

EXCAVATIONS AT
ALDBOROUGH
(ISURIUM BRIGANTUM)
2022
INTERIM REPORT



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Summary

Excavation was carried out between the 27th August –24th September 2022 as part of the Aldborough Roman Town Project (University of Cambridge) close to the North Gate of Isurium Brigantum. Excavation continued in the area previously opened in 2019 and 2021 that had revealed part of the Roman street (EW1), late and post-Roman buildings and a blacksmith's workshop. The aim of the work was to characterise the development of the town, in particular finding evidence for early and late activity, as well as how this area of the town was used in relation to buildings on the geophysics and the warehouse excavated in 2018. Work in 2022 further clarified the character of the late Roman building sequence and provided new evidence for the 2nd-3rd century phases of development.

Introduction

Aldborough (*Isurium Brigantum*) is the most northerly major town in Roman Britain and acted as the *civitas capital* for a major part of the North, but until recently its archaeology has remained poorly understood. Since 2009 the Aldborough Roman Town Project has focused research on the site, providing a fuller understanding of the establishment, functioning and decline of the Roman town in the context of its role in relation to the northern frontier of the Roman Empire. The first stage of this work (2009–16) deployed large-scale geophysical survey (including high resolution Ground Penetrating Radar), combined with a full reassessment of all past excavations and finds to re-evaluate the development of the town. This work (Ferraby and Millett 2020a) showed that the dynamics of urban development were more complex and interesting than previously thought, and focused attention on two key issues for further research, the nature of the processes of urban foundation in the first century AD, and the character of the transition from Roman town to estate centre in the early post-Roman period.

The second stage of our research (which commenced in 2016) focused on refining our knowledge of the planning and chronology of the town's development by re-opening past excavation trenches to address specific issues of chronology and urban character. This work has re-examined three areas across the town, and has been successful in using small-scale work to establish the chronology of the forum, and other key structures. The most recent element of this research, initiated in 2019, aimed to examine an area excavated in 1924 (Barber *et al.* 1925) in the northern part of the town where it was hoped that it would be

possible to explore a larger area of the earliest urban phases in order to better characterize the initial development of the site. In particular, it was hoped to understand the extent of its economic role in the early development of the Roman North.

In the event, the 2019 trench where excavation continued in 2021 (Ferraby and Millett 2020b; 2022), revealed a much better preserved and more sequence than we had originally anticipated. Although extensive, the 1924 excavation had been less deeply intrusive than we had expected, whilst our excavation revealed both a complex late Roman – early medieval sequence as well as deep and well preserved earlier deposits, including a second-century blacksmith's workshop. It did not prove possible to fully explore this sequence in the 2019 and 2021 seasons, so a further season was planned for 2022.

Following the success of the previous work, the 2022 season had two principal objectives:

- 1) To investigate further the phases of late Roman– early post Roman timber buildings at the top of the sequence. These post-date deposits radiocarbon dated to the mid fourth century. We aimed to complete the explorations of these buildings and recover evidence for the material culture and economy of this key phase of the site's history.
- 2) To investigate further the sequence of earlier buildings, with a particular focus on (i) better understanding the character of the earliest phases of the town's development, (ii) characterising the industrial activity revealed, and (iii) establishing the chronology of the planned town, specifically the date of the most northerly street in the grid which runs along the edge of our trench.

Location

The trench reopened the 2019/2021 excavation (see figures 1 and 2), close to the North Gate at the junction of the Principal North-South street and EW1 (see Ferraby and Millett 2020a).

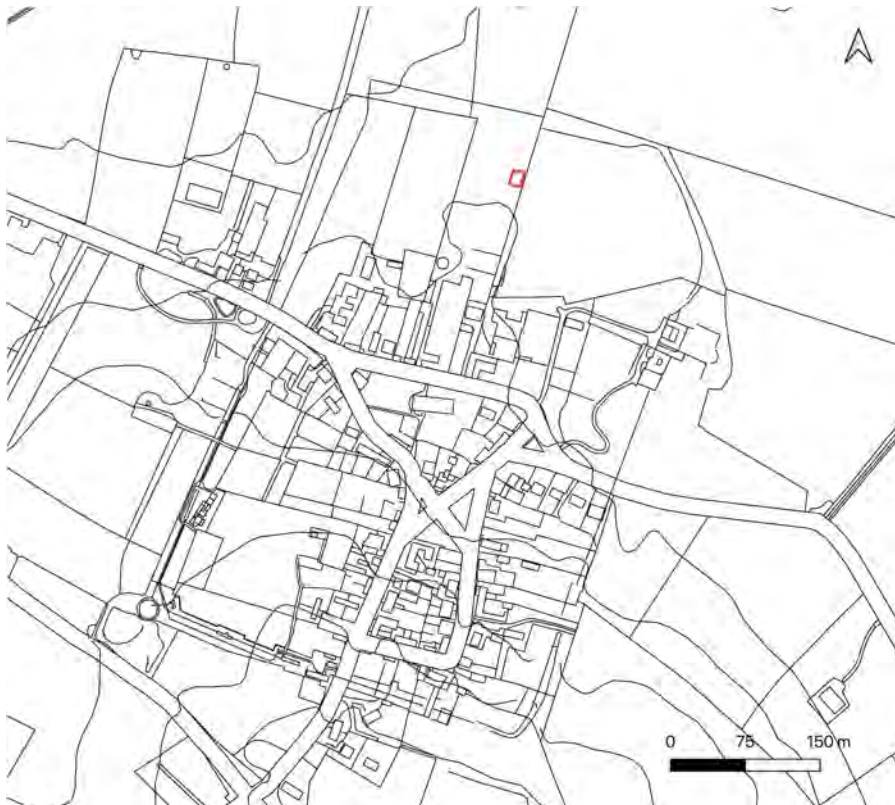


Figure 1: Location of the trench in relation to the OS map.

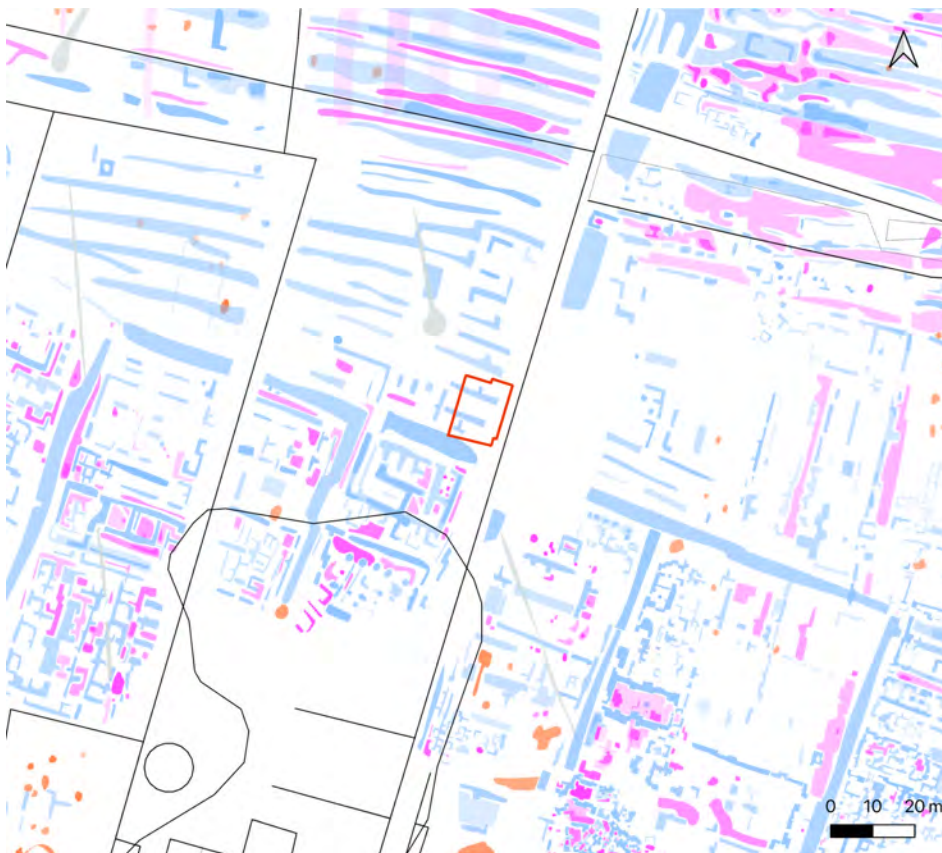


Figure 2: Location of the trench in the northern area of the Roman Town, showing the OS map and interpretation of the magnetometry survey.

Methods

The previous trench was re-opened (by machine) down to the levels previously reached (that had been covered with fabric prior to backfilling). In 2022 three areas continued to be the focus of excavation:

- (a) the late sequence of deposits covering the western part of the trench
- (b) the section previously cut through the building sequence on the eastern side of the trench, and
- (c) the section was cut through the street at the southern end of the trench on its eastern side.

The site was recorded using standard recording systems, complemented by the use of 3D digital photographic recording, and the volumetric recording of excavated contexts. Working with a group of metal-detectorists, we screened all excavated soil. Environmental samples were collected to complement those from the earlier seasons. Specialist sampling also focused on understanding the nature and scale of iron production in the blacksmith's workshop and its use of coal as its fuel.



Figure 3: Excavation in progress (Photo: Rose Ferraby)

Results

The excavation was very successful, with substantial progress made in respect of each of the aims. The work also produced very large volumes of finds, analysis of which will add substantially to knowledge of the Roman town. However, the complexity of the sequence again meant that we were unable to reach the bottom of the sequence. On this basis, we are planning a further season of excavation in this area in 2023.

Excavation in 2022 clarified and added considerable detail to our knowledge of the stratigraphic sequence. This has made the matrix (Figure 5) more complex. In the following account we have maintained the basic framework of terminology of Periods used in the previous interim reports for simplicity, but have extended and elaborated the sequence so subdivisions of these phases are varied.

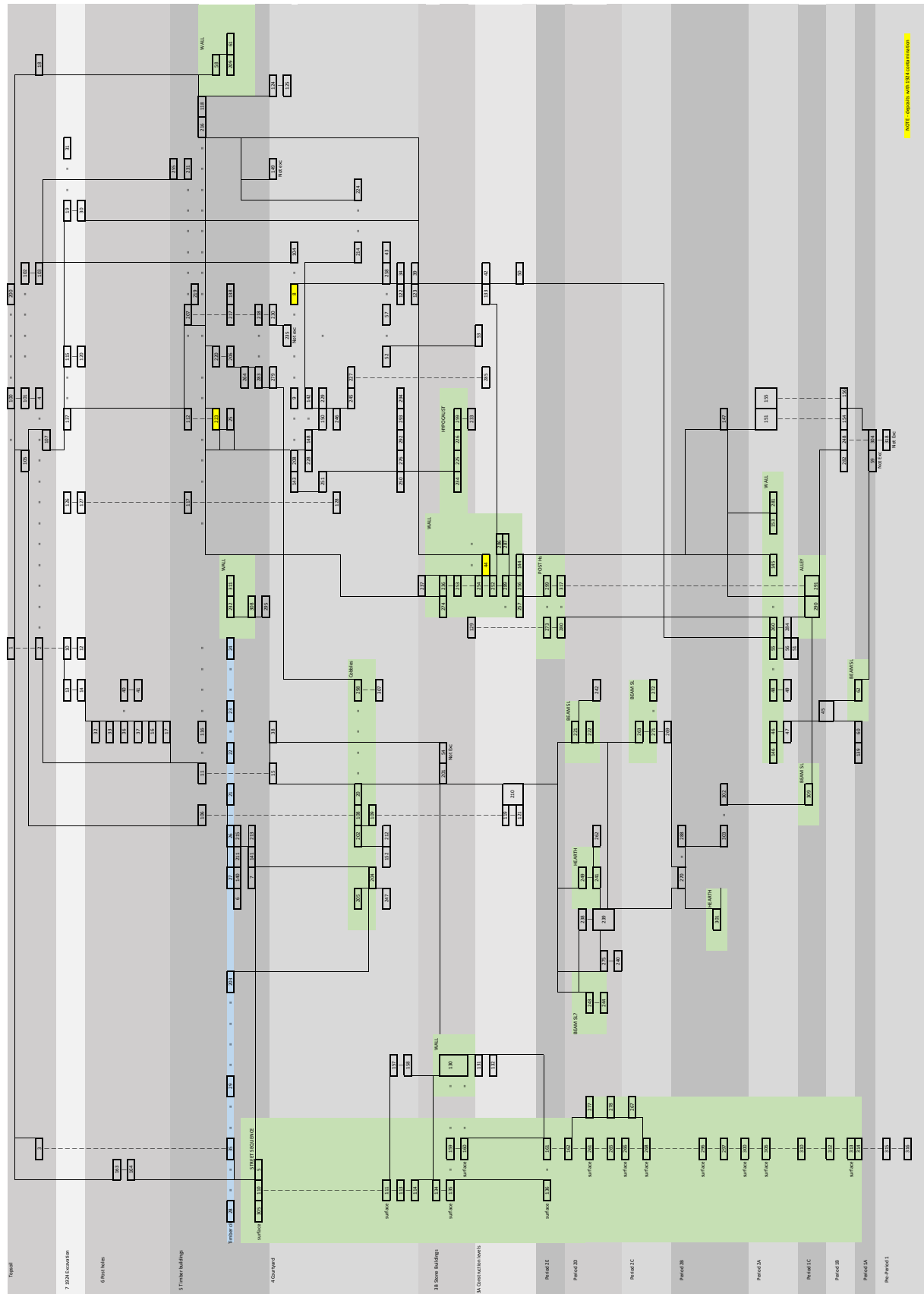
This text has been prepared using the preliminary analysis of the pottery and other finds from the 2022 season, so the chronology is likely to be refined as work on the archive progresses.



Figure 4: Final view of 2022 excavation. (Photogrammetry: Dominic Powlesland)



Figure 5: Annotated view of the trench (Photogrammetry: Dominic Powlesland)



Phased description

Deposits earlier than Period 3 were only excavated in the deeper section on the eastern side of the trench. Here the excavation was divided into two parts, with a small section cut through the street sequence at the southern end, while an area of buildings was more fully explored to the north. The correlation between the street surfaces and the structures to the north prior to Period 3 requires further clarification.

Pre-Period 1

The earliest deposits reached in the excavation were found in two areas. At the southern end of the trench, at the base of the section cut across the street, the lowest street surface overpays a deposit [315/316] that was only examined in a very small area. This comprises a very dark deposit with much charcoal and pottery provisionally dated to the late first century. At the northern end of the trench, removal of the cobbled surface under the blacksmith's shop revealed a clay layer [318] that was not excavated. The relationship between these two sets of deposits has not yet been established.

Period 1

The main sequence in the northern part of the deeper cutting provides the phasing for Periods 1 & 2. Although the street sequence excavated in the southern part of the trench runs in parallel with this, we have not yet established the full correlation between these sequences before Period 3. This street was resurfaced on at least eight occasions between its foundation and the construction of the Period 3 wall (probably in the 3rd century). On the basis of our general understanding of the town's development, the street is most likely to have been first laid out in the early second-century AD, at about the same time as the *forum* was constructed, but confirmation of this awaits full study of the finds from the current excavation.

Period 1A

At the northern end of the trench, the sequence of structures begins with the laying of a cobbled surface [59, 303] which had a shallow E–W beam slot [62] set in it on. A large block of stone at its W end may represent a post support. To its S was a clay deposit [60] formed a slight bank on top of the cobbled surface.

Period 1B

In the same area, these features were overlain by an accumulation of finely laminated deposits of ash, coal and iron slag derived from black-smithing [154, 156, 248, 282]. (The same deposit, excavated in 2019 was not differentiated between Periods 1B and 1C). The pottery and a coin from these deposits suggest an early–mid second century date.

Period 1C

After the initial deposition of smithing deposits an area of gravel [290, 291] was laid in an E–W strip across the trench. This was c. 3m wide, and had been cut into by a series of later features, but shows evidence for a camber, and is interpreted as a metalled alleyway. Its S side was defined by the straight cut of a beam slot [309] which is presumed to represent the frontage of a timber building adjacent to the alley. It contained a complete, inverted pot, deposited when the building was demolished. The well-defined linear character of the N side of the ally probably indicates a similar slot here. The small amount of pottery suggests a date in the second half of the second century.



Figure 7: Looking west along the line of the alley, the southern side clearly visible in contrast to the black deposits of the blacksmith's workshop



Figure 8: The complete, inverted pot found in the blacksmith's workshop, against the south side of the alley

Period 2A

The sequence of deposition of smithing material continued to accumulate across the whole of the northern area, but a new building was constructed with a foundation on a N–S alignment that cut across the alley way and continued to the limit of excavation to the N. This is most likely a plinth on which a timber beam was set. There are indications that it continues beneath the as yet unexcavated sequence to the S. At its N end, its line is continued by a tile-built sleeper wall [48, 49] that was thought to represent a furnace in the 2019 season. To the S, this appears to have been robbed to leave a shallow pit [46, 146], with the foundation then continuing [153, 281] to the line of the edge of the ally. The course of the foundation is then represented by a slot to the S [55, 56, 260], which is joined at a probable post hole by a N–S slot that was cut into the surface of the alley. In the area to the N, accumulated smithing deposits [151, 155] built-up on either side to this boundary. A date in the second half of the second century seems likely.

Period 2B

The Period 2A structure may have been relatively short lived, and there is evidence for its demolition and the continued use of the ally. A series of smithing deposits accumulated to the N of the ally [147] whilst to the S, there were surfaces [302, 303] within the accumulation of smithing debris as well as a hearth [301] suggesting workshop use. This is overlain by accumulated smithing deposits [270, 288]. The pottery indicates a later second–mid third century date.

Period 2C

The sequence to the S of the alley continues through this phase, with a beam slot [263, 269, 271, 272] marking its N edge. This phase could not be differentiated from Periods 2B and 2D in the area to the N of the alley [with 145 and 147 presumably continuing to be deposited through this time]. A small assemblage of pottery is probably third century.

Period 2D

The sequence to the S again continues through this phase, with a replacement beam slot [221, 222] beside the ally at its N, and surfaces and deposits to the S [238, 239, 275, 240]. At its S, this sequence was defined by a possible E–W boundary, perhaps a beam slot [243, 244] on the line of the later Period 3 wall. Within the area of the structure defined by these features, was a substantial stone built furnace or hearth [249, 241]. A date in the early third century seems likely.

Period 2E

Cut into the surface of the alley that had been established in Period 1C and which continued in use down to this period, were a pair of very substantial post holes [273, 280 and 299, 317] that were very closely spaced (*c.* 1.5m centre to centre). These underlay the line of a robbed Period 3 wall in an area where the complex stratigraphy had also been disturbed by a 1924 excavation trench. This made establishing the relationship between the post holes and the Period 2D deposits uncertain. It is possible that they may be contemporaneous with Period 2D, but the structure is very different in character, indicating a major replanning of the site. Some of the deposits attributed to Period 3A may also perhaps be associated with this structure. It is hoped that work in 2023 in the area to the W may clarify this. Notwithstanding the uncertainty over the phasing, the construction of these post holes indicates both the continued existence of the property boundary that had been marked by the ally and a change in its character with the replacement of the ally by the building of a major wall. This wall line

continued in various forms through the remaining Roman-period occupation of the area. A date in the first half of the third century seems most likely.



Figure 9: East facing section of one of the large postholes dug east-west along the line of the alley

Period 3

This period sees a substantial replanning of the whole excavated area, with the use of the blacksmith's workshop ceasing and stone buildings being constructed. These maintain the existing E–W boundaries adjacent to the street at the S and continuing the line of the alley in the centre of the trench. At the N, there are indications that there was a further boundary on the approximate line of our trench edge but its location means that it cannot be fully explored. The walls and floors of the buildings of Period 3 have been very heavily robbed, making it difficult at present to establish whether they represent a single structure or two separate properties. The subsequent development suggests that there may have been two distinct buildings throughout the sequence although the stratigraphic evidence indicates that they were first built at the same time. These seem most likely to have been simple strip buildings constructed gable-end onto the street that ran from the *forum* to the North Gate of the town.

Period 3A

In preparation for the construction of the stone buildings, the area seems to have been levelled and then trenches dug for the construction of two E–W walls and the sub-floor structures in the building plot in the N part of the trench. At the S end of the trench, the foundations [131, 132] for wall [130] were cut into the edge of the E–W street. In the centre of the trench, the foundations for another major E–W wall (which had later been heavily robbed) were examined both in the deep cutting on the eastern side of the excavation and also in the area excavated to a shallower depth across the rest of the trench to the W. Correlation

of these sequences in the two areas requires further clarification in 2023. At present, it seems clear that the wall had been robbed down to its foundation in the deep cutting, where the wall trench was represented by a series of gravel and rubble deposits [144, 256, 257], with the remains of the foundations [286, 287] surviving only in the eastern trench section. At a higher level in the area to the W, only parts of the foundation have so far been excavated, with the foundation sequence [252, 254, 289] only partially explored. To the N of this wall are the footings for the hypocaust [225] of Period 3B. A date around AD 250 seems likely for the construction of the stone buildings.



Figure 10: The head of a pipeclay Venus figurine found in the levelling deposits.

Period 3B

The southern wall [130] had the remains of a stone flagstone floor [54, 201] abutting it to the N with make-up surviving in patches elsewhere [258] where the slabs had been robbed. To the S of this wall there were contemporaneous road surfaces [135, 160] with a built-up of silts [134, 159] against the wall. These imply a long period of use. In the northern and western parts of the excavated area very heavy later robbing left only limited remnants of the buildings (although further work in 2023 may reveal more detail when the remains of the robbing phase are removed). There are some indications of that a N–S wall ran through the middle of this area beside the street to the S. The principal structure so far examined includes part of a channelled hypocaust [225, 226, 234, 259] in the building in the N part of the trench. One intact N–S flue survived together with sandstone slabs that had formed the floor of another running E–W. Blocks of rubble had been created to support the floor, and there was some possible evidence for the incorporation of an earlier N–S wall. It is not clear how long the hypocaust had remained in use but the remnants of stone irregular stone flooring over the infilled hypocaust channels indicates a complex use history which probably continued

through Period 4. A date in the second half of the third century seems likely for the beginning of this phase.



Figure 11: Hypocaust channel (looking south-west)

Period 4

At this period the sequence of buildings in the northern and southern parts of trench differ. The building with a hypocaust in the northern part of the area apparently continued in occupation, whilst that to the S was demolished with a cobbled courtyard surface [20, 108, 202, 205, 298] laid over it, whilst the street [111] to the S spread across the line of the robber trench [157, 158] former wall. The cobbled courtyard surface abutted the standing wall of the building to the N showing that it continued in use. The cobbling dates to around the middle of the fourth century. It was overlaid by a series of layers which were not easy to differentiate from those of Period 5; further analysis of the finds may clarify this.

In the area to the N, there is a complex sequence of deposits relates to the reuse of the hypocaust room as noted above, and its subsequent demolition and partial robbing. Establishing exactly at which the stage this happened is problematic, but there was at least one associated surface [148, 150, 228, 229] with muchdebitage derived from the breaking up of roof slates. Towards the N edge of the trench, an insubstantial stone wall foundation [214, 224] perhaps dates to the stage.

Period 5

The whole of the excavated area was covered with a layer of later Roman rubble and dark earth. It was not possible to differentiate strata within this, and the large quantities of animal bone etc indicate use as a midden. Within this accumulation, but presumably predating the midden, there was extensive evidence for the construction of a series of substantial timber buildings. That to the north was defined by a cobble wall foundation [232, 311] which incorporated large stone blocks that had been used as post supports. This was built on top of the earlier, Period 3, wall [256 etc] indicating that property boundaries were being maintained. Incorporated in the foundation of this wall [308] was a substantial Tuscan-type Roman column capital. A series of three horse heads and one cow's head had been carefully laid in a line within its footings [295], presumably as a foundation deposit. Another cobble wall footing [58, 61, 209], parallel and to the N probably represents another wall of the same building.

To the S, a series of stone alignments appear to represent sills on which timbers were set to support another strip building occupying the area of the Period 4 cobbled courtyard. A probable beam slot [7, 141, 213] seems to represent the S wall of this structure, at least in one phase. At the western edge of the trench there was a well-built stone hearth [138, 217] on the axis of this building with a sequence of associated floor deposits. A series of quern stones had been deployed to provide roof supports on the axis of this building, and further querns elsewhere across the area had also been used as post supports.

A complex sequence was explored in the centre of the western part of the trench apparently lying between the two timber buildings. A substantial masonry block [264], incorporating a trimmed quern, apparently formed part of a structure, and had a pit [219, 220] cut though it to the S. All these features themselves overlay the apparent slump into what is presumably a substantial earlier feature underlying the Period 4 cobbling. At the lowest level excavated in 2022, it appeared that a stone revetted pit, or perhaps a well, might be emerging.

A date range for this period probably runs from the the middle of the fourth century and into the fifth.



Figure 12: Foundation deposits of horse and cow skulls of wall [308]



Figure 13: Tuscan-type column capital in foundations of wall [308]

Periods 6 and 7

The 2022 excavation added little of substance to our understanding of the latest, post-hole built timber buildings (Period 6), or the 1924 excavations (Period 7), although the presence of one of their E–W trenches was confirmed adjacent to the northern limit of our trench.

Discussion

The 2022 excavation has provided much information on a rich sequence of deposits. Work in 2023 is planned to further explore the Period 3 buildings and the early sequence in the deeper cutting on the eastern side of the area. It is hoped that this will enable us to explore the earliest phases of the development in this part of the town.

Acknowledgements

Our huge thanks to the McDonald Institute and Faculty of Classics in the University of Cambridge for funding the excavation. We are extremely grateful to Sir Andrew Lawson-Tancred for supporting the work in all kinds of ways, and making the excavation run so smoothly. Thank you to Neil Bailes and Edward Craggs for letting us take over the field and traipse through the farmyard, and for their help throughout the dig.

Once again, we have had a fantastic team of people working with us on site: our thanks to them all for their enthusiasm. Gigi and Donna Signorelli and Sarah Talks kept the excavation and finds' tent running like a well-oiled machine. We were also joined by fantastic postgraduates and undergraduates from the Faculty of Classics: Nina Bizziocchi, Miranda Evans, Neal Payne, and Sophie Rabinow with Alice Bastinelli, Sieve Bonaiut, Eden Dudley, Sally Edser, Philip Harper, Ruth Mitchell-Fox, Layla Stabile and Emilia Whitehead. Metal-detecting on site was carried out by Dave Haldenby, Roy Doughty and Chris Hannard to whom we are very grateful. Our huge thanks to all the volunteers and local sixth form students who joined us on site throughout. Key members of the team from the Friends of Roman Aldborough included: Richard Anderson, Sonia Anderson Lucy Crosbie, Alasdair Harrison, Rob Matley, Pandora Thoresby, Steve Treece.

We are hugely grateful, as ever, to the Friends of Roman Aldborough for organising various aspects of the excavation, including the school visits, talk, marquees and much more. The Boroughbridge Allotment Society lent us their marquee and assisted with taking it down, for which we are very appreciative.



Figure 14: Team photos from the 2022 excavation (left: looking north in the first week, right: looking south in the last week)

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Appendix 1: Project Team on site

Excavation: Rose Ferraby, Martin Millett, Donna and Gigi Signorelli, Sarah Talks, Neil Payne, Sophie Rabinow, and Nina Bizziocchi

Survey: Jason Lucas

Photogrammetry: Dominic Powlesland

Metal-detecting: Dave Haldenby, Roy Doughty and Chris Hannard

Geoarchaeology: Charly French

With students from the University of Cambridge and volunteers from the Friends of Roman Aldborough and local Sixth Form students

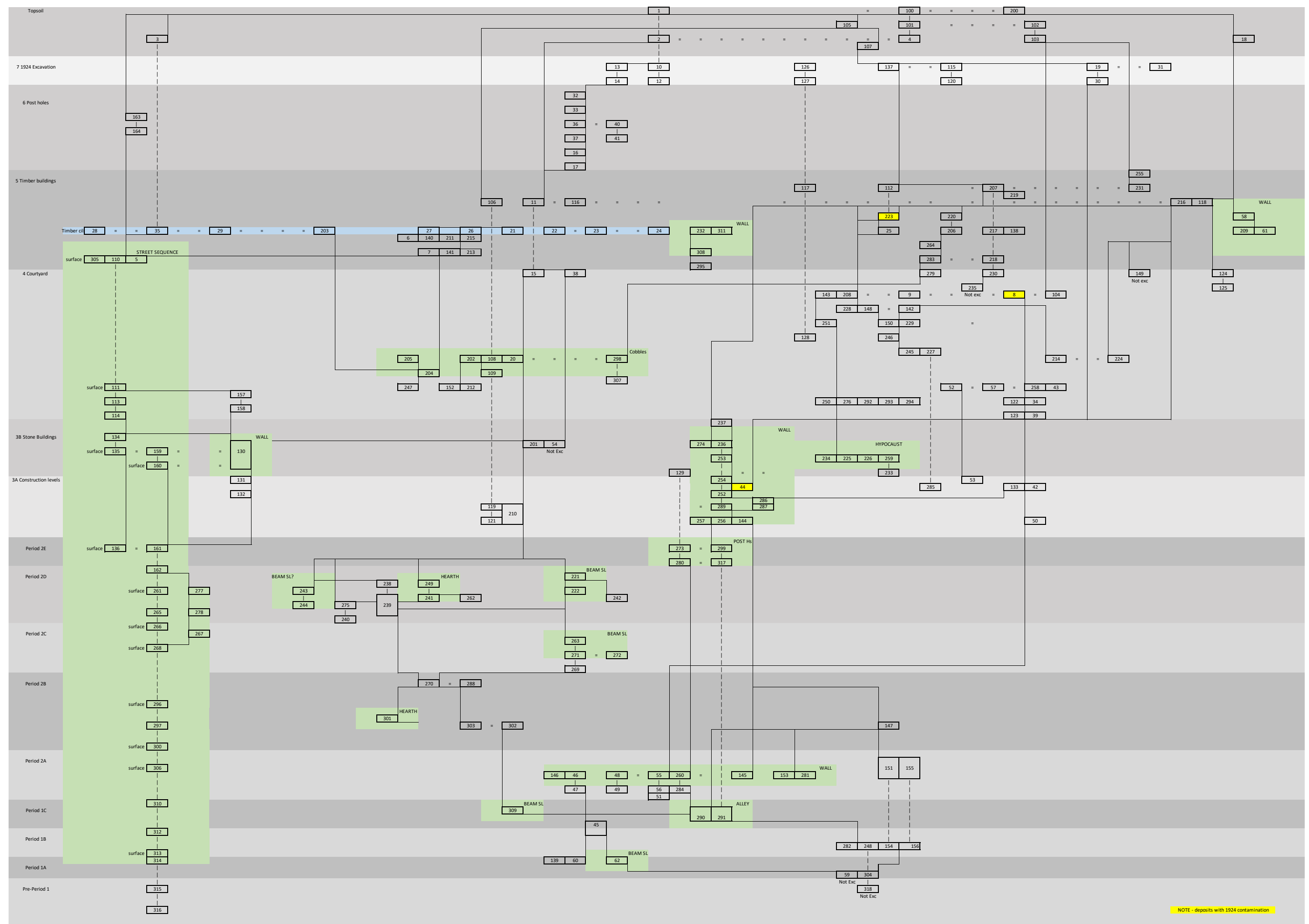


Figure 6: Aldborough 2019 - 2022 matrix