

## Recent archaeological investigations in Bedford town centre: evidence for an early northern boundary?

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### SUMMARY

*The location of the boundaries of the Anglo-Saxon burh of Bedford, and the origin of the street grid, are matters of great historical interest. Evidence from an archaeological watching brief sheds new light on these issues. While the narrow trenches of the recent town centre enhancement scheme inevitably produced evidence of a fragmentary nature, a broad picture, nevertheless, did emerge. Besides expected traces of urban occupation from late Saxon to post-medieval times, by far the most significant discovery was a large ditch of probable 9th century date running E-W along the present course of Midland Road. This feature is interpreted as the northern boundary of the early burh. Some wider implications of this interpretation are explored in this paper.*

### INTRODUCTION

Between 1995 and 1997 a programme of town centre improvements was undertaken by Bedford Borough Council. These consisted of road widening/narrowing, re-paving and the excavation of planting pits and service trenches on the W side of the town centre. Areas affected by the works were parts of St Paul's Square, Horne Lane, River Street, Midland Road East and Harpur Street, including the large open space adjacent to the eastern facade of the Harpur Centre (Fig 1). Bedfordshire County Archaeology Service (BCAS), now Albion Archaeology, was commissioned by Bedford Borough Council to carry out an archaeological watching brief alongside the development. In this report, the part of town covered by the watching

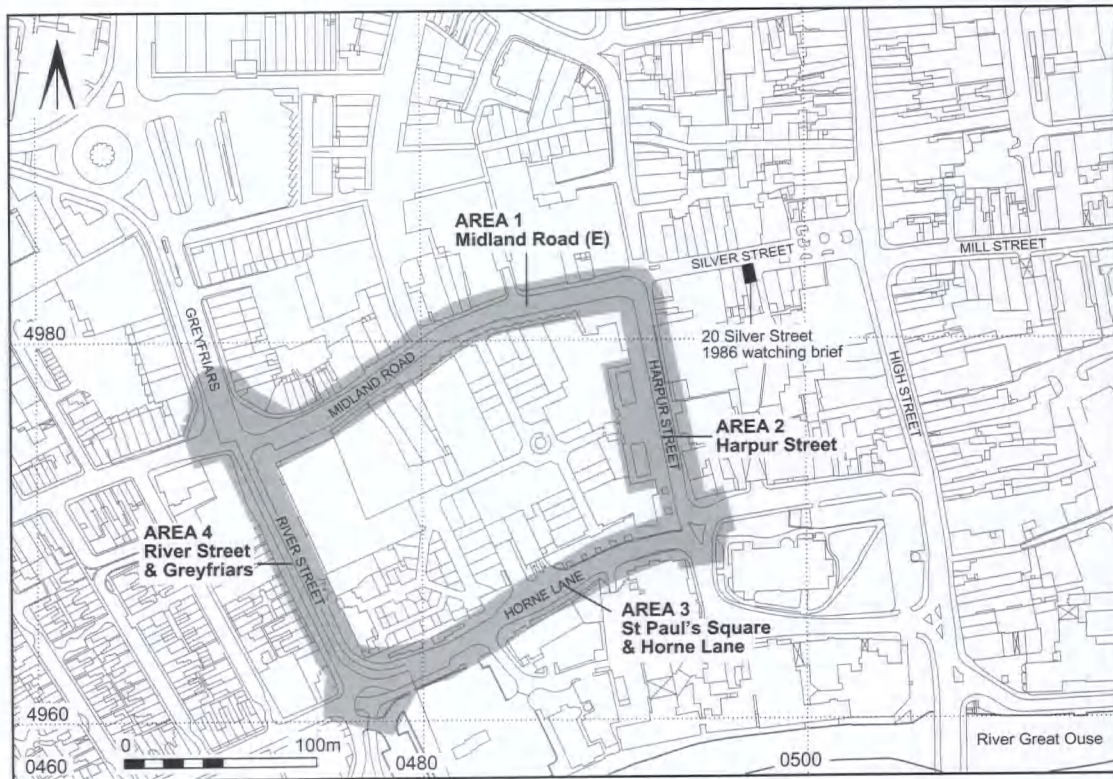


Figure 1 Location map, showing area covered by Town Centre Watching Brief



brief is divided into 4 areas, each representing a more or less distinct grouping of archaeological evidence. These are described, as far as possible, in clockwise order.

This report combines and summarises the results from all the various stages of the project, with a particular focus on the large Saxon boundary ditch and related features in Area 1. Evidence from other areas is presented in summary form only. For a fuller account refer to the excavation archive held in Bedford Museum (accession no. 1995/99).

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The improvement area is situated on a slight gravel terrace in the floodplain of the River Great Ouse, which flows 100-200m to the S. There is a gentle, almost imperceptible slope down from N to S, with an average height of 26.5m OD. The underlying solid geology is Cornbrash limestone, overlaid by river gravels and alluvium.

The Great Ouse valley around Bedford has been densely occupied from the early prehistoric period. A ford across the river may have existed in Roman times, and a limited number of Roman potsherds have been found in the vicinity (Hassall and Baker 1974, 77). The origins of the town, however, lie within the middle Saxon period. Entries in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle indicate that a settlement or burh already existed on the N side of the river in the late 9th century, when it was occupied by the Danes. At this time Bedford was a frontier town on the border of Wessex and the Danelaw. In 915 King Edward the Elder repossessed the town and constructed the burh to the S of the river. The enclosing earthwork still survives as the King's Ditch. The precise location and date of construction of the boundaries of the earlier northern burh, however, remain unknown. These issues have been the subject of much historical speculation and debate (Hill 1970, Haslam 1983, Crawley and Freeman 1988, 2001). Existing theories, however, tend to be based primarily on historical and topographical evidence, together with comparison with other Saxon towns, rather than on archaeological evidence from Bedford itself.

Over 50 excavations or watching briefs have been carried out in Bedford over the last four decades. Of particular relevance to this paper are excavations at Bedford Castle in 1967-73 and Bedford Midland Road in 1973 and 1974 (Baker *et al* 1979), the Empire Cinema in 1978 (Hassall 1983), the Liberal Club in 1979 (Baker 1986), 20 Silver Street in 1986 and 14-15a St Paul's Square in 1996 (BCAS project 451).

## RESULTS

### AREA 1: MIDLAND ROAD (EAST)

From the passageway near British Home Stores to the junction with Harpur Street and Silver Street a series of trenches were excavated along Midland Road as part of a ground reduction and general improvement scheme. It is these that provided the most archaeologically significant evidence to emerge from the watching brief (Fig 2).

### Boundary Ditch L3 (fills L4)

#### *Ditch G3 (fills G4)*

A large ditch was found running along and beneath the present course of Midland Road for a distance of nearly 70m in an E-W direction. Only the S edge of the ditch was located in plan. The estimated width of the ditch is 3.5 - 4m, assuming that there has been no significant truncation. The projected course of the ditch continues to both the E and the W. At one point the two upper fills were excavated down to a depth of 0.8m (section a, Fig 2), but neither the base nor the lower fills of the ditch were reached. The upper fills were grey-black silty clays, containing grey ash and charcoal flecks, and a large quantity of animal bone. Pottery found in these fills was a mixture of hand-made Maxey ware or proto-St Neots ware (thought in this case to be 9th century in date), early St Neots ware proper (10th-11th century), and developed St Neots ware (12th-13th century). Also found was an iron key of a type characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon period up to the 9th century. These fills were partially sealed by road surfaces G5 (see description of L12 below).

#### *Ditch segment G67 (fills G68)*

A small segment of ditch fill was later excavated within the projected course of ditch G3, 4m to the W. No side or base of the ditch was located within the segment but a similar dark grey-black silty clay fill with charcoal flecks was encountered. In this case the fill was waterlogged and contained some preserved organic material (twigs, chips of wood, etc), which included the remains of a shoe. The shoe was dated stylistically to the 12th-13th century and was found directly *below* sherds of proto- St Neots ware. Also found in the fill were sherds of wheel-thrown St Neots and Lyveden pottery, thus giving roughly the same mix of finds of different date as G3/4 (see Table 1). The fill of the ditch was sealed by the medieval road surface G69.

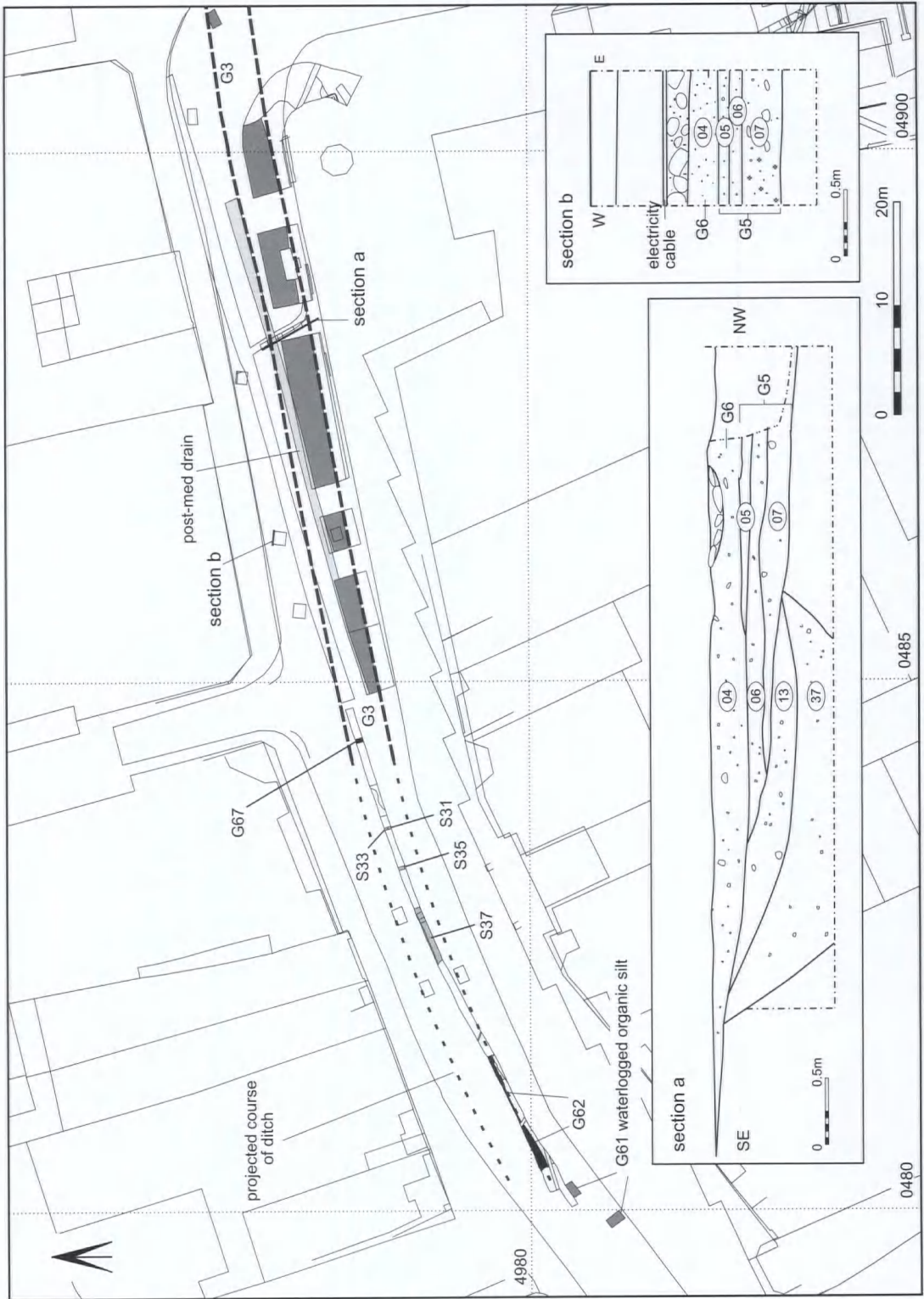


Figure 2 Plan of Area 1, showing ditch L3 with projected continuation to the west



Landscape	L4		L12	
Group	G4		G68	G69
Context	13	37	369	370
<b>Pottery</b>				
Proto-St Neots (A11) 9th-10th C	23:23:295	2:3:56	1:5:159	
St Neots (B01) 10th-11th C	2:2:33			
St Neots (B01B) 10th-11th C	7:7:66			
St Neots (B01C) 10th-11th C			1:1:3	
Developed St Neots (B05) 12th-13th C		1:1:8		
Lyveden (B09) 12th-13th C			1:1:11	
Brill-Boarstall (C11) 13th-14th C				1:4:13
<b>Non-ceramic artefacts</b>				
Key, 9th century or earlier	One			
Shoe, 12th-13th century			4 frags	

Table 1 Artefact assemblage from ditch L3/L4 and sealing road surface L12  
(pottery is quantified by vessel:sherds:weight g.)

### Medieval Road Surfaces L12

#### *Gravel metalling G5*

A series of road surfaces of early medieval date were found within test pits and trenches at the E end of Midland Road. The earliest layer was a metallated surface of small flint gravel and limestone fragments within a matrix of black clay silt which had probably been rammed to form a consolidated surface. This was overlaid by two thin stony layers associated with the use of the road, which in turn were overlaid by the post-medieval layers/surfaces G6. Section a in Fig 2 shows these layers sealing and partly truncating the N part of ditch G3. Indeed, each successive layer can be seen to encroach further over the upper fills of the ditch, indicating that the road was moving or being widened over time towards the S. Section b in Fig 2 shows the series of road surfaces overlying undisturbed clay 'natural' to the N of the ditch. The gravel metalling G5 at the eastern end of Midland Road is probably continuous with the limestone metalling G69 which seals ditch G67 further to the W (see below).

#### *Limestone metalling G69*

This metallated surface was comprised of compacted limestone and gravel within a matrix of a mid-grey clay silt. The stones were medium sized, densely packed, unshaped and randomly arranged, forming a flat surface. This lay above and was partly rammed into the upper fill G68 of ditch L3/G67, the finds from which can be used to provide a rough *terminus post quem* for the construction of the road. It also

formed a consolidated surface sealing the waterlogged deposit G61. Clearly it is an extensive deposit as it was observed in several trenches along much of the length of Midland Road East. In all cases it was overlaid by post-medieval gravel surfaces G6. Together with G5, with which it is probably continuous, G69 is interpreted as the early medieval precursor to Midland Road. Sherds of 13th -14th century Brill-Boarstall pottery were found on the surface, providing a *terminus ante quem* for its construction.

A similar limestone surface was noted during roadworks on the former corner of Gravel Street and Midland Road, now QS plc, at TL 04754974, 1m below the modern road surface (Bedfordshire Historic Environment Record (HER) 7681).

Finds and stratigraphy indicate a 12th-13th century date for the construction of the road. One possibility worth considering is that this took place at roughly the time that Bedford Castle was demolished in 1224, when large quantities of limestone would have become available for local construction work.

### Projected Course of Ditch L3 Westwards:

#### **Ambiguous Evidence**

Narrow trenches for services were excavated down the centre of the road westwards as far as Allhallows. Evidence from this stretch, however, was fragmentary and ambiguous, due to extensive flooding and the small window of visibility afforded.

#### *Linear feature G62*

A length of 11.5m of this linear feature was located,

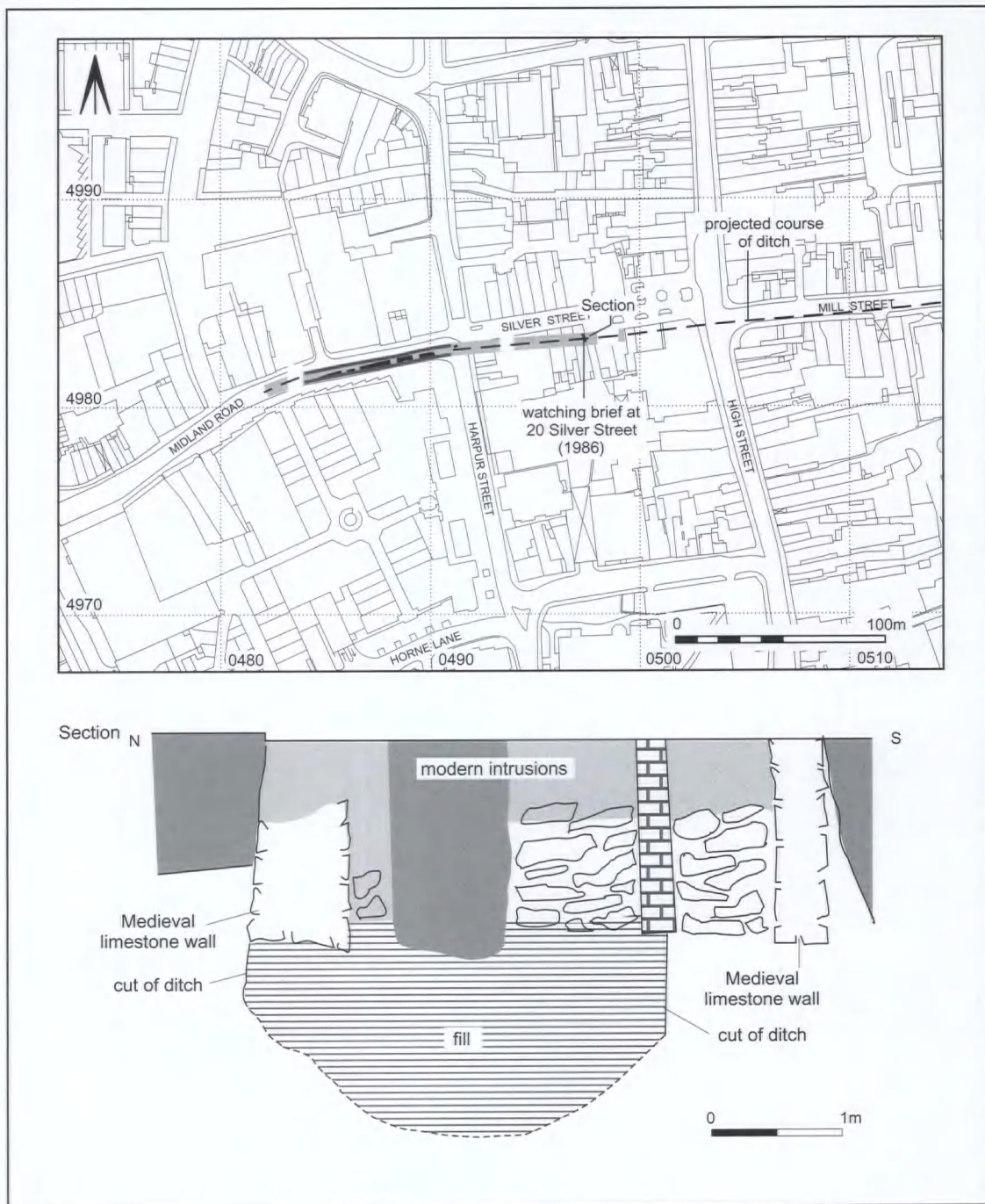


Figure 3 Projected continuation of ditch L3 to the east, with section through linear feature at 20 Silver Street (1986)



orientated approximately ENE to WSW and running under the centre of the present course of Midland Road, apparently continuing on in both directions (Fig 2). It represents a possible continuation of the boundary ditch L3, or alternately a continuation of medieval drain S37 (see below). A width of 0.8m was visible in the trench, with only the S side of the feature found. The fill, as visible on the surface, was a greenish grey clay loam. The feature was not excavated and there were no finds.

#### *Medieval drain S37*

In the one area where visibility was not constrained the N edge of a linear feature of early medieval date, running ENE to WSW, was observed. This extended for a distance of 5m and apparently continued to the W, terminating with a square cut end to the E (Fig 2). Partial excavation revealed vertical sides with a slight overhang at the top. The S edge and base of the feature were not located. The fill was a mid-grey sandy silt with numerous large fragments of limestone in the upper part and against the northern edge. Voids in the fill suggest a sudden in-filling or maybe collapse of the northern side. Two sherds of 12th - 14th century pottery were found in the fill. Its relation with the road surface L12 is unclear, though it could have been constructed at the same time as L12 and as an integral part of it. The feature may represent a medieval 'kennel' or drain, either open or covered and probably stone-lined, running down the middle of the street.

#### *Post-medieval drains S31, S33, S35*

In other cases the cuts of linear features, running approximately ENE to WSW were found. Such features are dated by post-medieval pottery and are likely to represent drainage work undertaken in the last 500 years. The apparent presence of undisturbed natural clays on the side of some of these features may indicate that the ditch is absent in this area. The possibility that the ditch is discontinuous, or that it turns towards the S at a point roughly opposite British Home Stores, should not be discounted.

#### *Waterlogged deposit G61*

A layer of black organic silt was observed at the base of two small test pits, 4m apart, excavated in the centre of Midland Road near the junction with Allhallows. Of unknown extent and depth, it contained some preserved plant material. The material was quite different from the fill of the linear feature G62 nearby, but similar to the waterlogged fill of ditch segment G67/68. Like G68, it was sealed by

the medieval road surface G69. It could represent the fill of a continuation of ditch L3 possibly turning to the S. Another possibility is that it is the fill of the large N-S ditch found under Allhallows during the Empire Cinema excavations (Hassall 1983), or even a former course of the Saffron Ditch. Similar waterlogged material was encountered during the Bedford Liberal Club excavations nearby (Baker 1986).

#### **Projected course of ditch L3 eastwards: 20 Silver Street (1986)**

The apparent continuation of ditch L3 under buildings on the S side of Silver Street raises the question of whether it could possibly have been observed in previous excavations (Fig 3, plan). Fortunately, two 15m long trenches aligned N-S were excavated during a small watching brief at 20 Silver Street in 1986 and provided convenient sections across the projected course of the ditch (Fig 3, section). Remarkably, a large E-W linear feature was noted. It was at least 3.5m wide and 2m deep (the base of the feature was not reached). It was sealed by the limestone walls of a building, the destruction of which was dated to the 12th -13th century by a few sherds of developed St Neots ware in demolition deposits. The upper fills of the feature comprised a black silty loam containing some animal bones, but trench sides were too dangerous to allow a search for finds (BCAS project 62).

The evidence is clearly ambiguous, for the feature looks more like a pit with vertical sides in the section shown here, but the fact that a continuation of it was apparently picked up in a second trench 5m away argues against this view. Vertical edges could be more to do with later cuts for stabilising ground prior to construction of walls in the medieval period. It is important to remember that because of the conditions recording was done at speed from above, and cannot be taken as completely accurate. Perhaps all that can be said is that a large feature, apparently linear and running approximately E-W, was noted here.

If this is a continuation of the ditch L3, then the possibility arises of a very long feature indeed, perhaps even extending along Mill Street (Fig 3). This hypothesis could be tested quite simply by excavating a trench across Mill Street, should the opportunity ever arise.

#### **AREA 2: HARPUR STREET**

Archaeological observation was constrained in this area by the narrowness of the trenches, excavated mainly for services, and tree planting pits. The fragmentary nature of the evidence means that any inter-

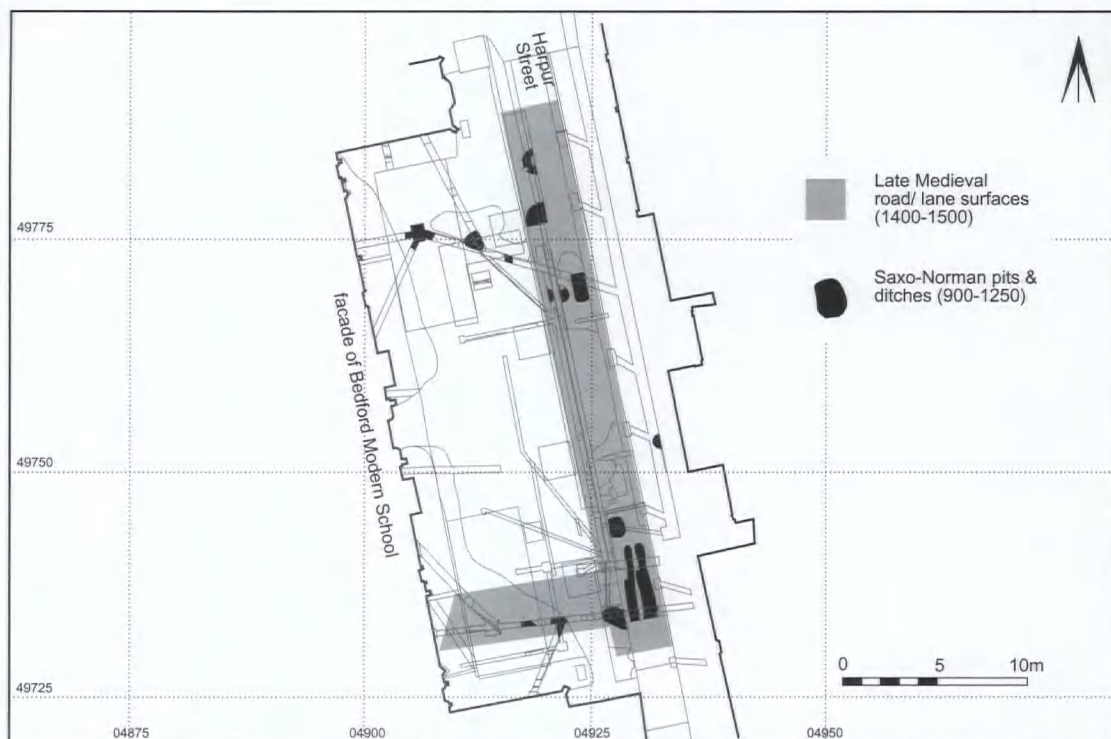


Figure 4 Saxo-Norman pits and ditches and late medieval road surfaces in Harpur Street (Area 2)

pretation is limited. For example, several short segments of limestone walls, probably components of houses or other buildings, were observed in the sides of trench sections. However, these are difficult to date and hard to make sense of within such narrow trenches; no further account of them is given here.

A considerable number of rubbish pits of variable size were recorded, mostly dating from the 10th-13th century (Fig 4). These were probably related to the buildings mentioned above. Some contained amounts of ash and slag indicating metalworking activity nearby. Of particular interest was a 13th century rubbish pit with a quantity of Pottersbury tile and roof furniture, including a flanged tile and fragments of a roof finial. Tiled roofs of any kind would have been reserved for buildings of the highest status. A rich town house may well have existed in this part of Bedford.

There is evidence for a change in use of the area during the 15th century, when ground was extensively levelled and external surfaces of limestone and tile fragments were laid.

A series of ditches, recut several times, was found on a N-S alignment below the southern end of the

present Harpur Street. These were up to 1.1m wide and 8m long, continuing to the S but terminating to the N (Fig 4). Dating from Saxo-Norman and early medieval times (10th-13th century), this series of ditches may have marked a property boundary within the early town. The first indication of a metalled surface being laid, in some cases sealing earlier pits, was in the late medieval period. A smaller lane of similar date ran E-W at right angles to Harpur Street on the W side. But while Harpur Street continued in use to become a major thoroughfare in recent years, this other lane fell out of use and was built over in post-medieval times.

The reinforced concrete foundations of a WWII tank trap were found at the southern end of Harpur Street.

#### AREA 3: ST PAUL'S SQUARE AND HORNE LANE

Trenching undertaken in the NW corner of St Paul's Square, at the junction with Horne Lane and Harpur Street, revealed a sequence of post-medieval metalled surfaces underlying the present road tarmac. These overlaid a cobbled surface formed of closely



set river pebbles at a depth of 0.64m. This surface is undated but is thought to represent a late medieval or early post-medieval precursor to the present road. Excavations did not extend below this level. Likewise road widening works along the N side of Horne Lane were too shallow for any significant archaeological observations to be made.

#### AREA 4: RIVER STREET AND GREYFRIARS

Construction work on the roundabout at the junction of Horne Lane and River Street revealed mostly modern gravel make-up layers. However, along River Street to the N of the roundabout a considerable stretch of reddish brown silty clay of periglacial origin was exposed. These deposits were important in the sense that they provided potentially good archaeological visibility. The absence of early features here was itself a significant archaeological finding, perhaps confirming that this area lay outside the W boundary of the Saxon town. The first indication of settlement was provided by the presence of two large medieval pits up to 3m in width, one of which was paved with limestone slabs and gave access to a stone well. Both were situated in the centre of what is now River Street. A smaller pit was uncovered at the southern end of Greyfriars. Pottery in the fills of all these features was dated to the 12th-14th centuries. Post-medieval pits and dumps of occupation debris, including clay pipes and bottles dated to the 17th-18th centuries, were found at the junction with Midland Road. These are thought to represent refuse from an inn. A 19th century brick well was observed on the site of the present Pilgrim's Progress public house.

## DISCUSSION

### DATING OF DITCH L3

The existence of ditch L3 beneath Midland Road East challenges conventional theories of the development of Bedford. Both Hill (1970) and Haslam (1983) place the northern boundary of the early burh further to the N. Their models are based upon the assumption that the E-W route (comprised of Mill Street, Silver Street and Midland Road East) was an integral part of the planned street grid of the first town. As other authors have put it, "the essential feature was a central crossroads formed by the intersection of a north to south road with an east to west road" (Crawley and Freeman 1988, 101). However, evidence from the watching brief clearly indicates that the substantial ditch L3 predates the E-W road, the first construction of which (at least in Midland Road East) seals the upper fills of the already silted up ditch. The implica-

tion is that the road is not an original feature of the early burh; rather it follows the course of an earlier ditch which may be an original feature.

The dating of the upper ditch fills L4 has to take account of the presence of a key dated to the 9th century or earlier, a range of pottery dated from the 9th-13th century, as well as a 12th-13th century shoe fragment. See Table 1 for a summary of the dating evidence for the backfilling of this feature. Moreover, in some cases artefacts of later date are found stratigraphically below earlier material, indicating that some inversion of stratigraphy may have taken place. How do we explain this mixing of finds? A likely explanation is that the ditch was originally associated with a parallel bank formed of upcast material. The ditch would have needed clearing out of accumulated rubbish from time to time, and this material was probably thrown onto the adjacent bank. It is well known that features periodically maintained in this way can be very long-lasting indeed. The King's Ditch is an example of a channel cut over a thousand years ago still carrying water today (see Hassall and Baker 1974, for a section through the bank, showing tip layers).

Ditch L3 was probably a feature of town life for a period of three to four hundred years, originally as a town boundary but later as a ditch within the expanding town – see discussion below. However, in order that a road could be constructed through the centre of the expanded town in the 12th-13th century, however, the ditch was back-filled. The obvious place to obtain the material to do this was the bank: the general sloping down from S to N of layers within the ditch may indicate that the bank was on the southern side – see section a, Fig 2. The bank was removed and thrown into the ditch at the same time as the road was constructed. This would have led to a mixing of both early and late material in the upper fills.

A provisional date of the 9th century is therefore accorded to the construction of the ditch even though there are artefacts of much later date in the upper fill. For verification of the original date of construction, a segment would need to be cut right down to the base of the ditch in search of dateable finds from primary fills.

### INTERPRETATION OF L3 AS THE EARLY BURH'S NORTHERN BOUNDARY

The length and size of the ditch make it difficult to interpret as an internal property division within a larger burh. The total known length of ditch L3 is 70m, continuing on in both directions. If the projections of its course to the E and W are accepted, that length is



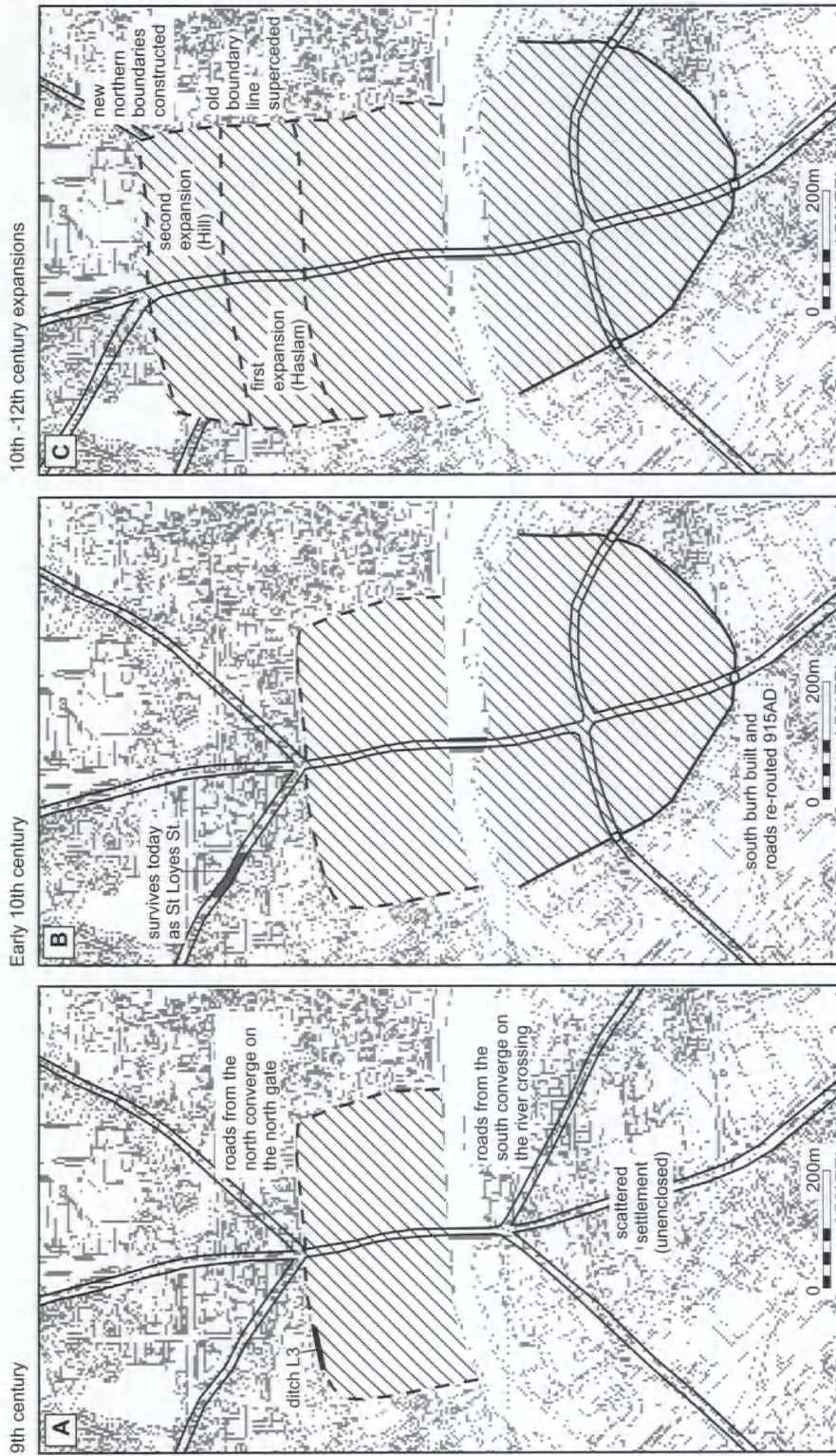


Figure 5 A new model for the origin and development of Bedford



increased to 175m, and the corrected alignment of the ditch indicates that it may be extending along Mill Street. Thus it is likely that the ditch was originally constructed as the northern boundary of the burh. (Following other authors, the eastern boundary is taken to run roughly along the course of Newnham Street or slightly further to the W. The western boundary was probably an equal distance away from the central axis of the N-S road, perhaps making use of the Saffron Ditch – see Hill 1970 and Haslam 1983).

The interpretation of ditch L3 as a northern boundary fits in well with information from previous excavations in the town centre. Nearly all discoveries of middle Saxon pottery in Bedford have been on or to the south of the line of ditch L3. Substantial remains of early-middle Saxon timber buildings, possibly halls, were found within the area of the later Norman castle; these were sealed by black occupation layers containing large quantities of St Neots ware pottery (Baker *et al* 1979, 20-26). Other structural features dated to this period were found at the nearby Bennett's Works (Baker 1986, 59-66). A cemetery of probable middle Saxon date was recently discovered on the N side of St Paul's Square (BCAS project 451). It is generally thought that the present St Paul's Church may be on or near the site of an earlier Saxon church, which was probably associated with this cemetery. A large sherd of an Ipswich ware pitcher was found in Horne Lane, although the exact findspot is not known (Kennett 1966). All these sites and find-spots are somewhat earlier in date than ditch L3, indicating that it was constructed to enclose a settlement that was already well established. Earlier boundaries, perhaps to the S of the line of L3, may remain to be discovered.

The discovery of the boundary ditch L3 running along Midland Road East, with the possibility that it extends down Silver Street and Mill Street, implies a gateway at the point where it crosses the High Street. This gate would then have provided the focal point for roads coming from the NE and the NW as well as from the N. One of the problems with previous models of town origins was St Loyes Street, which "cannot be fitted neatly into the burh pattern because it seems to breach the defence line in an awkward way at the NW corner" (Crowley and Freeman 1988, 101). However, St Loyes can now be seen to be heading straight towards the N gate of the earlier burh.

#### AN EXPANDING TOWN: A NEW MODEL OF TOWN DEVELOPMENT

The existence of ditch L3 does not mean that the Haslam and Hill models are wrong - rather that they

are more relevant to later phases of town development. Expansions of the town northwards in the 10th-12th centuries may be partially attested by the 30m stretch of ditch running N-S beneath the present course of Allhallows, as excavated on the Empire Cinema site. This ditch measured at least 4m across and 1.8m deep, with vestiges of a stone-lined bank on the E side. It was provisionally dated to the 12th-14th centuries (Hassall 1983, 61). Although not interpreted at the time as an urban boundary or defence, it lines up well with the generally accepted western boundary of the early burh, and may well be a later extension of it. A large ditch running E-W just to the N of Lurke Street may have been encountered in several places during the 1920s and 1930s (Kuhlicke 1937, Kennett 1992).

Conventional theories tend to trace the origin of the internal street grid and the encompassing boundary to a single plan and a particular moment in time. But the archaeological evidence is much easier to incorporate into models of a developing and expanding town. Extra-mural development may effectively create the need for new boundaries. Outward expansion of a town tends to leave former boundaries as strips of land running through built-up areas, with buildings on either side but with the strips themselves unsuitable for the construction of buildings. Almost inevitably these are eventually utilised as spaces for movement through the town, and thus take on the function of roads or thoroughfares. One of the main conclusions of this report must be that there was no single moment when the entire surviving street grid of the northern burh was conceived and laid out in one go. *Contra* Biddle and Hill (1971), organic and planned growth went hand in hand, with successive expansions of the town taking place in modular fashion on the basis of what was already there.

A new model for the origin and development of early Bedford, based on both the work reported here and previous excavations in the town, and drawing heavily from previous interpretations, is shown in Fig 5. It is suggested that ditch L3 was the northern boundary of the burh (**A**) just before and during the Danish occupation (though earlier boundaries enclosing a smaller middle Saxon settlement may exist to the south). The burh at this time consisted of two roughly equal areas of land either side of the main N-S road. Other roads converged on the bridge/ford to the S and on the gateway to the N.

The next stage of development (**B**) was the construction of the burh to the south of the river, creating a double-burh. This stage is documented by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as being the work of King



Edward the Elder in the year 915, shortly after the northern burh was re-taken from the Danes. Roads coming into Bedford from the SE and SW were deliberately re-aligned onto a central crossroads (Crawley and Freeman 1988). The efficacy of the changes made by King Edward was proven when Bedford was attacked again by the Danes in 917, but this time successfully defended.

The subsequent stage of development (C) comprised a series of expansions of the town in late Saxon times. Bedford was now a flourishing economic centre with its own market and mint. Along with many other towns it underwent considerable growth during the 10th and 11th centuries - see, for example, the detailed account of Oxford during this period (Blair 1994, 159-167). The northern boundary was moved progressively further northwards (see the models of Haslam and Hill), and roads realigned accordingly. The ditch L3 which marked the former boundary may have been kept open to serve as a drain within the town. It was eventually back-filled in order to facilitate the construction of the E-W road - the precursor of the current Mill Street/ Silver Street/Midland Road - through the centre of the expanded town in the 12th-13th century.

#### NOTES FOR FUTURE EXCAVATION STRATEGY

A significant pattern emerging from excavations in Bedford is that of former urban boundaries being replaced by later roads, which follow, more or less precisely, the course of the underlying ditch. Two outstanding examples are the middle Saxon ditch L3 under Midland Road East, and the late Saxon ditch under Allhallows. A lesser example is the series of smaller ditches, recut several times, at the southern end of Harpur Street, probably representing an internal boundary. The implication for further research in Bedford, and perhaps other Saxon towns, is that further undiscovered urban boundaries may also be hidden by roads. Roads near likely boundaries tend to be seen as intra-mural or extra-mural, rather than actually being on former boundary lines. This perception may now change. The watching brief excavations reported here have demonstrated the great potential of excavations along or across roads for providing crucial information about urban origins.

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