

EXCAVATIONS IN ROMAN LONG MELFORD, 1970-1972

by RICHARD AVENT, M.A., F.S.A. AND THE LATE THOMAS HOWLETT

IN A PAPER published in these *Proceedings* in 1961 Norman Smedley summarized some of the more recent evidence for the Roman occupation of Long Melford (Smedley, 1961, 272-89). He showed that to the west of the main street of the town (A134) there appears to have been a pre-conquest Belgic occupation followed by a Roman settlement which survived into the 4th century, although its peak of prosperity appears to have been in the 2nd century. Very little evidence could be found to show that this settlement extended to the east of the modern main road although a small amount of pottery, dating to the 1st and early part of the 2nd centuries A.D., had been found in the area of Chapel Green which lies at the southern end of the modern town.

In the past it has generally been assumed that the A134, where it passes through the town, is on the line of the original Roman road which ran from Chelmsford via Braintree, Long Melford and Ixworth to the Wash (Margary, 1973, 255-56). In 1970 it was decided that the field to the south of Chapel Green, known as Chapel Field (TL 863 449), would be developed as a private housing estate (Fig. 34). One of the authors (T.H.) felt that this provided an ideal opportunity to conduct a rescue excavation in order to check on the alignment of the Roman road and to see if the chance finds in Chapel Green pointed to a more extensive area of Roman occupation in the south-eastern corner of the town. The excavations started in March 1970 and continued until March 1972, when the area was backfilled and levelled prior to the field being developed as Park Corner Estate. The work was undertaken on a part-time basis with local help and without grant-aid.

Chapel Field is nearly flat and it appears to have been regularly ploughed. The underlying geology consists of a fairly fine angular gravel mixed with sand and varying in colour from yellow through orange to a reddish brown. Four trial areas, numbered Ai to Aiv (Fig. 34), were excavated first, starting with a trench (Ai) near the eastern edge of the A134. The foundations of part of a 17th-century house were revealed in this trench and the existence of this building was confirmed when site Aii, c. 10ft (3.04m) square, was opened. The foundations of a cellar or basement consisted of loosely mortared flint with occasional Tudor bricks. Neither site produced evidence to confirm the existence of the Roman road, hence two further sites, Aiii and Aiv, were opened further east. A distinctive Roman road surface was located in the more easterly (Aiv), and in order to establish its alignment, two trial trenches (Bi and Ci) were laid out further south, across its assumed line. At the western end of Bi (and in a northerly extension to it, designated Biii) a clay floor with a slot for a horizontal timber was found. This appears to have formed part of a 17th- or 18th-century house which must have been sited just to the east of the post-medieval main road through the town. In addition to establishing the alignment of the Roman road, these trenches suggested that there had been two ditches on either side of it. The large quantity of occupation debris also seemed to indicate the existence of an area of settlement very close to the road.

Once this initial work had been completed, it was decided to extend site Aiv and combine it with an accurate transverse section of the Roman road; this new site was referred to as Aiv/v. A further area (site Avi) was also opened at the western end of this site. Both these sites are discussed in more detail below. Shortly before backfilling a final, larger, area (site X) was mechanically stripped and the Roman road and some medieval or post-medieval field boundary ditches were examined over a large area. A circular well with a lining of

CHAPEL FIELD, LONG MELFORD

No. 9
Chapel Green

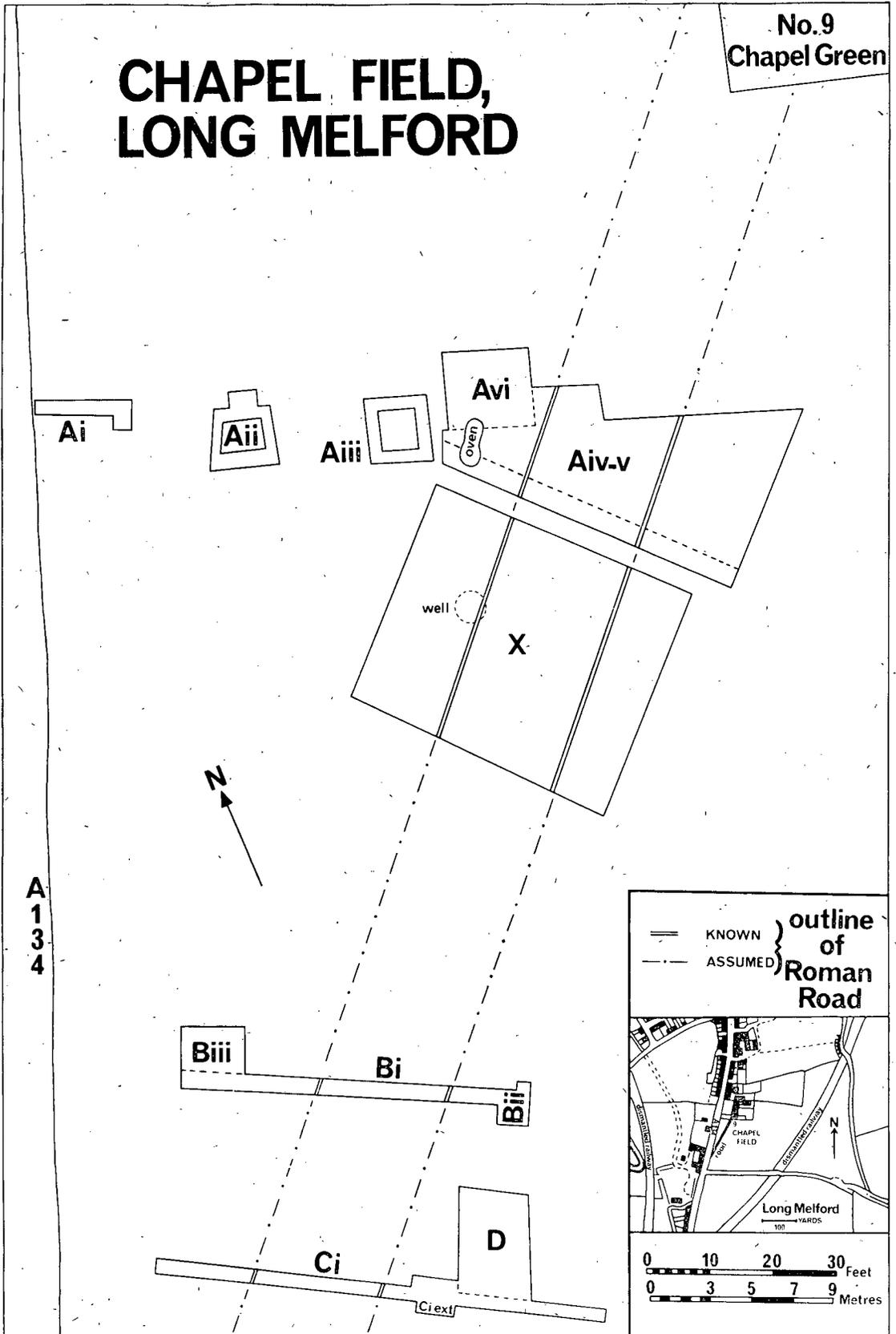


FIG. 34—Chapel Field, Long Melford: overall site plan.

mortared flints and a diameter of 3ft 8½in (1.13m) was also located in this area although there was insufficient time to examine it fully or, indeed, to examine most of the other features revealed.

THE SITES

Site Aiv/v - Description

This site consisted of the main transverse section of the Roman road and an area to the north-east of it which had been opened to expose a larger area of the road surface. The main cut through the road layers and associated ditches was 3ft (91.4cm) wide and 49ft (14.94m) long: cf. Fig. 36 (where it should be noted that, for ease of illustration, the feature numbers have been reduced to two digits by the omission of the common prefix 3; e.g. 301 becomes 01).

The road make-up consisted of thin layers of hard-packed orange sand (layers 318, 320 and 322) containing flints varying in size from ¼in (0.6cm) to 2ins (5cm), which alternated with very hard-packed layers of what appeared to be a grey concrete-like surface of lime and small stones (319, 321 and 323). These layers overlay a thick layer of red-brown sand (324) which, in addition to the smaller stones of the layers above, contained flints up to 5ins (12.7cm) in size. This layer in turn overlay a layer of thin grey sandy silt which contained occasional flecks of charcoal (325). The bottommost layer (340) consisted of closely packed pebbles set in lime (rather like a conglomerate in geological terms) with the stones varying in size from ½in (1.2cm) to 3in (7.5cm). There were no dateable finds in any of these layers. The upper levels of the road had been heavily disturbed by ploughing and medieval and post-medieval features such as the pit or posthole (317) on the north-western side and the field-boundary ditch (315) on the south-eastern side. Another similar ditch (314) overlay the Roman ditch at the north-western end of the trench. Layers 306, 307 and 309, which consisted of sand with stones and small amounts of lime, appear to represent the spreading of this road material by ploughing.

As has been mentioned above, there appears to be evidence for the existence of two ditches on either side of the road. Both are represented on the south-eastern side of the road (334 and 335) in Fig. 36 but only the inner one can be seen to the north-west of the road. However, layer 363 seems to represent one of the upper layers of the outer ditch which must have been partly visible on site Aiii although most of it would have been under the baulk between the two sites. Layers 333 and 313a may represent a small pit which must have pre-dated both the south-eastern road ditches and therefore, presumably, also the road although no dateable material was found associated with this feature to prove this supposition. No dateable material was found in the thin grey silt (334d) at the bottom of the outer ditch but mid to late 1st-century pottery was found in the light orange coloured sand which made up layer 334c. The dark brown soil of layer 334b included thick lenses of charcoal which contained large quantities of pottery but the most critical piece of dating evidence for this feature came from the uppermost layer. A decorated sherd of samian form Dr. 29 (samian no. 27), dating to the Neronian period, was found in the fine brown soil which made up layer 334a. Another sherd from the same bowl (samian no. 30) was found in the bottommost fill of the inner ditch (335c). This consisted of a light brown silt and the juxtaposition of these two sherds proves that the inner ditch must have been open and the outer one silted up at the time of their deposition. Layer 335b consists of a similar but slightly more sandy fill to 335c, while 335a is made up of a fine grey-black silt with lenses of charcoal. This latter layer also produced Claudian-Neronian samian and coarse pottery dating to the second half of the 1st century. Two sherds of Flavian samian were found to the south-east of the outer ditch (334) in the orange-brown silt of layer 371. Dateable material was also found in

the layers which overlay both these road ditches. First and early 2nd century coarse wares were found in the fine grey-brown soil which made up layer 313 while pre-Hadrianic pottery was found in the silt of 311a. The latest dateable material from this side of the road, found in the grey-green silt of layer 311, is represented by a sherd of Antonine samian. A bronze brooch of Colchester type A, dating from the early years of the 1st century to the Boudiccan revolt, was also found in this layer.

On the north-western side of the road neither the bottom layer of the inner ditch (370), which consisted of a stoney orange sand, nor the grey-brown silt (369) above it contained any dateable finds. However, the heavily burnt layer (368) above these contained a sherd of decorated Neronian samian. Layer 359, which consisted of a fine brown gritty soil, contained Neronian samian and coarse wares and one sherd (probably from the upper part of the layer) of Castor box which can be dated to about A.D. 180–320. The brown rather sandy soil of layer 361 contained Flavian samian. Finally, layers 358 and 360 appear to be almost identical consisting of a yellow gritty silt. Layer 358 is slightly darker in colour and contained 1st-century coarse wares while layer 360 contained Flavian samian and coarse pottery probably dating to the Hadrianic/Antonine periods. Layer 363, which may represent one of the upper layers of the outer ditch, consisted of a brown compact silt.

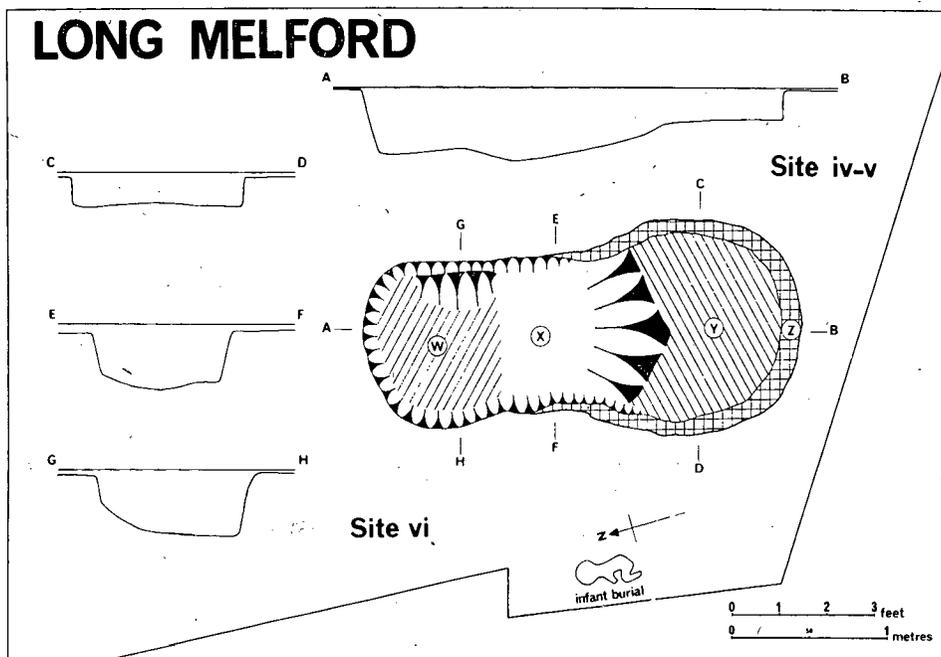


FIG. 35—Plan and sections of the oven.

Site Avi – Description

At the north-western end of the main section (Aiv/v) the curved end of an oven was located in layers 358 and 360 and, in order to examine this feature more fully, an additional area, designated Avi, was opened. Layer 377 on this site was identical to layers 358 and 360 (described above). A slight depression, with a dark brown fill (354/381), had been hollowed out of the upper part of these layers and the oven formed a central feature in this. The oven consisted of three parts. At the southern end, on site Aiv/v, there was a rough but level clay

floor which had been heavily burnt to a purple or dark-brown colour (Fig. 35, Y). This was surrounded by the very residual remains of a clay wall which also incorporated a few stones and had been heavily burnt (Fig. 35, Z). This whole area had been infilled with a dark brown burnt soil which contained some charcoal (353/384). To the north of this the floor of the oven sloped down to a lower level (Fig. 35, X) before rising slightly at the other end. The area of this slope was filled with a dark brown silt which included a considerable amount of charcoal. At the northern end there was another hard-packed floor (Fig. 35, W) although this was at a lower level than the main floor at the other end of the oven (Fig. 35, section A - B). This part of the oven had been cut straight into the underlying yellow-grit (377) and was not surrounded by a clay wall. It was infilled with a fine black burnt soil which also contained occasional small stones (352/382). A sherd of Castor ware of Gillam type 341, dating from about A.D. 180-320 was also found in this layer (coarse pottery no. 91).

Just to the west of the oven an infant burial was found in the upper levels of the yellow grit (377) and beneath the fill of the depression (Fig. 35). This appears to have been a baby which was either stillborn or died within a few days of delivery (see Appendix).

DISCUSSION

These excavations have proved that a substantial Roman road crossed the north-western corner of Chapel Field on a north-east to south-west alignment. It was carefully constructed with layers 340, 325 and 324 providing a firm foundation. The alternating layers of sand and concrete above this probably represent four or five phases of resurfacing with the concrete-like layers acting as the actual road-surfaces. Originally the road would have had a heavy camber in order to facilitate efficient drainage into the side ditches. Most of the evidence for this has subsequently been destroyed by ploughing. No evidence has survived of a road-side kerb or a central rib. It is difficult to estimate the original width of the road but in its final phase, as illustrated in the section on site Aiv/v, it cannot have been wider than 21 or 22ft (6.40 or 6.71m).

The profiles of the road ditches, represented in the three sections (Aiv/v, Bi and Ci), show quite marked differences and this seems to suggest that they may have been cleaned out or recut over very short lengths. Had they been systematically maintained over a considerable length, one would have expected to have seen this reflected in some uniformity of profile. The two ditches to the south-east of the road on site Aiv/v may be interpreted as either being contemporary or representing two separate but consecutive phases. Mention has already been made of the fact that the outer ditch (334) appears to have been silted up when the inner one (335) was still open and this would normally lead to the assumption that the former pre-dates the latter. However, it is not unusual to find two parallel and contemporary ditches on either side of a Roman road and this may have been the case in this instance with the inner ditch being kept open longer than the outer. Layer 371 contains two sherds of Flavian samian and, as ditch 334 appears to have been cut through this layer, this suggests that these road ditches cannot be dated to earlier than the Flavian period. The layers overlying the ditches produced Hadrianic and Antonine pottery and, if the silting up of its side ditches reflects the fact that the road was no longer in use as part of the highway, then this road must have gone out of use by that date.

The large quantity of Roman material found in Chapel Field confirms that the original settlement in Long Melford extended to the east of the A134 road, at least in the south-eastern corner of the town. It seems probable that the road located in Chapel Field is part of the original Roman road from Chelmsford to the Wash (Margary's no. 33a - Margary, 1973, 255-57) even though it is not aligned along the present A134 main road. Certainly, in its

final phase the road is not very wide and the possibility that it may be a branch road linking 33a to the road from Wixoe to Peasenhall (Margary's no. 34) should not be ruled out. The real question centres on why, if the interpretation of the silted up road ditches is correct, the road went out of use so early and what replaced it. It is of course still possible that a later road from Chelmsford to the Wash could have been realigned along the route of the main street of modern Long Melford (A134):

Roman occupation in the area of Chapel Field appears to have continued until around the end of the 2nd century. Sometime during this latter period the baby was disposed of in the fill (377) overlying the ditches on the north-western side of the road. The corpses of infants of this age were frequently discarded in this cursory manner. The depression for the oven was cut into a layer containing Hadrianic and Antonine pottery. The southern end of the oven with its clay walls formed the main part of a circular domed oven. This would have been heated with blazing fuel fed into it from a stoke-hole at the northern end. It would then have been raked out, loaded with bread and tightly shut until the specified time for baking had elapsed. The sherd of Castor ware found in the infill of the stokehole area (352/382) suggests that the oven must represent one of the latest features on this site.

Note

Most of the work at this site was undertaken by Thomas Howlett, who died at a tragically early age within a year of the excavation being completed. I was only involved in three months' work at the site in late 1970. The preparation of this report was only in its initial stages when Thomas Howlett died and, consequently, I have only been able to deal with that part of the work in which I was directly involved. This consisted of the main part of the excavation of the transverse section of the Roman road on site Aiv/v and that of an oven and an infant burial on site Avi. Two earlier trenches (sites B and C), which were laid down to establish the alignment of the road, produced a number of important finds and, wherever possible, I have tried to relate the features (mainly the road ditches) in which these objects were found to those located in the main road section (Aiv/v). All the finds, plans and notes relating to the excavation have been deposited in Ipswich Museum.

This report updates and revises the views expressed in Owles, 1971, 99-100.

THE SAMIAN POTTERY

by Kevin T. Greene

Site Aiv/v layer 300

- 1 Dragendorff 15/17. South Gaulish, Flavian.
- 2 Dr. 18/31. South Gaulish, Flavian.
- 3 Dr. 27. Central Gaulish, Trajanic-Hadrianic.

Site Aiv/v layer 301

- 4 Dr. 15/17. South Gaulish, Neronian.
- 5 Dr. 15/17, two sherds. South Gaulish, Flavian.
- 6 Dr. 18. South Gaulish, Neronian-Vespasianic.
- 7 Dr. 18. South Gaulish, Flavian.
- 8 Dr. 18/31. Central Gaulish (Les Martres-de-Veyre ?), Trajanic.
- 9 Dr. 27, four sherds. South Gaulish, Flavian.
- 10 Dr. 27. Central Gaulish (Les Martres-de-Veyre ?), Trajanic.
- 11 Dr. 30; footing only. South Gaulish, Flavian.
- 12 Dr. 35/36 ? South Gaulish, Flavian.
- 13 Dr. 37. Central Gaulish (Les Martres-de-Veyre ?), Trajanic. See below.
- 14 Dr. 37, small sherd with undiagnostic decoration. Central Gaulish, Trajanic ?
Also 2 indeterminate South Gaulish sherds.

LONG MELFORD

Site Aiv-v

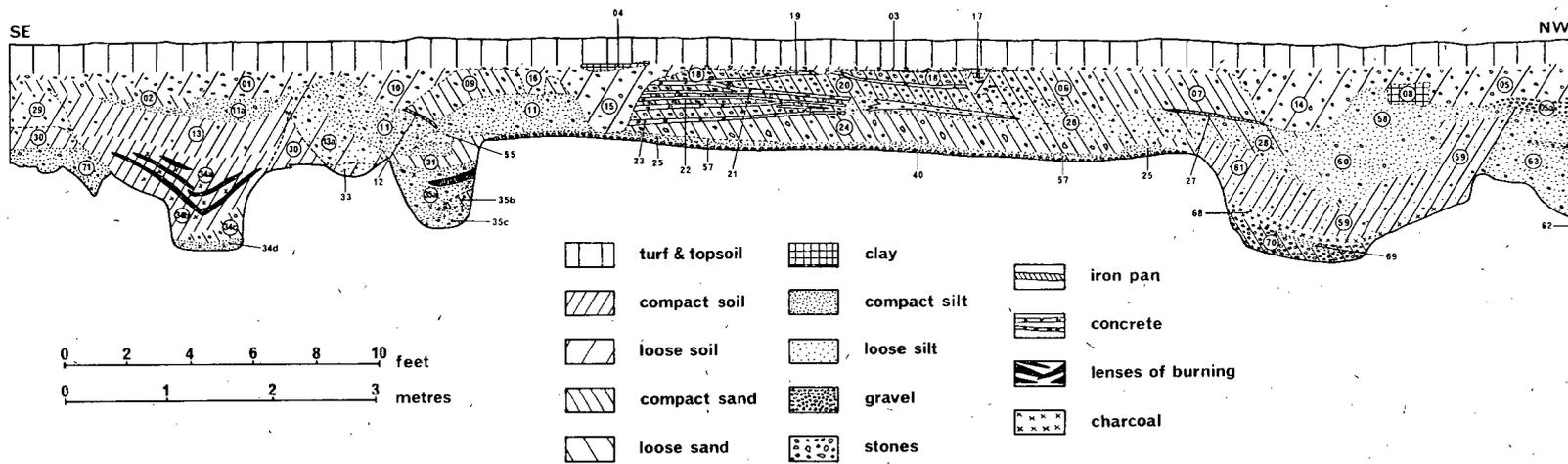


Fig. 36—Section of the road and its associated ditches on site Aiv/v.