EXCAVATIONS IN LEICESTER 1965-1968

by

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During the years 1965-1968 a considerable amount of work has been done on Roman Leicester. The following brief account is an attempt to show the progress made, and to indicate some of the outstanding problems. A full report is in preparation and should appear later in the new Romano-British Journal, Britannia Romana.

Most of the discoveries of the past three years have been made in the course of museum excavations, but some notable finds have come from building operations, especially from the work connected with the Underpass. The line of the latter cuts right through the west wing of the Roman forum, and the subsidiary excavations made in connection with road developments have brought to light other finds which have been especially useful in checking and extending the street plan of the Roman town. Large quantities of pottery have been found during these excavations, but the most interesting group contained a rough storage jar of native manufacture and six samian bowls of the Claudian-Neronian period. These bowls were nearly complete; all bore potter's stamps and examination of the footrings showed that they had never been used.

During the last three years also large quantities of medieval and post-medieval pottery have been recovered from both the Museum excavations and commercial developments, while occasional fragmentary remains of features of these periods have also been found. With one or two exceptions however the following account will be limited to the Roman remains found.

The Museum excavations of 1965-1968 can be divided into three sections, concerned respectively with (I) the forum, (II) the defences, (III) other buildings in the town.

I. THE FORUM

Three sites were explored in 1965 and one in 1966; all were in the area due to be affected by the building of the Underpass, south of the original line of St. Nicholas Street. (see plan, fig. 1).

Trench I (1965), across the south wing of the forum, confirmed the position and alignment of two walls found further west by Mr. M. G. Hebditch in 1963. Both walls in I (1965) had been completely robbed, and immediately beside the more southerly of the two there ran a third robber trench. The latter was not found by Mr. Hebditch and may have been a drain rather than a wall, as a large fragment of concrete capping still remained in position, overhanging the robber trench and overlain by later Roman layer. All the floors in trench I had been destroyed by later pits, but
fragments of thick mortar floors were seen in the sections. Fifteen feet further south of the ? drain another robbed wall was located and also a build-up of occupation levels of quite different character from anything known to exist within the forum itself. Unfortunately it was only possible to expose these features over a very small area. It could still be seen from the section that some of them, at least, probably antedated the forum. The area between these levels and the forum walls, a strip about fifteen feet wide, had been considerably disturbed in medieval times and excavation was further hamp­ered by the presence of massive modern concrete foundations. Typical road-like silt was observed in the section overlying the concrete capping of the ? drain and the presence of an east-west street or possibly even an open cobbled space is indicated.

Trench II (1965) cut across the east wing of the forum, and was intended to check the southward continuation of two north-south walls observed during the sinking of foundations in 1902 on the north side of St. Nicholas Street. In fact three parallel walls of the forum were discovered, of which the two on the interior were again represented only by robber trenches. The third wall, which was still standing to its original height, was the outer colonnade wall of the east wing, and was built of granite set in lime mortar. The stylobate blocks of Derbyshire millstone grit were still in position. The foundations for the stylobate were five feet deep and had a maximum width of four feet, while the stylobate blocks themselves were three feet square and one foot thick. The outer colonnade was eighteen feet wide and the range of rooms behind it only slightly narrower. The trench was extended west in an attempt to locate the inner colonnade wall, but no trace of this was found. Instead, an east-west wall was uncovered which, after running west for nineteen feet, turned south. Although space was cramped, search was made for a northward continuation but such evidence as there was indicated that no wall ran north from this corner, where the inner colonnade might have been expected. On the other hand evidence suggesting make-up for interior floors was found further west still.

East of the external colonnade ran a street, at least twenty feet wide, made up of very hard rammed gravel. Continual re-surfacing had built up the street surface to a level three feet above that of the stylobate. Silt from these later levels had washed right over the stylobate, and inside the colonnade. A similar occurrence was noted at Cirencester, but at Leicester there was no indication of any attempt to lay floors while this silting process continued, and use of the portico must have been made extremely difficult.

Reference to the plan (fig. 1) shows that this street is likely to be a subsidiary one, the existence of what is probably the via decumana having been checked at a point north of Guildhall Lane and in Peacock Lane. Below the first layer of metalling earlier occupation levels and the stake holes of a timber structure were found.

On the east side of the street, opposite the forum, one wall and some traces of flooring were found belonging to a building, probably a domestic one, clearly constructed later than the forum. By contrast with the colonnade wall of the forum the only wall of this building to be found had foundations
only three feet wide, not quite three feet deep and consisting of large blocks of granite set in clay. Above ground level the wall was mortared. This may well be part of the building under the Midland Bank which was partly excavated in 1954.4

Trench IV (1965) (fig. 1) was intended to cut the walls of the south wing of the forum, and to prove if possible that the basilica lay on this side, as had seemed most likely by considering the results of previous excavations and by adopting a process of elimination. Extensive robbing and disturbance in post-Roman times had, once again, destroyed most of the evidence. One edge of a north-south robber trench was found with what seemed to be interior floors to the west of it. This should be the interior colonnade wall of the west wing. No east-west walls of the south wing were found. Four blocks of millstone grit of similar size and shape to the stylobate blocks of the east wing (see above) were found lying in a roughly straight east-west line, but they were unmonared and rested immediately on undisturbed sand. Destruction levels containing smashed roof-tiles, fragments of mortar floor and column drums overlay these blocks and occupation levels to the south of them. No floors were found in situ.

In 1966 a further attempt was made to elucidate the problem of the position of the basilica (fig. 1, I (1966)). Here two parallel robber trenches, fourteen feet apart, were located. Traces of mortar floor remained above a layer of granite chips which had formed the base for the floor. Unfortunately finds from below the floor levels here and in other trenches were few, and are still being examined with other material from the whole forum area, including the street and adjacent buildings.

In 1967 the excavation of the north end of the Underpass revealed further information about the north wing of the forum which may be relevant to the question of the siting of the basilica (fig. 1, I (1967)). Three parallel east-west walls were found, and one of these lined up with the most southerly of those found by Mr. Hebditch in 1961.5 This wall and another twenty-two feet further south of it differed from the other forum walls so far discovered in that the foundations were not cut into the undisturbed sand at all but rested on it. The faces of these walls were covered with plaster in which lines had been incised to give the impression of false jointing. This feature was also observed by Mr. Hebditch in 19616, on the outer colonnade wall of the north wing. Yet another wall ran east-west sixteen feet further south of the latter, and this time its foundations had penetrated the undisturbed sand.

These discoveries raise the possibility that the basilica lay on the north side of the forum, instead of on the south as had hitherto been assumed, but the question must be reserved for fuller discussion in Britannia Romana.

II. THE DEFENCES

Sections were cut through the town defences on the south in 1966 and on the east in 1968. (Fig. 1, II (1966), IV (1968)). The 1966 section showed clearly the foundations of the stone wall and beyond this two ditches. The
foundations had been about nine feet wide, and had been dug, not into un­
disturbed ground, but through a build-up of earlier occupation layers con­
taining second-century pottery. It should be emphasised that only a very small area of these levels remained undisturbed and they yielded only a handful of sherds. The upper part of the wall and part of the foundations had been robbed, but the foundations remaining were of large blocks of granite, packed tightly together with clay; there was no mortar. In 1968, in a service trench on Southgate Street, opposite the end of Friar Lane, a very thick stone wall was seen. A line joining this with the wall in II 1966 should give a possible line for the south defences. Between the wall and the inner ditch was a berm ten feet wide. Beneath the wall and parallel with it was a line of post-hole pits, represented by three in the excavated area. Each of these was about eighteen inches in diameter and at least eighteen inches deep. The holes were dug to the side or at one end of shallower depressions. All the posts had been removed and the holes and the shallow scoops packed with large blocks of granite at the same time as the building of the wall. Just in front of the town wall, and again roughly parallel with it, ran two small U-shaped gullies with flat bottoms. These were apparently about three feet wide and eighteen inches to two feet deep, but the medieval and modern disturbance of the site may have removed the upper levels through which the gullies were dug. Because of the destruction of stratification caused by the building and later robbing of the wall and by subsequent pits, it was not possible to relate these post-holes and gullies to the levels observed behind the wall. No trace of an early bank which might have been associated with them was found. It is, however, certain that these features are earlier than the town wall, but it is not possible to say how much earlier on the strati­
graphical evidence obtained. Neither can it be certain that the post-holes and gullies are contemporary with each other, though their roughly parallel alignment makes this probable. It is worth noting, in this connection, that one of the gullies, or one not unlike it, was seen during building operations in 1939 about thirty or forty-yards further east and recorded by Mr. Cottrill.7 Post-holes and “shallow depressions filled with rough stones” were also recorded.

The ditches here would have presented formidable obstacles to an attacker. That nearest the wall was twenty-feet wide and eight-feet deep; it was V-shaped in section with a step on the north side near the bottom. The second ditch, one yard beyond the first, was thirty five feet wide and ten feet deep with a flat bottom eight feet wide except for a channel about one foot deep and eighteen inches wide on the north. This ditch pattern might be explained by accepting current ideas about the strengthening of the town defences in the province as a whole by the addition of bastions in the later fourth century, which would necessitate the filling-in of the first ditch and the digging of another further out. The filling of both ditches was almost entirely of black soil with a high organic content yielding largely medieval pottery. The filling in the lowest ten-twelve inches of both ditches was of a quite different character, being composed of soft clay, derived presumably from the sides of the ditches themselves by the action of the weather. The
(a) II. (1965) Outer colonnade wall of East wing of forum showing stylobate blocks. Looking West.

(b) III. (1968) View of cellar from above, showing doorway, 4 niches and 2 window sills.
III. (1968) South wall of cellar showing doorway and wall niches.
very scanty finds from these levels were all Roman, though the pottery was not very helpful for any close dating. The only find from the lower levels of the outer ditch, apart from a few fragments of tile and bone, was a jet bead.

A similar ditch system was located in 1968 on the east side of the town, but in view of the time and money available the ditches were not completely excavated. Instead attention was concentrated on the rampart behind the wall, the full width of which was available for excavation for the first time. The rampart here was all one period as in Mr. Wacher's excavation of 1958 between Cumberland Street and Sanvey Gate. It was composed of layers of gravel and turf, the individual sods of which were clearly visible. The town wall had been robbed completely, and unfortunately a modern sewer-pipe had removed all traces of the relationship of wall and rampart at one side of the trench. In the south section it was clear that there was no trench cut into the rampart for the insertion of the wall. Most of the pottery from the rampart was clearly residual, only a few sherds indicating a date not earlier than the third century for its construction. This date of course may well be proved too early when more of the rampart is excavated.

Below the rampart a series of post-holes, gullies and a ditch at right angles to the town wall and extending eastwards beyond it, point to an early phase in development which is of considerable interest and demands further investigation whenever any relevant sites become available. These features did not appear to be of a military character; the ditch was U-shaped with a rounded bottom. It was about four feet wide and three feet deep and at one end had been cut through earlier occupation levels containing Roman pottery. Post-holes were found in one of the gullies, but they were generally shallow and ill-defined.

In 1967 an area between the canal and the river near West Bridge was excavated in the hope of recovering some indication of how far the Roman town had extended in this direction. The area excavated was of necessity a small one, but some interesting finds were made, raising a number of points. There were three quite distinct periods in the use of the site.

The latest of these periods was represented by a number of burials. These were all orientated along an east-west axis with the heads to the west, and while some were single interments others were in groups of two or three. No trace of coffins remained, and the ground around the skeletons was so disturbed that it was not possible to get any idea of date from associated finds, which included Roman, medieval and later pottery, a fourteenth-century floor-tile and a torch battery! It is possible to reduce this date range a little. The burials must have been made after the Roman period, for reasons which will become clear in a moment, and no records exist of an official burial ground in this area in the medieval and post-medieval periods, so there would be a period of several hundred years from the close of the Roman period to the early middle ages when the burials might have been made. The pagan-Saxon period can also be ruled out because of the orientation of the skeletons, but that, at the moment, is as far as it can be taken.
The middle period in the use of the site was represented by patches of street metalling belonging to the Roman town. The grave of one of the skeletons was dug into the surface of the street, hence the conclusion that the site was not used as a burial ground until the existence of the street was forgotten. It seems unlikely that the grave-diggers would have chosen this spot if they had known that the hard gravelled layers existed. The discovery of a street at this point is of considerable interest, especially as, in spite of the patchy nature of the metalling, its position shows that it should belong to a north-south street, and it lies at about the right distance from the next parallel street to the east to form part of the main grid. The position of this street raises the possibility of extending the western limits of the town further than has been considered before and it is possible that the western defences, if any traces now remain, may be sought west of the present course of the river Soar. The possibility that the defences, when built, enclosed a smaller area than that covered by the original street grid, as for example at Silchester, Caister-by-Norwich and Canterbury cannot, however, be ignored.

The street metalling sealed the earliest period of occupation on the site, which was represented by a length of a ditch of military type, V-shaped and with a square-cut cleaning channel at the bottom. The size of the ditch, three feet six inches deep and rather more than six feet across, though hardly a very formidable obstacle in itself, may be compared with that of the inner fort ditch at Cirencester where the defences were strengthened by two further ditches. At Leicester this small ditch may also have formed one of a series though any others have not yet been found. Unfortunately no other structures were found associated with the ditch, so it is not possible to draw any conclusions about the type of military work represented. Whether it is a temporary marching-camp or a permanent fort are questions which must await further investigation. The possibility of linking this ditch with the military-type structures found by Mr. Wacher beneath the north defences near Cumberland Street raises the possibility of a half-legionary fortress at Leicester, such as those at Longthorpe and Newton-on-Trent, but this must remain speculation until further work has been done. In this connection also the timber structures found by Dr. Kenyon beneath the Jewry-Wall site spring to mind, and the mid-first-century pottery found below the Peacock pavement (see below p. 7) and in Lower Redcross Street (see below p. 9) and the earliest structures found on the site at Bath Lane (see below p. 7) may also be relevant. From the pottery found in the ditch at West Bridge it would appear to have been filled by the late-first century, although the street above it cannot have been laid down before 120-125.

III. OTHER BUILDINGS WITHIN THE TOWN

During the winter of 1965-66, after the removal of the Peacock and companion pavements to the Jewry Wall Museum, their site in 50 and 52 St. Nicholas Street became available for excavation. (fig. 1, III (1965)). It was not possible to recover much of the plan of the buildings to which the
pavements belonged, as the site was bounded by the cellar walls of the modern buildings which were still standing. It was found that the two smaller pavements were divided from each other by a timber partition and from the Peacock by a masonry wall which had been robbed in the middle ages. There was little trace of earlier structures on the site, though towards the west there were layers of cobbling which may have been a street. The ground was considerably made up with layers of rubbish, the pottery from which went down only to the late-second century. The absence of any Castor ware was particularly striking. This is interesting as the Peacock pavement seems to date stylistically from the late-third to the early-fourth century, and the smaller pavements look to be later still. The earliest occupation on the site was represented by pits or ditches containing pottery of about the middle of the first century A.D.

At the beginning of 1968 permission was given by S. Russell and Sons Ltd. for a small excavation on their site in Bath Lane (fig. 1, I (1968)). The area concerned was very small and the upper levels had been completely destroyed by nineteenth-century buildings, but enough remained to give a sequence of three periods in the Roman occupation of the site.

The earliest occupation here was represented by timber slots, post-holes and gullies. In the confined space a complete plan was not recoverable. Associated with this period were two hearths, one of which was quite small and shallow while the other was about six feet in diameter and over one-foot deep. No slag or other debris was found in association with these features to give an indication of their function, and in fact the area gave the impression of having been tidied up before it was abandoned. After this the first stone building was erected on the site, represented by a robber trench and rather patchy mortar floor. Painted wall-plaster and roof-tiles were recovered from the layers above the floor.

In the third period a stone building of a quite different plan, with an apse attached to the west wall, was erected on the site. Unfortunately the floors had been removed in the later disturbance of the site, but some tesserae and fragments of wall-plaster were found among the debris in the robbed wall trenches. The pottery from the site ranged from the mid-first century well into the late-second or early-third centuries.

Later in 1968 two further sites in the town were explored. The first of these was in Silver Street, (fig. 1, II (1968)), where one room of a large building was uncovered. It had a number of strange features. The size of the building itself, which had one external wall over three feet thick, is unusual for a domestic building in the town. The foundations of this wall had, moreover, been faced with tiles on the outside below ground level. This may have been an attempt at water-proofing, a subsequent attempt being represented by a massive bank of clay which extended to below the foundations and above the tile facing and surviving Roman levels in the rest of the trench. In these circumstances it was unfortunate that only a short stretch of this wall could be uncovered. Inside the room the floor, a massive structure of concrete six inches thick resting on a dry stone foundation eighteen inches thick, was also sunk below the contemporary ground
level. Remains of a quarter-round moulding were found adjacent to two walls. The internal dimensions of the room were seventeen feet six inches by twelve feet six inches. The massive nature of the building and particularly the character of the floor suggest a bath-building of some kind; on the other hand if the suggestion of water-proofing is correct then possibly a store-building is indicated. Further excavation is, in any case, desirable when suitable sites become available.

On Southgate Street permission was granted for an excavation on an area of land opposite the Midland Red bus station (fig. I, III (1968)). Permission to excavate was sought because of reports of a possible Saxon pottery kiln seen in a service trench in 1964. No sign of this kiln was found. Instead, the complete plan of a Roman cellar about ten feet square with walls surviving to a height of more than six feet was revealed. The doorway also survived, but owing to the proximity of a modern building it was not possible to dig far enough to determine whether the cellar was approached down a ramp or a flight of steps. In each wall of the cellar, though not symmetrically placed, was a recess, three feet high, two feet wide and one foot deep and a sloping window-sill was found in each of two adjacent walls. The cellar was constructed mainly of small blocks of granite, but the door jambs were made entirely of tiles which were also used in the recesses, though not exclusively. From traces of painted plaster which remained on the walls it could be seen that the decoration had been very simple, the walls having been painted white with red angle bands and with a thin blue stripe inside them. The decoration of the recesses followed the same pattern, and a fragment of plain red-painted plaster still adhered to one of the window-sills. The filling of the cellar was composed of layers with a very high organic content and contained only Roman pottery and unglazed Stamford ware. The layers were disposed horizontally and could not have resulted from simple tipping of rubbish into the cellar. They were quite undisturbed and the floor of the cellar had been completely removed before the filling took place. Only a few traces of mortar were found at the bottom of the filling to give an indication of the nature of the floor. Centrally placed below the cellar was a rectangular pit four feet six inches by four feet and originally two feet deep (a small oval pit rather deeper had been dug through it before the cellar was filled). Both of these features contained only Roman pottery.

Outside the cellar an accumulation of earlier occupation levels was excavated, including a number of small hearths and kilns of varying types and belonging to different phases. No floor levels were found of the same period as the cellar which must date to the third or fourth century. The later levels had been removed during the construction of cellars during the nineteenth century. Adjacent to the cellar on the west and pre-dating it, was a rectangular pit, about seven feet by five feet, with a post-hole at each corner, which may have been an earlier timber-lined cellar or underground store.

Two further sites should be briefly mentioned. The first, a site just inside the south defences, north of Friar Lane (fig. I, III (1966)) was ex-
cavated in 1966. The area had been disturbed in medieval and later times down to the undisturbed clay. The only feature remaining was another V-shaped ditch with a square-cut channel at the bottom, though this feature was not so clearly marked as that in I (1967). The ditch was three feet six inches deep and four feet wide. The filling contained pottery later than 120-125 and the layer sealing it, although very similar to the disturbed levels above, contained only Roman pottery, including a sherd of a Castor-ware flanged bowl of third-century date.

An area of Lower Redcross Street (fig. 1, III (1967)) was excavated in 1967. Here again the area has been disturbed down to the undisturbed sand in post-Roman times, and the only Roman features remaining were a number of timber-slots, post-holes and gullies, some of them containing pottery of the mid-first century A.D. These features were mainly sealed by the disturbed layers. A long stretch of wall also uncovered here was of medieval date, and may be associated with the castle.

From the above report it can be seen that the excavations of the last three years have added considerably to our knowledge of Ratae Coritanorum. The line of the defences has been checked on two sides while on the west a new line might be suggested; the pre-rampart structures on the east need further investigation as soon as this is possible. The street pattern is gradually emerging and new buildings have been examined as well as the forum which has rightly absorbed so much attention over recent years. Our knowledge of the forum itself, although it can never be complete, has been considerably increased, while a number of sites at last begin to suggest the area covered by the military occupation of Leicester.16

NOTES

1. J.R.S. LIV (1964), pp. 161-162; further information from Mr. M. G. Hebditch.
2. J.R.S. XXIII (1933), p. 198; also Arch. Journ. LXXV (1918), p. 36, no. 10g.
6. Photograph in Leicester Museum and information from Mr. Hebditch.
9. The fort ditch at Brough was also this shape, see Society of Antiquaries Research Report No. 25 (1969).
11. Information from Mr. J. S. Wacher.
13. In this connection it may be noted that a coin found in a modern repair to the Peacock Pavement during lifting operations was a denarius of Severus Alexander, minted between 222-228. Also, when the pavement was first uncovered in 1898, in the refuse immediately above it were found a denarius of Severus Alexander and a brass of Victorinus. See Arch. Journ. LXXV (1918), p. 37 (12) & (13).
14. In 1874 and 1876 the angle of a building “with one side curved” was found in Bath Lane. According to one report it was within a few feet of the Public Baths which were the site of the 1968 excavation. See Arch. Journ. LXXV (1918), p. 39, no. 15.
The Museum's and the writer's gratitude must here be expressed to the owners of various sites in the City who gave permission for excavations to take place: Leicester Corporation, S. Russell & Sons Ltd., Messrs. Ravensaft Ltd. and the East Midlands Electricity Board. Messrs. Hardow Ltd., the contractors for the Central Ring Road, co-operated most generously by allowing the Museum staff free access to the Underpass excavations at all times, so that a watch could be kept on the work, and also by reserving certain areas adjacent to it where Museum excavations could be carried out. Leicester Corporation and the Ministry of Public Building and Works provided the money necessary to continue the work. Grateful thanks are also due to the many people who have assisted in the excavations either as paid labourers or volunteers. It would be impossible to name them all and invidious to single out some more than others, but mention must be made of Miss E. Blank, Mr. D. M. Calow and Mr. M. G. Gribble who acted as site supervisors, and Miss R. Walton whose help in dealing with the vast quantities of pottery and other finds has been invaluable. In addition, Mr. J. A. Daniell, Assistant Keeper of Antiquities, deserves a special mention for the untiring watch he keeps on any building sites in the City.