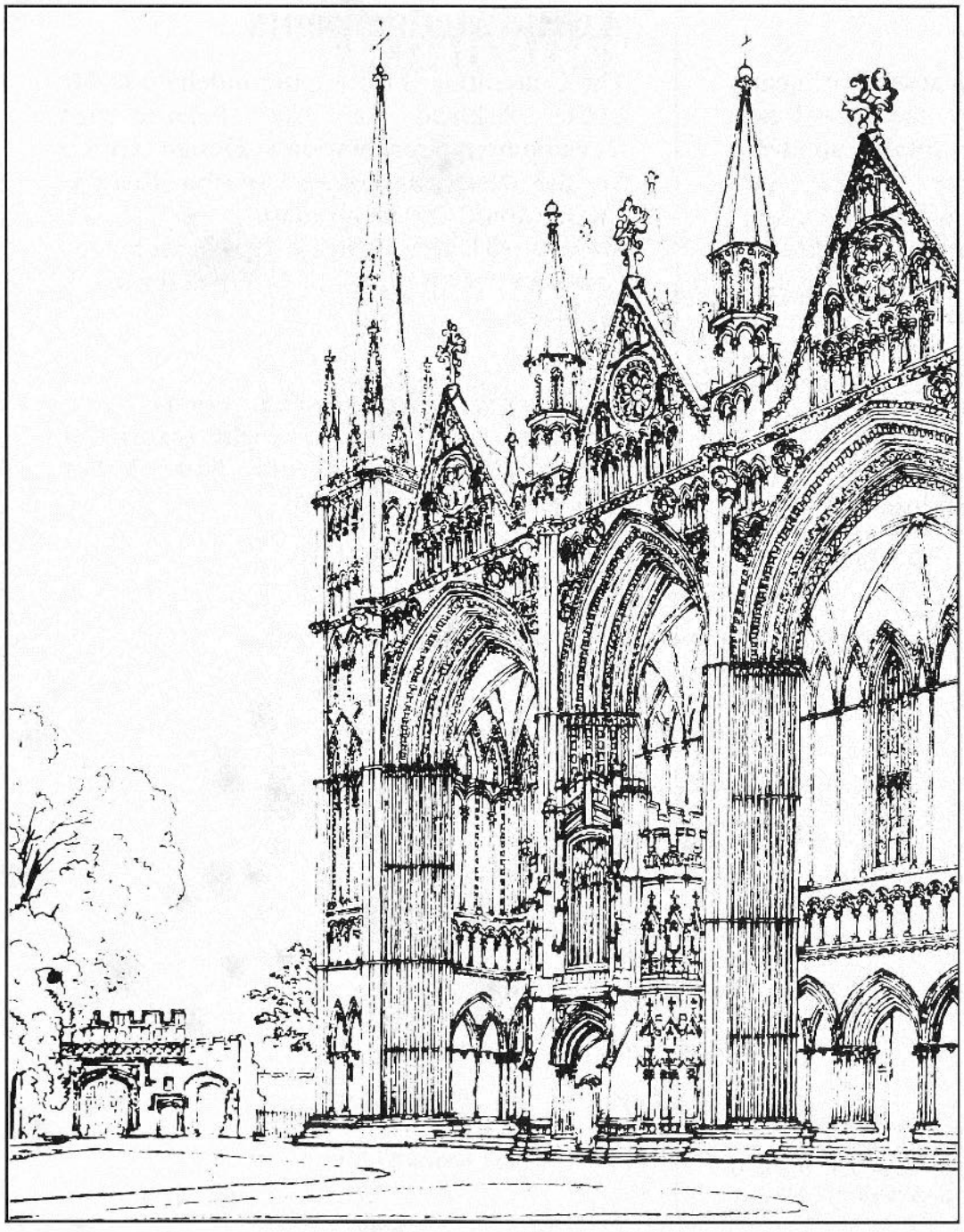
Durobrivae

A Review of Nene Valley Archaeology: 9
1984



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Durobrivae: a review of Nene Valley Archaeology

ISSN 0307-7756

Editor's Note

Durobrivae returns after an absence of nearly three years, laid low by the unwelcome financial side-effects of a totally unrelated archaeological-administrative problem. Our Review owes its new lease of life to the keen interest of the Peterborough Development Corporation and to the many protests of faithful but disappointed readers.

Floreant Durobrivae!

John Peter Wild

Nene Valley Research Committee,
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Orton Waterville,
Peterborough PE2 0UU

The cover shows a late Roman grave at Ashton (p. 28), in which the head of the deceased is at the feet.
The title page shows Peterborough cathedral, the west front of the new monastic church dedicated in 1238 (see page 18).

Acknowledgements

The Committee is once more indebted to Mr Colin Ashfield of the Peterborough Development Corporation's Design Group for the design and layout of this Review. Credit should also be given to:
Mr Edward Curry for figs 9, 10, 12, Mr Steven Czwortek for fig 13, Mr S. G. Upex for figs 3, 14, 15, 16.

Contents

The Years' Work: 1980/83

by John Peter Wild

'The Hundredth Meeting of the Nene Valley Research Committee will be held on 6th January, 1982, in the Peterborough Museum.'

An agenda-rubric of that kind could not pass in archaeological circles without due celebration; and at the conclusion of formal business that day the Committee welcomed the Mayor and Mayoress of Peterborough (Mr and Mrs Tom Grey), the General Manager of the Peterborough Development Corporation and other prominent local figures to a reception in the newly equipped museum store. Centrepiece was the great Christian lead tank from Ashton (*Durobrivae* 5, 1977, 10f.), fresh from conservation at Lincoln.

The year 1957 when the Committee was brought into being by the Council for British Archaeology marked the beginning of a period of intense archaeological research in the Nene Valley. The year 1847 when Edmund Artis died marked the end of the only comparable period of archaeological activity in the past, and it is of great fascination to us. We were delighted therefore by Peter Crowther's discovery of a letter from Artis' wife Elizabeth which was the basis of a well-known obituary of 1849 (p. 14). What the published obituary omitted was as revealing as what it included!

The era of large-scale excavations arising directly from the development of Greater Peterborough will shortly be at an end. Digging is already being replaced by the equally demanding task of preparing manuscripts for publication. But an element of the unexpected remains. At Orton Meadows, across the Nene from the Longthorpe group of archaeological sites, David Hall identified in 1975 two 'mounds' which in 1979 came under threat from gravel extraction and landscaping to make a new golf course (*Durobrivae* 8, 1980, 4,13). Both proved on excavation to be barrows in an unexpectedly good state of preservation.

Mound 1 (*c.* 30m in diameter) covered a single primary burial, a badly cremated skeleton in a grave cut into a low natural gravel knoll. There had been at least five secondary burials at a higher level, and on the SW side the barrow ditch has been removed by river erosion. Mound 2 has a more complex history. Beginning as a mortuary enclosure or small long barrow, it was drastically remodelled on several occasions, taking the form eventually of a platform or barrow surrounded by a sub-circular ditch. In its final phase or phases five secondary burials and three Bronze-Age pots were inserted into the mound. The archaeological value of the 'mounds' was obvious; but financing their excavation was a major headache!

Contractors earthmoving in the vicinity of the mounds uncovered several former river-beds of the Nene. In their filling the keen eye of the machine operator spotted a series of metal objects which were revealed as swords, spearheads and currency-bars of Iron-Age date. Ian Stead reports below on the main collection (p. 6); but at the time of writing intriguing finds are still being made. Thanks to a forward-looking tripartite agreement between the Peterborough Development Corporation, the British Museum, and the Peterborough Museum, Peterborough residents will have the opportunity of seeing both the original items conserved and restored, and modern copies of them.

Francis Pryor, Maisie Taylor and their Associates continue to offer breath-taking predictions about the archaeology of the wetland sites in the Fens – and then come up with breath-taking finds to match. In this number (p. 8) they discuss the Neolithic 'causewayed camp' at Etton, still in course of excavation, and describe the remarkably well preserved woodwork. The 'crannog' at Flag Fen (p. 10), an equally striking site, was found during a research programme that treated the Cambridgeshire drainage dykes as archaeological cross-sections through the countryside.

Opportunities to examine the great Roman building under Castor village which Edmund Artis brought to light are few and far between. But in the past two years thanks to the kindness of two local families Calum Rollo has been able to add some crucial elements to the plan of the house. Don Mackreth offers below (p. 22) an impressive reconstruction, fit for the pages of *Country Life*. Equally appealing to some no doubt would be Calum Rollo's investigations of a Middle Saxon cess-pit within the Roman ruins which Kyneburgha colonised for her nunnery.

The long-heralded Oundle by-pass will soon cut a swathe through the Roman town at Ashton. Excavation in anticipation of the event, with very variable funding, has been in progress under John Hadman and Stephen Upex since 1971. The summer campaigns have now been supplemented by larger-scale work under Brian Dix of the Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit (p. 26). John Hadman reports below (p. 28) on the parallel excavations.

Many of the most significant monuments of Mediaeval Peterborough lie preserved within the Cathedral Precincts. Through the kind interest of the Dean and Chapter, Don Mackreth has begun to ask and answer some of the fundamental questions about the archaeology of that period (p. 18). Outside the city Adrian Challands has surveyed 46 acres of the Deserted Mediaeval Village at Botolph Bridge, and recovered Saxo-Norman and Mediaeval sherds from tree-planting on the spot.

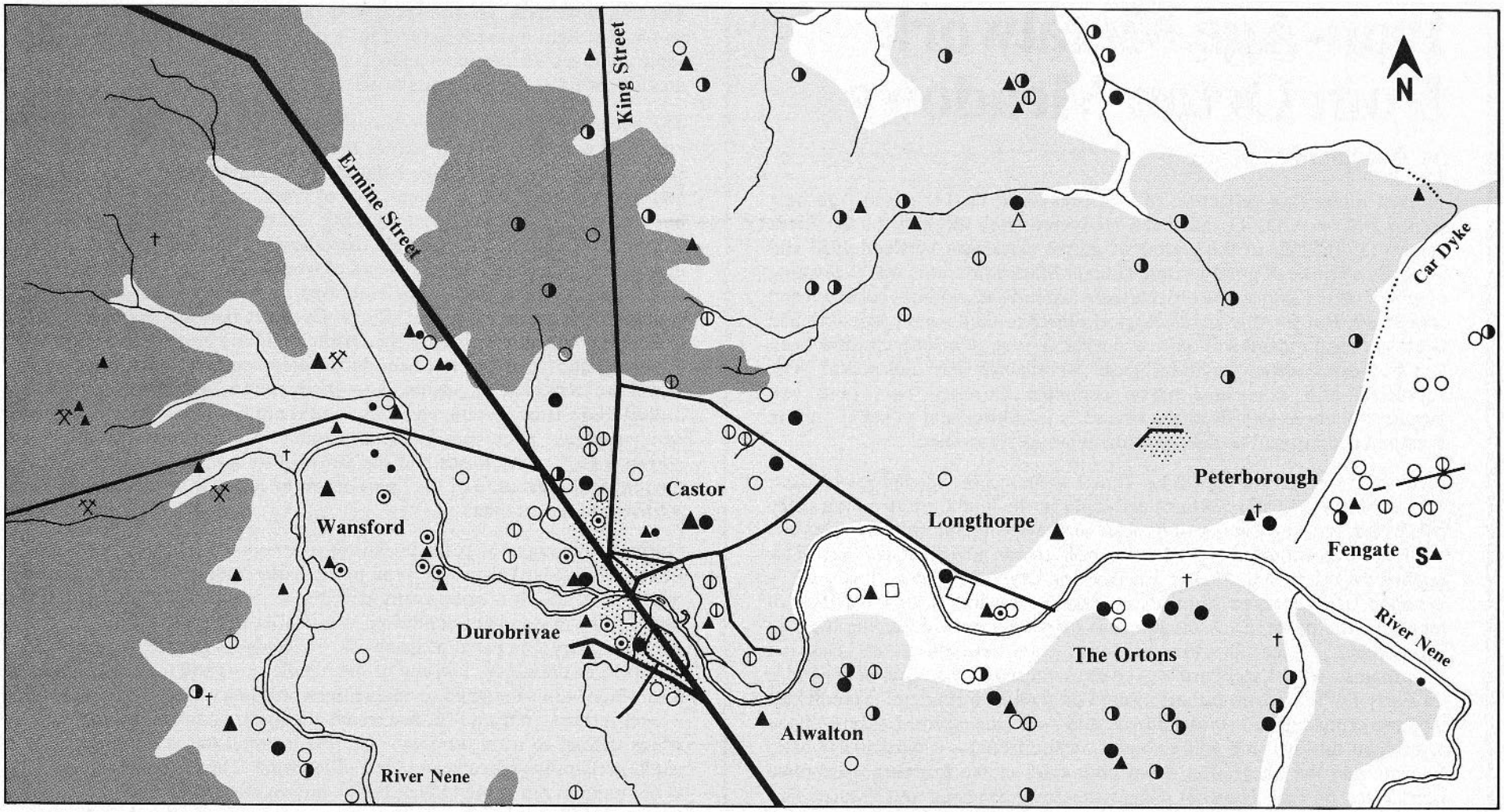

Fig 1 Map of the archaeological sites in the Nene Valley

Iron-Age Metalwork from Orton Meadows

by Ian Stead

A most interesting collection of iron objects of La-Tène Iron-Age date (*c.* 400 B.C. – A.D. 43) has been recovered from old beds of the River Nene (TL 165969) in the course of gravel extraction between 1980 and 1982. By a stroke of good fortune Donald Mackreth's team was excavating a barrow on the site, so the objects were instantly recognised, collected and conserved. But for this archaeological presence they would probably had been lost, and indeed it is quite conceivable that other objects have been lost because constant archaeological surveillance was impractical. The collection now comprises seven complete currency bars (and two fragments), three swords, a spearhead, a latchlifter and a 'ladle' – all in excellent condition. The next instalment is eagerly awaited.

Two of the swords are typical La-Tène I weapons, the blades of which are not very long (532 and 538 mm) and taper in the final third to a long sharp point. One has only the top of its scabbard surviving, but the other was in a complete iron scabbard (fig. 2d) from which it has now been removed. This second sword is remarkable because its blade has been 'laddered' – punched or hammered to produce close-set horizontal lines for the full length of the blade. Such ornament is extremely rare, occurring twice in Switzerland, twice in France, and once elsewhere in England (Walthamstow). Its scabbard is even more unusual. The open chape-end is an Early La-Tène form hitherto found only once in England (Standlake). The top of the chape is bridged front and back (the typical La-Tène chape is bridged on the back and clamped on the front) – a particularly early feature; and the decoration down both sides of the front scabbard-plate recalls that on Late Hallstatt dagger-sheaths in England and France. This piece is as early as any La-Tène sword and scabbard in Britain, and it suggests that British armourers produced the long sword no later than their continental colleagues.

The third sword from Orton Meadows is very different. Its blade is narrow and long (855 mm) – almost the longest La-Tène sword from Britain – and it has parallel sides and a rounded tip. This is a typical La-Tène III slashing sword, as opposed to the La-Tène I sword which was designed for thrusting as well as cutting. It had been in a wooden scabbard, but only a little of that survived. The construction of the blade seems particularly interesting, and it has been sectioned for study in the British Museum Research Laboratory.

The fourth weapon, an iron spearhead (fig. 2b) has a badly chipped blade and at first sight it seems to be of little interest. But close study has shown some engraved decoration – a line parallel with the median ridge and some arcs adjoining – which appears to make it unique in England.

The seven complete currency bars are important partly because of their excellent condition, which allows them to be accurately measured and weighed (fig. 2e). They range from 660 to 735 mm long (average 701 mm) and vary considerably in weight: five of them are between 577 and 633 g, but one is 525 g and another only 460 g. This, the lightest bar, is also the longest (it is slightly thinner than the others). The currency bars are also important because substantial pieces of wooden 'handles' have survived in their sockets: three have been identified as possibly hazel and a fourth could have been cherry or blackthorn. Currency bars are frequently found in hoards – and at least four of the Orton Meadows pieces had clearly been close together. If it had not been for a reference by Caesar, such objects would be regarded as ingots, like their continental counterparts, and indeed there is no reason why they should not have served both as ingots and currency. They may seem incredibly cumbersome, but primitive currency took many forms and the British bars are no more strange than the long iron spits used by the Spartans or the heavy iron bars used in West Africa until recent times.

Of the remaining objects the latchlifter (it was probably used for drawing a bolt) is a standard Iron-Age type particularly common from La-Tène III oppida (fig. 2c). It is noteworthy because of its superb condition. But the 'ladle', also in excellent condition, is much more unusual (fig. 2a). It is a large and very fine piece of ironwork – 625 mm long, with the bowl some 185-8 mm in diameter. The end of the handle turns and terminates in a flat foot which seems designed to enable the whole piece to rest comfortably on a level surface. In form it rather recalls the bronze pans of Aylesford type, which belong to wine services – bearing in mind the very long handle it could perhaps have been used for mulling wine. The Orton Meadows ladle is not unique, but it might well be the largest and best-preserved example from Celtic Europe.

Some of the Orton Meadows objects – e.g. the currency bars – were deposited together on one occasion, but most found their way into the river over a period of 400 years or so. Some may have been chance losses, others are more likely to have been deliberate deposits, but together they put the Nene firmly on the list of rivers producing fine Iron-Age metalwork. For the moment, the Nene ranks some way behind the rivers Witham and Thames – but its collection is still growing!

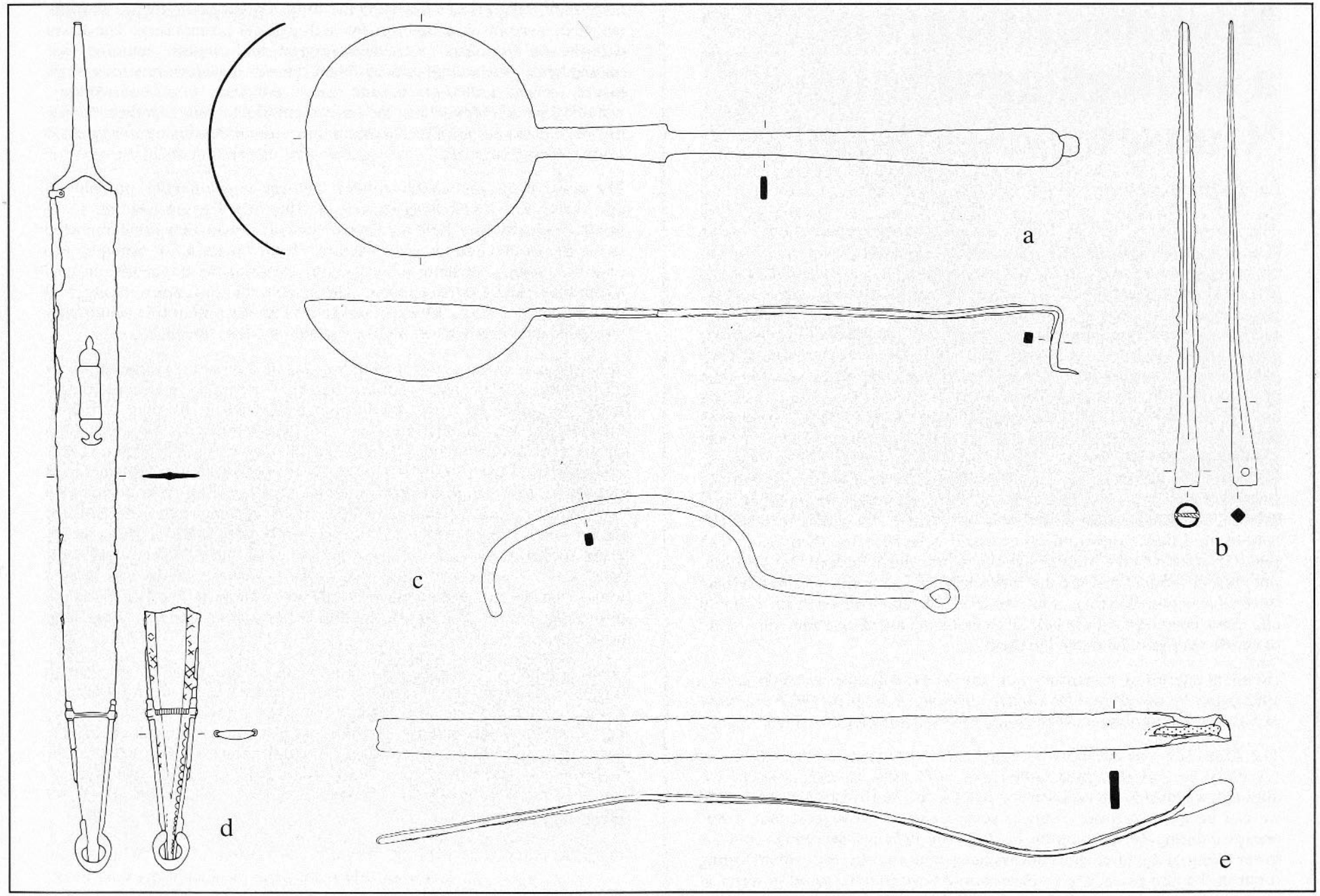

Fig 2 Iron-Age metalwork from Orton Meadows

Neolithic Etton: a Waterlogged 'Causewayed Camp'

by Francis Pryor

The extraordinary site at Etton was discovered by the Nene Valley Research Committee's aerial photographer, Stephen Upex, in 1976. His photo (reproduced here, fig. 3) was very dim and rather indistinct, but this was no fault of Steve's – the site was covered by a metre thickness of stiff river-borne clay alluvium. During normal seasons this clay would have prevented cropmarks from appearing, but that exceptionally dry summer caused plant roots to grow deeper than normal, in search of water. They penetrated below the surface clay and there found the damp silts and clays of the prehistoric ditch. If you look closely at the air photo (fig. 3) you will see the narrow segmented Neolithic ditch surrounded by a darker grey swirling cropmark, an extinct course of the Welland river system. The site sits within a meander of the old river, on a low gravel rise. Near the top of the photo you can clearly see the parallel ditch-like lines of the old ridge-and-furrow system; these represent the last vestiges of the Mediaeval field-system which reached almost as far south as the Neolithic site. The land around the causewayed camp would have been too damp to plough regularly, either in the Middle Ages or in prehistory. Indeed, Mr Whitton, the present farmer, told me that the southern part of the field was subject to regular winter flooding as late as 1953. Mr and Mrs Whitton, I should add, have been particularly helpful to us during the excavation, and we are of course very grateful indeed to them.

(Readers interested in learning more on the site's discovery should see the 1982 paper by myself and Dr Kinnes; meanwhile the first (1982) season of excavation is described in *Northamptonshire Archaeology* for 1982.)

The Etton site was probably occupied for 50-100 years or thereabouts in the early part of the third millennium B.C., say around 2700 B.C. – although we must await radiocarbon dates from the British Museum before we can be more precise. There is some evidence to suggest that it was occupied during the dry months, i.e. between June and September, but the lower filling of the ditch must always have been wet. Indeed, when digging it out in the first place, the workers would have to have stood in water at least up to their knees. The ditch was cleaned-out a number of times, probably when people returned to the site at the end of the winter. In one place they constructed a low-lying flat-topped platform, to fill in a low dip, and fires were lit atop this turf-fronted artificial promontory. The lower deposits of the ditch were waterlogged and organic material was consequently very well preserved. Plant remains included numerous twigs, leaves, seeds, pollen-grains and much evidence for wood-working, including wood-chips which we have managed to join together. Maisie Taylor, our wood specialist, has more to say about this and other aspects of wood working on p. 12.

The most easily-appreciated wooden find was an axe-handle, probably in ash, which was found lying directly on the ditch bottom (see fig. 4). It would originally have held a polished stone axe made of a stone imported to the site from a considerable distance – from Cumbria, for example. We recovered many fragments of such exotic axes and axe-fragments, most of which bore clear evidence of use. The axe-handle, too, was used and had split across the socket. One can imagine what was said as this beautifully-fashioned item was heaved into the stagnant muds of the ditch.

Other finds from the lower ditch filling included numerous large sherds of thick-rimmed 'Mildenhall' pottery, many of which were decorated and some of which still had food remnants adhering to their surfaces. Preservation was superb and even the lightest decoration showed up clearly; one pot was huge (height and diameter about 50cm) and was probably used for storage – as such, it is possibly the earliest recorded storage jar from England. The pottery was all very similar and showed a very reduced range of shapes and decorative motifs. Higher in the ditch fillings we encountered material that had never been waterlogged. Instead, it has slipped in from the interior and included finely crushed potsherds, small bone-fragments and numerous tiny flint waste flakes and broken tools. This material had almost certainly been trampled. We also found the post-holes and floors of buildings, and hope to excavate these more fully next season.

Once again Peterborough, already well-known for its important Roman presence, has produced a prehistoric site of international importance. I thought, after Fengate, that such a thing was impossible. Then we dug Etton. Again, I thought it impossible to cap Etton, only to discover Flag Fen (see p. 10). Surely we cannot go on like this for ever. Or can we? Only time will tell.

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Acknowledgements

The site was supervised by members of the Welland Valley Project (Miranda Armour-Chelu, David Crowther, Charles French, David Gurney and Maisie Taylor) and took place thanks to the kindness of Messrs Hoveringham Gravels (Maxey Pit) and Mr and Mrs Whitton of Glinton. Funds for the first season were provided by the British Museum, to whom we bow our heads in thankful acknowledgement. It kept us off the dole . . .

Fig 3 *Aerial photograph of the Etton causewayed camp, 1976, with north at the top. The first season of excavation took place to the left of the N-S boundary ditch*

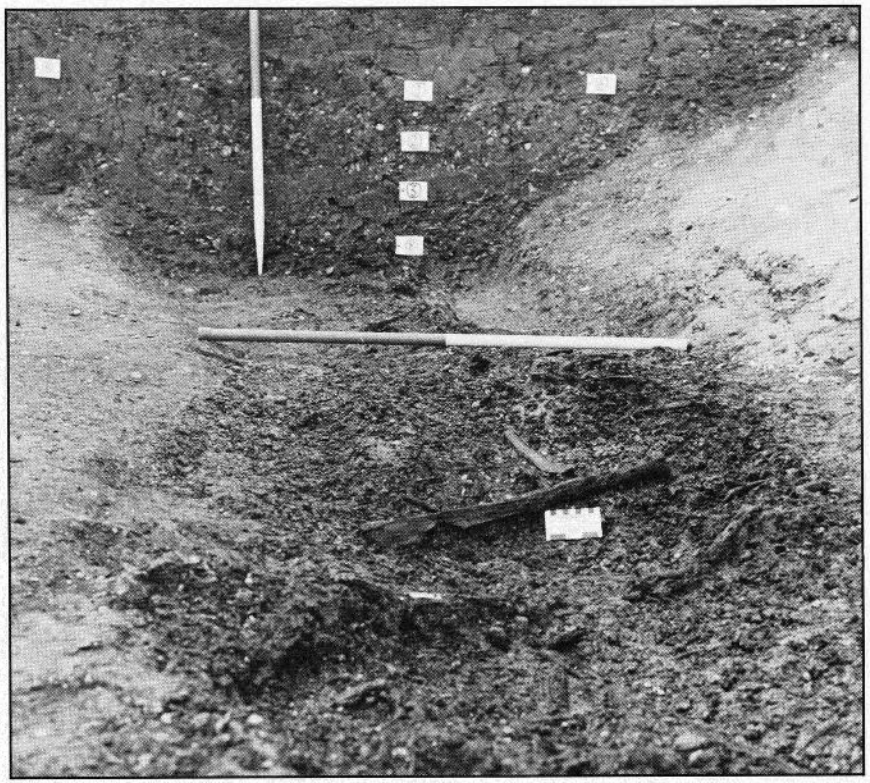

Fig 4 *Etton: a view along the bottom of the enclosure ditch showing the wooden axe-handle lying in place (behind the small scale)*

Buried Sites in the Peterborough Fens

by Francis Pryor

We finished excavating the Fengate complex of sites in 1978, and then spent two years or so writing it up. Our next project was at Maxey, some 10 miles north of Peterborough, where we dug a large and very exciting multiperiod prehistoric and Roman site. This work led to the investigation of the Etton causewayed camp (discussed in this issue, p.8) and, via Etton, to the Fens proper, some 3-5 miles further east. My interest in the Fens was aroused many years ago, while still working at Fengate; but travel to and fro across the Atlantic (I had a full-time job with the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto) meant that I could not be in the Fens during winter. Winter is the only time of year when one can carry out field-survey in the Fens: crops show a minimum of growth or the earth is bare, and dykes are being cleaned out between October and May. In other words, conditions are ideal.

The Fenland Committee at Cambridge, chaired by Professor John Coles, is attempting the very daunting task of a complete surface-survey of the Fenland, in all four counties (Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Suffolk). The work was started by David Hall (see *Durobrivae* 8, 1980, 13f.; 7, 1979, 16f.) and he in many ways is its inspiration. Our approach is somewhat different. We build on the surface-survey by walking along freshly cleaned drainage dykes, and there plot sites buried beneath the peats and clays that form the superficial Fen deposits. Obviously, there is more to our work than just looking at dyke sides, but we don't have space to discuss that here.

Many doubts were expressed when we first suggested the dyke survey; but the Department of the Environment decided to back us, and for that it deserves all credit. We started work in October 1982 and have been down dykes, on and off, all winter. Our discoveries have been extraordinary – indeed I simply could not have predicted that we would have uncovered such a wealth of material in so short a time. I thought the doubters had common sense on their side and that we would find nothing. Instead, we have shown that a ten-acre enclosure near Peakirk is not a ditched Mediaeval monastic site, but is instead a superbly preserved Iron-Age ring-fort, with its interior entirely buried beneath clay and all its floors etc still intact. The bank and ditch that surround it, too, are intact and the defensive ditch is waterlogged. Consequently, survival conditions will be comparable with those at Etton. It must be among the most important Early Iron-Age sites in Britain.

Near Eye we demonstrated that the Fens hid an intact land surface perhaps 5,000 years old, today spread across some 5 square kilometres of country. It produced good evidence for human occupation. Moving south, towards Fengate, we found numerous buried sites in the 'skirtland' surrounding the gravel island of Northey, immediately north of the (modern) course of the River Nene. One of these sites was placed on the extreme edge of the island, and produced animal bone, flint, pottery and worked wood. About a hundred yards out into the newly-forming Fen (Flag Fen) we found the remains of a wooden artificial 'island'. This 'island' was large (at least 80 metres across) and constructed from woodwork laid down on the Fen muds in a crude lattice-pattern. Many of the timbers seem to have been re-used from buildings (see Maisie Taylor's paper, p. 12). The landward approach to the site was defended by a zone of vertical piles which had been driven deep into the Fen muds beneath. The photograph (fig. 5) gives some idea of the site's sheer size (woodwork spreads along the water's edge to the far ranging-pole; the two figures are standing below the remains of a gravel-dump Roman road which passes across the site at this point, but is separated from it by about 50cm of peat and clay). At one particularly wet point the 'island' had been built upon ash tree-trunks laid directly on the bottom; a piece from one of these trunks can be seen atop the dykeside in the photograph.

We plan to attempt a survey of the site's true extent in the summer of 1983, and will carry out larger-scale excavations, if all goes well, in the following two years. Our small dykeside 'cleaning' operation produced 500 timbers. Heaven knows what future full-scale excavation might produce.

Fig 5 Flag Fen: general view along the modern drainage dyke showing timbers near the water's edge. The water level is a few centimetres below modern sea level

Prehistoric Woodworking in the Fens

by Maisie Taylor

It seems strange to have two such diverse sites as Etton and Flag Fen covered together in one paper. First of all Etton is Neolithic (p. 8) and the people who lived and worked there would have been as distant in time from the people at Flag Fen (p. 10) as the Romans are from us now. The next point is that Etton is a causewayed enclosure, whereas the site at Flag Fen is a man-made island. Etton is located on the gravel of the river Welland and subject to seasonal flooding; peat was already growing at Flag Fen when the platform was being built. The wood that we have dug up at Etton represents only a tiny fraction of the whole site whereas we don't even know what proportion of Flag Fen has been examined so far, as we haven't been able to define its edges yet. A final important point is that Etton was a carefully planned and executed excavation with minute and careful retrieval and recording. Flag Fen, on the other hand, was found unexpectedly and had to be salvaged in the worst weather of the winter with freezing fog for days on end, and all equipment carried for twenty-five minutes along the dyke side, night and morning.

Given all these differences, it is not surprising if we find that the wood from these sites is completely different. The wood from Etton is almost entirely composed of fen species, with willow, alder, birch, hazel, poplar and very little oak (perhaps the debris from small-scale woodworking activity). There are large numbers of rods, up to 15 mm in diameter, some with bark, some without, and some showing where they were detached from the stool. At present I think that these may be rejects from building requirements, as the longest ones are about 1.5 m long which is about the shortest sensible length for making wattle walling of any quality. One of the great excitements of last year for the diggers was the wooden haft for a stone axe (fig. 4) which we successfully lifted (although it was extremely soft) and which is now being conserved at the British Museum. I have been luckier, because, going through our 1,000 pieces of wood in the laboratory, I have found several things which have been exciting, not least a scatter of wood-chips which could be joined back together again, to show us what sort of stake it was that had been sharpened on the side of the ditch four thousand years ago.

The wood from Flag Fen is totally different, but for most people, visually much more exciting because it is so big (fig. 6.). It is also worked in a way that everyone can identify: there are planks and beams, mortises and wedges of oak and ash with smaller pieces of other species. The great problem for me is actually manhandling it. The wood is strong enough to pick up and move around, but if it is touched too much, or if the surface is allowed to dry out, it soon starts crumbling. It also has to be supported constantly as it may snap under its own weight. If a piece is dropped (not happened so far, fingers crossed), then the only way to pick it up again is with a shovel and dustbin liner. At the moment I think that the timbers used to build up the platform in Flag Fen were taken from some kind of structure that was demolished. It is very hard to guess what kind of structure we might be talking about as there are no Bronze-Age wooden structures still standing in this country for us to use for comparison. Luckily, however, I have recently been working in Holland where they occasionally dig up houses in their waterlogged areas. My first impression is that there are enough similarities between our wood at Flag Fen and the structural wood of known use from the Dutch houses to suggest that what we have may be comparable.

After all these differences it may seem surprising that these two sites are being considered together in one short article. They do have one important fact in common: they are both *waterlogged* sites. We think that they are probably the first of many to be found but at the moment I find it hard to look ahead and speculate, as I am fully occupied trying to process the wood before we start digging again. The great thing that these sites give us is a glimpse of the extraordinary range of material and activities which we may have suspected before, but for which we have never had much evidence. We have just begun a very important phase in our understanding of the prehistoric people who lived in this area two, three or four thousand years ago, or even further back in time. This time next year I shall probably have completely different views about what the wood means, such is the rate of our progress. Everything that we dig up is giving us new insights, new ideas, and new directions in which to turn our thinking.

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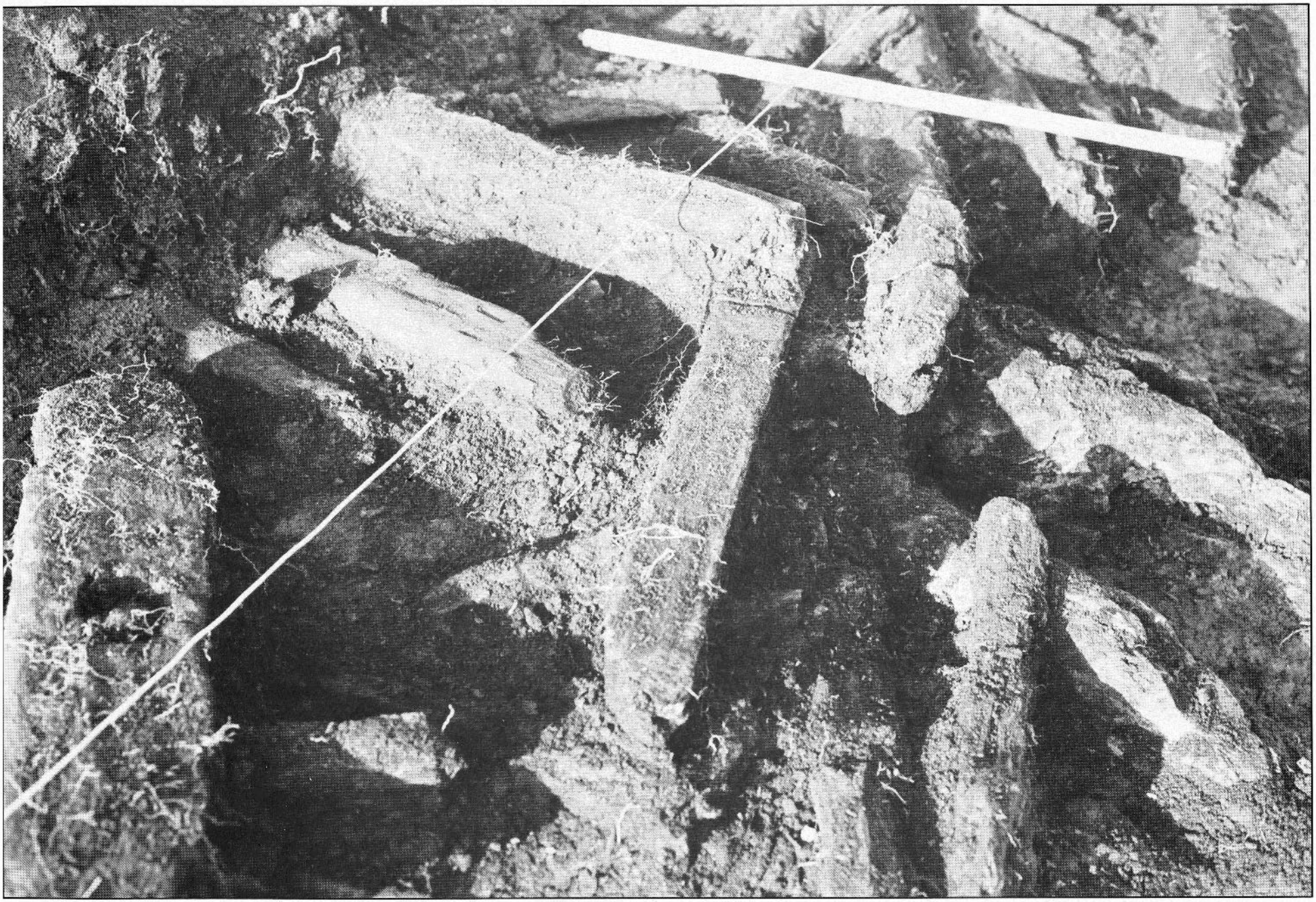

Fig 6 A small part of the wooden platform at Flag Fen. Note especially the mortise-hole in the plank on the extreme left. The scale-bar is 1 m long

Edmund Artis: the Obituary of 1849

by Peter Crowther

Edmund Tyrell Artis (1789-1847) is a name known to many archaeologists and geologists, especially to those with an interest in the historical development of their subject during the first half of the nineteenth century. *Antediluvian Phytology* (1825) on Coal Measures plant fossils, and *The Durobrivae of Antoninus* (1828) which illustrated his work in and around Castor in the Nene Valley west of Peterborough, are both minor classics of their type.

The veneration with which the name of Artis is held by Nene Valley archaeologists in particular was given practical form in 1978 with the celebrations organised by the Nene Valley Research Committee to commemorate the 150th anniversary of his *The Durobrivae*. Artis has no biographer, but contemporary obituaries give a summary of his life and Tomlinson (1974) provided a brief insight into his varying talents and achievements. I am concerned here with the origin of the contemporary published obituary which resulted from Artis' membership of the Geological Society of London (de la Beche (1849), xxii-xxiii).

The founding of the Geological Society in 1807 was undoubtedly a major landmark in the making of geology as an independent science (Porter (1977),146). It selfconsciously promoted the empirical method in true Baconian tradition and turned its back on quasi-religious 'world systems'. For two generations every important English geologist of social standing became a member, and English geological debate was centrally conducted within the Society's ambit (*ibid.*,148).

The Geological Society's emphasis on the collection of reliable data based on field observation, rather than the imaginative theorising which had bedevilled studies of the earth in previous centuries, would certainly have appealed to a practical man like Artis. His name appears as a new member for 1824 (Woodward (1907), 283), the year in which the Society obtained its Royal Charter. It is of interest that among the other 26 newcomers for 1824 was one Roderick Impey Murchison, 3 years Artis' junior, who rapidly rose to the peak of the Victorian scientific establishment as the second Director of the Geological Survey of Great Britain (1855-1871) and ofttimes President of the Geological and Royal Geographical Societies. Sir Roderick Murchison Bart., as he eventually became, was also instrumental in launching the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1831.

It was long a custom for the President of the Geological Society to provide brief biographical sketches of prominent members recently deceased as part of his Address to the Annual General Meeting. The President for 1847-1849 was Sir Henry Thomas de la Beche, one of the foremost geologists of his day. It thus fell to de la Beche to report the death of Artis to members in his Annual Address delivered at the Society's apartments in Somerset House on 16th February 1849. The original source of information included in the published obituary has recently come to light among the personal papers of de la Beche preserved in the Department of Geology, National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. A letter from Artis' widow Elizabeth, dated 25th January (no year, either 1848 or 1849, but more likely the latter), is clearly her response to a request from de la Beche for biographical information for inclusion in his 1849 Anniversary Address. Much of the letter's content was of course incorporated in the published account, and has been put into a wider context by Tomlinson (1974). Yet its status as a rare, contemporary primary source, written by one who knew Artis better than any other, justifies its reproduction here in full.

Elizabeth Artis
Woodcroft
nr. Peterborough
25 Jan

Sir,

In reply to your letter, I beg to inform you that my husband, Edmund Tyrell Artis, was born in the year 1789 at Sweflin in Suffolk near the small town of Saxmundham, he was the eldest child of this parents who were in easy circumstances in the middle rank of life. He remained at Saxmundham till the age of 16, when he went to reside with and assist an uncle, a Wine Merchant; I have heard he very early evinced a great talent for Drawing and Mechanisms. In 1816 he painted from life a portrait of the late Earl Fitzwilliam, which was considered very well executed and an excellent likeness. The Plates in his work on Roman Antiquities are all taken from Drawings done by him – he was always fond of the study of Geology, about the years 1816 & 17, and many years after that he devoted much of his time to that pursuit, and visited all the coal pits for many miles round Wentworth in Yorkshire, as well as many in Derbyshire, from which places he principally formed his fine collection of coal fossils – I have enclosed a catalogue of part of his

collection which he disposed of in consequence of changing his residence, but he retained a small collection of what he considered most rare and valuable – My late husband's natural abilities were very great as those who knew him intimately in early life can bear testimony and his pursuits in life so numerous, that I can scarcely recollect them, but among others I can name – he modelled a bust in clay of John Clare the Poet – some roman ovens in wax and many other things in that art – he attained a great proficiency in bird stuffing and at one time had quite a Museum of Stuffed Birds & Animals, Antiquities, Geological Specimens, and many other things connected with the Arts, of his own collecting, and making – For the last 22 years of his life, my husband principally resided at Castor, near Peterborough, but was the owner of the Club House, at Doncaster, where he died after a short illness December the 24th 1847 – in the 59th year of his age.

I beg leave to say I feel greatly obliged and honoured by your letter, and beg that you will alter or suppress any portion of my communication you think proper.

I am Sir Your
Most Obedient Servant
Elizabeth Artis

De la Beche understandably omitted from his biographical sketch any reports of Artis' proficiency in 'bird stuffing' or his modelling of 'Roman ovens' in wax, yet added a well known anecdote of a winter excavation supervised by Artis at Sibson during 1846-1847 when conditions were so bad that his diggers eventually deserted.

And what of the man to whose lot fell the task of summarising Artis' achievements? Allen (1978), 87) described Henry de la Beche as the master 'operator' of the nineteenth century natural history scene. He was personally well connected and not afraid to use his influence in high places for the general advancement of the young science of geology. De la Beche was a member of that small, influential group of eminent figures responsible for raising geology to the forefront of British Victorian science, a group which included Roderick Murchison, Adam Sedgwick, William Buckland and Charles Lyell. It was the persistent advocacy of de la Beche which led eventually to the founding of the Geological Survey of Great Britain in 1835 with, appropriately enough, himself as its first Director.

The fortuitous discovery of Elizabeth Artis' letter in the de la Beche archive gives us an all too rare picture of a man whose archaeological excavations in the neighbourhood of Castor set a standard for others to follow and began a tradition of investigations in the Nene Valley which flourishes to this day.

Acknowledgment

I thank Dr Michael G. Bassett, Keeper of Geology, National Museum of Wales, Cardiff for permission to reproduce the text of the letter from Elizabeth Artis to Henry de la Beche.

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From the Museum

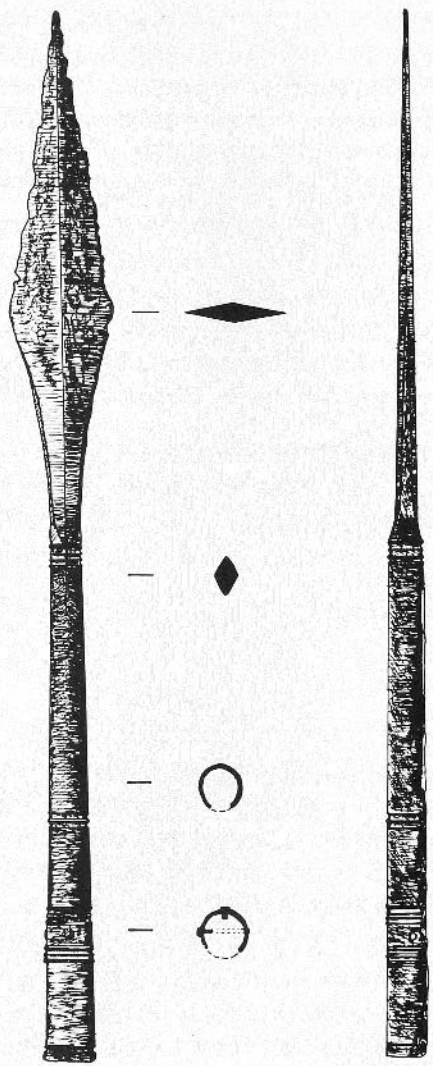
by Martin Howe

The Viking descent upon the lands of Western Europe was seen by contemporary commentators as a retribution for past sins. The English scholar Alcuin wrote that 'never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could be made'. Thus the present-day reader could be forgiven if, after having read these rather hysterical writings, he had a view of Britain in the ninth and tenth centuries as being over-run by vast Viking hordes. In reality the Vikings have left little to archaeology outside the large centres of settlement such as York.

However, the subjects of this note are a spearhead (fig. 7) and axe (fig. 8) of Viking origin which bear witness to a Viking presence in the Peterborough region.

The spearhead (L 567) entered the Museum's collections in 1912. It had been discovered at Horsey Toll (TL 23209960) during the course of ditching works and was accompanied by a skull. It is thus probable that the spear was grave-furniture in the burial of a pagan Viking warrior, but the account of the discovery, noted by J.W. Bodger (the donor), is terse. The spearhead measures 549 mm in length (fig. 7), the blade measuring 280 mm and the socket 269 mm. The latter has a deep slit on its underside which runs to the base of the spear blade, a noted feature of Viking Age spearheads. The blade shows corrosion along its cutting edges which suggests that these were probably case-hardened and thus more susceptible to rust. In general, however, the spear is very well preserved and shows the characteristic black-brown colour of iron objects which have been exposed to iron-rich water. The junction of the blade and socket is successfully achieved by giving the shaft an oval section which is decorated with three deeply incised lines. This decorative arrangement is repeated a further three times on the socket, the lower two sets of lines bordering the three rivets which secured the head to its shaft. These 'rivets' are of interest as they were probably not rivets in the strict sense of the term. When viewed in section there is insufficient room for them to traverse the shaft without some arrangement for one to pass over the other. As such an arrangement is technically difficult to produce and would weaken the shaft to an unacceptable degree it is more likely that the 'rivets' were in fact nails.

The Horsey Toll spearhead belongs to Petersen's type M (Petersen (1919), 34) and is readily paralleled in form by an example from Halsteinshov, Loiten, Hedmark, Norway. The Norwegian example does not have such a long socket, but closely resembles the blade form of the Horsey Toll



Shown at ¼ scale

Fig 7 A Viking spearhead from Horsey Toll

example. Petersen assigned the type M spears to the early eleventh century and there seems to be no reason, recalling the activities of Cnut and his Vikings, to doubt that the Horsey Toll example belongs to this period.

The exact provenance of the axe head (fig. 8) is unfortunately not clear. It was donated to the collections on the 7th March 1916 by a Miss Laurance and is attributed to Whittlesey (TL 270970). However, its exact location is not known beyond the fact that it comes from somewhere on the gravel islands between Whittlesey and Horsey Toll. The axe (L 564) measures 185mm in length and is surprisingly thin in section (1.5mm). It thickens out noticeably at the cutting edge and the edge was welded on to the body using a harder steel which would produce a more trenchant edge combined with a flexible core. The blade has the graceful curve of the classic Viking 'bearded axe'. However, this shape evolved not for any aesthetic reason, but to produce a weapon that could inflict the maximum amount of damage upon an adversary. When brought down from a height, the blade made contact at its lowest point and the velocity of the blow coupled with the precise angle of the cutting edge ensured that the axe would shear its way through anything but armour of the best quality. The efficacy of such weapons is graphically demonstrated by the illustration of Harold's Huscarles using similar axes on the Bayeux Tapestry. The Whittlesey axe falls into Petersen's type M (Petersen (1919), 45). He illustrates the type with an axe from Homerstad, Stange, Norway (Petersen (1919), 45, fig.45) and the type can be readily paralleled in England by examples from the Old London Bridge Group in the Museum of London. The best known axe in this group is illustrated by Wheeler (Wheeler (1927), fig.3) and still retains its socket-liner which is made of copper alloy.

The liner is of particular interest as it gives some indication of the thickness of the handles of Viking axes. It has always been the case that reconstructions of axes have very thick handles as it is felt that a thick handle was vital to ensure the maximum effect of the weapon. However, the socket-liner from the Old London Bridge Group indicates that the handle of the axe was approximately 40mm in thickness. It was the mechanical design of such axes that gave them their efficacy and not thick handles and heavy blades.

Petersen attributed a late tenth- to early eleventh-century date to the type M axes and this would seem to be confirmed by the presence of 'Ringerike' style decoration on the socket-liner from Old London Bridge. The Whittlesey axe closely resembles the Homerstad and Old London Bridge axes and a late tenth- to early eleventh-century date would be appropriate for it.

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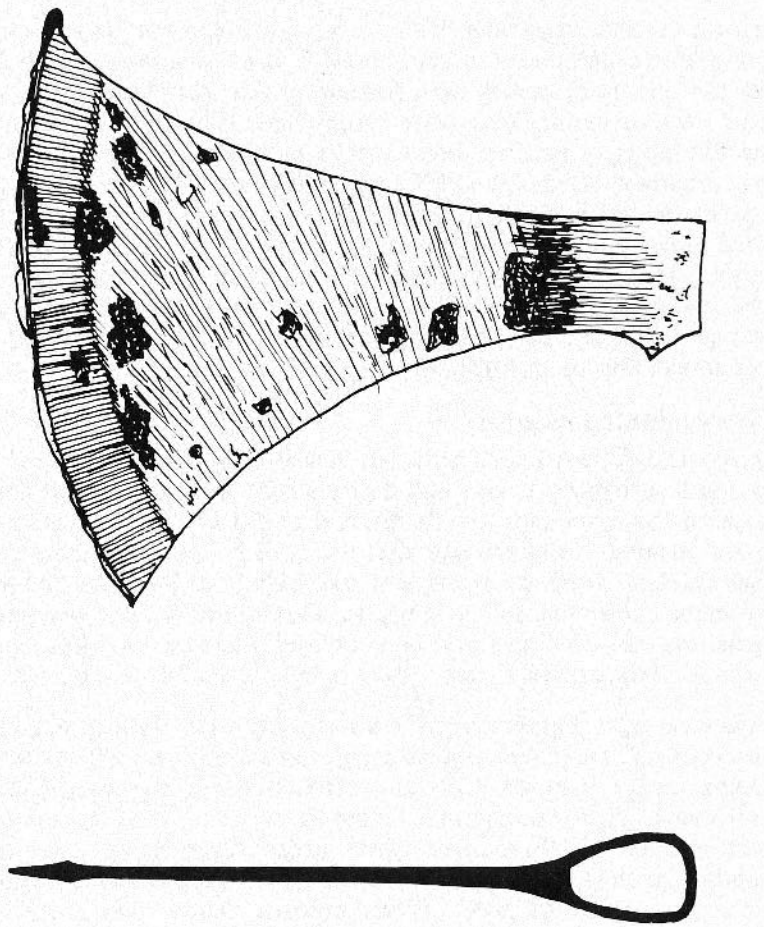

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Fig 8 A Viking axe from Whittlesey

Recent Work on Monastic Peterborough

by Donald Mackreth

Because the Department of the Environment could not fund rescue work arising from development in Peterborough, the Committee could only deal with the threats by setting up a Manpower Services Commission scheme under the Community Enterprise Programme. One of the projects was to date the monastic precinct boundary by excavating in what is now a car park. Another, because the MSC finance was not tied to rescue threats, lay in the cloister of the Cathedral, and the Committee gives its grateful thanks to the Dean and Chapter, especially Canon T. Christie, for its help in carrying out the work. Both pieces of work, undertaken by Calum Rollo, were rewarding in that the long-sought-for *burh* defences have almost certainly been identified, and the enigmatic remains found in 1894 in the cloisters can now be set into context.

The Precincts Boundary

Fig. 9 uses as a base Eyre's survey of Peterborough made in 1721. It is the first good survey to survive and represents to a large measure the basic layout of the town as it was at the end of the Middle Ages. On purely general grounds, it is thought that the squared-off western part of the Precincts dates from the reign of Abbot Martin de Bec who laid out the new town before his new abbey gate. Our trenches were laid out at A against the only available part of the north boundary wall. The intention was to see if the earliest boundary was indeed of twelfth-century date.

It was soon clear that the excavation was going down through pond-fillings sealed beneath the garden soil belonging to Peterscourt, built as a teachers' training centre between 1856 and 1864. Most of the pond-filling was Mediaeval in date, but contained a surprising quantity of Roman pottery which increased as the trenches went further down. It was clear that no boundary ditch was going to be present unless a trace was left under the southern edge of the pond. When deposits dating after *c.* 1200 were removed, a broad band of rubble and mortar was found, and, when that was taken away, part of a massive pitched stone foundation set in a hard mortar was revealed. The wall had been set on a shelf in the underlying cornbrash and had itself been cut into the front of an earlier bank. The foundations cannot have been less than 2.35m thick and it is a matter of conjecture as to how much had been eroded by the pond. Indeed, the pond itself may have begun as a ditch quarried to provide stone for the wall. A trench to the east located the wall again, but, because of the Dean's garden wall, its width could not be checked. In the Dean's garden is a long bank running parallel with the wall and on the line of the earlier bank. A set of resistivity survey traverses carried out by Adrian Challands in the garden showed that there was a bank there, and an anomaly in the resistivity readings may be caused by a possible robbed-out wall along its northern edge. How far these anomalies run to the east is not clear, owing to the presence of the Mediaeval castle, Tout Hill, and the ditches around it; but they show that the motte lay outside the newly-found boundary.

The archaeological dating of the wall and bank is slight, but reasonably clear. The wall had been demolished by *c.* 1200 and the observable monastic boundary wall was set more or less on the crest of the bank to the south. In the bank were some scraps of shell-tempered pottery which is not Roman, early Saxon or full Mediaeval in character. Under the wall was found a small group of pottery including similar shell-tempered sherds and a piece of Northampton ware.

The pottery can be shown to be late Saxon. Thus we have a probable date-range for the life of the wall from about the ninth or tenth centuries to *c.* 1200, after which the wall was forgotten and sealed by a pond probably belonging to the Prior's lodging, the thirteenth-century hall which still forms the core of the present Deanery.

Historically, there appear to be only three abbots who may have been responsible for such a wall. The first is Kenulph (992-1005), the second Torold (1070-98) and the third Martin de Bec (1133-55). Kenulph is said to have been the first to surround the monastery with a wall and this is supposed to be the cause of the change of name from Medeshamstede to Burh. Torold is credited with having built a castle and he certainly enfeoffed 60 knights on the instructions of William I. Martin de Bec is not known to have built either a wall or a castle and he is said to have destroyed the latter. The only castle known is Tout Hill at the bottom of the Dean's garden and clearly part of an earth and timber motte-and-bailey.

It seems strange that Torold should have spent so much effort on a great stone wall and yet have been content with earth and timber for the castle. It might also seem odd for the castle to lie outside the Precincts, but the rude soldiery would have sorted ill with the religious community of a monastery. If de Bec had built the wall, why did he leave the castle in timber? It is possible that he did away with the latter and replaced it with a stone circuit; but as he reigned through the Anarchy, he is more likely to have kept the castle and only demolished it at the end of the Anarchy when there was a general destruction of mainly unlicensed earth-and-timber castles. On general grounds, it could be argued that he or his successors

William (1155-75) or Benedict (1175-94) were responsible for the destruction of the wall. But the homogeneity of the pottery recovered and the problem of the castle favours Kenulph, even if a monastic *burh* in the sense of the Peterborough *burh* seems to have been unusual.

The traditions which mention that Kenulph built such a wall are Peterborough-based and are a problem as they cannot necessarily be taken at face value. There is, however, independent dating for the change of name, and presumably for the building of the wall. Aelfric's *Life of St Aethelwold* can be dated to 1006. In it, he says that the monastery by the Nene that Aethelwold refounded was once called Medeshamstede, but was now called Burh. He is unlikely to have made a mistake as he addressed his work to the Old Minster monks in Winchester and Bishop Kenulph, the same man who is said to have built the wall and who died in 1006.

Fig. 9 shows the conjectural circuit of the wall. On the west it most likely followed line B on the east side of a shallow valley containing a small stream. The stream was diverted by de Bec to run outside the boundary between the monastery and his new town. The stream was diverted back in post-Reformation times and is shown on the 1721 map. The southern course, C, cannot be drawn further south without lying on the Nene's floodplain, and it is still followed by the Precincts boundary. On the east, there is more uncertainty. Much depends upon whether de Bec's new vineyard, D, lay within or without the *burh*. Between 1214 and 1222 part of the vineyard was given over to the monastic cemetery. Irvine found the original vineyard wall during under-pinning works under the east end of the Cathedral and recorded the details in plans and annotated and coloured sections. There is no trace of an earlier wall or a substantial robber trench and we can be sure that Irvine would not have missed either. Thus it looks as though the burghal defences ran on the east side of the vineyard and this fits in with the layout of what looks like the *vill* of the pre-new town days (fig. 9, E.). If all this conjecture is correct, then the site of the Bolhithe gate at which Hereward and his Danish allies fought would be at F.

Fig. 9 also shows, blocked in, the approximate size and shape of the early monastic church and also shows the probable site of the great tower dedicated in 1059. The figure also shows how close to the present wall end the wall would have run – far too close, hence the removal of the wall here would belong to de Bec at the earliest, or to Benedict at the latest, as he is said to have carried the building of the new church to its front.

The Monastic Church

Apart from the ultimate east end of the church damaged by fire in 1116 and recorded by Irvine in the 1880s, there has only been one other known

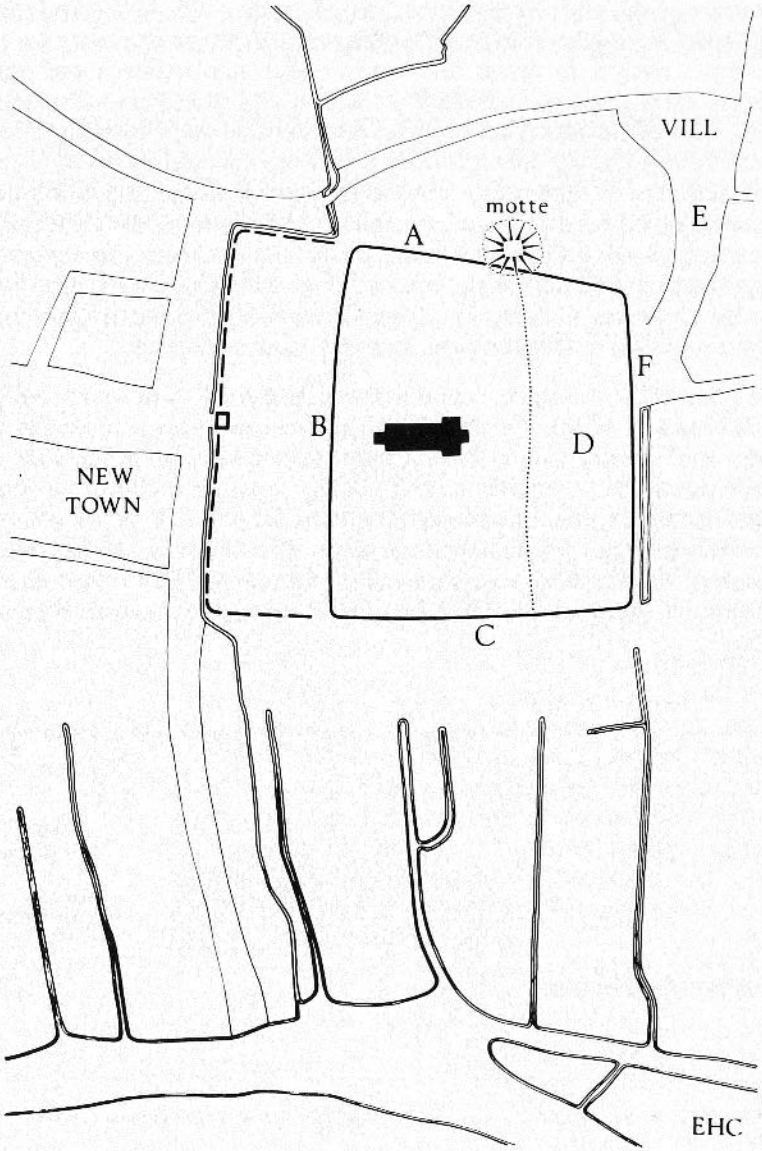

Fig 9 *The Cathedral precincts after Eyre's survey of Peterborough in 1721 showing the conjectural circuit of the boundary wall*

exposure of the early church (see *Durobrivae* 8, 1980, 11ff.). In 1894, J.T. Micklethwaite, with Sir Henry Dryden and J.T. Irvine attending for part of the time, sought to prove his theory that Irvine's church was seventh-century in date and modelled upon the plan of Old St Peter's in Rome. He chose the north-east corner of the cloisters as that was closest to the known remains and should have revealed part of the great cross-transept he expected. There were other views as to what would be found, but none of the antiquaries expected what was uncovered and the excavation remained unpublished, the only records being those compiled by Irvine. From these, it looked to us as if part of the east end of an early church had been located, and the Dean and Chapter kindly gave permission for the original trenches to be re-opened so that the earlier results could be checked.

The plan of the structures found is shown in fig. 10, A in which a-a are the walls found by Micklethwaite. However, the south wall was seen to run on under the Sacristy and to have a major offset thickening the wall on the south side at b. A robber trench belonging to an addition (c) was also found, although its south end could not be defined as it has been cut away by works belonging to the later cloisters. The addition had cut through a cemetery which had developed against what *should* be the first church on the site; for there were no burials within it, and had it been an extension to

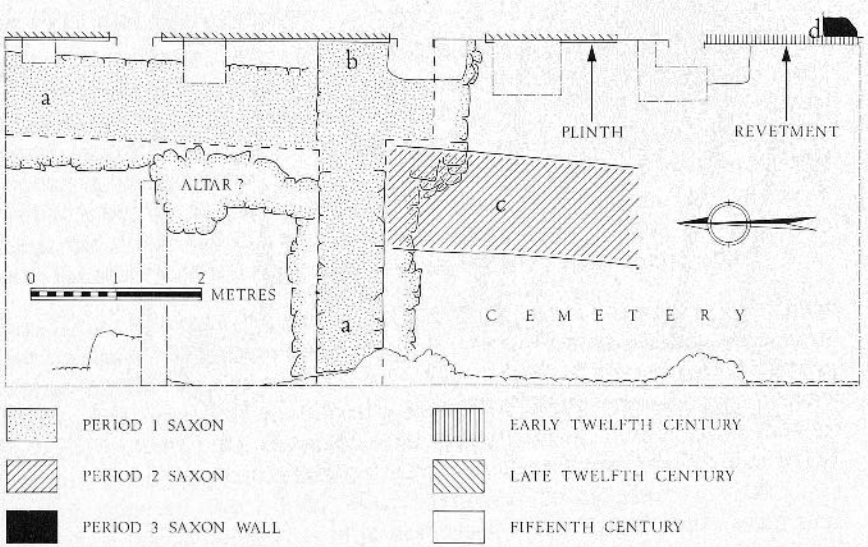

Fig 10A *The east end of the earliest monastic church in Peterborough: the excavation plan*

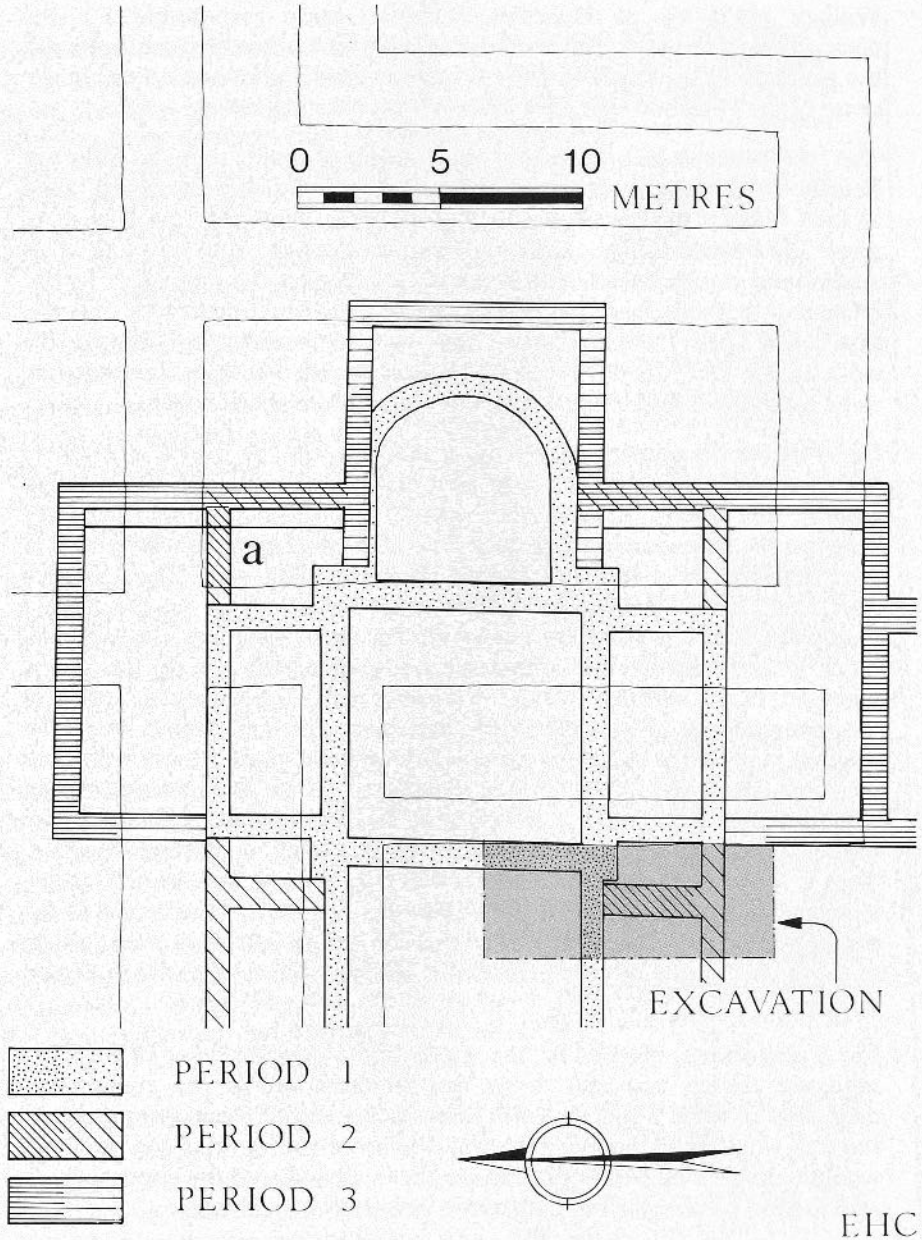

Fig 10B *The east end of the earliest monastic church in Peterborough: the conjectural plan (excavation area shown by grey tone)*

a yet earlier building, then it should have sealed burials associated with that. The surviving end of the building found by Irvine under the Sacristy in 1889 was located (d) under the primary twelfth-century work.

Once the remains of the cloisters had been removed, no dating evidence for any Saxon work was found. In the back-filling of the construction trench of the earliest church were some Roman tiles and these should show, not surprisingly, that such tiles had been used in the superstructure. The only carved stone of interest is a beast's head which once projected from the face of a wall and came from Micklethwaite's back-filling.

Two other details of interest were found: at the bottom of the south end of the Sacristy wall is the original revetment wall for the platform which raised the floor level of the new church above the pre-existing monastic cemetery. Secondly, it was found that the late Mediaeval cloister floor had been lowered by about 10cm below that of the twelfth-century cloister.

Putting all the records together, it can be seen that there are, in essence, two discrete blocks of building and only conjecture can relate them; this is shown in fig. 10, B. A careful scrutiny will show just how much has had to be guessed at and the drawing shows just how much damage has been caused by the great foundations and sleeper walls needed for the new church.

It seems clear that there had been a chamber, probably square, to the east of the walling a-a, and using Repton as a kind of analogy it very probably had a *porticus* to the north and south, and a square- or apsidal-ended element to the east. The first known addition may have been associated with a line of *porticus* along both sides of the nave, possibly connecting with the hypothetical ones belonging to the first church. The next set of additions is basically that found by Irvine, probably belonging to building works to be associated with Aethelwold's reformation of the house, or, as Irvine thought, to Aelfsige (1005-1042), to house the relics garnered by this acquisitive abbot. However, all is not plain sailing; for Irvine found a wall sealed beneath the floor of these later works (fig. 10 B,a.) and levels taken in 1982 show that the floor of this is lower than any possible lowest floor in the building in the cloisters.

The full significance of all these details is not yet fully appreciated, but additional information comes from stones in the Cathedral's *Lapidarium*. Here are to be found the feet of a great sculptured rood, in the same manner as the battered remains at Headbourne Worthy, Hants, and the fragments at Bitton, Glos. More remarkably, some of the architectural detail shows that a major decorative scheme required imposts and other work in the Winchester Style of art, and this seems to be the first recorded instance in which it was applied directly to architecture, although the miniatures in which it is found show it in architectural settings. It seems likely that the style was used more often, but probably in paint rather than carving.

The excavation was rewarding and blessed with good weather. The burials were left in peace for future archaeologists and the work was impressively rounded off by a burial service conducted by Canon Christie, in memory of the first monastic community in Mercia.

Castor

by Donald Mackreth

The Roman buildings recorded by Artis under the village of Castor and lying around the church have at times been thought to be houses belonging to the town of *Durobrivae* itself. They have also been interpreted as belonging to potters. It was only as a result of renewed investigation by J.P. Wild that Artis' original idea that all these elements belong to a single great house was re-established. It was the manner of Artis' own publication which gave rise to the idea that here was a series of loosely co-ordinated and separate structures (Artis (1828), pl.XIII) (see fig. 11).

Fortunately, there are still fragments of walls to be seen in Stock's Hill and Church Hill, as well as in the churchyard. They show that the foundation works are of a scale far greater than would normally be found in an ordinary Roman villa. Similarly, the impression given by the plans available is of a series of ordinary rooms; but when a scale is applied to these their very large size becomes apparent. Also, it is only when the remains and the plans are related to the topography that we can see that the major parts of the known plan are uncomfortably placed on quite a steep hill-side. However, a careful assessment of the floor levels recorded by Artis in relation to the slope shows that the buildings are terraced and the whole carefully adapted to the site to produce a grandiose effect.

The fact that the modern village prevents any concerted investigation beyond a few very small areas is the major obstacle to a good understanding of the complex. The picture which is presented here is based upon the remains which are visible, the details which were recorded by Artis, and further ones recovered in work carried out by J.P. Wild and, from the Committee's Field Centre, Calum Rollo. If all the buildings recorded by Artis are to be included, the whole complex would seem to measure 270m by 140m – an area of about 3.75 hectares; but our knowledge is largely confined to the north-eastern end of the site and it is this part that is considered here.

The structures are on three major levels with the north-eastern end raised up on two great terraces. The lower of these runs along the 'south' side of the church and the upper, running parallel with the first, crosses the 'northern' part of the churchyard. The church itself is aligned basically with the Roman structures and is markedly out of true with the traditional east-west line. No trace is recorded of the lower terrace, although it must have been cut into by graves when the churchyard was extended towards the end of the last century. The sharp drop along the line of the old churchyard boundary shows clearly where the terrace lies. As for the upper terrace, one end shows in the side of Stock's Hill and the other is recorded by Artis in his pls. II and XI, which also show the differing floor levels.

One of the factors which has delayed a proper appreciation of the layout of the site is that the only plan published by Artis was based on a survey of the village which has some inbuilt distortions. Thus his room F is sited too near the church. Fortunately, he gave the dates of the burial of those in whose graves the mosaic was found. The approximate area covered by these can be identified and it is much more in the area shown on the plan in fig. 12. In effect, F is a room set in the front face of the upper terrace and almost certainly aligned with Artis' room J which must be on the upper terrace itself. Similarly, C, the so-called temple, can be seen as a room at first terrace level with the wing from the upper terrace running out over it, and this wing is matched by one at the other end of the terrace. The use of a modern map shows that Artis' building D is also set in the front face of the upper terrace and the long room to the west of that can be moved so that its north end parallels his rooms A, B and C.

It was J.P. Wild's discovery of the north end of the room marked K which revealed most about the scale of the whole design. He found that in the centre of the north wall was a flue opening into the room which had remains of a full *pila*- supported hypocaust. The internal width of the room is some 9m and, as the walling in Church Hill shows, its length is not less than about 20m. If the room ran out so that it ended in line with the wing containing rooms A, B and C, the floor area would have been some 216m^2. As an indication of size, the area of the great pavement at Woodchester is about 204m^2. Another indication of the scale of the Castor building is the minimum height of the wing needed just to contain room K. The terrace is some 5m high and the room would have been not less than its width (another 9m) and some 5m can be added for the roof works. Hence the height of the wing from the level of the first terrace to the approximate ridge-line of the wing would have been about 19m. As some kind of confirmation of the size of the room, it should be mentioned that the type of hypocaust, as is the case of the similar system under the Aula Palatina at Trier, should be a reflection of the volume which needed to be heated.

If this interpretation is accepted, the scale of the rest of the buildings on the terraces becomes a matter of note: the width over the wings is about 110m and, taking room I as a good indication, the width of the main block is about 20m. It is these dimensions which suggest a truly palatial scale for the structure and it is the interpretation of the relationship between rooms F and J which reveals whether or not we can speak of a 'palace'. It is possible to see here a great hall on the top terrace running out to the front edge of room F, a length which can only be estimated, but which may be as much as 30m with a width of 20m. It is a great pity that all we know about

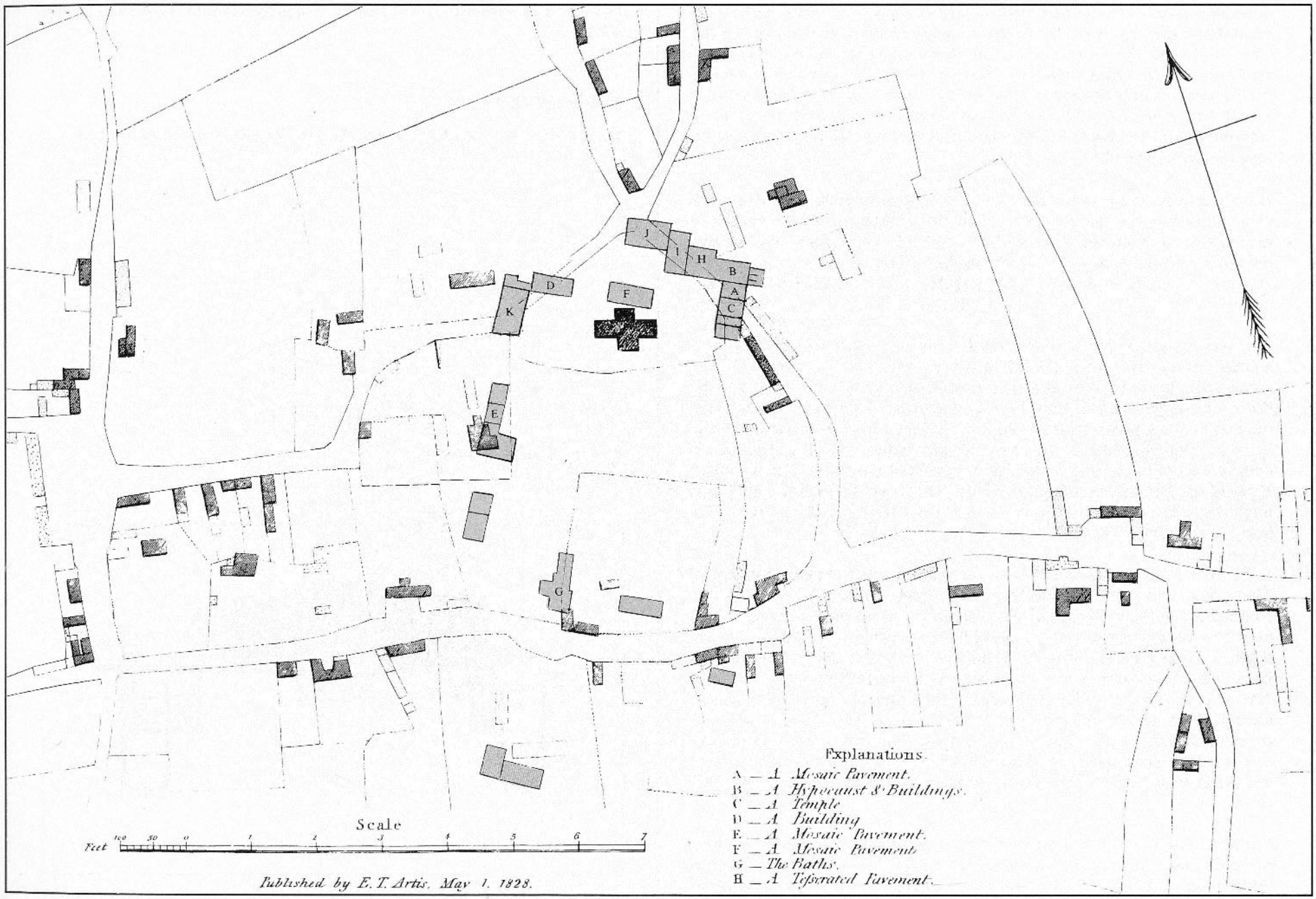

Fig 11 *Artis' plan of the Roman buildings under Castor village (Roman remains shown by grey tone). Items I, J, K are explained in the text*

these two rooms comes from outline representation on Artis' pl.XIII. It seems more than likely that Artis first found the Roman buildings when the lanes north of the church were cut down in order to improve their gradients; hence J may only have been detectable as foundations, and F itself was never fully opened because of the nearness of other burials. What should be borne in mind is that the back wall of F may have been only a revetment for the upper terrace and may have been the same as the apparent front wall of J.

Having arrived at a possible over-all plan, all that remains is to give some idea of how the building masses may have been arranged and this is done in the highly interpretative drawing here, figs. 12. The return of the wings inward is deduced from the foundations furthest up the hill slope in Stock's Hill, which belong to a right-angled wall junction in which both walls are major ones.

It is one matter to put forward the thought that here was a palace and another to see who, in *c.* 300 when it was built, may have used it. It is surely striking too high to think in terms of an imperial residence; coming down the social scale, it may have been intended for one of the major officials in the administration of the Britains. As *Durobrivae* would appear to be peripheral to any of the provinces of Roman Britain at this date, it does not seem likely that it was for a provincial governor. The presiding Vicar of the Britains would, presumably, have been based on London, but might have had a summer residence. Even so, Castor is probably too far north to have served as such.

If the civil administration has to be discounted, what about the military? There are only two officials who might be considered. One is the commander of the mobile field army within the island who, although York may be a more natural centre, could have operated from a base further south. Failing him, there is the Count of the Saxon Shore. His area of responsibility certainly lay more in the south than in the north, but in *c.* 300, he probably controlled both sides of the Channel. Yet for the site of a headquarters it should be noted that *Durobrivae* had good land communications, sitting, as it did, astride the main north-south and east-west routes in the East Midlands, and the Nene was navigable from the Wash to the town, thus giving good access to the whole of the east coast.

From a set of foundations and disjointed records has been created a major complex and a plan which accounts for all the known details. The site seems palatial; but if we put it forward as a palace in the strict sense of the word, we are left with the problem of determining for whom it could have been built! What *does* seems clear is that what lies under Castor (and was later used as a Middle Saxon monastic site) looks much *more* than a great villa.

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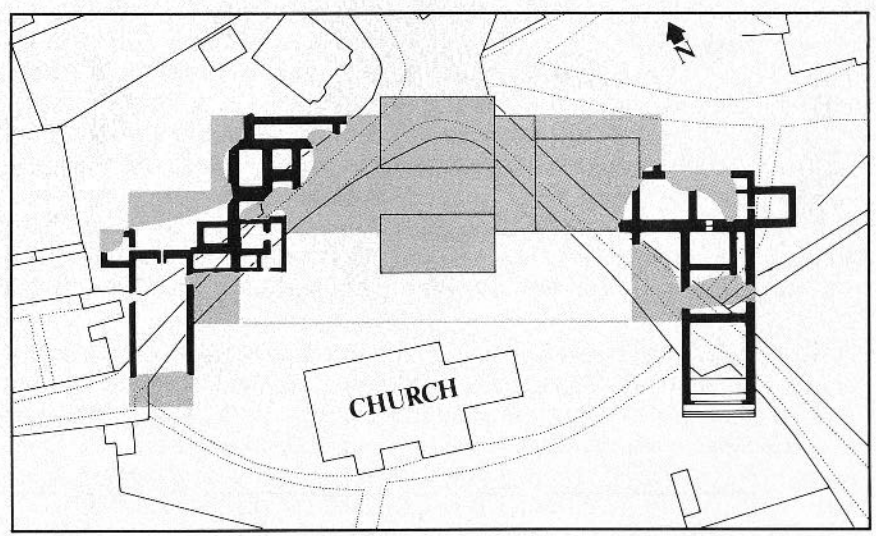

Fig 12A *Castor: a reconstruction of the great Roman building showing the plan and probable outline (grey toned area)*

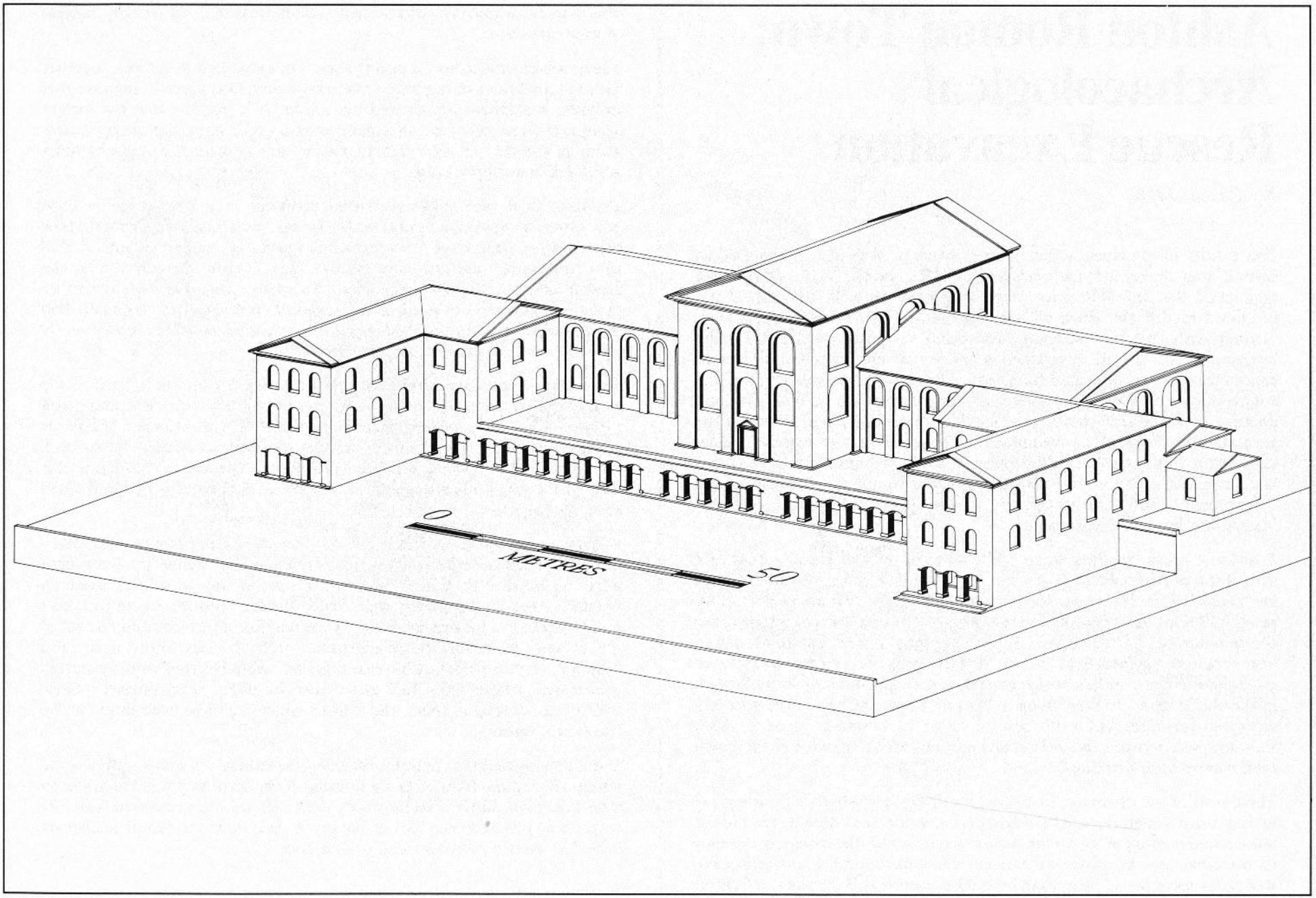

Fig 12B Castor: a reconstruction of the great Roman building

Ashton Roman Town: Archaeological Rescue Excavation

by Brian Dix

The results of previous archaeological work at Ashton, as reported in several past issues of *Durobrivae* (7, 1979, 29; 5, 1977, 6ff.), have highlighed the desirability for large-scale excavation in advance of the proposed roadworks which will destroy part of this Roman small town. Consequently, the Northamptonshire county surveyor, in recognising the importance of a full investigation prior to the commencement of contractors' works, allocated funds which have permitted a team from the county archaeology unit to undertake this responsibility. With the kind permission of the landowner, the Hon Mrs M.L. Lane, and following the granting of Scheduled Monument Consent, archaeological rescue excavation along the line of the planned highway improvement began in late June 1982. The work is being supported by the Department of the Environment and has benefited greatly from assistance from the Manpower Services Commission.

Two large areas covering some 5,000m^2 were opened initially on either side of the previous excavation trenches to provide an important link with the results of earlier work. In the northerly of the two areas a series of stone buildings has been discovered beside a metalled street which is the continuation of a road that was already known (fig. 13). The road-surface was repaired and re-metalled on several occasions and a number of grooved and worn stones, together with ruts in the surface, are indicative of the traffic which moved along it. At one point, two side-streets form a crossroad-junction; but elsewhere a series of lanes or areas of hard standing pass between the individual buildings which are each aligned with their narrow ends fronting the road.

The layout of the buildings on either side of the street-line forms a regular arrangement which may have originated at some time during the mid- to late-second century A.D. In the two instances where the complete outlines of buildings can be observed the overall dimensions of the respective structures measure 12.90m long by 6.90m wide and 10.85m by *c.* 5.50m. Like the other buildings, they appear to have continued in use until late Roman times, but already by the close of the fourth century one building at least had been partially dismantled and the materials of its construction re-used elsewhere.

The numbers of hearths set into the floors of individual structures, together with the quantities of hammer-scale which were also present, indicate that smithing was frequently carried out inside. It is possible that the former occupants lived in rooms on a floor above, and a narrow passage, 1.20m wide, at the rear of one workshop may have contained a flight of stairs which led to an upper floor.

The individual dates when particular buildings were erected and re-built have yet to be determined with certainty; but it is already apparent that the buildings are secondary features which overlie an earlier system of land allotment. The adjacent road pattern may also be an addition to the original settlement plan, since there is a clear indication from the other excavated areas to the south that a series of enclosures was originally laid out following a different road alignment and their positions subsequently altered to respect the later street-line.

In addition to an area which was opened beside the southern limit of the earlier excavations, a further 4,000m^2 of an adjacent field has been exposed to reveal a continuation of settlement-evidence towards the River Nene. Although both timber- and stone-built structures have been recorded from this work, it is clear that there were fewer buildings in this area of the town which probably lies close to the margins of the Roman zone of occupation.

A number of enclosures was laid out in the area from perhaps A.D. 50/60 onwards. Their boundaries were initially defined by ditches, but later these were replaced with fences and one property was separated from an adjacent street by a masonry wall. Some of the surrounding land had been given over to use for human burial by the late Roman period and a series of graves laid in a formal arrangement probably represents part of a cemetery. Some groups of burials, however, were interred within separate properties. Where individual graves can be dated from pottery vessels which were placed in them, the burials appear to have been made in the late fourth century.

Variations in funerary practice included furnishing the grave with a stone lining, placing the body within a wooden coffin or resting it in the grave on a shallow bier, and in two instances the head had been removed from the corpse and placed at the foot of the grave. It is hoped to report further on these burials in a future issue of *Durobrivae*.

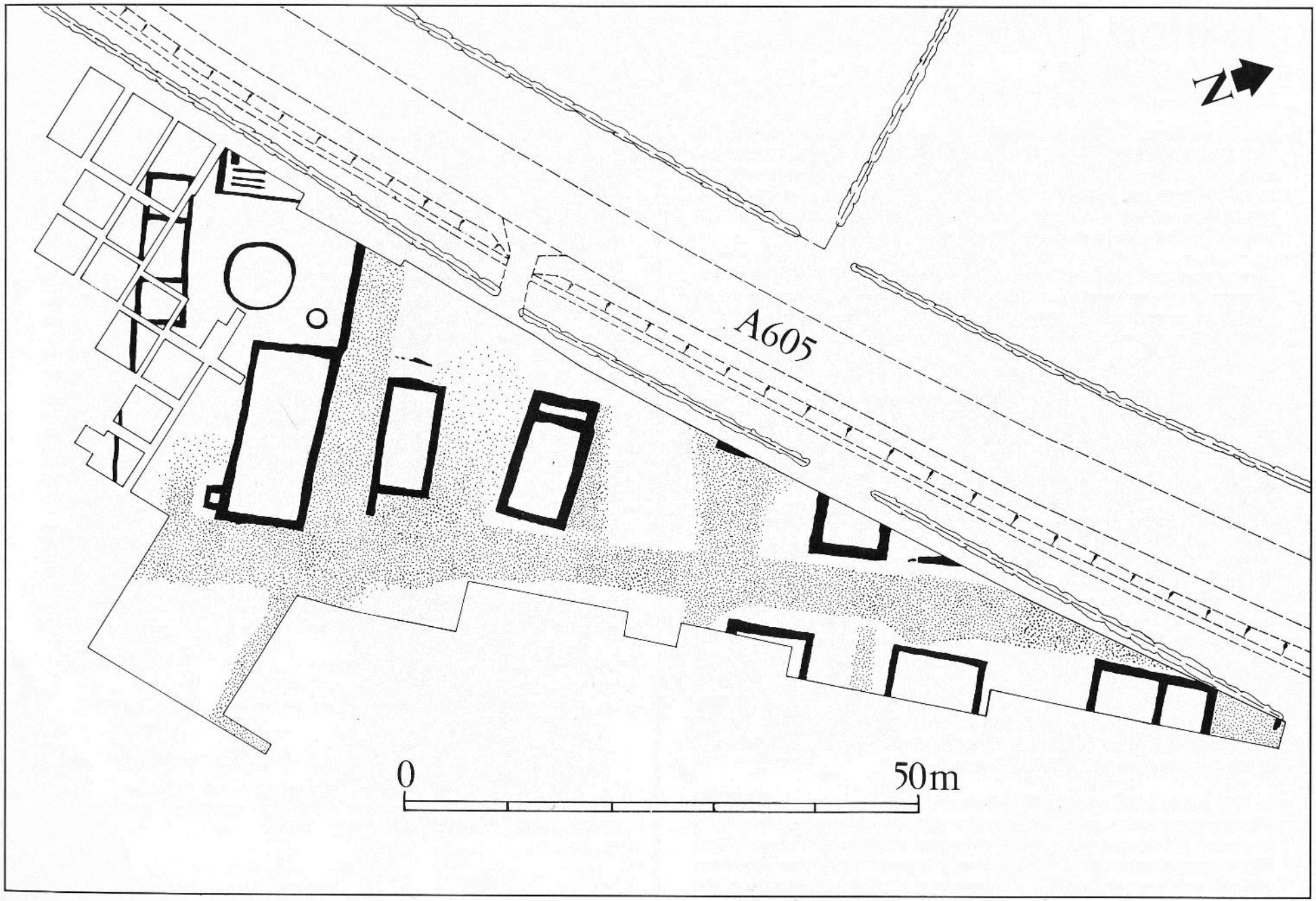

Fig 13 *Plan of part of the Roman town at Ashton near Oundle*

Ashton 1979-82

by John Hadman

The excavations at Ashton started in 1974 and continued each summer until June 1982 when the Ashton Excavation Committee handed over the reins to the Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit. It was gratifying to all those who had worked on the site and who had pressed for more outside involvement when the County Council agreed to allocate funds from the by-pass road scheme to allow a full-time team to start work.

The area already opened by the Ashton Excavation Committee was extended each season until 1982 and a more complete picture began to emerge as ground further away from the main Roman road junction was examined.

The principal area investigated in 1979 (fig. 14) was along the road edge and to the south of the large Building I containing smithing hearths. A metalled surface running at right angles to the road led to a side entrance into that building as well as proceeding westwards towards another building located in 1978. A large stone-packed feature within this area proved to be a sandpit. When excavated, it provided an ideal opportunity to examine the chronological relationships of the ditches which ran under the large Building I, another ditch running at right angles to the road, and a short length of wall sealing the pit itself.

Two hearths were found, both outside buildings, and one of these proved to be interesting in a number of ways (fig. 15). Heavily built of limestone blocks, it was lined with clay and obviously had been subjected to very high temperatures. There were two vents, one leading off at right angles to the long axis of the hearth. Identical structures had been discovered in Normangate Field, Castor, in 1969 and at first they were thought to be pottery kilns. The common factor was a narrowing or waist, effectively dividing the structure into two elements. No evidence of pottery manufacture has been found at Ashton, but the associated waste products of smithing suggests a use in that industry.

In 1980 a strip building some 20m from the road was uncovered (fig. 16). The narrow structure, with its long axis at right angles to the road was built in several phases and was later in date than several underlying ditches. Three internal rooms and an external addition were recognised, but there was no evidence of function. Immediately south of the building and probably contemporary with it a horse had been buried in a square pit cut through an earlier ditch. Other deep square pits to the west of the building

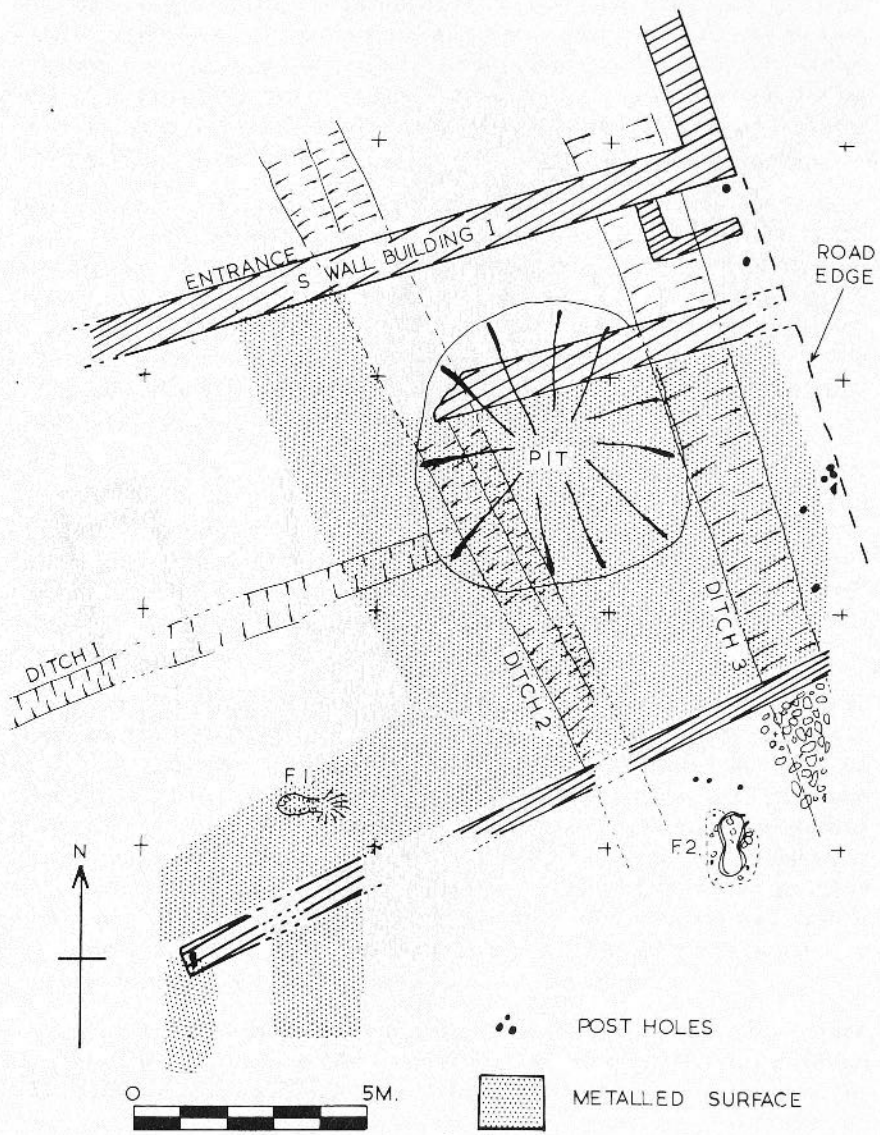

Fig 14 Plan of Ashton excavations 1979

were set very close together and shared evidence of upright timbers in the corners. These were probably cess-pits or latrines.

The overall pattern of ditches now seemed to suggest a well-ordered system of land allotment. In some cases these boundaries were accompanied by fences as evidenced by the regularly spaced post-holes. This type of evidence continued to emerge over the next two years when groups of burials were located. The burials appeared to be fourth-century in date and included one peculiar rite found in other late cemeteries. In two cases the head had been severed and placed either beneath the feet or between the knees. The graves varied from simple holes in the ground to well constructed stone-lined cists. Coffin nails were found in a number of graves and most burials included the use of accompanying limestone slabs either as supports for the head or as weights on the body. As a number of burials were in or across ditch lines, the land-use in that particular area seems to have altered considerably in the late Roman period.

In 1982 two wells were located in what was now quite recognisable as a backyard position. No other stone structures of any substance were found as the excavations proceeded away from the main roadline. One narrow well just over 6m deep was square in plan and the finds from this included the top of a stone column, suggesting a substantial building somewhere in the vicinity. The other well, 1.5m in diameter, was poorly constructed and the eventual excavation provided very little environmental evidence apart from large quantities of animal bone.

The Ashton Excavation Committee had one more season of work assisting the Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit to complete the excavation of the whole of the threatened area before a start is made on the new by-pass road. This will bring to a close ten years of investigation of this small Roman town.

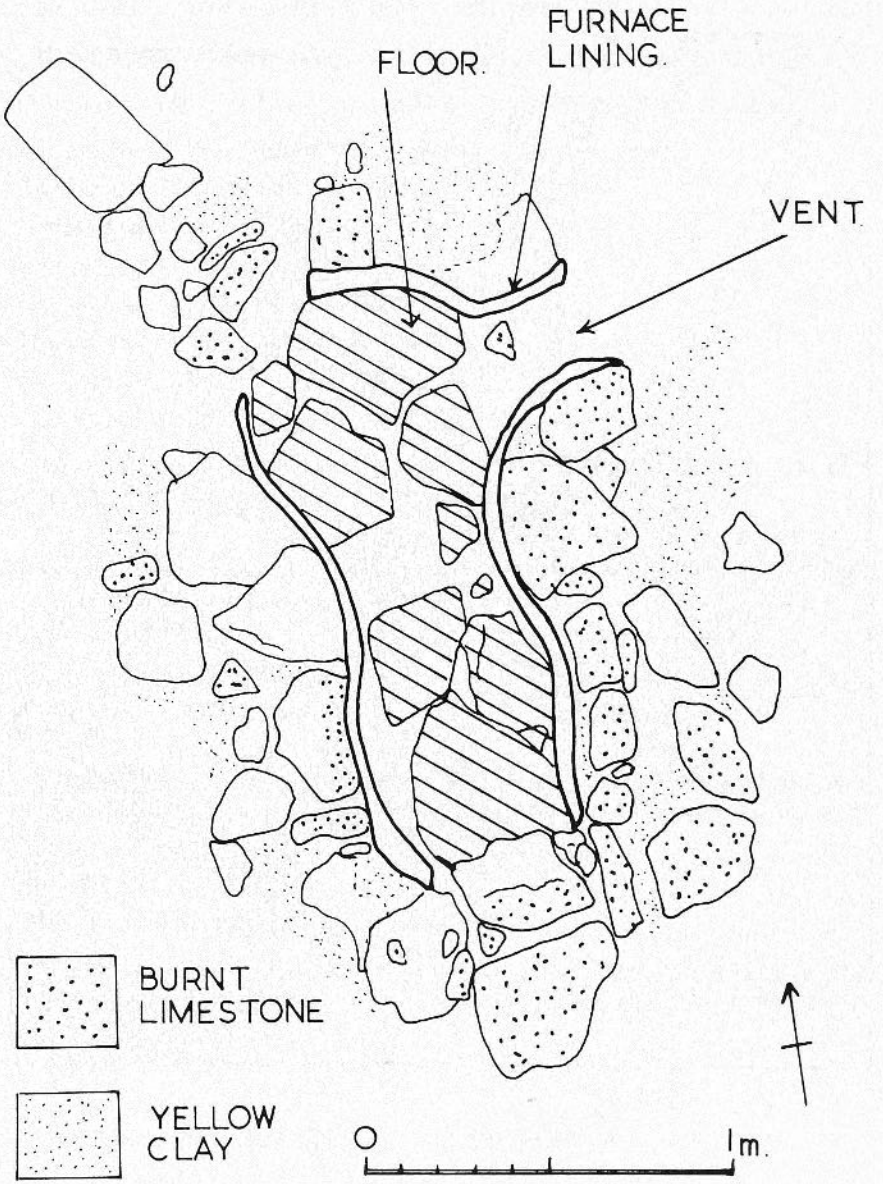

Fig 15 Plan of hearth F2 at Ashton, 1979

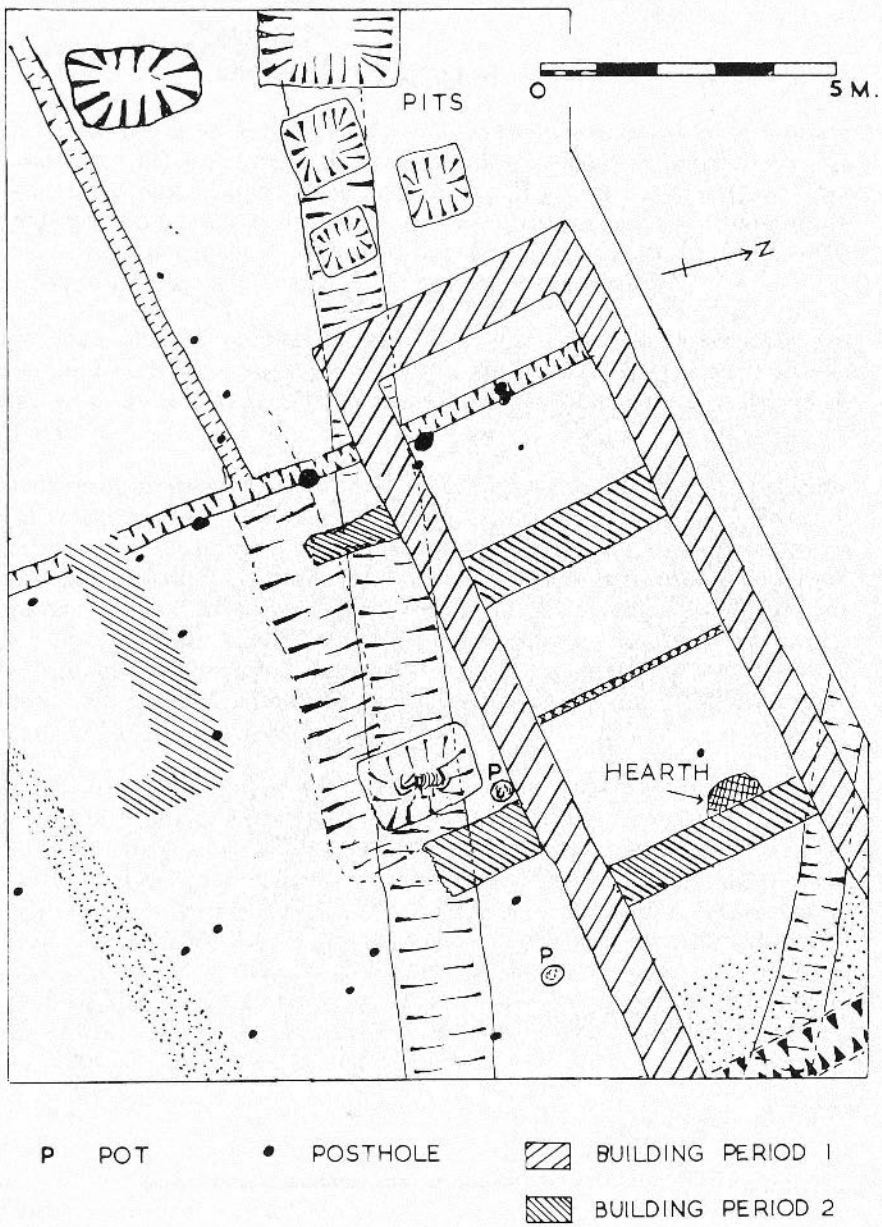

Fig 16 Plan of Ashton excavations 1980

A Nene Valley Bibliography

by Richard Hillier

The following books and articles were published between 1980 and the beginning of 1983, and are ones which may have some interest and appeal to local historians and archaeologists in Peterborough, the former Soke and further afield. All the items listed have passed through my hands in a professional capacity, and almost all of them are available for consultation in the Local Studies Collection of the Central Library, Peterborough.

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The Nene Valley Research Committee has published the following works:

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D.F. Mackreth, *The Saxons in the Nene Valley* (1978) Price 50p

Durobrivae 1, 1973 (out of print)
Durobrivae 2, 1974 (out of print)
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These publications, together with this Review for 1984, are available from Mrs L. Rollo, Archaeological Field Centre, Ham Lane, Orton Waterville, Peterborough, PE2 0UU.