer list; description of a number of deposits noted only in the eastern face of the trench are to be found only in the site archive.

Phase 1 comprised light yellowish brown to brown sticky clays (42, 58, 109) cut by a number of pits (49, 50, 54, 59, 61, 66, 108) and a gully (60). These cut features were not necessarily all contemporary. Pits 59 and 61 seem to have been lined with basket-work made from hazel (fiche 23) and pit 59 may have been used for flax retting (below page 150 and fiche 32).

In Phase 2 a series of dumped clay deposits (33, 38, 40, 47, 52, 69) raised the ground surface by up to 0.5m. Pit 48 was probably cut at this time. The stone deposits (63, 64) lining pit 48 appeared to form a lip of consolidated material rather than being a deliberately constructed lining. The rapid build-up of material seems to indicate a reaction to waterlogging and the environmental evidence suggests conditions on the site to have been wet but not marshy.

Phase 3 is represented by the filling up of pit 48. In Phase 4 there was a further raising of the ground surface with deposits 6 and 46, and pit 44

was cut. The southern edge of this pit was revetted with rectangular sectioned oak planks trimmed at their bottom to a point (fiche 23-24). It was perhaps also at this time that metalled surface 32, which continued into trench Z, was laid down at the north end of the trench.

Phase 5 was represented by the backfilling of pit 44. In Phase 6 a spread of stones and large bones created a rough metalled surface over all but the southern portion of the trench. Phase 7 was again formed of major dumps of clay (2, 3, 4, 7) over the whole of the trench but particularly at the north end of the trench. The increased depth of this material towards the north and the direction of the tip lines within the clays seem to indicate that it was derived from the north of the site and the possibility of a bank to the north, perhaps for defensive purposes, cannot be discounted although clearly there is no positive evidence for this. Phase 8 comprised probably Medieval activity on the site.

DATING

The earliest deposits in trench A contained S3/T1 transitional sherds but the presence also of St Neots type ware (T1) suggests a date in the range 850-950 for Phase 1. Phases 2 to 7 probably all belong to the Late Saxon/Early Medieval period, with Phases 6 and 7 probably dating either to the late 11th or 12th centuries.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The site clearly witnesses Late Saxon activity in a part of Northampton not previously subject to excavation yet lying on the periphery of the presumed area of the Late Saxon town. The defences of this date probably comprised a bank and ditch and it would seem reasonable that to the south of the Saxon town they ran east-west close to St James's Square. No firm indications were found for such defensive works and the evidence recovered seems to indicate that, although waterlogged, the northern part of the flood plain was not sufficiently marshy to have provided an adequate protective barrier (below, p 150 and fiche 31). No domestic structures were discovered although this would have been difficult in the narrow trenches but it would appear that industrial processes were carried out on and near the site. Pit 59 may have

been used for flax retting (below, p 150 and fiche 32) and the animal bone assemblage perhaps also suggests horn working (below, p 150). Approximately 2½kg of ferrous slag and associated material possibly indicate iron working in the area (fiche 18-19). The two human bone fragments were probably brought to the site as part of the spreads derived from elsewhere but there is no Saxon cemetery known in the immediate vicinity. The quality of the preservation of the organic materials suggests that further excavation in the area would be profitable.

THE POTTERY
by V DENHAM

INTRODUCTION

The pottery from St James' Square provides a record of Late

Saxon occupation in this area of the town. The bulk of the material dates from the 10th and 11th centuries but a few (?) Middle/Late Saxon sherds were identified in the earlier levels and the later levels were characterised by the sporadic occurrence of Late Saxon/Early Medieval transitional material. The report is divided into the following sections:

MAIN REPORT

- i) Key to fabrics (Table 1)
The fabric code, title or brief description, probable source, kilns (where applicable), appropriate date range and references to previously published discussion, are provided. Full descriptions and discussion of fabrics can be found in the 'Ceramic Gazetteer' (McCarthy 1979, 153-65) the Marefair report (Gryspeardt 1979, microfiche frames 86-91) and the Chalk Lane report (Gryspeardt 1981, microfiche frames 37-71). Notes on specific fabrics (marked *) will be found in the microfiche section of this report.
- ii) Fabric quantities by phase (Table 2)
- iii) Phase summaries

TABLE 1
SAXON/EARLY MEDIEVAL FABRICS

<i>Code</i>	<i>Familiar Name</i>	<i>Publication</i>	<i>Manufacture</i>	<i>Main Fabric Inclusions</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Date Range</i>
S3/T1		M115:155-156 M139:(M)55	Handmade/ wheel-thrown	Shelly limestone	Local	650- 1100
T1	St Neot's type ware	M115:156 M178:(M)86 M139:(M)59	Wheel-thrown	Shelly limestone	Local	850- 1100
T1/2		M178:(M)86	Handmade/ wheel-thrown	Shelly limestone	Local	950- 1250
T2		M115:156-157	Handmade/ wheel-thrown	Shelly limestone	Local	1100- 1400
V1		M115:157 M178:(M)87	Wheel-thrown	Quartz, Shelly limestone	?Midlands	1100- 1400
V5		M139:(M)60	Handmade	Oolitic limestone, Quartz	Oxon/ Glos	900- 1300
W1*	Northampton ware	M115:158 M178:(M)86 M139:(M)61	Part handmade/ wheel-thrown	Quartz	Northampton	850- 1100
W3	Thetford type ware	M115:158 M178:(M)89	Wheel-thrown	Quartz	E Anglia	850- 1200
W4		M115:158-159	Wheel-thrown	Quartz	?S Lincs	1050- 1250
X1*	Stamford ware	M115:164 M139:(M)65-66	Wheel-thrown	Quartz	Stamford	850- 1100

TABLE 2
FABRIC TOTALS BY PHASE: TRENCH A

Phases	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	U/S	Total
Fabrics:	7	2					2			11
S3/T1	6	13	1	124	5	19	83	8	25	284
T1/2		4		13	1	1	10	1		30
T2						1	1		1	3
V1 ₁									2	2
V5				1			2			3
W1		1								1
W3							1			1
W4							1			1
X1(A)				1		1				2
X1(C4)				6		6	3	1		16
Phase Totals	13	20	1	145	6	28	103	10	28	354

TRENCH Z

	Z7	Z6	Z9	Total
S3/T1	1			1
T1		6		6
T1/2		2		2
T2		1	1	2
V1			8	8
Total	1	9	9	19

- iv) Illustrated pottery
The pottery has been ordered according to fabric (indicated by caption). A full catalogue is contained in microfiche (12-15). Economy of space has required that only previously unpublished examples of each fabric have been illustrated.
- v) Synthesis

Microfiche

- i) Table of pottery (microfiche 6-9)
A codified, layer by layer account is given, following the format used in the St Peter's Street Report (McCarthy 1979, 169-224).
- ii) Notes on specific fabrics (microfiche 10-11)
- iii) Catalogue of illustrated pottery (microfiche 12-15)
A record of each vessel includes fabric, form, diameter, Munsell colour, small find number, layer, phase and relevant comments. In addition, column two contains a reference number for unillustrated vessels which duplicate previously published examples.

i) KEY TO FABRICS

- A. Main fabric groups (McCarthy 1979, 153)
S Early-Middle Saxon

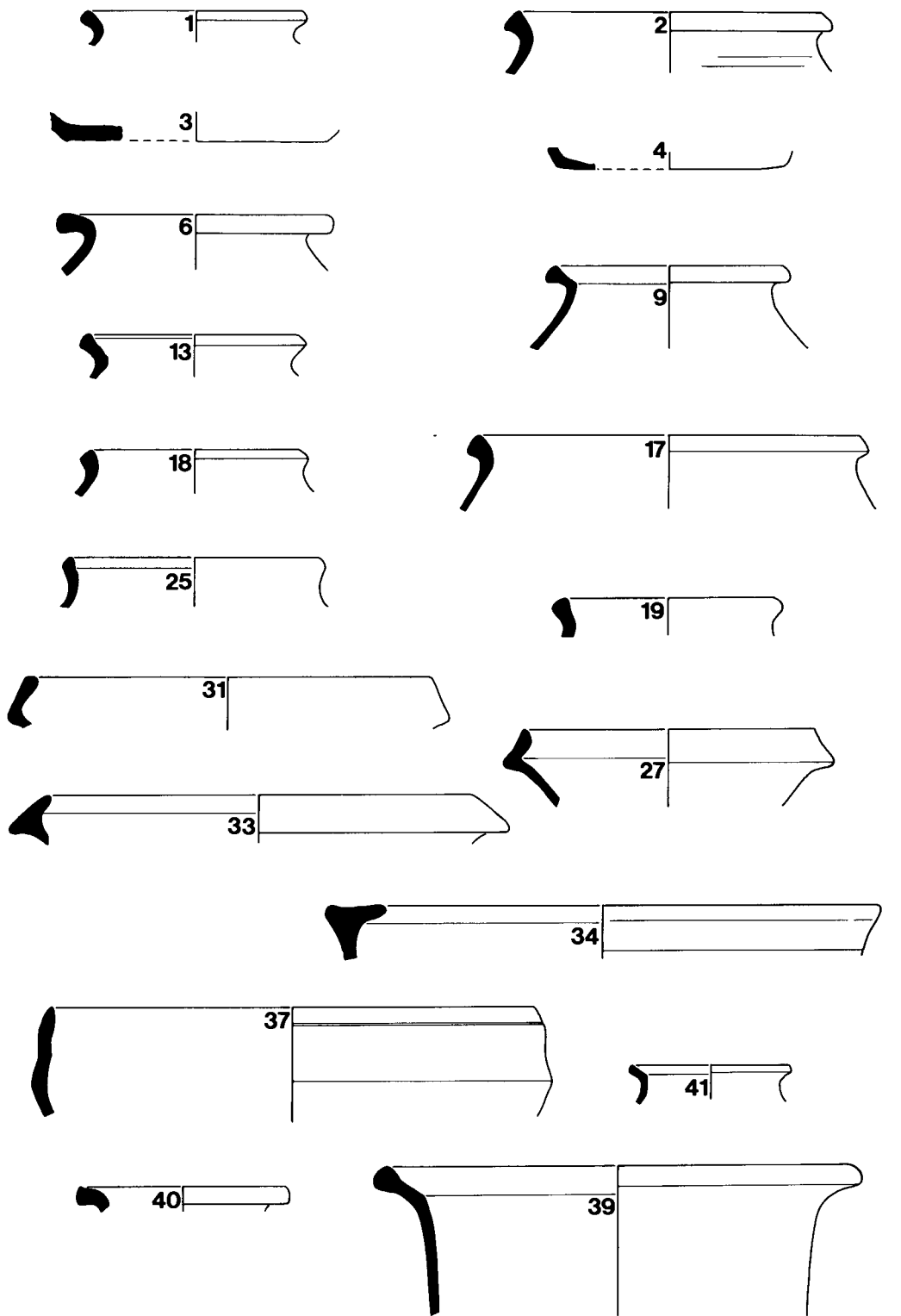
- T Late Saxon/Medieval : calcareous
V Late Saxon/Medieval : calcareous-sandy
W Late Saxon/Medieval : sandy
X Late Saxon/Medieval : very fine sandy
- B. Saxon/Early Medieval fabrics
References to previously published fabric definitions and discussion are cited in the third column.
Report code: M115 St Peter's Street report (McCarthy 1979)
M178 Marefair report (Gryspeerd 1979)
M139 Chalk Lane report (Gryspeerd 1981)
(M) prefix denotes microfiche frame(s); unprefixed number denotes page(s) in main report.

iii) PHASE SUMMARIES: Trench A
Phase 1 (13 sherds)

The S3/T1 sherds from this phase could either be from unusually crude and possibly early vessels of St Neot's type ware, or be related to the Middle Saxon Maxey Group III ware of Lincolnshire (Addyman 1964, 47-50; Addyman and Whitwell 1970). Traces of burnishing on one sherd, and the probable hand-made production of this material argue for a Middle/Late Saxon date. The remaining sherds are typical examples of St Neot's type ware and a date early in the T1 range, perhaps some time within the period AD 850-950, is suggested for the group as a whole.

Phase 2 (20 sherds)

Sherds from St Neot's type ware wheel-thrown cooking pots and hammer headed bowls are common in Phase 2. The pottery has close affinities with T1 from St Peter's Street, Houses 1 and 8, Phase 4B (McCarthy 1979, 166, 203) and as such could be expected to date from the earlier part of the 10th century, although the presence of three unassignable T1/2 sherds recommends the use of the broader 850-1100 range.



Scale 1:4

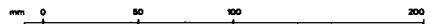


Fig 6 St James' Square: Middle to Late Saxon pottery
 Fabrics S3/T1: 1-3; X1: 4; T1: 6, 9, 13, 17-19, 25, 27, 31, 33, 34, 37, 39-41

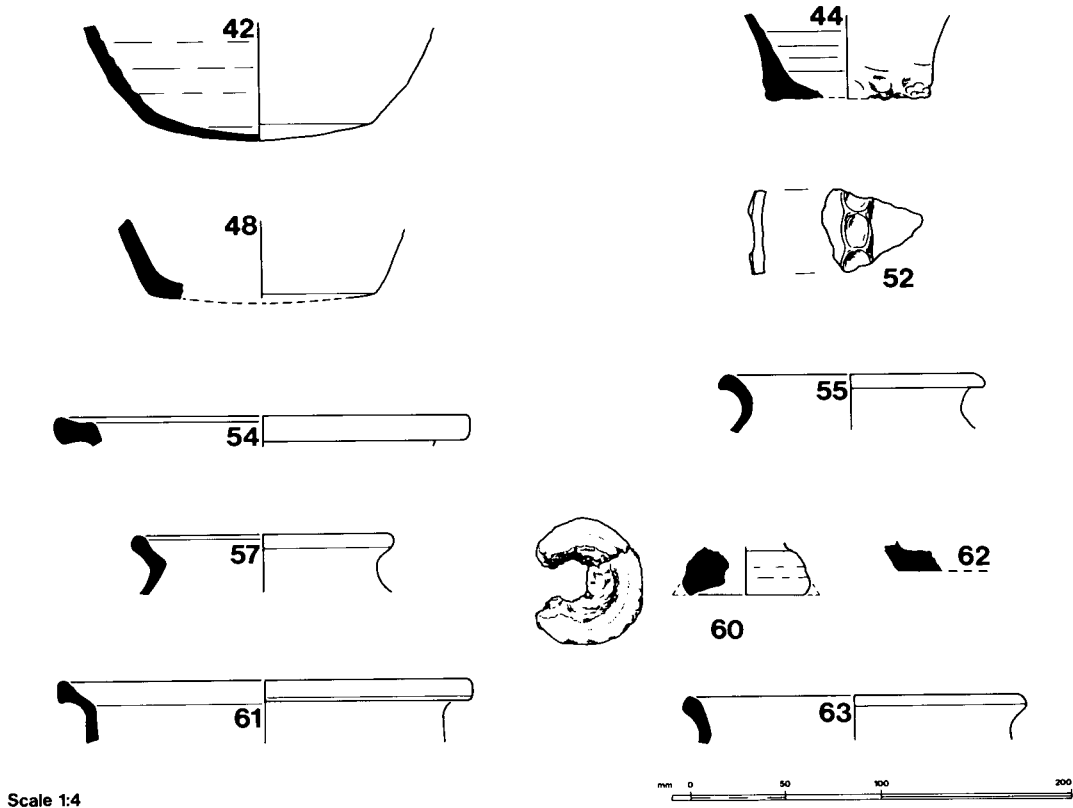


Fig 7 St James' Square: Late Saxon to Early Medieval pottery
 Fabrics T1: 42, 44, 48, 52; T1/2: 54, 55, 57, 60; V5: 61-63

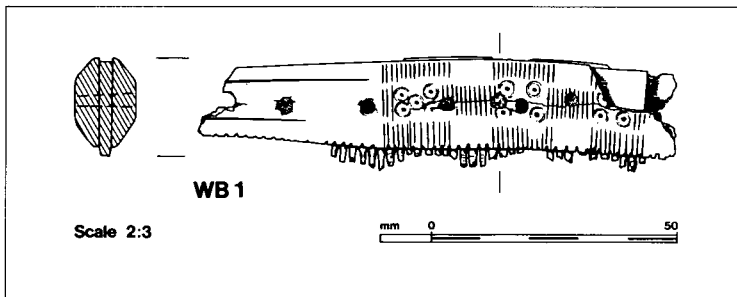


Fig 8 St James' Square: bone comb

Phase 3 (1 sherd)

Only one sherd of St Neot's type ware was recovered from this phase.

Phase 4 (145 sherds)

Of the 145 sherds found in Phase 4, 86% are St Neot's type ware, 9% are transitional Late Saxon/Early Medieval, and 5% are Stamford ware. The forms represented by the T1 material are typical small curved rim cooking pots with rounded bases, and hammer headed bowls. The Stamford ware (see microfiche 7) comprises one unglazed cooking pot sherd and six sherds from a glazed pitcher. An 11th century date would seem likely for this phase.

Phase 5 (6 sherds)

Only six sherds were recovered from this phase, of which five are T1 and one is transitional Late Saxon/Early Medieval shelly ware.

Phase 6 (28 sherds)

Of the 28 sherds which are assigned to this phase, seven are of Stamford ware (see microfiche 10) and probably fall within the AD 1020-1175 range, a date which is supported by the occurrence of a T1/2 transitional sherd, and one sherd of Early Medieval shelly ware. The remainder of the pottery is St Neot's type ware.

Phase 7 (103 sherds)

Most of the pottery attributed to this phase is St Neot's type ware, but there is some transitional T1/2 and a few regional imports of Late Saxon/Early Medieval date. The recovery of one sherd of T2 would suggest a date at the end of the 11th or early in the 12th century for the phase as a whole.

Phase 8 (10 sherds)

The majority of the pottery found in Phase 8 is fabric type T1. A sherd from a Stamford pitcher and a piece of T1/2 transitional Late Saxon/Early Medieval shelly ware were also found.

Unstratified (28 sherds)

Most of the unstratified pottery is St Neot's type ware. A few Early Medieval shelly and calcareous tempered sherds were also recovered.

Trench Z

In Trench Z 19 sherds of pottery were found in three layers. The earliest layer, Z7, produced one undiagnostic body sherd of S3/T1, which is handmade and probably dates from the Middle to Late Saxon period. Layer Z6 produced nine sherds, six of which are St Neot's type ware, two are transitional Late Saxon/Early Medieval shelly ware and one is Early Medieval shelly ware. In the latest layer, Z9, nine sherds were found, and all probably date from the 12th to 14th centuries.

v) SYNTHESIS

In the excavations at St James' Square 373 sherds of pottery were found. The earliest fabric is of Middle to Late Saxon date and is handmade. The sherds are on the

whole undiagnostic of form but small bowls and cooking pots are probably represented. St Neot's type ware makes up 78% of the total assemblage. Small bowls, frequently hammer headed, and cooking pots with simple rounded or everted rims and both flat, and, less commonly, sagging bases and 2? lamps (FIG 6-40, 41) were recovered. With one exception (FIG 7-42) all the material is wheel-thrown. A 10th or 11th century date is likely for the St Neot's ware, although some was recovered in residual contexts. Stamford ware, probably from glazed pitchers in the AD 1050-1175 date range, makes up 5% of the assemblage. A sherd of Thetford type ware (W3) and a sherd of possible South Lincolnshire origin (W4) are the only other imported wares. Northampton ware surprisingly is only represented by a single sherd. Cooking pots and bowls of shell tempered Late Saxon/Early Medieval transitional ware (T1/2), probably dating from the 11th and 12th centuries, were recovered. In later and unstratified contexts Early Medieval wares, cooking pots and bowls in fabrics V1 and T2, were found, making up 5% of the assemblage.

THE LEATHER
by J M SWANN

The leather was in very poor condition because of the acidity of the soil but nevertheless a few fragments belonging to footwear could be identified. This is the first material of this period recorded from Northampton. The most impressive piece (L1) was decorated with the ladder patterns usually associated with the centre of a shoe vamp in the Late Dark Age-Early Medieval period. The only other excavated shoes which are comparable come from Durham. Various other leather fragments with (?) thong holes, some of which may also, but not necessarily have been from footwear, were also found.

THE LATE SAXON ENVIRONMENT
by MARK ROBINSON

Samples from various 10th-11th century pits and layers were examined for waterlogged and carbonised macroscopic plant remains. They indicate conditions on the site to have been wet, but not sufficiently marshy to have provided an effective defensive protection for the town. There was no evidence for environmental change over the period spanned by the samples, although the water table of the site has possibly risen since Late Saxon times.

The plant remains were typical of Late Saxon/Late Saxon/Early Medieval urban assemblages: a great diversity of species from many habitats, some of which grew on the site as weeds, others which were imported both intentionally and accidentally. The crop plants identified included flax, bread/club wheat, rye, barley and perhaps oats. The cereal remains may merely represent waste from domestic use, but pit 59 contained large quantities of flax capsule fragments, suggesting that flax threshing took place on site. Other imported plant material included bracken, which was perhaps used for bedding; arable weed seeds, which were probably derived from agricultural processing on the site; and seeds from what was possibly hay. The purpose of the waterlogged pits is unknown, but the plant remains show that they were not latrines.

THE MAMMALIAN BONES
by MARY HARMAN

Most of the bone was in good condition and most was identifiable. Almost all of that recovered came from Late Saxon levels, and these levels have been grouped in phases, and the bones from each phase have been listed (microfiche 39-46). There are, however, two examples of bones from Phase 2 belonging with bones from Phase 6: two joining parts of the same horse humerus were found in different layers, and left and right dog tibiae which are undoubtedly a pair came from two further different layers. This, together with the similar and peculiar characteristics of the bone groups in

different phases, suggests that all the Late Saxon phases should be considered together; a list of the bones identified from Phases 1-7 is shown in Table 3. The lack of some of the smaller bones such as sheep and pig phalanges may be partly due to the wet and muddy condition of the site.

Most of the bones were from adult animals: there were a few jaws to which ages could be attributed, using the charts and 'old ages' of Silver (1963, 250-268); Cattle: 2 at c 1 year, 2 at c 2½ years, 1 at 4-5 years, 3 at over 5 years; Sheep: 1 at c 6 months, 1 at c 1½ years, 3 at 2½-3 years, 2 at 3-4 years, 6 at over 4 years; Pig: 1 at c 1½ years, 4 at c 2½ years, and 2 over 3 years; Horse: 1 at c 4 years, 1 at c 6 years, 1 at c 20 years. Most of the post cranial bones were consistent with this,

TABLE 3
PHASES 1-7

Numbers of bones from different species present, and minimum number of animals, with percentage of each

	Cattle			Sheep			Pig		Horse	
	L	R	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	
Horn core	6	3	8	35	4	14				
Skull		3	3	2	2		1		3	1
									(one prob whole)	
Maxilla	1		1	1		1		3		1
Mandible	6		12	11		12	4	3	3	3
Tooth		6			20			3		4
Vertebra		16			10					9
Rib		50			11			1		4
Scapula	3	3	8	1	4	4		3	1	1
Humerus	11	1	11	6	1	4		2	4	4
Radius + ulna	8	1	11	10	1	5	1	1	4	6
Metacarpal	12		5	3	2	1				2
Pelvis	5	1	8			3	3	2	4	2
Femur	7	1	7	3	5	1	1		1	4
Tibia	13	2	7	9		13	2	2	2	4
Astragalus	2		1					1		
Calcaneum			1							
Scapho-cuboid	1				1					
Metatarsal	15	2	5	10	3	6			1	1
Phalanx 1	1		1				1			2
Phalanx 2			1							2
Phalanx 3			1							
Total		199			185			31		59
(excluding T, V, R)		42%			39%			6.5%		12.5%
(exc horn cores)		48%			44.5%			7.5%		excluding horse
		56%			35.2%			8.7%		
Minimum no of animals (exc horn cores)		15			13			6		6

Also: Dog: maxilla R, mandible L, tooth 1, vertebra 1, humerus L, tibia L+R

Cat: humerus L

Roe Deer: metacarpal L

though there were two from young horses: one from an animal of between 1½ and 3½ years, and one from a foal of less than 1 year.

The deposit is remarkable because of the unusually high proportion of horse bones and of horn cores and parts of the frontal bone from both sheep and goat. Horn cores account for almost one third of the bones from sheep/goat. If the horn cores and the horse bones are disregarded, then the relative numbers of cattle, sheep and pig bones are comparable with contemporary groups from other sites in the town; the number of pig bones is proportionately smaller than usual, while cattle bones are more important than in most other groups, but the differences are not great. Similar deposits of horn cores and horse bones were found in later deposits on the St Peter's Street site (Harman 1979, 328-331), the largest group being from a 15th century pit associated with House 4 though slightly earlier pits on the same house plot contained smaller groups of bone with a similar composition. The horn cores were from cattle and were almost undoubtedly horn-working waste; the horse bones appeared to be related in some way since they appeared consistently with the horn cores although they were found above them and were not mingled with them. The horn cores from St James' Square seem to be horn-working waste also; twenty-eight, from their size and large curved shape, were probably from rams; five slight cores may have been from ewes, and eleven with long, barely curved horn cores were probably from goats; these varied in size. Almost all of the horn cores had been cut off the skull, but those which had not had only a portion of the frontal bone attached to them.

Two human bones were found, from deposits attributed to Phases 2 and 6. Both were pieces of skull vault, from two different people, both adults, the one from Phase 2 possibly from a male.

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