

Excavations in Thetford by B.K. Davison between 1964 and 1970

by Carolyn Dallas

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Cover Illustration

Kilnyard 1966. Excavating a large storage jar (D16 F80).

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Abbreviations

Ac	copper alloy	IW	Ipswich-type ware (late 7th – 9th century)
Cal. Pat. Rolls	Calendar of Patent Rolls	LM	Late Medieval (14th – 15th century)
CUL	Cambridge University Library	LM/EPM	Late Medieval/Early Post-Medieval (15th – 16th century)
DB	Domesday Book	LMT	Late Medieval Transitional Ware (15th – 16th century)
EM	Early Medieval Ware (11th – 12th century)	LS	Late Saxon (10th – early 11th century)
	Fabric A 11th into 12th century	M	Medieval
	Fabric B mid to late 12th century	Med	Medieval
	Fabric C mid 11th into 12th century	NRO	Norfolk Record Office
EM/M	Early Medieval/Medieval (12th-early 13th century)	OGS	Old Ground Surface
EPM	Early Post-Medieval (16th century)	PM	Post-Medieval
ES	Early Saxon (5th-7th century)	R	Roman
GMM	Grimston Medieval (13th – 14th century glazed)	RB	Romano-British
GMT	Grimston Thetford-type (late 11th – 12th century)	SFB	Sunken-featured building
GRE	Glazed red earthenware (16th – 17th century)	SN	St Neots-type ware (10th – 11th century)
HM	Heddingham Ware	ST	Stamford Ware (10th – 13th century)
HMD	Handmade	TBA	Thetford Borough Archives
		TH	Thetford Ware
		THS	Thetford Smooth ware
		Unident.	unidentified

List of abbreviations used in microfiche

(A)–(C)	EM Fabric types	M	Medieval wares
A1, B3 etc	ST Fabric types	PM	Post-Medieval wares
EM	Early Medieval wares	R	Roman pottery
EPM	Early Post-Medieval wares	SF	Small find
GMM	Grimston-type Medieval wares	SN	St Neots-type ware
GMT	Grimston Thetford-type wares	ST	Stamford ware
HM	Heddingham ware	T	Sherd total
HMD	Handmade pottery	TH	Thetford ware
IW	Ipswich-type ware	V	vessel estimate
LM	Late Medieval wares	?	Not known
LS	Late Saxon		

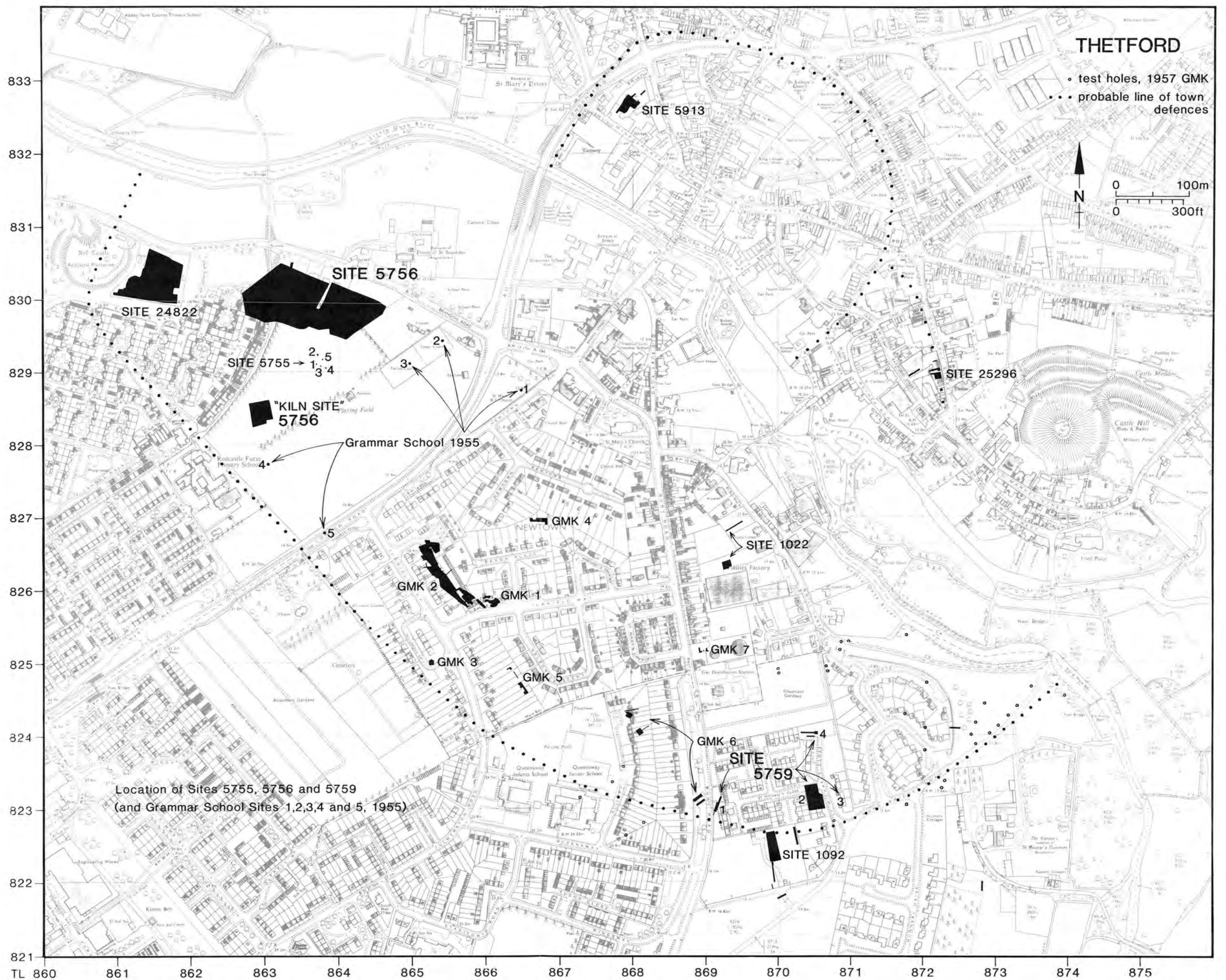


Figure 2 Map of Thetford with underlay based on O.S. 1:2500 maps Crown Copyright Reserved. Excavations by G.M. Knocker are designated GMK. Sites 5755, 5756, 5759, 1022 and 1092 are County Sites and Monuments Record numbers. Scale 1:5000.

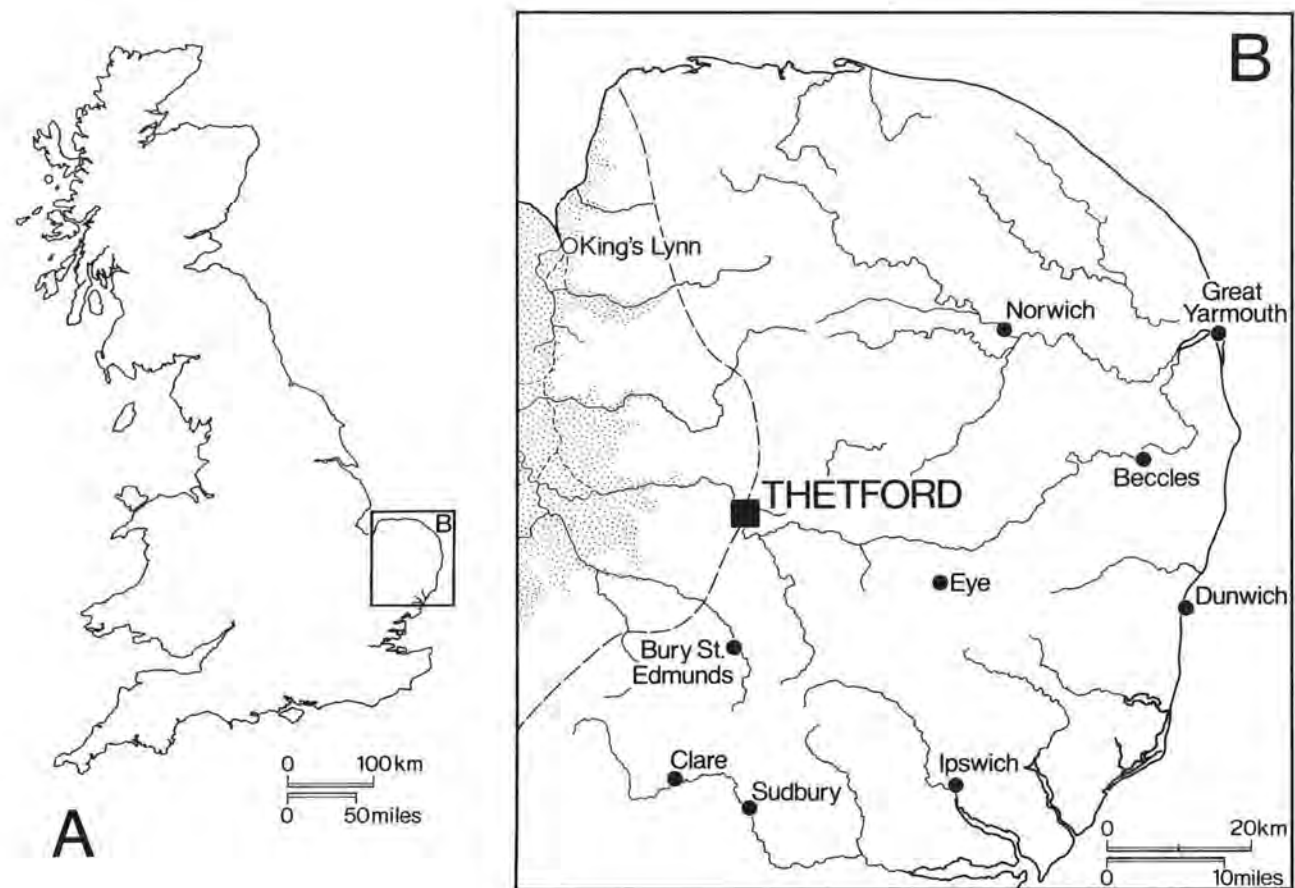


Figure 1 Location maps. B shows: Domesday Book boroughs; King's Lynn; the Icknield Way; the Fen edge; the original course of the Great Ouse River (after Darby 1974).

Part I

General Introduction

Anglo-Saxon and medieval Thetford developed on the Icknield Way at a fordable point at the confluence of the rivers Thet and Little Ouse (Fig.1B) which then connected with the Great Ouse and the Nene, reaching the coast near Wisbech. Therefore, as well as being situated on a major north-to-south route, there was access by water to the Fens, the Wash, and the North Sea. The position of Thetford near the edge of the Fens also provided a depot for east-to-west trade from across the Fens into the heart of East Anglia. Such a dominant position suggests origins in military considerations, trade, and communications.

Although there are some prehistoric finds in the area, the present town has so far not produced major evidence earlier than the Iron Age. Thetford Castle seems to have been an Iron Age fort reused in the Norman period (Green and Clarke 1963), and a site occupied from the Late Iron Age to the fourth century AD has been excavated on Fison Way at Gallows Hill north of the present town (Gregory 1992). Evidence of unstratified finds suggests Roman period occupation on the north river bank opposite Red Castle, and Early and Middle Saxon settlements lay on the south bank in that area (Knocker 1967).

Entries in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle could indicate that an important base for the Vikings was established at Thetford (see below, Documentary Evidence) and the continuous history of the town is usually taken to begin in this period, in the later ninth century. There was a mint here by at least the mid-tenth century, and for a brief period in the late eleventh century Thetford was the seat of a bishopric. The importance of the town in the tenth and eleventh centuries is attested archaeologically by the extent of the defended area on the south bank (Fig.2), of which some of the boundary remains visible on the north-west side of London Road, by the excavation and observations of Guy Knocker within this area (Rogerson and Dallas 1984), and by the possible Late Saxon defences on the north bank. The south bank area was gradually abandoned after the twelfth century (see below, Documentary Evidence) and became little more than pasture by the sixteenth century. The building of new houses on the south bank began in 1912, and continued intermittently

with large-scale post-war redevelopment as part of the London County Council's 'overspill' programme. No archaeological work was undertaken until T.C. Lethbridge and Group-Captain G.M. Knocker in 1947 recognised the significance of the pottery which had been found there and realised the potential of this still largely undisturbed area for the study of a large Late Saxon town, unhindered by roads and standing buildings (Rogerson and Dallas 1984, 2). Knocker carried out excavations and observations from 1948 to 1960 (Knocker and Hughes 1950 a and b; Dunning 1949; Knocker 1967; Rogerson and Dallas 1984).

Within a few years, little of the area remained available for archaeological exploration, and when Thetford Borough Council and London County Council announced plans for building further estates, the opportunity was seized to excavate the last remaining area of any great extent in 1964–6 (Davison 1967). An area south of Brandon Road (Fig.2, Site 5756) was surveyed by the electronic devices available and an area of some three acres was examined (Wilson and Hurst 1965, 173; Wilson and Hurst 1966, 172–3; Davison 1967; Part II below). Evidence of pottery kilns resulted in a separate trench to the south containing six related Late Saxon pottery kilns (Davison 1967; Part III below). Both of these sites remain unique in British archaeology (1987). In 1969–70, further excavations by Brian Davison in the south-east part of the town revealed the complete plan of a pre-Conquest timber church which was replaced in stone (Wilson and Moorhouse 1971, 130–1; Part IV below).

A few other, smaller, excavations have also taken place in Thetford on both south and north banks (see Green and Clarke 1963; Dunmore with Carr 1976; Hare 1979; Rogerson and Dallas 1984; Davies 1991, and Mackay 1957, as well as some trenching by the Thetford Grammar School (Appendix).

Gardens and playing fields are now the only open ground within the southern defences which remain undisturbed by modern activity, and the chance is most unlikely to come again for major excavations such as those described below. The sites remain of not only national, but European, importance.

Part II

Brandon Road 1964–6

I. Summary

In the summers of 1964–6 B.K. Davison undertook three seasons of excavation at Thetford, south of the Little Ouse River, in advance of development. The site chosen for investigation, some three acres in all, had stood open for centuries, and promised to enlarge understanding of this important Late Saxon town, with its probable origins in the submission of East Anglia to the Danes in the late ninth century. Hitherto, knowledge of pre-Conquest Thetford was based largely upon a few scant entries in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the evidence of *Domesday Book* and the excavations carried out by G.M. Knocker. The archaeological evidence of Davison's site indicated that it had been occupied twice before, once in the Roman period and again in the Early Saxon period. About ten round buildings and a few pits represented occupation in the first century AD, when native traditions were still strong. The next period of occupation, the Early Saxon, was represented by four sunken-featured buildings and pits. These were found at the west end of the site and may have been outliers of contemporary occupation at Red Castle, 250 m to the west. After this, the site again lay open until some time in the tenth century when after a period of use of a rural character, this area was densely occupied as part of the sprawling town of Thetford, and within its defensive circuit. The site was now continuously occupied until the sixteenth century. The main interest and aim of the excavation was in the form and character of the Late Saxon town; it was hoped to recover a general plan of a large part of a town of this period, not readily available anywhere else in the country.

Davison's work revealed dense settlement, loosely planned but ranged along well-maintained roads. Buildings, of post-hole construction, were set within individual 'properties', bounded by fences and gullies, which contained many pits. The pits and ditches contained material which hinted at the commerce and industry of Thetford, both in its role as a local port and as home to its inhabitants, estimated at 4000 to 5000 in 1086 (Darby 1971, 141). Sometime in the twelfth century, Thetford's fortunes waned; occupation continued on the north bank but on the excavated site (and elsewhere on the south bank) dense occupation was replaced by a more open pattern of use, possibly industrial, connected with the textile industry, and later agricultural use involving paddocks and corn driers. Even this reduced level of activity came to an abrupt end in the sixteenth century when those parts of Thetford in the hands of religious houses were seized and came into the hand of just one great landowner and were turned over to grazing. Thus the archaeology of Thetford south of the river remained virtually intact until this century.

II. Introduction

In 1964 an area of some seven acres south of Brandon Road was designated for house building by Thetford

Borough Council in conjunction with London County Council as part of the scheme to develop Thetford as a small 'New Town'; the development is now part of the Redcastle Furze housing estate. As this was a chance for a large area excavation within the Late Saxon town, the then Ministry of Works arranged for Brian Davison to conduct excavations in advance of development. The area was examined, and some three acres selected which could be excavated over three seasons.

III. Geology

The site lies on the west side of Thetford 20 m south of Brandon Road at a height of 14 m OD. It is 100 m south of the Little Ouse River and situated on river gravels which in turn rest upon solid chalk 4.50 m down. The gravels are mainly flint gravels, probably derived from glacial sand and gravel, and are probably part of the Freckenham Series (Corbett 1973, 67–8).

In the area opened for excavation, yellow sand (30–60 cm deep) capped the gravels in the northern part of the site. In the southern part, the gravels were exposed but contained many sand pockets. The sand subsoil had weathered yellow-red-brown down to a depth of c. 15 cm and there were many brown and red stained areas in the gravel.

IV. Aims and Methods of Excavation

The aim of the excavation was to recover a general plan of a large area of the Late Saxon town and record as much of the overall plan as possible. This sometimes resulted in loss of detail, but the larger relationships were more clearly revealed.

Before excavation, the land had been under plough and there was a general surface scatter of pottery.

Before excavation, an area of one hundred and ten 50' (15.24 m) squares was examined by three proton magnetometers and one resistivity meter, which showed dense disturbance. In April–May 1964 this survey was followed by twenty hand-dug test trenches 10' (3.04 m) square spread over the entire area available, which revealed evidence of occupation. Work took place over three annual seasons; 29 June–21 August 1964, 28 June–7 August and 30 August–1 October 1965, and 18 April–14 May and 20 June–6 August 1966 – a total of about sixteen weeks in all.

The size and position of the excavated area was determined by the position of boundaries, trees and farm tracks.

A grid of 50' (15.24 m) squares was laid out (on baseline C11–N11). The grid was given a code system of letters running from south to north (J to Q) and numbers running from west to east (17–29) (Fig.10).

Work began on the north part and continued from north-west to south-east. About eighteen grid squares were dug in 1964, about fifteen in 1965, and nineteen in 1966.