

A Romano-British Site at St. Mary's Lane, Portishead, Somerset*

(N.G.R. ST 467755)

By

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SUMMARY

In 1956, deep trenching at Portishead revealed indications of a Romano-British habitation site. The exposed sections were recorded and investigated by minor cuttings as far as was practical. The main occupation can be broadly dated within A.D. 250 to 350 and a substantial masonry building is indicated. The main occupation level in the recorded area is separated from earlier features by a marine silting.

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KEY TO ALL FIGURES

- A. Modern humus.
- B. Post-Roman hillwash.
- C. Main Romano-British occupation level.
- D. Flood silting.
- E. Trias subsoil.
 - 1. Occupation, Building "A".
 - 2. Rubble fall, Building "A".
 - 3. Ash-layer, associated with post-hole.
 - 4. Early occupation layer.

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5. Grey silt filling of ditch no. 1.
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8. Ash associated with ditches 3 and 4.
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- 12 and 13. Foundation and rubble of Building "B".
14. Fall of Building "B" mixed with Roman debris.
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INTRODUCTION

The site was discovered through routine examination of deep cuttings in the district. A machine-cut trench, 13 ft. wide and of an average depth of 5 ft., provided a 170 ft. long section through the site. The examination and recording of the sections was undertaken for the Ministry of Works, Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments. Copies of the original field drawings and report are deposited with the Ministry, the Archæological Survey, Bristol Municipal Museum and with the U.B.S.S. Museum.

There is no known record of this site or any other Romano-British site in the Portishead district.

LOCATION AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site lies adjacent to St. Mary's Lane, Portishead, and to the junction of the Bristol and Clevedon roads with Portishead High Street (*Fig. 55*); O.S. 6 in. plans, Somerset Sheet III, S.W.; N.G.R. ST 467755.

Originally orchard and pasture, the field is now incorporated into the grounds of a secondary modern school. It lies at the foot of the Trias flanking the eastern slope of the Portishead-Clevedon ridge, at the edge of the Gordano Valley alluvial flats. In the valley, 200 yd. east, the cutting showed 10 ft. of alluvium without reaching the Trias and, 600 yd. eastwards, the brickyard cuttings show stratified silts and peats.

As is common in the Bristol District the Trias slope shows heavy erosion by surface water and the Roman levels are covered by from 2 to 4 ft. of hillwash. The subsoil on which the Roman level rests is of similar origin and shows evidence of scouring, leaving lenses of sand. The field has a local reputation for hidden springs and was once crossed by a stream, several times piped and redirected. Notable among the archæological features revealed by the cutting is the intricate system of ditches draining to the valley.

The Gordano Valley drains into the Bristol Channel by the Portishead Pill or Yeo, the mouth of which now forms Portishead Dock. The original course of the Yeo is lost through land drainage works but probably was close to the St. Mary's Lane site.

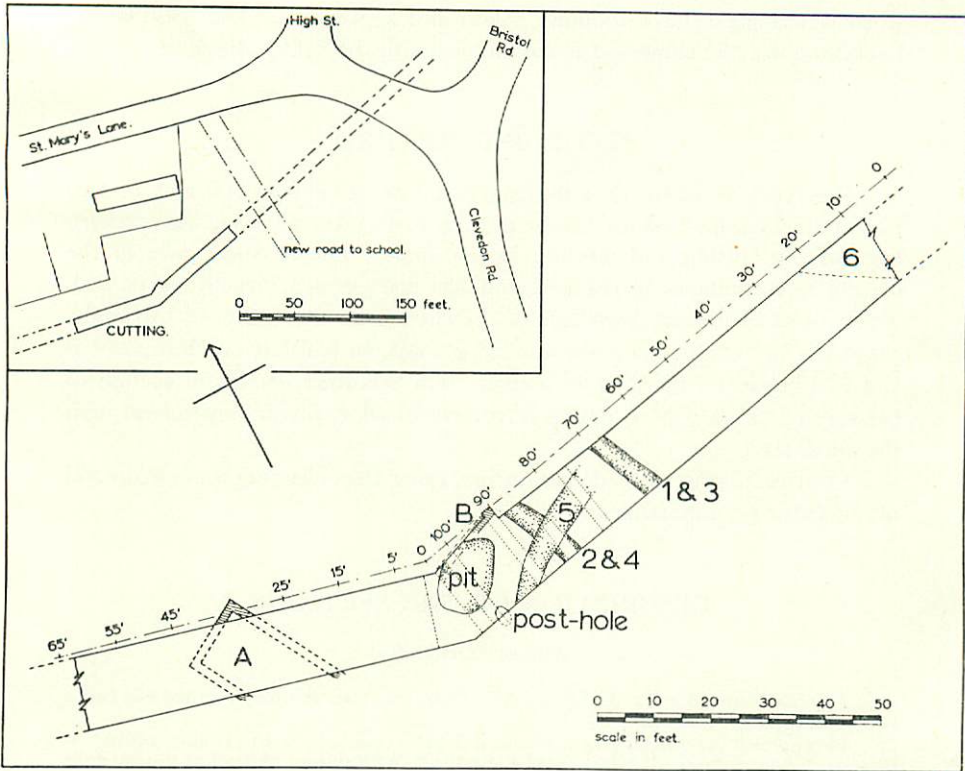


Fig. 55.—Location and site plans. A, B: Buildings, masonry cross-hatched. 1-6: Ditches. Exploratory trenches indicated by fine broken lines.

MAIN STRATIGRAPHY

The cutting followed the hill-slope, west to east. During its course through the site, there was a slight change of direction. This angle more or less coincides with changes in the stratigraphy and it is convenient to use it as a dividing point between west and east halves of the sections. In the western, hillward division the cutting goes down to undisturbed Trias marl. This is covered by marl subsoil, [E], more or less disturbed by the Roman occupation level, [C], which rests on it. Hillwash, [B], and modern soil, [A], complete the section.

At the angle there is a marked downward step in the marl substratum which falls away to north and east. As a result, in the eastern division, the marl lies below the water-table. Intercalated between the marl subsoil [E] and the Roman soil level [C] in the lower cutting, there is a flood silting [D]. Evidence of water scouring on the marl subsoil surface and the fine texture of the flood silting adequately serves to distinguish these two deposits, which,

when waterlogged, have a similar colour and appearance. The flood silting thickens down the slope and is continuous with the valley alluvium.

RECORDING METHOD

Reference is made to a horizontal datum at 30 ft. O.D. and to two longitudinal datum lines marked by posts at 10-ft. intervals along the northern edge of the cutting and meeting at the angle. The northern face of the cutting is continuous throughout and has been drawn directly as viewed. Twelve feet of the southern face of the cutting, in the region of the angle, could not be recorded, for the trenching machine had left no clean section and had burdened the area with spoil. The recorded lengths of section of the south face have been drawn in reverse to allow direct comparison with the north face.

Construction work made excavation, other than cleaning the section and minor cuttings, impossible.

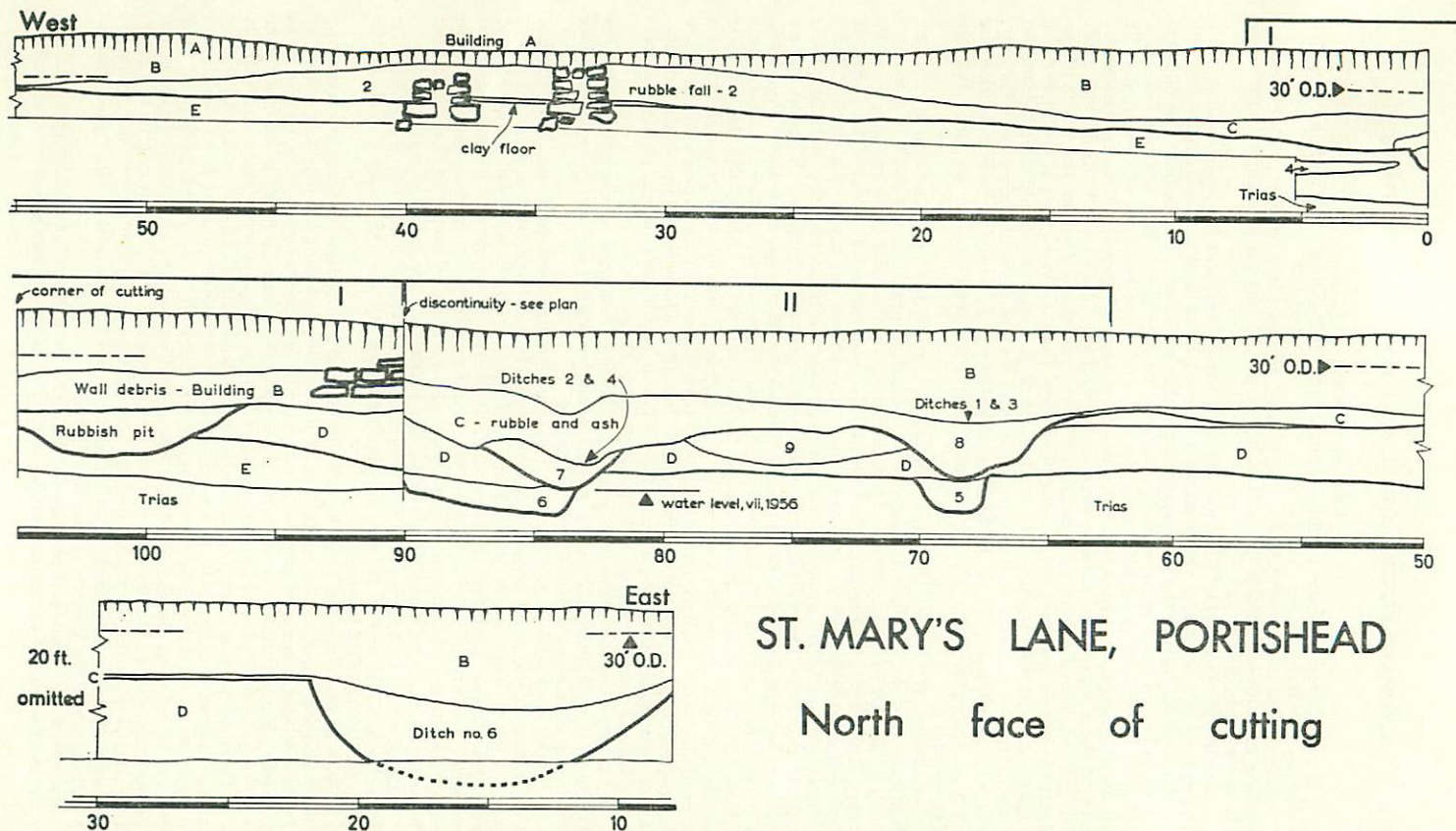
DESCRIPTION OF THE SECTIONS

WESTERN DIVISION

The main features are Building "A" of the main occupation, a post-hole and a deeper occupation layer [4].

Throughout the greater length of the sections in this division the main occupation layer is heavily burdened with the rubble fall [2] of Building "A". The rubble falls away evenly on either side of this building so that it must be an isolated structure or the terminal room of a suite. It has been sectioned obliquely by the trenching machine, obliterating one corner and leaving another in the north face of the cutting (*Fig. 55*). The masonry is of roughly squared Triassic sandstone, 21 in. wide, coursed with a rubble core and seated on an off-set course. The corner in the north face was excavated and was wanting both foundation and bonding courses. The walls exposed in the south face had shallow but well-laid foundations provided with the usual clay cushion as a wall seating. Within the room at off-set level there is a floor of rammed clay and clay with stones. Outside of the room to the west, is another, patchier, clay floor, possibly of a yard or of a timber lean-to. Overlying the clay floors there is an occupation layer of dark soil [1] with pottery which has been assigned to the later fourth century. A late date is also suggested by the rather inferior construction of the building. The marl subsoil on which the building rests shows signs of disturbance and this may be a late building extension over previously cultivated land.

Eastwards the rubble fall passes into the general Roman soil level [C]. In the north face the subsoil [E] shows a considerable depth and within its thickness is a lens of occupation deposit [4] (*Fig. 56* and Sheet 1) consisting of a thin layer of stones and dark soil. Its full extent could not be followed nor were any finds made in it. A large scoria was recovered from the subsoil below this layer. Two small chert flakes and a small worked flint flake were taken from the base of the subsoil. Layer C in the south face is unburdened with rubble and is a dark soil and stone layer about 3 in. thick with scattered shards. At the eastern end of the section it sags into a post-hole, 22 in. by 18 in. by 32 in. deep, filled with damp black ash. Eastwards the ash spreads as a thin layer [3], below the occupation level, to the end of the recorded section. In the succeeding, unrecorded, section there was evidence of a very considerable ash spill. The post-hole was excavated; the only finds were a large-headed iron nail, the right mandible of sheep or goat and some other, fragmentary, bones.



ST. MARY'S LANE, PORTISHEAD

North face of cutting

Fig. 56.—Outline of section in north face of cutting.

EASTERN DIVISION

The main features are a rubbish pit, a wall of Building "B" and the complex of ditches 1 to 6.

Fifteen feet of the north face of the eastern division, from datum 90 ft. to 105 ft., showing the rubbish pit and the wall of Building "B" was cut at a slight angle to the rest of the cutting (Fig. 55).

Rubbish pit (Sheet I). This was cut into the subsoil and the flood silting. The thickness of the latter and the presence of stones in its upper part indicate that the soil removed in digging the pit was spread in this direction. The bulk of the filling is a dark ashy soil with some stones lining the bottom [10]. The identification as a rubbish pit was confirmed by excavating the remnant in the floor of the cutting. It was an irregular oval depression, cut down in a series of steps. Its dimensions at the level of the floor of the cutting were 15 ft. by 10 ft. Its greatest depth was $4\frac{1}{2}$ ft. The greater part of this pit was destroyed by the trenching machine and much of the pottery found on the spoil heaps must have come from it. With the exception of three fragments, all of the Samian ware found *in situ* came from this pit and mainly from the bottom of it. Associated coarse ware appears to be late third to early fourth century. The uppermost 4 to 6 in. of the filling was a water-laid sand [11], indicating that the pit remained open when filled and that it may have continued in use until the site was abandoned.

Building "B" (Sheet I). This building is represented in the section by a short length of wall, the machine having cut through it obliquely at the angle and worked along its length to 90-ft. datum. Its foundation consists of a close packing of small stones [12] set on the Roman occupation level. Associated with the wall is a layer of dark soil and rubble [13]. An exploratory trench was cut across the cutting floor, between 90 and 92 ft., and into the northern face to investigate this wall and ditch no. 5 (Sheet IV). The wall is 20 in. wide on a 24-in. off-set course. The foundation is of the slightest, consisting of a packing of small stones on and in the Roman soil level. The building is obviously post-Roman. Abutting onto the north face of the wall was a flagstone, *in situ*, laid well above the Roman soil level. Above the flagged floor rubble and dark soil reached almost to the surface. Some finds of green glazed ware were made here. The frequent passage of heavy lorries over the wet ground north of the cutting showed up the outline of this building which lies close to the surface. It is a rectangular structure, aligned NE.-SW. It is probably recent, possibly associated with the nearby Grange which is reputedly Tudor.

The ditch complex (Sheets II and III). In the remainder of the cutting, east of datum 90 ft., the ditches form the important archaeological feature. The features are essentially similar in both faces of the cutting.

Ditches no. 1 and no. 2. Ditch no. 1 is aligned approximately S.-N. The remnant of its filling in the cutting floor was excavated. It was filled with a wet, stiff, close, grey silt [5]. Fronds of the Marsh Fern, *Thelypteris palustris*, were well preserved and abundant. In the south face the bottom of the ditch is not quite 5 ft. below datum and contained a depth of from 4 to 6 in. of silt. It ran shallowly at this depth for 7 ft. across the cutting and then deepened suddenly by 12 in. The top of the filling near the north face yielded some sherds and a Kimmeridge Shale spindle whorl.

Ditch no. 2 is also aligned S.-N. and in its depth and grey silt filling [6] is similar to ditch no. 1. It was $4\frac{1}{2}$ ft. wide in the south face, broadening to $6\frac{1}{2}$ ft. wide in the north face, with little or no fall.

Both of these ditches were flooded and buried by the flood silting [D]. Only the filling of ditch no. 2, in the south face of the cutting, remained completely sealed by the flood silting, since new ditches, nos. 3 and 4, were cut through the silting on almost the same alignments. However, from the sealed filling, came an unworked chert flake and two very small shards of coarse vesicular pot which appears to be an early fabric.

Ditch no. 3. Ditch no. 3 is cut through the flood silting and almost exactly superimposed on ditch no. 1. In the north face it broadens to some 6 ft. in width and deepens to 30 in. The filling is charcoal ash [8] with some small lenses and thin strata of burnt clay. In the north face the ash filling spills to either side of the ditch. To the east it forms a thin layer over the bank of spoil from the cutting of the ditch, while to the west it is a thick spread. The filling showed pottery in fair quantity, pieces of Pennant Sandstone, a tooth and bones of horse and a blue glass tessera. A carbonized wheat grain was also recognized.

Ditch no. 4. This is superimposed on ditch no. 2 but aligned slightly to the east of the centre line of the earlier ditch. The section in the south face showed a basal

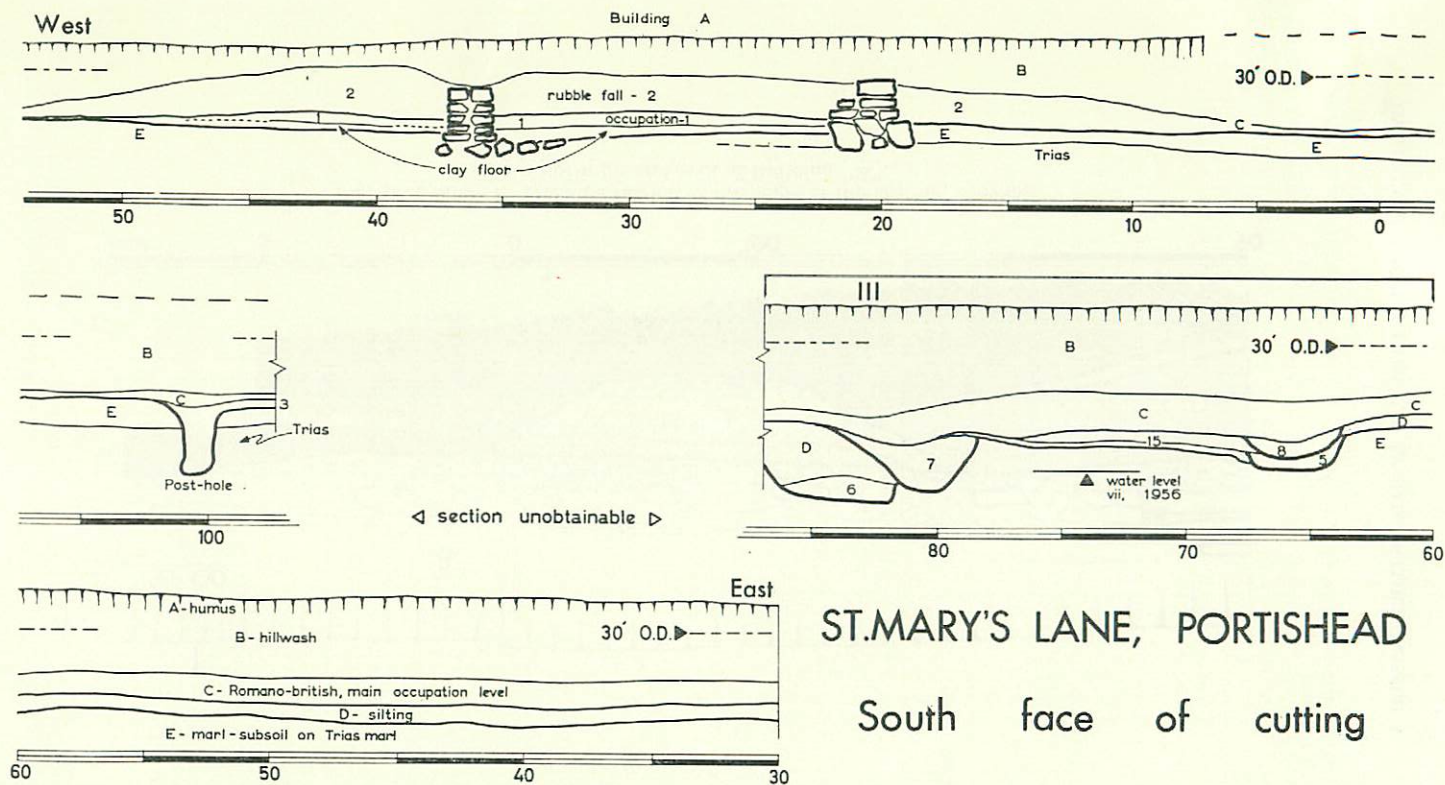


Fig. 57.—Outline of section in south face of cutting.

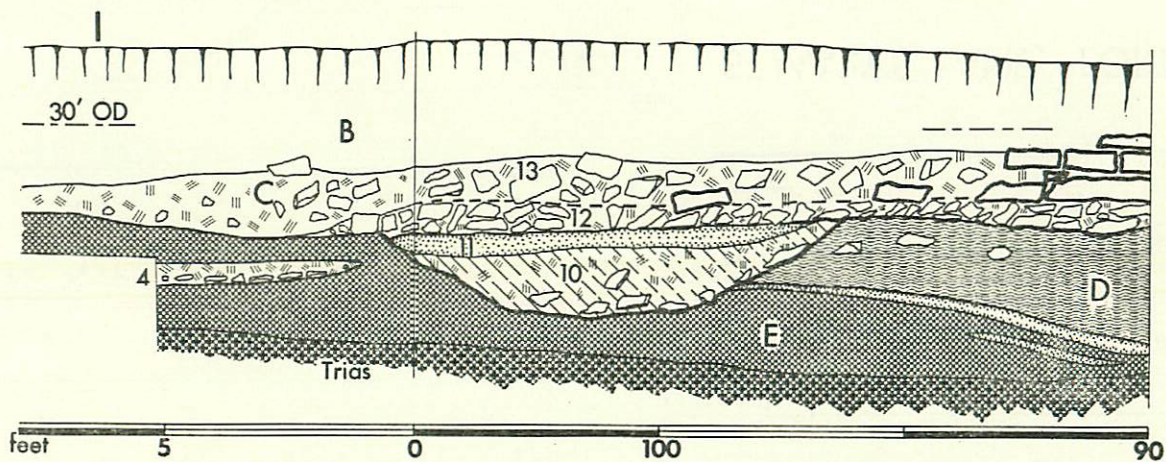


Fig. 58.—Sheet I. Detailed section at the angle of the cutting, showing the rubbish pit and wall of Building "B".

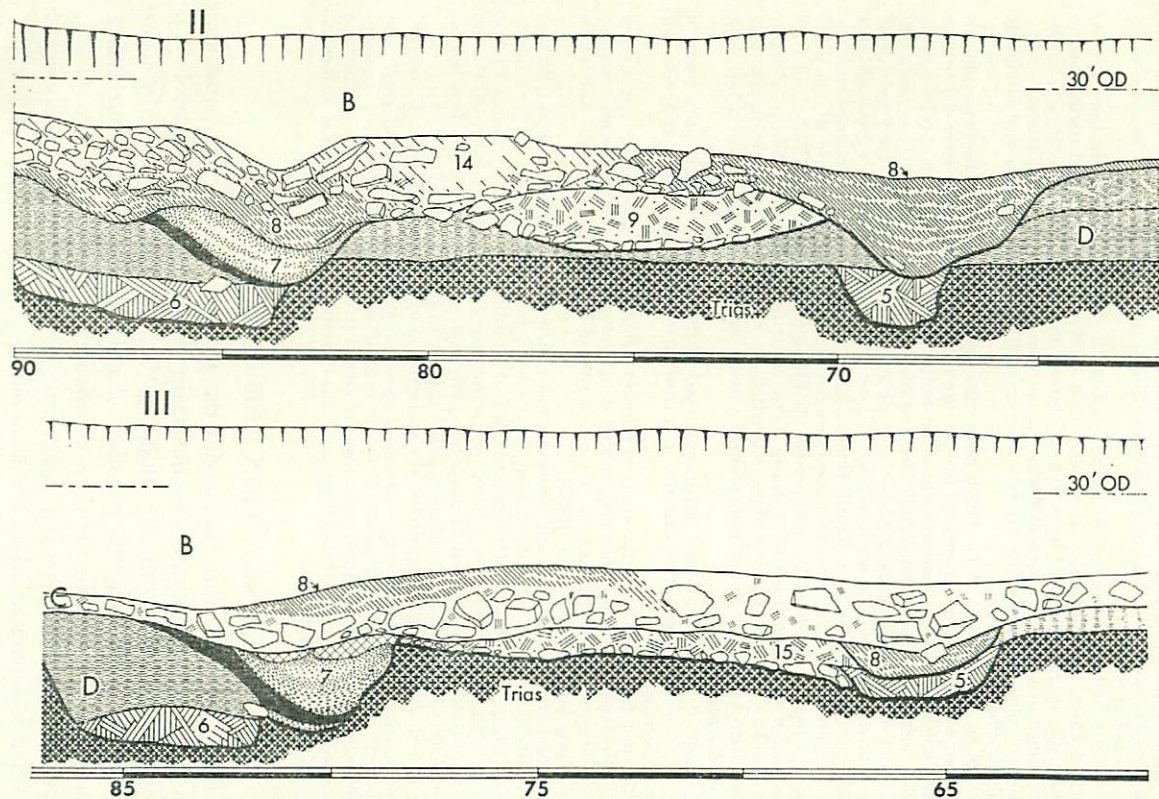


Fig. 59.—Sheet II. Detailed section showing ditches, north face. Sheet III. Detail of ditches in south face.

layer of dark brown silt, thinly overlaid by a highly humified vegetable material which spreads up the western side of the ditch. The remainder of the ditch section is filled by a brown, coarse-textured silt, topped by sand. The whole filling is capped by an irregular spread of clay. In the north face the humified vegetable material appears in the same position as a layer of black silt, while the bulk of the filling is a coarse sand [7]. Filling the hollow of the ditch is the ash spread [8] which seems to be continuous with that filling ditch no. 3.

Layers 9 and 15. Layer 9, in the north face of the cutting, occurs between the 70-ft. and 80-ft. datum points. It appears as a shallow, saucer-shaped depression in the flood silt, its floor marked by a layer of flattish stones. Its filling is similar to the flood silting but contains charcoal flecks, sparse shards and occasional bones.

Layer 15 in the south face stretches between ditches nos. 3 and 4 and obviously resembles layer 9.

Ditch no. 5 (Sheets IV-VI). Ditch no. 5 runs from west to east and was recognized in the floor of the cutting. It entered the cutting from the south face where the section was unrecordable and its remnant could be followed in the cutting to 70-ft. datum, east of which it had been completely stripped out. The ditch remnant was sectioned at 90 to 92 ft., partially excavated between 80 and 90 ft., and completely excavated between 70 and 80 ft. The 90-ft. section (Sheet IV) showed it to have been of large size, at least 10 ft. wide, with gently sloping sides, unlike the S.-N. aligned ditches. At 85-ft. datum, it was found to have been cut across ditch no. 2 and it was filled with heavy boulders (Sheet V). Otherwise the filling throughout was of ashy silt with the bottom of the ditch lined with stones. The stone lining and ashy filling resemble layers 9 and 15 in the vertical sections. As ditch no. 5 was obviously a wide one, it is possible that these, otherwise unexplained, layers are the edges of ditch no. 5 in horizontal section.

The ditch filling contained small, scattered shards of pot, mainly grey ware of third- to fourth-century appearance but including three small burnt and abraded scraps of Samian.

Roman soil level [C]. In the south section the Roman soil level is broken up and heavily burdened by the stones and rubble of a masonry fall, although no masonry structure was visible in the section. Over the rubble layer, between 72-ft. and 82-ft. datum, there is a discrete layer of ash.

In the north face the ash spill from ditches nos. 3 and 4 spreads over the Roman land surface from 50-ft. to 90-ft. datum, mixed with dark soil and debris. The whole has been much disturbed by the masonry fall of Building "B". The collapse of this wall with its slight foundation was no doubt hastened by its being built across the soft filling of ditch no. 4. East of ditch no. 3 the Roman land level extends as a thin layer of dark soil and stones, with occasional shards, to the end of the section.

Ditch no. 6. This was exposed at the eastern end of the north section. Construction work made it impossible to examine it closely. It was sectioned obliquely and its width in the section was about 11 ft. It cannot have been less than 4 ft. deep. The Roman occupation level ran to its western edge. It was filled by a close, slate-blue silt, containing a few stones, bone fragments and charcoal flecks. One shard of Roman ware was found in the filling.

INTERPRETATION AND CONCLUSIONS

The common feature throughout the sections given by the north and south faces of the cutting, is the main Roman occupation level [C]. Undoubtedly related to this are Building "A", the rubbish pit and ditches nos. 3, 4 and 6. Building "B" post-dates it and is clearly recent. Ante-dating the main occupation are: the deep occupation layer [4], sealed by subsoil; the post-hole, since layer [C] passes over it uninterrupted; and ditches nos. 1 and 2, separated off by the flood silting.

The square-cut section of ditches nos. 1 and 2 contrasts strongly with the parabolic section of the later ditches. Their form, depth and similarity of filling make it certain that they are contemporary. The small shards from

the sealed filling of ditch no. 2 are of a distinctive coarse fabric and may be first or second century. The pottery from the top of the filling of ditch no. 1 was pie-dish of late third- to early fourth-century form, but this and the spindle whorl are certainly derived, sinking through the soft filling from ditch no. 3 above.

The small pottery samples suggest a third- to fourth-century date for ditch no. 3, ditch no. 4 and the rubbish pit, while Building "A" is undoubtedly fourth century. The fairly high proportion of Samian shards recovered may indicate a long period of occupation, but as this ware had a high survival value it is valueless for dating when found mixed with later fabrics.

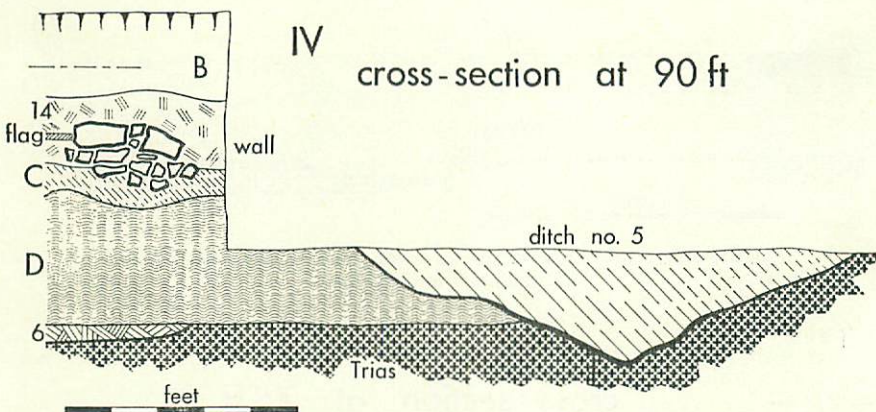


Fig. 60.—Sheet IV. Cross-section of cutting at 90-ft. datum through wall of Building "B" and ditch no. 5.

The post-hole is obviously an earlier feature of the site, since the main occupation level is carried across it. Its ash filling is extraneous and not due to the burning of the timber *in situ*. The conspicuous bulge at the base of the hole suggests that the upright had been levered out and removed. The ash filling was immediate since there was no erosion or silting of the hole. The source of the very considerable spreads of ash seen in the sections seems to have been from a point just south of the angle in the southern face, where, unfortunately, it was impossible to record the section.

Ditch no. 5 post-dates no. 2 and presumably ditch no. 1. If it includes layers 9 and 15, it ante-dates ditches 3 and 4.

The character of the site strongly suggests a Romano-British villa and the situation closely resembles that of the villa in Kingsweston Park. If it is a villa, the ash spread would certainly be from the furnace of a hypocaust. The cutting has been made just north of the main building area and the rubble fall suggests that a fair-sized building awaits excavation.

There may have been an early or reasonably early occupation of the site represented by ditches nos. 1 and 2, and a timber building of which we have one post-hole. Following the flooding of ditches nos. 1 and 2, ditch no. 5

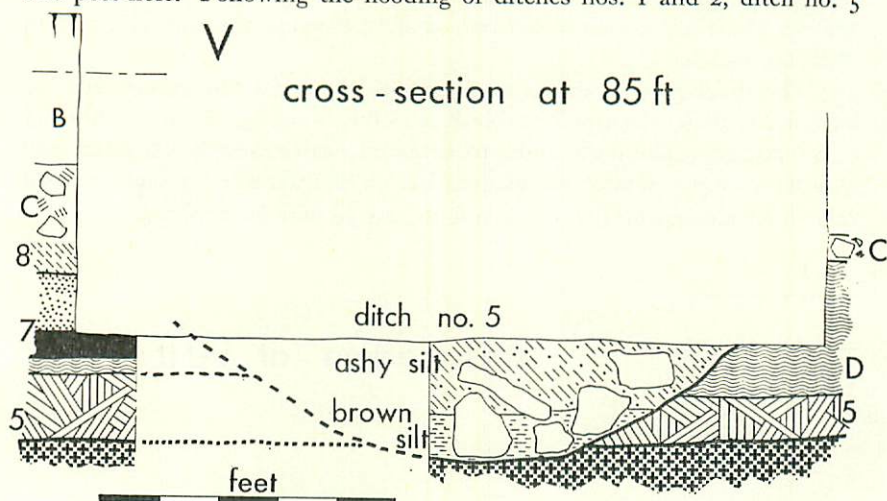


Fig. 61.—Sheet V. Cross-section of cutting at 85 ft., showing relation of ditch no. 5 to ditch no. 2.

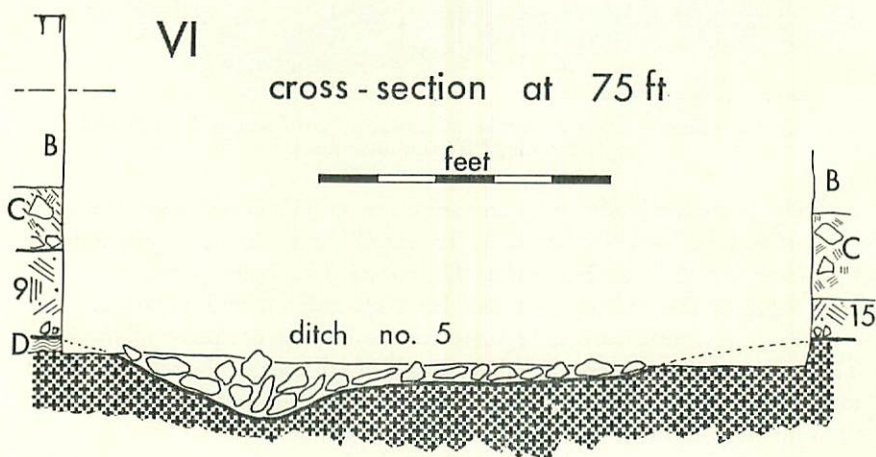


Fig. 62.—Sheet VI. Cross-section of cutting at 75 ft., illustrating possible relation of ditch no. 5 to layers 9 and 15.

was cut. This has an ashy fill and leads from the "furnace area". A masonry building with an hypocaust had been built and the timber building removed. Ditch no. 5 continued as the main drainage channel to the end of the occupation and may have been more of a rubble drain than an open ditch.

The later ditches nos. 3 and 4 certainly carried little water. The sandy filling of ditch no. 4 suggests that this served as a storm-water drain, carrying away infrequent and rapid flows but was usually empty, with a damp-loving vegetation growing on its side. Ditch no. 3 seems not to have carried water but to have served only as a dump for ash. Their siting over the earlier ditches suggests some function connected with the main habitation area. A late addition to the Roman occupation of the site is shown by Building "A".

Apart from its intrinsic interest, the site is important for the possibility it offers of dating one of the earlier marine floodings of the Roman period in the Bristol Channel area.

FINDS

The small pottery sample does not warrant a report. Only one coin was found, a badly preserved barbarous radiate from the Roman soil level at 90-ft. datum, beneath the wall of Building "B".

A most unusual find was the blue glass tessera from the ash filling of ditch no. 3. As one face is worn it is presumably derived from a mosaic pavement. I am grateful to Dr. D. J. Smith for confirming the identification and for the following notes on blue glass tesserae which are rather rare in Britain.

They have been found at the following places: Aldborough, Yorks.; Cirencester, Glos.; Keynsham, Som.; Silchester, Hants.; and London. At Aldborough they were used for picking out the Greek inscriptions on the mosaic in the so-called Basilica; at Cirencester, in the hair and beard of Neptune in a mosaic uncovered in Ashcroft Road in 1905. In London blue glass tesserae were used in a fragmentary pavement showing a peacock and vase on the site of no. 37, Fenchurch Street, and again in the mantle of Bacchus on the pavement found in 1803 in Leadenhall Street. At Silchester they were used in the representation of a cantharus in Room 9, House II, Block 2, and were also used in a mosaic in Room 14 in House 2 of Insula XIV. At Keynsham they were found loose in Room V of the villa.

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