

# Excavations in a Medieval Market Town: Mountsorrel, Leicestershire,

*by John Lucas*

Mountsorrel is situated 12 kms north of Leicester and forms a linear settlement straddling the A6, Leicester to Derby road. It lies on a keuper marl capped gravel terrace on the west side of the Soar valley, and skirts a large granodiorite outcrop. A castle was built on this outcrop in 1080 but there was no mention of the town in the Domesday Book. The earliest reference to it was in 12th century market charters which established a weekly market and an annual fair. Only a little is known of the town's subsequent history until the 17th century when it started to expand. The introduction of the hosiery industry and the impact of the 18th century improvement of water transport on the local quarries, stimulated a greater development of the town in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Thus the redevelopment of an area of one hectare on the east side of the main road in the centre of Mountsorrel represented a major threat to the historic core of this medieval market town. An excavation was therefore undertaken and this was carried out by the Leicestershire Archaeological Unit under the direction of John Lucas. It was supported by a Manpower Services Community Programme Scheme, administered by the Leicestershire County Council's Community Programme Agency. The purpose of the scheme was to assist the excavation and to promote and publicise the project within the community. With the co-operation of the Charnwood District Council, the Mountsorrel Parish Council and the developers, SOL Construction, and with financial contributions from both councils, the excavation commenced in April 1986 and was completed in September 1986. The development enveloped a series of properties that lay between the main road and the edge of the modern floodplain. Two areas were investigated, one at number 13, The Market Place, and the other at numbers 1 and 3, Leicester Road (Fig. 1).

In the Market Place an area of 360 sq metres was opened up within the boundaries of a single property (Fig. 1). The demolition rubble and garden soil were removed by machine. A cellar, set back 5 metres from the modern street frontage, together with traces of a slate floor and a granite foundation orientated east to west (Fig. 2) represented the last building that occupied this plot. Photographic evidence indicates that this had a brick superstructure and had been used as a shop. It had an entrance to its rear yard on its south side. The pottery from the make up for its floor suggests an 18th or 19th century date for this building. On both the east and west sides of the cellar earlier cellars were located. These were probably associated with a floor level indicated by the survival of two small areas of pitched stone, and a rectangular, granite sided hearth (Fig. 3). There were no traces of the foundations of the building within the area of the excavation. These features were dated to the 16th or 17th century.

The area to the east of the cellars was not deeply stratified, once the modern yard and garden soil had been removed only features that cut into the natural ground survived

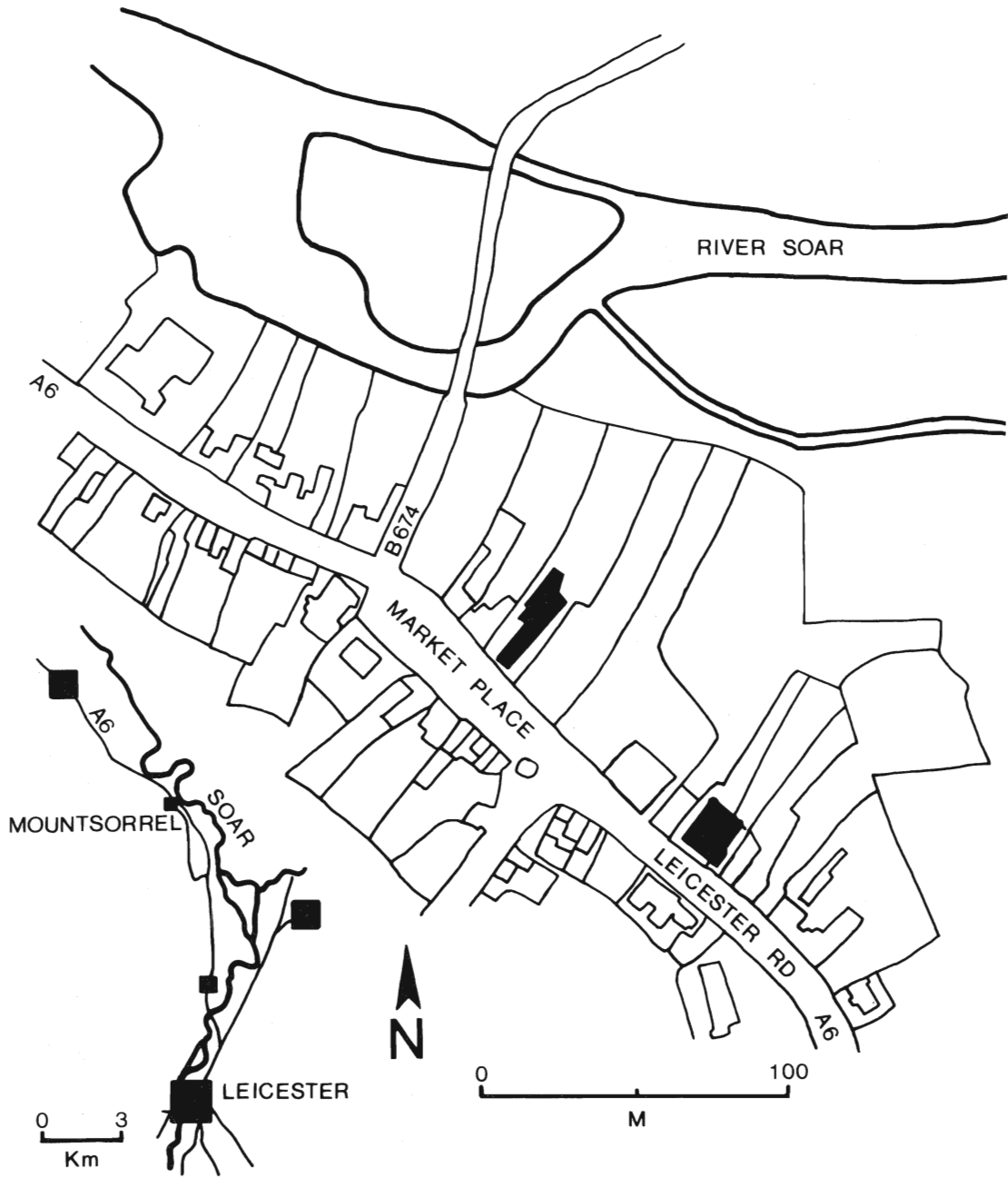
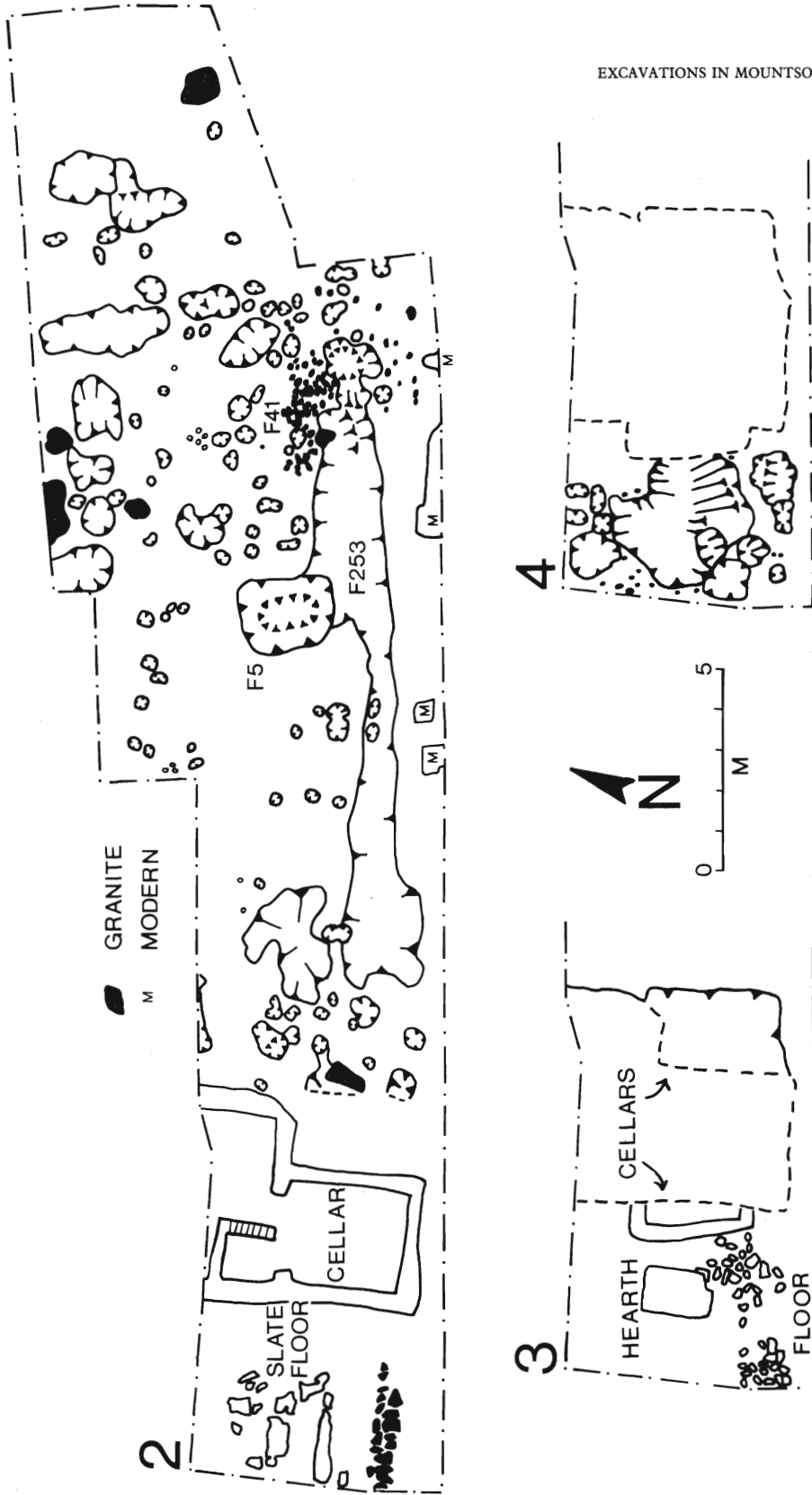


Fig. 1 Location plan: Mountsorrel and the sites excavated



Figs. 2-4 The Market Place: excavated features and the 18th/19th century building (2); the 16th/17th century building (3); and the medieval features at the west end of the site (4).

(Fig. 2). Many of these contained no evidence to indicate their date or function, but some were obviously modern and these were predominantly associated with the provision of the various services. In the period from the 17th century onwards only a few small rubbish pits and a dog inhumanation were identified.

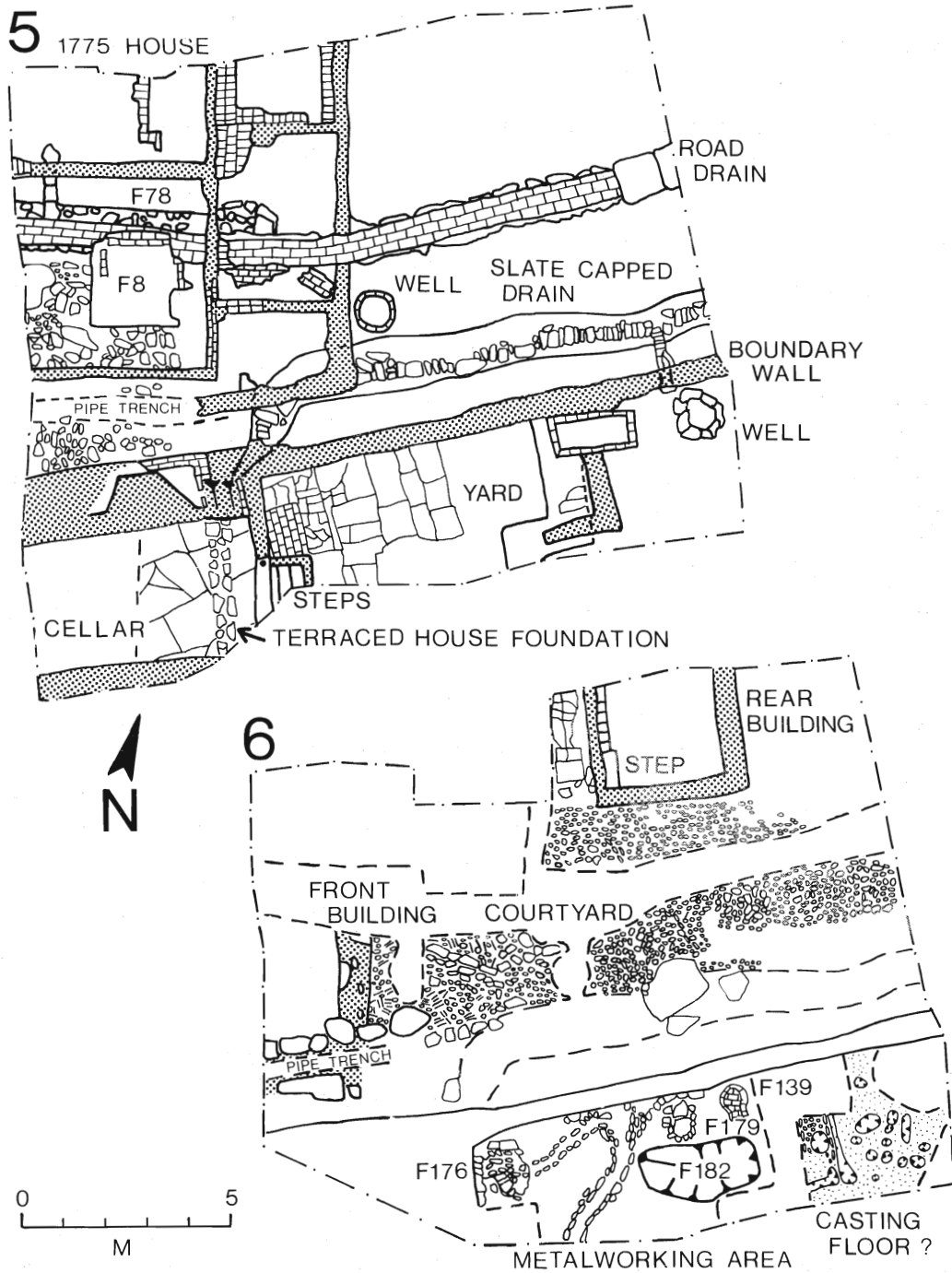
The existence of several small timber posted buildings was indicated by the presence of numerous small post holes. The small number of these that can be dated have a date range from the 12th to the 16th century and thus they may have predominantly belonged to the medieval period. In the centre of this area was a large cesspit, F5, 3.5 metres deep and dated to the late 12th to 13th century. Associated with this was a ditch, F253, which drained west to east. At its east end it cut into a cobbled area, F41, which subsequently had been heavily disturbed (Fig. 2). The medieval features at the west end of the excavation were more densely concentrated. These appeared below the 16th or 17th century building and consisted of several small pits, a possible hearth, some post holes and numerous stake holes (Fig. 4). These date from the late 12th through to the early 14th century. Here and throughout this plot there seems to be a dearth of activity in the period from the later 14th through to the early 16th century. This suggests that the national economic decline of this period was affecting Mountsorrel, but the evidence of a single plot is far from conclusive.

The absence of any substantial medieval building suggests that the plots fronting the Market Place may not have been intensely occupied, even in the relatively more prosperous 12th and 13th centuries. There is, though, a possibility that a building fronting this plot lay to the west of the excavation under the present footpath and road. If this was the case there must have been some re-alignment of the street frontages, but any such movement must have been quite small, as this part of the town is hemmed in by the high ground immediately to the west.

A second area was examined 75 metres to the south; it comprised two properties, numbers 1 and 3, Leicester Road. Photographic evidence shows that the former was a house with a brick superstructure dated to 1775; it had been used as a saddlery since 1859. Its neighbour was a simple brick terraced house of unknown date. The topsoil was removed by machine and an area of 220 sq metres was examined.

The substantial mortared granite foundations revealed the final plan of the 1775 house (Fig. 5); the original building had undergone several alterations. The brick floors and the east to west walls which divided the front of the building into two rooms with, to the south, an entrance to the rear of the premises, were, together with the addition of a washroom and pantry at the rear, the final alterations. Stairs had also been added to accommodate the lower floor level at the rear. At an earlier period the front of the building had been divided by the east to west wall F78 (Fig. 5). In the room to the south of this was a large rectangular mortared granite foundation. This could have been the foundation to a forge, and hence the saddlery was probably preceded by a blacksmith's shop. The large foundation had been built directly on top of a floor made up of large granite cobbles; this seems to have been part of the original building, as too was a large arched, brick drain that was found to be still connected to the modern road drains. It drained west to east and continued, beyond the property's eastern boundary, towards the river. The yard to the rear of the property contained a brick lined well.

Traces of the superstructure of the brick terraced house that occupied the property to the south were located. Its eastern wall had a foundation that consisted of loosely packed unmortared granite, but its north and south walls were built straight onto the foundations of a much more substantial earlier building (Fig. 5). This was built probably just before the 1775 house next door: all that survived of it was the cellar. This had mortared granite walls, which were plastered and painted white, and a floor of large flags, 0.06 metres thick.



Figs. 5-6 Leicester Road: the post 1750 features (5), and the courtyard and the metalworking phases (6).

A sloping sill in the north wall indicated the position of the cellar window and the original stairs were located in the centre of the east wall. These were later blocked, and a new stairway was inserted at the east end of the south wall. The evidence from the cellar suggests that this was a substantial well-built house. To the rear was a yard; its original fine cobble surface had been replaced by a slate flag floor. Only traces of this survived, for later the level of the yard was raised slightly and the floor was relaid. Subsequently the western edge of the yard was relaid with brick. The yard extended from the house to a brick wall at the rear. A rectangular cesspit indicated the presence of a toilet at the north end of this wall. These features were probably associated with the small brick terraced house. The brick wall though was a later rebuild of a wall with a substantial granite packed foundation, and this was contemporary with the slate flag yard. To the east of this wall was a stone-lined well.

Both the area around the well, and the cellar were drained, via holes in the north boundary wall, into a narrow stone-lined, slate-covered drain (Fig. 5). Orientated west to east this lay entirely below the adjacent property but had no connections with it. It represents the only exception to the completely separate histories of the two properties investigated here, that is, until the earlier medieval flood deposits were reached.

Within the northern property a new layout, originating within the period 1725-1750, was revealed with the removal of the 1775 building. The disturbance caused by the latter left only the remnants of a much smaller building represented by large blocks of granite that indicated the position of its south and east walls (Fig. 6). To the east of this was an extensive granite-built yard, which continued beyond the eastern limits of the excavation. On its northern edge was a building which extended up to the northern boundary wall and would have measured five by four metres. It had a packed granite foundation and a mortared granite superstructure. The doorway in its west wall had a single step, which was required as its slate floor was at a lower level than the yard. The combination of a large yard with only relatively small buildings is the principle evidence for attempting to identify the use of the plot at this time. Previously, most of this plot seems to have been uninhabitable as the ground level sloped steeply from west to east and much of the lower ground to the east was waterlogged and formed part of the floodplain. It would seem that only when there was an increased demand for land as the town expanded in the 18th century, was it considered worthwhile to go to the trouble of dumping large amounts of soil to raise the land out of the floodplain.

The cellared building on the adjacent property destroyed all evidence of any earlier buildings at the front of the plot, but the area to the rear had been used for metalworking in the late 16th or early 17th century (Fig. 6). The flat granite bases of several furnaces or hearths survived (Fig. 6), but their superstructures were destroyed. The most westerly hearth, F176, was possibly rectangular in shape, and had a stone lined drain beneath it, presumably to take away any excess moisture. It drained eastwards and joined a similar drain that was orientated south west to north east. Their similarity suggests that another hearth could have been positioned at the southerly end of this second drain, beyond the limits of the excavation. The hearth, F175, was possibly circular and had another hearth just to the south of it, but 0.25 metres higher. Its granite base had been replaced three times, the final time with a small brick structure, F139. The slag from these features suggests these were smithing hearths. There was no definite evidence of any smelting taking place but just to the east of the hearths was an area of sand that contained narrow channels and several small depressions. This may have been a casting floor but the lack of any definite evidence of smelting makes this interpretation problematical. Analysis of the slag may solve this problem, but interpretation is difficult, particularly as only part of the plot was excavated. To the south of the central hearths was a large ash and charcoal filled

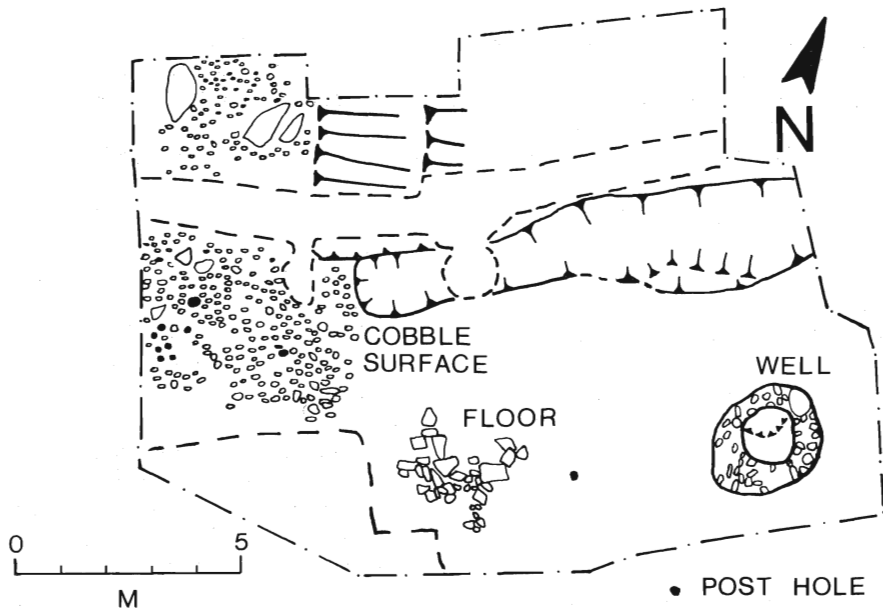


Fig. 7 Leicester Road, the medieval features.

depression, F182, with a hard, heat-affected bottom which suggests this may have been a smithing hearth for large pieces of iron. A similar hearth was found below the possible casting floor.

In common with the site in the Market Place, on both these plots there was very little activity in the 15th and 16th centuries, but both revealed evidence of occupation in the 14th century. Beneath the area of metalworking there was the remains of a pitched stone floor with a stone line well five metres to the east (Fig. 7). With the exception of a single post hole, there was no indication of any other structures. In the property to the north, the eastern half of the areas was part of the floodplain but there were traces of occupation on the higher ground to the west. Here, lying directly on the natural ground was the remains of a rough cobble surface and some timber structures, indicated by a few small post holes and stake holes (Fig. 7). A narrow ditch, on the same alignment as the later property boundary, could show a continuity of the property division between the two plots, with this 14th century ditch originating the division. These traces of 14th century activities were the earliest evidence of occupation identified, although late 12th and 13th century material was found in the waterlogged area to the east.

Thus this second site was first occupied at a slightly later date than the site in the Market Place, but it had a similar period of decline in the later medieval period. It was probably not until the 17th century that it was extensively occupied as the town began to expand along the line of the main road.

The two excavations have therefore helped to show how Mountsorrel has developed from the 12th century through to the present day. The finds from the two sites provide a sample of the artefacts being used throughout this period. Analysis of these should be very useful in revealing how their character reflects Mountsorrel's position between the major market centres of Leicester, Nottingham and Derby.