# EXCAVATIONS AT ALDBOROUGH (ISURIUM BRIGANTUM) 2019

## INTERIM REPORT

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ALDBOROUGH ROMAN TOWN PROJECT 2019

## Contents

## *Summary*

*Excavation was carried out between the 27th April – 1st June 2019 as part of the Aldborough Roman Town Project (University of Cambridge). A trench covering an area of 78m² was excavated by hand, in order to re-investigate a 1924 trench and the clarify the nature of the structures around it. The aim was to use the 1924 trench to examine the earliest contexts, whilst undisturbed areas could be dug to learn more about the latest phases of the town. The results of the magnetometry survey in this area were partly obscured by ridge and furrow, therefore the excavation would allow us to better understand the character of this part of the town, leading on from the 2018 work on the warehouses to the east. Finally, the location of the trench was designed to include part of the northern-most east–west street of the grid, providing an opportunity to date the construction of the street grid.*

## *Introduction*

The Aldborough Roman Town Project is now in its tenth year. A synthesis of all previous work – from the antiquarian investigations, commercial digs and our own survey and excavations – is now with the publishers (Ferraby and Millett, in press). Pulling together this huge volume of information has allowed us to write a new narrative about *Isurium Brigantum*, and its role in the Roman North. One of the strongest themes is the role of Aldborough as a centre for trade and exchange. As such, it is a place of movement and connections of (and between) people and material culture. Its location at the highest navigable point on the Ure is key, and may be a defining factor in the town's foundation.

The excavation in 2018 of part of one of the large warehouses in the north-east of the town contributes to our understanding of the control, storage and redistribution of goods. However, we still know relatively little about the origins of the town in around AD 70, and the character of it before the establishment of a planned layout around AD 120. Equally, evidence for the late Roman period and beyond is also scarce, making fuller understanding of these transitions difficult. Our recent excavations have targeted previously excavated trenches, in order to cause minimum disturbance to the site while we seek to understand its character. This year we again focused on a trench from the 1924 campaign (Barber *et al.* 1925), this time to the west of the Principal North-South street.

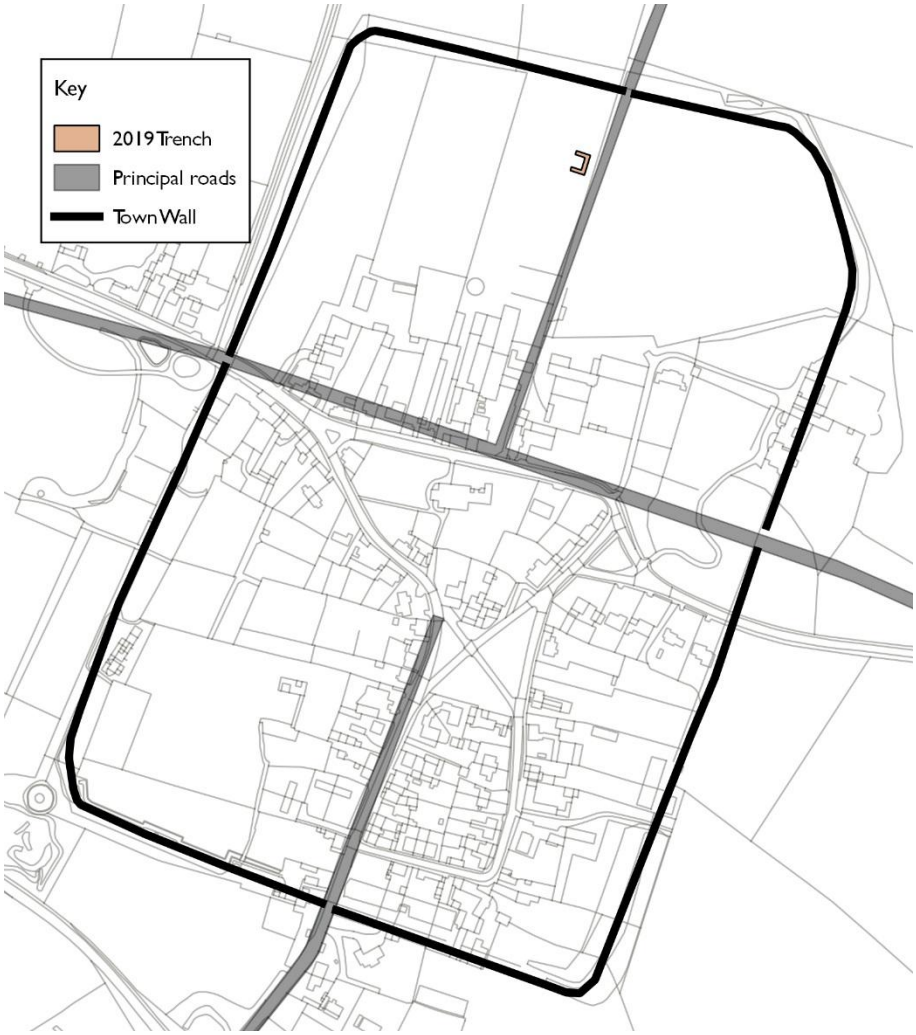


*Figure 1: Location of 2019 trench in relation to the modern village and the Roman town wall and the principal roads of Isurium Brigantum*

The trench was located in the north of the Roman town, approximately 50m from the North Gate and 7m from the Principal North-South street. The project had a series of aims:

1) To reopen part of the 1924 excavations, in order to sample an area of the earlier, deeper deposits, thereby enhancing our understanding of the origins of the Roman town
2) To understand the context of the stonework found in 1924 (which is now located in the museum grounds)
3) To excavate part of the northern-most east–west street (EW1) to get a establish the date of the laying out of the street grid
4) To better understand the character of this area of the town, north of the street grid, in light of the excavations of the warehouse area west of the Principal North-South in 2018

## *The 1924 excavations*

As with our re-investigation of 'Masonry T' in 2018 (Ferraby and Millett 2018), the plans from 1924 are more informative than the written report (Barber *et al.* 1925). Plan 'E' shows detailed drawings of the area dug to the south-west of the North Gate, along with sections, drawings of stonework and annotations (see Figure 2). From this, we have been able to identify the stonework and match it to our catalogue of items that still extant (Ferraby and Millett in press, Appendix 4).

The plan itself shows a series of trenches just west of the North Gate, and a larger trench south along the field boundary (seen more clearly on Figure 3). It was this southern trench which we were interested to reinvestigate, offering a larger previously-excavated area that would allow us to investigate the earliest layers.

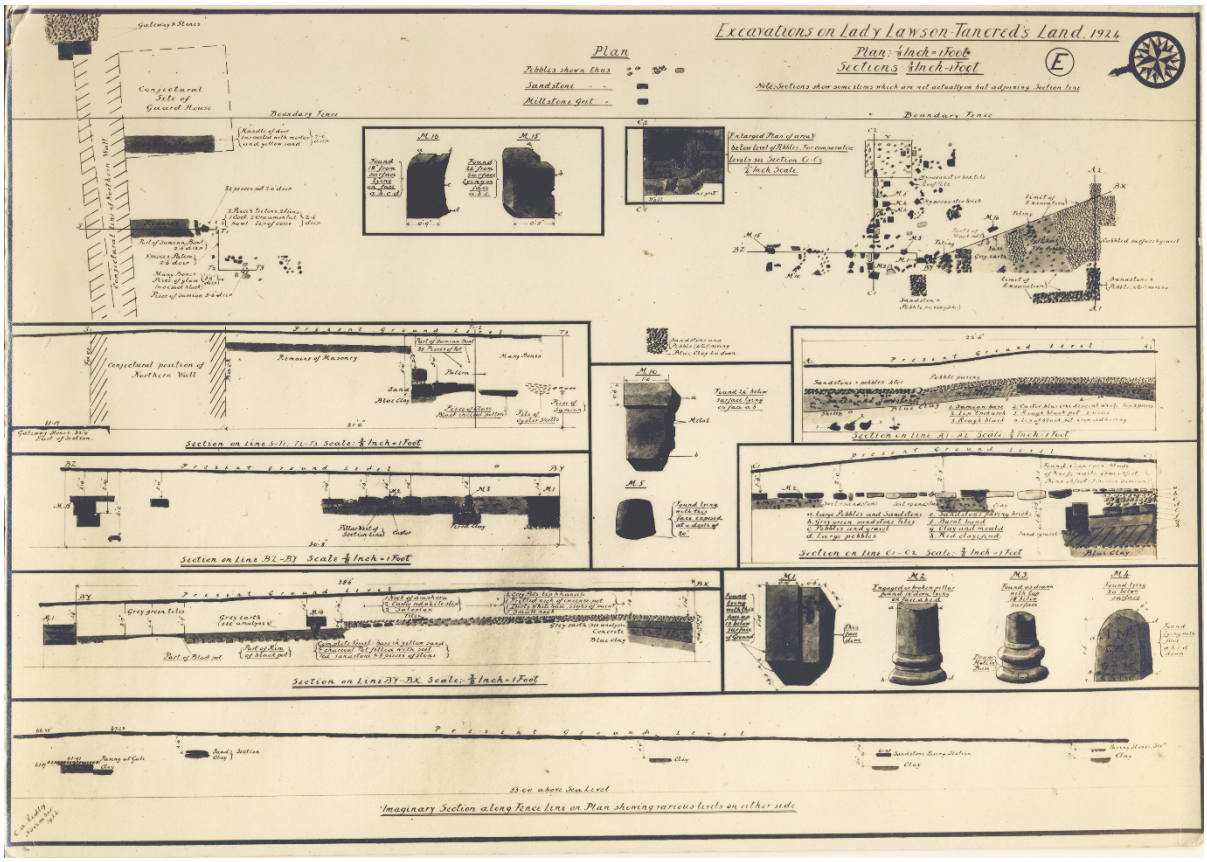


*Figure 2: Plan 'E' of the 1924 excavations south-west of the North Gate, with sections and stonework by C.A. Ridley (Barber et al. 1925)*

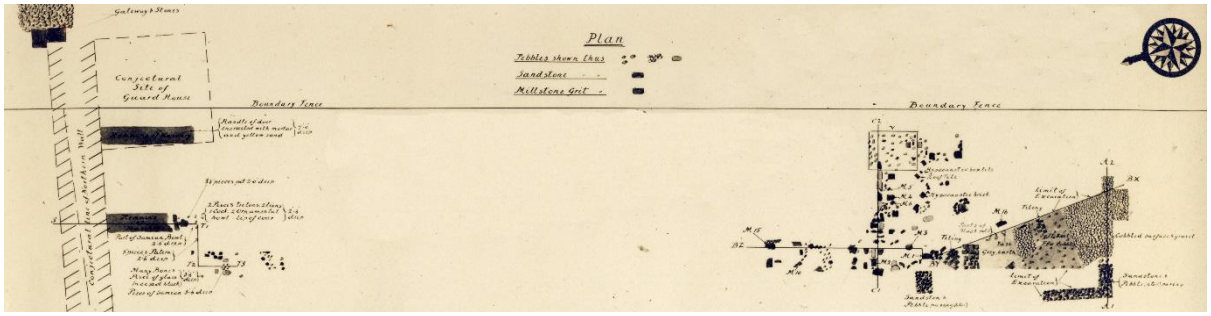

*Figure 3: Plan of 1924 excavations south-west of the North Gate by C.A. Ridley (Barber et al. 1925)*

The plan of this area suggests that they had discovered part of a cobbled surface, along with mixed rubble that included the pieces of stonework (including an altar, columns and a milestone – RIB 2277) and some possible walls (Ferraby and Millett in press, Appendix 1, site G34). However, unlike many of the other 1924 trenches, there is little indication of the full extent of the dig or what was discovered.

Looking at the trench in relation to the areas excavated in 1924 (see Figure 4), this is one of the largest areas explored. The unpublished account of the work records that that this was one of the first trenches to be dug in February, as witnessed by the photographs clearly taken in the winter. One of the apparent aims of the 1924 campaign was to establish the line of the northern defences and to see if a North Gate to the town existed. Before their work, and subsequently that of Myres, Steer and Chitty in the 1930s (Myres *et al.* 1959), it was thought that the northern line of the Town Wall to the west of the Principal North-South Street had an irregular course with a kink in it (see Figure 5). It seems likely therefore, that this trench was designed to investigate whether the Town Wall was indeed on that line.

*Figure 4: Location of the 1924 trenches and finds, with the 2018/19 trenches and magnetometry interpretation*

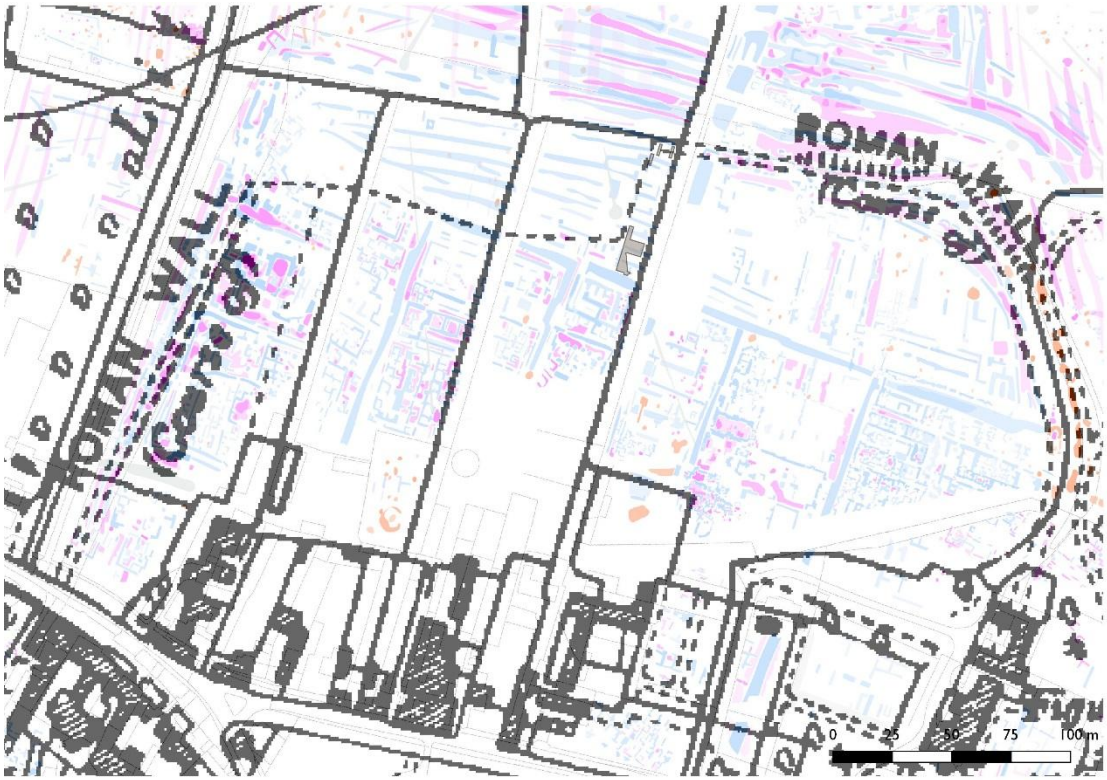


*Figure 5: Location of the 1924 trench near the North Gate in relation to the 1890 OS Map (Courtesy of Ordnance Survey and Digimap) and the magnetometry interpretation, showing the then assumed course of the Roman town wall.*

Photographs from the report show relatively crisp trench edges, with spoil piled high at the sides (see Figure 6). The architectural stonework has been propped up on display. However, in contrast to the rectangular trench that we re-examined in 2018, the areas that they had explored here appear sprawling and ill-defined, with areas of topsoil apparently having been cleared alongside the deeper cut trenches. It is interesting to also note the rise of the field in the background, which is the North Gate (just right of the hedge) and northern Town Wall.

*Figure 6: Photo of the 1924 excavation south of the North Gate, facing north (note the stonework on display) (Barber et al. 1925)*

## *Magnetometry survey and recent research*

The magnetometry in this area of the town worked particularly well, suggesting that the archaeology was generally shallow and relatively undisturbed (see Figure 7). The northern-most east–west street is clearly visible as a negative linear anomaly. South of this street visible buildings include town houses. Between this street and the Town Wall, however, the results look quite different. Ridge and furrow in this area makes it difficult to discern some features. East of the Principal North–South street, the ridge and furrow is north–south aligned, whereas to the west it is east–west in direction. The signal of the ridge and furrow is very similar to that of walls. What does differentiate them is their spacing, pattern and context. The negative linear features *c.* 25m from the Principal North–South street do appear to represent buildings lining the road. A series of linear anomalies running west from the 1924 trench also clearly represent buildings lining the street. The size, layout and location of these suggest functional strip building facing gable-end onto the street, of the type often associated with shops and workshops.

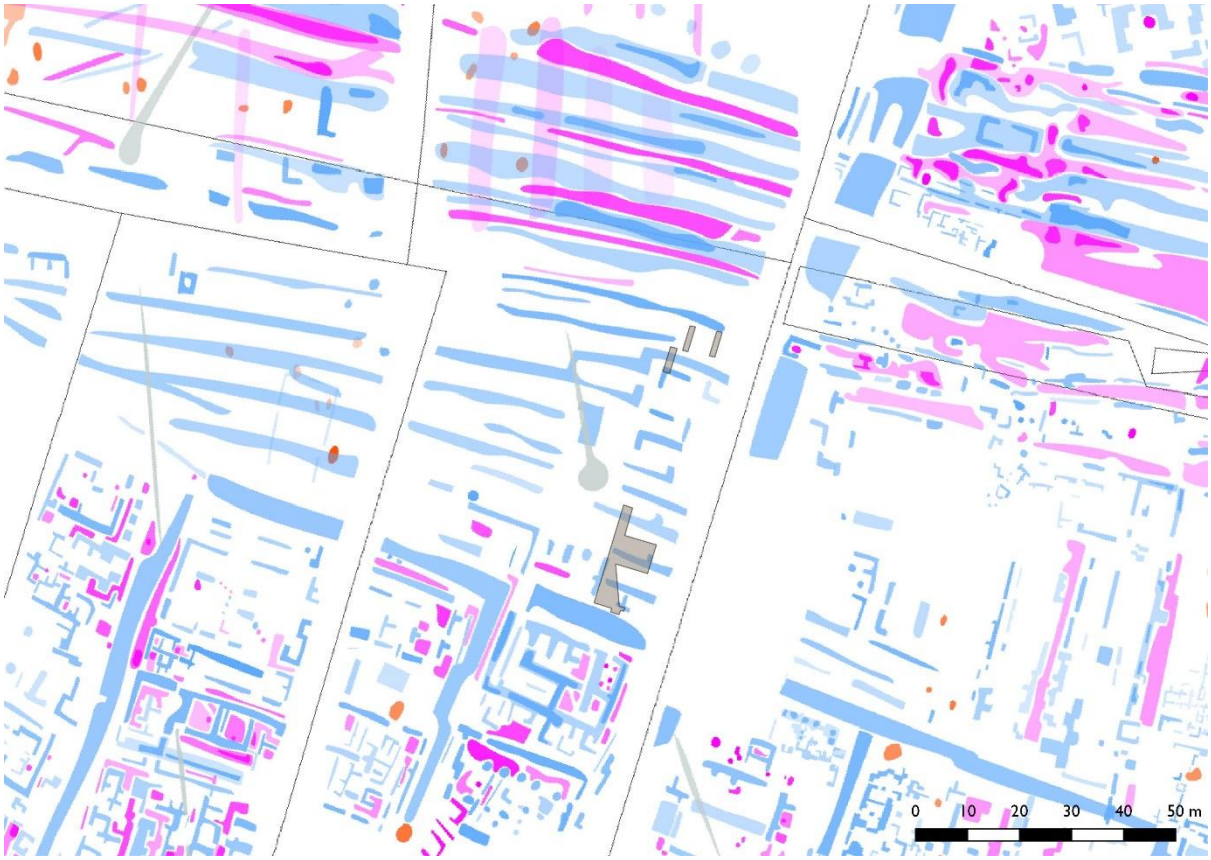

*Figure 7: Interpretation of the magnetometer survey in the north of the town, with the 1924 excavations west of the North Gate.*

## *Methodology*

The plans from 1924 were georeferenced in GIS based on the field boundaries and other points of reference on the plans. We were thus able to overlay them with the results and interpretation of the magnetometer survey to see if we could observe any patterns or connections. The area selected for Scheduled Monument Consent (see Figure 8) was chosen to include the 1924 trench as well as additional areas of undisturbed ground.

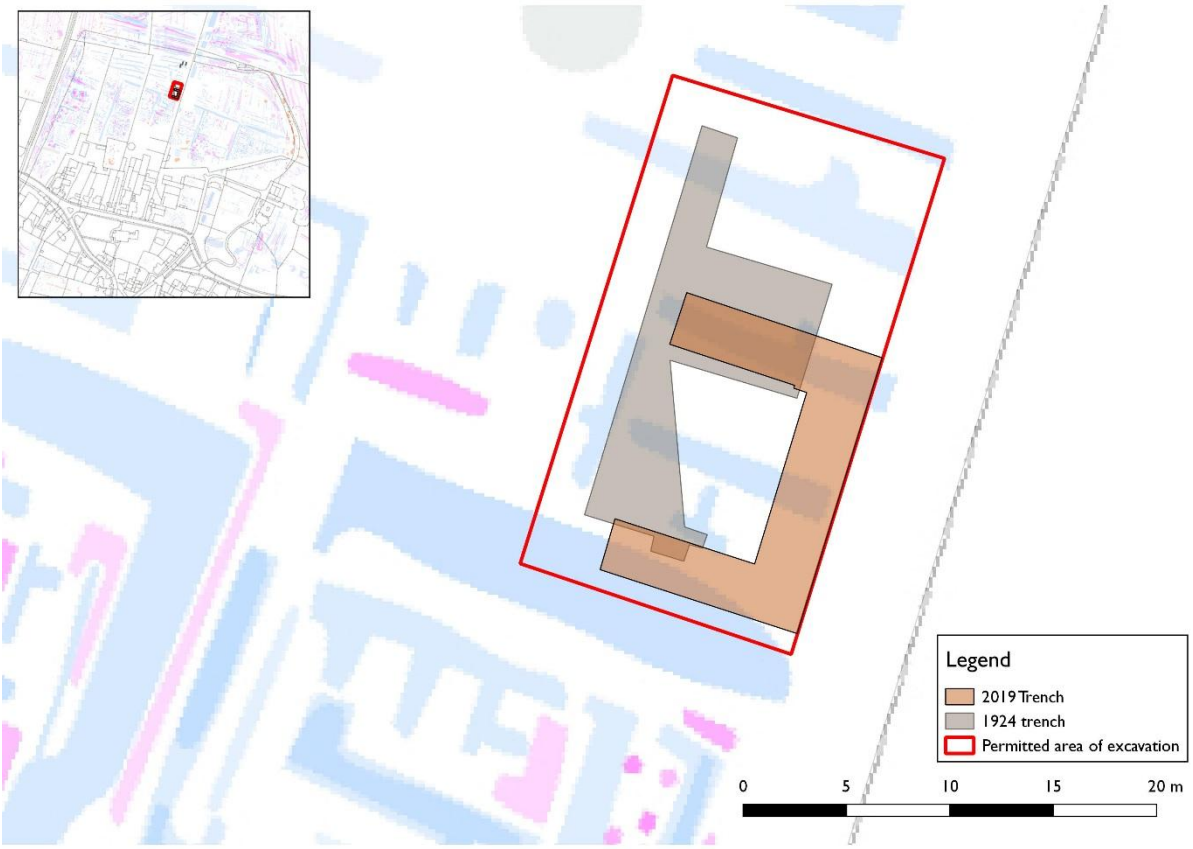


*Figure 8: Location of 1924 trench, area of Scheduled Monument Consent and the 2019 excavation*

To begin with, an area 10 by 14m (140m²) was deturfed by hand (Figure 9). Topsoil was then removed by hand from two east–west strips, 2.5m wide, at the northern and southern limits of this area in order to establish the location of the 1924 trenches. The east–west Roman street was found at an early stage as it had been indicated on the geophysics, at the south end of the trench. The 1924 trench remained elusive, so topsoil was removed from a further north–south strip along the eastern side of the area, joining up the first two areas.

Once clear of disturbed deposits, the volume of spoil from each excavated context was recorded (number of buckets/barrows). Spoil from each excavated context was kept separately so that it could be metal-detected. Such metal-detected finds were recorded separately, but could be related to context from which they derived. Soil samples were taken from sealed contexts, where appropriate. Micromorphology samples were taken from the area of the blacksmith's workshop by Professor Charly French (University of Cambridge).

*Figure 9: Deturfing*

The site was recorded in a number of ways, using a single context recording system. The GPS and total station were used to record feature outlines and levels, as well as providing real-world co-ordinates for the photogrammetry targets. Hand-drawn plans and sections were also produced. Photogrammetry was carried out at intervals throughout the excavation where it was felt a surface or set of features needed recording in more detail. A final photogrammetric survey was carried out by Dominic Powlesland at the end of the excavation. The ortho images of all the models can now be overlaid, along with the drawings.

*Figure 10: Gigi Signorelli and Dominic Powlesland carry out photogrammetric survey*

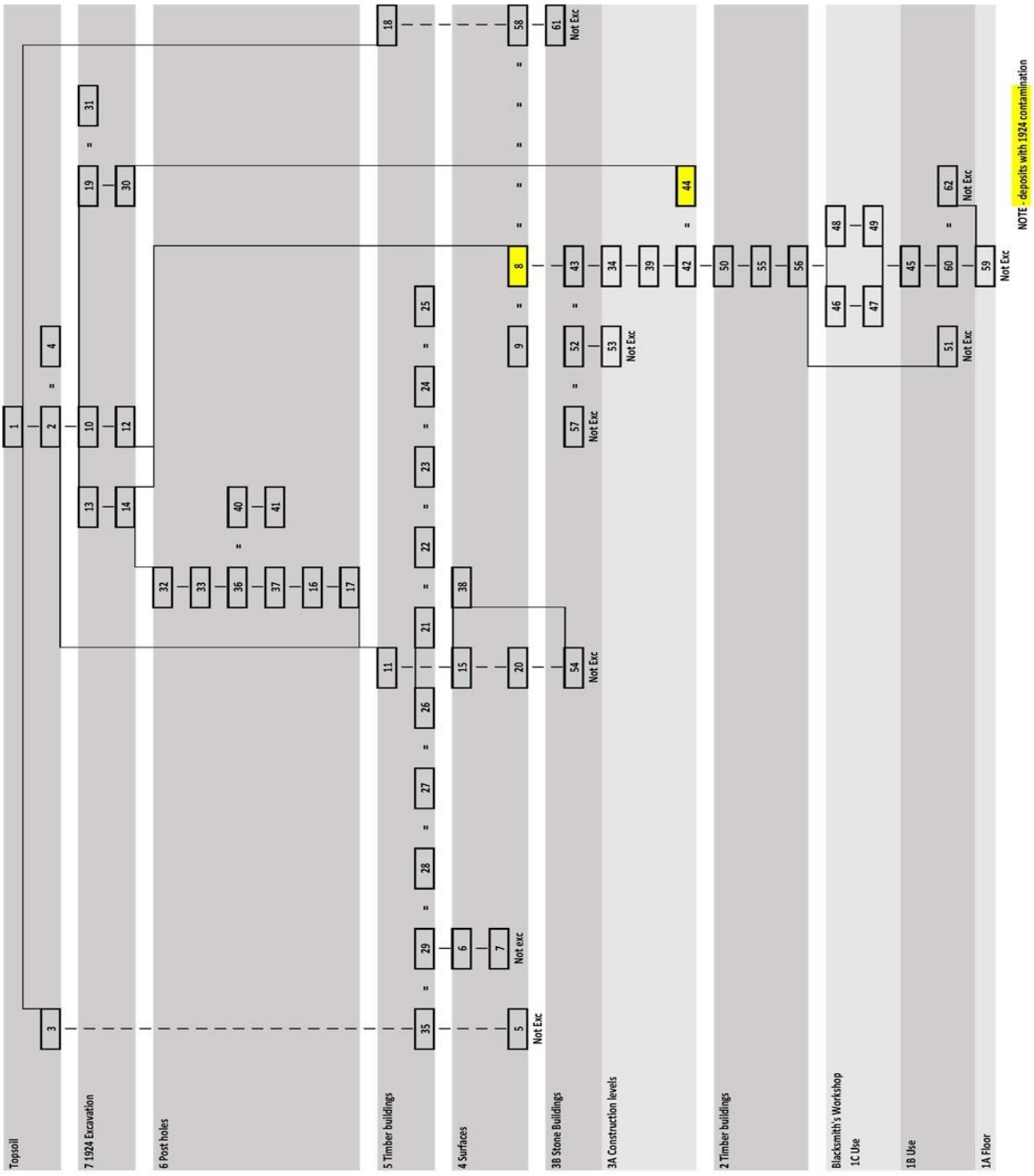


*Figure 11: Stratigraphic matrix*

## *Results*

In the event, the excavation only partially achieved its aims (as summarised above). The 1924 trench proved very difficult to find, and then fully define. We concluded that the trench was further to the south and east than we had estimated in our georeferencing of it

(and as shown in Figures 4–8), possibly by as much as 5–6m in each direction. The only parts of it that we confidently identified lay in the north-east part of our trench, where an area had been cleared of topsoil down to a rubble layer, with a deeper east–west cutting running along its southern limit (below Figure 15). As noted above, the extent of their work seems to have been rather ill-defined and in the area that they had only cleared of topsoil, it seems that they had dug out stonework leaving craters. Furthermore, in the deeper trench, parts of an exposed wall seem to have weathered and collapsed before backfilling leaving a confused stratigraphy. As a result, we were not able to quickly clear the backfill to examine the earlier layers of the town. However, the limited destruction caused by the 1924 excavation enabled us to uncover important evidence from the site's later layers. The Roman street was uncovered at the south end of the trench, although we did not progress to cut a section to relate it to the adjacent structures and date it. In the north-eastern part of the trench we were excavated below the 1924 disturbance to reveal a deep and complex stratigraphic sequence as summarized below. However, due to the complexity and depth of the archaeology, we did not reach the earliest layers this year, nor get to natural at any point. We plan to continue work in this area in 2020, exploring a larger area of the early deposits and examining the later phases over the whole trench.

## *Provisional phasing*

As the excavation did not reach the bottom of the sequence in any part of the trench, and different parts of the site were completed to different depths, the phasing provided here is provisional, and will certainly be revised after further excavation planned for 2020. Assessment of the finds is also required before the sequence can be firmly dated. On the basis of the stratigraphic relationships, the following phases have been identified (see Matrix Figure 11).

**Period 1 – Blacksmith's Workshop** (Figure 12)
In the north-eastern part of the trench, the earliest excavated deposits were examined. These clearly relate to a blacksmith's workshop that can be assumed to have opened onto the street leading to the North Gate which lies immediately to the east. Part of its rammed gravel floor [59] was exposed (Period 1A) but excavation did not go below this level. Lying above the floor was a finely laminated series of deposits [45] comprising alternating lenses of debris comprising fragments of coal, ash and iron-smithing slag, and sand/clay (Period 1B). It was evident that these formed a sequence of working surfaces which had accumulated over time. We also identified features probably associated with a timber beam slot which can be associated with this phase [61, 62]. As the floor level rose during use (Period 1C), alterations were made including the construction of a stone-built furnace [48], and the opening of a small pit [46]. An infant burial was also interred in the floor during this phase. The impression is of an industrial facility that was used intensively for a reasonably long period. A preliminary assessment of the pottery indicates a second century date for these features. It may be significant that a pot decorated with appliqué tools representing iron-smithing, probably in Norton fabric, was found in the disturbed deposits above this structure. A preliminary examination of the pottery suggests a mid–late second-century date.

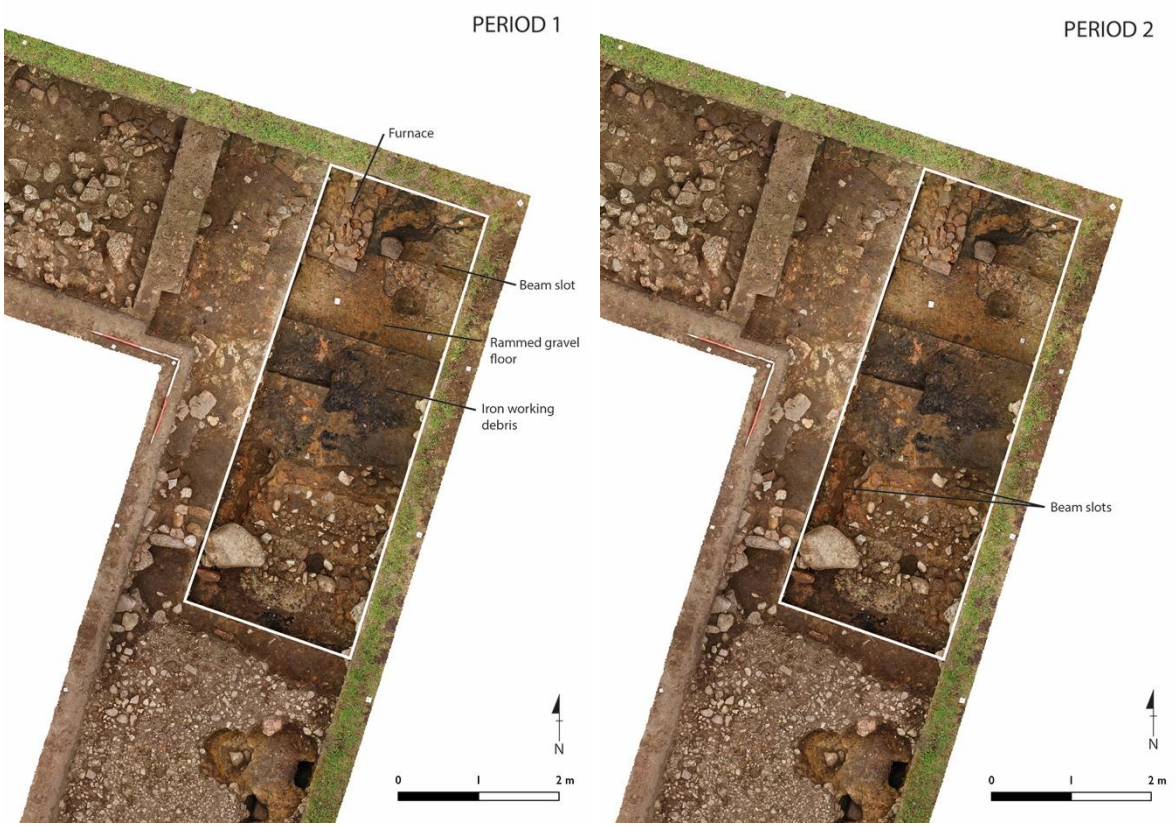

*Figure 12 Plan of the principal Period 1 and Period 2 features*

**Period 2 – Timber buildings** (Figure 12)
Overlying the blacksmith's, at the southern end of the area uncovered, there were beam-slots to support a timber building [50, 55]. One section of slot ran perpendicular to the street leading to the North Gate. This intersected to form a corner with another that ran parallel to the street on a north–south alignment. A deepening at their intersection suggests the presence of a corner post. Only a small part of the structure was exposed, and the interior of the building was largely damaged by later intrusive features. The pottery is later second century.

**Period 3 Stone buildings** (Figure 13)
After the Period 2 buildings went out of use the ground level was raised [34, 39], and it is presumed that this was in preparation for the construction of a stone building that was built gable end on to the street leading to the North Gate (cf. Figure 7). Only elements of this building were examined, primarily a floor [43] in the north-eastern part of the trench which seems to equate with an *opus signinum* surface that was only seen in later post-holes cut through a later cobble surface to the south. The wall separating these two floors had been largely removed by the 1924 excavation trench, and possibly also later Roman stone robbing. It is presumed that a further wall defining the southern side of the building is yet to be located beside the east–west street. A wall which was recorded in the later rubble surface in the north-western part of the trench [61] may related to this building, but has not yet been excavated (Figure 13). The first assessment of the pottery suggests a mid third century date for this phase.

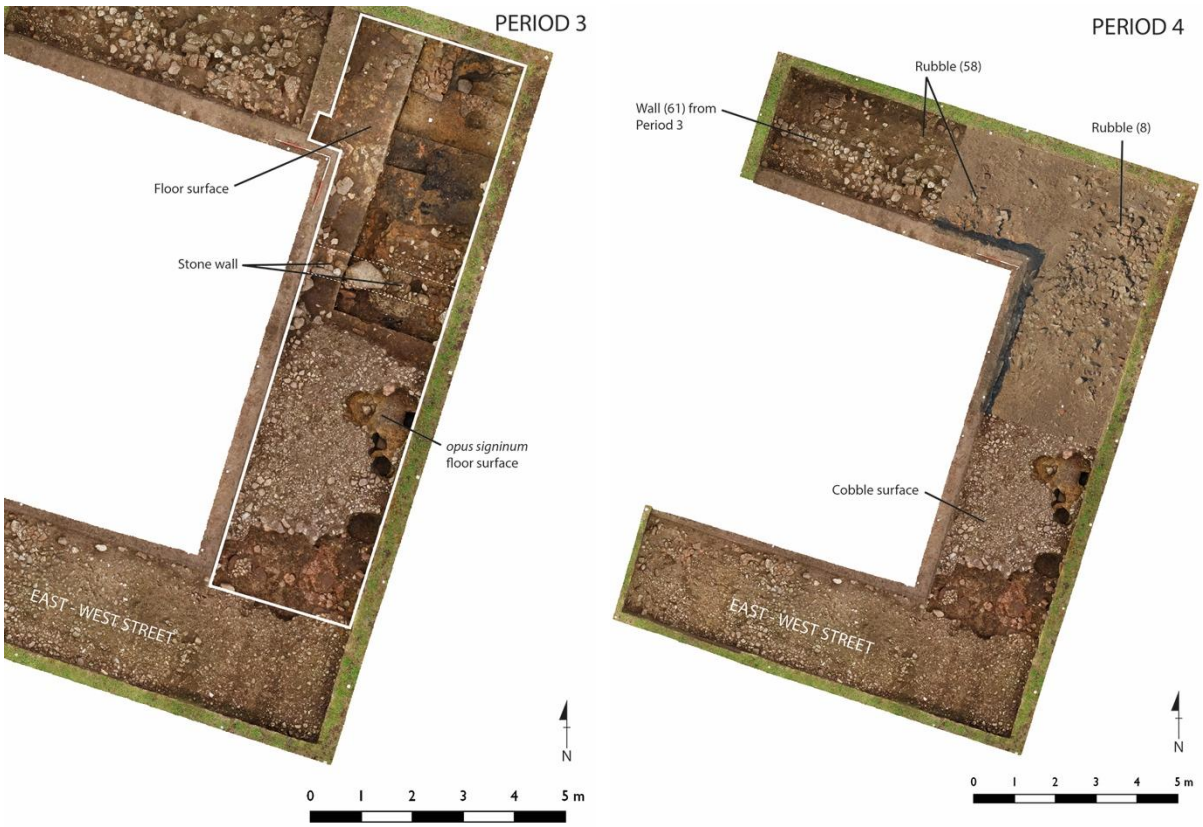


*Figure 13 Plan of the principal Period 3 and Period 4 features*

**Period 4 Surfaces** (Figure 13)
The remains of the Period 3 building were overlain by a series of surfaces. In the northern part of the site these comprised rubble [8, 58], which incorporated re-used stone (including an altar and a fragment of an inscription. The north-eastern part of this area had been exposed and disturbed by the 1924 excavation (Figure 14), which produced a series of architectural fragments (Ferraby and Millett in press, Appendix 4, nos 13, 14 and 37) and an inscribed milestone (RIB 2277). The extent of this rubble was largely confined to the area to the north of the wall of the Period 3 building. To the south of this wall there was a well-laid cobble surface [20]. This adjoined the latest surface of an east–west street [5] which can be identified with the most northerly street of the planned town (Ferraby and Millett in press, fig. 3.6). This street surface was well-laid and showed evidence for a camber, with a gully defining its northern limit. The junction between the cobble surface and street surface was cut by later features. The pottery assemblage includes late 4$^{th}$-5$^{th}$ century material.

**Period 5 Timber buildings** (Figure 14)
There was a building up of silty deposits above the cobble surface [15], which was overlain by a series of stone footings which appear to have been supports for a surface-built timber building which ran east–west [21–29], overlying the edge of the east-west street. This lay at a slight angle to the earlier buildings. It was *c.* 2m wide, and extended beyond the limits of excavation to both east and west. A further similar possible post base was noted at the western extent of the exposed area of the east–west street, and perhaps form part of the same building [35]. The level surface of the stones suggests that they were designed to support sill beams, whilst the northern wall was articulated with reused quern stones perhaps designed as bases for upright timbers, implying some architectural pretention.

In the northern part of the trench, a substantial bone-rich midden lay [18] overlay the Period 4 rubble spread. In the area of the 1924 excavation the same deposit [30] had been disturbed. The midden may have started to be deposited in Period 4, but seems to have continued through Period 5. A number of offcuts of worked red-deer antler were found in these deposits, indicating the presence of a workshop. Finds from these contexts suggest activity from the middle of the fourth century onwards. It seems very likely that this sequence of building continued into the fifth century, but this suggestion needs to be evaluated with further evidence.

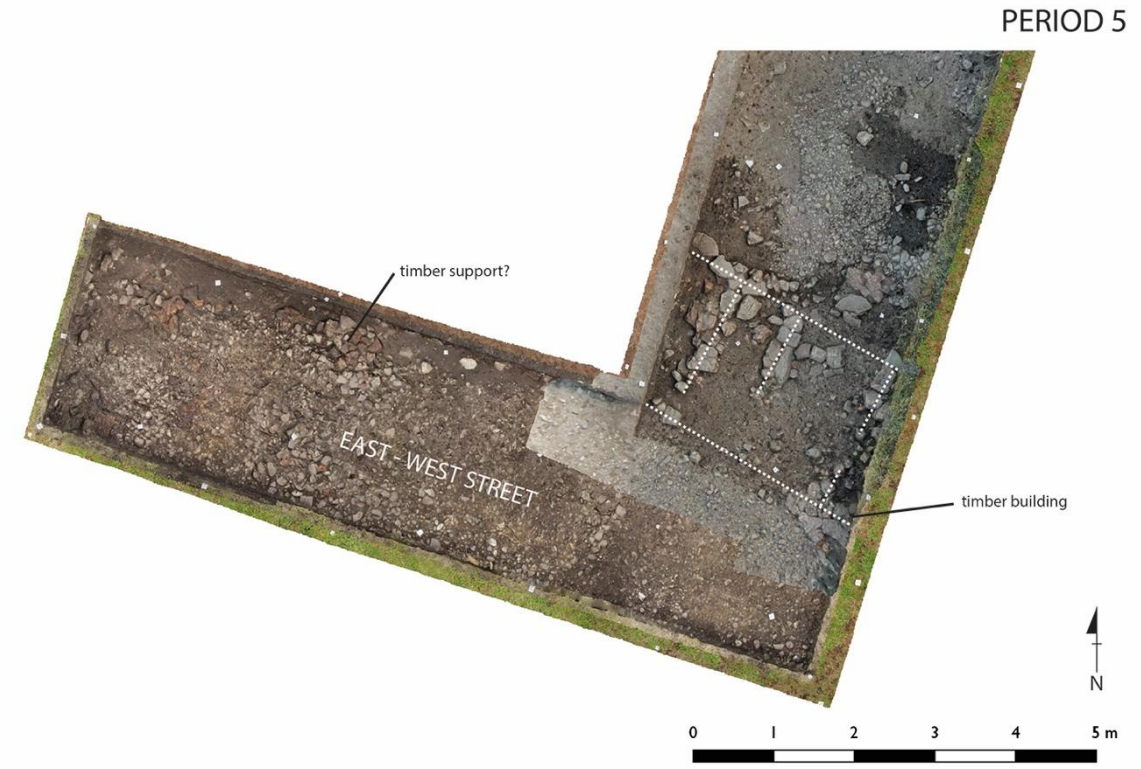


*Figure 14 Plan of the principal Period 5 features*

**Period 6 Post holes** (Figure 15)
A group of large post holes [16, 32, 36, 40] cut through the Period 4 gravel surface to the north of the Period 5 building. These are evidently structural, but it was not possible to establish stratigraphically whether they were contemporaneous with or later than the Period 5 buildings. The pottery suggests a Medieval date, although there was some evidence for disturbance caused by animal burrowing in them. The surface of the east–west street showed evidence for having been cut by a north–south orientated system of ridge and furrow.

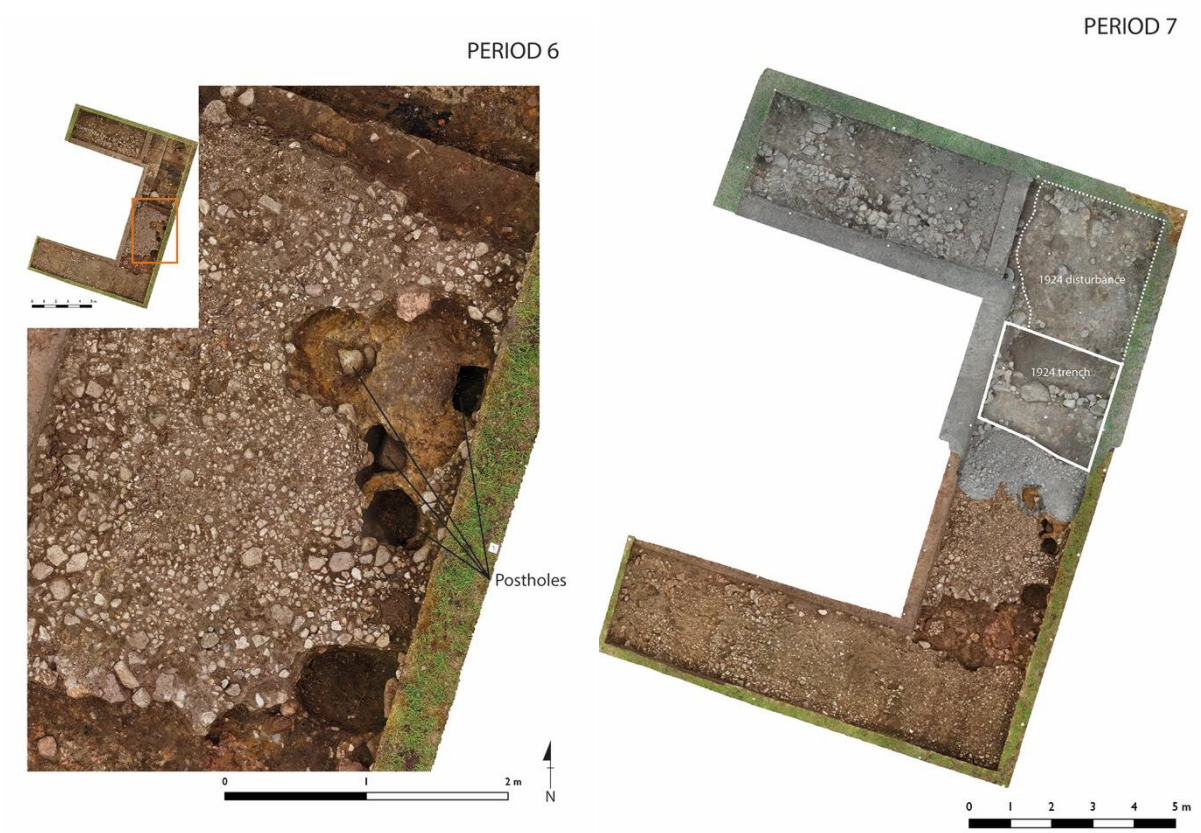


*Figure 15 Plan of the principal Period 6 and Period 7 features*

**Period 7 1924 Excavation** (Figure 15)
In contrast to the 2018 excavation, which also re-examined a 1924 trench, the extent of the previous excavation was poorly defined. Photographs and a plan of the 1924 trench confirmed that it had involved the clearance of topsoil from a large area, and the removal of various stone artefacts, as well as the cutting of a series of deeper sections. We were able to identify an area topsoil clearance over the Period 4 rubble in the north-eastern part of the trench, and we also emptied a deeper cutting that had removed a Period 3 wall just to the south, but we were not able to identify with certainly the area of the east–west street which seems to feature on their plan. The 1924 clearance and their removal of stones has clearly also led to the contamination of some of the earlier deposits excavated.

## *Discussion*

The excavations have demonstrated the considerable archaeological potential of this part of the Roman town. The early sequence includes industrial metal-working which is consistent with the idea that *Isurium* originated as a centre associated with commerce and the requirements of the army and the state. The later deposits, especially the bone-rich midden, are also compatible with the idea that the town continued as a commercial hub into the late Roman period, whilst taken with the evidence from the warehouse excavated to the east in 2018, we can perhaps begin to see the northern area of the town within the walls as having a distinct focus on storage and processing. Finally, the late Roman timber building sequence is of considerable interest, with evidence that may suggest a long-lived sequence continuing

after the fourth century. These issues and especially the dating of the sequence require further work that we hope to continue in 2020.


## *Acknowledgements*

*We are most grateful to Sir Andrew Lawson Tancred for permission to excavate and for Edward Craggs not only allowing us to work on his farm, but also for his help and support during the project.*

*The excavation was funded by a generous donation from Jan and Chris Martins, for whose support we are extremely thankful.*

*We are indebted to our excavation team who worked through the project, ably and enthusiastically helped by volunteers from the Friends of Roman Aldborough. Dominic Powlesland and Laurie Reed undertook the photogrammetry, providing a 3D record of the trench. Dave Haldenby, Roy Doughty and Chris Hannard again kindly undertook systematic metal-detecting of the spoil. Our thanks also to Jason Lucas for undertaking the survey work.*

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## *On-line resources*

During the 2019 excavation, a weekly podcast was created. This traced the progress of the excavation, interviews with specialists and volunteers, and sounds from the trench. The five episodes can be accessed on the Aldborough Roman Town website:
https://aldboroughromantown.wordpress.com/podcasts/
or on Soundcloud:
https://soundcloud.com/soundingaldborough/sets/sounding-aldborough

## Appendix 1: Project Team

*Excavation*: Rose Ferraby, Martin Millett, Donna and Gigi Signorelli, Jason Lucas, Rich Best, Thomas Matthews-Boehmer and Hanneke Reijnierse-Salisbury
*Survey Assistance*: Jason Lucas
*Photogrammetry*: Dominic Powlesland and Laurie Reed
*Metal-detecting:* Dave Haldenby, Roy Doughty and Chris Hannard
*Geoarchaeology*: Charly French and Sean Taylor
*With volunteers from the Friends of Roman Aldborough*

## Appendix 2: Report archive

OASIS ID-roseferr2-384526_1