Observations at Somerton, Oxon., 1973

By R. A. Chambers

SUMMARY

During the autumn of 1973 a watching brief was kept over a series of pipe trenches dug for the installation of main drainage in and around the shrunken medieval village of Somerton, Oxon. (SP497287).[1] *Continuous observation of the open trench sections provided material from the medieval village*[2] *and also enabled a reappraisal of the cemetery at Castle Yard (SP496288).*[3]

THE VILLAGE

THIS report is concerned with the archaeological information from pipe trenches. The historical and topographical background has been included to provide a context for the features encountered and is not a comprehensive account of the whole village,[4] which was one of the largest and richest in Ploughley Hundred during the Middle Ages. Since the medieval period the village has shrunk, leaving the present nucleated settlement with the Norman parish church on its southern edge (FIG. 1). The deserted areas which surround the present village are for the most part under pasture with earthworks clearly visible (PL. XI, A). On the west side of the village, Church Street forms a ' T ' junction with a hollow way shown by Davis' map to have been disused and under pasture by 1797.[5] Northwards the way ends by the assumed castle fishponds. Some 100 m. south-west of Church Street the hollow way continues westwards and forms the boundary between some less pronounced village earthworks to the north and the edge of the open field to the south (PL. XI, A).[6] The western limit of the open field and a further length of the hollow way lie buried by the mid nineteenth-century railway embankment. On either side of the hollow way north of Church Street may be seen enclosure banks running down to and under the railway embankment. These enclosures probably never extended much, if at all, beyond the western edge of the railway embankment as the land beyond the canal is liable to winter flooding. The ' double ' appearance of the hollow way on the earthworks plan opposite the castle fishponds is the result of a long, low, hollow platform which hints at the presence of a former row of buildings.

[1] Observation and recording at Somerton were conducted by Mrs. V. Winchester and the writer for the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit. The finds and detailed site records will be deposited with the Oxon. C.C. Dept. of Museum Services, Woodstock.

[2] P.R.N. 5614. (Oxon. C.C. Dept. of Museum Services, Primary Record Number).

[3] P.R.N. 2455.

[4] For which see V.C.H. *Oxon.*, VI (1959), 290.

[5] R. Davis, *Oxon.* (1797), map.

[6] By courtesy of Oxon. C.C. Dept. of Museum Services (P.R.N. 5614) and Oxfordshire County Council Planning Department, 1961 county aerial survey.

FIG. 1
A sketch plan of the earthworks of the shrunken village of Somerton, Oxon.

Since this report was first drafted the bank of the hollow way at points D and E (FIG. 1) has been bulldozed revealing beneath the bank at D the remains of mortared footings to a medieval building.[7]

There was probably medieval occupation on both sides of the High Street and several deserted house platforms may be seen on the eastern side by the spring-fed wells A and B (FIG. 2). Modern houses on this side of the High Street are also built over platforms that may belong to an earlier period. Other medieval features at Somerton included a castle and a water-mill. The earthworks of fishponds also

[7] P.R.N. 4476.

survive and a break of slope surrounding the school has suggested a possible moat.[8] There is a local tradition that the former elementary school (FIG. 2) stands on the site of the inner court of the castle[9] and that area of the village is still referred to as Castle Yard. A Roman Catholic chapel stood on the site from 1530 to 1580 when Thomas Fermor bequeathed ' the chapel in the Castle Yard at Somerton '[10] to be used as a common school. Part of the chapel wall including an original mullioned window of seven lights was incorporated into the present school when it was extensively rebuilt during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[11] Eight inhumation burials were found in the school grounds in 1953, five more in 1969 on the west side of the school, and a sixth burial during later house alterations.[12]

The site of the early sixteenth-century manor house built by William Fermor[13] occupies the high ground at the eastern end of the village and its large rectangular earthworks are clearly visible. Close by are several quarry pits dug for limestone. Oblique aerial photographs[14] show further early enclosures filling the triangle of land to the south of the manor house earthworks.[15]

Until the second half of the eighteenth century Somerton was an open-field parish, for an incipient move to enclose in the sixteenth century had been checked.[16] In 1512 William Fermor was accused of converting 40 acres in demesne from arable to pasture and some time after 1736 another William Fermor is recorded as making some new enclosures.[17] In 1797[18] much of the parish was under pasture and aerial photographs show extensive traces of ridge and furrow to the north and south of the village. Several enclosure hedges reflect the reversed S shape of the ridge and furrow, and these may be the early enclosures. Such shapes are less obvious on the more rigidly enclosed plateau east of the village where no trace of ridge and furrow has survived modern ploughing.

Geology

The lithology of the hill slope which represents the remnant of a river cliff is complex[19] and often obscured by Head.[20] The sixteenth-century manor house was sited on the edge of the Great Oolite limestone plateau at 133 m. (400 ft.) O.D. Below this, the hill side comprises strata of clays, sandy limestones, sands and silts until the Marlstone Rock Bed which forms a slight terrace from the church to the

[8] The line of the suggested moat is discussed by M. Aston, ' Somerton, Oxon. ', *Council for British Archaeology, Group 9, Newsletter*, 4 (1974), 16–17.

[9] *Oxoniensia*, XVII–XVIII (1952–3), 218.

[10] V.C.H. *Oxon*, VI, Thomas Fermor's will dated 15th June, 1580.

[11] J. Sherwood and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England Series—Oxfordshire* (1974), 768. I am grateful to Mrs. A. Shukman of the Old School House for permission to inspect the building.

[12] P.R.N. 1705.

[13] V.C.H. *Oxon.*, VI, 290.

[14] P.R.N. 5614.

[15] M. Aston and R. T. Rowley, *Landscape Archaeology* (1974), 171.

[16] V.C.H. *Oxon.*, VI, 295.

[17] *Ibid.*, 294.

[18] R. Davis, *Oxon.* (1797), map.

[19] W. J. Arkell, *The Geology of Oxford* (1947), in conjunction with the Geological Survey of Great Britain, map 218 (1968).

[20] Head is material moved by slow flow or by gravity, possibly solifluction, to be redeposited further down the slope.

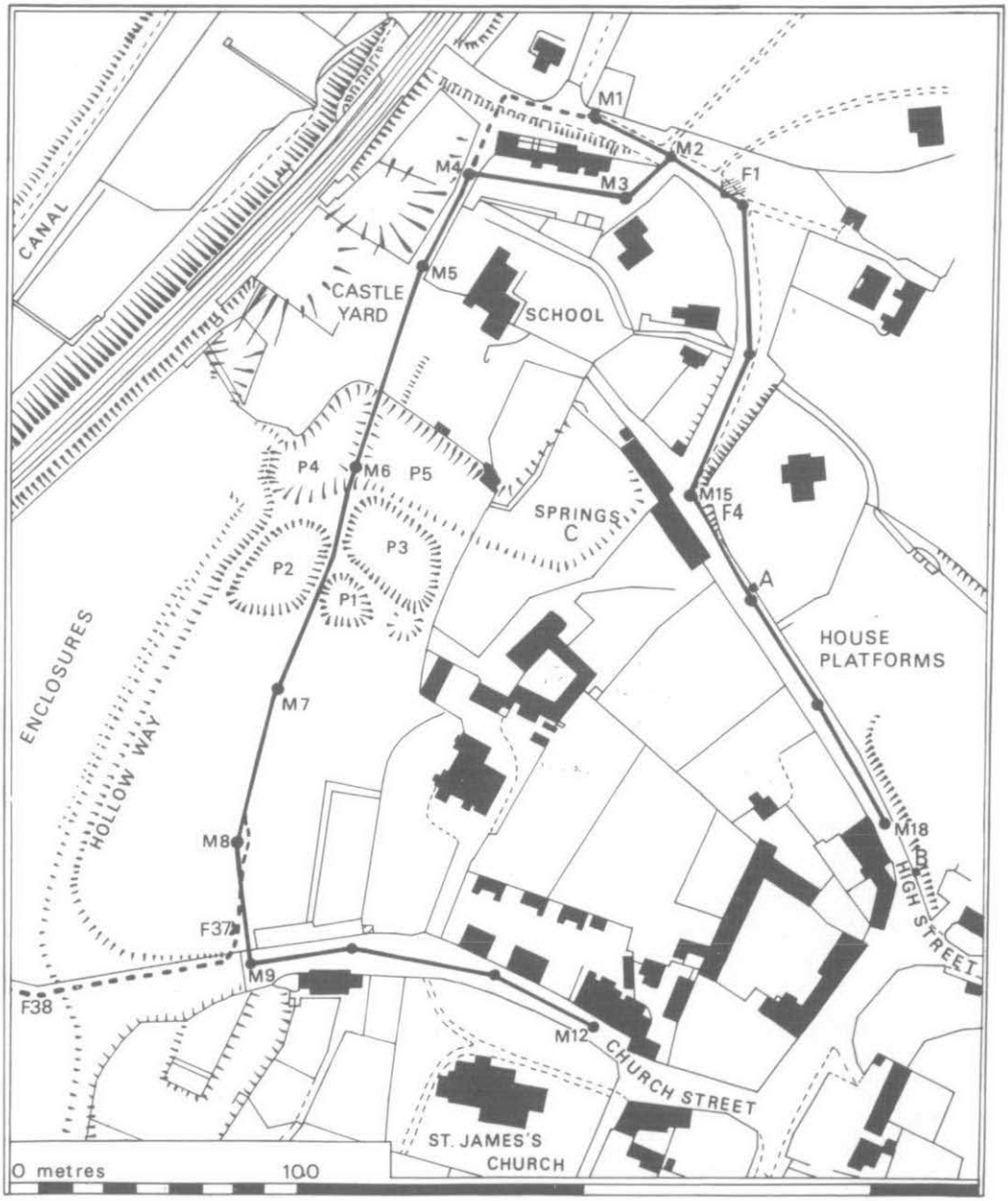

FIG. 2
The pipe trenches.

edge of the N.–S. hollow way N.W. of the church.[21] Beneath the Marlstone Rock Bed lie clays, silts and silt-stones into which the valley bottom has been cut. Springs rise from various strata on the hill side although some spring water does not surface but seeps through the permeable, overlying Head to emerge as a spring further down slope or to add to a lower spring line.

THE TRENCHES

The sewerpipe trenches followed the road, except for the section from manholes M1–M9 which crossed a deserted part of the medieval village (FIG. 2). Both trench M1–M9 and the road trenches M1–M18 and M9–M12 were watched. A full-time watch was not kept over the remaining trenches as the chances of any features appearing were considered remote.

The Features

These are numbered, the number preceded by an F, except in the sections, FIG. 3, where this has been omitted for clarity. Only feature numbers are quoted in the following description and each layer, post-pit, etc., has been allotted a feature number where necessary. Unless otherwise indicated depth measurements are quoted from the modern topsoil or road surfaces.

Trench M1–M18 (FIG. 2)

This trench followed the High Street up hill to the junction with the Lower Heyford road. The trench revealed two earlier, limestone metalled road surfaces with considerable repair work indicated in places. These earlier surfaces were clean of debris, understandable on such a steep slope. As in trench M9—M12, there was no evidence that buildings had ever encroached onto the road.

F1. An 18th- or 19th-century, brick-lined pit, apparently the S.W. corner of a cellar with a natural clay floor.

F4. A stone and brick built structure, probably the base of a covered well originally lost to road-widening. Two other shallow, spring-fed wells (A & B, FIG. 2) remain on the same side of the road.

Trench M1–M9

This trench sectioned the High Street (FIG. 2) and also crossed a deserted area of the medieval village which remains as earthworks under pasture. The High Street is slightly sunken east and west of M1 and the roadside bank was shown to comprise topsoil with recent building debris. The lowest rubble contained nothing later than late 16th-century pottery.

F9, 10 and 11. Three wooden post stumps momentarily revealed at a depth of 2 m. (FIG. 3).

F12. A cemetery. Only 3 graves could be accurately planned. The trench sides quickly collapsed and the total number of graves exposed is unknown. The graves all appeared to be supine inhumations whose orientations varied from approximately N.W.–S.E. to N.–S. In every discernible case the head was at the west or north end of the grave. The burials varied in depth from 1·2 m.–2 m., but any deeper graves would have remained unobserved. In some of the deeper water-logged burials, coffin wood was seen. Some of the graves cut through earlier shallower burials. The spoil heaps contained a large quantity of human bone from both adult and child skeletons. Some of this bone came

[21] Observed in the pipe trenches.

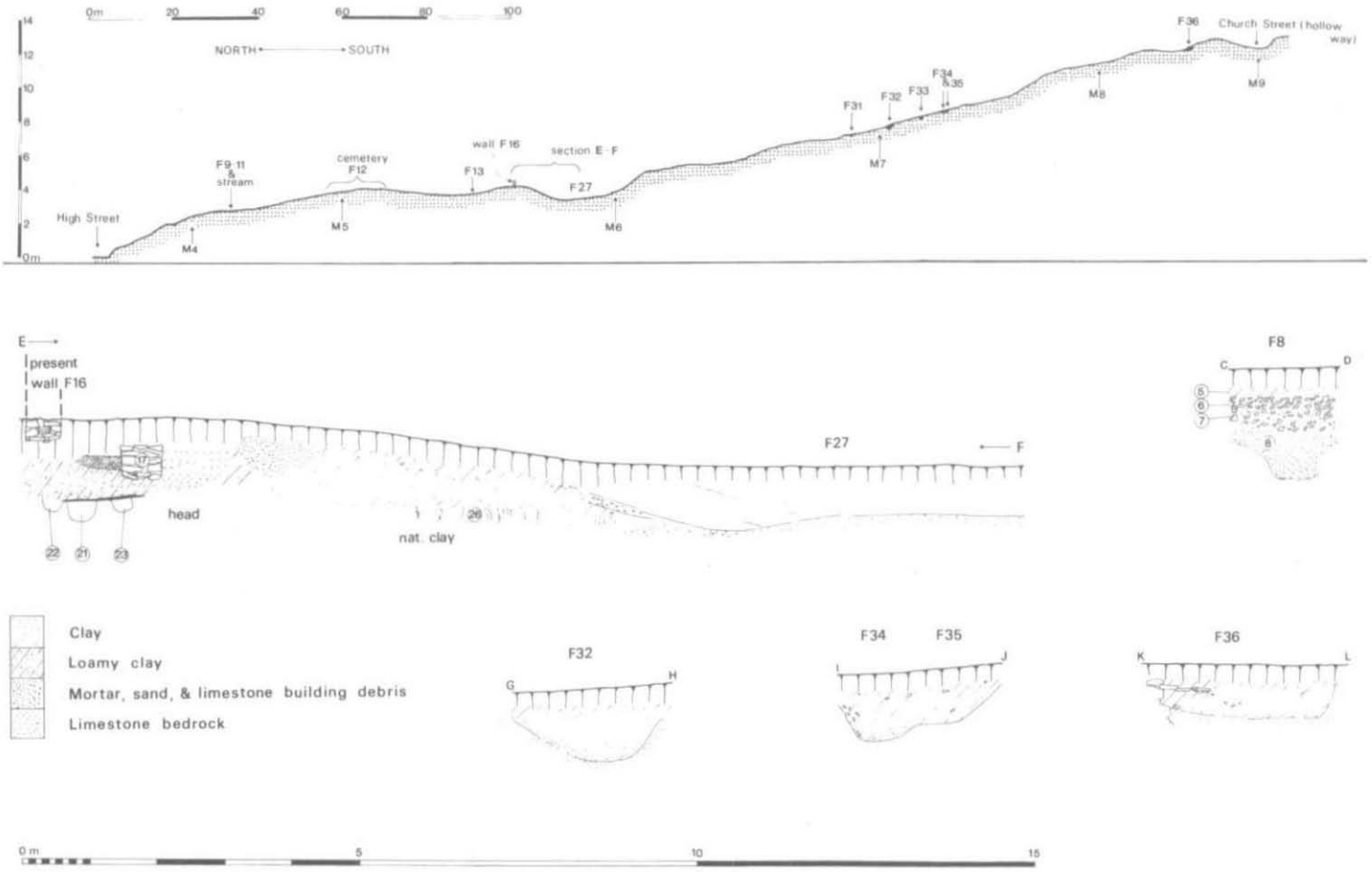

FIG. 3
Sections.

from places where burials were not otherwise discernible. Discounting these, a minimum of eleven inhumations was observed.

Expansion of the manhole, M5, exposed four or five more burials of which one, 2 m. deep, was orientated W.–E. Again only a cursory examination was possible. No visible remains of coffins or fittings were found. Later three more graves were exposed whilst enlarging the manhole, one above the other approximately 1·5 m., 1 m. and 0·5 m. deep. The top 0·4–0·5 m. of soil over the cemetery area was much disturbed and contained several 18th–19th century pottery sherds.

F13. Probably a robbed wall foundation running at approximately right angles to the trench.

F16. An upstanding post-medieval limestone wall.

F17–20 (Section E–F). Remains of a stone building with one upstanding wall and a partially destroyed lime mortar floor; maybe associated with F13.

F21, 22 and 23. Three post-pits sealed by a thin brown organic layer.

F26 (Section E–F). A loamy soil with traces of apparent root action, probably the turf line previous to the construction of the adjacent fishpond.

F27. A low causeway crossing created by the excavation of material from either side, to form two separate fishponds P4 and P5.

F29 and 30 (FIGS. 2 and 3, south of M6). Layer 30, mixed clay and soil from the digging of the adjacent fishponds P1, P2 and P3, was seen to seal the old ground surface (F29), which was clearly seen as a turf line. This stratigraphical arrangement continued uphill for the length of the fishponds.

Mark Robinson kindly examined soil samples for molluscan evidence and has submitted the following:[22]

> *F29.* Apart from the one individual of *Planorbis*, all the snails are terrestrial but can occur in a marsh habitat. *Planorbis planorbis* is an aquatic species which can tolerate poor water conditions. Therefore this layer was either a marsh or a mixed deposit.
> *F30.* All the molluscs from this sample are aquatic. *Bithynia* spp. and *Valvata piscinalis* require either moving water or a large expanse of still water. *Anodonta cygnea*, the swan mussel, prefers a muddy bottom with a firm substrata to anchor to underneath. The presence of fish is also required by the parasitic larvae of *Anodonta*.[23]
>
> The molluscan evidence suggests this layer to have been the bed of a flowing stream, ditch or pond. If it was a pond, it was likely to have had moving water or to have been very large.

Thus the molluscan evidence supports the topographical evidence that a spring had been excavated out and embanked to form this pond. The presence of the parasitic larvae of *Anodonta* suggests that the spring may have already been filling a smaller pond which was merely enlarged.

F31. Shallow U-shaped channel 0·8 m. below surface.

F32 (Section G–H). E.–W. ditch running downhill. Contained charcoal flecks and fragmentary animal bone.

F33. Small E.–W. silted stream channel.

F34 and 35 (Section I–J). Two E.–W. ditches running down hill. Homogeneous, dark loam fills with occupational debris. Analysis by Mark Robinson of the snails within a soil sample taken from the bottom of F34 suggested that the ditch had been dry and overgrown for most of its life.

F36. Vertical-sided, flat-bottomed feature below 0·2 m. topsoil. Homogeneous dark brown loam fill with charcoal flecks and animal bone.

Rising Main Trench (FIG. 2)

F37. The very edge of a pit showed in the west section.

[22] The detailed analysis of these samples is stored with the site records.

[23] A. E. Boycott, ' Habitats of Fresh-water Mollusca in Britain ', *J. Animal Ecol.*, 5 (1936), 132–33, 139–40.

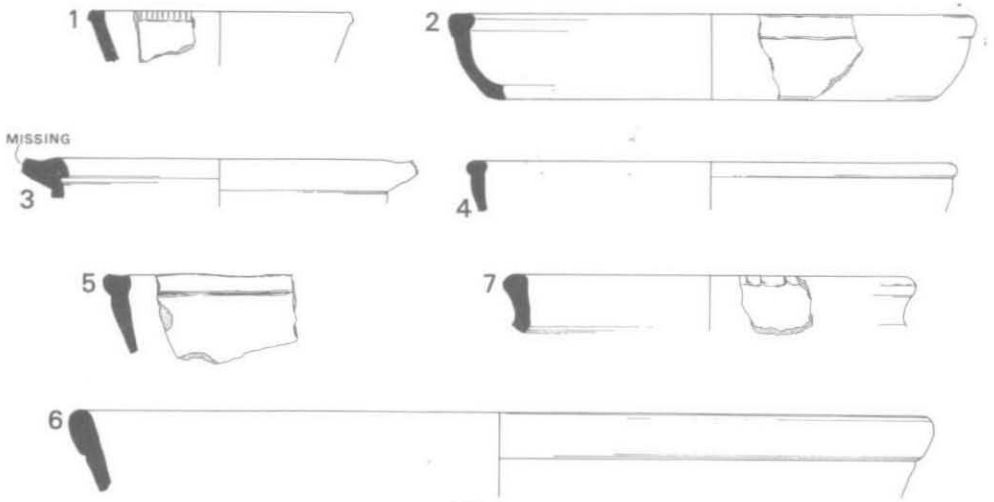

FIG. 4
The Pottery (¼).

F38. Feature with dark fill afterwards reported by workmen. Several small coarse pottery sherds later found in remaining spoil.

Trench M9–M12

This pipe trench ran eastwards from M9 along Church Street and revealed only the hard, thick bed of the Marlstone Rock Bed.

POTTERY. Identified by R. HALDON

All the 34 sherds examined came from the trench between manholes M4 and M8, mostly from the ditches F31–5. The only glazed piece is from the rim of a tripod pitcher (FIG. 4, 1) which is possibly as late as the early 13th century. 27 sherds are of a hard fabric, abundantly tempered with fine to coarse oolitic and other limestone and occasional quartz. This fabric type was common in early medieval Oxford[24] from *c.* 1070 to *c.* 1200 and is also analogous to 11th- and 12th-century fabric types from Banbury,[25] Ascot Doilly[26] and Middleton Stoney.[27]. There are also four sherds of a hard, coarse, sandy fabric used in Oxford from the late 11th to the early 13th century to the detriment and final demise of the coarse limestone wares,[28] as seemingly happened at Middleton Stoney.[29] The Somerton pottery comprises local coarsewares in use from the late 11th to the 13th centuries. In the Somerton area there is a variety of clean clays within the river cliff for the sandy fabrics whilst the coarse wares suggest the use of valley bottom clays.

[24] Fabric *AC*—Maureen Mellor, Oxon. Arch. Unit., *pers. comm.*
[25] P. J. Fasham, 'Excavations in Banbury, 1972. First Report', *Oxoniensia*, XXXVII (1973), 329–31. Fabric 1.
[26] E. M. Jope and R. I. Threlfall, 'The Twelfth-Century Castle at Ascot Doilly, Oxfordshire: Its History and Excavation,' *Antiq. J.*, XXXIX (1959), 248–56. The 'standard fabric'.
[27] T. Rowley, *pers. comm.*
[28] Pottery from St. Aldates, Oxford; Fabric *Y*. Maureen Mellor, Oxon. Arch. Unit., *pers. comm.*
[29] Pottery from cutting 3 both above and beneath the castle bailey bank which is thought to have been erected in the mid-12th century. T. Rowley, *pers. comm.*

Descriptions (FIG. 4)

1 Tripod pitcher rim, milled along outer edge; light grey, very harsh sandy fabric; thick lustrous brownish-olive glaze externally; unstratified near F4. *Cf. New Bodleian*,[30] Fig. 22, E, p. 98; probably first half of the 13th century.
2 Bowl rim, folded over on outside, hard coarse fabric from F38. *Cf. Banbury*[31] fabric 1, 11th–12th century, pots 1 and 2.
3 Worn rim, large internal flange, folded over on outside; coarser than 2. From lower part F35. *Cf.* two unpublished sherds from Middleton Stoney dated to before 1300.
4 T-shaped, flat-topped rim; fabric as last; F8.
5 Rim, flat-topped, slightly thickened externally and internally; fabric as last; F34.
6 Rim, folded over on outside, coarse limestone detritus gritted fabric; F37. The rim but not the fabric compares with a pot from *Seacourt*,[32] Fig. 24, 16, and the fabric compares with Fig. 24, 17, both late 12th–13th century.
7 Cooking-pot rim, finger-pressed trail on edge of rim; sandy fabric, unstratified, Castle Yard.

INTERPRETATION, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Observation of the open trench sections between M4 and M8 revealed material from the medieval village, *i.e.* buildings, ditches, and pottery. Much of the pottery came from the enclosure ditches F31–5, dating them to between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. This may imply that settlement on this side of the village was taking place by or before the Conquest and had been abandoned before the mid-fourteenth century, if the ditches remained open until desertion took place. The evidence from a single pipe trench is insufficient for a confident conclusion to be drawn, however, and the desertions at Somerton need not be other than a conventional later fourteenth- or fifteenth-century depopulation. To the south of Castle Yard the pipe trench section also clarified the visible fishpond complex which appear to be those referred to in an extent of 1295.[33]

From the map, FIG. 1, the High Street skirts around the Castle Yard area in a wide arc, evidently respecting an important area within the village and here the High Street is partly terraced into the hill slope and partly embanked to maintain an even camber. This has resulted in a break of slope in line with that formed a little to the south-west by the spring line at C and has, in the past, been taken as possible evidence for the line of a dry moat.[34] There is no corresponding break of slope along the inside of the moat and there is no moat in the two pipe trench sections from M1 to M4. Any castle bailey in this area must then have been a simple walled or stockaded enclosure. The suggestive title of ' castle ' has been retained in this text for clarity in future references.

Amongst the English possessions of Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, at Domesday were Deddington, Somerton 4 km. to its south-east, and Cogges 12 km. to the south.[35] It was probably Odo who ordered the making of the major castle at Deddington.[36] To the south of the church at Cogges are moats enclosing a site known as Castle Yard which probably contained a fortified residence.[37] The moat is unusual for it was

[30] R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, ' The Archaeology of the Site of the Bodleian Extension in Broad Street, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, IV (1939), 89–146.
[31] P. J. Fasham, ' Excavations in Banbury, 1972. First Report ', *Oxoniensia*, XXXVII (1973), 329–31, Fig. 8.
[32] M. Biddle, ' The Deserted Medieval Village of Seacourt, Berkshire, ' *Oxoniensia*, XXVI–XXVII (1961–2), 155.
[33] V.C.H., *Oxon.*, VI (1959), 290.
[34] Aston, *op. cit.* note 8, 16–17.
[35] V.C.H. *Oxon.*, I, 404–5.
[36] H. M. Colvin, *A History of Deddington, Oxfordshire* (1963), 13 & 18.
[37] E. T. Long, *The Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Cogges* (1964).

probably abandoned during the thirteenth century when the present Manor Farm seems to have been built,[38] and so predates the majority of moats.

In 1086 Richard Wadard held Cogges as undertenant to Odo, and also the three manors of Somerton, Fritwell and Souldern for which Somerton may have been the administrative centre. Thus in the early years after the conquest a fortified residence at Somerton might have been desirable, with the large parent castle at Deddington, although not under Wadard's jurisdiction, supplying military force if necessary.[39] The castles may, however, result from later ownership; after Odo's downfall, the Barony of Cogges, with Somerton, passed to the Arsec family.

Somerton castle may have begun with a small motte,[40] with a later manor house nearby, perhaps in the castle bailey, comprising a simple walled enclosure with the N. Aston–Ardley road diverted around the manor area. The undated building with the mortar floor (F13 and F17) on the southern edge of Castle Yard may have belonged to the castle. Evidence for an earlier, substantial, wooden structure below this building comes from post-holes F21–3 sealed below it and another post-pit in the opposite section.

Several styles of burial have been found in the cemetery surrounding the former Elementary School and Catholic Chapel. Burials were first recorded in the nineteenth century[41] when several graves and a silver cross (now lost) were found beneath a floor. In 1953 and 1969 a total of twelve shallow graves was discovered, each supine, W.–E., and some with a slab of limestone covering the skull. During 1973 many more inhumations, some orientated haphazardly and only approximately W.–E., were observed. The graves varied from shallow to deep inhumations and at least some were in wooden coffins although no more burials with slab covered skulls were seen. Many of the plain and coffined burials can be related to the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic Chapel, but the inhumations with slab covered skulls represent an Anglo-Saxon[42] to early medieval practice which is but imperfectly understood at present. The slabbed burials may be evidence of the medieval castle chapel mentioned in the extent of 1295 or they may be 'pre-castle' and their occurrence by the school either a coincidence or indicative of an even earlier church. The Chapel created in 1530 by Thomas Fermor may as well have been a rededication of the castle chapel as that of a new building, in which case the section of chapel wall retained in the school house may be all that remains standing of the medieval castle first mentioned in 1295 during the time of the De Greys.[43]

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[38] James Bond, Field Dept., Oxon. C.C. Dept. of Museum Services, Woodstock, *pers. comm.*
[39] Colvin, *op. cit.* note 36, 18.
[40] Aston, *op. cit.* note 8, 16–17.
[41] V.C.H. *Oxon.*, VI, 299.
[42] A. L. Meaney and S. C. Hawkes, *Two Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries at Winnall* (1970), 15, Grave 24. Also at Prittlewell, Essex, *Ibid.*, 31.
[43] I would like to take this opportunity to thank Ploughley Rural District Council for their help and advice which made this watching brief possible. I am also grateful to Mick Aston, then of the Oxford City and County Museum, for his help, and to John Hazelden of the Soil Survey for England and Wales for advice on geology. James Bond of the Oxon. C.C. Dept. of Museum Services, Woodstock, kindly commented on the text. I am grateful to Mrs. J. M. Chambers for typing this manuscript.

A. Oblique air photograph by M. Aston of Somerton, Oxon., from the S.W., showing deserted medieval enclosures and a hollow street.

Oxfordshire County Council
SOMERTON

B. (Left) Roman bronze model shovel from Sibford School, Oxon. Scale 1 : 1.
C. (Right) Plaster copy of Roman glass ring from Shakenoak, Oxon. Scale 3 : 1.

Phh.: Ashmolean Museum
NOTES