

Excavations at No. 12 Market Place, Chipping Norton, Oxon., 1974

By R. A. CHAMBERS

INTRODUCTION

DURING December 1974 a single week of excavation was conducted on the site of No. 12¹ Market Place, Chipping Norton, to examine suspected medieval remains. Floor levels and a hearth from a building demolished in the 16th or 17th century were discovered. A uniform layer of soil covered these building remains indicating that the site was then left as open ground until the mid 18th century when it was again built on.

The site was excavated by the writer for the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit. I would like to thank the owners, Bullock Developments Ltd., for permission to excavate the site.

THE EXCAVATION

The excavation was confined to an island of ground filling the corner between the present New Street and Market Street, area centred SP 31312709. This corner of ground was all that was left by the cellars of Nos. 12-14 Market Place, shown stippled on FIG. 1. Accompanying the demolition of Nos. 12-14 Market Place, New Street had been widened by the demolition of a row of properties as indicated by diagonal hatching on FIG. 1.²

The bedrock beneath the site was a light buff, fine oolitic limestone, part of the Great Oolite of the surrounding Cotswold hills.³

The excavated area measured approximately 38 sq. m. The stratified material was sealed by an overburden of demolition rubble which was removed by hand as quickly as possible (Section A-B, FIG. 3). This revealed six 18th-century free-standing, dwarf, floor foundation walls. Each of these walls was constructed of lightly mortared stone and brick and had been laid directly onto the soil surface of the prepared site. This soil surface was liberally covered with spreads and droppings of the same light yellow mortar (layer 3) as was contained in the walls.

The soil level to which the site had been cleared was a general layer of light grey-brown loam which contained much domestic refuse (layer 4). It covered earlier building remains and indicated that the site had been left as open ground for a long period before it was again built on. The pottery refuse contained in layer 4 comprised 16th- and 17th-century wares, some of which continued into the 18th

¹ Information kindly supplied by the Treasurer's Dept., West Oxfordshire District Council, and Chester Hurley and Taylor Ltd.

² The widened road is shown on the later 25 inch O.S. map, 1971 ed.

³ I am grateful to Mr. John Hazelden of the Soil Survey for England and Wales, for advice on the local geology.

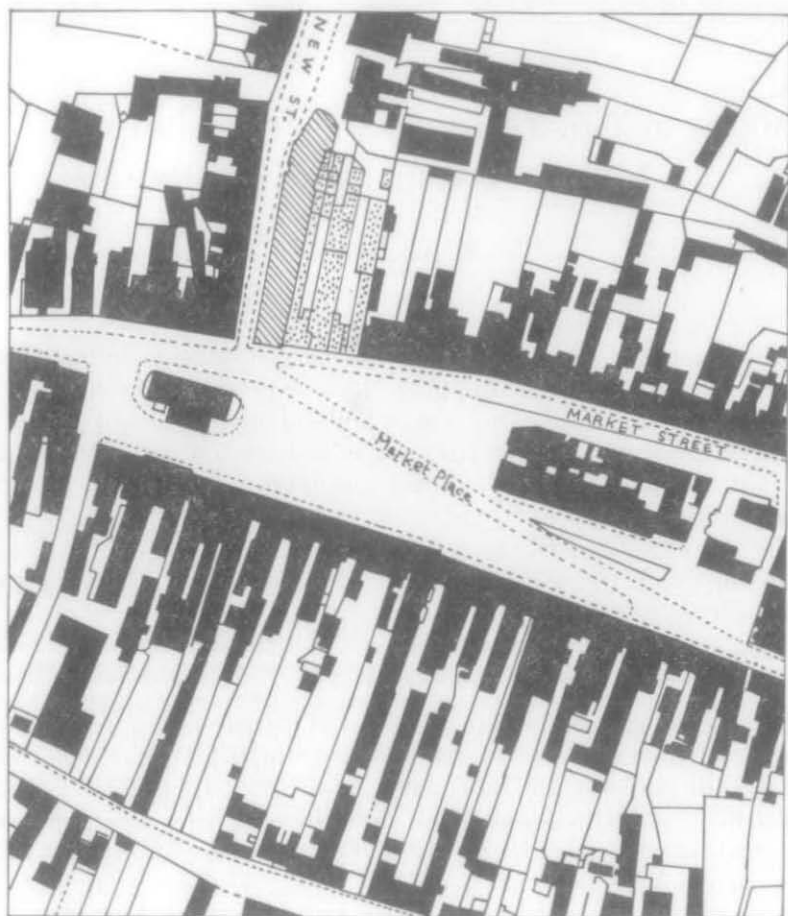


FIG. 1

Based on the Ordnance Survey 1 : 2500 plan (1922 ed.). North at top.

century. Animal bones, of which some bore signs of butchery, and many oyster shells were also present. Four coins dated 1574, 1603–25, 1723 and 1746 confirmed the pottery dating and indicated the late date at which the site appears to have been redeveloped. Section A–B (FIG. 3) shows where the redevelopment disturbed the stratigraphy covering the southern half of the site, mainly with a large fire in a hollow (F1) probably associated with the site clearance.

The removal of the soil build-up, layer 4, revealed several adjoining, contemporary floor levels; one of clayey, brown stoney subsoil, layer 6, and the rest of rammed, local soft oolitic limestone laid directly onto the bedrock. The clay floor was clearly contemporary with two clay-bonded, random coursed limestone walls, W8, 0.7 m. wide, and W9, 0.8 m. wide. The two shallow foundation courses of W8 and W9 were bonded into each other; W8 remained slightly higher than W9, which had been robbed to the level of the clay floor and some of the foundation stone removed. The surface of the clay floor, layer 6, was covered by a thin, patchy,

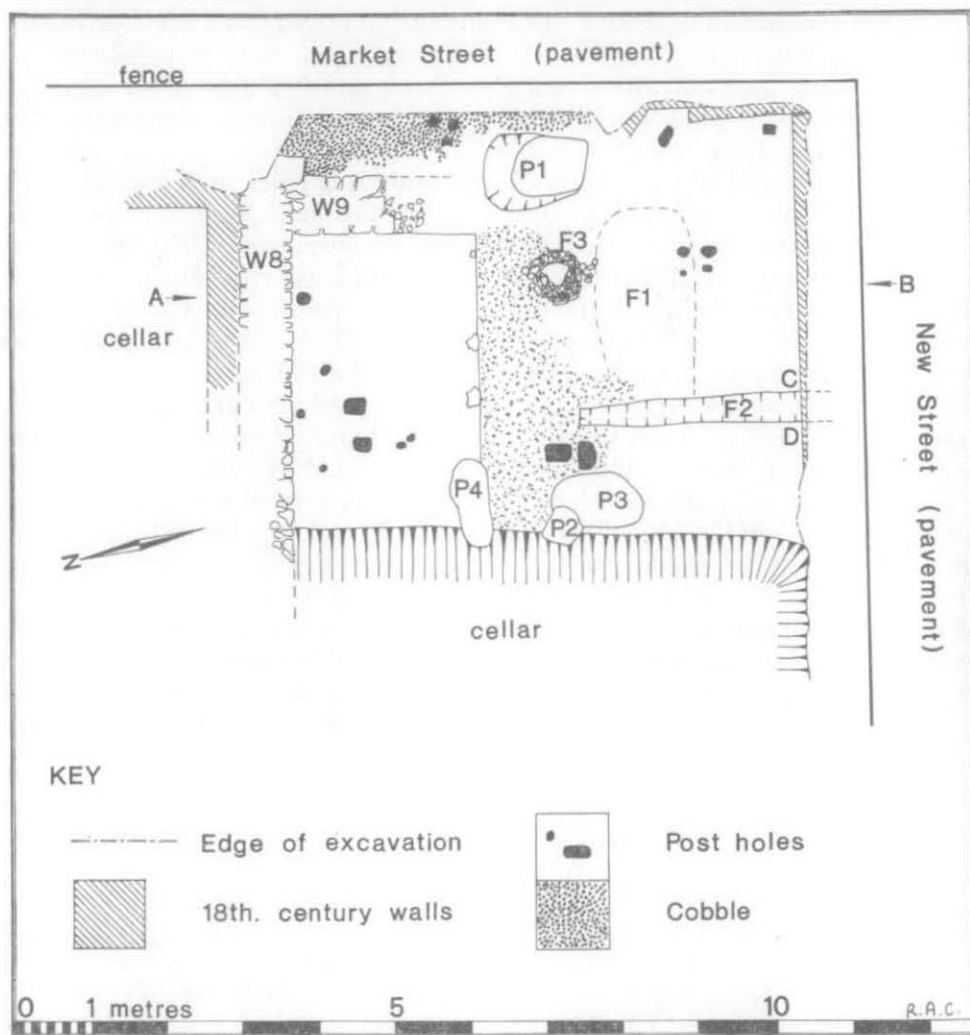


FIG. 2
Excavation plan.

black, amorphous carbon layer never more than 2 mm. thick (soot?). The division line between the clay floor and the adjacent rammed limestone surface was level, and there was no sign remaining of a partition. The rammed limestone floor surface was well preserved in the area shown by the stippling on FIG. 2. A circular hearth, F3, some 0.7 m. diameter, comprising packed limestone of a harder, more shelly rock type, had been let into the floor some 0.8 m. from the partition line and only 0.25 m. from the projected inside edge of the stone wall W9 (PL. IV, B). The proximity of the hearth to Wall W9 indicated the employment of a fire hood. A surface of limestone cobbling butted up against the exterior of W9 which suggested that W9 formed part of an early frontage onto the market area. The original extent

of the frontage remains unknown as the southern end of Wg had been obliterated by later redevelopment. Pit 1 was modern. The make-up of the clay floor (layer 6) contained several pieces of 16th-century stoneware and fragments from 16th-17th-century black glazed cups and tigs as well as several sherds of medieval coarse pottery and oyster shells.

Excavation revealed nineteen post-holes and stake-holes from various periods (Plan, FIG. 2). Many of the stake-holes were shallow and clearly the end impressions from stakes driven into the ground from higher, later levels. The impression of a shallow, square ended sill-beam, F2, in the limestone floor (Section C-D, FIG. 3), ended by two large, shallow, rectangular post-holes which with two similar sized post-holes founded on the limestone beneath the clay floor (layer 6) appear to have formed an integral part of the building standing in the 16th-17th century.

The cess pit on the western edge of the excavated area (FIG. 2) comprised a 0.4 m. deep, oblong upper pit, P3, with a packing of large stones at the northern end which separated the open southern end from a 0.7 m. deep sump, P2. The stone packing was retained in P3 by a large slab of re-used worked stone, 0.48 x 0.35 x 0.07 m., with a plain bead-moulded edge. Both P3 and P2 were discoloured green with urine, and the arrangement suggested that it had been designed principally as a urinal. The open southern end of P3 had later become filled with limestone rubble and soil which did not contain any datable material although the sump P2 contained two, possibly residual, medieval pottery sherds of which one was glazed. Unfortunately the stratigraphy that sealed the cess pit had already been destroyed during the recent demolition work. An adjacent pit, P4, shown on the plan, was modern.

THE FINDS

POTTERY

Medieval

Nine small body sherds were found, six below the floor level (layer 6), and the remaining three in upper levels. The six coarseware sherds from layer 6, one sherd from Wall W8 and an unstratified sherd represented three different fabrics, the first of which was black throughout with medium crushed limestone detritus, the second was a grey or black sandy fabric and the third fabric was black throughout with both limestone detritus and sand filling.

A residual sherd from the surface of layer 4 represented a fourth fabric, brown with finely crushed shell filling. The sump for the cess pit (P2) contained two residual sherds, one a very hard sandy, unglazed ware and the other a small, hard sherd with a light red fabric, lightly sandy. The exterior had a rich olive brown-green glaze; probably not before the 14th century. All of the coarseware sherds resembled fragments from cooking vessels.

Post-medieval

As the quantity of pottery in general from the site was small no analyses have been produced. There was much more post-medieval than medieval pottery.

The floor make-up (layer 6) contained several sherds from blackware cups and tigs, one piece of 16th-century stoneware and a fragment of a 16th-century globular cup. The general soil layer covering the floors (layer 4) provided many sherds of 16th-17th-century

⁴ I am grateful to Mrs. Jo de Goris for identifying the post-medieval pottery.

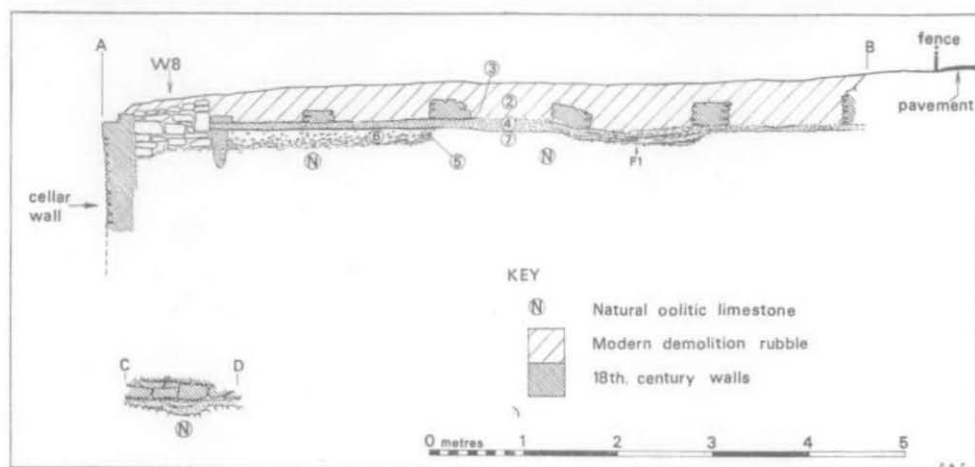


FIG. 3
Sections.

wares, some of which continued into the 18th century. Again black glazed cup and tig fragments were present as were several plain clay pipe stems, more stoneware including two stamped rims (Nos. 1 & 2 below) and a thin, deep red brick typical of the period. Several sherds glazed on the interior and sometimes on the exterior with a uniform, lustrous, reddish-brown glaze mottled with darker, iron speckles were also present.

This ware was similar to products from both the Leafield and Nettlebed industries of which Leafield is the closer (12 km.). Unfortunately it is not known whether the Leafield kilns were operating before the 18th century although comparable industries such as the Nettlebed kilns were operational from the 17th century.⁵

Descriptions (FIG. 4)

- 1 Rim ; hard, dense, highly fired, smooth red fabric with black core ; uniform lustrous, dark brown glaze on interior ; stamped rim ; 16th-17th cent. ; layer 4.
- 2 Rim ; hard, dense, highly fired, smooth red fabric throughout ; uniform, lustrous, dark green-black glaze with iron specks on interior ; stamped rim. Spoilt by another vessel that marked the rim during firing ; layer 4.

OBJECTS OF IRON AND LEAD

A heavily corroded iron key was recovered from layer 6.

FIG. 5

- 1 Lead whorl? Layer 6.

OBJECTS OF GLASS

- Not illustrated is a fragment from the lip of a 15th-16th-cent. style glass beaker ; layer 4.
- 2 Oval glass paste bead with central perforation. The surface is amorphous and pitted but the inside of the perforation retains a smooth vitrified surface. It resembles a glass paste bead in which the outer surface came away with the mould. The glass paste has a range of pale colours giving an overall greyish appearance with fine black speckles. Layer 6.

⁵ I am grateful to Mr. M. Aston, formerly of the Oxford City and County Museum, Woodstock, for this information which has come to light as a result of documentary research.

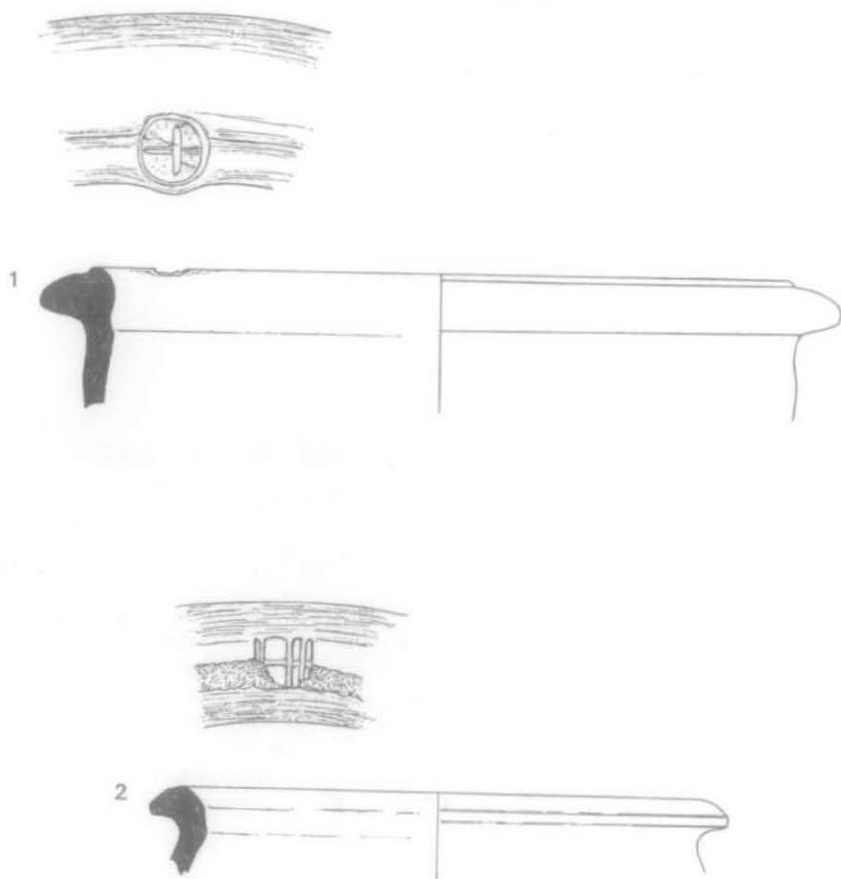


FIG. 4

Post-medieval Pottery, Scale $\frac{1}{4}$; rim stamps, Scale $\frac{3}{8}$.COINS⁶

The following copper coins, nos. 1-4, and one silver coin, no. 5, were recovered.

- 1 Charles II (1672-5 or 1679), Farthing. Layer 2.
- 2 James I (1603-25), Farthing. Layer 4.
- 3 George I (1723), Halfpenny. Layer 4.
- 4 George II (1746), Halfpenny. Layer 4.
- 5 Elizabeth I (1574?), Threepenny piece. Layer 4.

INTERPRETATION AND CONCLUSIONS

The construction date for the building containing these early floor levels was not discovered. The clay floor, layer 6, contained fragments of 16th-17th-century pottery as well as medieval coarseware, but this floor stood out as the only level on the site to contain many medieval sherds. Evidence of earlier building had been

⁶ I am grateful to the staff of the Heberden Coin Room, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, for identifying the coins.

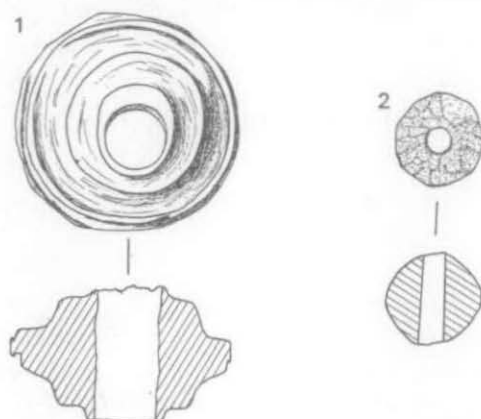


FIG. 5
Objects of Lead (1) and Glass (2). Scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

effectively destroyed or masked by the construction of these floor levels. The building to which these relate was demolished sometime during the 16th or 17th centuries as the soil, layer 6, that later accumulated also contained much 16th–17th-century material. It should be noted though that the coins of Elizabeth I (1574?) and James I (1603–25) from layer 6 are not significant as dating evidence as these coins remained in circulation until the end of the 17th century when the great re-coinage of William III took place.

It was impossible to demonstrate the original height to which Walls W8 and W9 stood. These two unmortared limestone walls, of which W8 stood high enough to demonstrate that it was constructed of well laid random coarsework, were both well founded on the shallow limestone bedrock.

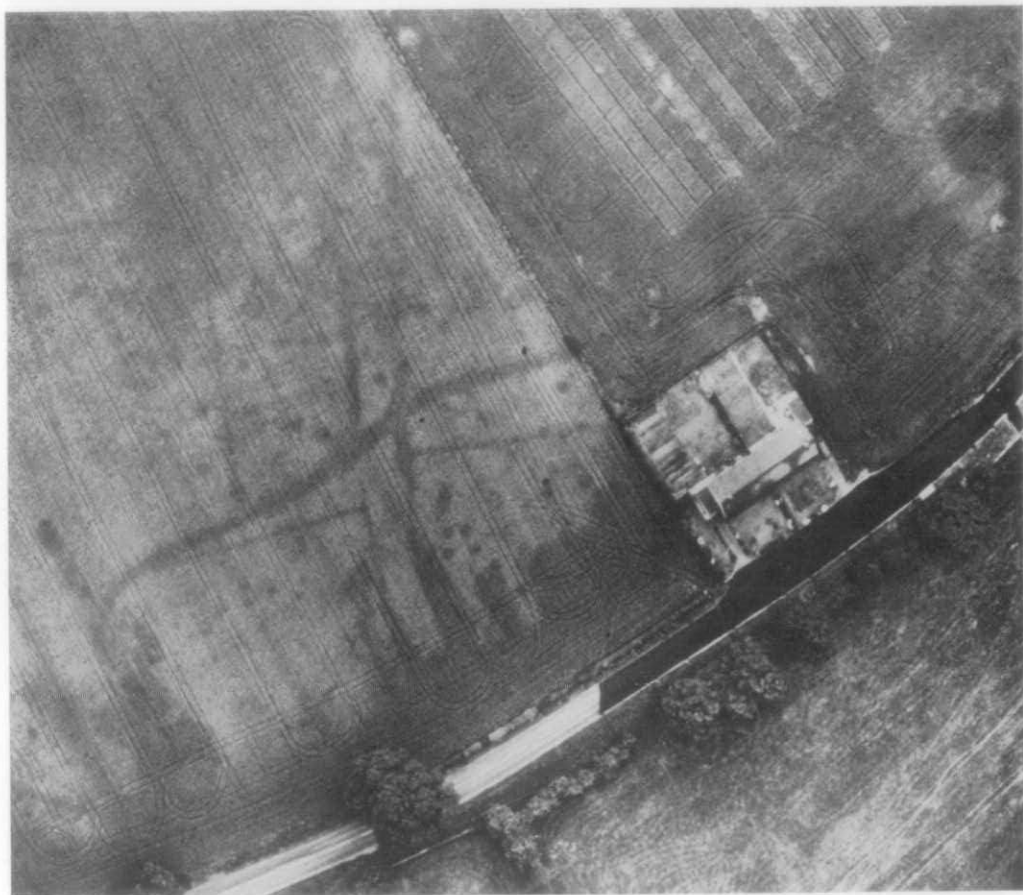
The site appears to have remained as open ground which served as a dump for some domestic refuse until perhaps the mid 18th century when redevelopment took place. The new building coincided with the general refronting of many of the older houses during the 18th century.⁷

The cobbling which ran up against the exterior of the unmortared stone wall on the market side indicated an early post-medieval or late medieval frontage which has not changed to the present day.

A publication grant from the Department of the Environment is gratefully acknowledged for this paper.

⁷ Jennifer Sherwood and Nikolaus Pevsner in the Buildings of England Series, *Oxfordshire* (1974), 539.

PLATE IV



A. The Ducklington cropmarks, south-west at top of photo (July 1972). See Fig. 2.
NMR Air Photograph: Crown Copyright



B. Chipping Norton : The Circular Hearth.