

THE EXCAVATION OF THE DEFENCES OF DEVIZES, WILTS., 1974

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Introduction

IN SEPTEMBER 1974 an excavation was undertaken by the writer on sites on the line of the outer defences of Devizes S of Hare and Hounds Street on the E side of the town (FIG. 1). This was in advance of renovation and building works by the Kennet District Council in the area bounded by Hare and Hounds Street to the N, Southbroom Road to the E, and Bridewell Street to the W. It was the first of a series of excavations on urban sites undertaken by the writer on behalf of the Wiltshire Archaeological Society and the Department of the Environment.¹ The excavation was designed to investigate the line of the outer defensive ditch of the Norman town, to obtain dating evidence for its construction, and to explore the relationship of this ditch to the presumed bank running along its inner edge. Further archaeological observations were also made during contractors' excavations in April 1976, when sections across the line of the bank and ditch (C-D and E-F) were exposed.

A close watch was also made during those excavations for any signs of Roman material, either *in situ* or in derived contexts, which might relate to other finds made only a short distance E of the site in Southbroom Road.² During the excavation several square metres immediately to the SE of trench 1 were cleared by machine and scraped clean, but no finds of Roman date were made. No Roman material was found during the subsequent contractors' excavations on the site.

The 1974 excavations

Three trenches were excavated, the first (T1, FIG. 1) across the presumed line of the ditch, and two others (T2 and T3) across the presumed line of the inner bank in the back gardens of nos. 24 and 27 Bridewell Street. The section across the ditch was excavated mainly by machine, but the lowest metre of the filling was dug by hand; the other sections, owing to difficulties of access, were excavated entirely by hand.

Trench 1 (Section A-B, FIG. 2).

The ditch was cut into Greensand to a depth of about 5 m from the highest surviving level of the natural rock on the outer (SE) edge. The inner lip of the ditch had been disturbed where its upper edge should have been, and the ground immediately to the NE had been completely removed by recent development. In profile (FIG. 2) the ditch was an irregular wide V-shape, with a rounded rather than angular base. Its outer edge was cut in both of the exposed sections in the ditch by a well (feature B on section, FIG. 2) of probably 18th century date. The latter had in turn been cut by a 19th- early 20th century pit (feature C), as well as by a trench running along the length of the ditch (NE – SW) and containing a brick lined sewer or drain (feature D), probably also of 19th century date. The well appeared to respect a brick wall with a stone base (feature E) cut into the Greensand, which followed

1 I am particularly grateful to the Kennet District Council for permitting the excavation and providing assistance with supplies and accommodation for its duration, and to Mr. W. Ford of the County Council Libraries and Museums Department for further encouragement and assistance. I must also thank Kate Fielden and Harold Mytum, for help with supervision. Site records, including a photographic survey of features found in the contractors' excavations, are deposited in Devizes Museum.

2. A list of the considerable number of Roman finds from Devizes is maintained by Devizes Museum. I am grateful to Dr. Paul Robinson for help in this matter. See also Boon (1973), discussing figurines from Southbroom Road.

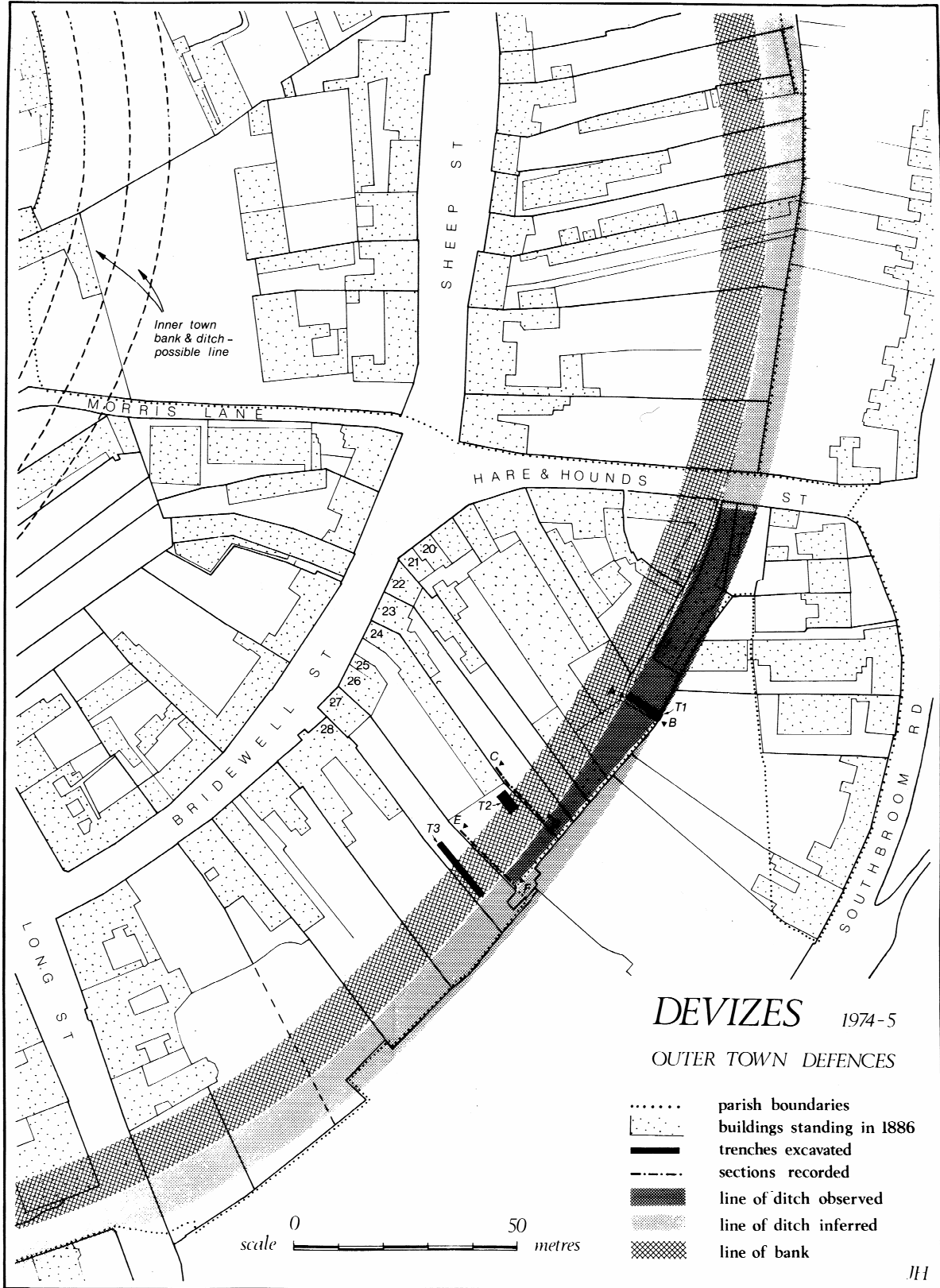


FIG. 1. Plan of trenches, & defences on the E side of Devizes. Based on the 1:500 Ordnance Survey plan, 1885-6.

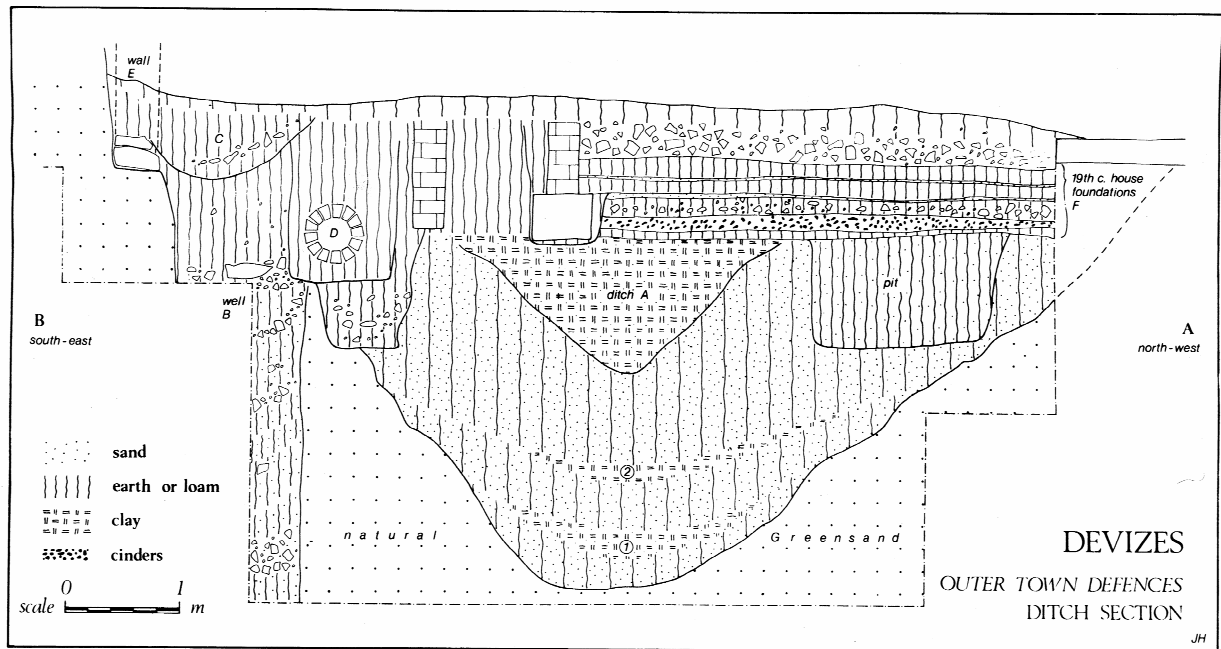


FIG. 2. Section of defensive ditch, trench 1.

the outer edge of the ditch and formed the rear boundary of the property fronting onto South-broom Road.

The filling of the ditch consisted of homogeneous, slightly clayey Greensand with only lenses of different materials: a thin layer (1, FIG. 2) of purple sandy clay about 50 cm above the bottom, and another thin layer (2) of grey-brown clay 70 cm above this. A shallower ditch (feature A) of similar profile to the earlier one had been cut into its filling along its centre line. This secondary ditch was filled with a layer of slightly sandy stiff greenish-brown clay. Into the top of its filling had been set the brick foundations of a house of probably 19th century date (feature F).

Discussion.

No pottery was recovered from the filling of the ditch. A number of small post-medieval sherds were found on the spoil heaps but none was from a stratified context. In view of this lack of dating material it is difficult to make any deductions about the date at which the ditch was last exposed. Since, however, there were no deposits in its lower filling which suggested that layers had accumulated naturally over any length of time, it is clear that the ditch must have been kept cleaned out during the period immediately following its construction. It is also clear from the generally homogenous nature of its filling that at least the upper three quarters of the ditch must have been backfilled in one operation, presumably from the material comprising the bank.

The ditch was also found at one point to have been recut to a depth of 2.5 m below the highest level of natural Greensand on its outer edge. The upper levels of this recut had, however, been truncated by the construction levels of a 19th century house, making it difficult to reconstruct the surface from which this was originally excavated. It is not possible to say on present evidence whether this recutting was primarily for defensive purposes or for drainage.

The excavation does, however, confirm the suspected line of the outer defensive ditch of the town, and is the first time that it has been exposed in a controlled excavation.³ In addition, the 1976

3. Earlier observations of the inner and outer town defences are noted by Pugh (1975, 230). The dimensions of the outer ditch recorded by Cunnington (1945-7, 39) were 'about 25 ft wide, 7ft deep and 4 feet wide at the bottom'.

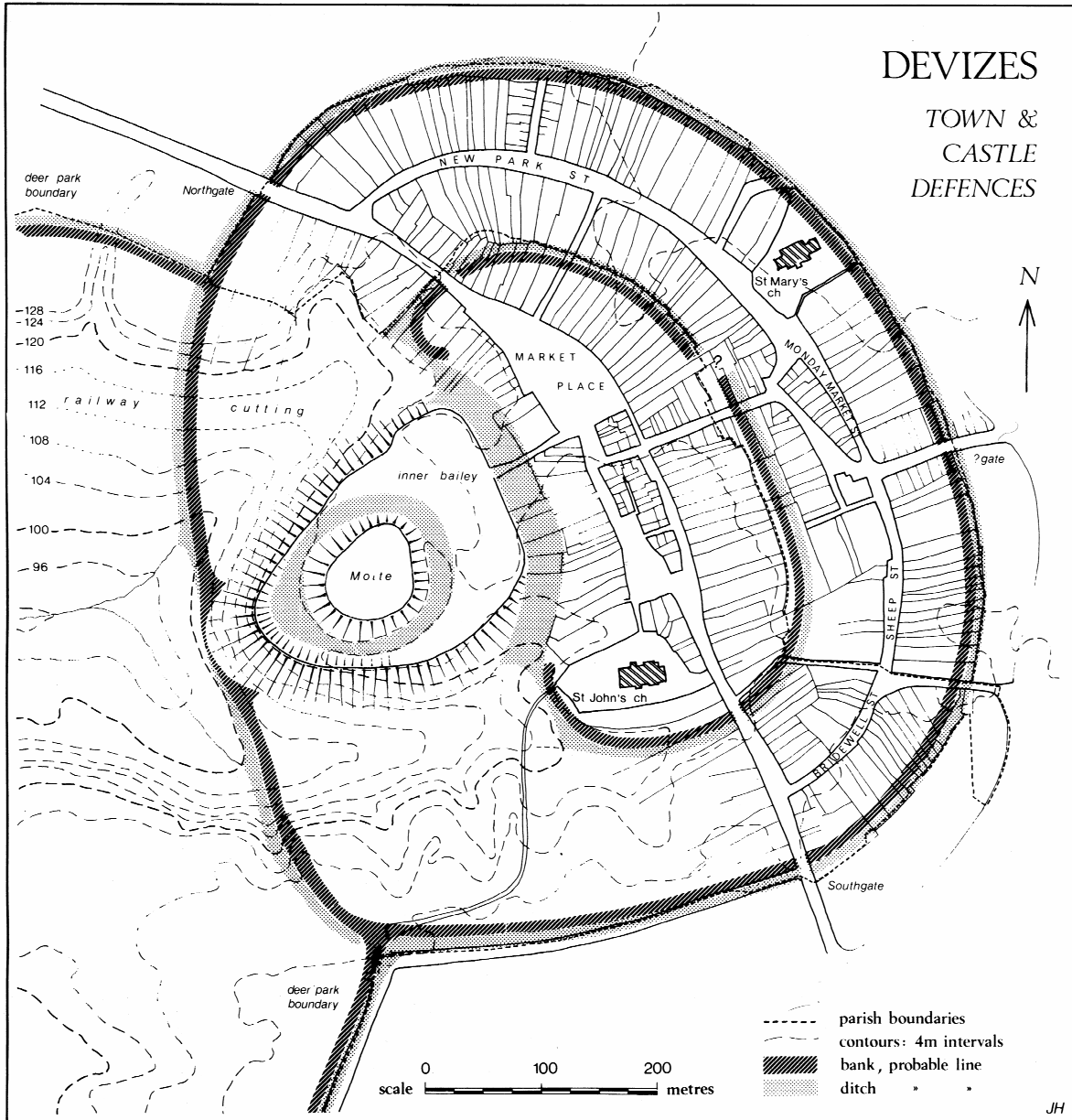


FIG. 3. Plan of Devizes with reconstructed 12th century castle and town defences. Based on the second edition 1:2500 Ordnance Survey plan, 1900.

contractors' excavations revealed the inner lip of the ditch 50 m to the SW of the first excavation (section E-F, FIG. 1). From these observations it was clear that the property boundary forming (until recently) the rear of the gardens of nos. 20-26 Bridewell Street lay along the approximate centre of the ditch, rather than along its outer edge (see plan, FIG. 1). Furthermore, when the conjectured course of the ditch to the SW is plotted on a large scale plan (FIG. 1)⁴ it appears that the parish boundary which follows the rear of the property boundaries takes an erratic course between the middle of the ditch and its outer edge. The ditches, rather than the banks, in other parts of the town (except along the E line of the castle bailey) have therefore been shown in FIG. 3 as following the line of the parish boundaries.

4. The course of the outer defences on the S and SE sides of the town takes into account the useful but imprecise observations of Cunnington in 1944 (1945-7, 40) relating to the position of the ditch along Hillworth Road.

Trenches 2 and 3 (FIG. 1).

These trenches were excavated by hand in an attempt to determine the structure and dimensions of the defensive bank which presumably lay along the inside edge of the ditch.

Trench 2. This was situated immediately to the SE of no. 6 Albert Terrace, a row of 19th century cottages occupying the probable medieval burgrave plot of the present no. 24 Bridewell Street. The trench measured 5 m by 2 m and was excavated to below the top of the natural Greensand. Above the natural Greensand lay a layer of brown sandy loam approximately 20 cm thick, which contained specks of charcoal and patches of orange and yellow sand. The natural Greensand showed some orange iron staining at its top, merging into the soil layer above, suggesting that this and the layer of soil represented a naturally developed soil profile. Above the loam layer was about 20 cm of hard pale-yellow and green sand, in places becoming a distinct orange colour. It seems likely that this layer represents all that is left of the original bank, which must have been constructed of material excavated from the ditch, and which sealed the soil and subsoil layers beneath.

Into these layers were cut a series of shallow elongated pits, beginning in the middle of the trench and extending SW into its side, and filled with mixed earth and sand. Though distinctly grave-shaped they yielded nothing, except the most south-easterly which contained a few dog bones. These pits were covered with a thick layer of modern garden soil and subsoil, about 60 cm in thickness.

Trench 3. This trench, 15 m by 1.5 m, was excavated along the length of the garden of no. 27 Bridewell Street NW from the presumed inner lip of the ditch across the whole width of the bank.

The layers within this trench had however suffered a greater degree of disturbance even than those in trench no. 2. There was some indication of a layer of slightly sandy loam forming a buried soil over natural Greensand, which was covered by layers of mixed sand and earth totalling between 70 and 90 cm in thickness. It seems likely that this layer represents the degraded remnants of the original bank, of which little still survived in its original position.

Contractors' excavations, 1976

The sequence of stratification observed most clearly in trench 2 was duplicated in the contractors' excavation of April 1976, which exposed two sections, one across the line of the presumed bank to the N and E of Albert Terrace (section C-D, FIG. 1), and a second across the upper part of the inner half of the ditch, and the outer edge of the bank (section E-F). For a considerable length of section C-D a layer of slightly earthy, probably redeposited, Greensand, 30-50 cm in thickness, was observed to overlie a layer of brown loamy sand. This latter merged into natural Greensand below and was probably therefore a buried soil. The horizontal extent of the sandy layer and the fact that in every place it sealed what appeared to be a buried soil, strengthens the suggestion that it represents the denuded remains of an original bank which was probably slighted and in part, at least, thrown back into the ditch. In section E-F the fill of the upper part of the ditch consisted of homogeneous sandy earth which was rather darker than the filling of the ditch in trench 1. The inner lip of the ditch was accurately plotted at this point, and immediately to the NW the same sequence of discoloured Greensand overlying a brown soil horizon suggested the remains of the former bank, reinforcing the conclusions gained from section C-D. Clearance work by the contractors also revealed in plan a considerable length of the ditch between Hare and Hounds Street to the N, and the line of section E-F to the S (FIG. 1).

Conclusions

In view of the lack of dateable finds in the filling of the ditch excavated in trench no. 1 it is very difficult to arrive at any more precise conclusions concerning the date of either its construction or its

regarded, therefore, as the line of the original defences of the earliest of these 'ports', built around the bailey of the castle probably before 1121 and almost certainly before 1139 (Beresford 1967, 504). In the writer's opinion this interpretation appears to be more consistent with historical probability than with the suggestion that this outer ditch was added later, at the time of the growth of the new market place (New Port) within the abandoned castle bailey. Furthermore, this outer ditch appears to be integrated with the line of the massive boundary bank and ditch of the oval park pale to the SE of the castle and town (Beresford 1967, 129), and is presumably therefore contemporary with it. The more natural association of the construction of this deer park with the fullest use of the castle in the 1120's or 30's,⁸ rather than with a phase of its disuse represented by the abandonment of the outer bailey to urban expansion, would also suggest that the outer town defences are primary.

8. Certainly by 1157, and probably by 1149, the park was surrounded by a substantial bank and ditch (Pugh 1975, 245), which implies that the outer town defences were then in existence.

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