

EVIDENCE OF ROMAN SOUTHAMPTON'S HINTERLAND AT THE NEW MAGISTRATES' COURT, LONDON ROAD

By J McDERMOTT

ABSTRACT

Two chronologically distinct phases of Roman land-use were observed on the site of the new magistrates' court building in Southampton. This land-use appears to have been relatively unintensive and suggestive of a small-scale settlement, perhaps one habitation, in the near vicinity of the site. A boundary ditch, a drainage ditch, two pits and a linear feature of uncertain function have been dated to these phases.

INTRODUCTION

The site (SU 4204 1249) lies approximately 1 km west of a Roman settlement, believed to be Clausentum, at present-day Bitterne Manor. It is south of Rockstone Place and west of the junction of the northbound carriageway of The Avenue with London Road. It is bordered on the south by the recently built Combined Courts building and on the west by buildings fronting onto Carlton Crescent (Fig. 1). The surface geology of the site is brickearth overlying river terrace gravels.

Map evidence suggests that the site was undisturbed by development in the Early Modern/Modern period until the construction of Ordnance Survey buildings at the turn of the last century. On the site these buildings appear to have had foundation trenches, which have left islands of undisturbed ground in which archaeological remains have been able to survive. They are marked 'building disturbance' on Fig. 1.

Roman coins are recorded on the Ordnance Survey map of 1866/8 as having been found in the area of the present-day College Place, 116 m SW of the site, (SMR ref. SU4212 NW 22).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING

An archaeological watching brief was carried out on behalf of Hampshire County Architects during groundworks associated with the construction of a new Magistrates' Court at London Road, Southampton. The work was in two phases: the first, 31 May to 24 June 1994, was undertaken during the construction of a temporary car park, and the second phase, 6 February to 6 April 1995, took place during the construction of a multi-storey car park. The two phases are separately numbered as SOU603 and SOU678 in Southampton City Council's site-numbering system, and are so marked on Fig. 1.

The groundworks of phase 1 consisted of a level reduction to building formation level, followed by the laying of stone as hardcore for the temporary car park surface. Two deep drainage trenches were subsequently dug through this. Phase 2 also involved level reduction. Concrete reinforcement holes and a service trench were also excavated. The phase 1 level reduction measured 108 m × 46.5 m. The drainage trenches measured 45.6 × 1.3 × 2 m and 12.6 × 1.2 × 2 m. The phase 2 level reduction measured 41.2 × 36.6 × 1.1 m.

No significant evidence of land-use between the Roman period and the Early Modern period was recorded in either phase of the watching brief. Nothing of archaeological interest pre-dating the Early Modern period was observed in phase 2. No further reference is made to that phase in this note. Only archaeological features dated to the Roman period are considered here.

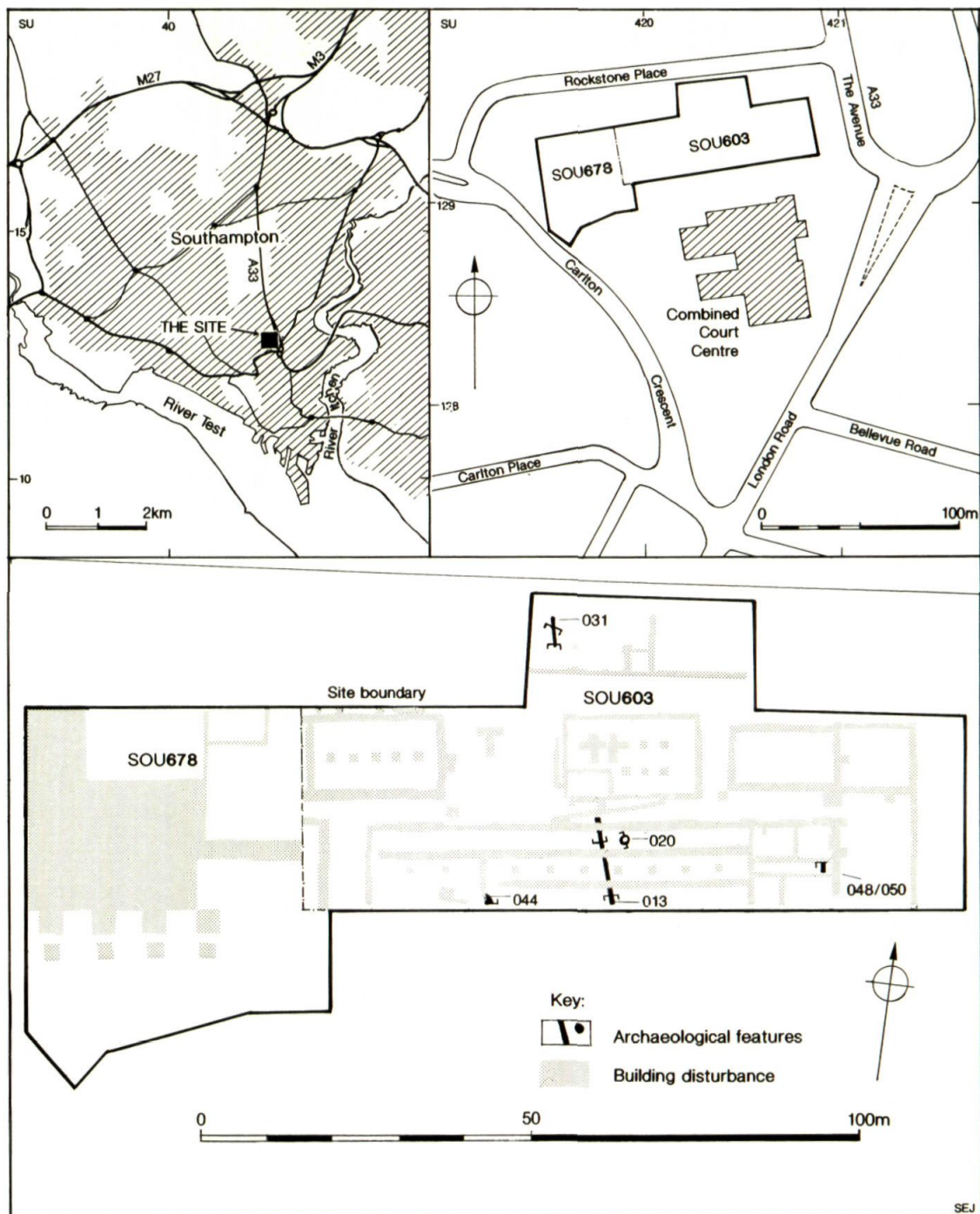


Fig. 1 Southampton Magistrates' Court: location of archaeological recording

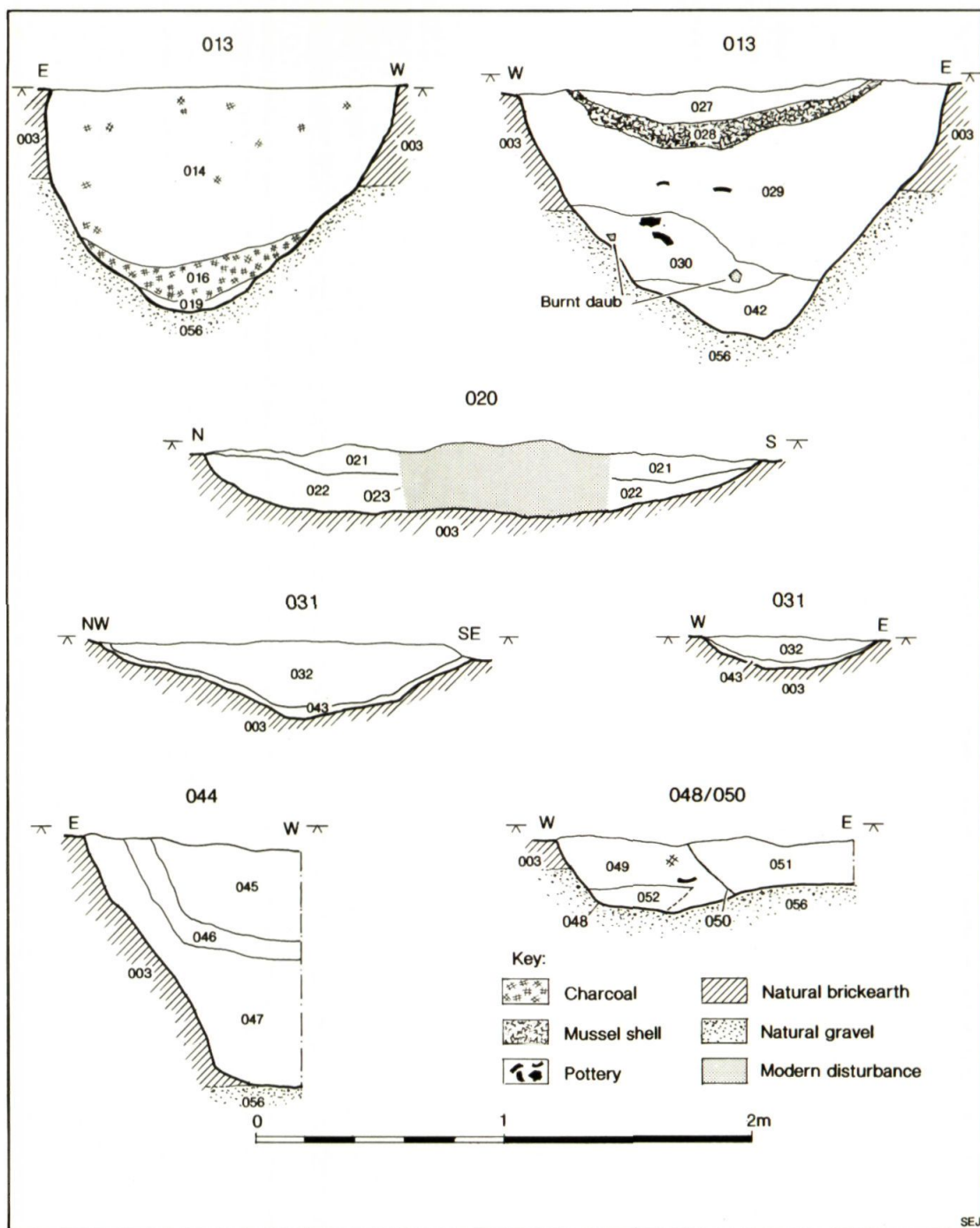


Fig. 2 Southampton Magistrates' Court: feature sections

FEATURES (Figs 1 & 2)

Two chronologically distinct phases of activity were encountered on-site:

- (a) 1st–2nd century AD
- (b) 3rd–4th century AD

In addition there were two Roman features that could not be securely dated to either phase.

Phase (a)

Boundary ditch 13. Linear oriented N-S. $12.23 \times 0.64 \times 0.66$ m. Filled by 14; 18; 19; 27; 28; 29; 30; 42; 55 & 57. Artefact inclusions: burnt flint; pottery; glass; animal bone. Sectioned in part.

Drainage ditch 48. Rectangular linear oriented N-S. $1.18 \times 0.6 \times 0.21$ m. Filled by 49 & 52. Artefact inclusions: burnt flint; burnt clay; pottery; slag; clinker; charcoal.

Phase (b)

Pit 20. Circular. 1.58×0.21 m. Filled by 21 & 22. Artefact inclusions: burnt flint; pottery; ceramic building material; glass; iron. Half-sectioned.

Linear feature 31. Rectangular oriented N-S. $4 \times 0.8 \times 0.23$ m. Filled by 32 & 43. Artefact inclusions: burnt flint; pottery; ceramic building material; glass; iron; silver; slag. Sectioned in part.

Other Roman Features

Posthole? 25. Triangular. $0.27 \times 0.24 \times 0.05$ m. Filled by 26. Artefact inclusions: burnt flint; pottery. Not illustrated on Figs 1 & 2.

Pit 44. Wedge-shaped (cut by modern foundation trenches). $1.36 \times 0.76 \times 0.72$ m. Filled by 45; 46 & 47. Artefact inclusions: burnt flint; sandstone; pottery; ceramic building material.

FINDS

Archaeological artefacts were recovered from 23 contexts.

Romano-British Pottery

404 sherds were recovered from 14 contexts. Helen Rees conducted a spot date on the pottery which is summarised below.

Overall the pottery of Roman date falls into two distinct periods: the earlier, 1st–2nd century AD,

is from boundary ditch 13 and drainage ditch 48, both on the south of the site and the later, 3rd–4th century AD, is from pit 20 in the centre of the site and the linear feature 31 on the north. Two features (pit 44 and posthole? 25) produced pottery from the Roman period which could not be more closely dated.

Six of the seven fills of boundary ditch 13 yielded pottery. This amounted to 66 sherds weighing 2.48 kg. The following fabrics were represented: greywares; oxidised ware; whitewares; grog tempers; flint tempers; shell tempers; samian ware; possible briquetage and possible amphora – all of these fitted a date range spanning the 1st to 2nd centuries AD. One later sherd of Black Burnished ware was recovered from the top fill of the ditch. Vessel types discernible were: storage jars; flagons; large platters; bowl/lid; carinated bowl and bead rim jar/lid.

The fill of drainage ditch 48 yielded 12 pottery sherds weighing 0.1 kg. The following fabric types were represented: greyware; grog temper and amphora – a 1st century AD date was suggested by these. Vessel type discernible: bowl.

The two fills of pit 20 yielded 235 sherds of pottery weighing 2.67 kg. The following fabrics were represented: greywares; grog tempers; New Forest ware; samian; East Gaulish colour-coat; colour-coat (probably imported) – all these fitted a 3rd century date. Vessel types discernible: storage jar; everted rim jar; colander; flanged bowl and rough-cast beaker.

One of the two fills of linear feature 31 yielded 70 sherds of pottery weighing 0.59 kg. The following fabrics were represented: greyware; grog temper; New Forest colour-coat; New Forest parchment ware; and mortaria – all fitted a late 3rd/early 4th century date range. Vessel type discernible: flanged bowl.

The fill of feature 25 yielded 2 pottery sherds weighing 0.006 kg. The sherds were of greyware and grog-tempered ware and could not be dated more closely than to the Roman period in general. No vessel types were discernible.

Two of the three fills of pit 44 yielded 19 pottery sherds weighing 0.2 kg. The sherds were of greyware and grog-tempered ware and could not be dated more closely than to the Roman period in general. No vessel types were discernible.

Other Finds

Around 40 fragments of daub weighing 0.76 kg were recovered from one context within boundary ditch 13

and may originate from a hearth. A further fragment was recovered from drainage ditch 48.

24 fragments of ceramic building material were recovered from six contexts within boundary ditch 13, the two pits and linear feature 31.

Four fragments of Roman glass were recovered from two contexts in pit 20 and linear feature 31. Three fragments of a bulbous vessel came from the pit. A rim fragment of a large vessel came from the linear feature. The glass was identified by Denise Allen.

A silver coin was recovered from linear feature 31. It is incomplete due to damage during excavation and the obverse surface is all but corroded away. It has been x-rayed, and some of the original lettering is discernible. It reads *??ES MILITV?*. The full legend would probably have read: *FIDES MILITVM* ('the loyalty of the soldiers'). The figure is recognisably female and is likely to depict *Fides*. Coins bearing this legend were issued throughout the 3rd Century, but especially in mid-century when a series of short-lived emperors relied on the dubious loyalty of the army. This date-range for the coin reinforces the dating suggested by the examination of the pottery from the same context.

Eight fragments of iron were retained from three contexts. All the iron has been x-rayed and none requires further conservation work.

Around 66 fragments of animal bone were recovered from six contexts. These were scanned by Sheila Hamilton-Dyer. Measurements on cattle bones from a fill of boundary ditch 13 were good enough to estimate animal size. Sizes estimated were compatible with cattle dated to the Iron Age/Roman period on other archaeological sites in the Southampton area.

DISCUSSION

Six of the thirteen archaeological features observed on-site have been dated to the Roman period, based on a spot-date of the pottery in their fills. This evidence is significant in the context of the City of Southampton. Firstly it was not expected to find Roman remains in this area of the city, despite the previously recorded find of Roman coins at the present-day College Place. Secondly not much is known about Roman occupation within the area of the present-day city.

Roman land-use is datable here to the 1st–4th centuries. The presence of pits containing domestic refuse (pottery, glass, and iron nails) would suggest nearby human habitation, as such material

was commonly disposed of close to the point of use. At least three ceramic tiles are attested to in the fills of both of the pits and of the linear feature. This can be seen as evidence that a building of the Roman period may have stood in the vicinity of the site. That only six such features were found on a site of this size, given the relatively good chances for survival of other features, suggests that the human use of the area at this time was not very intensive and any nearby habitation is likely to have been on a small scale.

There is evidence of two phases of perhaps similar land-use. Ditch 13 appears not to have been long-lived in its function and to have been infilled in the first phase. Its dimensions suggest that it was a field boundary. The presence of a drainage ditch also suggests fields. The linear feature and pit in the second phase of land-use do not necessarily suggest a changed land-use. However, it may be noted that there is a relative paucity of direct finds evidence relating to agricultural activity. A similar paucity of finds relating to industrial activity is also noteworthy. The finds bear witness primarily to domestic activity.

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Following submission of this note for publication the watching brief archive, including this note, will be deposited with the Southampton City Museums Service (accession numbers: A.1995.506 & A.1995.516). Summary reports of the findings have been sent to the City and the County for inclusion on their SMRs.

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