

THE EXCAVATION OF DUNWICH TOWN DEFENCES, 1970

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Of the once prosperous town of Dunwich only a tiny portion now remains, 150 ft. wide at St. James' Street, tapering away to nothing north and south. Dunwich was a large and important town; to judge from the map of Ralph Agas, 1587, it was then some 500 yards from east to west and almost a mile from north to south. It is worth recalling that medieval Ipswich measured only some 830 yards in both directions and was therefore considerably smaller than Dunwich when allowance is made for the amount that had already been lost before the 16th century.

The only other recorded excavation at Dunwich took place in 1935 under the auspices of the Ipswich Museum on the site of Temple Hill, a mound which stood just north of the Middlegate and on the town ramparts.¹ No archaeological evidence was advanced for the date of the rampart which the author merely assumed to be a result of an 1199 charter of King John, although there is no mention at all of the defences in the charter.

In view of the precipitous state of the cliff in the region of the surviving unencumbered fragment of the rampart the Ministry of Public Building and Works sponsored an excavation in May, 1970. The purpose was twofold. First, to section the defences in the hope of obtaining an archaeological date for their construction, in particular from beneath the rampart itself. Secondly, to open a small area inside the line of the defences to test the extent of the occupation at the western limits of the town.

THE SITE

Of the surviving portion of the town, the area to the north of St. James' Street is occupied by Coastguard houses and to the south there remains a portion of the western end of All Saints churchyard, thus considerably limiting the areas now available for examination. The sites of Middlegate and Temple Hill have now disappeared. The western boundary of Dunwich, where it still exists, is almost entirely obscured by the eastern wall of the Grey Friars site, with the exception of some 90 ft. of the original rampart

¹ H. E. P. Spencer, 'Notes on the excavation of Temple Hill, Dunwich', *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, xxii (1935), pp. 198-200.

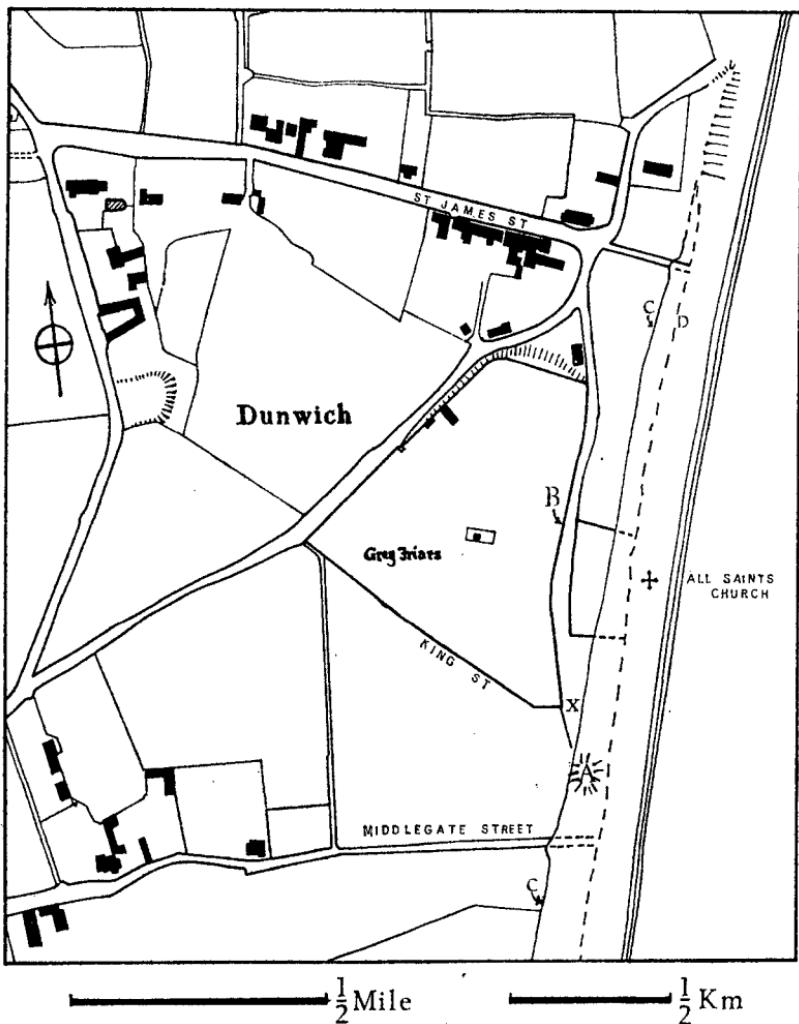
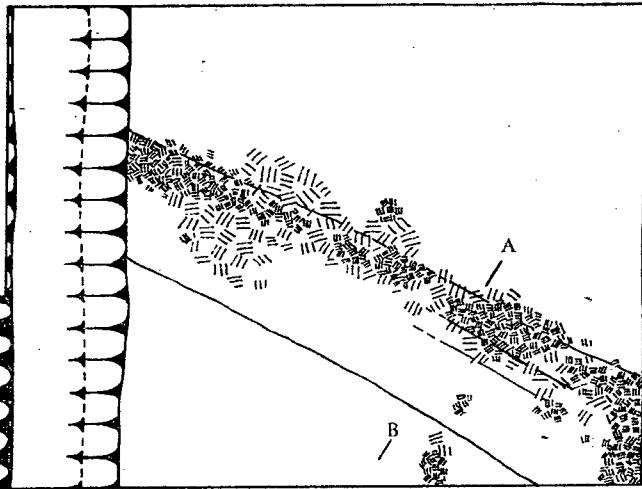
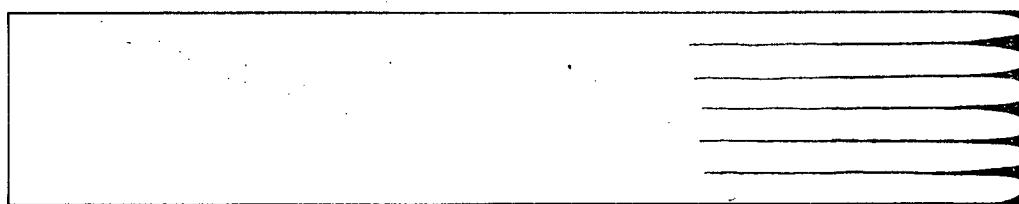


FIG. 13.—A: site of Temple Hill; B: line of town rampart under priory wall; C: cliff, May 1970; D: cliff, c.1925; X: excavations, 1970.

and ditch. A footpath follows the inner line of the rampart and seems likely to be an original feature between the properties inside the town and the tail of the rampart. At the south-east corner of the Grey Friars site this footpath swings westward to cross the site of the rampart and the existing hollow of the town ditch. Of the remaining 90 ft. of the rampart and ditch between the cliff and the monastic wall it was only practical to open a 15 ft. section (Fig.



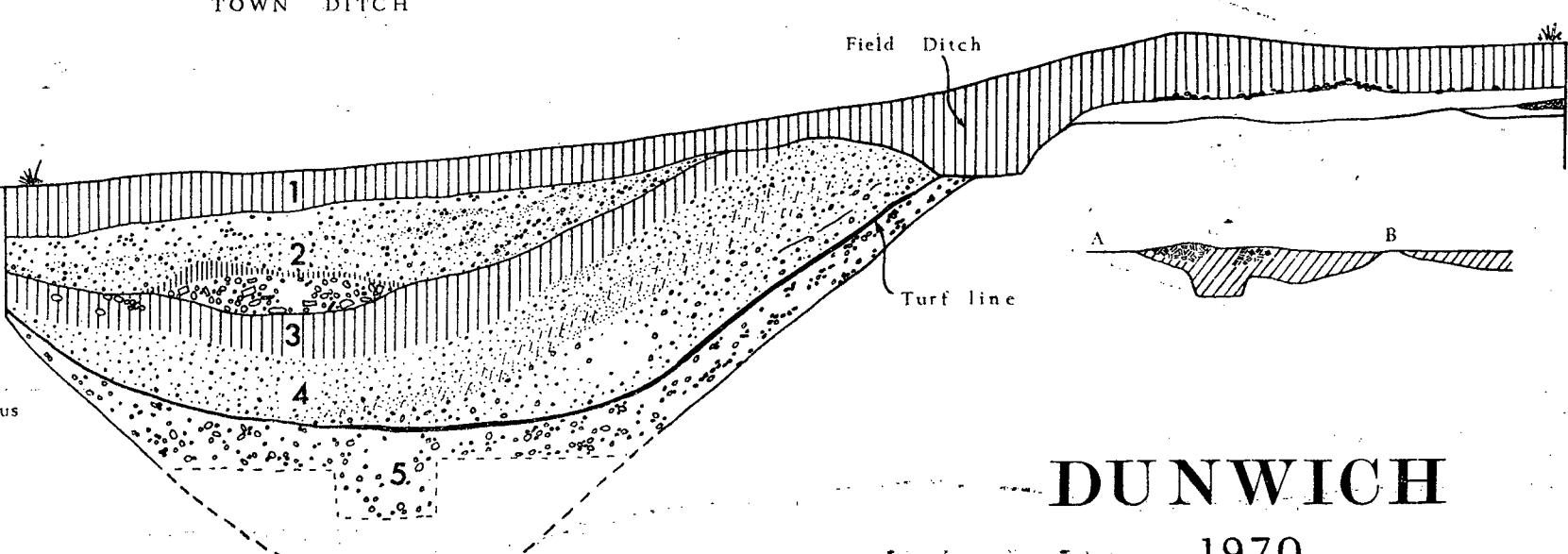
SITE B



Burnt clay

RAMPART

TOWN DITCH

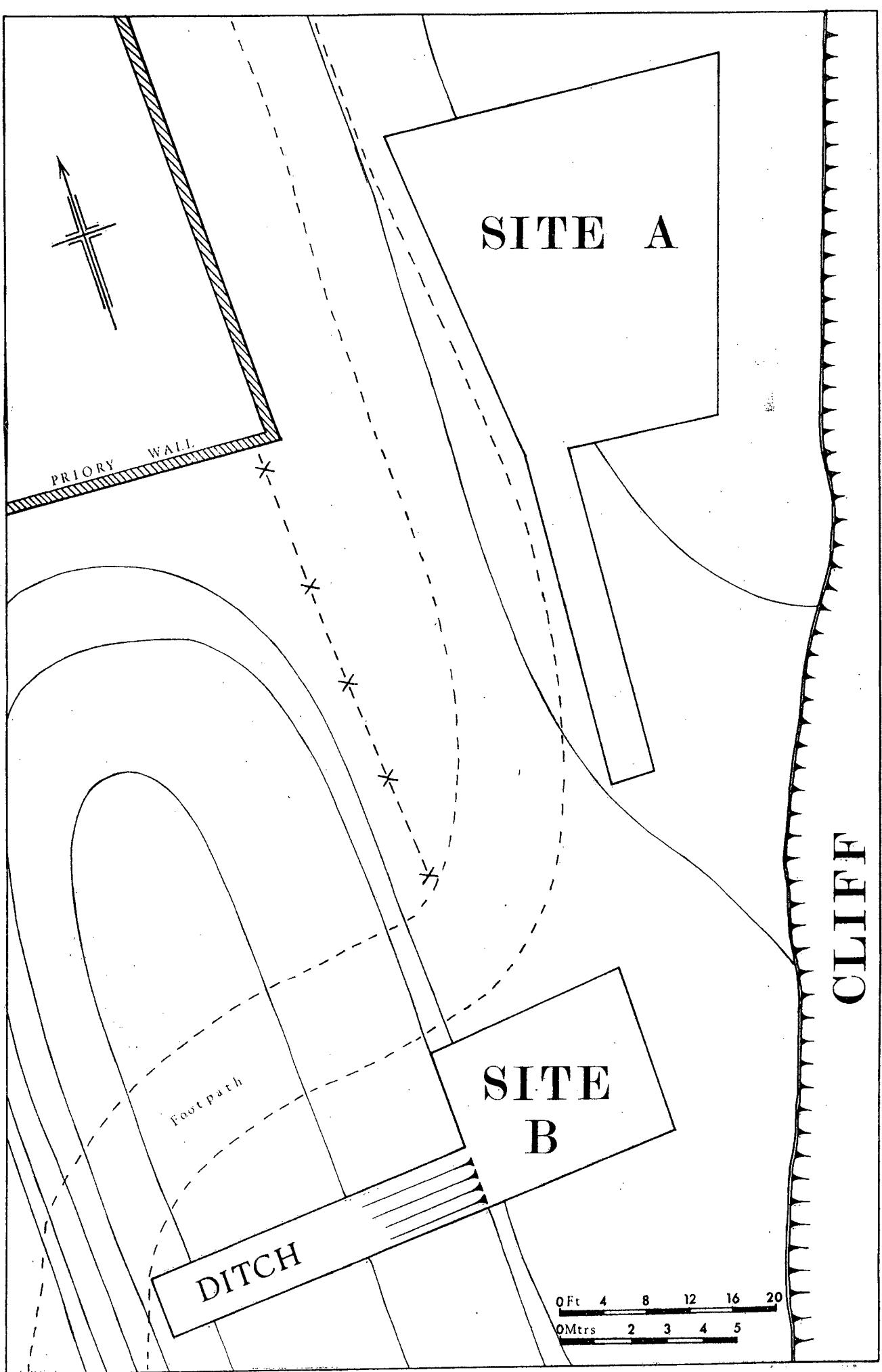


DUNWICH

1970

FIG. 15.—Site B, rampart and ditch, plan and sections.

FIG. 14.—Plan of excavations.



Three main phases can be distinguished in the infilling of the ditch:

Phase 1 (Fig. 15, Layer 5). The primary fill in the ditch—a dark grey sand with a high proportion of gravel. This is sealed by a turf-line after some 5 ft. of deposit had built up on the floor of the ditch.

Phase 2 (Fig. 15, Layer 4). A thick layer of dirty sand and gravel, much thicker on the rampart side of the ditch. This represents a deliberate levelling of the rampart and is in turn covered with a thick layer of humus, 18-24 ins. thick (Layer 3).

Phase 3 (Fig. 15, Layer 2). This phase of the filling consists of a layer of rubble with mortared flints, bricks, tiles and fragments of shaped limestone, mixed with early 19th century potsherds. This infilling, which thickens towards the monastic wall probably represents the 'tidying-up' of the Grey Friars site in the early 19th century. Above this, a further deposit of gravel, again thickening towards the monastic wall represents the final flattening of the rampart, probably associated with the field-ditch cut along the face of the rampart and with the ploughing of the inner area of the town which is known to have taken place within living memory. The field-ditch unfortunately cut away the face of the rampart destroying any traces of the wooden revettment. A revaluation of the 1935 section⁴ of Temple Hill shows two vertical black marks in the outer face of the rampart, which contained 'carbonaceous matter'. It is possible that these represent traces of a wooden revettment of some kind, either of the mound, or of the rampart.

Site A. The Interior (Fig. 16)

Within the limits of the footpath and the cliff, an area 32 ft. by 30 ft. (maximum) was opened on the north side of King Street. In this restricted area three phases were distinguished.

Firstly a series of thirty post-holes at the lowest level were associated with early medieval pottery of the 12th and 13th centuries. Although the form of the structure or structures could not be determined, the orientation is north-south and some of the posts have been replaced. A later structure is represented by two parallel beam slots 8 ft. apart, in the western half of the excavated area. Both are at least 10 ft. long and 4 ins. deep, although the extent of the westernmost could not be determined.

The beam slots were in turn covered with a heavy gravel which extended for some 10 ft. from the western (rampart) edge of the

⁴ Spencer, *op. cit.*, fold-out opposite p. 199.

15, Site B). Because of the dangerous state of the cliff it was thus the last opportunity to examine and record the original defences of Dunwich, a fact since demonstrated by the heavy falls of cliff in the October following the excavation.

For the second purpose of the excavation a small area (Fig. 16, Site A) close to the section of the defences was opened to examine the interior of the town, beside the entry of King Street.

THE EXCAVATION

Site B. The Defences (Fig. 15)

The excavation by the Ipswich Museum did not suggest an archaeological date for the defences, although it appears that the mound known as 'Temple Hill'² post-dated the rampart and was apparently of 13-14th century date. The defences, known as 'Pales Dyke'³ originally ran the entire length of the western boundary of the town. In the excavated section it was clear that the rampart had been deliberately flattened and thrown down into the ditch, where it appears as a heavy band of gravel (Fig. 15, Layers 2 and 4). Only a small area of gravel remained on the site of the rampart itself. Fortunately, enough remained to preserve the levels beneath the rampart undisturbed. A 15 ft. square of the pre-rampart levels was stripped which revealed an irregular area of partially fired clay following the line of a shallow trench, itself at an angle to the line of the rampart. This shallow feature, 4 ft. in width, averaged some 6 ins. in depth and contained black soil and fragments of wattle and daub which extended over an area beyond the limits of the trench. For 5 ft. of its length the trench deepened into a narrow slot 9 ins. wide and almost 1 ft. deep. The western end was truncated by a modern field ditch cut along the face of the rampart. The eastern end ran out into the cliff. It would appear that timber buildings occupied the site of the rampart before its construction.

The profile of the ditch (Fig. 15) showed steeply cut sides and a flattened bottom 15 ft. deep and 40 ft. wide. The lower 3 ft. of the ditch were not excavated owing to the loose and dangerous condition of the fill, but were reconstructed from observations made in the cliff face. The true profile of the ditch appears then to have been some 5 ft. deeper than the section published of the 1935 excavation; the profile of which accords with the turf-line sealing the primary silt in the 1970 section.

² *Ibid.*, p. 200.

³ T. Gardner, *An Historical Account of Dunwich* (1754), p. 4.

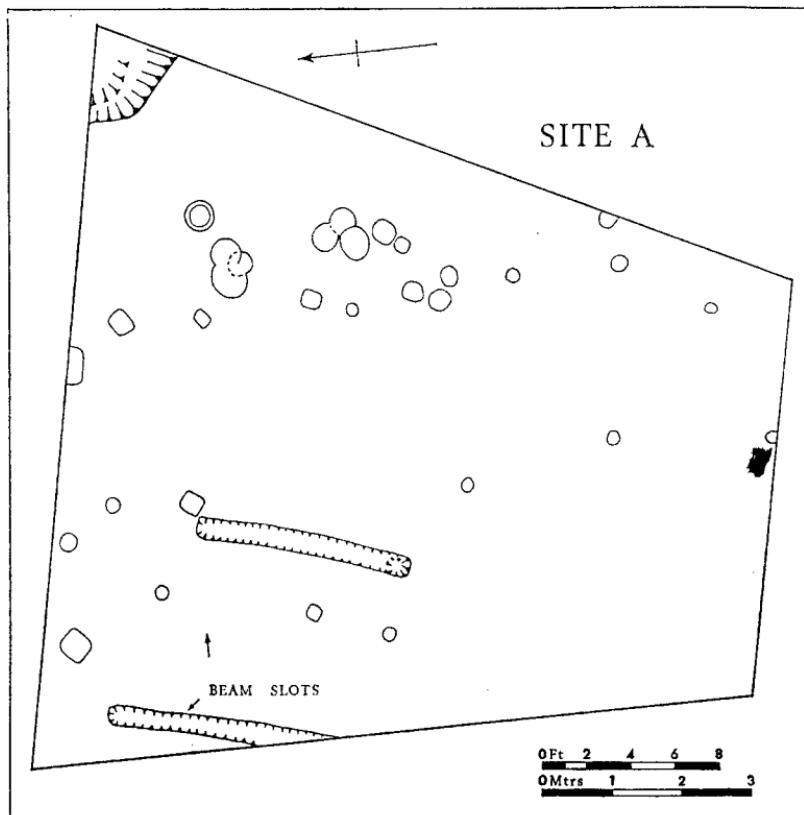


FIG. 16.—Site A, plan of structures.

excavated area. This gravel probably represents the spreading of the tail of the rampart, helped by the cart-track along its eastern edge.

DATING

The archaeological dating for the rampart and ditch rests upon the pottery found beneath the rampart, which consists of two distinct groups. Firstly, the coarse ware cooking pots, which include a number of simple forms of the late 12th century and some more developed, squared rims (Fig. 17, nos. 5—12) which ought to belong to the early 13th century. Five sherds of imported Andenne Ware were also recovered from the same level. These included a fragment with diamond shaped rouletting and the battered remains of a spout. Although incomplete, the spout appears to have been a short stubby one, which would suggest a 12th rather than a 13th

century date. Another fragment, of distinctly redder fabric than the rest, is probably a 13th century piece.⁵

The pottery under the rampart indicates a lengthy occupation on the site and that the rampart had been constructed at some time during the early 13th century. This does not agree with the documentary evidence, which, if reliable, would point to an effective defence at the time of the insurrection of 1173.

CONCLUSIONS

Although it would be dangerous to make categorical statements on the results of an excavation as small as that undertaken in 1970, some profitable observations on the history and condition of Dunwich can be made.

Three pieces of Romano-British pottery from the infilling of the ditch are indications of some sort of occupation during that period but allow nothing more. The Roman road system inland, however, is clearly pointing to Dunwich; the development of this site as a port in the Middle Ages could well explain the preservation of such long stretches of Roman roads in this area. In spite of the lack of evidence for the nature of the Romano-British site, it can surely be assumed to have been of some considerable importance as it was the focal point of at least four roads, giving access to Combretovium (Coddernham) and Venta Icenorum (Caistor-by-Norwich). Dunwich is also midway between the shore forts at Burgh Castle and Walton.

The site of the Romano-British settlement at Dunwich, be it fort, township or of lesser status, was situated almost a mile to sea beyond the line of the present cliff, on the end of what must have been a conspicuous promontory. The long arms of the Dingle and Westwood Marshes to the north and of Minsmere to the south, reaching inland well beyond Dunwich, must have recommended the site strategically, providing a vantage point over a long stretch of coastline and shelter for shipping in the creeks.

There is, to date, no archaeological evidence for the Saxon and early Norman periods, but the excavation has some bearing on the state of the medieval town. The presence of a considerable number of imported Pingsdorf type wares and Andenne Ware of the 12th and 13th centuries, the result of trade with the continent, supports the historical evidence for the prosperity of the town. The discovery of these fine wares, associated with traces of timber buildings, is an indication that the town was extensively built up to its western boundaries at that time. The archaeological dating for the rampart

⁵ R. Borremans and R. Warginare, *La Ceramique d'Andenne*, Stichting 'Het Nederlandse Gebruiksvoorwerp' (Rotterdam, 1966).

in the early thirteenth century runs counter to the suggestive contemporary documentary evidence concerning the siege of the town by the Earl of Leicester in 1173 (see below, p. 35).

THE POTTERY

The Coarse Wares

Site A. Twenty-seven different rims were recovered from the lower levels on this site. Two (not illustrated) were simple upright rims of the Ipswich Ware type. Twelve were simple upright rims,

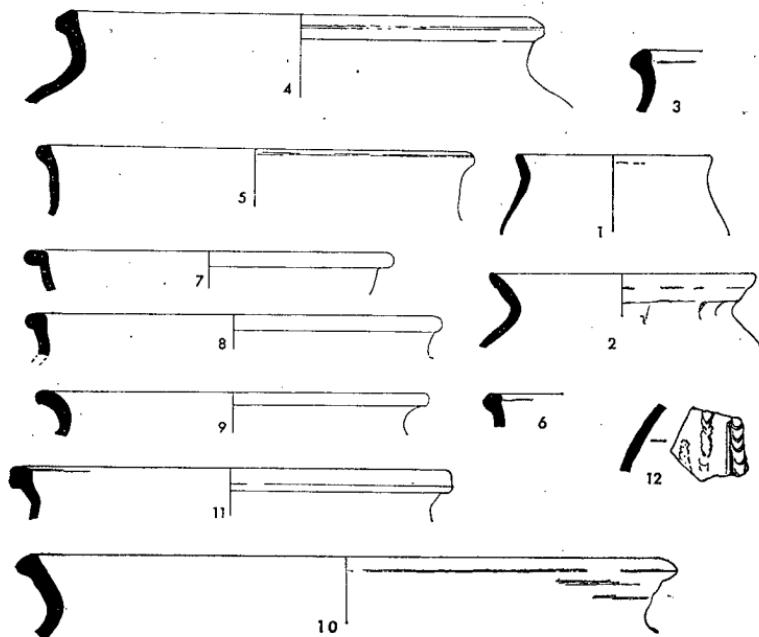


FIG. 17.—Dunwich, medieval pottery, scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

some with a small bead, of Early Medieval fabric of 11th and early 12th centuries and six were more developed types of the 12th and early 13th centuries. The remainder were indeterminate medieval wares.

Early Medieval

Fig. 17, 1. Small cooking pot with simple rim in thin brown sandy ware. Diameter $5\frac{1}{2}$ ins.

Fig. 17, 2. Simple flaring rim of cooking pot in thin brown ware. Diameter $5\frac{1}{2}$ ins.

- Fig. 17, 3. Rim with simple bead in Early Medieval fabric, one of seven examples. Usually larger vessels than nos. 1 and 2. 8-10 ins. in diameter.

Medieval

- Fig. 17, 4. Heavily beaded rim of cooking pot in pale buff sandy ware. Diameter 10 ins.

Site B. Eighteen rims were recovered from beneath the rampart. They range from simple beaded rims to the more squared forms of the early 13th century. No glazed sherds were found. Close dating is not yet possible for this material, save to suggest a general late 12th-early 13th century date. However, the imported pottery from this area further strengthens a 12th century beginning for the pre-rampart occupation.

- Fig. 17, 5. Upright rim with simple bead. Thin, hard gritty ware. Diameter 9 ins.

- Fig. 17, 6. Beaded rim in hard, gritty brown ware.

- Fig. 17, 7. Heavily beaded rim, almost flanged. The surviving portion of the body would indicate a bowl form. Hard, dark grey, gritty ware. Diameter 7½ ins.

- Fig. 17, 8. Heavily beaded, upright rim of cooking pot. Hard light brown sandy ware. Diameter 8½ ins.

- Fig. 17, 9. Unusual everted rim in smooth grey ware. Not Romano-British. Diameter 8 ins.

- Fig. 17, 10. Out-turned rim with pointed bead from cooking pot. Hard, gritty, buff surfaced grey ware. Diameter 13½ ins.

- Fig. 17, 11. Cooking pot rim with developed, squared rim. Brown surfaced grey ware. Diameter 9 ins.

- Fig. 17, 12. Medieval sherd with applied scale decoration and dark green glaze. Pale buff ware. From Layer 2, town ditch.

Imported Wares

A Eight small sherds of Pingsdorf type ware were recovered from Site A. Two sherds (Fig. 18, nos. 13, 14) had distinctive, dark red spots of paint. A third (Fig. 18, no. 15) was the upper portion of a broad strap handle and a fragment of the rim. Small spots of dark red paint occur on the handle. The remaining fragments were unpainted body sherds.

B Fourteen sherds of Andenne Ware were recovered, nine from Site A and five from Site B. The sherds are small, with the exception

of the spout. The ware is mainly buff, ranging to pale pink, with one red sherd; the glaze is deep yellow with dark brown splashes, four sherds having a deep orange glaze. Three sherds are illustrated:

- Fig. 18, 16. Small sherd in buff ware with portion of rouletted ornament. Bright yellow glaze.
 Fig. 18, 17. Body sherd with fragments of applied strap ornament. Buff ware with deep yellow glaze and spots of dark brown.

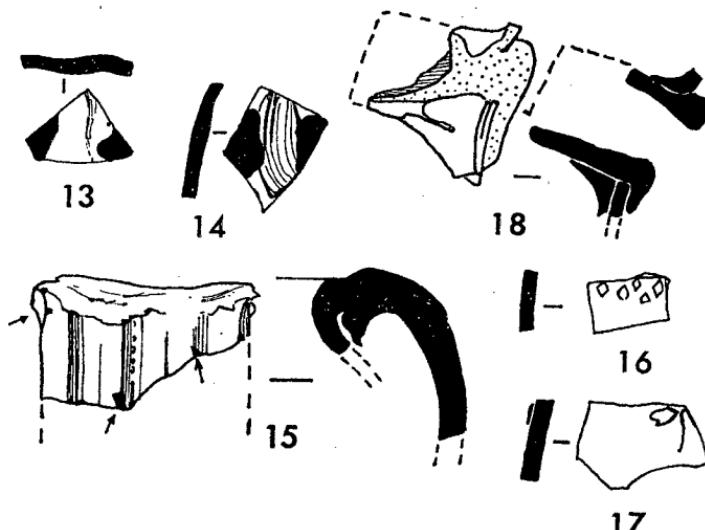


FIG. 18.—Dunwich, imported pottery, scale $\frac{1}{2}$.

- Fig. 18, 18. Incomplete tubular spout in buff-pink ware, partly covered with a deep yellow glaze, spotted with dark brown. The spout has been inserted into the wall of the vessel, burred over on the inside and a collar applied at the base of the spout on the outside.

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