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Excavations on the Medieval Defences, Portwall Lane, Bristol

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Excavations on the Medieval Defences, Portwall Lane, Bristol, 1965

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CLEARANCE of buildings on the South side of Portwall Lane, Bristol (ST 5918 7242) in advance of road building made available an area in which to section the southern defences of Bristol, known as the Portwall. Excavation of other parts of the medieval defences of Bristol has taken place at St. Nicholas Almshouses, King Street (Barton 1965), Baldwin Street (Rahtz 1961), and Wine Street (Marshall 1952). The excavation¹ failed to find the foundations of the Portwall itself, which are presumed to lie under the present Portwall Lane. However, the 52 ft. (15.8 m.) wide defensive ditch, which ran in front of the Portwall, was discovered. No archaeological evidence was discovered which helped to date the original construction of this defensive system.

A single trench (see plan ; FIG. 1) was dug across the presumed line of the medieval defences. Building layers of the 19th century and a large part of the 18th century and later fill of the ditch were removed mechanically. Below that, all layers were removed by hand. The nature of the ground on the site required close-boarded shoring. The excavation was carried to a depth of 14 feet establishing the original profile of the upper portion of the ditch. At this stage excavation ceased as it was felt that the considerable cost of clearing the ditch to the bottom was unlikely to be justified by the results achieved.

THE EXCAVATION

The Medieval Period

The profile of the original ditch, cut into brown/grey undisturbed clay forming part of the alluvium of the valley floor of the Avon, can be seen in the section (FIG. 2). The ground surface at this time

¹The excavation was undertaken by the City Museum, Bristol in March and April 1965 and directed by the writer. A grant towards the work was made by the Ministry of Public Building and Works. Permission to excavate the site was given by the Planning and Public Works Committee of Bristol Corporation. Labour and other assistance were provided by the City Engineers' Department. The help of Mrs Jennifer Gill and Miss Susanna Everett is gladly acknowledged. The advice of Mr Alan Warhurst, Mr Leslie Grinsell and other Museum colleagues has been invaluable.

was about 25 ft. (7.7 m.) above Ordnance Datum (5 ft. below the present ground level). Although the bottom of the ditch was not excavated, probing suggested that it was at least 14 ft. (4.3 m.) below the original ground level. There was no indication as to where the material excavated from the ditch was deposited. Resting on the inner North slope were a number of limestone chippings which

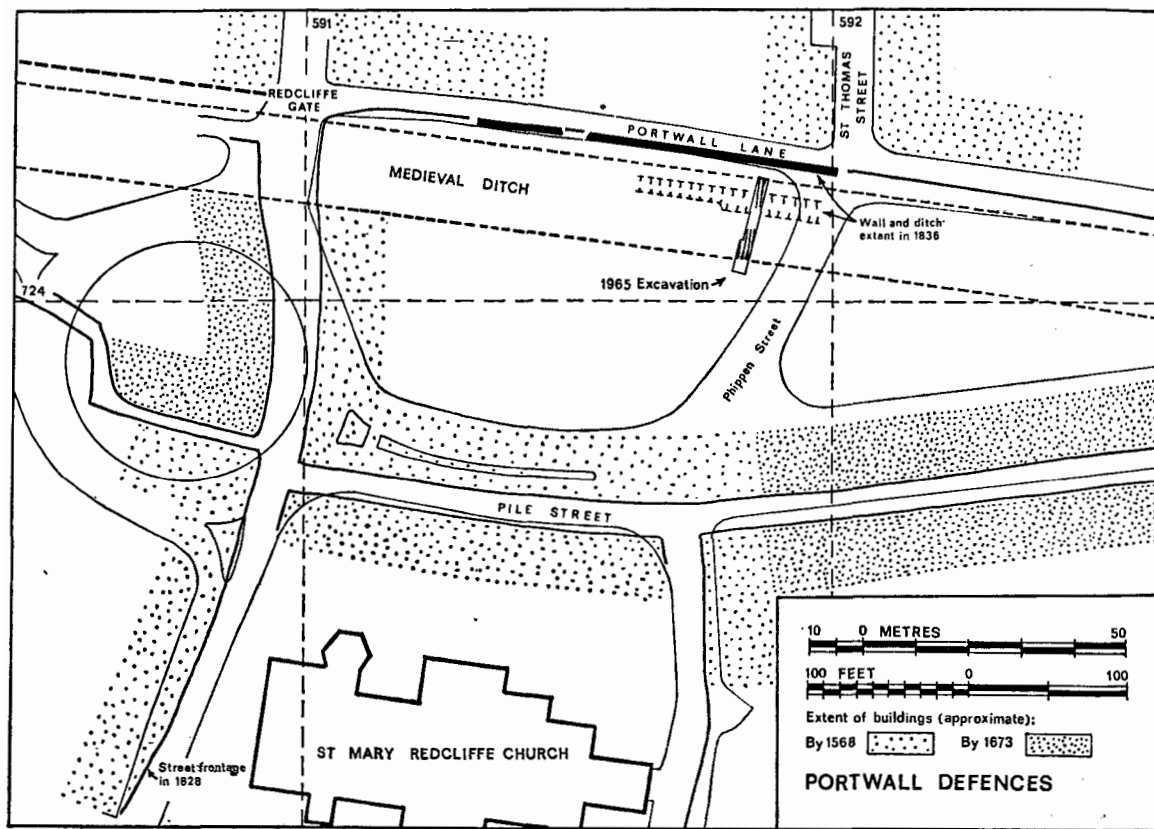


Fig. 1

can reasonably be associated with the construction of the Portwall itself. The lowest layers of the filling of the ditch that could be examined were sticky black clay containing organic material (14 and 15).¹ Above this on the South side was a rather greyer silt layer (10). Neither produced any dating evidence.

¹ Numbers in brackets indicate layers and refer to the section (Fig. 2).

EXCAVATIONS ON THE MEDIEVAL DEFENCES, BRISTOL

On the North side of the ditch and earlier than the deposition of (10) was a layer of clay (13) which included within it patches of mortar, perhaps associated with repair of the Portwall. Subsequent to the deposition of (10) the ditch was partly filled in on the South side. A drain (F4) of slabs of pennant sandstone was constructed and over this a layer of yellow clay (8) deposited. The North end of the

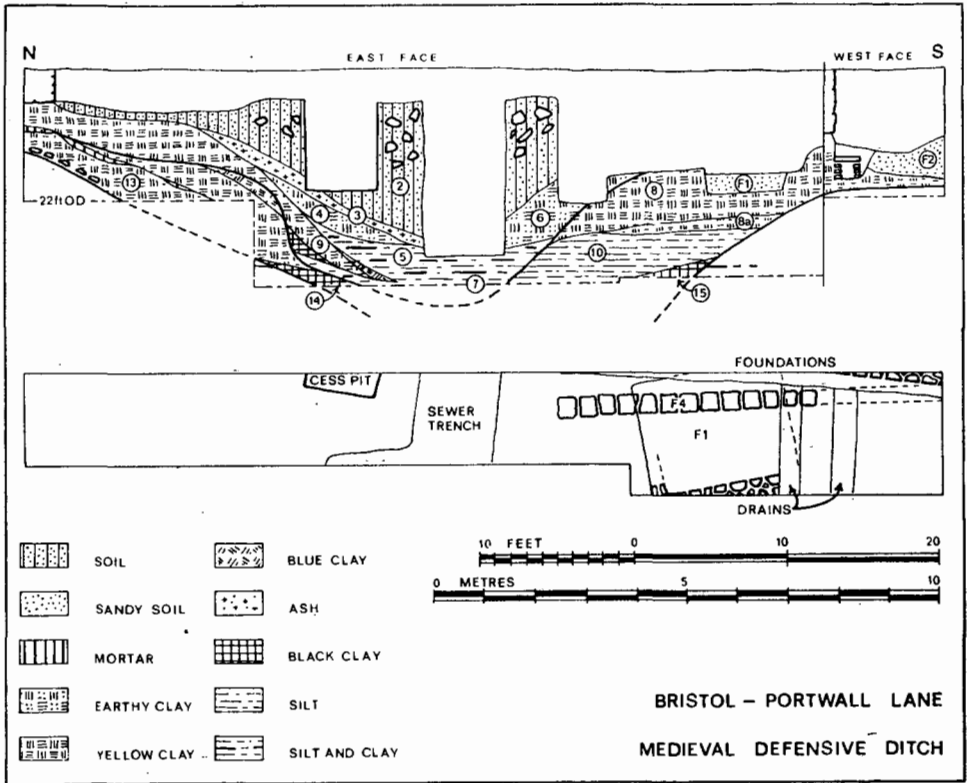


Fig. 2

drain was disturbed by a later re-cutting of the ditch. From the more silty layer (8a) at the base of this clay came the fragment of a base of a jug (FIG. 5, No. 31). The remaining sherds from (8) (FIG. 5, Nos. 28 to 36) are of similar fabric and all are 14th century. However, as the material and its ceramic content may be derived from elsewhere, the date of deposition of this layer could be much later than the 14th century.

The Post-Medieval period

At some time subsequent to layer (8) the ditch was re-cut to a width of approximately 25 ft. (7.7 m.). The fill of this recut (5 and 7) contrasts with that of the medieval ditch. It consists of clay and organic material in thin "varve"-like layers, presumably representing tidal depositions. The lowest part of this fill that could be examined (7) contained a bellarmine jug (FIG. 5, No. 23) dating to the first half of the 17th century. The material from the upper part of the fill (5) (FIGS. 4 and 5, Nos. 18 to 27), also belongs to this period. It is likely that layers 5 and 7 accumulated rapidly as they were succeeded by a layer of earthy clay (4) containing late 17th century pottery (FIG. 4, Nos. 8-17) thrown in on the North side. Immediately above this, on the same side of the ditch, was a layer of ash and kiln debris (3) among which was slag presumably derived from one of the potteries established in Redcliffe early in the 18th century. The remainder of the ditch fill (2) comprised garden soil with some building debris towards the top. Features which it was not possible to tie in to this stratigraphical sequence include a stone-lined cess pit (F1) containing 17th century pottery (FIG. 3, Nos. 1 to 7) and a further shallow pit of uncertain date (F2).

The latest features on the site were foundations, drains and cess pits for buildings constructed in Phippen Street and Portwall Lane as a result of the Improvement Act of 1840 (Latimer 1887, 250). These houses survived until the clearance of the site for the present excavation.

INTERPRETATION¹*The construction of the ditch*

Although no evidence of the date of this ditch was found in the excavation, it seems reasonable to associate it with the construction of the Portwall. This work, which enclosed the transpontine settlements in the parishes of St. Thomas and Temple Fee, is probably that for which a grant of murage was made in 1232 and was the subject of a dispute in 1235 (Cronne 1946, 37-8). Although the wall was not located in the present excavation, an examination of early maps and plans has enabled it to be plotted fairly accurately (FIG. 1). The stretch of the Portwall between Temple and Redcliffe Gates survived until the Improvement Act of 1840 and was described in 1834 as being "partly perfect for several hundred yards to Redcliff-street"

¹ The author is greatly indebted to Miss E. Ralph and her staff at the Bristol Archives Office for their help and advice in compiling this section. The opinions expressed are those of the author.

(Dallaway 1834, 82). Plans in the Corporation Plan Books of c. 1836 (Bristol Archives Office 04479 (3) p. 134 and p. 136) show the Portwall adjoining the excavation as being 4 feet (1.2 m.) thick. The map of Bristol in 1828 by Ashmead shows Portwall Lane as 18 feet (5.4 m.) wide bounded on its South side by the Portwall. This indicates the existence of a berm approximately 8 feet (2.4 m.) wide between wall and ditch. This, on analogy with the St. Nicholas Almshouses bastion, would not have been wide enough to accommodate the three bastions shown on the Millerd Map of 1673, and the ditch must have been diverted round them. According to Millerd all the bastions were semi-circular, but Millerd cannot be relied upon on this point. He also shows three semi-circular bastions on the wall between Temple Gate and Tower Harratz, whereas the plan of Bristol in 1742 by Rocque shows (from West to East) one semi-circular and three rectangular bastions.

In 1247, according to Seyer (Seyer 1823, 2, 28-9), the Portwall ditch was used as a diversion course for the Avon while Bristol bridge was constructed. The authority for this statement appears to be an unpublished calendar history of Bristol (Bristol Archives Office 07831, quoted in Corry 1816, 152) completed after 1724 from unknown sources. The 17th century Adams Chronicle (Fox 1910, 21), although mentioning the building of the bridge, gives no indication that the Avon was diverted. It seems quite possible that the additional information contained in the 18th century chronicle was added by the writer in order to offer some explanation of the way in which Bristol Bridge was erected. These thoughts may have been occasioned by the demolition of the old bridge at the time of the construction of the present structure in 1768. This opinion is reinforced, perhaps, by the results of the present excavation which indicate a ditch originally 52 feet (15.8 m.) wide. This is approximately half the width of the present New Cut which carries the Avon round the floating harbour.¹ It seems unlikely, therefore, that the original Portwall ditch would have been an adequate temporary course for the whole flow of the Avon; on the other hand, it could have carried a portion of the flow thus reducing the depth of water at Bristol Bridge at lowtide.

Later medieval history of the site

In so far as it could be examined the lower fill of the ditch appeared to be a tidal deposit of black clayey material containing

¹ The present dry-weather flow of the Avon at low tide is between 70 and 80 million gallons per day. (Information from the Port of Bristol Authority).

organic remains. Such a deposit suggests that landwater was not flowing through the ditch, when a scour effect would be likely. Subsequent to the partial silting of the ditch the wall was repaired and a bank of clay deposited on the North side of the ditch. A context for this repair may be provided by three grants of murage made between 1321 and 1348 (Harding 1930, 65, 85, 93) "for repairing and amending the wall of the aforesaid town". However, there was no archaeological evidence to date the repair.

Layer 10, which succeeded this repair, could be a flood deposit as the silt is smooth and uniform in texture. Immediately above this deposit the ditch was partly filled by the deliberate deposition of a layer of clay with a contemporary stone-lined drain at the base. Fourteenth century pottery was incorporated in the clay, which was brought from elsewhere, and may have been deposited at a much later date than its ceramic content. It is tempting to interpret layer 10 as a deposit resulting from the flood recorded by Ricart in 1484 (Smith 1872, 46) and to associate the partial filling of the ditch and the construction of the stone lined drain with suburban development subsequent to this date. Such development is shown on the map of Bristol in 1568 by Smith (Wheatley 1879, Pl.25) as extending eastwards along the North side of Pile Street (connecting Redcliffe and Temple Gates) to a point almost opposite the end of Thomas Street. However, an entirely different and earlier flood may have been responsible.

The recut

The archaeological evidence for the date of the recut indicates that it took place later than the partial filling described above and before the deposition of a bellarmine jug of the first half of the 17th century (FIG. 5, No. 23) in the early tidal filling. Two possible historical events may have necessitated the recut. Firstly, it could have been undertaken as part of a plan to improve the drainage of the area after the disastrous flood of 1607 (Smith 1872, 64). Secondly, it could have been carried out as part of a scheme for the improvement of Bristol's defences at the time of the civil war. In 1642 orders were given by the Council that "earthworks be made in all needful places round about the city" (Latimer 1900, 161). Although these orders refer to the great ring of defences constructed North of the city, an associated improvement of the Portwall, still largely uncluttered by suburban buildings, would be likely. This section of the wall had been described by Leland one hundred years earlier as "the highest and strongest Peace of the Towne Wauls"

(Toulmin Smith 1964, 5, 87-90). On the whole, the recutting of the ditch in 1642 is perhaps the more likely explanation.

Later history

After the civil war, the line of defences between Redcliffe and Temple Gates became completely obscured by buildings as is shown on Millerd's map of 1673. Nonetheless, even as late as 1674 the city authorities acted against numerous breaches which had been made in the walls and in that year ordered that the holes between Redcliffe and Temple Gates be blocked, except for that opposite the end of St. Thomas Street (Latimer 1900, 367). No doubt through this breach came the deposit of earth and pottery of the late 17th century found on the North side of the ditch. Subsequent to this date the ditch ceased to be flooded each tide and garden soil accumulated in it. The bastions on this stretch of wall were removed before 1742 as they are not shown on Rocque's map of that date, but the wall itself continued to stand until at least 1834. It was probably not demolished until the Improvement Act of 1840 which widened Portwall Lane from 18 feet (5.4 m.) to 26 feet (7.9 m.).

The plan books (already cited) show that the Corporation continued to own a strip of land parallel with the wall and separated from it by another strip, 16 feet (4.8 m.), wide and in the possession of Whitson's Charity. A surveyor's note of c. 1817 (Bristol Archives Office O1162 (8)) describes the Corporation's property as the city ditch, which presumably was still discernible as an earthwork. It is interesting to note that the Corporation owned only the inner slope of the ditch, the outer slope being in the possession of houses in Pile Street; the berm and upper inner slope of the ditch belonged to Whitson's Charity.

As a consequence of the Improvement Act of 1840 the ditch was filled in, the remains of the Portwall demolished and Portwall Lane widened. Phippen Street was constructed nearby to connect St. Thomas Street with Pile Street. On the South side of Portwall Lane a group of buildings was erected known as Tubal Place, whose date stone bore the legend 1844, and which survived until demolished previous to the present excavation.

Finally, a note of caution must be sounded. The archaeological evidence for this interpretation is derived from a single trench. Until a further section, preferably including the Portwall itself, has been dug, the results must be regarded as tentative.

CERAMICS

Fig. 3 ; Ft. Stone-lined cess pit

1. Base of a cream ware cup with decoration of brown tendrils.
2. Profile of a wide mouthed bowl, with handle. Red ware with white grits ; the interior glazed dark brown.
3. Rim of a wide mouthed bowl. Red ware with a grey core ; the interior and rim glazed pale green.
4. Rim of a jar. Red fabric ; traces of dark red slip externally ; the interior glazed olive green.
5. Rim of a jar with lip. Dark grey fabric with red surface ; the exterior glazed mottled green ; the interior glazed patchily green.
6. Complete cylindrical jar. Buff fabric ; glazed internally dark green.
7. Fragments of jar with carrying handle. Buff fabric ; the interior and exterior of the rim and the shoulder glazed dark green.

The small fragment of a cup (No. 1) dates to the first quarter of the 19th century. However, the rest of the group compares very closely with the coarse wares discovered in the mid 17th century layers at the St. Nicholas Almshouses site (Barton 1965, Fig. 70). No. 1 can perhaps be regarded as a stray, the result of some disturbance of an otherwise homogeneous 17th century deposit.

Fig. 4. Layer 4. Earthy Clay on the North slope of the ditch

8. Rim of a delftware bowl. Hard white fabric ; decorated internally mainly in blue, with the outermost circle pale green, and tin glazed ; the exterior lead glazed.
9. Base of a bowl. Fabric as 8 ; decorated internally mainly in blue, with the cross and outer circles mauve, and tin glazed ; the exterior lead glazed. A base decorated and glazed in an identical manner is among sherds in the City Art Gallery, Bristol which are described as coming "probably from the Brislington kiln site."
10. Rim of a cylindrical jar. Heavily quartz gritted buff fabric ; the interior and lip covered with a dark brown speckled glaze.
11. Rim of a jar decorated with a band of finger tip impressions. Brick red fabric ; completely covered with a ginger-brown glaze.
12. Handle and rim of a pipkin. Fabric as 10 ; the interior covered with a dark brown glaze.
13. Rim of a bowl. Fabric as 11 ; interior covered with a dark brown glaze.
14. Rim of a bowl. Brick-red fabric ; the interior decorated with a trailed slip of pipe clay and covered by a clear lead glaze.
15. Neck of a jar. Fabric as 11 ; the interior covered with an olive green glaze ; the exterior unglazed except for a large splash.
16. Rim of a bowl. Fabric as 10 ; the interior, but not the rim covered with a dark brown speckled glaze.
17. Rim, side and base fragments of a handled pot. Brick red ware covered externally with a cream slip with graffito decoration to reveal under-colour ; the whole covered with a lead glaze containing copper patches (shown stippled). There is another similar vessel.

EXCAVATIONS ON THE MEDIEVAL DEFENCES, BRISTOL

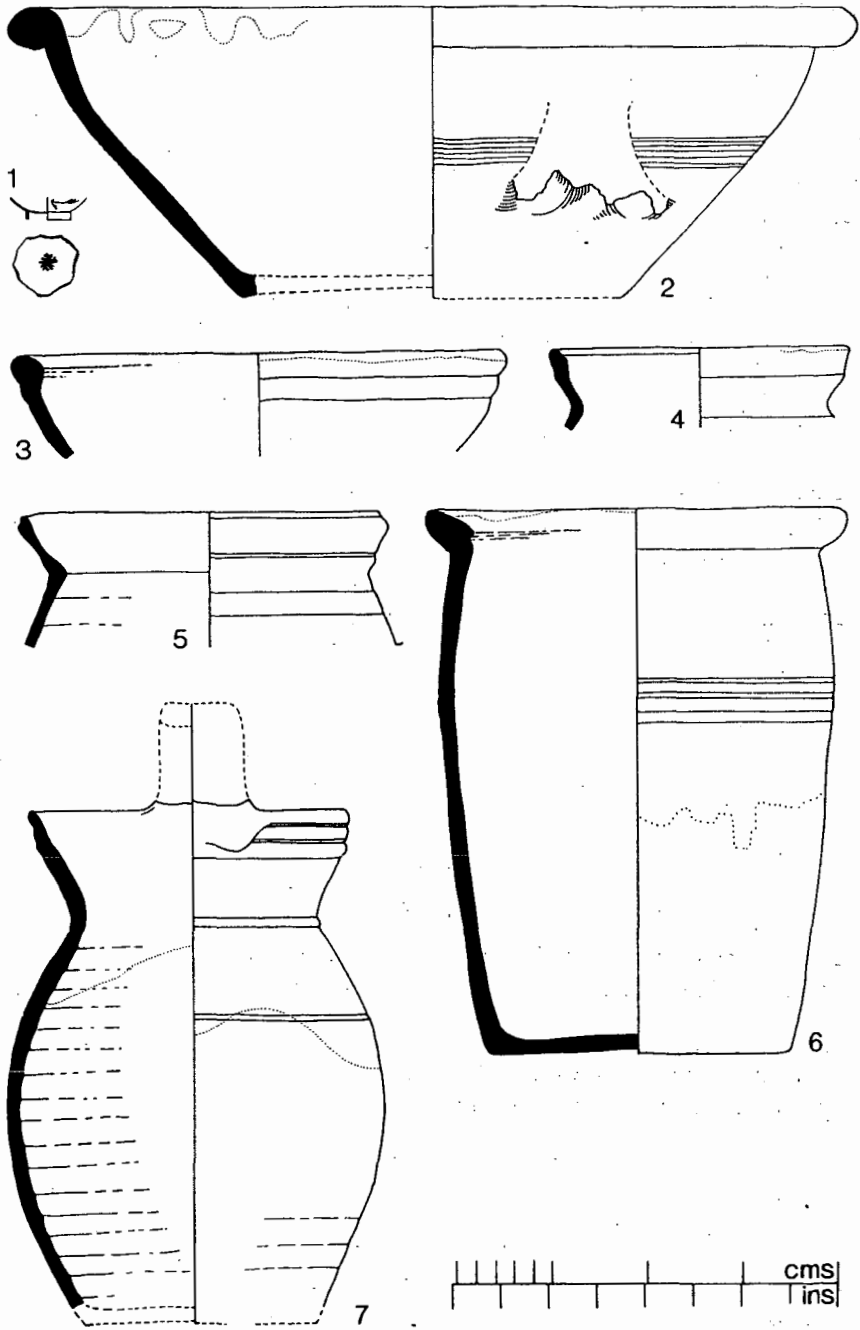


Fig. 3

The two delftware pieces (Nos. 8 and 9) are similar in character to sherds (now preserved in the City Art Gallery) from the kiln site at Brislington. Pottery began to be produced at this kiln before 1652 (Pountney 1920, 28). Material comparable to the remaining material was found in the rubbish deposited at St. Nicholas Almshouses between 1652 and 1656. The fabric of Nos. 10, 12 and 16 is paralleled by Nos. 74-7 in the St. Nicholas Almshouses catalogue. The fabric of Nos. 11, 13, 15 is paralleled by Nos. 78-94 at St. Nicholas Almshouses. The trailed slip decoration of No. 14 is seen there also. The graffito technique (but not the form) of No. 17 is seen at St. Nicholas Almshouses on Nos. 46 to 58. This technique coupled with the copper green patches in the glaze, is seen in wares from kilns at Donyatt in South Somerset, where the earliest dated piece is 1677 (Rackam 1935, 27). A date in the late 17th century is likely for this deposit.

Figs. 4 and 5. Layers 5 and 7. Silt of recut ditch

18. Base and sidewall of an albarello. Buff fabric ; with red slip covered by a patchy lead glaze giving an orange colour.
19. Another. Similar fabric with lead glaze giving a dark green colour.
20. Base of a delftware cup. White fabric ; covered internally with a speckled manganese glaze becoming dark brown at the base.
21. Rim and sidewall of a cup with horizontal strap handle. Red fabric ; covered with a cream slip beneath a lead glaze with some traces of copper on the inside. The exterior is patchily glazed. The form, fabric and glaze compare closely with St. Nicholas Almshouse No. 41 (Barton 1965, 205).
22. Profile of a bowl. Red fabric ; decorated internally with trailed white pipe clay slip ; clear lead glaze.
23. Almost complete bellarmine jar. Hard grey stoneware ; iron-washed and salt glazed to form a mottled finish.
The mask appears to be Holmes type V (Holmes 1951, 175).
From the lowest level of the fill (layer 7).
24. Rim of a jar. Brick red fabric ; covered with a clear lead glaze.
25. Half pint tankard. Slightly gritty grey fabric ; entirely covered with an olive green glaze.
26. Rim of jar decorated with thumb impressions. Slightly gritty red fabric ; covered internally with lead glaze.
27. Bowl. Brick red fabric ; covered internally with lead glaze.

All the pieces compare closely with the group at St. Nicholas Almshouses deposited 1652-6. Bellarmine jugs of Holmes type V appear to have been current in the first half of the 17th century and were imported. The absence of delftware, of which production began locally before 1652 and which occur in layer 4, suggests that the silting was complete by the mid 17th century.

EXCAVATIONS ON THE MEDIEVAL DEFENCES, BRISTOL

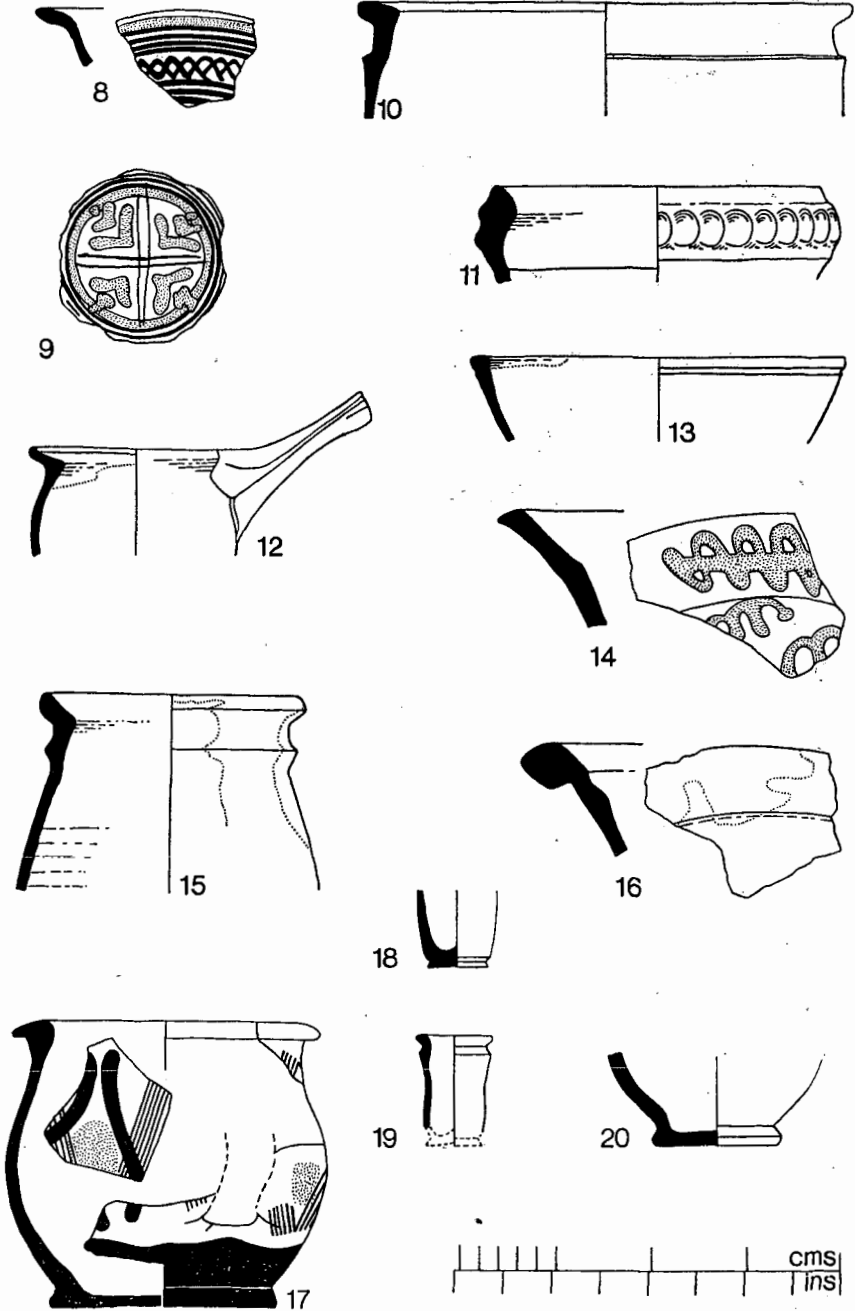


Fig. 4

TRANSACTIONS FOR THE YEAR 1968

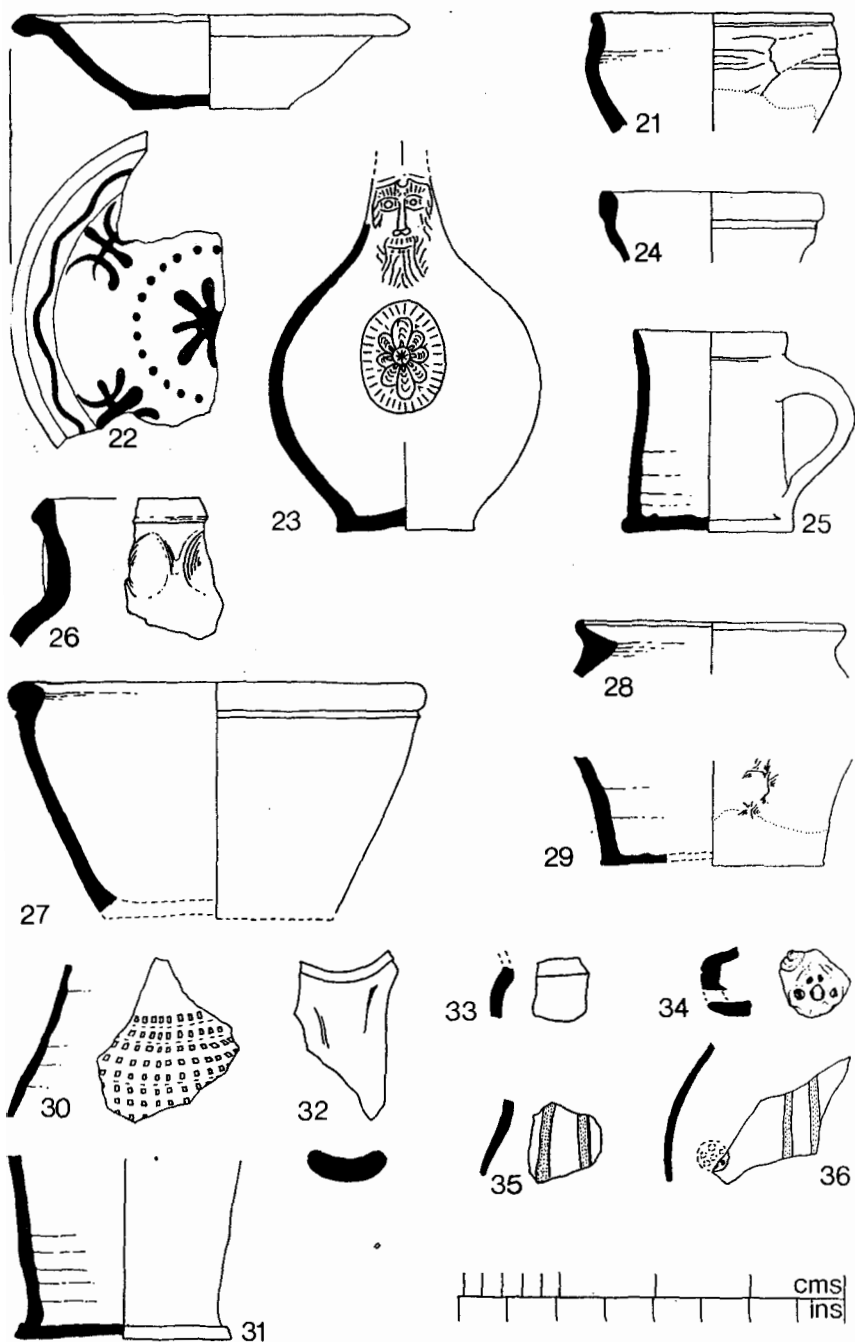


Fig. 5

EXCAVATIONS ON THE MEDIEVAL DEFENCES, BRISTOL

Fig. 5. Layers 8 and 8a. Clay with associated stone lined drain (F4)

28. Rim with rebate for a lid. Glazed internally. A similar globular vessel with recess for lid was found at Back Hall (Barton 1961, Fig. 6 No. 3) where it was ascribed to c. 1300.
 33. Shoulder of globular vessel glazed internally. Slight traces externally of a transparent glaze on shoulder.
 34. Spout in the form of an animal's muzzle. In the mouth are three holes, pushed through with a circular stick. The eye is an applied roundel.
- 29-32, 35 and 36 are all fragments of jugs.

All the pottery is in a hard slightly gritty fabric containing rounded quartz fragments. The clay matrix has a slight calcareous content and could well be a local triassic marl. The fabric approximates to that described as G3 in the Mary le Port Street series (Rahtz, forthcoming). The form of decoration seen on 36 (and found on several sherds which have not been drawn) is found at Back Hall (Barton 1961, Fig. 5, No. 2 and Fig. 8, No. 8) in the layers between House 1 (probably after 1247) and House 2. A 14th century date seems likely for this group.

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