

THE WEST GATE OF IPSWICH

by ELIZABETH OWLES, B.A., F.S.A.

In 1967 the site on the corner of Westgate Street and Lady Lane was cleared for redevelopment (TM/16054471). The site was occupied by a tobacconist's and the Feathers Inn; both buildings were of 19th century date but the latter succeeded a 17th century inn of the same name which appears in Plate XIX.¹

With the permission of the contractors, Shears-Neale Ltd., the excavations were watched and the remains of the West Gate, when they were exposed, were planned and photographed. At first the contractors agreed to incorporate them in the foundations of their new building, separating them from the modern concrete with a sheet of polythene. Unfortunately, however, there was a last-minute change of plan and they were demolished to just below the plinth. Mr. A. D. Williams, the foreman carpenter, kindly extracted three ashlar blocks which are now in Ipswich Museum (Reg. No. 967-58). A chip was sent to Dr. F. W. Anderson of the Geological Survey, who identified it as coming from the quarries at Caen in Normandy.

At the east end of the site the gate had been destroyed, to the depth of the excavation, by the cellar of the tobacconist's, but under the Feathers a chunk of masonry was exposed 10 ft. from the edge of the pavement 16 ft. long and with a maximum width of 4 ft. It rose in places to within 9 ins. of the present day ground level and continued to a depth of at least 14 ft. 6 ins., the limit of the exploratory hole generously dug by the contractors. It was built of large flints with some erratic boulders, but at the west end the bottom 8 ft. was faced with ashlar blocks. At 7 ft. 9 ins. below the present ground level was a plinth 150° from the vertical, four courses wide with a single course of ashlar above. The stones were about 9 ins. high and between 11½ and 14 ins. long, so carefully dressed that the joints were barely visible (Plate XXI). On the south side the plinth continued for a further 6 feet but without the ashlar facing (Fig. 46, *b*).²

The stones in Ipswich Museum were examined by Mr. S. E. Rigold of the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, and photographs were sent to Dr. Eric Gee of the Royal Commission, York. Both agree that the claw tooling on the stones taken from the plinth and the layer above it are of 13th century date, while the diagonal

¹ Francis Grose, *Antiquities of England and Wales*, III (1773-87), p. 227.

² The plan represents the top layer of ashlar, i.e. 7 ft. below the present ground level. In fact the measurements were taken at a depth of 5 ft. 6 ins. and the corner of the plinth is conjectural as unfortunately no observer was present when this portion was uncovered and demolished.

axing on the stone below is typical of the 12th century. Dr. Gee would see this as evidence of two building phases or a reconstruction, but Mr. Rigold felt that the two techniques could be contemporary, one perhaps favoured by a young man the other by an old or old-fashioned craftsman; on the evidence of the plinth he would date the structure to the early 13th century. This was also the time when the claw tool was replacing the axe.

This would fit well with the date of 1204 when an entry in the Ipswich Domesday records that ramparts were constructed with the aid of the county of Cambridge. The town was, however, already divided into letes or wards, probably of Saxon origin, named after the four gates,³ and the town must have been fortified in Saxon times since it was of some importance and very vulnerable to Danish raids. If the gate was built in two stages the upper part may perhaps be assigned to 1299 when the town obtained a grant of murage from the Crown. On one of the stones Dr. Gee thought he saw evidence of reworking in the late 14th century, perhaps in 1352 when a licence was obtained to strengthen and crenellate the town with a stone wall.

The first mention of the West Gate is when John de Caldwell, bailiff and portman, rebuilt the gate shortly after 1446 and turned it into a gaol at his own expense. It remained a lockup until in November 1781 it was sold by order of the Great Court for £30 and demolished within the next five months.

The engraving reproduced in Plate XIX shows a brick superstructure obviously that paid for by John de Caldwell. The lower story has the appearance of ashlar, which conflicts with the remains found in 1967. However, the accompanying text states: "The lower part, to the height of about fifteen ft. is of stone; but according to the present barbarous custom, covered with plaister".⁴ Two engravings

³ Ipswich Domesday, see J. Kirby, *The Suffolk Traveller* (1761), p. 11 and G. R. Clarke, *The History and Description of the Town and Borough of Ipswich* (1836), p. 167. Of the main gates only the west and the north (demolished in 1794) are marked on Speede's map of 1610. In Bacon's *Annals of Ipswich*, p. 73, there is mention in 1347 of a message in St. Clements parish 'abutting uppon Clemts Streete East, and uppon an empty place called Shirehouse hill and the churchyard of the antiquated Church called Osterbolt.' The only place which fits this description is the junction of Orwell Place and Orwell Street and not Major's Corner which might seem the more obvious site. The south gate was probably near Stoke bridge or the adjacent ford.

⁴ There is in Ipswich Museums an unprovenanced watercolour which has been attributed to Grose. It is inscribed on the reverse with the date 24 June 1769, the date of the drawing from which the Grose engraving was taken. There are, however, various discrepancies in the treatment of the figures and buildings, also deficiencies in the perspective of "The Feathers"; moreover, bricks are indicated below the plaster, thus contradicting the text. It may be, therefore, that, in common with most of the representations of the West Gate, it was copied from Grose's engraving rather than being the original.

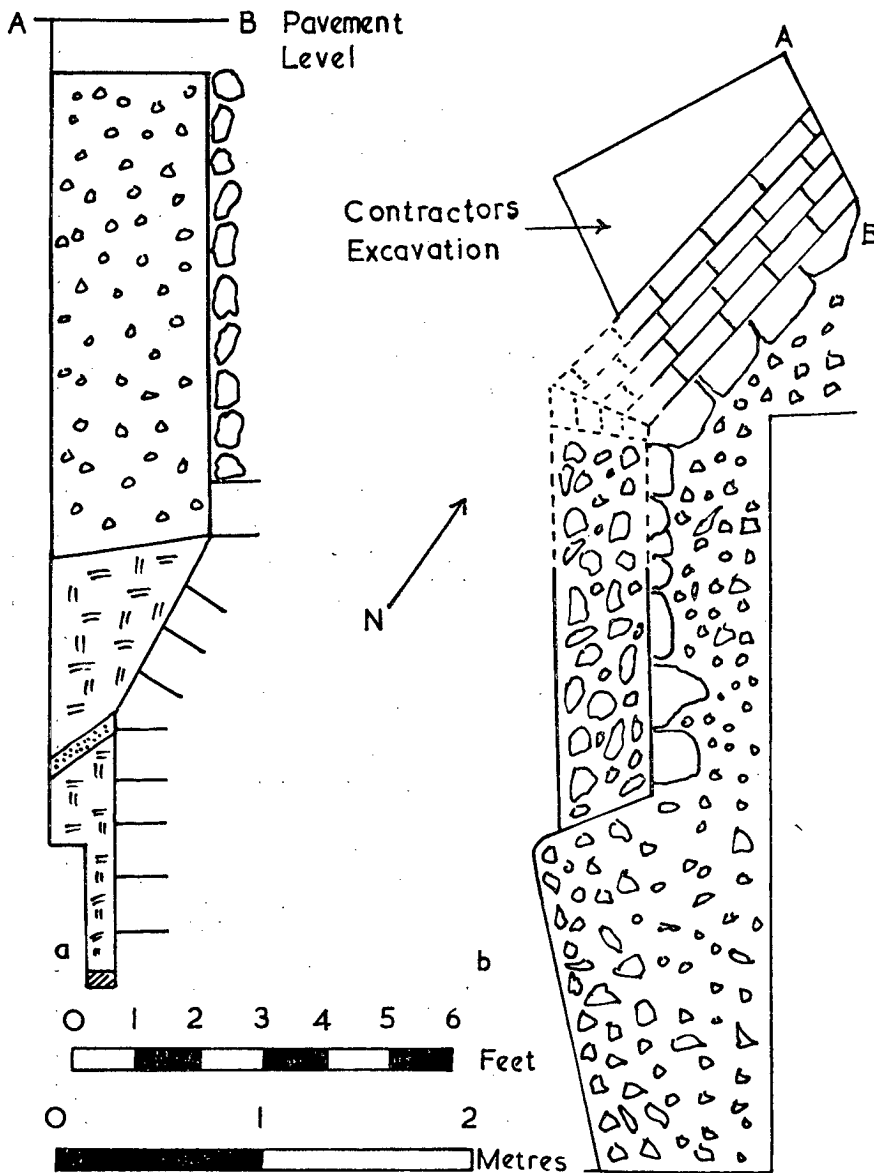
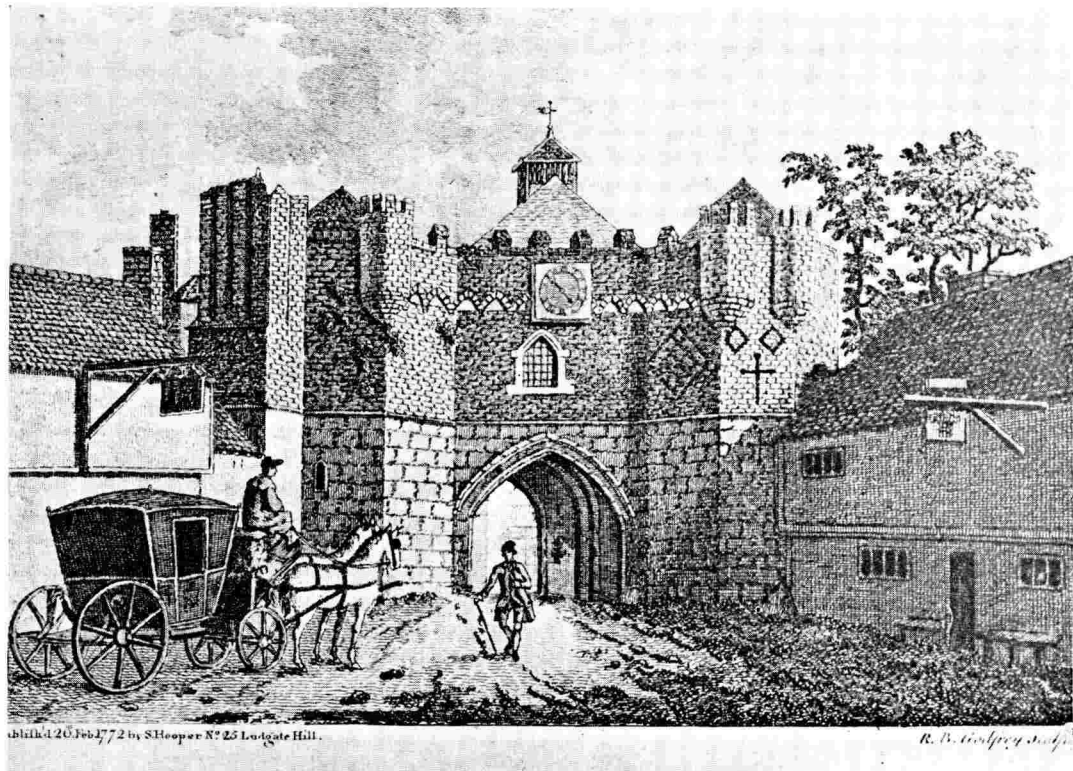


FIG. 46.—Section and plan of fragment of West Gate, 1967

Cellar

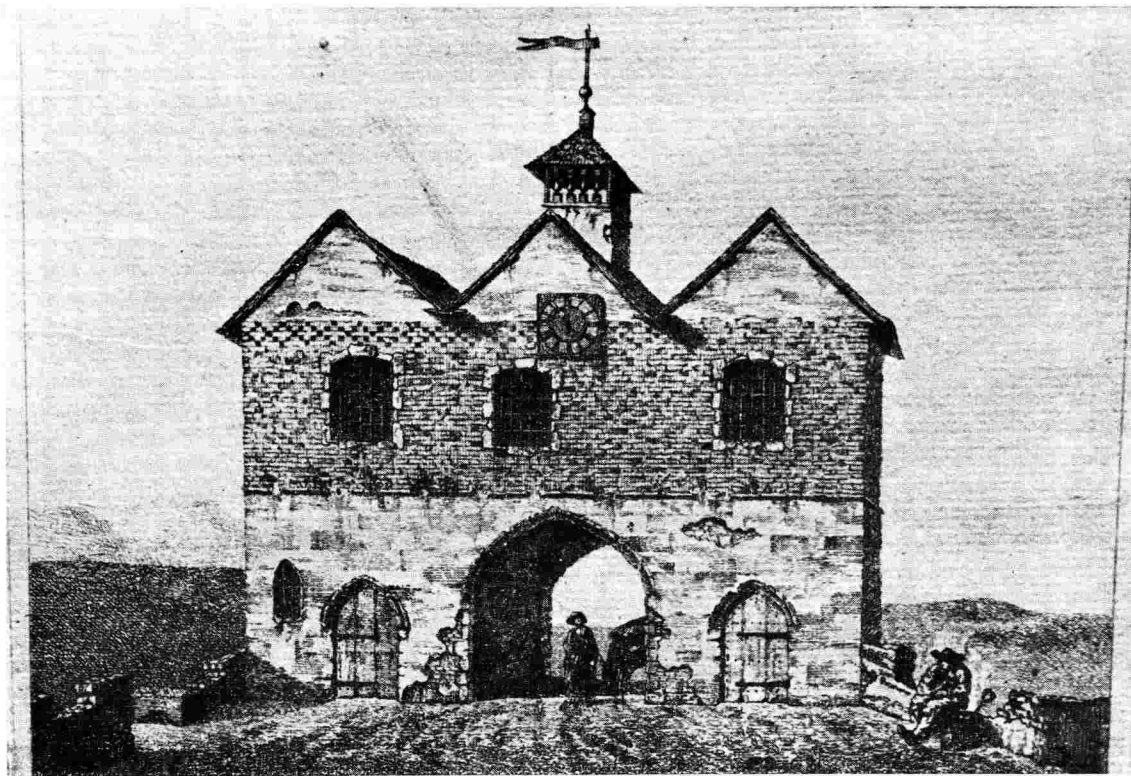
PLATE XIX



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West Gate, west side, 1769, from Grose's *Antiquities*.



West Gate, east side, engraving attributed to George Frost (1744-1821).

PLATE XXI



West Gate, 1967, showing plinth.

attributed to George Frost (1744-1821) (Plate XX) show the plaster peeling off to reveal below flint work with ashlar quoins. The arch appears squat due to the rise in ground level usual on urban sites; the plinth had already been buried. As can be seen in the section (Fig. 46a) the top 9 ft. of earth against the gate was a uniform grey fill and below this was a dark layer broken only by a line of mortar dipping sharply down from just below the plinth. The only find was part of a 16th century frilly based mug lying against the plinth. The two layers may represent a deliberate raising of the ground before the construction of the 16th century inn and its 19th century successor.

The contractors dug a series of holes 6 ft. deep to the south of the gate. These were not deep enough to reach the town ditch but on the east of the site the tip lines of the gravel rampart were clearly visible. In one section a pit, cut through the lower levels but sealed by five successive layers, probably represents a heightening of the rampart. Unfortunately the pit contained slag but no datable material. It was not possible to see in these small holes whether a stone wall had been built in this part of the defences. A section dug in 1959 across the rampart and ditch in Shire Hall Yard showed that here a foundation trench had been dug but that the wall had not been built. The excavator associated this with the licence to crenellate obtained in 1352 and surrendered in 1354.⁵

Glyde⁶ states that a portion of the gate was visible in a sewage trench below the property adjoining the tobacconist's a few steps from Black Horse Lane and presumably some fragments of the north pier survive on the other side of Westgate Street. It is to be hoped that when redevelopment takes place on these sites any remains of the West Gate which may be uncovered will be reburied intact so that they can be studied by archaeologists of the future. Ipswich has a long history dating back to Middle Saxon times, but every year the archaeological levels which would throw light on this history are being destroyed just as the late mediaeval and 17th century houses which gave the town its charm and character are being demolished.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to the contractors, Messrs. Shears-Neale Ltd., to Dr. F. W. Anderson, Miss P. M. Butler, Dr. Eric Gee and Mr. S. E. Rigold; and also to Mr. F. W. Simpson for the photographs.

⁵ S. E. West, 'Excavations at Cox Lane and at the Town Defences, Shire Hall Yard, Ipswich', *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, xxix (1963), pp. 233-303. See also D. Charman's review of the documentary evidence in the same paper.

⁶ J. Glyde, *Illustrations of Old Ipswich* (1889), p. 3.