

THE EXCAVATION OF THE TOWN DEFENCES AT TAYFEN ROAD, BURY ST. EDMUNDS, 1968

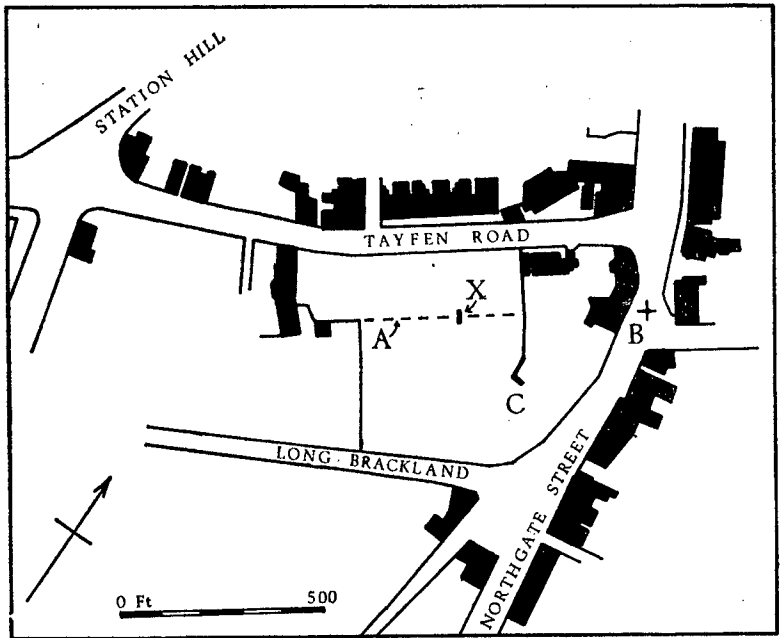
by S. E. WEST, M.A., A.M.A.

Medieval Bury St. Edmunds occupied the eastern tip of a tongue of land reaching down from Westley to the River Lark, bordered by the River Linnet to the south and Tayfen to the north. In this way the site was well chosen, only the line of the western boundary was unsupported by river or marsh.

Nothing is known, archaeologically, of Bury St. Edmunds before the setting out of the grid-iron pattern of streets by Abbot Sampson in the 11th century, although there are references to the foundation of a monastery there by Sigebert in the 7th century and the burial of St. Edmund there in the early 10th century. There is no archaeological evidence so far for the position of the Saxon town, but St. Mary's Square is assumed¹ to have been a pre-Conquest Market and this, taken in conjunction with the curving sweep of Maynewater Lane, would make the general area a likely one for the early settlement, in the angle formed by the River Linnet and the River Lark.

The area of the medieval town is well defined by the position of the town gates: the South Gate, the West Gate, the North Gate, Risby Gate and East Gate. Cullum Road, St. Andrew's Street South and North and Tayfen Road follow the outer edge of the town ditch; a low bank crossing the meadow from Cullum Road to Friars' Lane marks the alignment to the South; whereas a distinct change in level and the positions of property boundaries marks the alignment in the northern sector, particularly along the Tayfen Road portion. The position of the South Gate, well beyond the crossing of the Linnet may well indicate a secondary development south from Friars' Lane Bridge across to the Grindle and the site of the South Gate. The medieval bridge over the Linnet was revealed in September 1970 during road widening which also

¹ By M. D. Lobel in *The Borough of Bury St. Edmunds* (1935), p. 8. All we actually know is that St. Mary's Square appeared on Warren's map of Bury, 1747, as the Horse Market, and that in rentals of 1433 (B.M., Harl. 58) and 1295 (Bury Corporation Records printed in *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, xiii (1909), pp. 210-22) Le Horsemarket adjoined Southgate Street and so presumably already occupied the St. Mary's Square site. Lobel's reasoning (*op. cit.*, pp. 8 and 10) that Bury had a market before 1066 and that it was in this area is convincing. But there seems to be no evidence for the use of the name 'Old Market' until she used it in her book.



TAYFEN ROAD BURY ST EDMUNDS

FIG. 8.—A: line of town wall; B: site of North Gate; C: site of 17th century house; X: site of 1968 excavation.

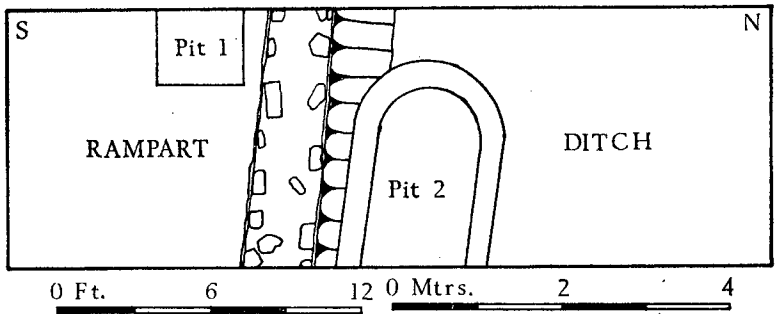


FIG. 9.—Tayfen Road, Bury, plan of excavation trench.

showed a flint rubble wall, two feet thick embanking the north bank of the river only, possibly the line of an earlier boundary.

The grid-iron street pattern is distinctly related to the central area of the medieval town, the area to the south of Westgate Street and that south of Tayfen, remained largely open and cultivated land within the town wall, so that even by 1740 a large area between Northgate Street and Long Brackland was still undeveloped.

THE EXCAVATION

In 1968 a flint rubble wall coursed with alternate bands of thin red bricks and considerable quantities of re-used dressed and shaped limestone blocks had been removed from the line of the defences in clearing the site for re-development. Later that year the Ministry of Public Building and Works took the opportunity to examine the line of the medieval defences just west of the site of the North Gate (Fig. 8). Because of the documentary evidence suggesting that a stone wall had been erected round the town by the Abbey sacrist Hervey, under Abbot Anselm (1121 and 1148)² there was some speculation as to the date of this wall. Accordingly a trench 30 ft. by 10 ft. was cut across the line of the wall to examine the foundation and to establish the position of the Town Ditch (Fig. 9). The removal of the wall revealed a marked change in level, in the order of some 4 ft. from the town side of the boundary to that beyond, a feature which can in fact, be traced along much of the western line of the defences.

The trench showed that the foundations of the stone wall were cut into the stump of an older, earthen rampart, of which 18 ins. remained below the base of the foundation. An examination of the south-west corner of the site, at a point where a fragment of the stone wall remained, showed that it was not continuous along the line of the defences but that there was a butt joint with the wall of the adjoining property and that the wall itself made a return to the east.

The Warren map of 1747 shows a sizeable house standing back from Long Brackland on the northern part of the site towards the North Gate and that the property used the line of the rampart as a boundary on the Tayfen side and returned toward Long Brackland at the point of the butt joint. A small portion of this house was still standing at the time of the excavation and was clearly part of a substantial structure built of 17th century bricks. The brick courses in the boundary wall were of the same character and date. The

² 'Murorum etiam ambitum circa villam Sancti Eadmundi'. B.M. Harl. MS. 1005, f. 120 printed in T. Arnold, *Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey* (1892), II, p. 290.

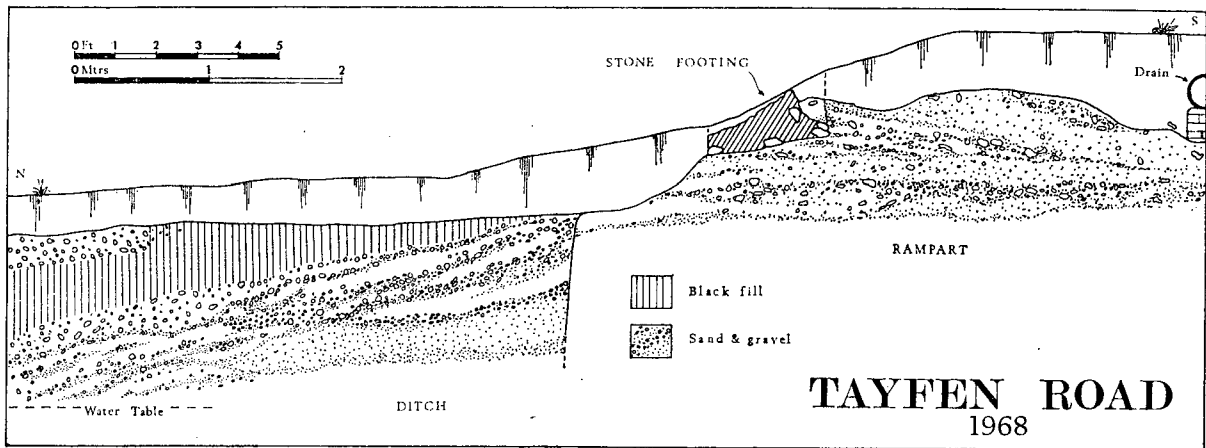


FIG. 10.—Section of rampart and ditch showing 17th century wall cut into stump of rampart.

excavation showed that the wall was an insertion into the earlier earthen rampart and that there was no evidence to suggest that there had ever been any other wall on the site.

The area examined was further complicated by two soak-aways which served the mid-19th century terraced housing in Tayfen Road and Long Brackland. Although one of these had been cut into the rampart it was possible to obtain a transverse section which showed that the rampart had been constructed of sand and gravel and was still standing to a height of 3 ft. 3 ins. (Fig. 10). This stump of the rampart was completely buried by more recent accumulations inside the boundary.

No trace of the old land surface or turf-line was found beneath the rampart, indicating that the site had been cleared before the construction of the bank. A modern sewer on the east obscured the tail of the rampart so that an accurate measurement was not possible, but the base must have been at least 14 ft. wide. It can be assumed that the rampart was constructed from the sand and gravel dug from the ditch immediately before it. The inner lip of this ditch was located 2 ft. beyond the outer edge of the rampart and was at least 14 ft. wide. The existing water-table was encountered at 5 ft. 6 ins. from the modern ground surface so that a complete profile of the ditch could not be obtained. Most of the filling of the ditch consisted of coarse gravel clearly intended to level the ditch while the stream itself was piped beyond that, when the terraced houses in Tayfen Road were built.

CONCLUSIONS

No dating evidence was recovered for the construction of the rampart, either from the rampart itself or from beneath it. However, the excavation showed that the medieval defences along this stretch of the boundary had never been provided with a stone wall in spite of the documentary evidence which suggests the sacrist Hervey's wall ran right round the town. It remains a possibility that the historian William of Malmesbury may have been right in quoting the tradition that Cnut built a ditch round the town.³

THE FINDS

The finds are now in Moyses's Hall Museum, Bury St. Edmunds.

Mesolithic

An interesting sidelight to the excavation was the recovery of over five hundred worked flints from the gravel core of the rampart. Among the assemblage were four microlithic points, a microburin, two typical cores and an unusual tanged arrowhead; apart

³ *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, p. 155, referred to in Lobel, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

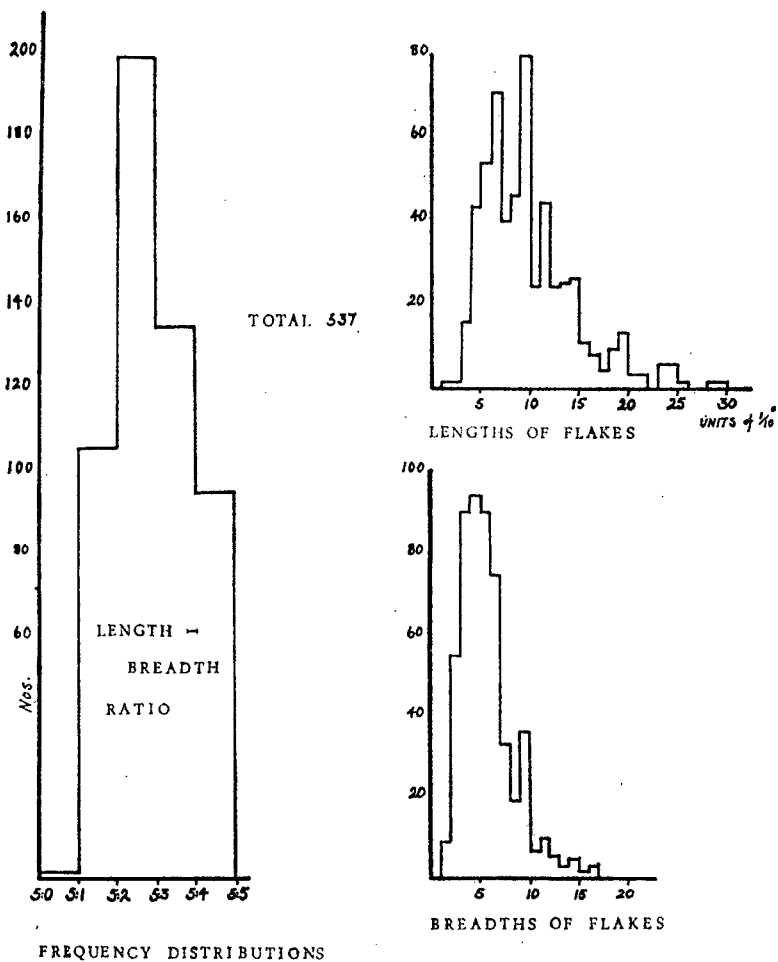


FIG. 12.—Tayfen Road, Bury, flint analysis.

from the arrowhead a fairly typical Sauveterrian industry being without trapezes or heavy elements. The large number of waste flakes and blades associated with cores and tools, although re-deposited in the rampart, indicates that the Tayfen had attracted a group of hunter-fisher peoples in the 5th and 6th millenia B.C. The length-breadth ratios of 537 flakes are shown in Fig. 12 together

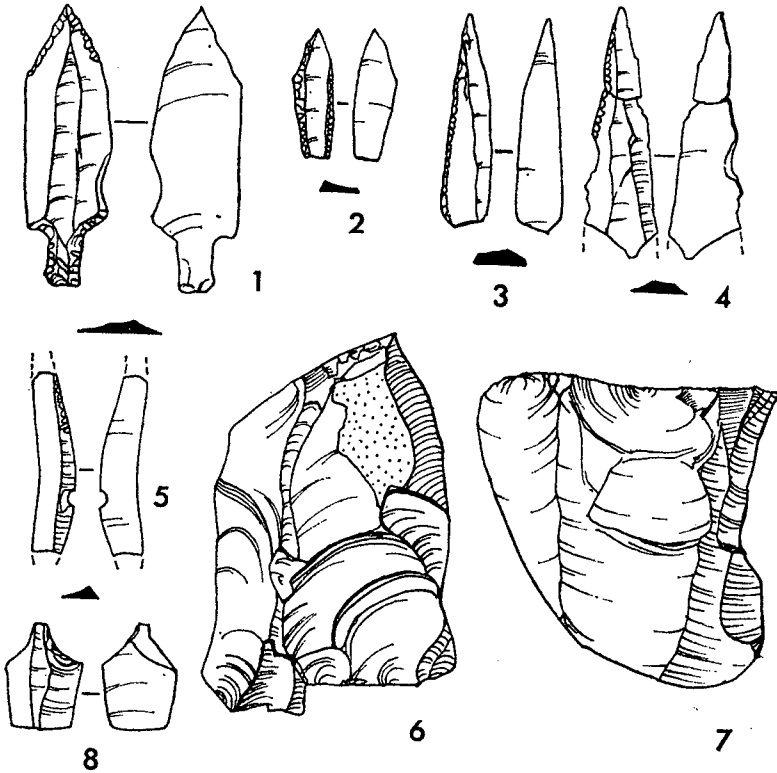


FIG. 11.—Tayfen Road, Bury, microliths. Scale $\frac{1}{2}$.

with frequency distributions of the lengths and of the breadths of the flakes.

Fig. 11, 1. Tanged arrowhead, point and tang made by re-touching from the main flake surface. Fig. 11, 2. Tiny barb with retouching along both sides. Fig. 11, 3, 4 and 5. Three typical points made by retouching long narrow blades. Fig. 11, 6, 7. Two cores. Fig. 11, 8. Micro-barin.

Medieval

No pottery was found under the rampart but one small sherd of indeterminate grey ware was found under the tail of the bank.

Nineteenth Century

A quantity of Staffordshire Willow pattern, flown blue, spattered ware and Lambeth stoneware of the early-middle 19th century were recovered from the two soak-aways belonging to the terraced housing along Tayfen Road. No documentary dates were found for the construction of this housing but they are not shown on the maps of the area up to 1845.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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