

## VII.—RECENT EXCAVATIONS AT CHESTER-LE-STREET

*J. S. Rainbird*

The only recent general account of work at Chester-le-Street has been *The Roman Fort at Chester-le-Street* by J. P. Gillam and J. Tait, in *Archaeologia Aeliana* 4, xlv, 1968, which is mainly concerned with the discoveries made in the course of building operations at the Grammar School. Within a day or two of the paper going to press, excavations made it clear that the plan would need to be revised, and one purpose of this review is to present a new plan. The other purpose is to catalogue the other recent work, as the 1968 paper did not take account of all the excavations. As there is the prospect of large-scale excavations in Chester-le-Street within the next year or two, there is no point now in attempting a final report: the site is too prone to provide surprises. Nor will this account deal with pottery and other finds.

Excavations in 1958, 1959 and 1960 were directed by Dr. J. C. Mann and short reports have been published in *Journal of Roman Studies* and *University of Durham Gazette*.<sup>1</sup> The plan is published here for the first time (fig. 1). The final phases of a building may be distinguished (flooding prevented the completion of the excavation). Of the three rooms which were found, the easternmost had been connected with the room to the west. The doorway was later blocked, and probably at the same time the easternmost room was divided by an east-west wall into two rooms, both of which were fitted with hypocausts; the east-west

<sup>1</sup> *JRS*, xlix, 1959 pp. 106 and 138 n.14; 1, 1960, p. 215; li, 1961, pp. 164ff.; *U.D. Gazette*, n.s. 6, Dec. 1958; 7, Dec. 1959; 8, Dec. 1960.

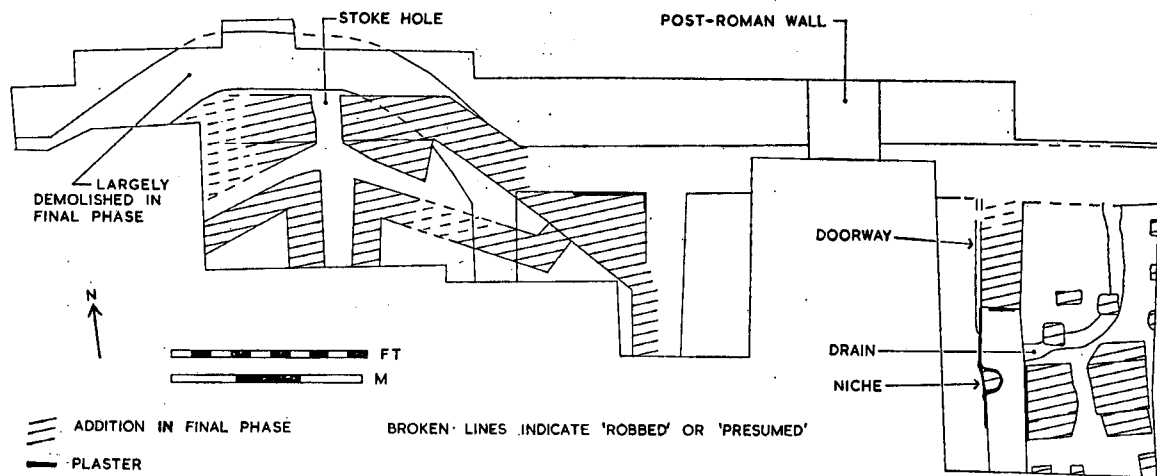


FIG.1: COMMANDER'S HOUSE

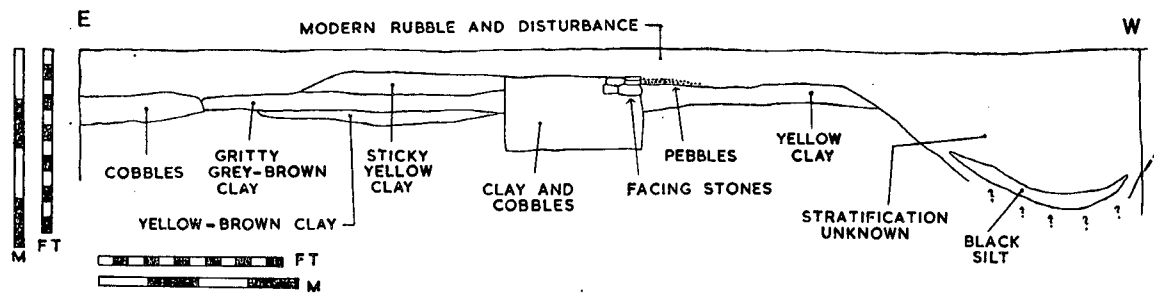
internal wall was arched below the level of the raised floor to allow the products of combustion to pass freely below both rooms. The stoke hole, to judge by the traces of burning in the northern room, was probably in the north wall of the building. Later, the hypocausts were filled in with debris which included tiles and pottery of the middle of the fourth century. The next room to the west had a hard concrete floor, on a level with the threshold of the blocked doorway into the eastern room. A little to the south of this doorway a small semi-circular niche in the wall, later filled up and plastered over, may have been a small shrine. The floor of the room was covered with several inches of fallen yellow wall plaster, but there was no sign that the room had met a violent end: its walls seem simply to have fallen down. The westernmost room had a three-sided bay projecting northwards, which superseded an apse when two earlier rooms were joined together. In its last form the room was fitted with a channelled hypocaust. The pottery found among the debris filling up the hypocaust in the easternmost room dates the disuse of the hypocaust and the insertion of a new concrete floor to the reconstruction of A.D. 369. A deposit of pottery datable to after 369 was lying against the outside of the north wall of the bay of the west room.

In 1964 Mr. M. Todd carried out excavations<sup>2</sup> which found a bay on the south side of the building corresponding to the one on the north side. To the south of this was a paved yard, with earlier buildings of two periods below.

In 1963 Mr. Todd excavated part of the Rectory garden (to the south of the fort) and found a road 35 ft. wide running north-south, and another road, 20 ft. wide, running east-west. To the south and east of these roads were the foundations of a building including, in its east wall, an apse.

In 1968 excavations were carried out in the car park, to the west of the Parish Church, and directed by John

<sup>2</sup> *JRS*, liv, 1964, p. 156; lv, 1965, p. 203.



CAR PARK: TRENCH 3

FIG. 2

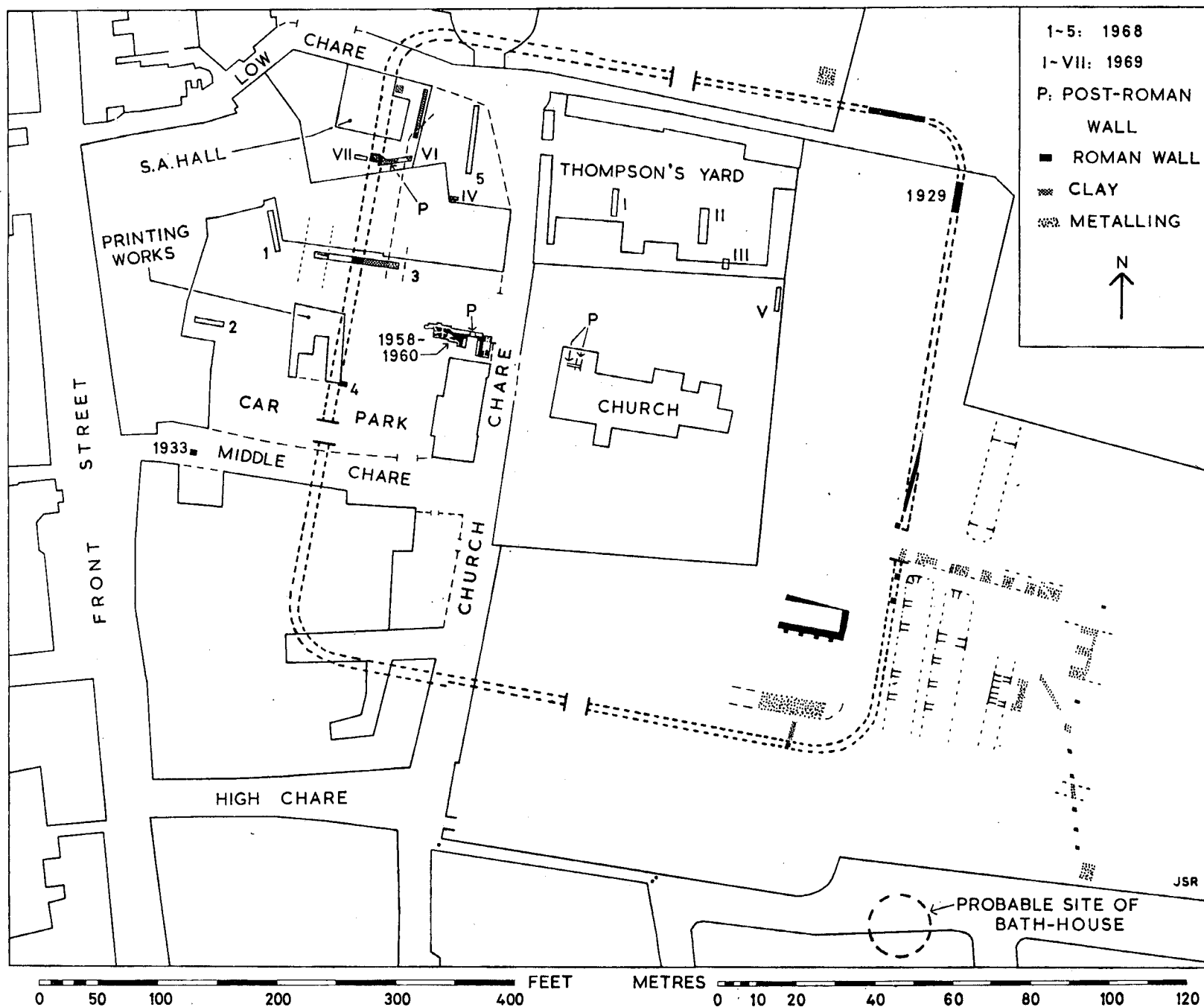
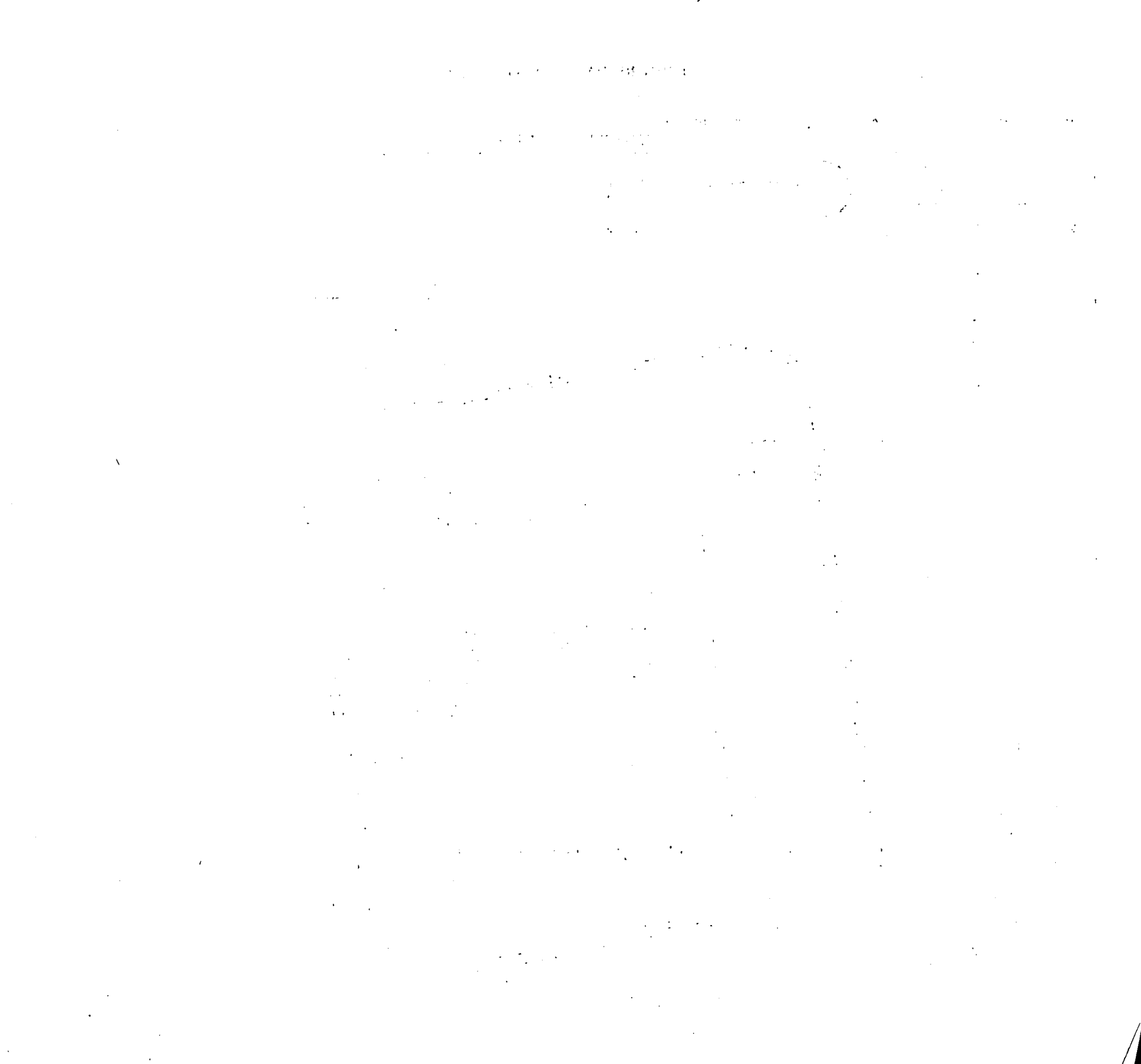


FIG.3: GENERAL PLAN (SELECTIVE DETAIL)



Rainbird, in order to test the hypothesis put forward by Gillam and Tait (fig. 3).<sup>3</sup> Trenches 1 and 2 failed to find the northern and western defences of the fort, but instead found scrappy stone walls (not certainly Roman at all). Accordingly, starting near to the site of Dr. Mann's excavations, which were certainly within the fort, a JCB digger dug a three-foot trench westwards (trench 3), and picked up the defences. The section is shown in fig. 2. Because it had been dug by a machine, trench 3 did not produce detailed sections, nor was it safe to enter it to clean the sides, but the defences stood out clearly. A further small hole at the south-east corner of the printing works (trench 4) confirmed the line of the wall. Trench 5, again dug by the JCB, failed to find any structures.

The threat of building developments in 1969 made it imperative to define the limits of the fort and to assess future archaeological priorities. Trenches I, II, III and V were intended to help locate the northern defences, and again what was found was ambiguous but certainly not the defences. In trench I the natural clay was only two feet down, with disturbed clay on top of it; in trench II there were bands of clay suggestive of construction trenches and a patch of compacted pebbles suggestive of metalling; trench III produced four stones lying in a straight line; in trench V (in the corner of the Churchyard) grave-digging had disturbed the ground right down into the natural subsoil (gravel here), and there were just slight traces of an east-west wall; while further to the west, trench IV picked up a T-junction of two stone walls, with pottery of the later second to third century below.

It was trench VI, behind the Salvation Army Hall, that provided the crucial evidence. The west wall of the fort was discovered, still running northwards. Part of it had been robbed right down to the clay and cobble foundation, but on what remained of the upper, mortared, part, was a road surface, with patches of small stones filling in hollows and

<sup>3</sup> *JRS*, lix, 1969, p. 205; *U.D. Gazette*, n.s. 16, Dec. 1968.

the whole surface very compacted. On top of this, using it as a foundation, was a wall composed of coursed facing stones with a rubble core, the whole bonded with clay. An air raid shelter had been built in the rampart backing, but the edge of the *intervallum* road was more or less intact. The road surface can only have been laid down after the fort wall had been robbed down to, but not below, the ground level of the time; then the later wall (of a building, presumably—the trench could not be extended because of buildings and an electricity pole) would have been built over part of the road, and finally what remained of the fort wall was robbed, leaving just the part that was serving as the foundation of the later wall. This argument would imply that the secondary building belongs to the period after stone-robbing had started, but before it was very far advanced.

The fact that the west wall went so far north meant that it must pass round the north side of the trenches to the east. Moreover, removal of the turf to the north of trench VI revealed the place where the *intervallum* road started to turn to the east. It appeared also, however, that the rampart backing lay as far west some way north of trench VI as it did in the trench itself, and it may be that the *intervallum* road was cutting the corner while the wall continued north for some way.

There is thus now a strong case for interpreting the east-west wall further to the east, and north of the Grammar School, as the north wall of the fort, and the wall to the south-east of that as the east wall. The north-west corner of the fort, and also the south-west, are not yet fixed precisely. But, with the piece of the south wall to guide us, the dimensions appear to be about  $540 \times 500$  ft. (about  $165 \text{ m.} \times 152 \text{ m.}$ ), with the long axis north-south. The position of the east gate, nearer the south side than the north, indicates that the fort faces south.

With this plan it becomes clear that the building in the car park excavated by Dr. Mann and Mr. Todd should be



the commander's house. Also, the east end of the Parish Church (the site of the original wooden church and shrine of St. Cuthbert) may well be in the cross-hall of the headquarters building. The wall in the west end of Middle Chare should now be assigned to a building in the *vicus*.

One difficulty (at least) still attaches to the plan of the fort. The east and north walls are uniformly six feet thick, whereas the west wall is uniformly nine feet thick. It may be that this is an unimportant irregularity. On the other hand, if we interpret the disturbed clay near the surface in trench I as rampart backing, it would be possible to postulate a fort occupying the eastern two thirds of the fort indicated on the plan (with the road to the north going to its north gate, perhaps), and with the western third added as an extension. This is speculation, but it does emphasise that so far we have not reached certainty.

There is still no evidence of structures which are certainly datable to the fifth to tenth centuries. Some of the slight structures which have been found (including some also in trench VII) may in fact belong to this period (if they are not part of the Roman *vicus*), but for the greater part of its post-Roman history this area of Chester-le-Street seems to have been given over to agricultural or gardening uses. In the Anchorage of the Parish Church, two walls which were excavated beneath the floor, running north-south and east-west, may be assigned to the first stone periods of the church, though they probably belonged to a separate building or buildings. Somewhat similar in appearance was the post-Roman wall in trench VI, except that it was bonded with clay while the walls in the Anchorage were mortared. Yet another similar wall, mortared, was found by Dr. Mann in the car park.

Although the use of smallish trenches, and JCB trenches, has so far been justified for the contribution they have made to our knowledge of the Roman period at Chester-le-Street, we have probably reached a stage when, even for the Roman period, far more can be gained by the method of area exca-

vation. It is hoped that the proposed town-centre developments will provide good opportunities.

Our thanks are due to the Durham University Excavation Committee for financing excavations in the period from 1958 to 1968, and to the Ministry of Public Building and Works for financing the excavations of 1969. Thanks are also due to the Chester-le-Street Urban District Council, J. Thompson, Esq., the Rev. A. Spurr, and about thirty archaeologists, especially J. P. Gillam, Esq., Dr. J. C. Mann, and, above all, the late John Tait.