

HEREFORDSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGICAL NEWS



HAN 34 January 1978

WOOLHOPE CLUB
ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH SECTION

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Sunday 19 th March	Longtown	Longtown Castle and Craswall area. Leader Mr R Kay
		Meet 11.00 am and 2.00 pm The Crown PH, Longtown
Wednesday 19 th April	Social Evening	Meet 8.00 pm, The Sun Inn, St Owen Street, Hereford
Sunday 30 th April	Ewyas Harold	Settlement Patterns and Castle Site Leader Mrs J O'Donnell
		Meet 11.00 am and 2.00 pm Temple Bar, Ewyas Harold
Sunday 21 st May	Little Hereford	Survey of Deserted Medieval Village Leader Mrs R Skelton
		Meet 11.00 am and 2.00 pm Salwey Arms Hotel, Wooferton, on A49
Sunday 18 th June	Bodenham	Examination of feature known as Tankard Walls, Bodenham. Possible visit to Hampton Court. Leader Mr S Webb
		Meet 11.00 am and 2.00 pm England's Gate PH, Bodenham

Note:

1. If any further information is required about this programme, or if in doubt in case of bad weather, please contact a Committee Member or Leader.
2. Guests are welcome at all field meetings.
3. Members are advised to wear suitable clothing and to bring a packed lunch and hot drinks.

FIELD MEETING AT NANT-Y-BAR, 17th APRIL, 1977

The meeting was arranged to visit the remains of a raised "causeway" having masonry revetting of a supposedly Medieval date, sited in the vicinity of the farm of Nant-y-bar. An endeavour was to be made to ascertain the purpose and dating of this antiquity which is listed in the Royal Commissions on Ancient and Historical Monuments for Herefordshire, Vol I, under the parish of Dorstone.

The "causeway" is sited some 270 yards NE of Nant-y-bar Farm, on the opposite side of the lane leading to Mynydd Brith at GR 284410. A bank some 60 yards long with a maximum height of 5 feet crosses a slight hollow between two low grassy knolls. It is revetted on the NW side by a wall of coursed drystone walling. Its purpose is problematical and although its top is now quite level, without any surface indications of a trench, it may have carried a leat, traces of which remain close at hand in the same field, on either side of a now dry shallow depression or valley. The leat or leats may have carried water from a stream, now descending the steep sided wooded Nant-y-bar dingle forming one of the headwaters of the River Dore, and designed to feed a large pond lower down the aforementioned dry valley. This pond, now drained, was held back by a masonry revetted dam, of which the lower courses remain. A leat emerging from the site of the dam, continuing along a level contour, is quite well refined as far as the further boundary bank of

the next field below the site of the pond, where it ends abruptly. The field boundary at this point slopes steeply down from E to W at right angles to the leat.

There is no indication that the pond or any of the leats described were utilised to provide water power for any mill. They may have been contemplated for a possibly unfinished irrigation system of a similar nature to that completed by Vaughan in the Golden Valley during the 17th C. However, it would appear that the existing masonry and earthworks are out of proportion to any advantage hoped to be gained. It was contemplated by the members that these interesting remains could not be earlier than the extension of the existing farmhouse sometime in the 17th/18th Centuries.

The party then divided, some to explore the scenic attractions of the narrow steeply sloping wooded Nant-y-Bar dingle, others to examine the well-preserved elliptical Norman motte crowning a steep knoll behind the farmhouse. At the invitation of the owner, the farm buildings and exterior of Nant-y-bar Farm were examined and a photographic record made of salient features.

The original house, quite a small affair, appears to belong to the early 17th C. A well preserved oak framed and diagonally mullioned window of this period remains in the N gable. The house was refurbished and extended to the S circa 1770. The new addition, larger and higher, is virtually a new house added to the original. At the same time, the farm buildings were rebuilt on a more lavish scale. Date stones in the gable walls of the barn confirm this. Much old material seems to have been re-used, note the timbering in the aforementioned barn, which retains some particularly massive roof trusses and braces. A few doors retain their original hand forged strap hinges with fleur de lis terminations. Part of the timbering of the E side wall of the barn has an infilling of massive slabs of laminated sandstone, held in place by T headed hand wrought nails. A field boundary nearby is composed of similar such slabs. An aisled extension of the barn on the W side, probably contemporary with the main structure, is roofed with smaller stone tiles than that of the main structure. This is supported by three cylindrical columns of coursed rubble. A similar open aisle of like construction, but dated a hundred years earlier, exists amongst the outbuildings of Tregate Castle Farm near Llanrothal. A cart shed with granary over and another two storeyed outbuilding are also of circa 1770. The latter has a long narrow open sided passage connecting with the barn, forming a third side to a roughly triangular yard. The whole forms an interesting and unusually attractive group of buildings.

At Mynydd Brith, the W farmhouse is close-neighboured and cut into the earthworks of a small motte and bailey castle sited on a spur above a little dingle. This Norman earthwork is in a much weaker but more convenient position than that at Nant-y-bar and may be its successor.

At GR 292417-291416 alongside the lane from Mynydd Brith to Dorstone, high on a steep slope above Cwm Farm, a rect depression banked on three sides was examined. Constructed as retaining banks for a pond, it is now dry, a small stream on its E side was apparently diverted to keep it filled. It was considered by members that this was a headwater reservoir, probably constructed about a hundred years ago to feed and power a turbine at the farm below.

R E Kay
23rd October, 1977

VISIT TO KENCHESTER AND NEW WEIR, 1ST OCTOBER, 1977

During the Saturday morning of 1/10/77, the Editor and Asst editor made a visit to the site of the excavations currently taking place E of Kenchester (MAGNIS) and at New Weir.

The first site, some 400 yards E of Magna Castra Farm and immediately S of the Roman road is a rescue dig being made in advance of the encroachment of the Stretton Sugwas gravel pits. It is being conducted by Prof Rahtz on behalf of the Department of the Environment. The site revealed is complex and extensive, with traces of occupation from 1st to 5th C. The timber first stage has been overlaid by various masonry rebuildings of a farm,

villa, tannery, and buildings showing signs of other industrial usage. A large apsidal building has been uncovered, together with footings of others showing traces of channelled hypocausts. A stream running through the site during Roman times has been diverted at least twice. A small number of coins, quantities of pottery and roofing tiles have been recovered. The site will remain open until the end of October and further excavations extending the known area of the site will be carried out during 1978. Prof Rahtz has promised a contribution to the Archaeological News Letter, on an interpretation of the sequence and dating of buildings on this interesting site, together with a plan.

A field on the north side of the Roman road shows indications of surface irregularities, possibly covering further buildings of Roman date.

A cursory examination was made of the site of MAGNIS, and a partial circuit made of its defences, which are incorporated in the boundary bank of Town Field. The construction of a new bungalow adjacent and overlying part of the site of the W gate and adjoining wall, rampart and ditch of the Roman town was noted and it is suggested that a letter of protest be made to the Woolhope Club at their next meeting, for communication to the South Herefordshire Planning Authority. The site of MAGNIS is almost unique in being unencumbered by later buildings and thus trespass on the best-preserved part of its defences should have been brought to the notice of the authorities before it was too late, and strongly resisted.

The parish church of Kenchester was next visited. A small aisleless building of Norman origin, it is notable as containing a font hollowed out of the base and lower part of a Roman column from the site of MAGNIS and similar to the remains from columnaded buildings lining the main street of the Roman town, uncovered during the excavations of fifty years previously. A search was made for fragments of other Roman masonry supposedly incorporated in the fabric of the building. Above and near the blocked N door of the nave, high in the exterior face of the wall, are three fragments of moulded and carved masonry which may be of Roman origin.

On the N bank of the River Wye below New Weir, at GR 437418, a visit was made to trial boxes being excavated by Ron Shoesmith. The site, on a level ledge below a steep bank and some fifteen feet above the normal level of the river, contains the stepped octagonal pool or fountain of masonry discovered and excavated during the 19th C and reported in an early volume of the Woolhope Club Transactions as being of Roman origin. A little upstream, a massive portion of walling at the river's edge was thought to have been the abutment of a bridge which carried the Roman road S out of MAGNIS across the River Wye. However, the crossing of the river by the Roman road was known to have been several hundred yards downstream and it was then suggested that the walling pertained to a revetment of the landscaping and terracing of the grounds of the mansion on its river front during Regency times. Mr Shoesmith's trial excavations have revealed a wealth of Roman debris, fragments of late pottery, tiles, tesserae and a fragment of masonry with incised decoration. The platform would appear to contain substantial Roman buildings, probably a temple complex of late fourth C date. The walling on the river bank of well-coursed masonry with a sloping offset string course probably forms part of the retaining wall of the temple enclosure and as such, still standing 15' high, would appear to be the highest portion of Roman walling standing in the country. The drift of soil from the bank above on to the platform may have preserved the walls of any surviving buildings to a considerable height. It is hoped that a full-scale excavation will be attempted in the near future. We may here have a late temple site to rival in complexity and magnificence that of Nodens at Lydney!

R E Kay
23rd October, 1977

Editor's Note

Since Mr Kay provided this note about the excavations at New Weir, Ron Shoesmith has supplied a Report on the trial excavations, and Philip Rahtz, Reader in Medieval Archaeology, School of History, University of Birmingham, has produced an Interim Report on Excavations, both of which are included in this issue. We record our appreciation to both for these excellent reports.

SEPTEMBER MEETING, 1976 – AYMESTREY DISTRICT By W R Pye

KING'S CAVE, AYMESTREY, NGR SO 40616555

Having met in the pub car park at Aymestrey, our first task was to find and locate King's Cave in which, it is said locally, the victorious monarch spent the night following the Battle of Mortimer's Cross in 1462 (?).

Following the Limebrook road we turned left at Lyepole Bridge, towards Covenhope (vernacular Cocop), and from this turned along a track across a field at a sign saying "Beware of the Bull" which, seeing nothing in sight, should be interpreted as "Don't believe everything you are told". This stoned track was followed to the entrance of the Forestry Commission Woodland, where the vehicles were left.

After a struggle (the ground rises 300 feet in 150 yards) through the undergrowth, we found the cave by walking half the way back to Aymestrey and then clambering back in extended line formation along the steep bank.

The cave turned out to be more of a rock shelter, being formed by the displacement and partial displacement of several massive blocks of weathered shale. The entrance is a quadrilateral some 6½ ft x 3½ ft wide, and some 15 degrees out of vertical. It was 6ft long, and from the entrance the roof slopes downwards and backwards to a height of 4ft and width of 2½ ft.

The walls are covered with the normally attendant graffiti, taking the form of initials and dates. The earliest one could see on a quick inspection was 1725, but undoubtedly some were earlier, had the lighting and time been available for a close inspection. An interesting feature was its early style of lettering, altogether earlier than that in Llewellyn's Cove at Aberedw (which must prove something).

The cave is best found by walking along the ridge at the top of the hill from the west, above the steep slope, and is approximately above the point where a dry watercourse joins the woodland boundary in the field below, some 80 yards west of the juncture of the wood hedge and the River Lugg, and is near the end of the Douglas Fir plantation.

The entrance is some 4 yards horizontally from the angle between the steep slope and the flattish top of the hill, and some 20 feet below it. It is difficult to see, being under a slight overhang and on a promontory, the entrance being obscured by an oak tree immediately in front of it. It is, however, some 10 yards to the west of a small landslip on which a tree has been uprooted, ten yards east of a holly bush and six yards east of a small clump of lime trees, on a precipitous slope.

Along the flattish ground above the steep slope were found many charcoal burning hearths, presumably from the 17th/18th century vogue for the ironworks at Downton.

Following the graceful glissade of one of our number down 200ft of the 300ft slope (hotly pursued by wasps), and some spectator hilarity, we proceeded back to Aymestrey, arriving just after closing time.

YATTON

During the afternoon we visited a mound with a shallow ditch at Yatton, SO 437669, which was reported by the writer as a barrow in Arch Wales, 1974.

Due to the drought all the vegetation on the mound had died, and one could see some cement and brick fragments on its surface. One should, therefore, for a more recent identification look for structures of a circular type, a kiln or columbarium being suggested.

AYMESTREY, SO 428660

We then visited the Aymestrey Gravel Quarries to see the effects of glaciation. The different angles of deposition of the gravel were very clear, and the varves could be seen in the alluvial sand.

Samples of pebbles which appeared suitable for stone axe manufacture were gathered, to undergo petrological examination into the domestic usage of glacially transported material.

AYMESTREY MILL, SO 425656

At the kind invitation of Mr & Mrs I Lawson, who had joined us for the afternoon, the group inspected the water corn mill, part of the buildings of which have been converted into a studio.

The mill here was rebuilt after a fire in the 1870's, and contains some of the most up-to-date milling machinery. The undershot wheel has been completely renovated, together with the sluices, etc, and is in good working order. Damage to the pit-wheel at present precludes the running of the milling machinery in gear. Direct drive in type, the mill ran two, sometimes three, pairs of stones. The stone floor and the double garner floor were all seen, and the whole mill is in excellent condition. It was last used for milling animal food some 15-20 years ago.

I would like to thank the following for permission to visit the various sites on their property:- The Forestry Commission; Capt T Dunn, Messrs ARC (Western), and Mr and Mrs I Lawson.

NEOLITHIC HABITATION SITE – FRON DDYRYS, LLANFIHANGEL-NANT-MELAN, RADNORSHIRE, SO 16105985

Following the ploughing of an area of hill on Radnor Forest, known as Fron Ddyrys, Llanfihangel-nant-Melan, for a shelter belt, surface finds were made. These consisted of a geometric and a non-geometric mesolithic point, a leaf-shaped arrowhead, blades and scrapers of flint, together with a fragment of a polished stone axe, and a fragment of poor quality agate.

Fragments of abraded pottery were found on eight separate find spots, and included amongst these fragments were two of decorated secondary neolithic pottery.

Two small trenches were excavated, and a layer found containing much charcoal, flint and a fragment of agate, as well as pottery. A single fragment of the pottery excavated was of decorated secondary neolithic type. The layer containing the foregoing would initially have been some 11" from the surface and some 6" below the hill peat.

The site is very exposed, at 1400 ft. Excavation continues. See Rads Trans.

W R Pye
Westfields, Lyonshall, Kington, Herefordshire

KENCHESTER 1977 – INTERIM REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS

A complex of buildings 400m to the east of Magnis has been known for many years from an air photograph by Baker. One of the buildings appeared to be a double square temple, and it was in the expectation of recovering the history of a religious complex that the DOE arranged a large excavation in advance of rapidly encroaching gravel digging. In the event, the air photo was wholly misleading, and the site proved to be a secular 'villa-type' complex, with characteristics which may link it to the economy of Magnis, and with a history extending over all four centuries of the Roman period and possibly earlier and later. Although not a temple site, the site is of considerable interest in landscape history, and valuable in any consideration of the nuclear sequence of Credenhill/Magnis/Hereford, which is one of the academic aims of DOE policy and of the Urban Research Committee of the University of Birmingham.

The excavation consisted of a trial fortnight at Easter and ten weeks in July-October, with an average labourforce of twenty, including ten from the Job Creation Programme. Some 2,500 square metres of ground was opened and mostly totally excavated: an equal area remains to be dug, and it is hoped that this will be done in 1978. The work was directed by Philip Rahtz, with the assistance of Lorna Watts, Anthony Hirst, Mark Horton, and Sebastian Rahtz, with Roberta Tomber in charge of finds analysis.

The area is on glacial gravels of the Stretton Sugwas Outwash; reddish gravels are overlaid by a multicoloured gritty clay which gives rise to a weathered clayey soil, which provided an amenable 'natural' for the excavation.

0) The earliest feature, which may indeed be the reason for the site's existence, is an ancient stream bed (E) with variegated silts and gravels, which were at least sometimes the result of fast running water, presumably derived from springs nearer Magnis. This stream in historic times was a boundary at which terminated at least two ditches of the Iron Age/Early Roman period (KK, MM), and which lay immediately south of one of the most impressive features, an enclosure with a massive ditch (LL) (see (2) below), probably of the first century AD.

1) The earliest phase of human occupation consists of features defined only in the buried soil north of the stream. They consist of pebble spreads, a large timber slot (JJ), a ditch 1.5m deep (KK) and possibly a large penannular enclosure defined by a shallow ditch (L). They appear to be part of an undefended open settlement by the stream. Finds are limited to a little bone, daub, charcoal and slag, the only dating will be that from C14 determination, but a pre-Romanised culture and possibly pre-Roman date seem probable.

2) Secondary to (1) are elements of a large curving ditch (LL), 2m across and 2m deep; the plan or size of the area enclosed is not yet known, nor can any internal features yet be defined, but the size of the ditch seems larger than would be needed for a boundary or for drainage, and a defensive function seems possible.

In the secondary silting were sherds of hand-made pottery (possibly of the first century AD), charcoal, bone, and slag. What appears to be a double entrance faces south, fronting on to the north edge of the stream.

3) The next phase is witnessed by early Roman pottery and other finds in the gravels and sands of the stream (G), which is also the southern limit of a large N-S ditch (MM) of similar date. In the area of the angle defined by the stream and ditch, an area of re-deposited glacial material is capped by a patchy burnt level (DD), extending to the edge of the stream. In this was found a fairly fresh coin of Trojan. Associated with this period are several timber slots for fences or light buildings (YY, PP), a set of burnt joist impressions (TT), postholes and cesspits (WW, VV); and there is little doubt that a major masonry building of the earlier second century remains to be discovered, probably with hypocausts to judge by building material in the stream and black ash deposits cut by later walls.

During the second century, the stream seems to have dried up; this may be due to a changing hydrology or to the interference with sources as part of the process of Romanisation of areas nearer to Magnis. What water remained - perhaps no more than a trickle - was led by a small leat into a trough (Y) some 8m long, whose carefully-dug emplacement slot was found in the south side of the stream bed. The areas to south and north were heavily cobbled in two patches of crescentic form. That to the north presumably marked the termination of an approach to the trough from the building area. That on the south side was the termination of a minor metalled and ditched road (XX), which was traced to the south for a distance of some 20m; it may lead either to further buildings or to field or farm areas.

The function of the trough is uncertain; there is no evidence that there was continuous running water flowing through it, but rather that it filled or was filled and then its contents used. Clothes washing or ordinary domestic use seems possible (no well has yet been found), as does animal watering though the small areas of metalling seem insufficient for this. It should be mentioned at this point that the over whelming mass of the animal bones from this phase, and also from all later periods, is bovine together with a smaller quantity of horse, and a few examples of sheep, pig, and bird. Another possibility is some industrial use such as fulling or tanning. The find of a leather-cutting tool in the vicinity of the trough may support the latter interpretation.

4) In the later second century there was a major change in layout; the eastern boundary of phases 1-3 was extended c15m, and now defined by a N-S ditch (A), possibly also ending at the stream further east. The ditch was finally filling up later than a coin of M Aurelius found on its base. It is probably to this period that some elements of the main masonry buildings (M, EE, FF) at present uncovered belong, with evidence of painted plaster, tessellated floors, hypocausts and pitched stone footings.

5) In the third century the new eastern boundary ditch was widened and deepened (B), and extended to cross and cut the silts of the now abandoned stream bed (G), and then to swing to the west at an angle of 110° to become a well-defined south boundary to the site, cutting through the road (XX) to the south; the trough, however, remained in use, approached from the north (X).

Contact with the south was at some later time renewed by cobbles being relaid across it (XX).

The main masonry building, mostly robbed out (EE, FF, M), shows evidence of major alterations whose chronology is not yet understood. In Building M, what had been two roughly square rooms with cobble footings (in the area so far excavated) was shifted to 2m to the south, a corridor inserted across the middle and an apse added at the east end – the arch into which was supported by an exterior southern buttress. The room leading to the apse has a mosaic, of which a small area of border survived; of the rest about 1000 tesserae in colours of white, grey, brown, red, buff and yellow were recovered from the area around. The new footings were of stone blocks. The superstructure was probably half-timbered, with a stone roof.

To the south, between the main building and the trough, was another building (T), primarily a rectangle with cobble footings and, secondarily, a rough square with the addition made of stone rubble footings. The function of this is uncertain, but it was presumably a farm building such as a dairy or granary. The superstructure was probably of cob.

Also of this later Roman phase was an area of industrial activity (U), east of the farm building. There was a double furnace (U) and remains of crucibles, ferrous and non-ferrous slags, tools, and part of a stone mould. Probably also of this phase were two burials, one a 'normal' skeleton (R), orientated head to west, the other a decapitated elderly female, 'head' to south (HH), with legs crossed and the head with cervical vertebrae laid to the west of the knees, facing south.

6) The eastern boundary ditch was filled with silt, bones and pottery deposited later than a coin of Victorinus found on its base, and to judge by the absence of any Constantinian coins or demonstrably fourth century material in a 30m length totally excavated, was full up by the earlier fourth century; this conclusion was reinforced by the finding on the surface of the filled up ditch of a coin of Constans.

It is probably during the fourth century that a causeway was laid across the east arm of the ditch, which was the end of a hollow way (S) leading to an entrance in, the east side of the farm building. This was almost devoid of cultural material, except for a ring with a design of punched dots on the bezel which an eye of faith could interpret as a Chi-Rho. The way

was clearly the latest feature in this area of the site. Occupation of some sort persisted through the fourth century – there are several coins of Constantine or his sons, and two of Valens – but none was found in anything but the highest levels, and there is at present no evidence to show that there were any structural alterations in the fourth century.

The trough feature Y continued in use. There were at least three well-defined phases in its cobbled surrounds, and a large sherd of a late Roman cooking-pot in the mud around the latest phase, in which it was seemingly in a semi-wrecked state. Finally, the cobbling to the south was cut by a deep ditch (Z) draining to the west, whose filling was also devoid of any artefacts. A layer of charcoal between primary and secondary silts may mark the site's destruction, and C14 determination may help in suggesting a date for this in the late or post-Roman period.

Of this final phase may also be two stone objects found high in the stream bed silt east of the trough. One was similar to a saddle quern rubber except that its wear marks were longitudinal not traverse. The other was a boulder decorated with hatched lines and other symbols, together with some bold incisions which look like a cursive inscription, perhaps of post-Roman date.

7) The final phase was Medieval; a shallow ditch (NN) crossing the main building diagonally could be equated with one in the air photograph which marks the east edge of a furlong of ridge and furrow, when at least the western part of the building complex was finally brought under cultivation, a land use which has continued down to the present day, witnessed by finds of late and post-Medieval pottery in the ploughsoil.

Finds include a wide range of building material; pottery, copper alloy and iron objects, bones and 31 coins. They do not at the present stage of analysis help materially with the interpretation of the site as a whole.

The principal problem is the extent to which the complex of buildings and other features is rural and agricultural, which comprise elements of the concept of farm/'villa'; or is an 'out-of-town' site ministering to the needs of the urban nucleus of Magnis. The two may not be irreconcilable. Much depends on whether the site can claim precedence over Magnis in origin – we know nothing of the possible pre-Roman origins of the town, and it remains to be demonstrated that any feature in the present excavation is pre-Roman. Air photographs suggest that the defences of Magnis represent a nucleation of an original elongated 'street settlement', of which the -present site is the eastern extremity. The existence of a stream allows an origin for the site independent of the town, and as a farm complex it may have included several acres of ditched enclosures and pits known from air photographs to the SE, now destroyed by the quarry. Limited excavation at Easter in the gravel face showed that one ditch of this complex at least was Roman (2nd-3rd century) and there were also two Roman burials, one a 'bootnail' burial, the other another good example of decapitation. Even if one postulated, as seems most likely at present, that the complex was largely independent of the urban nucleus, its economy and fortunes must have been closely linked to those of the town. Dr Webster suggests that the large number of ox skulls found, and the leather-cutting tool, may hint at the supplying of meat and leather to the town. There can also be no doubt that any extramural site such as this was indeed outside the walls, and vulnerable to whatever threats from which the walls were a refuge. The dating of the town walls may well be of the later 3rd or 4th centuries, and the failure to find evidence of flourishing 4th century occupation may reflect this vulnerability.

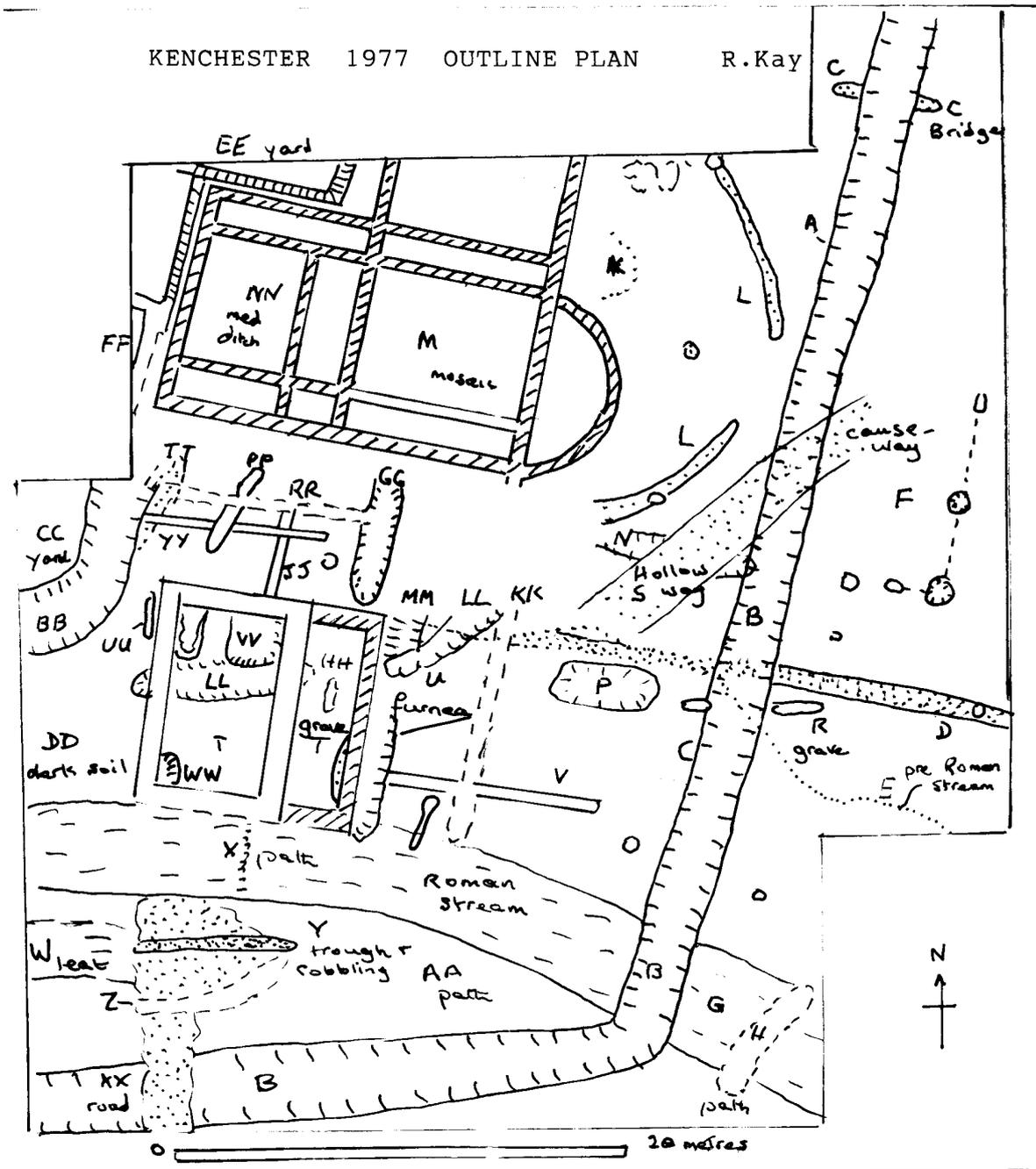
These are important questions, which further excavation and study of earlier evidence from the town and nearby sites such as the Bishopstone villa may hope to resolve.

Finally, we should thank not only the staff named earlier in this note but also the DOE for their generous support, the Herefordshire/Worcestershire CC and Jan Roberts for their organization, Blue Circle Aggregates and their staff for their co-operation and active help in the free loan of machinery, Mr Dew, the tenant farmer, for sacrificing an acre of his barley,

the Manpower Services Commission for granting us the employment cost of ten Job Creation workers, Ron Shoemith and the City of Hereford Archaeological Committee for their loan of equipment and dormitory space at Bewell House, Professor and Mrs Ellen Walsh for their fine drawings, Margaret Gray for her splendid cooking, and the numerous British and American volunteers who took part in the excavation, among whom we must single out for especial mention Beth and Leighton Bishop, who stayed with us on site through the whole excavation and took responsibility for finds collection and marking.

**P A Rahtz, Reader in Medieval Archaeology,
School of History, University of Birmingham**

4th November, 1977



THE ROMAN BUILDINGS AT NEW WEIR, HEREFORDSHIRE

Introduction

Remains of walls and an octagonal cistern in the National Trust gardens at New Weir, some 4 miles west of Hereford, were provisionally identified as Roman in a report written for the National Trust in May 1977 (New Weir – A Report on the Roman Masonry by R Shoemith and M G Boulton). The report proposed that small trial holes be excavated to establish the extent and condition of the remains, and these were dug during two weekends in October 1977.

We would like to thank Mr A J Finlinson of the National Trust for granting permission for the excavations, and for his interest in the project. Mr Allison of Bevan and Hodges of Hereford visited the site and provided details of the water supply to and from the hydraulic ram which is close to the site. The trial holes were dug by the writers, assisted by Ruth Devett, Tina Knowles, Tim Copeland and John Hood.

Analysis of the finds from the trial excavations is still continuing, so this paper should only be considered as an interim report.

Surface Description

The site is on a roughly level terrace, close to the River Wye, at the southeastern corner of the New Weir gardens. The terrace is some 120 metres long and has a gentle slope upward from the steep bank of the river for about 50 metres after which the ground rises quickly. Two grass paths cross the area, which otherwise grows wild flowers and rough grass. Several young trees have recently been planted.

Springs occur at the bottom of the steep slope, and at the southeastern end of the terrace there is a hydraulic ram and an emergency pump house, both associated with the water supply to the New Weir house.

Some 20 metres northwest of the pump house are the remains of an octagonal stepped cistern. The cistern, which was repaired early in the 20th century after its discovery in 1891, retains its original form and dimensions although some stones are misplaced. Each of the six steps is shaped as a regular octagon except for the lowest stone which is a single block with a hole in the centre.

Two stone buttresses support the river bank some 50 metres upstream of the cistern. The most distant one is best preserved, with masonry standing about 4 metres high. The river elevation, much overgrown with ivy, has a base of large blocks of cut stone with a well-coursed wall of smaller stones above. Similar masonry continues at right angles into the bank to the northeast, where the stonework rises higher and has a plastered surface. The large stone masonry foundation continues northwest from the main block of the buttress, stepping into the bank as footings. At the northwest of the main part of the buttress, and at right-angles, an upper wall continues into the bank and the remains of a mortar floor can be seen over one metre below the present ground level, with building debris above. Traces of other cross walls, Roman tile and mortar are visible in the river bank immediately upstream. Southeast of this buttress, and about 3 metres forward from its face, is a second buttress. Only the large stone footings remain and they are covered in a growth of tufa. Between the two buttresses, in the riverbank, is a mass of fallen roofing stone.

The riverbed for some distance downstream of the buttresses is littered with large blocks of masonry, similar to the buttress foundations.

Historical

The remains are marked on the Ordnance Survey 6" map (1938 edition) as Roman Masonry. They are described and illustrated in the Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club (Hereford) (Vol for 1890-92 p. 244-46 & Vol for 1893-94 p. 56-60). In the first report the finding of the cistern in August 1891 is described. It was discovered during excavations for a new water supply and was damaged by workmen, as the plan and photograph in the report shows. A stone trough led from the hole in the bottom of the cistern towards the river. During the clearance of the circular hole in the bottom, 'numerous

tesserae were brought out of it in handfuls'. The cistern is described in detail, with full measurements and a measured plan and section. The report also notes that the same excavation cut obliquely across a road some 10-12 feet wide between the cistern and the buttresses.

The second, report considers the buttresses, which were examined by some members of the Woolhope Club in April 1893. The masonry was first considered to be a bridge abutment but the visitors decided it was more likely to be a landing place or quay. Both reports considered that the remains were Medieval rather than Roman.

Some years ago Mr Morris, the life occupant of the New Weir house, together with the late owner, Mr Parr, did some digging and discovered 'bits of mosaic paving' which were 'either returned to the earth or sent to the local museum'.

The 1977 Trial Holes

Ten trial holes, each one metre square, were carefully positioned along the terrace to avoid disturbance to the water supply and damage to growing trees. The positions are shown on the accompanying plan and the excavation of each is described in the following notes.

- 1) This trench, off the main terrace to the northwest, was dug to establish the undisturbed soil pattern in the area. The trench was excavated to some 0.8 metres depth. Below the topsoil was clean gravel which was interpreted as hillslip. A fragment of Roman tile and a nail were found in the upper levels.
- 2) Eleven metres southeast of No. 1. This trench was also dug to a depth of some 0.8 metres. Hillslip material similar to that in No 1 predominated although it was considered that part of the fill could have been the remains of an earthen bank. Several fragments of tile were found.
- 3) Six metres northeast of No. 2 and close to the steep bank rising from the terrace. There was a lot of root disturbance in the topsoil, with compacted gravel below. The trench was excavated to 0.9 metres depth and no Roman material was found.
- 4) Fourteen metres south of No. 2 and some 10 metres east of the masonry buttress. Much stone was found in the upper levels of this trench, with many fragments of Roman tile, several grey and white tesserae, Roman pottery and a piece of painted wall plaster. This stony layer was covered and filled with grey, silty hill wash material. At a depth of about 0.8 metres below the surface, part of a mosaic pavement was found in the northern corner of the trench. The spread of tesserae from it covered less than one quarter of the trench, and it appeared that the mosaic was the corner of a pavement, possibly with robbed-out walls surrounding it on the southwest and southeast. Both grey and white tesserae were used in the fragment of mosaic visible, suggesting some geometric motif in the border of this pavement. The pavement was laid on a mortar layer which was also only present in the northern corner of the trench. The mosaic was not disturbed and the trench was carefully backfilled. Even in this small fragment over 80 tesserae were in place, of which 10 in the extreme corner were white. The overlying layer contained some 40 tesserae but all were grey, suggesting that the disturbance to the pavement was minimal and caused solely by the wall robbers.
- 5) Five metres northeast of No. 4. This trench contained many stones, in places tumbled on top of one another, all within a grey hillwash material. A few stones were removed, exposing further stonework. At an average depth of 0.5 metres, the trench had to be abandoned due to its small size and the many large stones in section. Many fragments of Roman tile were found amongst the stones. This stonework was presumably a spread of debris from a building. It is important to note that when

abandoned, the bottom of the trench was still over one metre above the level of the mosaic pavement in trench 4, only 5 metres away.

- 6) Seven metres northeast of No. 5. Part of a stone cover of a water tank was found in the eastern part of the trench. The size of this, presumably disused 19th century tank was established by rodding, and was about one metre deep and 2.7 metres long. It was full of water containing a lot of weed. In the surrounding soil were several pieces of Roman tile.
- 7) Fourteen metres southeast of No. 5. This trench had a similar fill to No. 5 and contained some squared stone and some river pebbles. Possible traces of occupation, including tesserae and tile, were found at a depth of 0.6 metres, at which point, with many large stones remaining in section, the trench was abandoned. As in trench 5, the stones presumably represent building debris but the total depth of deposits could not be established.
- 8) Fourteen metres southeast of No. 7. Modern disturbances had removed most of the earlier levels in this trench. Along the northeastern side of the trench at a depth of 0.8 metres was a disused channel constructed from semi-circular field drains. The southwestern part of the trench was also cut by a modern disturbance which was not bottomed at 0.8 metres, but the fill of the feature contained fragments of modern drain. The narrow ridge in the centre of the trench contained some stone, Roman tile and pottery, and had a calcereous layer on top of gravel at about 0.8 metres depth.
- 9) Fourteen metres south of No. 8. The footings of a wall running parallel to the river were found at about 0.5 metres below the surface, with a scatter of rubble above. The foundation was for a substantial wall and was cut into a white calcereous layer. Fragments of Roman tile, pottery and occasional tesserae were found.
- 10) Six metres northeast of, No. 9. This trench was 2 metres northwest of the cistern and was designed to establish its Roman origin. Below the topsoil was a layer of large stones, including one ashlar block, all within a grey silty hillwash. The stones and silt sealed a layer of broken stone roofing tile. Both levels contained Roman tile, a reasonable quantity of tesserae and some Roman pottery. Under the roofing stone was a mixed calcereous orange layer some 2cms thick, which lay on a clean white calcereous layer. Neither of these layers had the appearance of floors but the debris above suggests that either the cistern is within a building or it is in a courtyard surrounded by buildings.

Finds

Fragments of tile were found in most of the trenches examined. One was part of a flanged roofing tile with part of the flange cut away, and others were fragments of roof, floor and walling tile. Tesserae varied from about 0.5cm square to 3cm square. Most of the larger ones were of grey sandstone but many of the small ones were of a white stone. A few white ones were irregularly shaped. Little pottery was found in the trenches excavated. Soil samples from the lower levels of trench 10 are being examined by John Hood of the Environmental Archaeology Unit at York, and the pottery is being examined by Tim Copeland.

Archaeological Conclusions

The extent of the buildings

There is now no doubt that the terrace was occupied during the Roman period with buildings of some stature. The solid buttressing which has survived for over 1,500 years indicates that the course of the river has remained relatively constant. Some erosion of the bank has taken place both up and downstream of the existing masonry. The construction of the buttresses suggests that some of the rooms of the building were designed to overlook the river.

On the evidence available, the Roman buildings do not continue as far upstream as trench 1, but they certainly extend further downstream than trenches 9 and 10 and the cistern. The extent to which they are buried by the hillslip is still uncertain. All of the trial holes excavated except for No. 9 were abandoned well above the level of the mosaic pavement in trench 4 but, of course, the various ranges of buildings could be on different levels.

The preservation of the remains

Although the trenches give some idea of the depth of deposit, and thus the probable preservation of the remains, there are several factors which could not be answered by these limited excavations.

The first is the extent of erosion by the river. This is a continuing process and the masonry visible in the river suggests that some collapse has occurred in the not too distant past. Some undercutting of the remaining buttresses shows that they are still under active threat from the river. Upstream of the buttresses, the remains of walls in the riverbank demonstrate that erosion has taken place.

Downstream, the only known wall is in trench 9 and no floor level was found with it, so the associated room could be on either side. Only in the immediate area of the buttresses do we know that the full extent of the Roman terrace survives, and it was in this area that part of a mosaic pavement was found.

The second factor which will have affected the preservation of the remains is the use of the area for water collection for the New Weir House for at least 100 years. During this period trenches have been dug and water collection tanks inserted. The shallow 'rumble drains' would not normally go deep enough to interfere with Roman levels, but piping and storage tanks would have destroyed all but the deepest of the remains. The total extent of these works is not known, but presumably most would be linear features which would not destroy the main plan of the Roman buildings.

Thirdly, as with most Roman sites, root damage from trees is likely. However, in trenches where horizontal stratigraphy existed there was little sign of rooting activity below the topsoil.

The use of the buildings

The trial excavations have shown that there is a complex of rooms surrounding the buttresses, and that they include at least one mosaic. Fifty metres southeast, a further complex apparently surrounds the cistern, and tesserae from the area suggest further tessellated pavements. Between the two areas, the debris found suggests that they were joined by a corridor or a further range of rooms.

The restricted extent of the site would inevitably influence the design of the buildings, so one would not expect a standard design but it is suggested that there is a long range of buildings parallel to the river with several wings at right angles enclosing one or more courtyards.

It would seem to be unlikely that these buildings are a farm or villa, where extra room would be needed for service buildings and outer yards. The choice of this secluded site with calcerous springs in a large area of Old Red Sandstone, close to

the river and yet within a mile of the Roman town of Kenchester, makes it most probable that it was a temple with an associated range of residential buildings.

Comment

The remains are in a remarkable state of preservation considering the destructive power of the fast flowing river. The buttresses are the highest standing pieces of Roman masonry in Herefordshire and, for a building of this type, in the West Midlands or Wales.

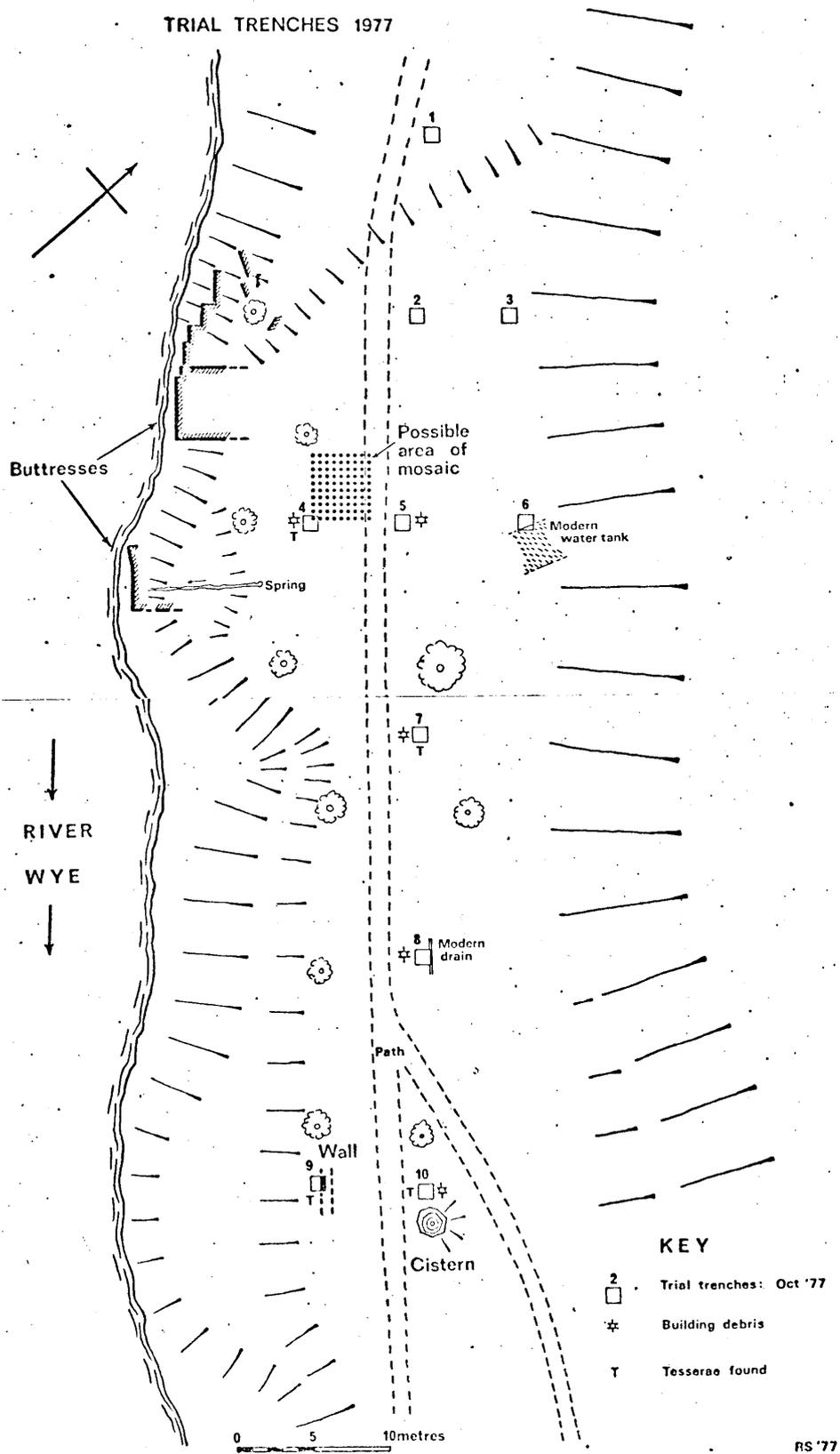
Some erosion has occurred, and damage from the water supply system, but the total absence of ploughing, together with the build-up from the hillwash and the calcereous springs which have provided a tufarous protective layer, has aided in the preservation. However, the river is now beginning to undermine the remaining buttresses and erode the bank at several places, and the site is in considerable danger.

This report only considers the archaeological information so far available. Proposals for further work on the site will be made in close co-operation with the National Trust and the Department of the Environment.

**R Shoesmith
M G Boulton
October 1977**

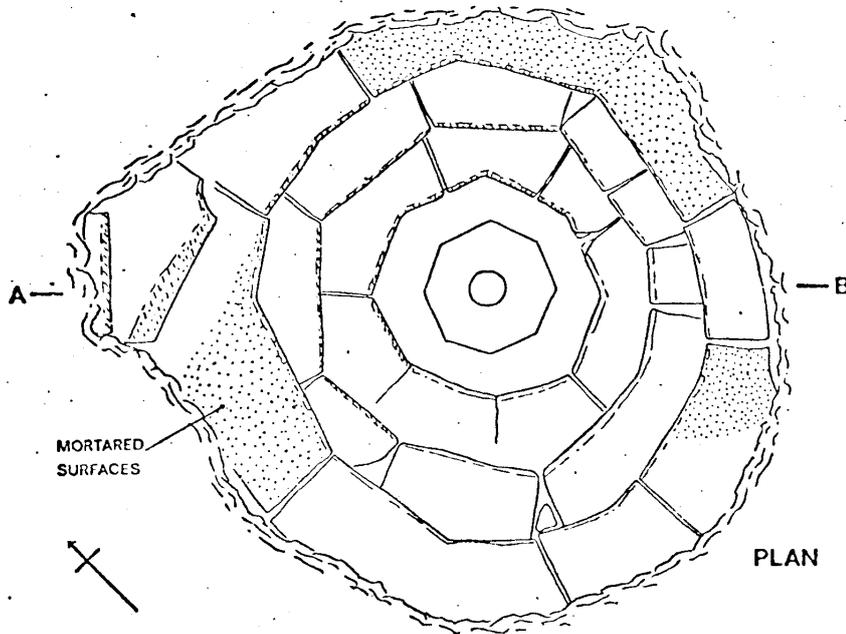
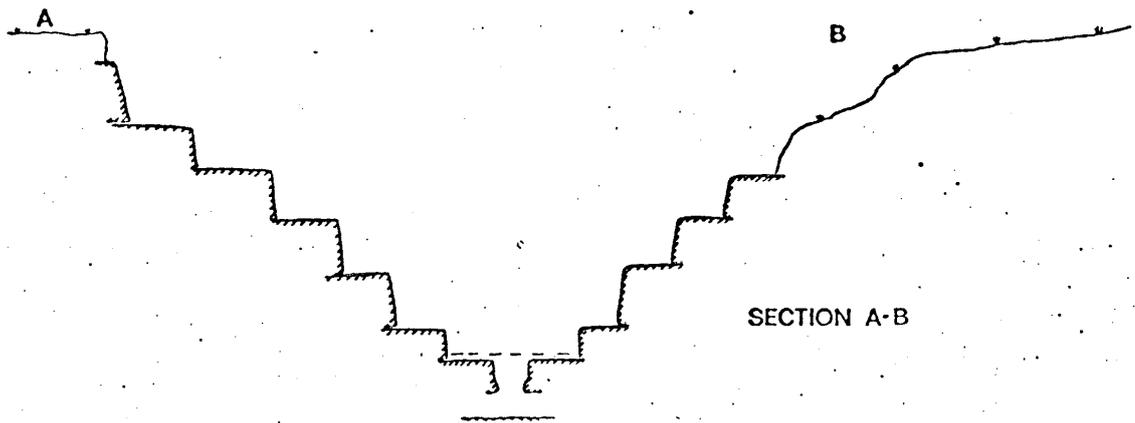
NEW WEIR ROMAN BUILDINGS

TRIAL TRENCHES 1977



- KEY**
- Trial trenches: Oct '77
 - * Building debris
 - T Tesserae found

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