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**Excavations at the Shire Hall Site, Gloucester, 1965**

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# Excavations at the Shire Hall Site, Gloucester, 1965

By ROBERT ABBOTT

## *The Site*

THE site lies in the angle between Westgate Street and Quay Street, immediately to the west of the new Shire Hall extension (Plan 1.)

The excavation was initiated by Mr Irvine Gray, M.B.E., M.A., F.S.A. through the County Records Committee, and sponsored by the Estates Committee of the Gloucestershire County Council. Permission for me to supervise the excavation was readily granted by the Museums Committee of the Gloucester City Council.

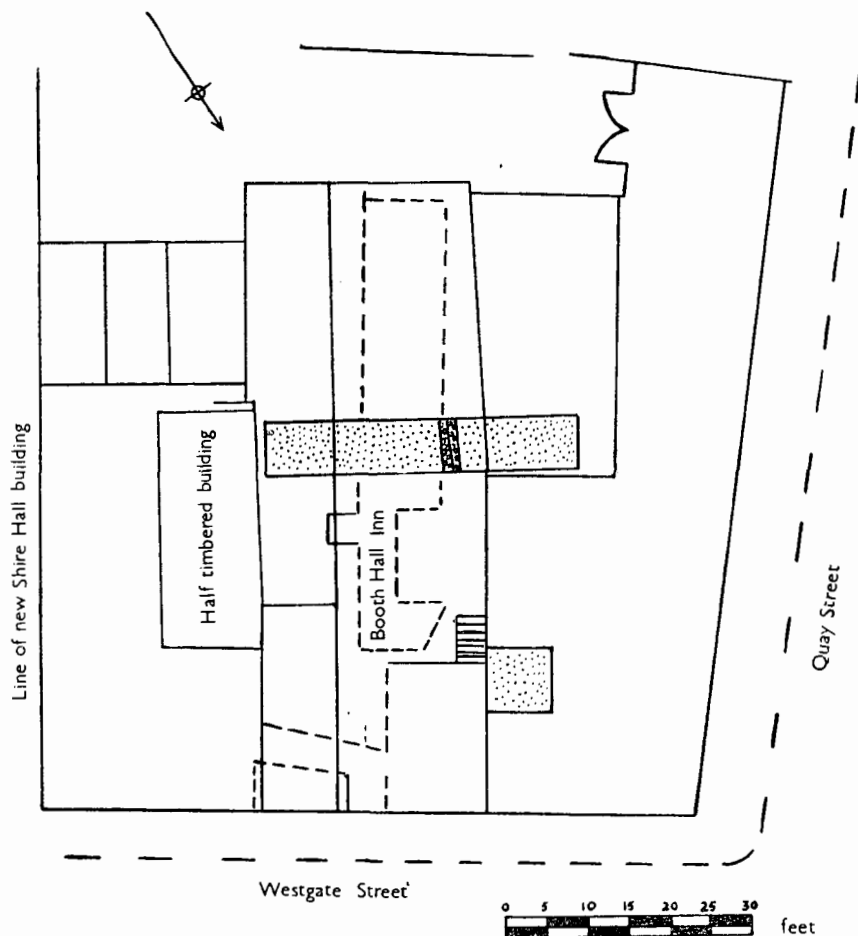
The principal object of the excavation was to establish the archaeological stratigraphy of the site, especially with regard to any medieval buildings which may have pre-dated The Booth Hall, which is first referred to in the Records of the Gloucester Corporation in c.1230.

## *The Booth Hall (Documentary references)*

I am indebted to the County Records Officer for permission to use the following documentary references to the Booth Hall which were compiled by Miss Susan Blanchard, B.A. (now Mrs O. Ransom), formerly Assistant Archivist in the Gloucestershire Records Office.

Fosbrooke's *History of Gloucester* (1819) describes the Booth Hall as being "The ancient Guild-hall, or place like an exchange, where merchants exposed their wares; and at what time it was converted into an Assize Court for the County and City does not appear. It was rebuilt in 1606, and is a very lofty lath and plaster building full of windows. The inside is barn-like and uncomfortable. During part of the reign of James I it was used as a prison for offending burgesses".

The 13th-century mention of the Booth Hall, referred to above, occurs in a deed of c. 1230 conveying a piece of land lying next the door of the Bothall. This property figures in other deeds, and is described as lying between the land formerly of Ralph Tudenham and the door of the Bothalle in the great west street of Gloucester. In 1348/9 a lease was made of a tenement lying near "Bohallam comunitatis villae Gloucestr" in Ebriggstreet. A deed of 1528 concerns a parcel of land in the street called Westgatestrete near the inn of the Bere, upon which land one part of a messuage called the Bothall is newly built.



Plan 1. Excavated areas are shown stippled

The first volume of Council Minutes (1499) contains the following entry:—

“At the Comon Counsaill holden the vi day of Decembre, the XV yere of the regn of King Henry the viiith, it is ordeyned and inacted that from hensforth no burges nor inhabitant withyn the town of Gloucestre by no maner of clothe wollyn nor lynnyn, of any chapman or merchaunt foren withyn the said town that is brougnt to the towne to be sold but oonly withyn the Bothall of the said towne: and he that doth the contrary to this acte shall forfeit for every pece of clothe, wollyn, lynnyn, or fryce, so by theym bought, vid., iiiid, thereof to be leveyed by distresse of the goodes and cattalles of the said byers, to the use of the Shrifves of the said town for the time beyng and the iid. residewe in like wise to be leveyed to the use of the occupyar of the Bothall of the said towne for the tyme beyng, toward the payment of the ferme of the said Bothall”.

Between 1549 and 1582 the following entry appears yearly in the Chamberlain's Accounts:— "Owte rents yerely paied by the Steward of the Citie of Gloucester goyng owte of the lands and tenements of the maire & Burgessez as hereafter ensuth In primis paid the Sheriffe of the Citie of Glouc' for langable rent goyng owt of the Bothall & a tenemente called Austens place now in the tenure of William lane thelder by yere vs. vjd.ob." After 1583 the Booth Hall is replaced by the Mercers Howse in the section of accounts listing "Owte Rents".

Minor items of repair to the Booth Hall are listed in the section dealing with repairs to public buildings, but in 1580-1 there seems to have been quite an extensive restoration of the building. In 1584-5 there are accounts for "Reparacions don about the new yarn howse at the Boothhall". In 1592-3, amongst other works done at the Booth Hall, a filthy well in the stables was cleansed and "ii cagements in the eleccion chamber" were installed. In 1593-4 is an Account for money "layde out for buldinge and repayringe the new hall att the bowth hall". In 1559-60 is the first mention of a scaffold being erected at the Booth Hall for the players, and a number of companies appeared at the hall including the Queen's Players, and Lord Dudley's players.

### *The Excavation*

The excavation was carried out in February 1965 utilising a JCB excavating machine supplied through Messrs. Terson's, the contractors for the new Shire Hall building. To obtain the longest possible section, and to employ the machine to the best advantage, a trench was laid out parallel to Westgate Street, its northern side being 48 feet from the pavement edge. The length of the trench and its siting were dictated by the contractor's requirements for the future laying out of the site. Within these limitations it was possible to cut a trench 7 feet wide for a distance of 40 feet. The eastern end of the trench was taken as close as possible to the line of foundations of that portion of the Booth Hall which survived until 1957.<sup>1</sup>

The cutting of the trench was carried out from the east and within a few feet the remains of 19th century brick built cellars were uncovered; the retaining walls of these, together with their brick rubble fill, were cut through with some difficulty. Fortunately, it was possible to obtain an undisturbed section at the extreme eastern end of the trench (Section 1). The section showed two floors of clay and rammed gravel at a depth between 5 and 6 feet. These floors were very slight, with a maximum thickness of *c.* 4 inches. The northern side of the section had been cut by a rubbish pit which contained a mass of organic

<sup>1</sup> Photographs and notes in County Records Office, Gloucester.

matter and a few animal bones. A few medieval sherds were also found in this pit. The floors were cut by a post-hole or wall slot adjoining the pit. Below the floors was black made-up soil almost completely devoid of any material remains, and below this again was black silt. At a depth of 10 feet water began to flow freely into the trench, and it was possible to do no more than sink a trial boring which located natural gravel at a depth of *c.* 12 feet. The stratigraphical make-up at the lower

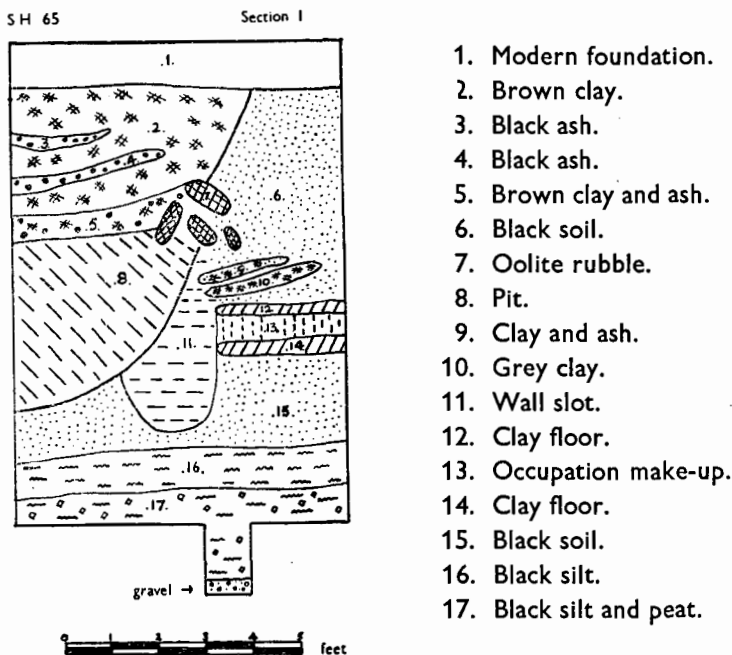
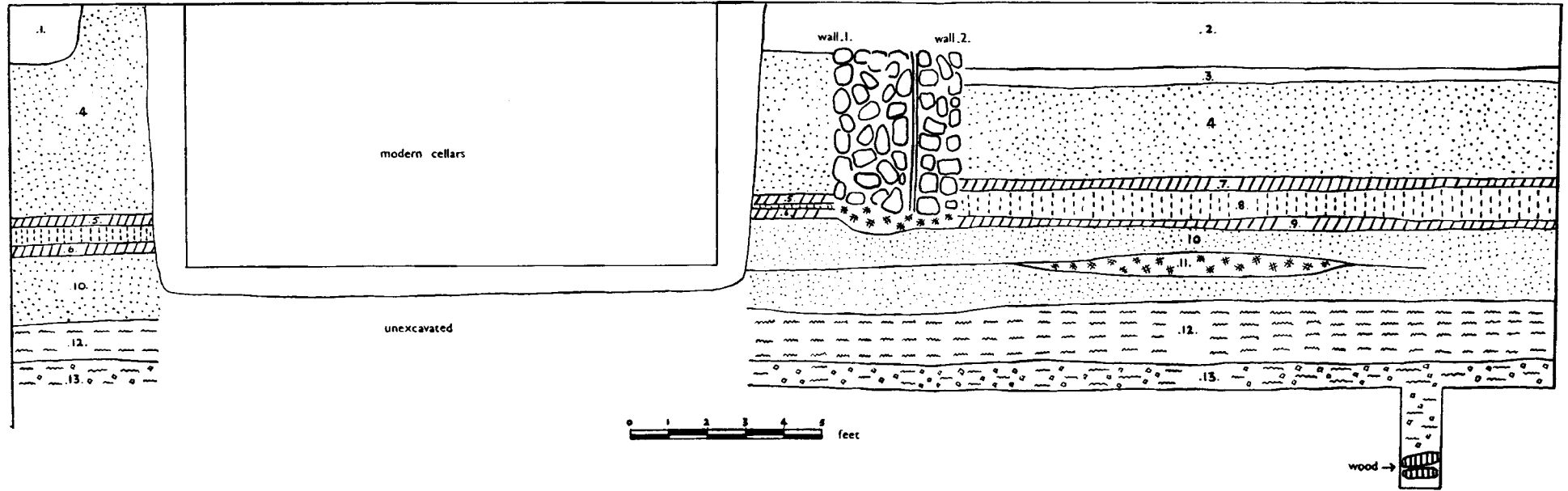


Fig. 1. Section 1

depths accords with the borings recorded from the corner of Three Cocks Lane, on the opposite side of Westgate Street.<sup>1</sup>

The southern section of the trench (Section 2) was marred by the modern cellars (presumably those of the Booth Hall Hotel), but the clay floors were located again to either side of the section disturbed by the cellars. To the west of the cellars were two adjacent stone walls, built north-south and cutting the trench at a slight angle. Both walls were of rough construction, being composed of blocks of undressed oolite set in lime and sand mortar. Their unsubstantial character

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Mr L. E. W. O. Fullbrook-Leggatt, M.C., B.A., for bringing these borings to my notice.



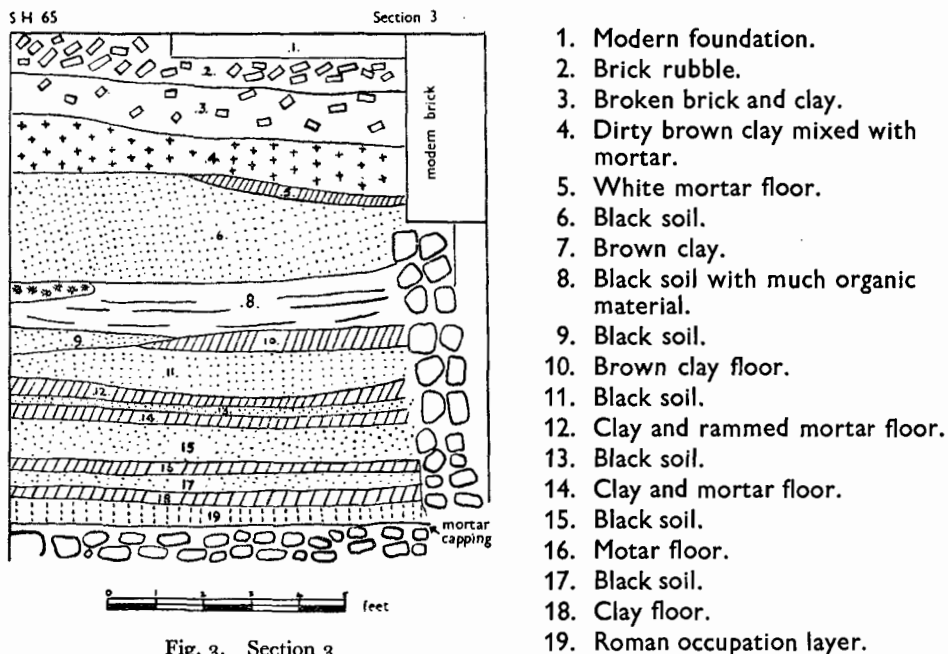
1. Modern foundation.
2. Brick rubble.
3. Modern concrete.
4. Black soil.

5. Clay floor.
6. Clay floor.
7. Gravel and mortar floor.
8. Occupation make-up.

9. Gravel and mortar floor.
10. Black soil.
11. Deposit of white clay.
12. Black silt.
13. Silt and peat.

Fig. 2. Section 2

suggests they may have carried timber superstructures and a date in the 13th century may be tentatively assigned to them in the light of slight evidence provided by pottery from the floors associated with them. In addition to the clay floors to the east of the walls, two further floors were found at a roughly similar level to the west, but in this case they were surfaced with a gravelly mortar. Below the floors the section was composed of homogeneous black made-up soil containing much



organic material, animal bones, and a few scraps of medieval pottery. The make-up also included a deposit of washed white clay, which presumably must represent waste material discarded from some industrial process. As with the eastern end of the section, the western end was found to contain substantial layers of silt and peat at a depth below 10 feet 6 inches. Flowing water and the unstable nature of the soil made additional excavation virtually impossible, but a small hole was dug downwards for a further 18 inches. Pieces of water-logged wood were recovered from this hole, but there was no evidence to suggest that it came from a structure, nor was there any indication of date. Any further attempts at investigation had to be abandoned

when a large section of the trench collapsed, in spite of the fact that precautions had been taken to reduce the risk of a cave-in.

Subsequent to the main excavation, it was possible to make observations of a rectangular hole dug by the site contractors nearer to the corner of Westgate Street and Quay Street, and intended to accommodate a transplanted tree. This hole was 10 feet square, and its cutting revealed a most interesting archaeological section (Section 3) in its northern side. No less than five floor levels of medieval date

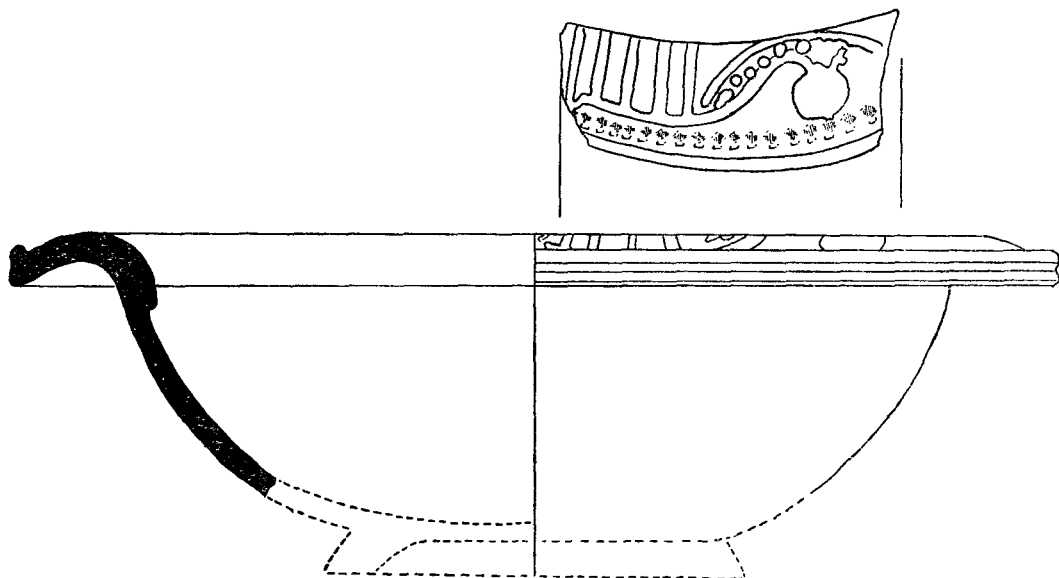


Fig. 4. Bowl, Oxfordshire red ware, 4th century. Decoration in white slip  
Shire Hall, Gloucester, 1965

were identifiable, and a section of medieval walling was visible at the eastern end. Above the medieval floors were deposits of the 17th and 18th centuries, and the remains of a comparatively modern mortar floor. The most intriguing discovery was made at a depth of 10 feet 6 inches, for a massive foundation of mortared limestone was found to cover the whole of the floor of the trench. Above this foundation was an occupation layer containing Roman sherds, the most important being the remains of at least three vessels of imitation Samian ware of the type produced at the Sandford kilns, and elsewhere in the Oxford region during the 4th century (FIG. 4).<sup>1</sup> In view of this evidence there seems

<sup>1</sup> *Archaeologia*, LXXII (1920), p. 225.

little doubt that the foundation should be dated to the Roman period, and the presence of Roman buildings in Westgate Street, beyond the presumed site of the West Gate of Glevum, suggests the possibility of a more intensive extramural development of the city than has previously been suspected, and the present discovery is a tantalising but significant addition to the evidence afforded by other Roman finds made in the course of commercial excavations in the Quay Street area.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, the present discovery may perhaps be associated with the defences on the river side of the city, for the evidence for their siting is by no means conclusive, and the extent of Glevum and its defences on the western side remains one of the most conspicuous gaps in our knowledge. It is to be hoped that future excavations in the Westgate Street area under more propitious conditions may perhaps supply an answer.

<sup>1</sup> *Trans. BGAS* LIX (1937), pp. 337-8 and LX (1938), p. 165 ff.