

NOTTINGHAM TOWN WALL: PARK ROW EXCAVATIONS

1968

by

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SUMMARY

The excavation, to the east of Park Row, of a 120-foot-long section of the medieval town wall, built between 1267 and 1334, produced further evidence for it having replaced an earlier, 12th-century, bank. The regularly aligned wall face was not matched by the rear of the wall, where several changes of alignment and thickness were seen, but the average thickness of the wall was 9 feet.

The work, occasioned by the construction of a new below-ground 'bus station, was carried out in two phases during May and June 1968. The two phases of the excavation are referred to as 1968A, the southern section, and 1968B, the northern one. Restrictions on the area freed for excavation meant that the whole of the spoil from the excavation had to be dumped between Park Row and the trench edge. The danger of collapse was such that the excavation of the ditch was extremely limited, and only in three places was it possible to examine the lower courses of the wall face in relation to the lip of the ditch. Despite all precautions the highly unstable nature of the upper ditch fill caused frequent collapse of the trench edge. Inevitably, this causes the stratigraphic position of material from the ditch to be suspect. Similar restrictions at the rear of the wall made it impossible to check Ponsford's assertion¹ that the 12th-century bank was, in fact, an occupation level.

The medieval town wall has now been examined, at intervals, along the greater part of its length between Chapel Bar and Cumberland Place² (see page 6, Figure 1, above). With the exception of the Park Place re-entrant³ most of the variation in surviving height and width of the wall can be attributed to the sloping ground on which the wall is founded. (The top of the wall was at 150 feet above O.D. at Park Place, and at 173 feet above O.D. at a point just north of Cumberland Place.)

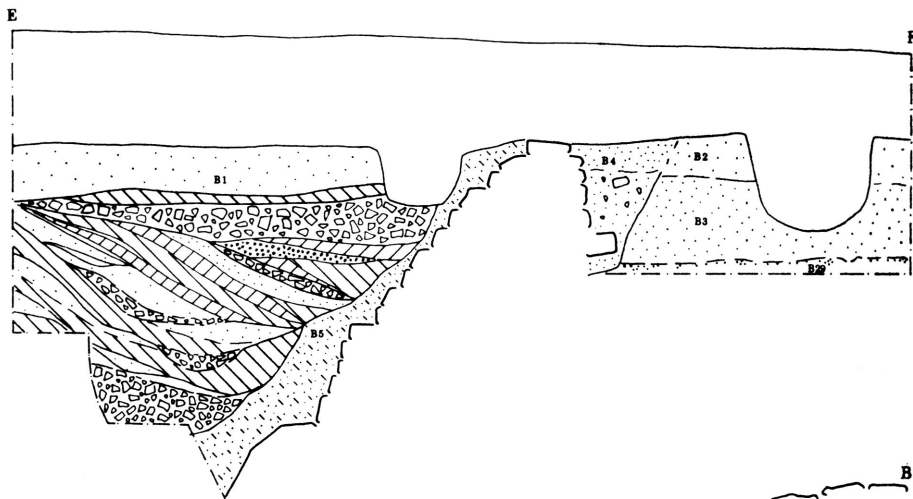
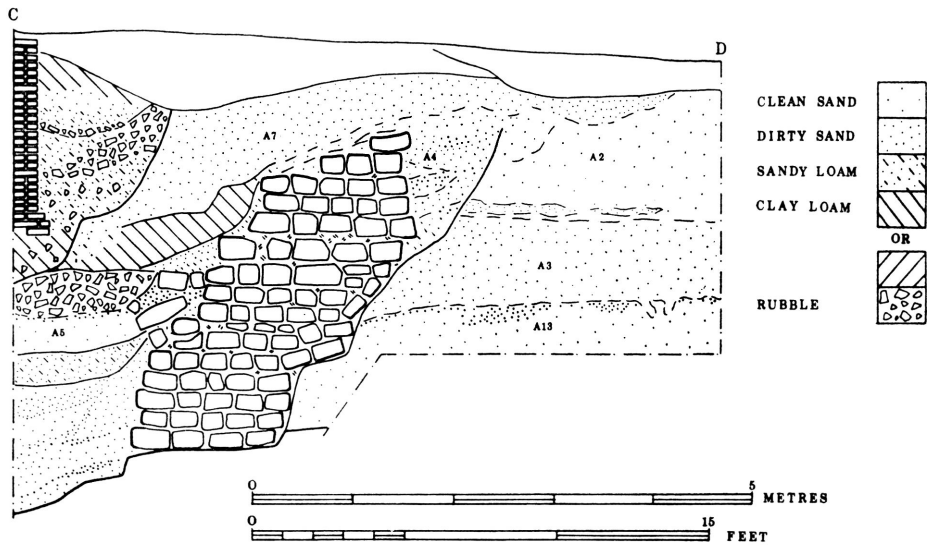
THE BANK

The 1964 excavation produced evidence of a 12th-century bank, into which the late-13th-century wall had been cut.⁴ The stratigraphy of the 1968 excavation (Plate 2a; Figure 1, sections CD and EF) is closely comparable with that of 1964, confirming the evidence of a wall trench cutting an existing bank. Beneath modern disturbance was a layer, A7, of dirty sand with a distinctive reddish appearance. It is thought that, in part, this is because of weathering products of the sandstone wall and its Keuper Marl (red clay) bedding becoming mixed with a late sand infill of the ditch. This level resembled that seen overlying the tail of the bank in the 1964 excavation.⁵ Beneath this was a layer of clean, sterile, sand, layers A2 and B2, probably representing upcast from the construction trench of the stone

¹Ponsford, above pp. 8, 15.

²*Trans. Thoroton Soc.*, LXIX (1965), 50-51.

³*Ibid.*, 56-57. ⁴*Ibid.*, 52-53, Fig. 3, Section AB. ⁵*Ibid.*, Layer 9.



SECTIONS AND PROFILE
THROUGH MEDIEVAL DEFENCES

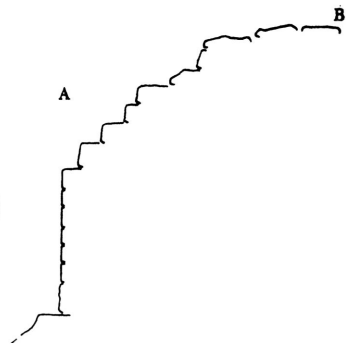


FIGURE 1 Nottingham town wall 1968: sections

wall. This level is seen clearly in the plate, behind the middle two sections of the ranging rod, graduated in feet. At the base of A2, left of the ranging rod, can be seen a lens of redeposited A3, dirty sand, separated from A3 by a lens of clean sand. Layers A3 and B3, dirty brown sand, were sealed by this upcast. This lower level, 3 feet thick and resting directly on natural sand, contained only 12th-century pottery. This pottery, described on pages 38–40, consisted largely of Stamford and early medieval splash-glazed wares, with a few sherds of St. Neots and Torksey wares.

The appearance of layers A3 and B3 would be consistent with material scraped from an occupation level resting on natural sand. The mixed occupation soil and sand would form an homogeneous dirty brown sand as seen. It should be noted, however, that there was little sign of abrasion or weathering on any of the sherds, most of the fractures being quite sharp. This could possibly support Ponsford's contention that this material represents an occupation level *in situ*, but the lack of stratification within the deposit would argue against this and strongly suggests that this was, indeed, a bank.

THE WALL

For ease of reference the wall, although aligned south–west to north–east, was assumed to run due north. References such as 'from 13 feet north to 20 feet north' refer to points north of the base-line of the site-grid; thus the southern edge of 1968A was at 13 feet north, the northern edge of 1968B at 130 feet north.

The full width of the wall was only exposed in three places. Between 13 feet and 20 feet north the wall survived to a height of 9 feet, 14 courses, and was 9½ feet wide (Plate 1a, Figure 1, profile AB). The dressed face of the wall survived to a height of 4½ feet, 6 courses. The lowest course of the wall was of squared, but not dressed, white sandstone blocks 1 foot high and 1 foot 3 inches long. Above this there was a considerable variation in the size of blocks, but all faces were dressed. The height of the blocks ranged from 5 inches to 9 inches, their length from 8 inches to 1 foot 9 inches. There was no sign of any mortar in the joints, the face, as the core, being bedded in a layer of red Keuper Marl clay of variable thickness. Behind the face the wall was roughly coursed, but there were marked discontinuities of coursing where small blocks of sandstone had been used as spacers. The wall was founded, not in a trench, but on a shelf cut from the natural sandstone. This shelf continued as a narrow berm, 1 foot wide, between the wall face and the lip of the ditch.

The second exposure of the full wall width was between 58 feet and 62 feet north, where the wall survived to a height of 10 feet, 16 courses, and was 9 feet 4 inches wide (Plate 3a, Figure 1, section CD). Here most of the wall facing had collapsed into the ditch, but there was sufficient left to reconstruct a section. The facing was extremely irregular and there was no evidence of any dressing on the face blocks. The lowest course rested on a rock-cut shelf, but this did not continue as a berm. The irregular construction of the wall, particularly towards its rear, can clearly be seen in both section and photograph.

The third full-width exposure was between 123 feet and 129 feet north, where the wall survived to a height of 9½ feet, 15 courses, and was 9 feet 9 inches wide (Figure 1, section EF). The irregular facing of the wall resembled that in the middle section, and again was not

dressed. In neither case were the face blocks set in mortar. In this section the wall was in a slight foundation trench, a few inches deep, cut into a rock shelf which continued beyond the wall face as a narrow berm.

Between these three full-width exposures only the upper part of the wall was exposed. The front of the wall had suffered considerable collapse or robbing, so that only the core survived. This was constructed entirely of local white sandstone, possibly quarried in part from the ditch, and bedded in red Keuper Marl clay.

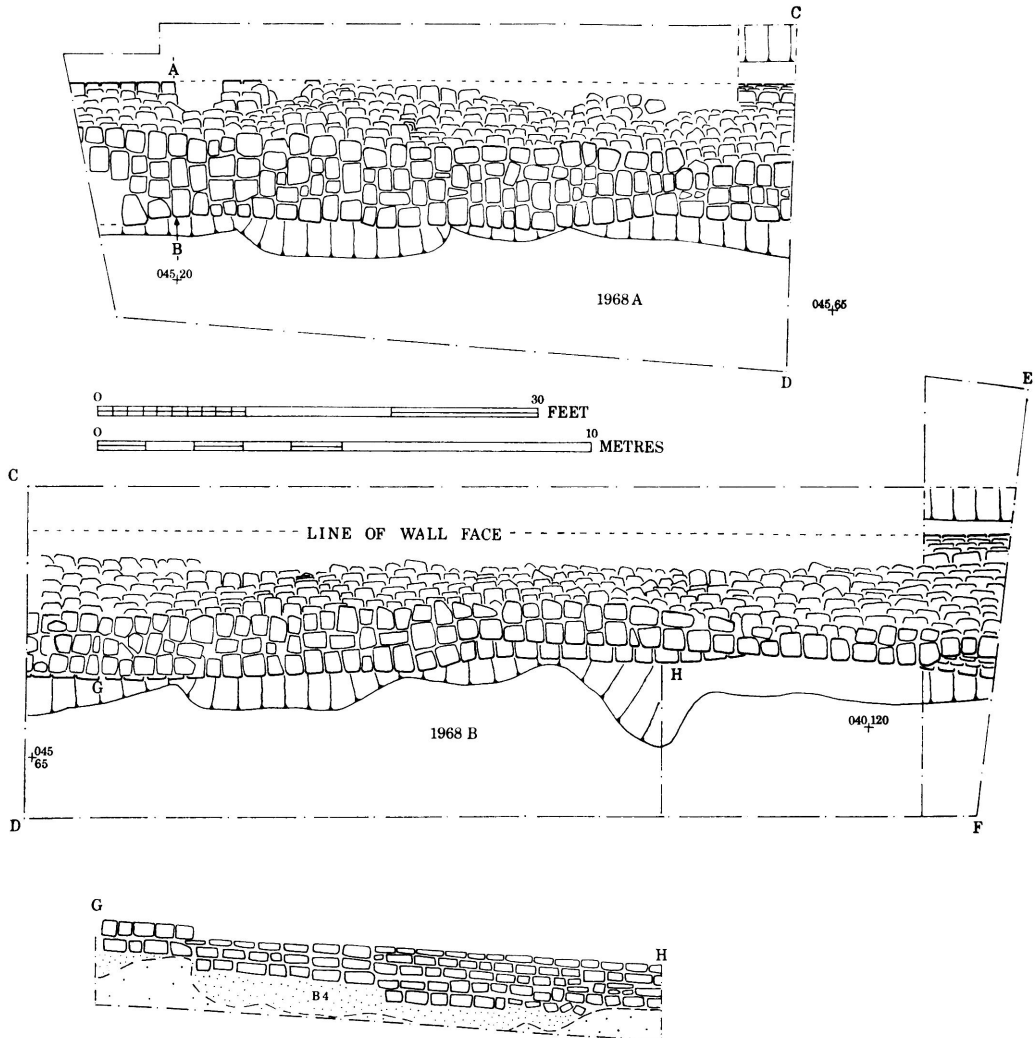


FIGURE 2

Plans showing positions of sections in Figure 1 and part elevation of rear face of wall
For the position of these sections, see Figure 1, p. 6

The wall face, where seen, lay along a straight line, shown as a pecked line on Figure 2. The rear of the wall was far more irregular and was parallel to the face of the wall along only short sections. The width of the wall ranged between 8 and 10 feet, but the usual thickness was closer to 9 feet. The construction of the rear face of the wall was also extremely irregular (Plate 2a, Figure 2, section GH) and set in an equally irregular foundation trench (Plan, Figure 2). Taken overall, this irregularity suggests strongly that the work was carried out by a number of small gangs working alongside each other. The nature of the construction trench, and of the upper levels through which it cuts, would also suggest that it might represent the trimming back, and collapse, of an unstable bank face. It is suggested that the lower zone of the sterile sand, layers A2 and B2, was derived from the digging of the ditch, the upper zone being derived from the foundation trench. This unconsolidated sand could easily slip forward to produce embayments in the construction trench such as that seen at H on the plan of 1968B (Figure 2), which are difficult to explain in terms of wall construction. The material in the construction trench was definitely derived from the wall construction. The relatively clean sand fill was characterised by its reddish tinge, produced by specks of the red bedding clay, and chips of white sandstone. Only two sherds of pottery, described on page 39, were found in the trench, both of them 12th century and probably derived from layer A3/B3.

The foundations of the wall itself were stepped both across and along the wall. The stepping along the length of the wall (Figure 2, section GH) was a partial solution to the problem of sloping ground. Despite this stepping, and despite the use of small spacing stones to level courses up, the coursing exhibited a marked northward slope. The stepping across the wall was presumably an attempt to minimise the amount of stone needed for a 9-foot-wide wall. This stepping showed clearly in the section cut through the wall at 62 feet north (Plate 3a, Figure 1, section CD). At its base, and resting on solid rock, the wall was only 5 feet thick, in a step 3 feet deep. A second step increased the width of the wall to $6\frac{1}{2}$ feet. The back of this step sloped backwards, possibly having collapsed during construction, but there was evidence of a third step, where the wall gained its full thickness of 9 feet 4 inches at 7 feet up from the bottom. This system of stepped construction, as well as saving material, would also have considerably eased the problem of moving stone into position.

THE DITCH

As stated in the introduction, the excavation of the ditch was far from satisfactory. Only the upper ditch fill could be examined, and that only in part, so that there is no confirmatory evidence for the re-cut seen in 1967.¹ The late, deliberate, infilling with clean yellow sand seen in 1964² was represented here by layers A5 and B1 (Figure 1, sections CD and EF). Beneath this there was a great variation in tip composition along the length of the excavation. The two sections show the extremes of this, one composed almost entirely of sand and dirty sand, the other a mixture of rubble, ash, clay loam, sand and dirty sand. The most important difference is that from approximately 70 feet north to the northern edge of the excavation the face of the wall was covered with a dirty, reddish, sand (Figure 1,

¹Ponsford, above p. 11. ²*Trans. Thoroton Soc., op. cit., Fig. 3, Section CD, Layer 5.*

section EF, layer B5). This can only be interpreted as a natural fill of the ditch, composed of the weathering products of the wall. No explanation is offered of its absence further south, nor can it be dated. The material overlying it, though, is certainly 18th century in date. There was no certain evidence to suggest that the ditch had not been filled in by 1740.

In default of excavation it is difficult to date the ditch, but one slight piece of evidence suggests that it may be contemporary with the wall, that is, late 13th century. If there had been a 12th-century ditch on this line, it would seem reasonable that layers A2 and B2 (Figure 1, sections CD and EF) would consist of material thrown up from its re-cutting, which they do not.

If, as seems likely, there was a ditch associated with the 12th-century bank, then it may well have been set forward from the bank.

THE POTTERY

Bank behind the wall (layers A3 and B3)

This group of pottery is closely comparable with that from the 1964 excavations.¹ As with that group, this material belongs to a transitional phase, with both Late Saxon and Early Medieval types occurring together. Again, no developed Stamford ware was found, which confirms the earlier impression that the bank dates to the first half of the 12th century.

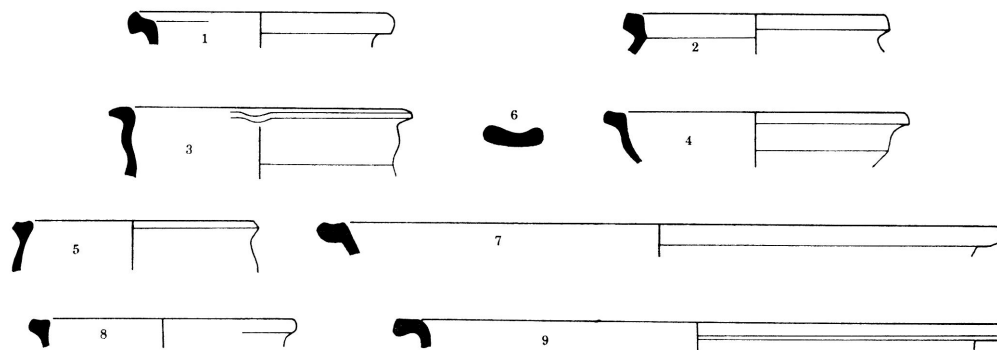


FIGURE 3
Pottery from 12th-century bank and wall foundation trench

St. Neots ware

One small rim sherd from a cooking pot with a simple everted rim, pinkish-buff surface with a grey core, shell tempered. Two body sherds in the same fabric.

Stamford ware

Thirty sherds were glazed. The glaze colour ranged from clear, on a white body, to pale green, on an off-white body, to pale yellow, on a pinkish-buff body. Five sherds were blackened externally, presumably from cooking pots, and there was one knife-trimmed sagging base.

¹*Trans. Thoroton Soc., op. cit.*, pp. 61-64, for a general discussion of 12th century Nottingham Pottery.

Fifty sherds were unglazed. Only 12 were not blackened externally, and, of these, three were definitely from the upper zone of the body. Forty-five sherds were off-white, five with a pinkish-buff outer surface. The other five sherds were pinkish-buff with a reduced, grey, outer surface. There were three knife-trimmed sagging bases and three rims.

- Figure 3, no. 3 Rim of pitcher¹ or storage jar. Fire-blackening beneath the rim, paralleled on a vessel from Stamford School,² suggests the latter.
- no. 4 Bowl with everted rim hollowed on top.
- no. 5 As no. 3, fire-blackened beneath rim.

Torksey ware

Five body sherds and one rim of typical hard grey sandy ware.

- Figure 3, no. 1 Cooking pot with internally hollowed everted rim.

Early Medieval splash-glazed ware

Fifty-three sherds of hard grey-brown, brown, and red wares, a considerable range of fabric from pimply gritty to smooth sandy. The smoother fabric tends to be in a reduced ware with a pinkish-buff surface. Twenty-one sherds were green and brown glaze spotted, ranging from scattered splashes to a discontinuous cover over large, up to five square centimetres, areas. Six sherds were glazed internally and externally, the internal glaze being limited to scattered splashes with the exception of one small rim fragment. There were two sagging bases, one strap handle, and three rims.

- Figure 3, no. 6 Fragment of strap handle, glazed on upper surface.
- no. 7 Everted rim of large bowl, hollowed on upper surface, fire-blackened beneath rim.
- no. 9 Everted rim of large bowl, fire-blackened beneath rim.

Wall construction trench (layer A4)

Only two sherds were recovered from this level:

Torksey ware

- Figure 3, no. 2 Rim of cooking pot with internal hollowing and external squaring of everted rim.

Stamford ware

- Figure 3, no. 8 Rim of bowl, reduced grey core with pinkish-buff surfaces, patch of glaze beneath rim.

The ditch filling

The considerable amount of post-medieval pottery from these levels is being held back for future publication. The bulk of the material was in a locally produced lead-glazed

¹Cf. *Proc. Cambs. Antiq. Soc.*, li (1957), p. 43, Fig. 1, No. 3, for type.

²*Ibid.*, p. 50, Fig. 3, No. 10.

earthenware, dating from the first half of the 18th century. There was, however, a quantity of both later and earlier material, including one medieval sherd, from the same levels. Until this material is published the finds and drawings will be deposited with the University Archaeology Department.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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