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Observations in Dyer Street and Market Place, Cirencester

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Observations in Dyer Street and Market Place, Cirencester, in 1849, 1878 and 1974/5

By R.J. ZEEPVAT

WORK BEGAN on a scheme to replace much of the main sewerage system in Cirencester in the summer of 1973. The first phase was completed in early summer 1974, including Victoria Road and Watermoor Road southwards towards Siddington. A second phase began in September 1974, to replace the section of sewer in Dyer Street and along the north side of the Market Place. Whilst some observations took place on the first phase, the second phase was considered to be of greater archaeological importance, as it passed through the centre of Cirencester, an area about which little is known, and in which excavation is never likely to be possible, barring major re-development of the town centre.

This report, therefore, is an attempt to piece together observations carried out by the author on behalf of Cirencester Excavation Committee between September 1974 and January 1975, in conjunction with information from two earlier public work schemes in the area. The first of these, in 1849, consisted of 'drainage works' in Dyer Street, from which were recovered the 'Hunting Dogs' and 'Four Seasons' mosaic pavements, now in the Corinium Museum.¹ The second scheme was the installation of the main sewerage system in 1878-80, the replacement scheme for which is discussed in this report.

Some comment should be made about the format of this report. The buildings and features recorded during the work are described according to the insula in which they are situated, very nearly in the order in which they appeared on site. To avoid confusion, not every wall or feature is given a precise position with respect to modern buildings, as these become apparent from the plan (FIG. 1), although depths, widths, etc., of walls and floors are given wherever possible.

Thomas Bravender

For much of the archaeological information on Dyer Street and the Market Place we are indebted to Thomas Bravender, who was both agent to the Abbey Estate and Surveyor/Engineer to the Town Council at the time of the 1878 sewerage scheme. Bravender, who subsequently became a member of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society, recorded such features as were brought to his notice on two plans — one of Dyer Street, the other of New Road and Corin Street (Victoria Road and The Avenue) — which are now deposited in the Bingham Library, Cirencester. In addition, he wrote an article² on the finds from the work, which, being all dug by hand, were more numerous than those from the present observation. These were subsequently deposited in the Corinium Museum, together with a brief catalogue.

The original plans were tracings of the 1875 Ordnance Survey 1:500 town plans on fine linen, and were annotated, presumably by Bravender himself, in longhand in red ink. The information

1. J. Buckman and C.H. Newmarch *Illustrations of the Remains of Roman Art in Cirencester* (1850), pp. 35-47 and 62-69.
2. *Trans. B.G.A.S.* VIII, Part 2, 1883-4, pp. 309-13.

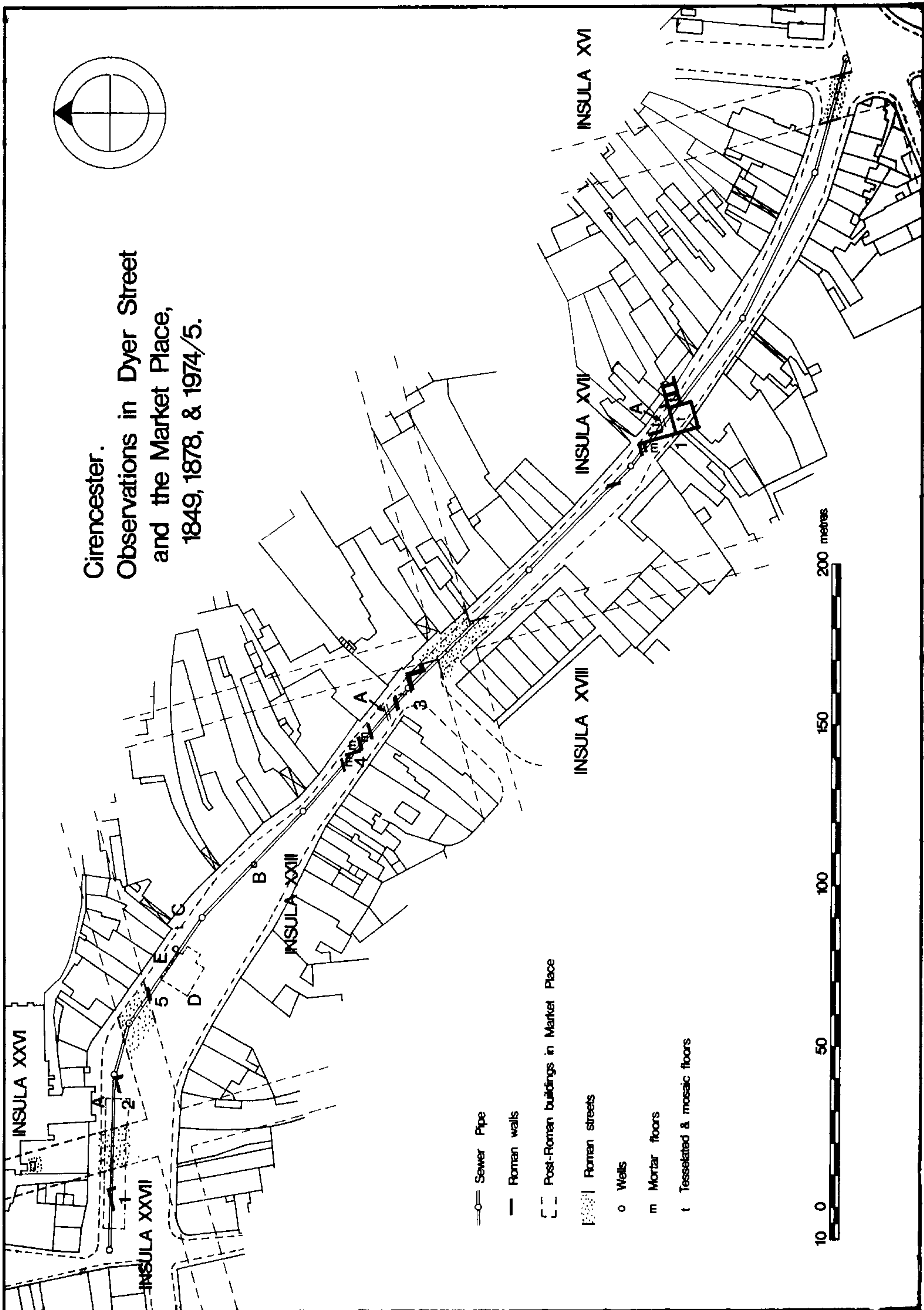


FIG 1.

from this source is surprisingly more precise than that contained in the article, which treats the finds very subjectively and in general terms. Where comments are given below in inverted commas on features, they are invariably those written by Bravender on his plans.

Observations

Work began in early September 1974 at a manhole on the existing system in the centre of the Dyer Street/Victoria Road junction. It passed almost immediately into a Roman street aligned NW/SE. This street proved to be that between Insulae XVI and XVII, and consisted of a series of street surfaces *c.* 2 m. thick, resting on natural brown clay, and covered with *c.* 0.5 m. of post-Roman road surface. The trench at this point was about 3 m. deep. Although the eastern edge appeared to have been removed by the insertion of the manhole and the sewer which continued up the Waterloo, the western edge was fixed, and the street appears to have been about 12 m. wide at this point. It is worth noting that this street can now be placed with certainty on the town plan, but in a slightly different position from that previously suggested,³ some 10 m. west, forming a staggered junction at the Fosse Way crossroad (at the end of Lewis Lane) with its southern continuation.

From the position of this street, the following 85 m. of trench cut into black soil, which appeared featureless, with the exception of some silty patches near the above road, and an increasing amount of rubble and mortar debris as the trench approached the centre of Insula XVII.

Insula XVII, Building 1 'The Dyer Street House'

The first structure it was expected to encounter was designated Building XVII, 1, (FIG. 2). A substantial proportion of this building, evidently a very rich town-house, was unearthed in 1849 'during the progress of making a sewer on the north side of Dyer Street', including the 'Hunting Dogs' and 'Four Seasons' mosaics already mentioned, plus several plain tessellated pavements and those walls marked A - J on FIG. 2. Previously, in 1783, during the excavation for a cellar beneath what is now no. 50 Dyer Street, the mosaic known as the 'Marine Pavement' (no. 4) was discovered. In 1820, during a similar operation beneath the house opposite, no. 33, a pavement depicting Orpheus (no. 3) was exposed. As these pavements have been discussed at length elsewhere,⁴ further comment is unnecessary, except to point out that mosaics nos. 1-4 must almost certainly be assigned to Building XVII, 1.

Since 1849, at least one other mosaic has been uncovered, and should be associated with this building. In August 1972, observations during the construction of a supermarket on the site of the former Congregational Church revealed a fragmentary mosaic (no. 5), in the south-east corner of the site, fronting onto Dyer Street.⁵

With this evidence to hand, it was expected that the sewer trench would cut across walls E, B and D, passing diagonally through the room which had contained mosaic no. 2. However, the whole of this section of the trench, *c.* 20 m. in length, cut through a mass of loose rubble, earth, clay and mortar fragments, suggesting that during the removal of the mosaics found in 1849 the building itself was damaged if not destroyed.

One item of interest recovered from this section was a column base of local limestone (FIG. 3). Although mutilated, this must have been originally a complete section of column, as both top and base were flat. It is very similar in size and design to another example in the garden of no. 33, Dyer Street, which was apparently recovered from the vicinity of the Building XVII, 1, in either 1849 or 1878.⁶ It also bears a marked resemblance to the example of a composite column base which formed

3. *Antiquaries Journal*, LIII, Part II, 1973, p. 193 fig. 1

4. cf. fn. 1, plus F. Haverfield 'Roman Cirencester' in *Arch.*, 1917-18, pp. 161-209; *Trans. B.G.A.S.* LXXXIX, 1970, pp. 175-6; A. Rainey, *Mosaics in Roman Britain* 1973, pp. 47-9 and references there given.

5. *Antiquaries Journal*, LIII, Part II, 1973, p. 201 and 218; pl. XXXIII, b. See also A.D. McWhirr's study of private houses in 'Cirencester (Corinium): a civitas capital' in *The Roman West Country*, 1976, pp. 81-98.

6. The 1974 find also remains at no. 33, Dyer Street.

'THE DYER STREET HOUSE'

Building XVII,1.

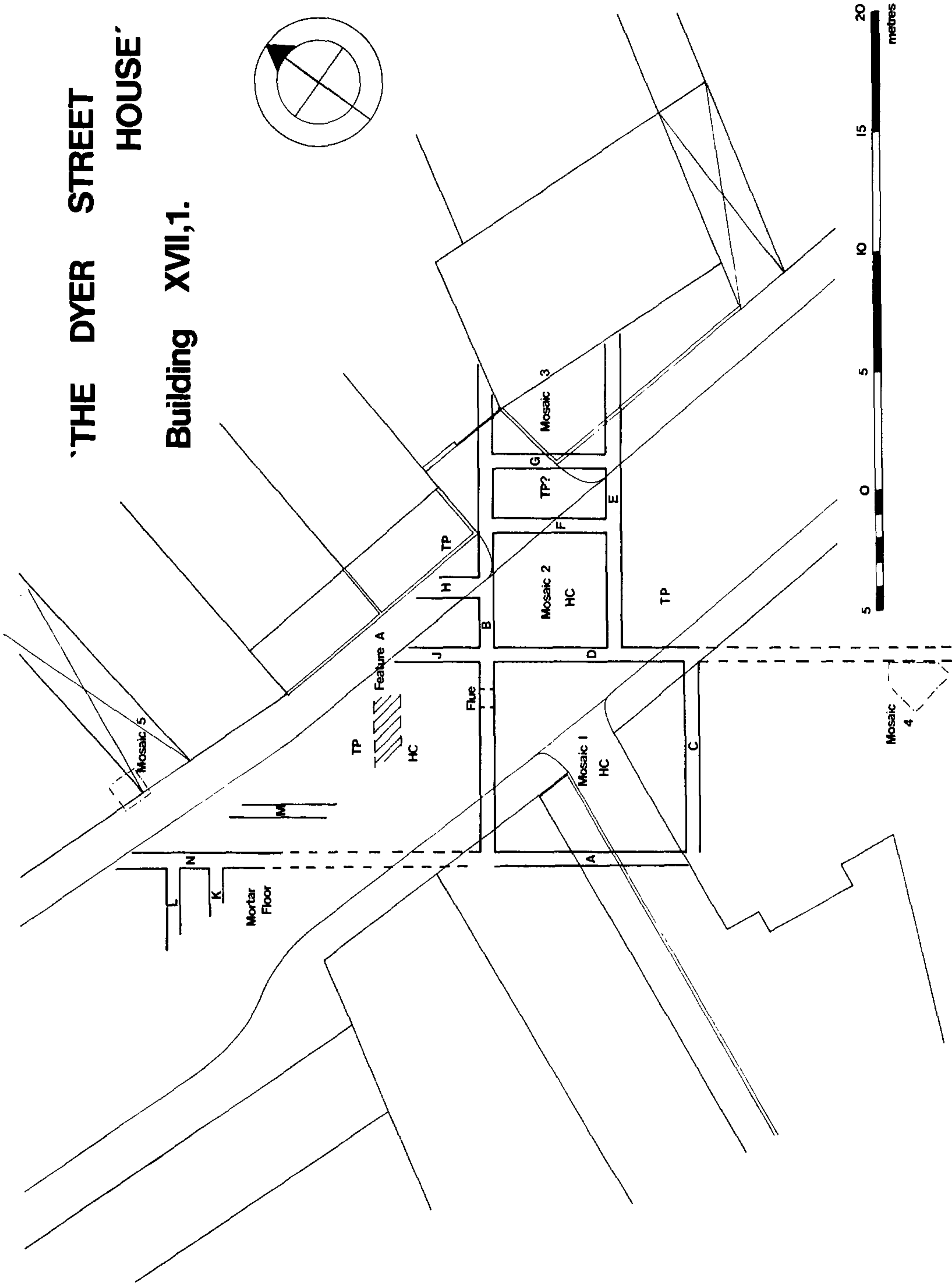
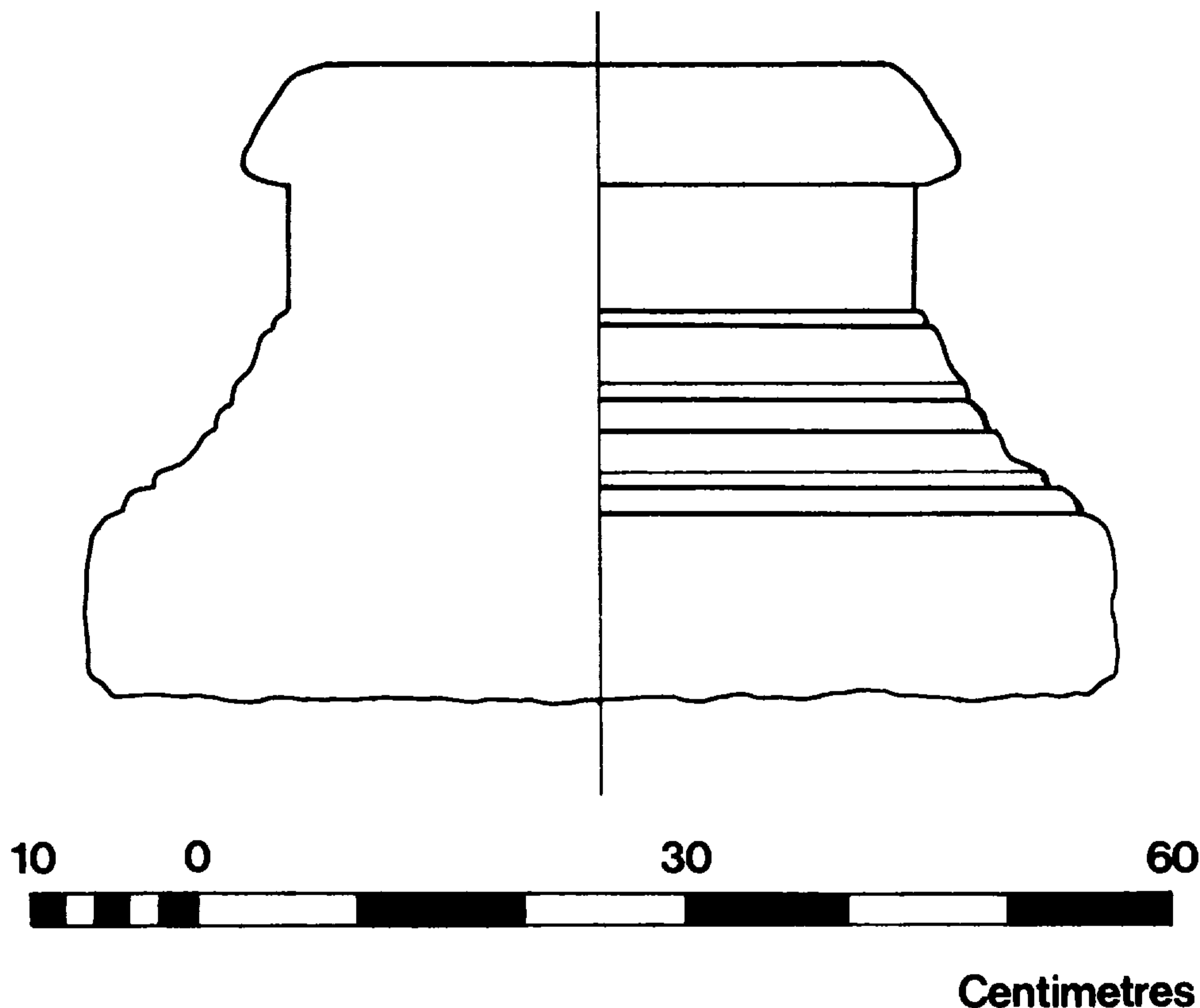


FIG. 2



Column base from Dyer Street

FIG. 3

one of the hypocaust pillars beneath mosaic no. 1.⁷

The first undisturbed feature encountered in the building (feature A) was located *c.* 3 m. north-west of the wall B, at a distance of *c.* 4 m. from the northern street frontage. This consisted of a mass of pink *opus signinum* in which were embedded a number of tegulae, mostly laid flat, although apparently mixed in at random with the binding mortar. The surviving part of this mass was 1.5 m. in depth and 1 m. wide, although the presence of the sewer trench and an adjacent parallel storm-water drain suggests that this presents only part of a much larger section of floor. As to its function, the 1849 plan records a 'pavement' to the north-west of mosaic no. 1, and a flue in wall B between the two pavements; the *opus signinum* may therefore represent the remains of a hypocaust beneath this pavement. From the 1878 trench, Bravender records in this area two 'strong stone walls between which and three feet below the surface is a common tessalated pavement, not figured'.

Presumably this was the same pavement, and it is unfortunate that no trace of it was found during the 1974-5 work.

The only other additions to this building consisted of four walls. One of these, N, aligned

7. Buckman & Newmarch, *op. cit.*, pl. VIII.

north-west/south-east, 7 m. along the trench, standing *c.* 1 m. in height, 0.5 m. wide, and 1 m. below ground level, appeared to be a north-eastward continuation of the south-west wall of the room containing the 'Seasons' pavement. A second wall, M, also 0.5 m. wide, 1 m. high and 1 m. below the ground level ran parallel to this one just over 1.5 m. to the north-east. Two further walls, K and L, were encountered subsequently to the south-west of the former, aligned south-west/north-east, each one being about 0.5 m. wide, standing to 1.75 m. only 0.75 m. below ground level. Both were very well-mortared, and, being only just over 1 m. apart, presumably joined the first wall described at 10.8 and 12.6 m. respectively from the west corner of the 'Seasons' room, though both junctions would have been north-east of the trench. A very badly damaged mortar floor was noted to the south-east of the southern of these walls, at about 1.2 m. below ground level.

The trench then passed into a mixture of black earth and rubble for up to 11 m. before uncovering a wall running north-west/south-east. This wall consisted of 8 or 9 courses of fairly well cut limestone, well mortared, about 0.5 m. wide, about 1.2 m. below ground level.

No floors were noted in association with this wall, and on its west side the trench passed into clean brown clay, showing no signs of disturbance, over which was a thin layer — no more than 50 cms. — of black earth and rubble, overlain by 75 cms. of modern road surfaces.

This 'clean' stratification continued in the sides of the trench for up to 35 m. Increasing amounts of road silt were then encountered, building up to a depth of about 2 m. immediately before the north-east/south-west road was located. The only object of interest from this section came from the fill of the 1878 trench. This consisted of a block of limestone forming a rectangle *c.* 78 cm. × 56 cm. × 20 cm. deep, one corner of which was broken off. Into one face of this was cut a bowl-like depression 30 cm. in diameter and 7 cm. deep, with a channel, semi-circular in section, also 7 cm. deep and 10 cm. wide, leading off it diagonally across the face of the block. A similar depression and trough were noted on the broken section, the troughs apparently forming a junction in the centre of one side of the block. The date and function of such an object remains a mystery.⁸

At a point *c.* 8 m. from the south corner of Cirencester Garage, and 6 m. from the west corner of no. 15, Dyer Street, the eastern edge of Street XVII/XVIII was encountered. The upper street levels were only 0.5 m. below ground level, and there appeared to be at least 12-15 surfaces in the 2 m. deep accumulation of road layers. The trench passed through 17 m. length of road surfaces at this point, and bearing in mind that a junction was expected in the locality, and that the position of the north-east/south-west street had already been fixed in 1962 by excavation on the nearby Police Station site,⁹ the trench must have cut diagonally through the centre of the junction, giving the width of the north-west/south-east street as 8.5 m. and the north-east/south-west street as 12 m. as shown on the plan. North-west of the junction, the trench passed again into silt in *Insula XXIII*.

Insula XXIII

The first building in this *insula*, XXIII, 3 was encountered only 5 m. from the street junction. It was represented by four walls, which were notable for their very strong, well-mortared construction and their thickness, which was 1.2 to 1.3 m. All four were over 1.5 m. below ground level, but survived in section to a depth of nearly 2 m. No offsets were noted on any of the walls. The first was aligned north-east/south-west, running towards the north-west/south-east street. Its relationship to the street could not be determined, being well away from the trench, but unless it cut into the street it cannot have been much more than a large buttress. It was joined at right angles by the second wall, aligned north-west/south-east which was exposed by trench collapse for a length of nearly 5 m. where it formed a junction with the third wall, cutting north-east/south-west back across the line of the trench.

8. The circumstances of discovery prevented the object being retained, but a photographic record was made.

9. *Antiquaries Journal*, XLIII, Part I, 1963, p. 16.

South of these three walls there were no surfaces noted, the fill being silt and loose rubble, though this may be due to collapse in the 1878 trench and subsequent rubble filling. However, north of the third wall, at a depth of 2.2 m. the trench passed through a deep pink/grey/black ash-like layer, which contained at least two tile hypocaust pillars, each 40 cms. high, composed of both tegulae and hypocaust tiles. Material from one of these pillars was recovered. Five metres north-west of the previous wall, the fourth wall of this building marked the north-west side of this hypocaust. At this point, Bravender records 'Two strong walls 5 ft. thick and 6 ft. below surface. Between the walls a common tessellated pavement not figured.' Presumably the pavement — of which there was no trace — had overlain this pillared hypocaust, which had become blocked with ash from heavy use or poor maintenance and had been missed by Bravender.

To the north-west of Building XXIII, 3, the trench passed once again into a 2 m. deep layer of rubble and black earth, *c.* 1.5 m. below ground level, which extended for up to 11 m. along the trench. The only feature (XXIII, A) of note in this space, which presumably lay between two buildings, was a culvert, running parallel with and 2.5 m. from the last mentioned wall, at a depth of 2 m. The culvert was constructed of drystone walls, *c.* 0.4 m. in height and 0.3 m. apart, with slab roof and floor. Because of its depth and alignment it is presumed to be Roman — possibly a sewer.

It was reported to be clear for at least 5 m. north-east from the point where it was cut by the trench, after which it was presumably cut by modern foundations.

Beyond the layer of rubble, the next building, XXIII, 4, was encountered. This was first represented by a north-east/south-west wall, 1.2 m. below ground level, consisting of 9 or 10 well-mortared courses, about 1.4 m. in depth, 50 cms. wide. About 3 m. north-west of this was a similar wall aligned north-west/south-east. Between these walls, at a depth of 1.6 m. below ground level, was a whitish mortar floor, with rubble make-up layer beneath. Only the one surface was visible. Just south of the trench, the second of these walls was seen to make a junction with a north-east/south-west wall, also *c.* 0.5 m. wide, 1.5 m. below ground level, surviving to a height of 1.2 m. which was subsequently cut by the trench. In this corner was seen the remains of a further mortar floor, *c.* 1.7 m. below ground level, with an earlier floor and make-up layer sealed beneath it and some 3 m. along the trench a fourth wall was encountered. This was aligned north-east/south-west. *c.* 1.7 m. below ground level, and was 50 cms. wide and survived to *c.* 1 m. in height. Between this and the previous wall was a third mortar floor, about 1.8 m. below ground level. Between the higher layers of this and the last building and the modern road surfaces was a layer of black soil about 0.5 m. thick, the modern surfaces being *c.* 1 m. in thickness.

Beyond Building XXIII, 4, the trench passed first through a layer of building debris — probably a destruction layer associated with that building — then into a layer of black earth 2 m. deep which extended for 60 m. into the Market Place. The only feature of note in this section (XXIII, B) was a well, 9 m. from the south corner, and 10 m. from the west corner of no. 37, Market Place. This well was stone lined, 1.5 m. in internal diameter. Up to 3 m. below ground level it was filled with rubbish — the top, *c.* 0.75 m. below ground level, was covered by slabs, and the depth was unobtainable owing to the presence of the rubbish. Unfortunately no positive dating evidence was obtainable, as the rubbish fill consisted largely of stone rubble.

The black earth previously encountered began to show signs of disturbance towards the west corner of Messrs. Boulton's, in the form of an increasing amount of building rubble. During the installation of a sewer connection at this point, a plain pavement (XXIII, C) of large white tesserae, set in white mortar on a rubble foundation was uncovered at a depth of 2 m. The full extent of the pavement was impossible to ascertain, as extensive disturbance near the modern buildings and wall robbing — probably post-Roman — had removed any associated walls.

Just north-west of this pavement, a series of walls were encountered (XXIII, D) running parallel with the trench for up to 10 m. at a depth of *c.* 1 m. surviving to a height of about 9 or

10 courses (about 1 m.). From a plan of the town dated 1795,¹⁰ it appears that these represented the north-east walls of a block of buildings situated at the east end of the Market Place until 1825-30. The construction of these buildings had, because of their depth, removed any Roman layers which may have existed on this section. Opposite the east corner of these buildings, a second well (XXIII, E) was found, presumably the one noted by Bravender as a 'perfect Roman well, the bottom of which is 15 ft. below the surface. The lower 7 ft. is in good condition and covered with a stone, and about 5 ft. of water in it'. Certainly, this well, unlike that described above, had been disturbed previously, and conformed with the dimensions given.

This second well was probably, if Roman, part of Building XXIII, 5, the last building encountered in this insula. Unfortunately, this structure is represented only by the pavement and well described above and a wall, 15 m. north-west of the well, aligned north-east/south-west. This wall, which had been badly damaged by robbing, was *c.* 0.5 m. wide, but had been removed to a depth of 2 m. below ground level and only survived to 0.4 m. in height.

North of Building XXIII, 5, was a series of packed gravel and stone surfaces, at a depth of *c.* 1.8 m. extending for 15 m. north-westwards in the trench. This section may be taken to be an oblique cut across the street separating Insulae XXIII and XXVI, a street which has hitherto been only conjectural in its placing on the town plan. It does not appear to have been heavily used, as it is represented at this point by only 1.3 m. depth of surfaces, all fairly lightly constructed, in contrast with the other streets described in this report.

Insula XXVI

Passing through the north side of this street, the trench then entered Insula XXVI for a length of *c.* 25 m. Much of the stratification in this area consisted of a great depth of road silt — some 2 m. minimum over the whole area. Only one structure was encountered, XXVI, 2, which was represented by a junction of two walls 6 m. south-east of the south-east corner of the church porch. Both walls were very fragmentary, and were 2 m. below ground level, 0.5 m. wide, and surviving to a height of 1.2 m. No associated floor surfaces were noted, nor any walls connected with these, but the surrounding area was much disturbed by the 1878 sewer trench and earlier pits, presumably medieval.

Much of the Roman levels in Insulae XXVI and XXVII were disturbed by a series of cellars (XXVI, A) encountered in the sewer trench running westwards from the church porch almost to the end of West Market Place. These formed part of the parallel rows of shops and houses situated at the western end of the Market Place until their demolition in 1825-30.¹¹

One of the most striking features uncovered during this work was a section through Ermin Street, which crossed the Market Place in a south-easterly direction *c.* 16 m. from XXVI, 2. Although both eastern and western sides of the street had been removed by the insertion of cellars, the position of the street is already well-known, and can now be fixed on the plan with more accuracy.

In section, Ermin Street was represented by at least a 3 m. depth of accumulated road surfaces, extending almost from ground level (covered only by 0.2 m. of modern surfaces) to within 1.5 m. of the trench floor, which by this point had cut well into natural gravel.

Insula XXVII

Passing from Ermin Street into Insula XXVII, the next building, XXVII, 1, was encountered *c.* 5.5 m. west of the presumed western edge of the street. This building was badly damaged by the foundations and cellars already mentioned and was represented only by two massive wall footings

10. Copied with permission from an original in the Gloucestershire Record Office, Gloucester.

11. W. St. Clair Baddeley, *History of Cirencester* (1924), p. 309.

joining at right angles 8 m. south-east of the south-east corner of no. 3, Market Place. These footings consisted of rubble set in orange mortar, and were about 1 m. wide, 1.5 m. in depth, and 2 m. below ground level. Any associated floor surfaces as with the walls, appear to have been removed by the post-Roman foundations.

Beyond this building the trench, now over 5 m. deep, passed into apparently undisturbed black soil, which underlay the modern road surfaces to a depth of 3.2 m. below ground level, below which was about 0.8 m. of natural brown clay sealing the natural gravel. No further walls or features were noted in this final stretch of trench, which ended at an existing manhole at the extreme western end of the Market Place.

Conclusion

From these observations it becomes apparent that much new information has been gained, as well as some degree of clarification of our existing knowledge of Corinium. Firstly, in terms of the latter, we have been able to place accurately the features noted somewhat vaguely in the 1878 trenches, and to comment on their nature more precisely, as well as adding some associated features which escaped Bravender's notice. With respect to new information, four new buildings have been noted, and, probably more important, several streets in the northern part of Corinium have been placed with some accuracy. It should be noted here that, prior to these observations, streets XVI/XVII, and XVII/XVIII were shown as direct continuations of their counterparts south of the Fosse Way, but can now be seen to be both *c.* 10 m. west of their conjectured position. Likewise, street XXIII/XXVI, which was previously not located elsewhere, has been established on a line south of that suggested for it.

Even the long stretches of trench that have proved barren of features have been fruitful in terms of information, if only in a negative sense, as they demonstrate that in Insulae XVII and XXIII the extent of development was not so great as to cover the entire insula. It has long been the writer's belief that observations on any urban site, however fruitless they may seem at times, will always justify the time spent in terms of new information, especially in a case such as this, where controlled excavation on any scale is a possibility so remote as to be hardly worth contemplating.

Acknowledgements

Finally, the writer would like to express his thanks to the main contractors for the scheme, Droitwich Construction Company, for much help and interest shown on site, to Cotswold District Council, for permission to undertake the observations, and to the Technical Services Department of that Council, for providing both plans and information on the scheme. The writer would also like to thank the Curator of the Corinium Museum, David Viner, for information on the 1849 excavations, and for encouragement and assistance in the preparation of this report for publication. Alison Howard-Drake, Museum Assistant, provided notes on Thomas Bravender and his work in 1878-80, and Alan Welsford, Librarian of the Bingham Library, Cirencester, made Bravender's plans available. Finally, the writer is indebted to Alan McWhirr, Director of Excavations for Cirencester Excavation Committee, for his continued interest and support. The observations were carried out as part of a programme of such work in Cirencester undertaken for the Cirencester Excavation Committee by the writer from 1973 to 1975 and financed by the Department of the Environment.

December 1975