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Roman Period Riverside Deposits at Castle Stairs, Sandhill

David Passmore, Colm O'Brien, John Dore

SYNOPSIS

A small excavation during re-development at the foot of Castle Stairs in Newcastle shows that modern and medieval buildings had been founded on deposits dumped on to the foreshore in the Roman period. This is the first finding of Roman material on the riverside, and it invites speculation on a waterfront of this era, the use of the Sandhill, and the site of the bridge.

INTRODUCTION

REDEVELOPMENT by Northumbria Properties Ltd of the long-derelict site once occupied by the Angel Inn at the foot of Castle Stairs afforded the opportunity to examine an area of the Newcastle waterfront close to the bridge head on Sandgate. David Passmore of the Archaeological Practice, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, with the assistance of David Fletcher and Ian Wood, excavated in January 1990 a trench immediately east of Castle Stairs (Trench A in fig. 1) on the narrow platform in between Sandgate to the south and the unstable retaining walls of previous buildings terraced into the hillside north. Safety considerations limited the scope for excavation in this confined and difficult space. Nevertheless, this excavation and the observations made by David Passmore and Colm O'Brien during the builder's works in the following months and the pottery study by John Dore have added new information on the riverside topography and have shown for the first time clear evidence of riverside work of the Roman period.

Three phases of activity are represented in Trench A with deposits of the Roman period and structures of medieval and post medieval date. Observations in Trench A and in the surrounding area have identified the heights (expressed as values above Ordnance Datum) at which boulder clay and alluvial deposits of silt and sand occur. These allow for some assessment of the natural topography of the site.

THE EXCAVATION

Trench A

Phase 1 (Plan fig. 2C)

Undisturbed alluvial or estuarine laminated sands and silts [57] were exposed below the archaeological deposits in the deepest part of Trench A (at 2·4 m OD), immediately west of an unexcavated baulk (Section C–D), and buried by a series of deposits that reach a combined maximum thickness of 1·85 m.

The oldest unit consists of mixed sandy silty clays [54] (0·35 m thick) with some charcoal and stone inclusions. Occasional traces of lamination suggests this material is either redeposited or heavily disturbed alluvium. Overlying this are clayey sandy silts [48] (0·5 m thick) and [47] (0·45 m thick). The former deposit is dominated by charcoal and coal inclusions while the latter context thins markedly to the west and south. To the east of the baulk excavation was halted at 3·2 m OD where yellow clays [50] were observed to underlie charcoal-dominated clayey sandy silts [49] which seem to be equivalent to [48] west of the baulk.

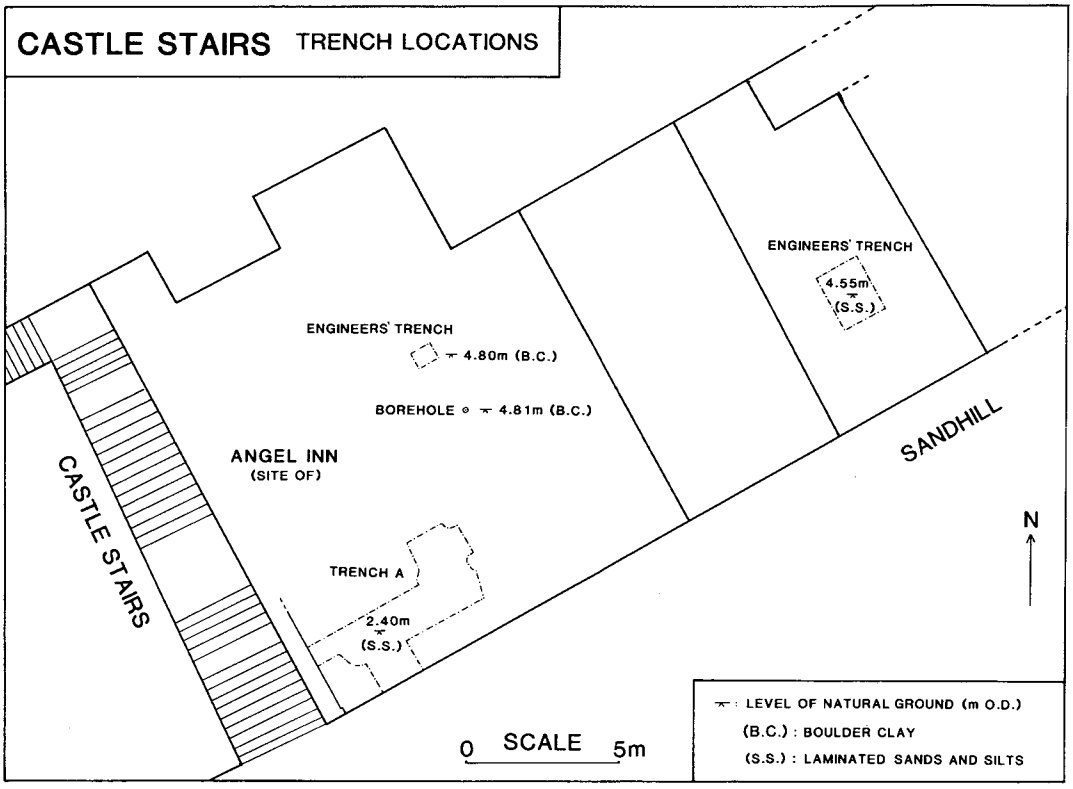

Fig. 1

Deposits [47] and [49] are buried by homogeneous yellow clays [18] (max. 0·7 m thick) that extend across the entire trench (Sections C–D and A–B) and contain frequent large and jumbled yellow sandstone blocks. Some of these blocks show evidence of stone working although no ashlar was recovered. In the eastern part of the trench these clays are capped by a discontinuous charcoal and coal lens [46] (Section A–B).

In the eastern part of the trench the sequence described above is disturbed by a poorly-defined and irregular feature [53] that is cut from the upper parts of deposits [46] and [18] and appears to extend beyond the north east limit of the trench. The cut is filled with a stiff and poorly-sorted grey clay [51] (probably re-deposited boulder clay) overlain by compact silty clays [44] and [40] and a charcoal lens [43]. The origins of this feature are unclear—it may represent the southern edge of a pit or ditch or alternatively it may be disturbance arising from contemporaneous deposition of differing clay dumps.

Overlying deposit [18] to the west, and sealing fill [40], is a further dump of mixed sandy silty clay [15] truncated by later buildings, and separated from a series of similar and probably contemporary dumps [39], [37] and [35] in the eastern part of the trench by a later drain [11] (see Section A–B). The matrix and inclusions evident in deposit [37], which lies in a shallow, south-dipping cut or depression [38], suggests it is the continuation of [15].

Phase 2 (Plan fig. 2B)

Overlying the dumps of Phase 1, Phase 2 consists of structural remains of a building occupying the corner between Castle Stairs and Sandhill.

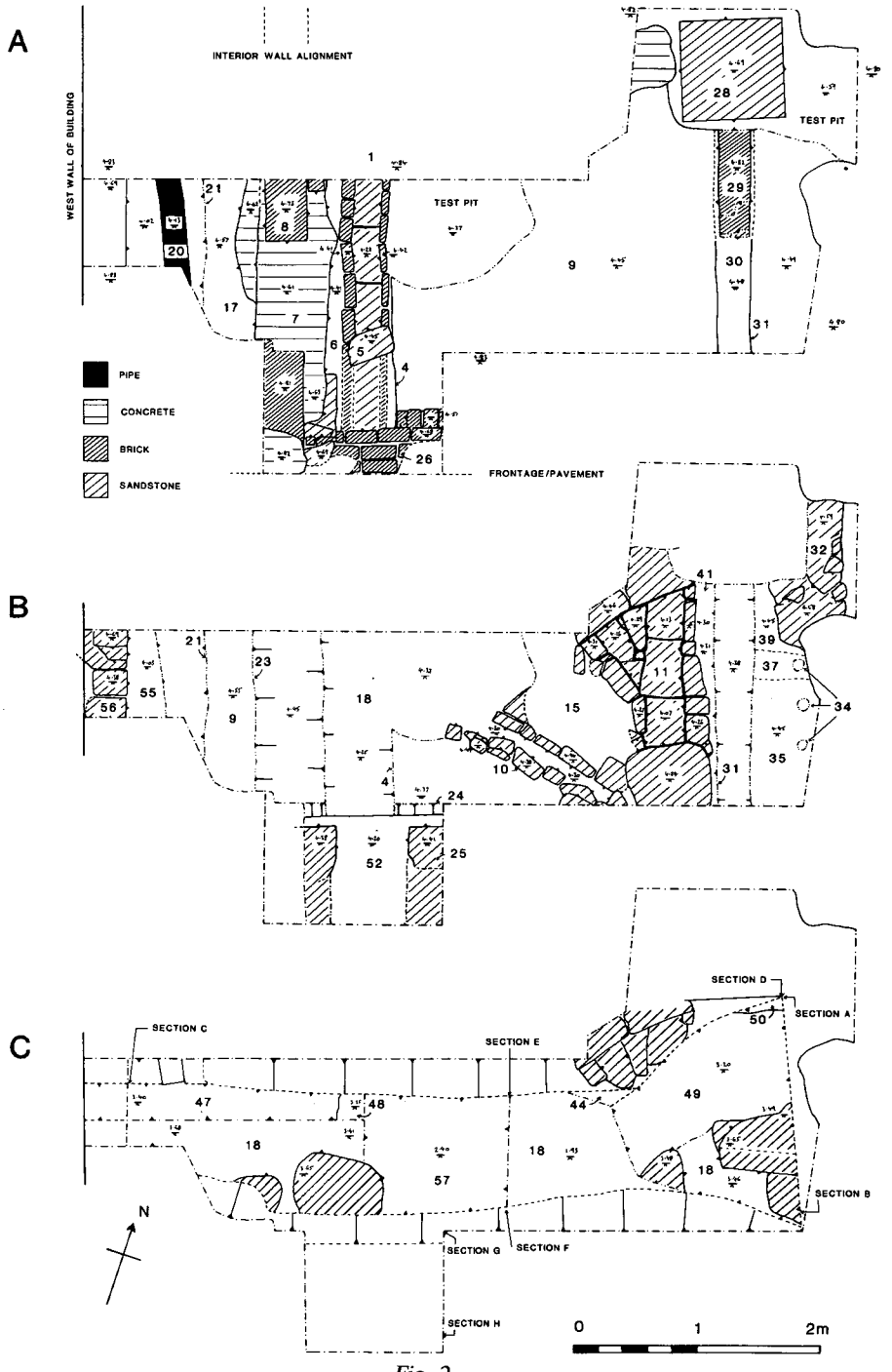
A
B
C
INTERIOR WALL ALIGNMENT
WEST WALL OF BUILDING
TEST PIT
TEST PIT
FRONTAGE/PAVEMENT
PIPE
CONCRETE
BRICK
SANDSTONE
SECTION A
SECTION B
SECTION C
SECTION D
SECTION E
SECTION F
SECTION G
SECTION H
N
0
1
2m

Fig. 2

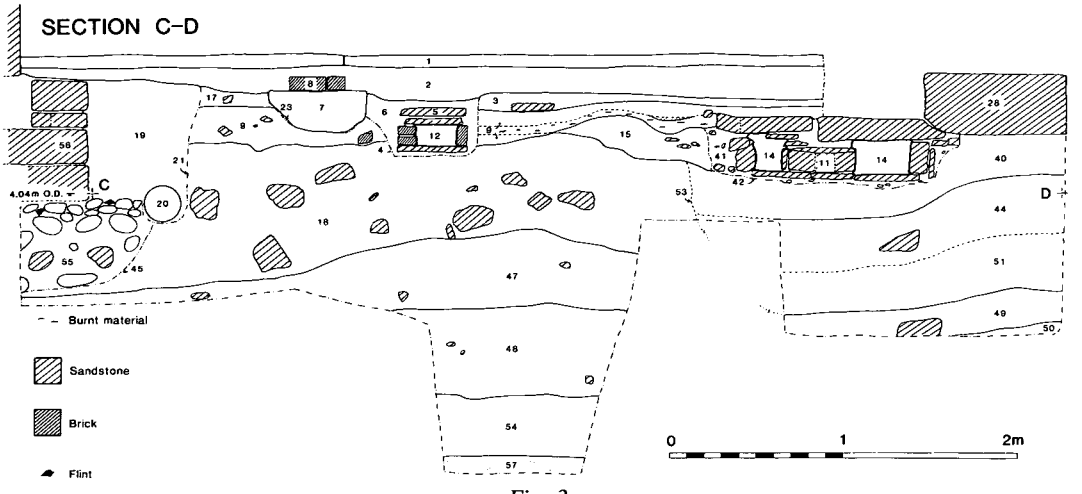
SECTION C-D
4.04m O.D.
C
D
Burnt material
Sandstone
Brick
Flint
0
1
2m

Fig. 3

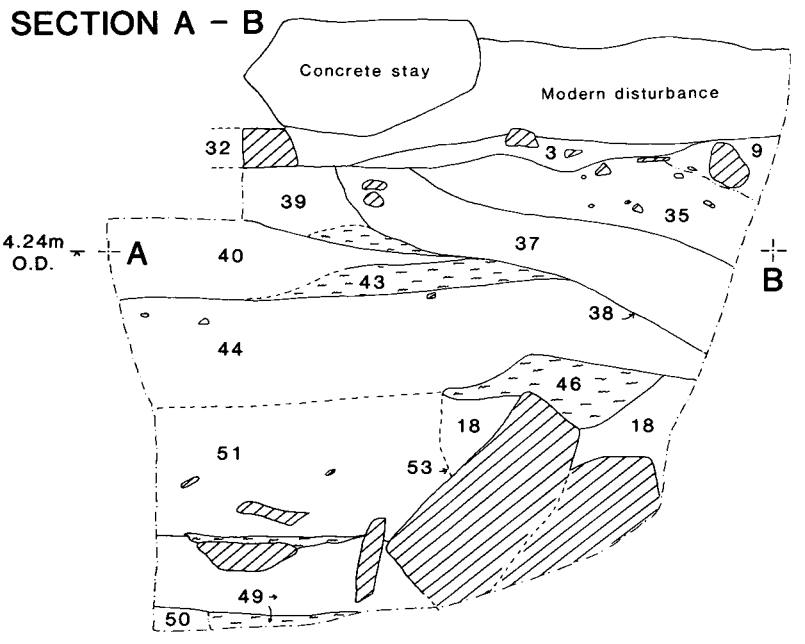
SECTION A - B
Concrete stay
Modern disturbance
4.24m O.D.
A
B
Sandstone
Charcoal lens
0
1m

Fig. 4

The south wall [25] occupies a construction trench [24] cut through deposit [15] and lined at the bottom with closely-packed rounded cobbles and occasional flint fragments [52] in a 0·4 m deep cut [24] through deposit [15]. Founded on the cobbles, the wall footings have an ashlar face north with a rough sandstone and mortar core surviving to a height of 0·35 m and an exposed width of 0·55 m (see Section G–H). Excavation did not reveal the southern edge of the structure. However, the frontage of the overlying brick rebuild (see below) extends a further 0·12 m south which suggest the footings are at least 0·67 m in width. Abutting this structure is a silty clay backfill [27] of the construction trench that in turn is sealed by deposit [9].

A similar construction sequence underpins the west wall of the building [56], although much of the uppermost construction horizon has been lost to a later pipe trench. The construction trench [45] cuts through clay deposit [18] to a depth of 0·45 m (see Section C–D) and is filled with a mixed sandy silty clay and cobble foundation [55] with occasional flint inclusions. These cobbles extend 0·25 m beyond the footing and are cut by the pipe trench [21]. The wall footings stand to a height of 0·7 m and are stepped out 0·36 m from the interior face of the wall above modern floor level (see Section C–D). They comprise yellow sandstone ashlar outside a rough sandstone and mortar core—at least one ashlar block is keyed into the core structure at this section of the wall. Both the cobble bed and footing are overlain and abutted by pipe trench fill [19] which obscures their relationship with earlier deposits. However, the similarity in construction to the south wall suggests they are broadly contemporary.

At the eastern limit of excavation the remnants of a shallow-founded, probably interior sandstone wall [32] aligned north–south are evident below an engineers' test pit (see Plans A and B). Comprising 0·1 m thick slabs of yellow sandstone underpinning thin (30 mm) and broken sandstone slabs and mortar, the wall is broken to the west by a modern sandstone pillar base [28] and extends into the northern limit of excavation. At a point 0·75 m south of this limit the wall terminates. However, the partition appears to be continued along the same alignment by a series of three post holes [34] spaced 0·25 m apart and cut

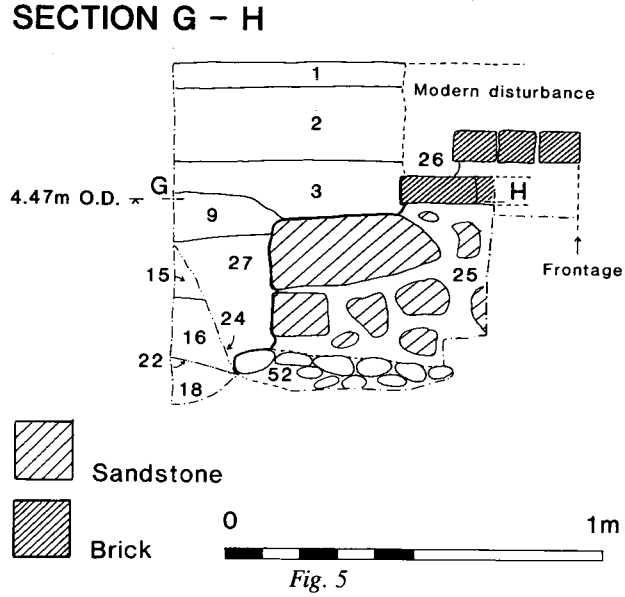

Fig. 5

through Phase 1 deposits [37] and [35] (see Plan B). No traces of wood were evident within these features which were sealed by deposit [9].

Associated with the building are two internal sandstone-built drains cut through Phase 1 deposits [15] and [40]. The larger of the culverts [11] occupies cut [42] and is constructed from large blocks of yellow sandstone set on edge over a channel floor of flat sandstone slabs, and is capped by massive slabs of roughly shaped sandstone (see Section C–D Plan B). Infilling the (now redundant) culvert is a loose silty deposit [41].

To the west of this feature is a smaller sandstone culvert [10] aligned NW–SE destroyed to the north west by the engineers' test pit (see Plan B). Overlying these drains and the construction horizon [27] of the southern wall, and extending over most of the area of the trench, is a mixed deposit of sandy silt and silty clay [9] (see Section C–D) which may represent a levelling horizon or sub-floor/floor probably burnt in-situ. Small sherds of buff-white ware were recovered from deposit [9] suggest the building and associated interior make-up are likely to be of medieval origin.

Phase 3 (Plan fig. 2A)

A number of structures and intrusions cut through and overlie the deposits and structures of Phases 1 and 2. Immediately east of the Phase 2 west wall a pipe trench [21] abuts the wall footings. A concrete raft [7] is the foundation for the remains of an interior brick wall [8] (see Section C–D), and beside this is a drain [5] built from red brick. This has been subsequently infilled with a loose sandy silt [12] containing clay pipe and glass fragments.

To the south this drain is cut through the footings of the southern Phase 2 wall [25] and is associated, at least in this particular stretch of wall, with a brick rebuild [26] over the drain representing the building's frontage (see Section G–H). The rebuild also appears to abut the southern extent of wall [8] although this relationship is badly disturbed.

In the eastern part of the trench another brick wall [29] sits on a foundation of rubble and clay [30] and is lost to the south in modern disturbance.

The wall [29] and a sandstone pillar base [28] set across its line seem to represent a rearrangement of the building's internal partition. Overlying the west wall footing [56] and internal walls [8] and [29] is a concrete floor surface [1], founded on a rubble hardcore [2] and a (discontinuous) levelling dump of clean sand [3] (see Section C–D). In the western part of the trench a layer of loose silty sand with occasional brick and mortar fragments [17] is probably the lateral equivalent of this levelling horizon.

WATCHING BRIEF

It was possible by observation of engineers' test pits and builders' excavations north and west of Trench A to set the findings in a wider context. To the north in a bore hole and a small test trench boulder clay was observed close to the level of the present ground surface at 4·80 m and 4·81 m above OD, and as the builders' works progressed it became evident that just south of the position of the borehole (see fig. 1) the boulder clay dipped sharply, with the archaeological deposits to the south banked up against it. Thus the position of the natural cliff edge where it is cut by the river channel can be defined as being on a line between 5 and 6 metres north of the building frontages of Sandhill. The backs of the properties have been terraced into the hill and the fronts stand on softer alluvial or archaeological fills.

Immediately west of the site of the Angel Inn an engineers' test trench was dug through the floor of the still standing building, and subsequently the interior was excavated to provide a basement. The floor at pavement level was founded on compacted rubble to a depth of some 0·2 m to 0·3 m, and immediately below this at 4·55 m above OD occurred laminated silts and sands similar to layer [57] at the bottom of Trench A which was more than 2 metres deeper at 2·40 m OD. Further excavation by the builders both within the standing

building and on the open ground where the Angel had stood showed that the archaeological deposits continued east beyond Trench A and that the alluvial silts extended west towards the boundary wall between the two plots. It was not possible to observe the junction between the two, for this occurred on or close to the line of the west wall of the standing building.

ROMAN POTTERY

A total of 177 sherds of Roman pottery was found in 13 of the Phase 1 contexts. The chronological limits of the assemblage are, roughly speaking, mid second to mid third century A.D., and the majority of the material dates to the second half of the second century. There are no examples of Black Burnished Ware category 1. The composition of the coarseware assemblage is what might be expected at this date: it is dominated by jars and bowls in dark coloured wares, but there is a small amount of colour-coated ware. The samian is mostly central Gaulish.

For the whole of the sequence, a *terminus post quem* of around A.D. 160 is provided by a sherd of samian mortarium from layer [48]. For the upper parts of the sequence, successively later *termini post quos* are provided by sherds of a round-rimmed bowl in BB2 from layer [49] (*c.* A.D. 180) and a sherd of colour-coated, indented beaker from layer [46] (2nd quarter of third century A.D.). Two contexts towards the top of the sequence, [15] and [35], contain medieval material.

In spite of the fact that the pottery appears to furnish evidence for a variance of about a century in the deposition dates for contexts in the sequence, it is worth pointing out, that because the quantities involved are small, there is at least a reasonable likelihood (better than 1 in 20) that the observed distribution of datable pottery arose as a result of a random distribution of material at some point at or later than the latest TPQ in the sequence. In other words, the period of deposition of the whole sequence could have been quite short and the majority of the pottery residual at the time of deposition.

DISCUSSION

The excavation results show that the site was built up with dumped deposits on the river bank during the Roman era, while the pottery in Phase 2 suggests that the first building represented in the sequence is of the medieval period. There is no evidence of the use of the site during the intervening millennium. From the small areas excavated, the buildings of Phases 2 and 3 cannot be described in detail, but there is good evidence that the position of the Sandhill frontage has remained fixed since the Phase 2 building.

The observations of the natural boulder clay and alluvial deposits show that this site which lies at the extreme north edge of the river channel is also at the west edge of the sandy knoll after which the street Sandhill is named. This is no longer a raised area, for extensive land fill along the riverside has built up the ground level, though Bourne (1736) describes it as "formerly a hill of naked sand". The sudden fall of 2·15 m in the level at which sand occurs seems to mark the edge, and in the Roman period this was built up in some way by the dump deposits of Phase 1. It is not possible on present evidence to say whether these are part of a quayside extending along the river, or a causeway projecting into the channel. Although downriver there were no quayside structures before the 13th century (O'Brien *et al* 1988), a Roman period waterfront in and around the Lort Burn inlet below the site of the fort is by no means unlikely.

With firm evidence now of Roman work immediately opposite the end of the medieval bridge, the site of the Roman bridge again invites speculation. John Collingwood Bruce first suggested (1885) that the Roman bridge occupied the same site as its medieval successor on the basis of his observations of piers in the river during construction work on the swing bridge. However, Paul Bidwell and Neil Holbrook have questioned his interpretations of

what he saw (1989), showing convincingly that what Bruce thought to be Roman work was in fact medieval. This being so, the only other evidence for the Roman bridge is circumstantial in the findings of altars, inscribed stone and coins close to the medieval bridge during construction work for the new bridge in 1778–86 and the swing bridge in 1866–75 (Spain 1930). The significance of the find spots has to be treated with caution, for no other part of the river bed has been searched so intensively as this.

The question is wide open, and we cannot expect any extensive area of land to become available for excavation to test the thoughts prompted by the findings at the foot of Castle Stairs. Opportunistic search of engineers' testing and service trenches in the roads may in time yield useful information.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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